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# *FORUM ARTICLE*

# *Chinatowns and the Rise of China*

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## Abstract

In the early twentieth century, Chinatowns in the West were ghettoes for Chinese immigrants who were marginalized and considered 'other' by the dominant society. In Western eyes, these areas were the no-go zones of the Oriental 'other'. Now, more than a hundred years later, traditional Chinatowns still exist in some cities but their meaning and role has been transformed, while in other cities entirely new Chinatowns have emerged. This article discusses how Chinatowns today are increasingly contested sites where older diasporic understandings of Chineseness are unsettled by newer, neoliberal interpretations, dominated by the pull of China's new-found economic might. In particular, the so-called 'rise of China' has spawned a globalization of the idea of 'Chinatown' itself, with its actual uptake in urban development projects the world over, or a backlash against it, determined by varying perceptions of China's global ascendancy as an amalgam of threat and opportunity.

## Introduction

The so-called 'rise of China' looms large today as a key driver of rapid change and shifting dynamics of global power and influence. As David Shambaugh (2013, 4–5) notes:

> Wherever one turns, China is in the news—gobbling up resources, soaking up investment, expanding its overseas footprint, asserting itself in its Asian neighbourhood, being the sought-after suitor in global governance diplomacy, sailing its navy into new waters, broadening its global media exposure and cultural presence, and managing a mega-economy that is the engine of global growth.

Importantly, China's rise to superpower status is not just a macro-phenomenon restricted to the field of international relations and the global economy. China's growing global power also has more intricate and



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intimate implications within everyday local realities around the world, in and beyond the West. In this article, I will discuss the complex and variegated local impacts of China's rise by focusing on the peculiar urban phenomenon of Chinatown. What I hope to illuminate are some of the multilayered social and cultural permutations brought about by the global and local changes associated with China's rise, as inscribed in the evolution of Chinatown, both as an idea—an imagined urban concept—and as a reality—actually existing Chinatown-making projects around the world.

Scholarly analyses of China and those focusing on Chinatown do not usually speak to each other. They tend to belong to quite different fields of specialization: the study of China is generally pursued by China specialists working within an area studies framework. Now that China has begun to exert major influence on global affairs—a development captured by the 'rise of China' trope—the study of China has become a focal concern in the field of international relations. The study of Chinatowns, on the other hand, especially those in Western cities, tends to be framed within the parameters of ethnic or multicultural studies, combined with the tools of urban studies and cultural geography. Here, the analysis generally remains focused on the local or national frame, concerned with the impact and experience of Chinese immigrants as a minority in a foreign land. Notwithstanding this disciplinary separation, 'China' and 'Chinatown' are inextricably linked entities. As I hope to show in this article, this is supremely evident in what is happening to the Chinatown phenomenon in the age of China's rise. Considering the rise of China and the evolution of Chinatowns together will serve to clarify what a profound impact China's growing global presence and power has on both the reality and the idea of Chinatown. In particular, this article will show how global ambivalence surrounding the rise of China—perceived as an amalgam of threat and opportunity—is a fundamental narrative trope through which we can understand not only the heightened global salience of the very idea of Chinatown, but also the variegated historical trajectories of actually existing Chinatowns in different parts of the world. First, however, I will elaborate on the way in which the opportunity–threat discourse operates in global responses to the challenges posed by the rise of China.

## The rise of China: opportunity or threat?

In his book *China Goes Global*, Shambaugh (2013, 4) observes: 'In two decades, China has moved from the periphery to the centre of the

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international system.' By 2015, the International Monetary Fund ranked China as the number one economic superpower of the world, surpassing the United States for the first time (Kamrany and Jiang 2015). This seemingly inexorable rise of China has been cause for a lot of debate and deliberation in the past decade or so, often affectively tinged by a sense of apprehension and nervousness, if not fear. Talk among political leaders has revolved around how to confront the task of 'managing China's rise'; newspapers have carried headlines such as 'Keeping China's rise peaceful is our biggest geopolitical challenge' (Roubini 2014). At the same time, China's ascendancy has also generated much excitement, whereby its escalating economic clout is touted as a source of growth for an ailing global economy, the driving promise for future wealth and prosperity. News reports from the United States, Australia, to the United Kingdom and beyond have persistently declared that China is today's 'land of opportunity' (Ma 2014; Chou 2015; Atherton 2017).

The 'rise of China', in short, is a discursive trope that reveals a major obsession among Western observers with the implications of China's increasingly important global role in the twenty-first century. This preoccupation is shaped by an affective regime that encompasses two seemingly opposing paradigms: 'China as threat' and 'China as opportunity'. However, as Chengxin Pan (2012) argues, with regard to China's rise the threat and opportunity paradigms are two sides of the same discursive framework, structuring the current Western desire for knowledge about China, in a bid to overcome a deep uncertainty about what a powerful China on the world stage might bring. This uncertainty is revealed in the frequency with which the words 'threat' and 'opportunity' are joined in questions raised about China's rise. Former British Prime Minister David Cameron, for example, on the eve of leading Britain's largest ever trade delegation to China in 2013, admonished that the West should see China as an opportunity, not a threat, and that China's rise to world dominance is a 'defining fact' of our age, 'even if the West doesn't like it' (quoted in Chapman 2013).

While the threat paradigm tends to emphasize the dangers and risks posed by China's rise to Western supremacy and global stability, the opportunity paradigm is guided more by an optimistic hope for the smooth integration of China into the world economy and global society. However, as Pan (2012) points out, the structuring of Western knowledge production on the template of this binary construct hinders a better understanding of the complex realities of today's globalized world and China's changing role within it, and can be seen as symptomatic of a

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general unease about the seeming inevitability of China's future world domination. Asking 'Why do we fear a rising China?', Michael Schuman (2011) hints at this sense of foreboding gripping Western observers:

> China appears to be challenging not just today's economic orthodoxy and order, but the world's political and military frameworks as well … The Chinese want to have more control over the world. And they want to use their economic clout to get it. Or so we think. The fact is we're only guessing at what China might do as a superpower.

In this context of uncertainty and relative powerlessness, wooing China for its favours has been deemed necessary, even essential, so as not to miss out on the spoils the newly emergent hegemon is now capable of handing out. This was starkly evident during President Xi Jinping's state visit to Britain in 2015, where he was treated with unprecedented pomp and ceremony, including a royal banquet at Buckingham Palace, leading *Fortune* magazine to declare: 'A weakened Britain finally learns how to kowtow to Beijing' (Smith 2015). Here, we see a clear example of 'China flattery' (Yee 2011, 4) in which even leading Western nations now engage to accommodate the perceived threats posed by a globally powerful China, while also clambering for its opportunities. Even President Donald Trump, whose trade war with China was a clear sign of the intensification of the threat narrative in the United States, could not afford to ignore the counter-narrative of the opportunity presented by China (*Time* 2018).

In short, the rise of China is seen in the West today not just as a threat or an opportunity, but as an uneasy amalgam of both. In this context, 'China' tends to be constructed as a homogenous whole that is entirely antithetical to 'the West'. This is not surprising as China has long functioned as a prominent 'other' in the Western Orientalist imagination (Zhang 1988). But the contemporary, twenty-first century context is quite different from earlier historical periods, when the West's relationship to China was characterized by an unequivocal hierarchy of power and strength in the global order. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, China was at the receiving end of European imperialism, which led to its status as a subjugated, semi-colonial state. From the mid-twentieth century, much of the Western construction of China's 'otherness' was nurtured by the dramatic historical events in that country, which led to a long period of isolation and the separate development of the People's Republic of China. In this period, there was an actual divide between China and the West, marked by official ideological difference and almost absolute social and cultural disconnection. Since 1978, however, when Deng Xiaoping

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'opened up' China for capitalist development and led its march into the globalizing economy, relations between China and the West have become much more complicated and multifaceted, and less affected by a one-sided hierarchy of influence. As Daniel Vukovich (2012, 5) argues, 'The decades since Bretton Woods [i.e. since the mid-1970s] have known a confluence of capital, China, and Sino-Western relations and flows.' This confluence has resulted in the emergence of a complexly mixed-up, globalized world, in which China's 'otherness' can no longer be relegated to a remote space, contained within an insulated, foreign country, and characterized by absolute difference. Indeed, it can be argued that what is of particular note in the contemporary condition is the increasing visibility and impact of 'China' *inside* the West (and beyond), unsettling and directing governance and social practice within nation-states around the world as they try to manage their relationship with China. In other words, 'global China' today is also a local phenomenon.

In this article, I will examine this entanglement of the rise of China within spaces outside China by focusing on an urban artefact that is both global and local: Chinatown. I will begin my examination with a discussion of Sydney's Chinatown, and Chinatowns in Australia more generally, to provide a case study of a long-established Chinatown whose historical evolution, especially in the past two decades, has been influenced thoroughly by forces and developments associated with the rise of China. While the Sydney case is overdetermined by a particular configuration of geographic, social, economic, and political specificities, its story is told here to shed light on more general and generic tendencies to be found in Chinatowns elsewhere. I will then move on to describe the dissemination of the Chinatown idea as an urban 'brand', embraced by many cities—often in collaboration with local and transnational Chinese entrepreneurs—to take advantage of the perceived opportunities emerging from the rise of China in the globalized neoliberal economy. Finally, I will discuss how Chinatown-making projects in cities the world over are also often controversial endeavours, associated as much with perceived threats as with the imagined opportunities promised by the rise of China.

## Sydney's Chinatown: from ethnic enclave to icon of multiculturalism to global hub

Areas known as Chinatown exist in cities throughout the world, although not, evidently, in China itself. Chinatowns are generally known as 'Chinese enclaves' outside China, where Chinese emigrants have

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clustered and created a 'home away from home'. Wherever they are located, Chinatowns have traditionally been considered by locals as quintessentially 'Chinese'. As spatially circumscribed areas in major cities in the West and elsewhere, they are seen—from the outside—as areas of 'otherness', inhabited by strange, self-enclosed, and inward-looking Chinese communities who are holding onto their own cultural traditions in a foreign land. In the Western imagination, Chinatown's presumed Chineseness has long been subject to both fascination and repulsion: these are areas whose identities have been constructed as antithetical to the countries within which they are embedded. As Kay Anderson (1990, 140) observes with regard to Chinatowns in Australia, '"Chinatown" has been a locus for the renewal of white Australian conceptions of the Chinese for over a century.' Thus, in common understandings, the Australianness of Sydney's Chinatown, for example, tends to be downplayed; instead it is the area's Chinese characteristics that are highlighted to stress its exotic difference. In this context too we are confronted with the captivating tenacity of essentializing Orientalist discourse: just like China, Chinatown is constructed as a bounded yet deterritorialized space, set apart from the rest of the city and absolutely different from it. Yet, in order to understand the evolution of any particular Chinatown, its entanglement and connection with its metropolitan surroundings need to be taken into account.

The history of Chinese immigration into Australia dates back to the mid-nineteenth century onwards, when thousands of Chinese sojourners, mostly from the southern provinces of Guangdong and Fujian, were attracted to the Australian goldfields. In Sydney, Chinese settlement began in the 1860s, first in Lower George Street close to the main wharves and later in the Haymarket and Dixon Street district, close to the markets where many working class Chinese worked (Fitzgerald 2008). However, Australia's so-called White Australia Policy, which stipulated that Australia as a nation-state should be reserved for the white race, legitimized pervasive anti-Chinese sentiment and the introduction of myriad discriminatory practices, which constrained the residential choices and living conditions of people of Chinese origin in the cities (Curthoys 2001; Irving 1999; Markus 1979; Yarwood 1968). The areas where they congregated, which we now know as Chinatown (although this term was an American import that was not used in those early days), was commonly perceived as a squalid no-go zone, subjected to common raids of reputed gambling and opium dens, and intensely scrutinized by successive generations of building and licence inspectors, police, magistrates, councillors, and other officials.

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While this space was long despised as an 'ethnic ghetto' by mainstream Western society, for Chinese themselves it has long functioned as a refuge from the hostile environment of white hegemony. Chinatown, in other words, was a pre-eminent diasporic space where Chinese immigrants in the West created places that gave them a safe haven and sense of communal belonging (Fitzgerald 2008; Ang 2016). The memory of this history is an important part of the heritage of Chinese in Australia. The White Australia Policy, which lasted until the early 1970s, thus had a profound impact on the sense of identity of Chinese in Australia. In this diasporic context their Chineseness was, to a significant degree, informed by their historical status as a marginalized minority, an unwanted, racialized 'other'. It is for this reason that to this day, Chinatown retains its symbolic and material significance in the narration of Chinese diasporic history.

Sydney's Chinatown today is a very different kind of place. Change began in the 1970s, when Australia—like other Western nations such as the United States and Canada—discarded immigration restrictions on Chinese and other non-white migrants and began to embrace policies of multiculturalism (which emphasized the celebration of ethnic and cultural diversity as a result of the global influx of migrants). In this context, the area that once carried the stigma of an abhorrent, dirty slum—symbolizing the *threat* posed by Chinese to Western society—gained the reputation of being a valuable contribution to a pluralistic, culturally diverse Australia. In this changed ideological context, Chinatown was turned into 'a symbol of difference to be protected rather than censured; revitalized, not left to the levelling forces of assimilation' (Anderson 1990, 137). In other words, Chinatown became an icon for Australian multiculturalism, an object of official love rather than hate. In Sydney, as elsewhere, the city government saw an *opportunity* to promote the 'exotic potential' of Chinatown in a bid to enhance urban revitalization and economic development (Collins and Kuntz 2007). Chinatown was cleaned up and Dixon Street was converted into a pedestrian mall. Local Chinese businesses eagerly made donations to the refurbishment of Sydney's Chinatown to highlight the area's Chinese 'atmosphere'. As Anderson (1990, 147) puts it, 'entrepreneurs of Chinese origin were well able to manipulate and appropriate the symbols of "Chineseness" that white Australians had come to expect in Chinatown'. They supported the local government in the design of 'a total Chinatown concept', in which selected elements of a timeless 'Chinese' culture were transplanted to Dixon Street, which saw the erection in 1980 of two ceremonial archways to delineate the

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distinctiveness of the precinct. As a consequence, Chinatown became known in the public mind primarily as a restaurant and entertainment sector, a place for tourists to go and visitors to sample Chinese food and culture. As one Sydney Chinatown businessman remarked in 1986, 'Chinatown has grown up and the unsavoury ghetto days are over. The politicians respect us now because they see Chinatown as a valuable attraction' (quoted in Anderson 1990, 141).

By the second decade of the twenty-first century, Sydney's Chinatown has become an integral part of the hurly-burly of the larger global city, even though it has retained its precinct identity as Chinatown (see Anderson et al. 2019). The area continues to host a dense concentration of Chinese businesses, restaurants, grocery and herbal medicine stores, community associations, and so on, but it is now a much more diverse area with fluid boundaries, with many Japanese, Thai, Korean, and other Asian restaurants and shops also setting up in the area. The past ten to 15 years or so has seen the rapid growth and diversification of the resident population in the precinct, many of whom are international students from Asia, who now occupy the tower blocks that have been erected in the surrounding area. According to the 2016 Australian Census about 65 per cent of the Haymarket/Chinatown population were Asia-born, up from less than 50 per cent in 2001 (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2016).

Nevertheless, the most rapid growth in the area's population was among student migrants from the People's Republic of China. This increased presence of mainland Chinese young people is one manifestation of the multifarious ways in which Sydney's Chinatown—and Sydney more generally—has become deeply enmeshed with the consequences of the rise of China. In the 1980s and 1990s real estate agents made a lot of money by selling properties to Hong Kong investors and migrants who were anxious about the Hong Kong handover to China (in 1997), but many of these people have now sold up and either moved on or moved their assets back to China. Today, they have been replaced mostly by mainland Chinese and Singaporean property developers, whose deep pockets and ambitious projects are helping to transform Sydney's southern central business district (CBD) area, where Chinatown is strategically located (Hawken 2015). Despite recent stricter controls on outbound investments by the Chinese government, in 2017 mainland Chinese remained by far the biggest buyers of property, not just in Chinatown, but across Sydney and Australia more generally (as well as globally) (Gottliebsen 2013; Rogers, Lee and Yan 2015; Lane 2018).

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Chinese tourism is also a core focus for the area's economic development. The New South Wales state government has a dedicated China Tourism Strategy to capitalize on the burgeoning market of tourists from mainland China, and Chinatown is seen as an important drawcard in that regard. Statistics show that of all international visitors to Sydney, nearly half (44 per cent) visited Chinatown and that visitors from China were by far the largest proportion of all visitors (28 per cent) (Destination NSW 2012, 2018).

The fast-growing presence and influence of Chinese from the People's Republic of China has had a marked impact on Chinatown, both culturally and economically. For example, the area has seen the arrival of a plethora of regional Chinese restaurants and karaoke bars catering specifically to Chinese students and tourists from the mainland. Mandarin is now the most common Chinese language spoken at home in the area, far overtaking Cantonese, which was the most prevalent language among older Chinese communities, whose ancestry was mostly in Guangdong province (Australia Bureau of Statistics 2016). Just like in Hong Kong, local Chinese businesses now feel the need for staff to learn Mandarin in order to communicate with a mainland Chinese clientele. These local manifestations of 'global China' have also led to some tensions with long-time Chinese Australians. As a lending manager at a local bank, a Malaysian Chinese who has worked in Sydney's Chinatown since the late 1990s and who speaks both Cantonese and Mandarin, comments: 'When I first went to Chinatown I spoke Cantonese all day. Now it's shifted to speaking Mandarin all day.' He also observes, from personal professional experience, that there is not much mixing between the Cantonese and Mandarin speakers. 'They are totally different cultures. They don't mix a lot. Southern Chinese in general—they don't like the Mandarin speaking people.' An old-time Australian Chinese community activist stresses that the influx of mainland Chinese has brought major investments into Chinatown, but 'we just find it hard to communicate and cooperate with them'. Another Chinese Australian community leader, who first came to Chinatown in Sydney in the late 1950s, also stressed '[there is a] distinction between the early Chinese who are fully integrated, and all the new ones who are coming out, and especially those who have come out from the PRC, because their system of government and what they're used to is quite different from here'. Referring to the final ending of the White Australia Policy and the discriminatory immigration regime in the 1970s, she continues by saying that the newer Chinese immigrants 'do not have any idea of what a lot of the

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early Chinese had to suffer in order for them to come in as virtually equals'.[1]

There is, then, a sense of disconnect between older generation Chinatown locals, whose outlook tends to be underpinned by their Australian citizenship, and newer generations of migrants from China, whose orientations are more transnational and China-centric (Li 2017). They certainly do not tend to consider themselves as part of one community based on a shared sense of Chineseness (Ang 2014). For older Chinese Australians, Chinatown's significance is linked directly to a historical past in which the enclave provided a refuge from their status as marginalized 'other'. Today, the evolution of Sydney's Chinatown is increasingly dominated by the economic, social, and cultural impact of a rising China. In this context, one might suggest that the legacy of Chinatown's past could be under threat. But, while maintaining the area's cultural heritage is an important concern for the local community, the predominant focus of local and transnational entrepreneurs alike is on seizing the opportunity rather than dwelling on the threat posed by China's rise. In this context, today Sydney's Chinatown has become a dynamic, Asian-accented, transnational hub of flows of people, money, and cultural trends, thoroughly transformed by the geopolitical and socio-economic shifts emanating from the rise of China.

This development has taken place with the active participation of the Sydney City Council, which has sought to modernize Chinatown and to upgrade the area's streetscape and amenities by investing millions of dollars in a Chinatown Public Domain Plan (City of Sydney 2010). It included the commissioning of new works of public art by well-known Chinese Australian artists, which strengthened the area's contemporary look and feel, while also transcending the essentializing Orientalist design characteristic of traditional Chinatowns (Ang 2017). For example, in 2012 an old, unused pagoda was turned into a luminous artwork-cum-information kiosk, which received a number of prestigious design and architecture awards. The kiosk was one of only three in the Sydney CBD, signifying the importance apportioned to Chinatown. At the same time,

[1] Empirical observations and interview extracts in this section are derived from fieldwork conducted for the project 'Sydney's Chinatown in the Asian Century: From Ethnic Enclave to Global Hub', funded by the Australian Research Council (LP120200311), with Ien Ang, Donald McNeill, and Kay Anderson as chief investigators and Alexandra Wong as a research associate, in collaboration with the City of Sydney. See further Anderson et al. 2019.

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the city has used its Chinatown strategically to leverage its endeavours to establish closer economic links with China. As in many other cities around the world, Sydney's Chinatown is a central site of the annual lunar New Year celebrations, when the city sponsors a fortnight-long festival with dozens of special events such as dragon boat races, Asian food markets, and spectacular Lunar New Year performances featuring lion dances conducted by Chinese and other Asian community groups. Supporting the Lunar New Year celebrations serves a dual purpose: it is both an act of community cultural recognition and a strategic economic initiative, where the festival, centred in Chinatown, is used to attract Chinese tourists to Sydney, bringing millions of dollars into the local economy. As a leading Chinatown activist says, 'The economic benefit will spread out of Chinatown across the city' (Thompson 2016). Importantly, the City of Sydney routinely organizes a major business forum to coincide with the festivities, bringing together delegations from China with industry and government leaders in Sydney to share insights on economic opportunities in China as well as across Asia. As part of its economic strategic plan, the city also provides grants to the Haymarket Chamber of Commerce, which represents local businesses in Chinatown, to promote the area's Chinese identity (for example, by sponsoring walking tours in the area). In this way, Sydney's Chinatown is being enlisted explicitly in the city's economic strategy to link its future to its involvement with a rising China, that is, viewing China's rise as *opportunity*. As one commentator observes: 'The new Chinatown is a dynamic global space, an experiment in the new economic relationships between China and Australia' (Hawken 2015).

## Taking the opportunity: capitalizing on the Chinatown brand

In Sydney, then, Chinatown has evolved from being an ethnic enclave, marginalized from dominant white society, to being positioned as a central site for transnational linkages in the context of a globalized economy increasingly fuelled by Chinese investment, business, and trade. From being the embodiment of a perception that the presence of Chinese was seen as a *threat* to civilized society, Chinatown has become the incarnation of the belief that China presents *opportunity*, especially in economic terms. Here, Chinatown has been incorporated within the dominant neoliberal logic of urban development, which has seen investment in the area by both government and private developers, that capitalizes on Chinatown's potency as an urban 'brand': a way of

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objectifying and exploiting the area's distinct cultural profile—that is, its nominal Chineseness—for strategic economic positioning vis-à-vis the rise of China.

This capitalization of Chinatown as an urban place brand has been an increasingly global phenomenon (Del Bono 2019). In many cities around the world, Chinatowns are now recognizable as branded precincts with highly distinguishable architectural, design, and cultural characteristics. The ubiquitous ornamental archways, or *paifang*, which can be found in Chinatowns around the world to mark their boundaries, are a case in point. They were often erected by local governments in collaboration with local Chinese entrepreneurs, often with financial assistance from either the People's Republic of China or Taiwan, to highlight the Chineseness of these areas (Allen-Kim 2013). The first such archway in the United States was built in San Francisco's Chinatown as late as 1970, with financial assistance from the Taiwanese government (Tsui 2009). Sydney's archways, as mentioned, were erected in 1980. Since then many self-respecting cities have rushed to build such archways to demarcate their Chinatowns as essentially 'Chinese' spaces. This is part of an urban development strategy that was widely embraced from the 1970s onwards for Chinatowns throughout the Western world. Together with the archways, other paraphernalia of Chinese culture—such as red lanterns, pagodas, green-tiled upturned roofs, and Chinese gardens as well as annual Chinese New Year festivals, with their inevitable dragon and lion dance performances or traditional Chinese opera—have been installed as attractions to entice tourists into the area, promising visitors a truly 'Chinese' experience. As Anderson (1990, 150) observes: 'Making the area more "Chinese" seemed to mean making the area appear more consistent with the architectural motifs and symbols of ancient China.'

As we have seen in Sydney, diasporic Chinese themselves have often actively contributed to the Orientalization of Chinatowns (McDonogh and Wong 2012), performing what Umbach and Wishnoff (2008) have called 'strategic self-Orientalism'. Ironically, however, this purposeful material display of Orientalist Chineseness took place at a time when these areas had begun to undergo rapid change, as Western societies became more open to racial and ethnic diversity, and adopted visions of multiculturalism. More than ever before, Chinese immigrants and their descendants were branching outwards into the suburbs, as they became increasingly integrated into the national societies within which they found themselves (Li 2009; Inglis 2013). As such, many Chinatowns have become more or less detached from the communities that

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historically sustained them, and their continued existence in an era of neoliberal urban restructuring depends strongly on active interventions by city governments as well as local and transnational Chinese entrepreneurs. And as we have seen in the case of Sydney, Chinatown is valued because it is considered an asset to the city in an age when economic fortune depends so strongly on attracting capital investment, trade, and tourism from China.

However, such a development is not the universal trajectory of Chinatowns around the world. Manchester's Chinatown in the United Kingdom, for example, has seen a very different fate (Barabantseva 2016). This Chinatown, as with others in the United Kingdom, had its boom time in the 1980s and 1990s, when the city's urban regeneration efforts, just like in Sydney, embraced multiculturalism as a policy platform and designated Chinatown as a circumscribed, ethnically essentialized space valorized for ethno-specific economic development and tourist consumption. Manchester Chinatown's *paifang*, an Imperial Arch that was a gift from Wuhan, Manchester's sister city in China, was erected in 1987. However, by the early twenty-first century, unlike in Sydney, the Manchester City Council had lost interest in its Chinatown. In the context of neoliberal urban development taking place in the new century, Chinatown was deemed old fashioned and not fit for the purpose of the city's new, cosmopolitan ambitions. As Barabantseva (2016, 108) observes: 'The sociocultural label of Chinatown as an underdeveloped place representing Chinese traditional culture prevents the area from being included in the city's marketing campaign, which stresses the city's ultramodern character.' In the city's marketing flyer intended to attract Chinese investors, Chinatown is expressly not included in the portrayal of Manchester as a 'vibrant, futuristic and European city'. In other words, here Chinatown is *not* treated as an urban asset in order to take advantage of the opportunity presented by the economic rise of China. As a result, Manchester's Chinatown is neglected and faces a precarious future.

This is also the case for other established Chinatowns in the West, especially in the United States. For example, there have been reports on 'the end of Chinatown' as traditional Chinatowns (such as those in San Francisco and New York) are becoming depopulated, not only because Chinese migrants have moved on to the suburbs, but also because increasing numbers are deciding to return to China to pursue 'the Chinese Dream', inverting the 'American Dream' which brought migrants to the United States in the past (Tsui 2011, 2014; Gammage 2013). In Houston, meanwhile, neoliberal urban revival efforts from the

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late twentieth century onwards have resulted in the erasure of Houston's downtown Chinatown as local Chinese entrepreneurs were squeezed out by the redevelopment initiatives of the city government, which directed public funds to large-scale urban growth projects elsewhere (Knapp and Vojnovic 2013). Failure to capitalize on the Chinatown opportunity thus leads to the decline of these precincts.

However, neoliberal urban development does not necessarily lead to a downturn in the relevance of Chinatown. On the contrary, the very idea of Chinatown as an urban brand can also operate as a driver of such development. Thus, some cities that did without a Chinatown in the past have been keen to erect completely new, artificial Chinatowns in response to increased Chinese and Asian immigration and, importantly, the growing economic clout of China. As in the case of Sydney, such new Chinatown projects tend to be the outcomes of neoliberal complicity between Chinese entrepreneurs and city governments.

An example is the Las Vegas Chinatown, which prides itself on being 'America's first master-planned Chinatown', built in the late 1990s to profit from the cachet of the Chinatown brand and consisting mainly of large Asian shopping malls, restaurants, and supermarkets (Tsui 2009, 2011). Founded by James Chen, a businessman who migrated to Los Angeles from Taiwan in 1971, the purpose of Las Vegas Chinatown was not to target the local Chinese population, which was not very sizeable anyway; it was to attract the swelling numbers of Chinese and other Asian tourists who frequented Las Vegas's casinos, but had nowhere to go for Chinese food. In Chen's words: 'One thing about a Chinatown is the food—it's the big draw. You know you will find it there' (quoted in Tsui 2009, 201). Las Vegas Chinatown, in short, was built especially for the commercial pursuit of Chinese tourists, although it soon galvanized local Chinese and other Asian communities as well, engendering 'a fully functioning Chinatown' (Tsui 2009, 211).

In establishing this new Chinatown, however, the initiators did not want to replicate the traditional image of the Chinatowns of an earlier era, associated as they were with narrow streets, unsanitary living conditions, and cheap food and merchandise. In other words, in the era of China's rise, the idea of Chinatown had to be remade as a thoroughly modern place, displacing the perceived non-modernity of the traditional Chinatown as the space of an inferior 'other'. As Chen observed:

> In American culture, 'Chinatown' also means negative things. It means filthy, gritty, dirty, produce on the street, people only speak Chinese, isolated, doesn't care about anybody else, or even worse … And to be in a new city, Las

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Vegas, I knew we had to be better. In creating our Chinatown, the Chinese image was at stake … It had to be a modern Chinatown befitting this modern city (quoted in Tsui 2009, 214).

In North Carolina, near Durham-Raleigh International Airport, the creation of Chinatown has been envisaged, privately funded by both American and Chinese investors. Here, too, a desire to *modernize* the idea of Chinatown is at play, in line with the image of a newly powerful, modern China. Initiator Lian Xie, head of the local Chinese business association, who migrated to the United States 20 years ago, had this to say about this new Chinatown:

We represent the newer generation of Chinese Americans. We've always wanted to change the image of Chinatowns in the minds of Americans. Many of the old, large Chinatowns developed without planning and are dirty and less developed as a result. But China has changed so much in the last few decades, and that Chinatown doesn't reflect the image of modern China. We want to create something that reflects the new China—a carefully designed, high-end Chinatown that is truly modern (quoted in Dawson 2013).

By late 2015 the realization of this ambitious plan was stalled due to disagreement over the project's overall vision among the investors (Sabin 2015). Nevertheless, the ambition remains and it exemplifies the heightened connection between the Chinatown idea as a brand and the rise of China.

There is more traction to a similar plan in North Miami, where the proposal to develop a new Chinatown was approved by the city council in 2016 (Ashley 2016). The plan, championed by the North Miami vice-mayor, Alix Desulme, in collaboration with the American Da Tang Group (a company that provides real estate services for wealthy Chinese wishing to invest in the United States), is to transform a 16-block commercially zoned land in a poor African-American and Haitian area of the city into a thriving Chinatown that would attract real estate investors, entrepreneurs, and tourists. An engineering consulting company was contracted to develop a masterplan, for which a brainstorming session involving real estate agents, business owners, and local residents was organized with live-streaming to potential investors in China (Bojnansky 2017). By mid-2018, the plan had progressed to architectural design stage, including for two ceremonial arches, while talks with potential Chinese investors were said to be continuing, despite the Trump administration's trade war with China (Lewin 2018).

Such new Chinatown-making projects are not confined to the United States, but occur around the world. In Australia's Gold Coast City, for example, a Chinatown has been created from scratch since 2011 without

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any prior history of Chinese or Asian culture or businesses in the designated area. The carefully planned new precinct is demarcated by three specially designed archways, dedicated to 'Harmony', 'Harvest', and 'Wealth', developed in collaboration with sister cities Zhuhai, Beihai, and Taipei. This modern Chinatown has been drawn up as a way of revitalizing an ailing part of the city's CBD and is envisaged specifically to attract Chinese business, investment, and tourism. As a Gold Coast City councillor put it: 'Obviously there is a massive market in China that we want to appeal to and encourage people to come here and enjoy being part of a Chinatown experience' (quoted in Marshall and Varley 2012).

Importantly, new interest in capitalizing on the Chinatown brand is also strong beyond the Western world. In Southeast Asia, for example, where there have been large overseas Chinese populations for centuries, Chinese quarters have long existed, although the label 'Chinatown' is a Western import. In Singapore, for example, a dedicated Chinatown should arguably be meaningless given that the majority of this city-state's population is of Chinese descent. However, since the 1980s the Singapore government has pursued rigorous urban development policies designed to revitalize the heritage landscape of various ethnic districts, including its Chinatown, whose provenance dates from colonial times. Millions of dollars were spent on a facelift 'to bring out the full flavour of the place's sights, sounds and smells' and 'enhance the Chinatown experience' to bolster the tourism industry (Yeoh and Kong 2012, 137). By the 2010s, Singapore's theme park-like Chinatown had become one of the most frequently visited tourist destinations in the city and a major magnet for tourists not only from Europe, but also from Taiwan, Hong Kong, and China itself.

In South Korea, a country which did not have an official Chinatown until the 2000s, the idea of Chinatown began to circulate in earnest after the 1997 financial crisis, which was a crucial moment for China's economic ascendancy in Asia (Lanteigne 2005). Several reports recommended the establishment of Chinatowns in the country, ostensibly propelled by the vision that in the brave new world of a dominant China in the global economy, no country could do without a Chinatown, envisaged not as an ethnic enclave but as the spatial launching pad for connections with transnational Chinese economic networks (Eom 2017). In the early 2000s the Korean government revitalized an old Chinese settler district to create a new, modern Chinatown in Incheon, complete with Chinese arches and lanterns, to attract Chinese investors and tourists. Today the Incheon Chinatown is

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Korea's only official Chinatown. However, to date, the absence of a critical mass of Chinese businesses in the area has inhibited the development of a dynamic Chinatown (Tan 2013).

On the other side of the globe, a similar situation evolved in San José, the capital city of Costa Rica, where a completely new Chinatown was inaugurated in 2012 (DeHart 2015). The establishment of this Chinatown was directly linked to the impact of the rise of China in a country that had switched its diplomatic ties from Taiwan to the People's Republic of China in 2007. Since then Costa Rica has seen the influx of massive Chinese business, tourism, investment, and government largesse, including the donation of a huge new stadium (which was built by 700 Chinese workers brought in exclusively for the task). The idea of a new Chinatown was conceived by San José's mayor as a way of materializing the visibility of the city's burgeoning connection with China, and it was built in collaboration with the city of Beijing, which donated money and expertise to construct the Tang Dynasty-inspired archway to mark the Chinatown entrance. However, soon after the grand opening of this new Chinatown the project was widely considered to be an utter failure, economically at least, evidenced by vacant buildings, sparse foot traffic, and only a handful of shops bearing the stereotypical signs of Chinese culture. When Chinese President Xi Jinping visited San José in July 2013, he decided to skip a visit to this Chinatown (DeHart 2015, 201).

These brand-new Chinatowns are artefacts of a globalized neoliberal economy, where cities and nations around the world have been counting on projections of a continuing rise of China for their own future prosperity. In these instances of what could perhaps be called Orientalist modernism, the idea of Chinatown has evolved in perfect harmony with the rise of China. Importantly, such initiatives are often propelled by local city governments, who are only too keen to embrace the imagined benefits of having a Chinatown within their boundaries. Here, Chinatown is associated with the *opportunity* seemingly promised by the rise of China. However, as the case of San José shows, embracing the Chinatown brand as a way to capitalize on this opportunity by no means guarantees success.

## Contesting Chinatown: between opportunity and threat

With the ascendancy of the neoliberal idea of Chinatown as a global urban brand, Chinatown has become irrevocably linked to its perceived

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benefits as an economic bridge to an increasingly powerful China. In this regard, having a thriving, modern Chinatown is a signal of a city's international stature, where older meanings of Chinatown as a refuge for a marginalized ethnic minority—or even as a proud multicultural icon—are being superseded. The newly fabricated Chinatowns of the twenty-first century tend to depend on the sponsorship of newer generations of Chinese migrants, mostly business people hailing from the mainland, who are Mandarin-speaking and have little connection with the histories of racism, exclusion, and communalism associated with the traditional Chinatowns.

The extinction of the old, though, is not inevitable. Diverse forms of local Chinese activism can generate quite different trajectories for traditional Chinatowns. For example, in Vancouver, Canada, there has been intense debate about the fate of its Chinatown, which is one of the oldest in North America, but whose traditional Cantonese cultural fabric is at risk of disappearing (Ley 2010). In this city, which has a strong community of Hong Kong migrants, a local art gallery recently mounted an exhibition in defence of the 'Canto-sphere' and to protest 'the "ominous" signs of Mandarinization of Chinatown in recent years' (Klassen 2015). A recent billboard advertising a new condominium development sporting the greeting 'Ni Hao' (Mandarin for 'hello') in large letters was seen as a slap in the face of the local Cantonese-speaking community. Vancouver's determination to remain a Cantonese city is also evident in the University of British Columbia's decision to reject four offers from the Confucius Institute, the Chinese government's cultural diplomacy body, to expand its teaching of Mandarin. Instead, it introduced a course in Cantonese, funded by a gift from a couple of Hong Kong philanthropists (*The Economist* 2015). In such instances, the rise of China is associated more with *threat* than with opportunity.

The case of Vancouver demonstrates that the fate of any particular Chinatown depends on local circumstances, including governmental considerations, national and urban politics, and local community activism. Here, we can see how Chinatown becomes a contested site, reflecting different and contradictory perceptions of the rise of China: regarded variously not just as opportunity, nor just as threat, but as a complex amalgam of the two. In other words, although Chinatown as an urban brand has acquired global salience, with more and more cities around the world being attracted to the idea of having a Chinatown as a useful strategic asset, local and national dynamics play a crucial role in contestations over the reception and implementation of Chinatown-making designs. The above-mentioned San José project, for

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example, was very controversial, with many locals, including those of Chinese descent, who were not consulted, pointing out that the designated area had few property owners and residents of Chinese origin (the city's ethnic Chinese population is diffusely spread throughout the city). The area was also a significant site for the history of Costa Rica in its fight against dictatorship and corruption, leading critics to associate the new Chinatown with the potential threat posed to Costa Rica's national integrity and identity by China's growing influence (DeHart 2015).

The examples of Vancouver and San José suggest that controversy over the making of Chinatowns varies in the extent to which local ethnic Chinese communities are involved, and the ways in which they relate to the increasingly dominant power of China. While in Vancouver activism was focused on defending a traditional Chinatown, in San José the issue centred on the creation of a new Chinatown where there was not one before. To show how widely distributed are the contestations over Chinatown around the world, signalling how the impact of China's global rise has become a matter of concern everywhere, I will provide two further case studies—Japan and Malaysia—where the establishment of Chinatowns has been fiercely contested, and two final case studies — New Zealand and Portugal—where proposals to establish Chinatowns were ultimately rejected.

Japan's relationship with Chinatowns has a peculiar history. Chinese settlements have existed in the country since the late nineteenth century, primarily located in port cities such as Yokohama, but these areas were not turned into proper Chinatowns until much later (Eom 2013). The Yokohama Chinatown, which is promoted as the largest in Asia and is one of three official Chinatowns in Japan (the other two being in Kobe and Nagasaki), derived its modern origins in the 1950s when city officials, faced with the need to rebuild the city in the post-war period, decided to develop the Chinese quarter into a proper Chinatown. Interestingly, this Japanese construction of a Chinatown was modelled after American Chinatowns such as that in San Francisco, perceived by the Japanese—who were subjected to hegemonic American forces after Japan's capitulation in the Second World War—as a desirable urban form for a modernizing city (Eom 2017). Since the 1970s, when the normalization of Japan's relationship with the People's Republic of China took place, Yokohama Chinatown has boomed, primarily as a tourist destination for Japan's new middle classes (Yamashita 2003). The more recent redevelopment of Kobe's Chinatown was more directly linked to China's rising economic clout. After the 1995 earthquake,

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which devastated the city, Kobe's city government attempted to link the city's economy to that of Shanghai, then the urban epitome of China's rise in the 1990s, and undertook to attract Chinese capital by investing in an artificial, gentrified Chinatown (Yamashita 2003).

Meanwhile, an informal 'new Chinatown' has emerged in the Ikebukuro district in Tokyo, an area which has seen a proliferation of Chinese businesses and restaurants due to a major influx of new migrants from the Chinese mainland, especially since the 1990s. In August 2008 a group of Chinese businesses, naming themselves the Promotion Committee for the Tokyo Chinatown, declared—without consulting the local community—the establishment of a Chinatown in Ikebukuro, coinciding with the opening ceremony of the Beijing Olympics. This plan was met with furious resistance from local (Japanese) residents, who objected to the creation of a Chinese enclave in the city (Yamashita 2011). The episode prompted some strong anti-Chinese activism, reflecting the heightened international tensions between China and Japan in recent years, whipped up by incidents such as the anti-Japanese riots in China in 2005 and the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands dispute. Here we see clearly how the idea of Chinatown can act as a lightning rod for anxieties spawned by a more assertive, powerful China.

In Malaysia, the situation is different due to the complicated inter-ethnic relations in that country. The area around Petaling Street in Kuala Lumpur, which has historically been a concentration of Chinese settlement and business activities in the city, has long been referred to informally as the city's Chinatown, but proposals to formally rebrand the area as such in the 1990s met with protests from nationalist Malay groups, who saw it as an attempt to highlight Chinese culture (Tan 2013). Moreover, many local ethnic Chinese Malaysians were also fiercely opposed to the Chinatown label, seeing it as a derogatory Western concept and as symbolic of their minority, second-class citizen status within the Malaysian nation (Loo 2012). Nevertheless, the government decided to give the area a huge facelift in 2003, at which point it was turned into Kuala Lumpur's official Chinatown—named as such on tourist maps—by the placement of two Chinese arches at either end of the street to welcome visitors. A green roof cover was constructed, dubbed the 'Green Dragon', covering the whole street, which was transformed into a pedestrian shopping mall selling stereotypical Chinese paraphernalia. Here, the heralding of a Chinatown by the state went hand in hand with the symbolic identification of a homogenized Chineseness at the expense of the diverse local heritages of Malaysians of Chinese descent.

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Meanwhile, in Auckland, New Zealand, a recent proposal to develop a Chinatown in the city received mixed reactions (Spoonley and Meares 2011). Proponents argued that if Auckland wanted to be taken seriously as a world city, it needed a Chinatown. Opponents, however, were uncomfortable with the rehashing of the ethnic enclave idea in a city where Chinese migration is a relatively recent phenomenon (Rudman 2011). The proposal was given an emphatic thumbs down by local Chinese young people, who dismissed what they call the 'Chinatown state of mind' as an outdated 'ethnic ghetto' mentality (Mok 2005). These young Chinese New Zealanders resisted the confirmation of their minority status as Chinese, which the creation of a Chinatown would presumably represent, and preferred to see the multicultural metropolis they live in develop into an intercultural, hybrid 'Asia-Pacifican' city, where their identities are not constrained by the essentializing imposition of a China-centric 'Chineseness', but are fully immersed within the multicultural local realities of this city on the southern end of the Pacific Rim. Ultimately, Auckland decided not to have its own Chinatown.

Finally, on the other side of the world, in Lisbon, Portugal, a proposal to establish a Chinatown in 2007 was also rejected after months of heated debate (Santos 2013). The Chinese immigrant presence in Portugal is relatively recent: the majority of Chinese, mostly from the People's Republic of China, only started arriving in the 1990s and their number is estimated to be only in the thousands. Nevertheless, their commercial activities—primarily discount retail as well as import and wholesale business—managed to unsettle the Lisbon downtown and were quickly seen as a threat to native Portuguese small business. In response, the coordinator of the Downtown Lisbon Urban Renewal Program proposed the demarcation of a proper Chinatown within the city where Chinese businesses would be concentrated and confined. Chinese entrepreneurs and shopkeepers were in favour of such a move, seeing the creation of a highly visible Chinatown not only as beneficial for their economic ventures but also as public recognition by the city government. Right-wing politicians were generally in favour, while left-wing politicians, NGOs, and some city council officials reacted against the proposal, seeing it as 'ghetto creation'. Meanwhile, youths of Chinese descent living in the city, similarly to those in Auckland, also expressed concerns, feeling 'anxiety about the possible consequences for future generations of the creation of such an encircled "Chinese space"' (Santos 2013, 240). This despite the fact that they also admitted enjoying going to Chinatowns in other cities for the social identification

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and cultural intimacy such visits afforded them. For them, however, this opportunity was outstripped by their unwillingness to be associated with the perceived China threat symbolized by the idea of a Chinatown in their city.

## Conclusion

The idea of Chinatown has become a salient urban development concept, as many cities around the world consider having a Chinatown as a means of attracting Chinese investment, business, and tourism. The rise of China, in other words, has given rise to a kind of globalization of Chinatowns, where Chinatown—as a branded urban form and idea—is associated with a neoliberal logic which positions China as an almost irresistible economic opportunity, amplified all too often by the self-Orientalizing gestures of migrant Chinese entrepreneurs who see themselves as representatives of the new, modern China. However, while some cities have adopted the Chinatown idea as a way of capitalizing on that opportunity, others have rejected it because they associate Chinatown more with the threat posed by China's rise. In other words, Chinatown now operates as a metaphor for the world's ambivalence about the rise of China: oscillatingly embraced as 'opportunity' or feared as 'threat'.

At the same time, the proliferation of Chinatowns is also an index of the increasingly palpable and undeniable presence of 'global China' in local contexts everywhere. This is what the rise of China actually implies: the insertion of 'China' into local experience, shaping and commanding interests, aspirations, and anxieties. In this regard, China can no longer be kept at bay as a distant 'other': its extensions are now too proximate, too intricately enmeshed within different urban and national realities across continents. However, this development also highlights the importance of developing a more nuanced and differentiated understanding of 'global China', by *transcending* its homogenized dichotomous construction as a giant hegemon that is either an 'opportunity' or a 'threat'. As Huynh (2015, 105) observes: 'Against the backdrop of China's rise, all things Chinese—from China's international policy to Chinese values, tradition and even, people—have been lumped together under the umbrella category of "China".' If we are to come to terms with the realities of an increasingly powerful and visible China, however, we should recognize the diversity and plurality of what 'China' and 'Chinese' actually represent, in

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ways that go beyond the Orientalist stereotypes which sustain the idea of 'Chinatown'. To explain what this might mean, let me return briefly to Sydney's Chinatown, with which I will conclude this article.

In the Sydney context, there is a disjuncture between the branding of Chinatown as essentially Chinese, on the one hand, and its dynamically mixed-up and hybrid reality on the ground, on the other, where remnants of the old Chinatown jostle with new developments, as the area becomes a transnational intersection of activity in a city increasingly connected with China and the Asia Pacific region more broadly. In this regard, as Christine Inglis (2013, 111) observes, 'Chinatown reflects the broader "Asianization" of Sydney as a city, even as it is presented to the world as being quintessentially "Chinese".' Here, the continuing Orientalist exoticization of Chinatown needs to be juxtaposed with the actual economic, cultural, and social processes through which 'global China' is neither just threat nor just opportunity, but complexly interwoven within the multiplicity of (trans)local transactions and ordinary cosmopolitan interactions which make up the city in the interconnected world of the twenty-first century.

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