Precariously at home: Chinatown in Sydney, Australia in Asia

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In its recent white paper entitled 'Australia in the Asian Century' (Australian Government 2012), the Australian government states that, for the first time in history, Australia is 'in the right place at the right time'. It is as if Australia has finally accepted its location in the Asian region. While a century ago white Australian consciousness was dominated by a sense of 'tyranny of distance' — experiencing itself as a far-flung colony of Europe located in an alien region of the world — today, in this so-called Asian century, Australia is only too keen to pronounce itself as belonging to the Asian region, constantly referred to in the white paper as 'our' region. But does this mean that Australia is now *at home* in Asia?

Home is not just a matter of geography, of *where* home is, but also of history, culture and politics. So if the condition of home amounts to our capacity to feel a sense of belonging, then feeling *at* home can only be arrived at if we succeed in claiming a space — the space where we find ourselves located — *as* home not just because we happen to be 'in the right place', but by actively embracing it, historically, culturally and socially. Home cannot be conceived as a taken-forgranted, fixed and inert space, nor a place which is simply there, where we feel naturally at home. The making of home requires effort: an effort involving an active coming to terms, fully and unreservedly, with where we are. In this paper I ask: how does Australia make itself at home in Asia today?

What needs to be emphasised here is that in today's globalised world our sense of home — as individuals, communities or whole countries — is bound to be a dynamic and uncertain experience, dependent on its shifting spatial and political parameters. It is tentative and provisional, not permanent and secure. Instead of home as safe haven, then,

we should consider the search for home as an ongoing process, a contested project with uncertain outcomes. Home in this sense is always an achievement, the upshot of an active endeavour, but it is by no means a stable or lasting accomplishment.

The place one has made one's home may change, or be swept up in a process of transformation which makes it no longer homely. This, as I will show later in this talk, is what is happening to Sydney's Chinatown today. In other circumstances, barriers may have been put up which prevent one from creating a home for oneself, turning the process of the search for home into a troubled one. The plight of asylum seekers whose boats, on their way to Australia, are turned back to Indonesia or who, instead of gaining entry into Australia, are sent to the offshore concentration camps of Nauru or Manus Island, immediately comes to mind here. These people are trying desperately to make Australia their home, but they are being barred from doing so. Asylum seekers experience more acutely than anyone else that home is a precarious concept.

This brings me to the idea of Australia itself as home, a home country, for those who reside within its territorial boundaries. Australia's status as a 'home country' has been subject to conflict and contestation since its establishment as a European settler-colonial society more than two centuries ago. For Aboriginal Australians, contemporary Australia is a home — their only home — within which they remain forever marginalised and internally displaced. As Patrick Wolve (1999) has argued, in 'settler colonialism' invasion is a structure not an event: the intent of settlers/colonisers is to permanently displace and *re*place the indigenous people as occupiers of the land. More recent initiatives towards 'reconciliation' between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians notwithstanding, the structure of permanent invasion remains inscribed in the history and memory of Australia as a nation-state. As a result, from an Aboriginal

perspective the contemporary experience of Australia as home can only be an irrevocably fraught and precarious one.

The attempts by the European settler/colonisers to monopolise the Australian space for the white race had implications for the home-making efforts of another group: Chinese immigrants. As is well-known, thousands of Chinese sojourners, mostly from the southern province of Guangdong, were attracted to the Australian goldfields from the mid-nineteenth century onwards. But they were received with pervasive distrust and outright hostility by the Europeans, who resented their different customs and efficient ways of working. The Chinese were formidable competitors in the search for gold. Australian colonial history is littered with widespread violence against Chinese gold miners in Victoria and New South Wales, the most infamous instance of which were the so-called Lambing Flat Riots in 1860–1861. Anti-Chinese racism was a driving force in the evolution of colonial society towards nation-state status in 1901, which saw the official instalment of the so-called White Australia Policy, the target of which was, in the first instance, Chinese immigration.

We should remember that the birth of the modern Australian nation-state was based on exclusion not just of Aborigines, but also of other non-white peoples, especially Asians (and the Chinese in particular). The construction of Australia as home for its mostly Anglo-Celtic population is thus historically reliant on a territorial demarcation which projects Asia — the geographical region on whose edge Australia finds itself located — as a resolute outside, and Asians as out of place in the Australian space within. As Helen Irving (1999: 114) puts it in her cultural history of Australia's constitution, 'In the example of the "Chinaman", Australians believed they had found the starkest example of what "Australians" were not'.

This history of discrimination and exclusion has shaped Chinese experiences of settling in Australia. The size of the Chinese population dropped dramatically after the official in-

troduction of the White Australia Policy, from almost 30,000 in 1901 to 6000 in 1947, many of them descendants of the gold-miners of the mid-nineteenth century. Those Chinese who remained had to work hard in their efforts to *claim* Australia as home against the odds. The so-called Chinatowns were pre-eminent spaces where Chinese immigrants in the West, including Australia, created places which gave them a sense of home and communal belonging. From the dominant white Australian point of view, these spaces were despised as 'ethnic ghettoes', but for Chinese themselves these concentrated urban localities have long functioned as a refuge from the hostile environment of white hegemony. To make themselves at home in Australia, these Chinese needed to carve out a space for themselves where they would not be 'the other', and Chinatown functioned as such an 'enclave'. In Sydney, for example, many Chinese — furniture makers, cooks, tradesmen, market gardeners who lived in the inner city in tenement houses — would gather in the area around Dixon Street, the heart of what is now widely known as Sydney's Chinatown, to hang out and meet their friends. As George Wing Kee, a long-time Chinatown community leader now in his seventies, says, referring to the big concentration of Chinese living and working in the area when he grew up in the 1940s and 1950s, 'this was a natural place to come to'.

Today's Chinatown, however, is a very different kind of place. By the 1980s, Australia had become a multicultural society where the celebration of cultural diversity had become the preferred official attitude, and in this changed historical context Chinatown was turned into 'a symbol of difference to be protected rather than censured; revitalised, not left to the levelling forces of assimilation' (Anderson 1990: 137). In other words, Chinatown had become an icon for Australian multiculturalism. It marked the beginning of a period where community life became entangled with ethnic commodification, when Chinatown became known in the public mind primarily as a restaurant and entertainment sector, a place to

go for tourists and visitors to sample some Chinese food and culture, as much as a community haven for Chinese locals.

What has occurred here is not unique, but an instance of a more global process of marketisation of ethnicity in the late twentieth century. What John and Jean Comaroff (2009) call 'Ethnicity, Inc', is a global phenomenon where ethnic identities are increasingly treated as sources of exchange value through cultural branding. Multiculturalism constituted a much-needed recognition of Australia's ethnic and cultural diversity, but it also tended to essentialise and fetishise ethnicity. Ethnic subjects now stand to benefit from their cultural difference by claiming their identities as property and presenting it in self-consciously consumable forms. George Wing Kee, for example, now runs walking tours in Sydney's Chinatown, during which he can proudly exhibit both his extensive local knowledge and his cultural authenticity as a local (as someone with intimate life experience in the area). For Wing Kee, this is a way of continuing to claim Chinatown as 'home' in a time of rapid change in the area.

This 'home', however, is no longer what it used to be. The sense of belonging afforded by Chinatown for long-time Chinatown locals such as George Wing Kee is no longer that of a community refuge from a hostile outside world, but one that comes from his active presentation of the place as cultural heritage to appreciative outsiders. However, the shift of Chinatown into a museum and heritage site also marks the passing of its role as the homely locus of a tight-knit community life. Asked whether Chinese still gather together in Chinatown today to meet up, Wing Kee said that it is no longer happening. Younger generation Australian-born Chinese, he suggested, were much more integrated into the Australian environment. He went on to say that these days the community is much more 'fractional'. With the arrival of Chinese from different countries — Hong Kong, Malaysia, Singapore, Vietnam, and so on — it became harder to establish common ground. They had different traditions and 'some

of them were very hard to mix, although there was not the animosity, it was just a separation of ideas', he said; it brought a 'change in the attitudes of Asians to Asians'.

For older-generation Chinese Australians like George Wing Kee, who grew up in the height of the White Australia Policy period, the disintegration of a Chinese sense of community in Sydney's Chinatown would certainly invoke a sense of loss. Located just south of the Sydney CBD, close to a range of international education institutions and just a short stroll to Central Station, Chinatown today is increasingly being absorbed into the hurly-burly of the larger global city. Many international students now live in the tower blocks surrounding the core streets of Chinatown, and Chinatown is now one of Sydney's most visited tourist attractions, especially for shopping and food (Tourism NSW 2011). Many new businesses are constantly being set up in the area, as the boundaries of Chinatown proper shift outward. As a consequence, not only is Chinatown today no longer simply 'Chinese'; it is now a fundamentally porous, hybrid and transnational space; an ever more dense, fast-changing and expansive commercial precinct whose dynamism is increasingly at odds with its essentialised Chineseness. The past ten to fifteen years or so has shown rapid growth and diversification of Asian populations in the Haymarket precinct (which encompasses Chinatown), not just overseas Chinese from diverse countries such as Taiwan, Singapore, Indonesia and Malaysia, but also non-Chinese Asians such as Koreans, Thai and Japanese. An important driver of this dynamism is the area's immersion within the global turbulence generated by the so-called rise of Asia, especially — in the past few years — of China.

The overall feel of the area, then, is one where varied signs of Chineseness are enmeshed within a manifestly multicultural, Asian-accented mix in the context of a distinctly Australian ambience. Sydney's Chinatown is therefore increasingly more characterised by an Asian hybridity than by an intimate, communal Chineseness. This hybridity is both

fluid and grating, replete with tension and instability. As an urban public space it is, in the words of Ash Amin (2012: 72), 'frequented by the many and open to changing uses and occupants'. To the extent that it is no longer a space for community, but for co-presence among strangers, it may be described as 'a space of possibility, but shared with others, and belonging to none' (ibid).

In short, Chinatown is now usurped in a metropolitan space where multiple, sometimes contradictory interests and attachments intersect, where the old sense of communal belonging has fragmented. So if George Wing Kee still feels at home in Chinatown today — and he definitely maintains a fierce sense of custodianship over the area — it will inevitably be, in the twenty-first century, a more precarious sense of home, accomplished in circumstances of progressive displacement.

A particularly poignant element in this progressive displacement is the impact of the fast-growing presence and influence of newcomers from the People's Republic of China. In Chinatown itself this has manifested itself in the arrival of Northern Chinese restaurants and of karaoke bars catering specifically to mainland Chinese students. Mandarin is now the most-spoken non-English language spoken at home in the Haymarket, overtaking Cantonese. This in itself has led to a sense of linguistic displacement among Cantonese-speaking business people in the Haymarket, who now feel the need to learn Mandarin in order to capitalise on the buying power of a mainland Chinese clientele.

Indeed, mainland Chinese are now the biggest buyers of property, not just in Chinatown and the Haymarket, but across Sydney and Australia more generally (and, it has to be said, globally). Mainland Chinese property investors are snapping up million-dollar mansions around the city, and young mainland Chinese students seem to have enormous spending power and are voracious consumers of luxury goods. This is looked at with some umbrage by long-time

locals who have a long-time attachment to Chinatown and whose stake is to maintain a sense of community and care of the area. George Wing Kee stresses that it is a good thing that the influx of mainland Chinese has brought investments in businesses and properties, but, he says, 'we just find it hard to communicate and cooperate with them'. There is, then, a sense of unease about the growing influence of mainland Chinese, who, by virtue of their economic power and power of numbers, are only going to play an increasingly prominent role in the life of the city.

The government certainly sees it this way and is determined to capitalise on it. The City of Sydney, for example, has organised an annual Chinese/Lunar New Year festival since the mid-1990s. Originally devised as an event through which the city council can engage with local Chinese and other Asian communities, these days the event is increasingly mobilised as a vehicle to strengthen business links between Sydney and China, a backdrop for high-profile business forums and other initiatives to boost opportunities for Sydney entrepreneurs in China. The City of Sydney also offers 'China Ready' workshops for businesses in the city who wish to skill themselves up to take advantage of the booming Chinese market. As the Lunar New Year Festival has become one of the largest celebrations of its kind outside mainland China, it has also become a conduit to lure Asian tourists to Sydney, especially from mainland China, who form the fastest growing tourist market for Australia.

Such developments illustrate that, from the perspective of government and business, China is all the rage because of the lucrative economic benefits it presents, far beyond the mining sector. This is all-too-clearly demonstrated in the Australian government's white paper on 'Australia in the Asian Century' (October 2012). This white paper proceeds from the breathless observation that 'the pace and scale of Asia's rise have been nothing short of staggering'. We are told that 'Asia will not just be the most populous region in

the world. Asia will be the biggest economic zone, the biggest consumption zone and the home to the majority of the world's middle class' (ibid). 'Asia has changed the world', says the white paper, and, significantly, it projects a purely positive image of the implications of this new 'Asian century', especially for Australia. As it puts it hyperbolically:

> The Asian century is Australia's opportunity. As the global centre of gravity shifts to our region, the tyranny of distance is being replaced by the prospects of proximity. Australia is located in the right place at the right time — in the Asian region in the Asian century.

Here, then, Australia wills itself to make itself at home in Asia for the sake of a bright future. The bright future being projected, however, is purely economic: the promise of the 'advantage of proximity' lies overwhelmingly in the riches to be garnered from an increasingly prosperous Asia. And while the white paper is careful to speak about 'Asia' as a whole, it is clear that the gravitational pull is towards China: China is the key signifier for the untold fortunes to be made by engaging with Asia. Australians are induced to take full advantage of this Asian century, but in order to do so they are told to put in some effort. As Prime Minister Julia Gillard pronounces, for Australia to be a 'winner in this Asian century' we all need 'to play our part in becoming a more Asia-literate and Asia-capable nation'.

We can read this emphasis on capacity building as a neoliberal desire to enhance Australia's competitive advantage on the Asian market: a commodification of Australian human capital through the beefing up of Asia-relevant skills and knowledge as part of a process of Nation, Inc. Nation branding to shore up a nation's market positioning in the interconnected globalised world is, of course, a common strategy adopted by all nation-states today. Thus, within Australia, 'Asia-relevant capability' seems to be made to mean above all the capacity to market Australian assets in

culturally 'Chinese' ways. For example, the *Sydney Morning Herald* reported that people wanting to sell their houses are now being recommended to emphasise their properties' good *feng shui* to attract Chinese buyers (Johnstone 2013).

One of the ironic consequences of such fawning is an apparent turnaround in the dominant Australian perception of the Chinese: from being racially excluded 150 years ago to being obsequiously welcomed today. As one journalist puts it (Nicholls 2013): 'In the 1850s, the Chinese came to Australia to mine for gold. This year they're coming for property.' What has changed is that rather than being seen as a threat, the Chinese are now being hailed as an opportunity — for now, at least. What has remained the same, however, is the purely economic calculus at play: in the nineteenth century the Chinese were resented because they proved redoubtable competitors in the gold mines, today they are embraced because we want their cash.

What this suggests is that, despite the rhetoric of 'deeper and closer engagement', Australia's relationship with Asia remains overwhelmingly external and directed primarily by mutual financial opportunism. The reduction of the wealthy Chinese subject — whether migrant, tourist, student or investor — to *homo economicus* (Ley 2010), valued only for their contribution to Australian affluence, is a prime instance of the exploitative transactionalism at work here. But as Michael Wesley (2012) comments: 'A transactional relationship builds no belonging, loyalty or community.' In other words, it doesn't build a shared sense of the region as home.

As I said at the beginning of this essay, the making of home requires effort to come to terms with where we are. Australia's effort to come to terms with being located in the Asian region is affectively deficient, however, because Asia remains stubbornly defined as a space 'out there', separate from 'us here'. Australia's mentality of 'distant proximity' to Asia — a sense of psychological remoteness despite physical propinquity — remains solidly in place (Ang 2010). The new

enthusiasm for Asia, as expressed in the 'Australia in the Asian Century' white paper, belies the fact that, at a fundamental level, Australia is still not capable of shedding its old, white colonial outpost image of itself, compelled to engage with Asia for self-interest only.

Australia can only be at home in Asia if Australians start chipping away at the fundamental binary that has underpinned Australia's national sense of home, and to think and feel of Asia and Australia as intimately entangled rather than separate. Nurturing such a *regional* sense of home would require effort beyond the acquisition of instrumental 'Asia-relevant capabilities' in pursuit of economic advantage; it requires the cultivation of transnational relationships and networks which have social and cultural intensity, recognising both commonalities and differences in a condition of intertwined co-existence and the sharing of space. Above all, it is important to remember that such a regional sense of home does not involve the easy generation of sameness, harmonious integration or cosy community; on the contrary, the huge space of multiplicity and inequality that is the Asian region can only produce a precarious sense of home, where tensions and frictions always need to be handled amidst mutual indifference, enduring hostilities, ambiguous loyalties and moments of reciprocal recognition. Australia's place in this Asia — itself a region with no natural identity or boundaries but a contested community under ongoing construction — is bound to remain fraught, ambivalent, if not precarious, not least because of the persistent dominance of an historical mindset which stubbornly continues to see Asia as 'other', of Australia and Asia as mutually exclusive entities.

In this regard, we can learn much from what has been happening in Sydney's Chinatown, where Asia and Australia are already intimately entangled in complex and variegated ways. Areas such as Chinatown remind us that Asia already, thoroughly and inescapably, *permeates* Australia — an Australia which, as a result of decades of global migrations,

not least from Asia, has itself thoroughly changed in the past century — no longer defined by an idealised racial purity but by an increasingly complex ethnic heterogeneity and hybridity, no longer an isolated island-continent but part of a region criss-crossed by highly energetic, vigorous and influential transnational flows and mobilities. (The current Australian insistence of keeping the boats at bay, with such tragic consequences, serves only to reinforce this unavoidable regional interconnectivity.)

At the same time, Sydney's Chinatown is no longer a Chinese communal enclave, separate from the Australian mainstream. It is a dynamic, vibrant, multicultural, metrolingual and cosmopolitan precinct with an intensified, thoroughly creolised Asianness, resonating with but also adding to the wild vitality of twenty-first century urban Asia, where the dominance of white Australia is no longer so obvious. Long-time Chinatown locals such as George Wing Kee, an Australian Chinese who still remembers the parochial old days of racial exclusion, now tirelessly work to reconfigure a shared sense of spatial belonging in a bid to reconcile the memory of the old and the embrace of the new, to inject into the new urban assemblage of heterogeneous actors and mobile interests a care of the common good, in which all can somehow feel precariously at home. This is often a frustrating process, as they meet with indifference and lack of concern, as well as competing designs for the precinct. They are confronted with a neoliberal fixation which puts wealthy mainland Chinese capitalists and consumers on a pedestal at the expense of other constituencies, identities and interests. But in the midst of all these interminglings, they continue to feel attached to a Chinatown that, however hybridised and transformed, remains a home of sorts. In this way, Sydney's Chinatown may prefigure the changing sense of home for Australia in the Asian century — requiring constant effort, provisional and precarious.

In response to Ien Ang
Fazal Rizvi

As someone who has keenly followed Ien Ang's work over the past two decades, I am pleased to have this opportunity to comment on the paper she has presented today, not least because Ien can always be relied upon to make remarks that are as perceptive and theoretically interesting as they are thought-provoking and practically useful. Her ideas often speak to issues of considerable public interest but are always grounded in the most sophisticated of critical cultural theories. She presents her analysis in ways that are both succinct and accessible, inviting serious conversations about our contemporary cultural conditions and the possibility of democratic futures. This paper is no exception: it is packed full of interesting ideas, suggesting new lines of inquiry linked to theoretical issues ranging from the effects of global capitalism on the reconstitution of communities to the social imaginaries of 'home', and to public policy concerns such as those relating to the attempts by Australia to reposition itself within the Asian region. As someone asked to comment on her rich arguments, it has been hard for me to isolate which of the various issues she raises in her paper I should focus my own remarks on. So, I will mention just four, albeit very briefly.

First, Ien's analysis of the profound economic, political and cultural shifts that have taken place in Sydney's Chinatown indicates how in recent years practices and meanings derived from specific geographical and historical points of origin have become transformed by a range of social processes, both national and transnational. Recent policy shifts in Australia with respect to cultural diversity and representation have, for example, resulted in Sydney's Chinatown becoming a place of cosmopolitan desire and economic opportunity, and not a place where alienated Chinese Australians once found a refuge, a safe and secure place which they could

call 'home'. Chinatown has also changed as a result of various transnational processes linked to the global mobility of people, ideas, media, and of course capital. It is now located across various crossroads of capital flows, as a great deal of overseas money has flowed into Sydney's Chinatown from people who do not often live in that community. Indeed, as Ien suggests, it is impossible to understand the changing character of Sydney's Chinatown unless the strategies of capital accumulation by Hong Kong and PRC Chinese are examined. However, what Ien has not mentioned in this paper is that this flow of capital is not only one-directional but also involves remittances, the movement of money from Australia to China. In this way, a new form of transnational space has emerged within which Chinatown represents but a node within the broader global network in which money moves in multiple directions.

Second, Ien argues that this movement of capital has also led to changing conceptions of identity and belongingness. In the early part of the twentieth century, Sydney's Chinatown was largely inhabited by Chinese immigrants who came to Australia from Southern China, spoke Cantonese, and had a distinctive set of cultural practices. Subjected to various forms of racist marginalisation, they viewed Chinatown as a haven — a home — away from the mainstream Anglo-Australian community. The Chinatown of today stands in stark contrast. Its population is culturally heterogeneous, composed not only of diverse Chinese traditions but also of other Asian communities, such as Korean and Japanese. Surrounded by a number of higher education institutions, Sydney's Chinatown has become a place where international students hang out on a transient basis. The dominant language of Chinatown is now Mandarin. Its relationship to both the Anglo-Australian community and the Chinese diaspora across Asia is constantly evolving within a neoliberal logic of economic opportunity.

What appears clear, then, is that Sydney's Chinatown

is now a site for the cultural production of a new hybrid Chineseness, which is paraded for international tourists, consumed by the broader community and displayed as a demonstration of Australia's commitment to multicultural-ism. If Sydney's Chinatown is still a home to some Chinese Australians then it is certainly a different kind of home. It is a product of various transnational circulations of cultural form, through 'the work of imagination'. As Arjun Appudarai, in his recent book, *Future as a Cultural Fact* (2013: 33), puts it, localities are produced not only 'by the hybridization of contents, arts, ideology, or technology, but by the negotiation and mutual tensions between each other'. He adds that 'it is this negotiation that creates the complex containers that fur-ther shape the actual contents of local practice'. In this paper, Ien is surely correct in suggesting that this negotiation now takes place with competing designs for the precinct, even if it is dominated by 'a neoliberal fixation which puts wealthy mainland Chinese capitalists and consumers on a pedestal at the expense of other constituencies, identities and interests'.

Third, Ien's analysis of Sydney's Chinatown, in my view, suggests a radical re-think of the public policy of multicultur-alism. Traditional conceptions of multiculturalism take the nation-state to be its moral universe. By doing so, it is often divorced from the processes of cultural globalisation that are increasingly affecting the ways in which many people think about their identity, their sense of belonging and the cultural spaces they inhabit, as is the case with Ien's account of Sydney's Chinatown. This account shows that the idea of multiculturalism can no longer remain tied exclusively to the agenda for managing inter-ethnic relations, *within the nation-state*. For it to be useful in addressing the translocal and transcultural relations that have become central to our understanding of spaces such as Sydney's Chinatown, mul-ticulturalism needs to interpret the local and the national within its wider global context. It has to deal, for example, with the diasporic spaces that enable many people now to

belong simultaneously to more than one community, and to interpret their sense of identity with respect to economic, social and political opportunities stretching across national boundaries.

The original construction of multiculturalism prescribed a way of reconfiguring the relationship between the dominant culture and minority communities within the nation-state. It was concerned with issues of cultural maintenance and equality of access and opportunity of minority groups. Ien's analysis suggests that the question we now need to ask is whether it is possible to enlarge the scope of this political agenda, to reflect the realities of cultural globalisation, and the diasporic spaces that now define the experiences of transnational mobility. Can multiculturalism respond effectively to those new patterns of cultural interaction and communication that are facilitated not only by the flows of people across the globe but also by the flows of finance, technologies and media images? If it can, then multiculturalism needs to be fundamentally reworked into a new concept consistent with the cosmopolitan futures that we are now required to imagine. This demands a dynamic view of cultural identity that emerges out of the conditions of global interculturality, requiring critical engagement with ideas and images that circulate around the world, and attention to the problems of inclusion and exclusion in transnational spaces such as Sydney's Chinatown. This involves rejecting a view of intercultural relations as synonymous with a particular set of social formations borne out of bringing together some pre-existing and authentic identities that all individuals are assumed to possess.

Fourth, and finally, if Ien's analysis has major implications for re-thinking multiculturalism, then so it does for understanding the conceptual limitations of the notion of 'Asia literacy' that has emerged out of an existential anxiety that Australia has always had about its location within the Asian region. From the very beginning of British colonisation, Australia has struggled to establish a coherent and consistent

position with respect to Asia. The suggestion that Australia might have an Asian future has always aroused a range of conflicting responses, from deep fears to a more progressive notion that suggests closer involvement with Asia is not only inevitable but should also be welcomed for the economic opportunities it provides. Yet there is still something new about the current construction of this anxiety, especially in the ways in which it is expressed in the recent Australian Government white paper on 'Australia in the Asian Century' (2012). To understand the broader logic of the white paper, it is important to appreciate the historically and politically constituted nature of the anxiety it seeks to address about Australia and its location within the Asian region.

In the context of changing global conditions, the shifting geopolitical architecture of the region and Australia's changing demography that are described in Ien's account of Sydney's Chinatown, a new narrative of Asia clearly is needed, which goes beyond the instrumentalism that appears assumed within the popular discourses of Asia–Australia relations that circulate not only in the popular media but also in academic, business and policy circles, and to which the concept of Asia literacy is clearly linked. These popular discourses are based on a binary between Australians and their Asian others. Despite almost three decades of scholarship in postcolonial studies, which has problematised such constructions, this dualism persists and suggests an instrumentalism that not only separates 'us' and 'them', but also encourages Asia to be viewed instrumentally — as a means to *our* ends.

This instrumentalism necessarily invokes conceptions of the Asian others whose cultures must be understood, whose languages must be learnt, and with whom closer relationships must be forged — in order for us to realise our economic and strategic purposes. A crude social distance is thus assumed between Australian 'us' and Asian 'them', a distinction that is often exploited by right-wing ideologues uncomfortable with recent demographic and policy shifts in Australia. This also

leads to the perpetuation of various stereotypes of Asia — as an homogeneous mass whose differences from 'us' must be understood and managed. Differences within and across Asia are obscured, as indeed is the dynamism of Asian economies, political systems and youth cultures, and the growing post-colonial confidence that appears evident across the continent, and also within Australia's communities of Asian background.

The binary between Asian and Australian cultural tradi-tions masks the irrefutable fact that all cultures are dynamic, changing through their engagement with other cultures. This applies to cultural practices in Australia, as much as it does to Asia. This binary is in line with the broader East–West di-chotomy — as in the idiom 'East Meets West'. In explorations of this idiom, much attention is paid to the notions of East and West, but relatively little to the concept of 'Meet'. Yet it is through the politics of the meeting of cultures that the ideas of East and West are imagined in the first place. Indeed, the differences across cultural traditions only become significant in the contexts of cultural exchange: otherwise there would be no need even to name them.

Moreover, cultural differences are not facts to be taken in cross-cultural exchange but matters that are constitutive of relations of exchange, borne out of cultural contact. It is im-portant, therefore, to finally abandon the view that cultures can be defined in terms of a set of closed cultural boundaries expressed in language, arts and cultural traditions, brack-eted as homogenised entities frozen outside history and con-temporary interactive cultural relations not only within par-ticular national spaces but increasingly beyond them as well. What Ien's analysis shows is that cultures cannot be assumed to exist prior to the transnational dynamics of historical and political interactions. If this is so, then engagement with Asia must necessarily be viewed in historical and political terms — historical because cultural interconnections are a product of various historically contingent factors and political because they require the naming and negotiating of constantly evolv-

ing differences in and across relations of power. An historically informed — and, yes, precarious — account of engagement with Asia must acknowledge the fact that most social practices and institutions in Asia are affected by histories of colonial experience, but are also re-articulated through expressions of national development, as well as the operations of global capitalism.

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Distinguished Professor Ien Ang is one of the leaders in cultural studies worldwide. Her wide-ranging inter-disciplinary work deals broadly with the social and cultural impact of patterns of flow and exchange in our globalised world. Her interests include media and popular culture; cultural diversity and multiculturalism; Asians in Australia and Australia–Asia relations; and cultural complexity and the politics of knowledge.

Her books, including *Watching Dallas*, *Desperately Seeking the Audience* and *On Not Speaking Chinese*, are recognised as classics in the field and her work has been translated into many languages, including Chinese, Japanese, Italian, Turkish, German, Korean, and Spanish. Her most recent book, co-edited with Elaine Lally and Kay Anderson, is *The Art of Engagement: Culture, Collaboration, Innovation* (University of Western Australia Press, 2011).

Professor Ang is a Fellow of the Australian Academy of the Humanities. As Director of ICS she champions engaged and collaborative cultural research and has worked extensively with partner organisations such as the NSW Migration Heritage Centre, The Art Gallery of New South Wales, the Special Broadcasting Service and the Museum of Contemporary Art. Her current ARC project examines the transformations of Sydney's Chinatown in the twenty-first century, in collaboration with the City of Sydney.

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Rizvi's disciplinary background is in philosophy, but much of his research over the past two decades has focused on educational policy. He has written extensively on issues of cultural diversity, social justice in education and more recently theories of globalization and their implications for educational policy and governance.

His current research areas include: internationalisation of higher education; theories of globalisation and education policy; postcolonialism and issues of identity and culture in transnational contexts; global inequalities and educational policy; and issues of reform in Indian higher education.

Acknowledgements

The Research Unit in Public Cultures is based in the School of Culture and Communication at the University of Melbourne. It focuses on transformations in public culture produced by new intersections of knowledge, media, space and mobility, within Australia and internationally.

It brings together scholars from four faculties at the University of Melbourne who are collaborating on projects with a wide range of industry partners. The Research Unit's agenda is to develop projects that address four fundamental trajectories:

- how cultural knowledge is shaped by and against the global forces which articulate Australia's place in the world;
- how developments in digital technologies alter the protocols for inclusion and exclusions within public cultures;
- how new practices of mobility impact on the constitution of public knowledge and cultures; and
- how public space is created, managed and accessed, specifically within networked urban environments.

The Research Unit plays a role in facilitating scholarship, enhancing research opportunities and enabling collaborations between creative industries, cultural institutions, research institutions, academic research centres and public communities. It houses a number of collaborative research projects across various disciplines, such as: education for a multicultural society; digital networks and participatory public space; art as a platform for global culture; transnational cinema practices; aesthetic cosmopolitanism; mediated public spaces; and cultural citizenship.

Nikos Papastergiadis is the Director of the Research Unit and is supported by co-founders Scott McQuire, Alison Young and Audrey Yue.

Precariously at home:
Chinatown in Sydney, Australia in Asia

Ien Ang & Fazal Rizvi

In this so-called Asian century, Australia is only too keen
to pronounce itself as belonging to the Asian region,
constantly referred to in the recent white paper on
Australia in the Asian Century as 'our' region. But does
this mean that Australia is now at home in Asia?
To address this question, this publication will first examine
the changing sense of home of Australian Chinese in
Sydney's Chinatown in a time of rapid global change and
the growing influence of China's rise as a superpower.
It will conclude with the observation that a precarious
sense of home is all we can aspire to in the twenty-
first century.