

Reviews



China

Kay Anderson, Ien Ang, Andrea Del Bono, Donald McNeill, and Alexandra Wong, *Chinatown Unbound: Trans-Asian Urbanism in the Age of China*

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In an era of Tiktok and Huawei, it can be easy to forget that until recently some of the most visible evidence of anything “Chinese” beyond the country’s borders was to be found in the Chinatowns, which are a feature of many major global cities. In Sydney—where the book under review is rooted—London, Vancouver, and elsewhere, these circumscribed pockets of Chinese residence and business, often dominated by people from southern provinces such as Fujian and Guangdong, reflected an age of racialized marginalization. How then has the role of Chinatowns shifted in a twenty-first century when the massively increased economic, political, and cultural weight of East Asia far exceeds the parameters of an “ethnic” enclave with its limited repertoire of foods, bilingual street signs, and swaying red lanterns?

This, among others, is a question that preoccupies Kay Anderson, Ien Ang, Andrea Del Bono, Donald McNeill, and Alexandra Wong in their five-way co-authored book *Chinatown Unbound*. Drawing on a heterogenous collection of materials from census and other statistical data, surveys and focus groups, participant observation, and media analysis, as well as Del Bono’s PhD dissertation, the authors take a multi-pronged approach to the shifting social, economic, and political currents of Chinatown in the Haymarket district of Sydney, Australia. The notion of “unboundedness” applies to more than simply the scope of the book’s ambition (or its accommodation of co-authors), for this idea is a thematic and theoretical lens through which to understand how “Chinatown” conceptually speaks of transformations occurring on a multi-scalar global canvas. Having emerged from a 2012–15 research project, this avowedly expansive work strikingly rings today like an unwitting elegy to an era of connection and openness that has since given way to boundary-drawing, retrenchment, and exclusion.

Following an introduction that sets the scene for the research that was carried out and fleshes out the idea of “unboundedness,” Chinatown Haymarket is considered from multiple angles in chapters dealing with the area’s past and present (chapter 2), its architecture and planning (chapter 3), demographics (chapter 4), “multi-Asian” diversity (chapter 5), business landscape (chapter 6), branding within Sydney and

Australia (chapter 7), consumption and youth culture (chapter 8), and public art (chapter 9), before a concluding chapter considers the place's future.

Many of the transformations charted in the book have accompanied changes in Chinatown's official treatment from being a marginal enclave in a "White" Australia to a feted hub of desirable diversity. Diversification of business practices moving beyond restaurants to salons and co-work spaces, the Mandarinization of more established Cantonese or Hokkien ways of living, and the arrival of Thai, Indonesian, Korean, and other Asian populations, some of which now have their own titular "towns," all reveal flows of ideas, people, and goods that are as important in making "Chinatown" as the streets of the geographical precinct.

A consistent goal of the book, therefore, is to center notions of change, heterogeneity, and flexibility, which cut against hoary and outmoded visions of Chinatown as a contained entity. The authors intend to "normalize diversity" (5), adopting a perspective that better accounts for Chinatown and its actors' longstanding role in forging a—still emergent—"trans-Asian metropolitan culture" for the city and even the country at large (175). The book is largely successful in this, capturing Chinatown's usefulness as an optic through which to examine larger-scale issues, from the less constrained lives pursued by Australian-born descendants of Asian migrants, to the countervailing effects of lingering Anglo-Australian racial hegemony, the fitful efforts by some authorities to frame Australia and Sydney as plausibly "Asian" places, the influx of new capital and people from the PRC, and, particularly poignant at the time of writing this review, their predecessors from Hong Kong around the 1997 handover.

Readers gain a good sense of both the potentialities and the pitfalls of this profusion of intersecting cultural flows—the "tensions between essentialism and complexity" (134)—as they play out in highly localized ways. From examples such as the small pastry parcel of globalization known as the "Emperor's Puff," which enfolds Korean, Chinese, and ultimately self-orientalizing Australian influences within its cream-filled interior (chapter 6), to the less comfortable Asian diversity evident as Chinese, Korean, and Vietnamese communities clash over the naming of an annual Lunar (or "Chinese") New Year parade (chapter 5), Chinatown emerges as a place whose bounds are far exceeded by processes radiating out from and culminating here. At a scale somewhere between pastry street snacks and geocultural struggles over what to call New Year, the book also leverages its insights into local governance and social politics to show convincingly how "'othered' identities and spatial entities may be formative of, rather than incidental to, the contemporary logic and ecology of the city of Sydney" (110). This perspective could profitably be applied in many other comparable locations globally.

Stylistically, the book also succeeds in weaving together material produced by its many contributors, and shifts in authorial voice or tone are largely absent, despite the text's (presumably) polysemous origins. Some information is repeated in several chapters, but this may be inevitable since, for all its ambitious scope, the book's structure does demand going over the same—often literal—ground to make different points. Conversely, the book's diversity of material and approaches also at times requires that specialist ideas are deployed, and these could at times have been better explained for those in other disciplines. This (anthropologist) reader, for example, struggled with some of the unglossed urban planning terms deployed in chapter 3. Given the authors' deep engagement with Chinatown Haymarket on many levels, anthropologist read-

ers of *Asian Ethnology* may also be disappointed at a lack of ethnographic depth in descriptions of what life is actually like there. The strongest sense of place arrives only in the final two pre-Conclusion chapters (chapters 8 and 9) with richer descriptions of the youthful buzz of the night market, and the creative web woven by Australian-Chinese artists who have reimagined the streetscape's narrow alleys, Victorian warehouses, and 1980s pagoda-oriented chinoiserie.

The expansive terms in which Chinatown is understood here arguably also dilute the focus on one of the book's purportedly headline concerns, namely the "Age of China" mentioned in the title. The implications of this new "age" loom spectrally throughout and receive some direct attention with chapter 4's examination of increasing PRC-origin property investments, and chapter 8's study of the new consumption patterns of Mandarinophone Mainland Chinese students, who betray little interest in Chinatown's history. But readers looking for a systematic dissection of just how China's "rise" is impacting lived realities in this Australian locale, a topic of great salience given the fearmongering yellow peril discourses surfacing in many Western countries (a theme touched on in the book's conclusion), may be left with questions.

Nevertheless, as a compendium of detail that simultaneously documents structural shifts occurring at a local level and relates these to wider trends, this book has much to offer readers interested in the ebbs and flows of "multiculturalism" in Western societies, and the merits of conducting spatially rooted research even as global transformations take on increasingly disembodied forms, whether on Tiktok or elsewhere. Equally valuably, *Chinatown Unbound* helps us understand just why it is that from Sydney to London, one is as likely to seek out a Korean-run Taiwanese restaurant employing white staff (144) as a "purely" Chinese establishment of a kind which, after all, never really existed in the first place.

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