

Special section editorial - Australian Housing in the Asian Century

Australian urban geographies of housing in the context of the rise of China in the “Asian Century”

Introduction

This special section is concerned with the changing geographies of housing in Australia's major cities in an emerging landscape marked by a Chinese reassertion of power in global geopolitics and by myriad flows of people, ideas, and capital between China and Australia. It is widely acknowledged that the twenty-first century is being shaped by a cultural, geopolitical, and economic swing towards Asia, and particularly China. The Australian Government and a host of international private sector corporations have gone so far as to suggest that Australia and indeed the international community have entered the Asian Century (Australian Government, 2012). Australia's role in geopolitical and global economic spheres typically has centred on an assessment of its relations with Europe and the United States. However, its geopolitical relations with Asia, and particularly with China, have been gaining prominence in recent years, albeit within an opaque spatial reasoning also centred on Europe and the United States (McNamara, 2017). Geopolitical commentary in the media, for example, is replete with discussions about Trump's America and Putin's Russia (Beauchamp, 2018, np), and with commentaries about how Xi Jinping's China is reinserting itself into this strange geopolitical landscape (ABC NEWS, 2018, np).

The rise of China fosters an important geopolitical context for understanding a whole raft of changes taking place in Australian cities. There is a large body of empirical evidence amassing about shifting geopolitical power and military alliances in the Asia-Pacific region, the interconnected

transformations of domestic and global economies in the region, and the effectiveness of China's soft power in Australia (Connors *et al.*, 2018). It is widely understood that Australia's economy is heavily dependent on Asia, with China being one of Australia's largest trading partners (Holmes, 2013). More contentious are claims by some pro-Asian geopolitical commentators that China will become a key security partner for Australia in the Asia-Pacific region (Gill & Jakobson, 2017), with critics viewing any increase in cooperation as a potential threat to Australian society (Hamilton, 2018). In any case, over the past two decades the Australian Defence Force and the People's Liberation Army of China have increased their military collaborations (Gill & Jakobson, 2017). In geopolitical terms, concludes pro-Asian geopolitical commentator Linda Jakobson, the

binary approach of thinking about the United States as a security partner, when indeed it is a very important economy partner of Australia, and China as an economic partner, when indeed it is also an important security partner is false. We should think of both of these great powers as important for both Australian prosperity and security. (Jakobson, 2018, np)

While the rise of China as a super power is obvious, less clear is what that power has risen from. The “century of humiliation”, which is also referred to as the “hundred years of national humiliation”, is one possible starting point from a Chinese perspective. The century of humiliation refers to a period marked by Western and Japanese imperialism and intervention in China between 1839 and 1949. Alternatively, the “open door

policy” reforms of 1978 might signal another point from which China started its ascent, especially in terms of economic reform and the socio-economic mobility of millions of Chinese people. A name given by “Westerners” to economic reforms to (re)integrate China into the global economy (Huan, 1986, p.1), the open door policy is certainly a key turning point in China’s recent geopolitical and global economic ascendance. For the Australian Government, the policy is a reference point from which to position the rise of China (Australian Government, 2012; Huan, 1986) that is perhaps more palatable than the redemptive narrative about the “century of humiliation”.

And yet, what does China’s rise mean? The “One Belt, One Road” initiative points to one of the directions of this new geopolitics through which China is taking a more central role in global trade, particularly with Euro-Asian countries (Hong, 2017). The Chinese deployment of soft power—the use of economic and cultural influence—resembles strategies used by the United States Government during its rise to global dominance after World War II. Australians have witnessed this soft cultural power in action on their televisions and movie screens in Hollywood representations of American popular culture (for example, *Happy Days*), militarism (*MASH*), and geopolitical fears of Russian power and espionage (*North by Northwest*). Much has been made of the form and function of Chinese soft power in Australia, from the suggested infiltration of Chinese language media to the funding of university think tanks and research programs (Hamilton, 2018). While we do not intend to weigh in on the divisive politics of these debates here (Sun, 2018), we note that soft Chinese cultural power is a geopolitical strategy that is important to understand in relation to Australian cities today (Connors *et al.*, 2018; Gill & Jakobson, 2017). Equally, more analytical attention needs to be paid to the cultural products exported to China and elsewhere by Australia’s own cultural institutions.

The six-episode Australian television series *Secret City* provides a useful example of the ways in which popular culture reflects back to the Australian public current geopolitical moments from an Australian city (Foxtel, 2016). Based on a book by conservative Australian journalist Chris Uhlmann, *Secret City* was shot in grey tones in Australia’s capital city Canberra, with some commentators calling it Australia’s response to the American political drama *House of Cards*. The *Secret City* captures many of the defining features and fears that typify Australians’ geopolitical

position in relation to the rise of Asia: escalating military conflicts in the South China Sea; questions about Chinese, Australian, and United States military cooperation; young foreign Chinese university students as political activists abroad; treacherous Australian politicians and secret services agents; and the infiltration of Beijing into the halls of government and the streets of the nation’s capital. In this piece of cultural critique, Australia’s greatest geopolitical threat is not solely (or even) a distant Putin’s Russia or Trump’s America, it is the country’s Asian neighbours.

Much like the cultural products discussed above, Australia’s media and policy discourses about the Asian Century and the rise of China are beset with problematic binary understandings of geopolitics, global economies, international trade, migration, and capital flows. Some economists have argued that the Asian Century ‘is something of a myth’, suggesting instead that global geopolitics and economics are becoming ‘multi-polar’ (Dollar, 2017, p.1) rather than shifting from Europe and America to Asia and China. Equally, positioning Asia as an “opportunity or a threat” exemplifies the binary thinking implicit in the Asian Century discourse. It might be better to conceptualise Australia’s relationship with Asia and China as *living with* rather than an *opposition to*. As Jakobson (2018, np) suggests, ‘whatever you might think of the communist party we will need to learn to live with them’.

Australia will need to *live with* China because some of the changes we are seeing in Australian cities are connected to the changes in urbanisation in Asia. The number of people living in poverty in China, for example, is reported to have fallen ‘from 250 million at the start of the reform process in 1978 to 80 million people by the end of 1993 and 29.27 million in 2001’ (Jacques, 2012, p.162). Rogers and Koh (2017, p.1) refer to China’s “new middle class”, and this group is increasingly globally mobile. In terms of migration from China to Australia, over 54 per cent of all China-born immigrants came to Australia between 2006 and 2015, and by 2016 there were 509,558 China-born people living in Australia, accounting for 2.1 per cent of the country’s total population (Rogers *et al.*, 2017). While Chinese migration to Australia stretches back to the early colonial days, there has been significant change in the last 30 years. For example, between 1900 and 1985 only 21,263 Chinese migrants arrived in Australia (this was a mediated by White Australia policy). By comparison, between 1986 and 2016, 466,722 Chinese migrants arrived in Australia

(ABS, 2016). But hidden in this statistical shorthand are over 55 ethnic Chinese groups (Jacques, 2012). In Australia, Chinese migration was met with waves of anti-Asian sentiment in relation to foreign education, foreign land claiming, and foreign real estate purchases (Jayasuriya & Pookong, 1999; Rogers & Koh, 2017). In this special section, we explicitly interrogate these place-specific but transnationally dynamic issues.

Much of the public discourse about Australian urbanism and the rise of Asia has focused on Chinese foreign investment in housing and infrastructure. The recent decline in individual investment in residential real estate from China has created the fiscal illusion that Chinese capital is withdrawing from Australian real estate and infrastructure markets all together. However, as pointed out by Martinus *et al.* (2018), while the dynamics of individual foreign residential real estate investment might be changing, so too is investment from other investor cohorts and investment into other asset classes; this includes foreign corporate and institutional investment into infrastructure projects in Australian cities.

Recent research has shown how the movement of people, ideas, and financial capital into global cities has had a variety of localised impacts (Atkinson, 2016; Ho & Atkinson, 2017; Liu & Gurrán, 2017; Robertson, 2013). There is little doubt that economic, political, and social change in Asia is affecting residential and commercial real estate and large infrastructure projects in several Anglo-sphere countries (Ley, 2015; Rogers, 2016b; Webber & Burrows, 2015), including Australia (Rogers *et al.*, 2017).

To fully comprehend these changes in Australia, it will be important to compliment macro-analyses of incoming and outgoing foreign direct investment data with more fine-grained and place-specific geographical scholarship that investigates the intersections of housing, home, culture, class, citizenship, education, and migration in Australia (Ley, 2015; Robertson, 2013; Rogers, 2016b). We need to move beyond economic conceptions of transnationality that limit discussions about Australia's relationship to Asia to dichotomous notions of opportunity and threat (Ang, 2016; Robertson & Ho, 2016). There are complex links between Asian housing consumption and investment, temporary and permanent migration, and international education pathways in Australia (Robertson & Ho, 2016; Rogers, 2016c; Wong, 2016). These are driven by the intersection of policy arrangements in Australia and other Asian and Anglophone countries. People are mobile between

Asia and Australia in increasingly complex ways (Robertson & Ho, 2016). Different conceptions of real estate, housing, home, neighbourhood, place, identity, and citizenship are implicated in these changing mobilities (Ley, 2015). There is an emerging body of scholarship on "super-rich" Asians and their impacts on high value global city real estate (Hay, 2013; Rogers, 2016a; Wiesel, 2019). But empirical attention is also being given to the new middle class and other "less wealthy" cohorts of Asian migrants and students who are living in rental and owner-occupied properties in Australia (Fincher & Shaw, 2009; Robertson, 2016).

This special section covers diverse geographical contexts relating to the new economic, cultural, and material dynamics of Australian housing in the so-called Asian Century. These new dynamics include the changing political economy of domestic and foreign housing practices in these cities (Rogers, 2016b), the changing migration practices associated with an increasingly mobile world, and the internationalisation of higher education in Australia, which has led to significant numbers of foreign students from Asia studying at Australian universities (Robertson, 2013; Robertson & Ho, 2016). New middle class and super-rich wealth in Asia is integral to each change, and this wealth, in some cases, has been claimed to change the physical landscape of neighbourhoods in Australian cities.

Australian urban geographies of housing in the Asian Century

In an attempt to better understand Australian cities in the so-called Asian Century, we sought contributions to this special section that analysed the diverse economic, social, or cultural geographies of Asian housing consumption and/or investment in Australia across different housing tenure forms (for example, rental properties, foreign investment, or foreign student housing); Asian housing consumption and/or investment in Australia across different income groups (for example, Asian super-rich, new Asian middle class, or foreign students); changing urban planning, place politics or neighbourhood dynamics that are associated with consuming Australian housing via temporary, permanent, student, or retirement migration from Asia; and changing embodied and/or cultural practices of home-making and/or place-making in Australia by Asian diaspora or foreign investors and/or students.

Here, we locate the special section's papers within a set of five of the more prominent themes

from geographical or other spatially informed literature since the early 1990s on Asian migration to Australia. Much of this literature has been broadly framed within the historical narrative of a shift from White Australia and assimilation policies towards a formal embrace of multiculturalism.

Residential segregation

Analysing patterns of residential segregation on ethnic or racial lines has been a key concern for geographers, demographers, and others (Burnley, 2002; Forrest *et al.*, 2006; Stevens, 2017). This literature includes empirical studies seeking to ascertain the degree of residential segregation across lines of ethnicity in Australian cities. The debate extended to the question of whether such ethnic enclaves or “ethnoburbs”—if they do indeed exist—are merely a transitory phase (Poulsen *et al.*, 2004) or a more permanent or intergenerational phenomenon (Birrell & Healy, 2003). Geographers have also sought to understand the processes that produce such racially or ethnically segregated spaces. For example, Fincher and Shaw (2009, 2011) have examined the production of racialised spaces in the context of “local” and “international” university students in Melbourne. They point to both institutional and self-enacted practices that produce separate spaces and social circles for students, while acknowledging that these categories represent racialised rather than simply administrative distinctions (also Robertson, 2018).

Addressing similar questions in this special section, Wang *et al.* (2018) argue that the post-2000 profile of the Mainland China-born migrant is changing, and that this change is producing new settlement patterns in Australian cities. The post-2000 China-born migrant is a highly skilled, educated, and investment-focused migrant. In terms of new urban geographies, the data provided by Wang *et al.* show that Sydney is still home to half of all China-born migrants at the national level; however, the number of migrants settling in Australia’s medium-sized capital cities, such as Adelaide and Perth, is increasing. In keeping with findings reported here by Rogers *et al.* (2018), these migrants are highly mobile, they have capital to invest in local real estate markets in Australia, and they value education as a form of cultural capital.

Racism, multiculturalism, and urban space

Much Australian geographical research has focused on the lived experiences, and wider social

and political implications, of intercultural cohabitation and encounters in culturally mixed urban areas. Many of these discussions have been framed in terms of tension, racism, and conflict on the one hand, and multicultural harmony on the other, with different shades of hope and despair in between. Wu (2003, p.374) has argued that settlement by Asian migrants in Sydney has occurred with relatively ‘few incidents’ in comparison with experiences in Vancouver in the 1980s. Wu’s work also recognises Asian migration’s contributions to population growth across metropolitan areas and nationally, and to the ‘revival of local commercial districts and neighbourhood vitality’ (Wu, 2003, p.374). Yet, more recently, Chinese investment has become associated in the public imagination with a housing affordability crisis, a perception fuelled to a large extent by negative and racialised media representations (Wong, 2016). In this respect, and acknowledging the variety of cultural compositions in different parts of Australian cities, Forrest and Dunn (2010) have examined how attitudes towards multiculturalism are shaped by the specific mix of cultural groups in an area. Although they found that racial segregation (or ethnic homogeneity) in an area is associated with negative attitudes towards multiculturalism, a more mixed ethnic composition does not guarantee support for multiculturalism, and its implications depend on the history of intercultural relations in that area. Other factors mediating intercultural relations have been exposed in work by Rogers *et al.* (2018), who have found that Australians financially invested in Sydney’s local real estate market are generally more supportive of foreign investment. In contrast, they found no significant impact of levels of housing stress on attitudes towards foreign investment.

Thus, research on ‘attitudes’ can only take the academic debate so far. Helpfully, Wise’s (2005, 2010, 2011) studies have investigated the emotional (sense of belonging) and bodily (sensuous) experiences of living in culturally diverse suburbs and engaging in their ‘contact zones’ such as shopping strips and malls. Acknowledging the exclusionary defensiveness of White Anglo-Australians in their engagement with their Chinese neighbours, Wise also points to the political context that produces such White paranoia, namely struggles for wellbeing in the face of the state’s failure to secure a “good life” for all citizens. Yet Wise (2005, p.184) finds hope in the *possibility* of a ‘critical space of local care across difference’ as a counter to parochial, indeed paranoid, national discourse.

In this special section, Dunn *et al.* (2018) present new data about the experiences of racism among respondents of Asian birthplace backgrounds and those who speak an Asian language. These Asian Australians have experienced twice as many instances of racism than have other Australians. When renting or buying a house, for example, almost six in ten (58.5%) Asia-born participants had experienced some measure of discrimination because of their culture or religion or “Asian” appearance. Such racism limits opportunities for new, non-Anglo forms of place-making by many Asian Australians. At the same time, both Dunn *et al.* (2018) and Rogers *et al.* (2018) frame their findings with a reminder that a foundational feature of every discussion about Australian housing and urbanism is the theft of land during the colonial invasion. In another contribution to this special section, Liu *et al.* (2018) also address the theme of multicultural encounters in a review of international scholarly literature on the convergence of two movements that have dominated global city living in recent decades: increased global mobility and increased urban density. Their review highlights the recent silence in this literature on everyday multicultural encounters in private apartment buildings. The scholarly gaze, they argue, has overlooked the very sites in which such encounters are ‘most likely to occur in our increasingly dense and culturally diverse cities’.

Cultural understandings of urban space

Influenced by the cultural turn in geography, analysis has focused on the representation of Asian, and particularly Chinese, people and the spaces that are associated with them within Australian cities. Moving away from objective indicators of residential segregation, the focus has shifted to public perceptions of “Chinese spaces”, and the consequences of such representations for people’s ability to exercise their “right to the city” and urban citizenship. Such analyses have demonstrated how representations associating Chinese people and places with gambling and drug dealing, on the one hand, and romanticised orientalism, on the other hand, underpin “the Chinese” as an essential racial category (Dunn, 2003). This analytic approach is exemplified in Anderson’s (1990) analysis of Australian Chinatowns in Melbourne and Sydney nearly three decades ago. Despite their changing forms over the years—alongside shifts from White Australia to assimilation and multiculturalism—in the early 1990s, Australian Chinatowns remained spaces of racialisation,

where White Australian beliefs about an essential “Chineseness” were reinforced both symbolically and materially. More recent work by Ang (2016) considers representations of Chinatown in the context of the Asian Century that signal growing recognition of Australia’s need to be more “at home” in Asia. In contrast to the depiction of Chinatown as inauthentic, Ang argues that Sydney’s Chinatown is reflective of Australia’s sense of home in Asia in the twenty-first century. However, Ang also argues that such a home is not one of sameness and harmonious integration; invoked instead is a precarious sense of home, involving tensions, indifference, hostilities, and ambiguous loyalties, but also moments of reciprocal recognition, as well as hybrid Asian-Australian identities.

Addressing similar themes, but focusing on the scale of the house, Levin (2012, 2015) has examined the meanings ascribed by Chinese migrants to the architectural and material forms of their homes. That analysis exposes migrants’ complex relations to both their past homes in China and their desire to be accepted in Australian society. In this special section, Stone *et al.* (2018) build on Levin’s work comparing Chinese migrants’ homes before and after immigration to Melbourne. Their analysis is focused on the environmental impacts associated with these migration and housing consumption patterns, pointing to a five-fold increase of the China-born migrants’ post-migration housing footprint compared with their pre-migration housing footprint

Race, class, and the politics of urban space

A fourth theme in geographical literature on Asian migration to Australia concerns the intersection of racial and social class identities and politics. Hage (2002) has argued that the distinctively Australian version of White colonial paranoia is associated with the perceived necessity to populate a vast continent to secure Australia’s economic prosperity. Since the 1970s, the shift to skilled-migration programs enabled migration by non-Whites, but primarily upper-middle class professionals. Indeed, many Asian—primarily Chinese and Indian—immigrants arriving in Australia in the late 1980s and 1990s entered as skilled immigrants with their families. The social class status and professional affiliations of these immigrants were also reflected in their choices to settle in major cities, until recently, primarily in Sydney, which is Australia’s most “global” city. Nevertheless, at the neighbourhood scale, Burnley (2002) has observed patterns of residential differentiation related

to social class. In his study, skilled migrants from China earned reasonably high incomes and settled in areas of reasonably high socio-economic status, whereas their relatives and others arriving on family reunion visas could not afford to live in the same areas.

Here, then, Wiesel and Levin (2018) examine intersections of social class and ethnicity in two of Australia's most affluent neighbourhoods: Toorak in Melbourne and Mosman in Sydney. Their paper examines White residents' anxieties in relation to the growing presence of wealthy Chinese residents and investors in Toorak and Mosman in recent years. Their analysis highlights the fact that White residents feel resentment and anxiety in relation to perceived threats to the suburbs' "European village" character. These anxieties are increasingly expressed through local urban planning conflicts related to density and heritage in residential development. But Wiesel and Levin also explore discourses through which residents seek to build new shared social class identifications that bridge ethnic and racial differences within these elite suburbs.

Brokering transnational migration and housing

The brokerage of contemporary migration and housing consumption is also a subject of inquiry in this special section. There is an expansive literature on agents, recruiters, smugglers, and traffickers who facilitate the movement of workers from the Global South to the Global North who are often low skilled or undocumented (Robertson, 2013). As Robertson and Rogers (2017) note, however, only recently have scholars turned to the complex brokerage industries that facilitate middle-class and high-net-worth mobilities via education and real estate investment. Seminal work in the late 1990s by scholars such as Ong (1999) and Pinches (1999) brought to our attention an emerging mobile capitalist class in Asia. That work hinted at the importance that intergenerational investment in foreign education and transnational real estate investment might play over coming decades. By the early 2000s, foreign real estate investment and foreign education had become key family strategies for creating familial financial capital and the "flexible citizenships" that enable the new middle class from Asia to move around the world (Ong, 1999; Pinches, 1999). Robertson and Rogers (2017, p.1) suggest that the movement of people and capital from Asia to Australia is facilitated by a complex array of national policies and transnational practices and

industries that 'link immigration, citizenship, international education, and real estate investment in complex and entangled ways'. They call the mediation of these new mobilities "brokerage assemblages" that cut across actors and processes that span the digital and the embodied, the state and the non-state, and the human and built environment.

In this special section, Rogers *et al.* (2018) ask whether a degree of commonality is developing around a set of ideological reference points related to the commodification and financialisation of housing in global cities. For example, they point to the influence of "real estate capitalists" who hold strong ideological views about the right to acquire property and to use real estate as an asset class within which to park and grow capital. Such ideologies, the authors argue, are boosting processes of financialisation and commodification across boundaries of cultural difference and political jurisdiction. Rogers *et al.* (2018) argue that this latest manifestation of Asian-led foreign real estate investment in some global cities might be contributing to land and housing becoming a liquid, global asset.

Conclusion

The reassertion of power by China over the last 30-odd years has shifted the global geopolitical landscape, and Australia's role within it. The Australian Government has gone so far as to claim that Australia, and indeed the international community, has entered the Asian Century. The rise of China and associated flows of people, ideas, and capital between China and Australia are increasingly important contexts for understanding a whole raft of changes taking place in Australian cities.

In this editorial, we introduced the special section, in two steps. First, we pointed to some of the contentious questions and debates characterising the concept of the Asian Century, thus providing a broad geopolitical context for the special section. Second, we located the six special section papers in relation to a set of five of the more prominent themes on Asian migration to Australia from geographical or other spatially informed literature written since the early 1990s. The scholarship in this special section offers significant new insights on domestic and foreign real estate investment, colonialism and racism, place politics and changing neighbourhood dynamics, and the cultural practices of home-making and place-making in Australian cities by Asian, and particularly Chinese, diaspora.

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