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China Anxiety: Deracializing Debates about Housing and Education

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Introduction: China Anxiety

The rise of China and the rapid expansion of its middle class are having far-reaching impacts on societies around the world, creating anxieties about the growing mobility of Chinese people and capital. In Australia, for whom China is the largest trading partner, public debates about not just trade but all manner of economic, social, and political issues are now infused with an anxiety about Chinese influence. While headlines about “political interference” and “trade wars” have proliferated in recent years, this article explores two arenas that have arguably received less public attention—namely, the role of Chinese migrants and Chinese capital in Australian housing and education.

As Fran Martin suggests in the introduction to this special issue, one emerging line of intellectual inquiry in China studies focuses on the global

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1 mobility and new assemblages of people, culture, capital, and expertise
2 throughout the region. This is a complex geographical, political, and cul-
3 tural landscape that involves new types of movement of people and capital
4 across national borders, and new networks of people, capital, and knowledge
5 to allow this mobility to occur. Citing Ching Kwan Lee's notion of "global
6 China," Martin "draws attention to these developments, highlighting those
7 'outward flows of investment, loans, infrastructure, migrants, media, cul-
8 tural programmes and international and civil society engagement' that have
9 so markedly intensified since the beginning of this century" (Martin, this
10 issue; quoting Lee 2022: 313). These new mobilities and assemblages are
11 operative from global (e.g., regional, transnational, and geopolitical) down to
12 local levels (e.g., biographical, translocal, and ethnographic). In this article,
13 we are interested in what it is like to live in a culturally, materially, and geo-
14 politically shifting Asia-Pacific region, in an era that is being defined by a
15 more globally focused China.

16 China's diaspora is increasingly mobile throughout the Asia-Pacific region.
17 Not only are the "new Chinese" living more transnational lives and estab-
18 lishing homes in multiple locations, but they are developing new global and
19 hybrid Chinese identities, through international study and migration (Chan
20 and Koh 2018: 2). They are a significant force in global real estate mar-
21 kets as property consumers (Ma 2020), and some work in the global real
22 estate industry as investment lawyers, accountants, and real estate agents to
23 facilitate the movement of people and money from Asia to Australia (Ma,
24 Rogers, and Troy 2023). These new Chinese investors and migrants have
25 complicated cultural identities and nation-state allegiances and are engaged
26 in international real estate and education practices that transcend static cul-
27 tural stereotypes (Robertson 2021). As Xiao Ma et al. (2022) write,

28
29 Looking at how families combine real estate, migration and foreign edu-
30 cation, provides a critical insight into how and why immigrants create,
31 form or sustain socio-cultural and financial relations in multiple places.
32 Transnational families are not simply settlers in a new country. They are,
33 rather, networks of people engaged in *transnational lives* that typically
34 integrate different physical sites, cultural spheres, and political and regu-
35 latory environments.

1 This article documents how the growth of new Chinese mobilities, in the
2 form of people and capital, has been enabled by Australian government
3 policies attempting to engage with a rising China. In the process, these new
4 mobilities have generated anxieties about “locals” being left behind. These
5 anxieties reflect larger-scale concerns about the shifting world order, with
6 China’s ascension threatening the dominance of Western powers, as well as
7 concerns about new class formations locally, as nonwhite migrants arrive in
8 Australia as well-resourced, highly educated, upper-middle-class profession-
9 als. Unlike previous generations of migrants, the economic resources of the
10 new migrants from China causes them to be seen as a threat to preexisting
11 relations of power in Australia.

12 An important context for considering these developments is the fact that
13 in Australia as elsewhere, there is growing competition for desirable places
14 in both the housing and education “markets.” In this competition, “Chi-
15 nese” individuals are often seen as being “too successful.” In housing, the
16 “Chinese” are successful in making strategic real estate purchases, includ-
17 ing for investment purposes.¹ In education, Chinese migrants’ children
18 dominate enrollments in high-performing selective schools and classes, and
19 perform disproportionately well in standardized tests. In relation to both
20 housing and education, public debates have included expressions of anxiety
21 and resentment at “others” taking up valuable positions in these increas-
22 ingly competitive markets. Concerns about being left behind or left out have
23 become racialized, with Chinese individuals blamed for crowding out more
24 deserving “local” people.

25 However, a key point that often disappears from public discussion of
26 these issues is that inbound movements of Chinese people and capital are in
27 fact the product of Australian government policies that have often directly
28 sought greater engagement with an economically growing Asian region,
29 particularly China. In recent decades, government policies have encour-
30 aged greater commercialization of housing and education, growing foreign
31 investment, and increased entry of people from Asia into Australia through
32 the skilled migration program. Despite this extensive courting by the Aus-
33 tralian government, popular anxieties have often focused on blaming “the
34 Chinese” for their perceived competitive advantage, and/or for bending the
35 rules of Australia’s education and housing systems.

1 Such concerns about “the Chinese” must be analyzed within the context
2 of Australian racism. The anxieties outlined above reflect long-standing
3 concerns about the “yellow peril” that predate white Australian nationhood.
4 Nineteenth-century Australian history is replete with moral panics and
5 fears of an “Asian invasion” or “Chinese takeover” (Jayasuriya and Pookong
6 1999). Indeed, one of the first acts of the newly federated Australian nation
7 was to pass legislation banning Chinese immigration, encompassed in the
8 Immigration Restriction Act, 1901, better known as the White Australia
9 policy. This act institutionalized the racism that characterized Australia
10 from invasion onward.

11 Prior to this immigration ban, large numbers of immigrants from China
12 were attracted to goldfields in New South Wales and Victoria from the
13 1850s, and the Chinese population in Australia grew from a very few in
14 1841 to thirty-eight thousand in 1861 (Choi 1975: 22). Questions about mov-
15 ing Asian labor and capital into Australia have been central to the resis-
16 tance to Chinese migrants in Australia ever since (Rogers 2017). This history
17 illustrates that a racial politics seeking to change the way Chinese migrants
18 move and use their labor and capital through and on Australia’s colonized
19 land—land first stolen from Indigenous peoples—has long been central to
20 white nationhood in Australia (Rogers 2017).

21 However, despite periodic revivals of all-too-familiar anti-Asian “inva-
22 sion” or “takeover” discourses, Australia’s immigration program has wel-
23 comed significant numbers of new arrivals from China since the early 2000s.
24 More than three-quarters (75.8 percent) of all China-born immigrants in
25 Australia arrived between 2001 and 2021, and in 2021 there were more than
26 a half million (549,614) people born in China living in Australia, account-
27 ing for 2.2 percent of the country’s total population. Meanwhile, 5.5 percent
28 of Australian residents reported a Chinese ancestry (ABS 2021). Austra-
29 lia’s skilled migration and foreign student programs have been important
30 drivers of these developments, with many Chinese international students
31 gaining permanent residency in Australia following their tertiary studies
32 (Hugo 2008; Robertson 2021). As a result of this, Australian residents born
33 in China tend to be highly educated. Among Australian residents born in
34 China, 50 percent have a university degree and 45.6 percent are employed
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1 as managers or professionals. In both cases these figures are substantially
2 higher than the national average (ABS 2021).

3 This increased immigration into Australia of well-resourced, upper-
4 middle-class Chinese individuals has coincided with the dramatic economic
5 rise of China, and the growing political assertiveness of its one-party state.
6 This potent combination has reignited “invasion” or “takeover” anxieties
7 within Australia (Rogers, Wong, and Nelson 2017). These anxieties, in turn,
8 have framed the way many Australians have viewed perceived imbalances
9 or inequalities in national housing and education markets (Ho 2020; Rob-
10 ertson 2021; Rogers and Koh 2017). We argue here that closely following
11 the push to marketize housing and education in Australia has been Chi-
12 nese, and indeed Chinese Australian, success at navigating these marketized
13 spaces. In line with Australian racism, this success has been racialized. Our
14 argument in this article is that critical attention must be paid to the *policy*
15 *structures* that set up the housing and education markets in the first place.
16 Current public anxieties focus excessively on one group of individuals who
17 are drawn into and then operate within these structures. These individuals
18 are persistently framed as “foreign,” and their behavior and apparent success
19 within national housing and education markets are understood in racialized
20 ways.
21

22 **Racializing and Marketizing Housing and Education**

23
24 In making the argument outlined above, we deploy two key concepts in our
25 analysis of housing and education: “racialization” and “marketization.”

26 The idea of racialization has a long history, though the term itself
27 emerged more recently (Meer and Modood 2019). Influential race scholar
28 Robert Miles elaborated on the concept of racialization in a number of
29 works in the 1980s. Racialization describes the way biological or cultural
30 characteristics are seen to “define and construct differentiated social col-
31 lectivities” (Miles and Brown 2003: 101). Racialized groups are seen to have
32 a cultural core: a uniform and static way of life (Modood 2005). Although
33 racialization is distinct from racism, given that racialization typically has the
34 effect of constructing a group of people as problematic or inferior, we argue
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1 that it is built on and made possible by underlying societal racism toward
2 the target group.

3 The concept of racialization has been usefully deployed to examine inter-
4 cultural relations in a variety of social settings. In Aotearoa, or New Zea-
5 land, Francis Collins (2006) examines the racialization of Asian students
6 by the media. In this case racialization serves to fix “a diverse group of
7 individuals within a singular racial identity that is known by stereotypical
8 economic, cultural and social characteristics” (Collins 2006: 217). That is,
9 Asian students in Auckland are represented by the media as economically,
10 culturally, and socially Other. Collins describes “a fantasy of the geographi-
11 cal origin of Asian student” and the way that young New Zealanders with
12 “Asian” heritage, or permanent residents with similar ancestry, also become
13 implicated in this Othering (218). One important implication of the racial-
14 ization Collins describes is the creation of “a racial category, Asian, that can
15 be known and controlled in the New Zealand context” (221). Within this
16 imaginary, particular individuals and particular behaviors are racialized as
17 “Asian” or “Chinese.” In the Australian context, as we explain below, this
18 includes behaviors such as particular forms of investment property purchas-
19 ing and the use of private tutoring.

20 We argue that the racialization of “the Chinese” in Australia is a key con-
21 ditioning context for the public response to Chinese “success” in Australian
22 housing and education. Furthermore, within this housing and education
23 context, those seen as Chinese in Australia are also marketized; that is, they
24 are treated as racialized consumers in housing and education markets. The
25 idea of marketization we are drawing on is loosely informed by the work
26 of Karl Polanyi (1975). Polanyi argues that before the advent of “market
27 society,” the economy was embedded within social structures and relations.
28 Social norms placed “redistributive” and “reciprocity” limits on the penetra-
29 tion of markets into social life. But the rise of capitalism was underwritten
30 by a “great transformation” of this relationship. The creation of markets
31 in land (nature), labor (people), and money (capital) each removed impor-
32 tant social limits on the market, eventually leading to the marketization of
33 almost every facet of our lives.

34 While the concept of racialization is useful for analyzing intercultural
35 relations in housing and education, the concept of marketization is useful

1 for analyzing the creation of foreign real estate and education markets by
2 government through public policy. Bringing some racial consideration to
3 Polanyi's class analysis of marketization, we contend that foreign real estate
4 investment and education markets are racialized in Australia. As detailed
5 below, decades of neoliberal government policies have transformed the way
6 Australians view housing and education, such that they are now viewed pri-
7 marily as commodities to be bought and sold, and people engaging in these
8 markets are viewed primarily as consumers. As Caitlin Neuwelt-Kearns et
9 al. (2021: 4) note, in the neoliberal context of society today, "marketization
10 processes—privatization, corporatization, commodification, competition"—
11 have profoundly shaped how society is organized along race, class, and other
12 lines.

13 Once a group of people is racialized, their participation in a social arena
14 can effectively be racialized as well (El-Enany 2020). In our cases, while
15 many groups participate in activities such as buying and selling real estate,
16 or using private tutors, concerns about competition and inequality are dis-
17 proportionately racialized in relation to Chinese families engaging with
18 these practices, such that public debates have increasingly framed Australian
19 housing and education controversies in racial terms, ignoring the broader
20 state-driven policy structures that have facilitated controversial outcomes.

21 The next section of this article sets out the policy structures that have
22 created the current housing and education systems in Australia. This is fol-
23 lowed by two sections that take housing and education in turn, detailing
24 some of the ways in which Chinese nationals and Chinese Australians have
25 been racialized in popular understandings of the housing and education
26 systems in Australia and, in turn, how controversies in these systems have
27 become defined in the public imagination as racial ones. The article's final
28 section examines how alternative frameworks for understanding these two
29 markets may provide a more useful foundation for productive public debate.
30

31 **Housing and Education Policy in Australia**

32
33 The policy structures that underlie the current housing and education
34 systems in Australia play a key role in governing the way that individu-
35 als operate as racialized subjects within these systems—or markets, as they

1 have become. Looking first at housing policy, we must consider the housing
2 market as a whole. The various policy settings shaping housing practices are
3 clearly demarcated along domestic and foreign lines.

4 The domestic policy settings shaping housing are complex and have
5 a range of aims, some of which conflict with each other. There exists an
6 intersecting suite of housing supply-and-demand-side policy levers, taxation
7 incentives for developers and investors, cash handouts for first home buy-
8 ers, bank regulation, and federal funding programs for social and public
9 housing (Pawson, Milligan, and Yates 2020). A key aim of these policies
10 is to drive productivity and economic growth. Following a strong federal
11 funding program for public housing in the immediate postwar period,
12 official support for public housing has been steadily declining since at least
13 the 1970s. This has been coupled with a focus on moving the Australian
14 population into housing ownership, supported by a new set of taxation set-
15 tings (such as negative gearing) and land-use policies that encouraged hous-
16 ing ownership and investment. In the late 1990s, homeownership peaked at
17 about 70 percent of households (Pawson, Milligan, and Yates 2020). The first
18 decade of the 2000s saw an increasing commodification of the housing sys-
19 tem with more investors in the market, income-to-housing-cost ratios blow-
20 ing out, and more younger people renting, for longer. By 2020, the rate of
21 homeownership had fallen to about 65 percent and housing affordability in
22 major Australian cities was in crisis. The treatment of housing as an invest-
23 ment vehicle for wealth creation has been heralded as a new “asset economy”
24 era in housing (Adkins, Cooper, and Konings 2020).

25 Policies governing individual foreign real estate investment add an extra
26 layer on top of the domestic policies discussed above. Australia’s federal
27 government developed its foreign real estate investment rules to direct for-
28 eign capital into new dwelling construction in order to support construction
29 jobs and economic growth and improve housing affordability (Rogers and
30 Dufty-Jones 2015). As such, and with some exceptions, nonresident foreign
31 nationals are typically restricted from buying established properties. The
32 government’s argument that increasing housing supply might address hous-
33 ing affordability pressures has been widely criticized in Australia, includ-
34 ing by the country’s leading housing researchers (Phibbs and Gurran 2021).
35 Critics argue that injection of foreign capital adds to, rather than decreases,

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domestic housing affordability pressures (Pawson, Milligan, and Yates 2020; Phibbs and Gurrán 2021). Yet these policies have led to an influx of foreign investment in Australian housing over the last two decades, on top of an acceleration of domestic property purchases for investment purposes (Ma, Rogers, and Troy 2023).

Education policy settings similarly shape the way that individuals operate within them. Since the 1980s, federal and state governments in Australia have set out to enhance competition and choice in the education system. Key policy reforms include: establishing more selective and specialist government schools; increasing funding to nongovernment schools; relaxing school catchment zone policies to enable families to apply to nonlocal government schools; expanding standardized testing (for example, with the institution of NAPLAN, or the National Assessment Program—Literacy and Numeracy); and creating the MySchool website that contains statistical academic and socioeconomic information on all schools in Australia (Windle 2015; Campbell, Proctor, and Sherington 2009; Ho 2020).

All these changes have been implemented in the name of providing more choice for families, either by increasing the types of schools families can apply to or by providing more information about schools' performance, funding, and student cohorts. Not only has school choice been presented as a democratic right for citizens, but in accordance with neoliberal ideology, greater choice is viewed as promoting competition in education, in turn lifting the quality of the "service" provided, as families are empowered to reject schools perceived as substandard in favor of perceived high-quality schools.

In these ways, families have been encouraged to take a market-oriented approach to education, comparing schools and engaging in strategies to maximize their children's chances of being accepted into a "desirable" school. Such strategies include moving into the catchment zone of a desirable school, undertaking private tutoring to prepare children for admissions and scholarship tests, and enrolling children into extracurricular activities to enhance their enrollment competitiveness for top-performing schools. This has created additional anxiety for families of school-age children, who in previous generations were more likely to simply send their children to the local comprehensive public school.

Race and Real Estate

In the context of the housing policy settings outlined above, this section documents the racialization of Chinese nationals and Asian Australians in Australia through their actual or perceived engagement with foreign real estate investment. Several key changes to the foreign investment housing market occurred between 2010 and 2020. Foreign investment in Australian real estate grew rapidly from A\$6 billion in 2010 to A\$29 billion in 2016 on the back of a significant injection of Chinese capital, before a spectacular fall back to A\$5 billion in 2019. This period is known as “the foreign investment ‘boom and bust’” (Ma, Rogers, and Troy 2023: 5).

The cultural politics of foreign real estate investment was highly visible when the federal government’s geopolitical commitment to Asia (Australian Government 2012) became entangled with a media discourse linking Chinese foreign investors with increasing property prices and corruption. This was particularly evident in the commentary associated with the 2014 Parliamentary Inquiry into Individual Foreign Investment in Residential Real Estate (HRSCE 2014). However, although the inquiry’s chairperson, then opposition MP Kelly O’Dwyer, associated a large proportion of the growth in residential real estate approvals with nonresident Chinese investors, evidence from the Australian Treasury and others indicated that Chinese purchases accounted for only 2 to 4 percent of the real estate market (McCarthy and Song 2018: 329).

In the Australian housing system, the politics of nonwhite citizens purchasing real estate is a highly charged issue linked to national housing identities such as the so-called Great Australian Dream of homeownership. At a time when housing affordability is at an all-time low in every Australian city, there is widespread concern at the prospect of younger generations being locked out of homeownership, in addition to worries about the housing stress being felt by many, across the generation divide. Concerns about unequal access to housing increasingly focus on the role of foreign investors, who between 2010 and 2020 were seen as too dominant in Australian real estate markets.

Chinese investment, in particular, has been “constructed ontologically and ideologically as a threat” (McCarthy and Song 2018: 325). Compared

1 to foreign investment from “friendly” (read: white) Euro-American sources,
2 Chinese investment is viewed as threatening not only because of racial dif-
3 ference but also due to suspicions about Chinese communism representing
4 an alien and hostile economic and political force—an authoritarian “China
5 Inc” (Nyland, Forbes-Mewett, and Thomson 2011: 616). Despite biparti-
6 san support for foreign investment in residential real estate, media report-
7 ing suggests that popular anxiety ran high during the foreign investment
8 boom-and-bust period, with allegations that foreign investors were driving
9 up property prices, locking out “local” buyers and owner-occupiers (Wong
10 2017).

11 Within this context, two of the authors’ research explored Sydneysiders’
12 perceptions of foreign investors in Sydney, with a particular emphasis on
13 Chinese investors (Rogers, Wong, and Nelson 2017). While there was an
14 assumption in public policy and media rhetoric in the mid-2010s that there
15 existed a high level of public concern about foreign investment, there was
16 surprisingly little data that examined public perceptions. Our study exam-
17 ined whether the dominant voices in this debate represented broad public
18 views about this issue.

19 We conducted a survey of 899 Sydney residents in November 2015, just
20 prior to the 2016/17 high-water mark of the Chinese foreign investment
21 boom. Our study found high levels of concern and discontent about for-
22 eign investment. Participants were asked to identify factors that they felt
23 contributed to rising house prices in Sydney. Foreign investment was the
24 factor identified most frequently by participants and was twice as likely to
25 be selected than domestic factors such as the purchase of a home to live
26 in and the negative gearing policy, which enables local taxpayers to offset
27 losses on investment properties through the tax system. This was despite
28 the reality that Australian government policies actively encourage both for-
29 eign and domestic property investment. More than three in four agreed that
30 foreign investment was driving up house prices. In line with this, almost
31 two-thirds did not think foreign investment should be encouraged, more
32 than half believed that the government was not effectively regulating for-
33 eign investment, and a majority did not believe foreign investment should
34 even be permitted in Sydney.
35

1 But in what ways might we say that the debate about foreign real estate
2 investment is racialized? The high volume of foreign capital coming from
3 China at the time of our study, together with the dominant media frames
4 discussed above, meant that “foreign investment” effectively operated as a
5 proxy for “Chinese investor” in our survey. In participating in Australia’s
6 foreign investment market—a market that was created by the Australia
7 federal government for exactly this purpose (to attract foreign investors)—
8 Chinese nationals were racialized by the Australian media and in broader
9 public debate. As Xiao Ma, Dallas Rogers, and Laurence Troy (2023: 3)
10 show, “Land acquisition and property investment by European foreigners
11 are rarely mentioned in the mainstream media in Australia. . . . The activi-
12 ties of Asian investors, by comparison, have featured prominently in media
13 discussions about foreign real estate investment since at least the 1980s” (also
14 see Wong 2017).

15 Another way of exploring the racialization of the federal government’s
16 foreign real estate investment market is to look at the boundaries con-
17 structed between “foreign” and “domestic” investors in debates about Chi-
18 nese foreign real estate investors. In another study, we found that members
19 of the public in Australia misidentified “Australian-Chinese” people (i.e.,
20 Australian citizens) who were buying Australian real estate as being “Chi-
21 nese bidders” and “Chinese nationals” (Rogers, Lee, and Yan 2015: 736).
22 Australians often assume that all individuals who they perceive as ethnically
23 Chinese are foreigners, discounting the possibility that many may be long-
24 term residents or Australian citizens of various ethnic backgrounds (736).

25 The racialized tensions between “foreign” and “domestic” investors in
26 Australia’s housing markets, and particularly public discontent with the rise
27 of Chinese real estate investment, exposes a dilemma for the federal govern-
28 ment’s attempts to build a foreign real estate market in Australia within the
29 context of the geopolitical aspirations to foster an economically beneficial
30 relationship with China. The government’s policy settings and public rheto-
31 ric encouraged foreign investment, including Chinese investment. And yet
32 intercultural relations on the ground in Australian cities were tense around
33 Chinese real estate investment, since Chinese nationals and Australian Chi-
34 nese were racialized as foreign housing consumers and competitors in the
35 housing market.

1 To add further detail to this finding, participants in our 2015 survey
2 research were given the opportunity to provide comments about housing
3 costs and foreign investment in Sydney. The characterization of “Chinese”
4 through these comments revealed the racialization of Chinese people living
5 in Australia, as well as Australians with Chinese heritage. For example, one
6 of the most frequent comments made was around the supposed failure of
7 “the Chinese” to integrate socially.

8 Along these lines one respondent wrote that Chinese immigrants “don’t
9 integrate[,] create Chinese communities and only buy goods and services
10 from their Chinese communities” (survey respondent 3). Chinese foreign
11 investors, and by implication Chinese Australians, were also seen as rule
12 benders whose motivation for purchasing housing was purely for financial
13 gain:

14 I think there is far too much bending of the rules—particularly by foreign
15 investors. They buy large properties as a bolt hole for their money, pricing
16 people who actually live and work here out of their neighbourhoods, and
17 then do not live in the property, leaving it vacant. . . . I was told reliably by
18 a friend that out of a block of 8 houses in her area, only one was occupied.
19 I can see the same thing along our street too. One house was built and sold
20 for 2.45 million, (which was already overpriced) and 8 months later was
21 sold for 3.5 million to a foreign investor, without anything being done to
22 it. It stands empty, just like so many others round here. (survey respondent
23 278)

24
25 These comments indicate an explicit *Othering* at play, which occurs in at
26 least two ways.

27 First, the racialization of “the Chinese” depicts a group that pushes
28 deserving Australians out of the housing market. We see this clearly in the
29 following quote: “My family sold a house in Chatswood, three years ago to
30 Chinese. They lived in it for three months. It now sits empty and neglected.
31 This house [was] sold by my family for \$2.7 million. Some young Austra-
32 lian family could be living in that house” (survey respondent 452). In these
33 excerpts, respondents (re)articulate a racialized set of assumptions about the
34 negative effects of Chinese foreign investors on the domestic housing system.
35 European and North American foreign investors are rarely positioned as

1 absentee investors who are pushing “Australians” out of the housing market.
2 Yet Chinese immigrants are positioned in this way regardless of their actual
3 behavior or motivations.

4 Second, the Australasian real estate industry is in fact key to promoting
5 the Australian government’s foreign investment policies (Rogers, Lee, and
6 Yan 2015; Wong 2017), and actively promotes itself to Asian investors as
7 part of its transnational business model (Dal Maso, Robertson, and Rogers
8 2021). One foreign investment entrepreneur described this business model
9 as follows: “One of the founding principles [of his foreign real estate invest-
10 ment] company, was; it wasn’t about real estate, it was about educating the
11 Chinese consumer about the [foreign investment] opportunity that existed
12 in the world. Our target audience was high-net-worth, affluent Chinese con-
13 sumers who had the means and ability to travel internationally” (Dal Maso,
14 Robertson, and Rogers 2021: 569). Thus, the model focused on “teaching”
15 Chinese foreign buyers about Australia’s foreign investment policies, rules,
16 and laws is key to this business model, but operates on essentialized racial
17 categories (Dal Maso, Robertson, and Rogers 2021; Rogers, Lee, and Yan
18 2015). This model positions “the ‘other culture as risky’ to fuel wary atti-
19 tudes between buyers and developers, and to subsequently develop its medi-
20 ating role therein” (Dal Maso, Robertson, and Rogers 2021: 572).

21 In summary, Australian government policies have in recent years facili-
22 tated and encouraged the inflow of “Chinese” capital into Australian
23 real estate markets in the form of foreign investment. While the scale of
24 these property purchases has both dramatically escalated and then fallen
25 spectacularly over the last ten years, overall “Chinese” foreign investment
26 remains a small fraction of total property purchases. Although popular
27 anxieties about housing affordability often blame “Chinese” investors, the
28 reality is much more complex. We propose that legitimate concerns about
29 housing inequality need to be refocused to examine how public policies have
30 facilitated this inequality—with policies about foreign investment just one
31 small part of the picture. Resentment at “Chinese” property investors, which
32 is part of broader geopolitical and economic concerns about an increasingly
33 dominant China, undermines community relations in Australia.
34
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Race and Educational Success

Just as “Chinese” property investors are seen as “too” successful in the real estate market, in the arena of education, there is growing anxiety about the success of children of Chinese migrants in Australian schools. In this case, we focus on perceptions about Chinese Australian students in the education system in the state of New South Wales (NSW). The majority of these students were born in Australia with parents who are first generation migrants from China. A smaller number are from longer-established Chinese migrant families (from China and other source countries).

The state of NSW has arguably the most hierarchical education system in Australia, with almost fifty academically selective high schools that routinely outperform all others in standardized tests, including in the all-important Higher School Certificate (HSC) exams that determine students’ university entrance opportunities. Although selective schools are public (government funded) schools that enroll students on the basis of their results in a centralized admissions test, there is much public disquiet about Chinese and other Asian Australian families allegedly “gaming” the system in order to gain a place. Concerns have focused on these migrant families’ use of private tutoring in particular, and on allegedly authoritarian “Chinese” parenting practices symbolized in the figure of the “tiger parent” (Chua 2011).

It is not difficult to see why these concerns exist. Among fully selective high schools in NSW, enrollments are dominated by students from Language Backgrounds Other Than English (LBOTE). In Sydney, LBOTE students make up 80 percent or more of enrollments in all but two fully selective high schools (Ho 2019). In NSW’s top-performing school, James Ruse Agricultural High School, LBOTE students constitute 97 percent of enrollments.² There is qualitative evidence that LBOTE students are also overrepresented in primary school Opportunity Classes (Ho 2020), which are specialized classes for gifted and talented students and are unofficial “feeders” for selective high schools.

Asian Australians comprise the vast majority of these LBOTE students. Children of migrants from China are typically the largest cohort within the selective schools, joined by students from an array of other Asian back-

1 grounds, including Korean, Vietnamese, Indian, Sri Lankan, and Bangla-
2 deshī. In the popular imaginary, the identity of these students tends to be
3 simplified into the category “Asian” or “Chinese.” This conflation is also
4 often deployed by Asian Australian students themselves. For example, in
5 Christina Ho’s (2020) research on Asian Australian families and selective
6 schools, a Chinese Australian respondent remarked about her selective
7 school, “It’s like a mini-Chinatown.”

8 In public debates, commenters have often argued that selective schools
9 have become dominated by Chinese and other Asian Australians because
10 “their culture” suits the cutthroat competitive process of gaining admission.
11 “Selectives are skewed Asian because what it takes to pass the test suits their
12 culture,” argued one parent in an article published in the high-circulation
13 *Good Weekend* newspaper magazine. Another parent in the same article
14 explained, “The Chinese are very savvy at working the system” (Broinowski
15 2015).

16 In the popular imagination, “Chinese culture” includes a willingness by
17 parents to subject their children to punishing weekly routines consisting
18 of hours of after school tutoring and home study as well as tight restric-
19 tions on leisure activities such as playdates with friends. This “culture,” it is
20 argued, relegates childhood to a relentless pursuit of academic success, with
21 the target of achieving a top HSC ranking, enabling admission into the most
22 prestigious university courses.

23 This interpretation of Asian or Chinese “culture” fuels anxiety and resent-
24 ment on the part of middle-class Anglo-Australians, who perceive themselves,
25 self-flatteringly, as relaxed and liberal parents. Their self-perceived parenting
26 style cannot countenance the type of authoritarian and demanding parenting
27 they associate with Chinese migrants. As a result, they fear their children
28 will never be able to compete with the children of migrants. In the words
29 of Liz, one of Ho’s Anglo-Australian parent respondents whose primary
30 school-age children attended a high-performing opportunity class:

31 Both my kids play string instruments. The Asian kids whip them. They
32 practice an hour a day. . . . The kids in Year 3 come in and already play in
33 the school orchestra. It’s not just music. Every super star child at the swim-
34 ming carnival is Asian. They’re doing hours a day, going up and down
35

1 the pool, perfecting. Anything that has a technique involved, that you can
2 perfect, like swimming, violin, that's where they're going, and doing at a
3 high level.

4 The "Asian" practice of private tutoring is a particular touchpoint of racial-
5 ized resentment. While traditionally, in Australia, it is low-achieving stu-
6 dents who have engaged in private tutoring for remedial purposes—to
7 "catch up"—many Asian Australian students who are already academically
8 high-achieving engage in private tutoring to "get ahead," or specifically to
9 prepare for tests, including the selective school admissions test. In the last
10 decade, commercial tutoring centers have proliferated in cities such as Syd-
11 ney, concentrated in areas where large numbers of Asian migrants have set-
12 tled. Students spend months or sometimes years preparing for admissions
13 tests, doing weekly practice tests and refining their test-taking skills.

14 * * *

15
16 In the eyes of many non-Asians, test preparation tutoring is tantamount to
17 "gaming" the system. One of Ho's Anglo-Australian student respondents,
18 Robert, labeled tutoring as "that cheating system," arguing that it distorted
19 the outcomes of selective school admissions, excluding intelligent applicants
20 who had not been tutored. Meanwhile, Robert's father likened tutoring to
21 "doping" in sport.

22 It is not surprising that such perceptions have arisen in relation to Asian
23 Australians' approach to education. They build on long-standing stereotypes
24 of Asian migrants, and particularly the Chinese, as the "model minority"
25 (Fong 2008; Li and Wang 2008). As the "model minority," Chinese and
26 other Asian migrants have been lauded for their hard work and self-reliance.
27 However, there has always been a dark side to the stereotype—namely,
28 that Asians' industriousness poses an ever-present threat to others. There
29 is always a threat that the model minority could become "too successful"
30 and "take over" particular arenas within their hosts' society, whether this
31 is jobs, school places, or real estate. As described above, this is particularly
32 pertinent in an era where changes in the global order threaten the taken for
33 granted predominance of white-dominant Euro-American countries. And
34 in the Australian setting, the changing profile of recent migrants, who are
35

1 now overwhelmingly skilled professionals, threatens the taken for granted
2 social and cultural dominance of Anglo-Australians.

3 Of course, the model minority stereotype has always hidden the diver-
4 sity of experiences and practices within Asian migrant communities. Not
5 every Asian Australian student is successful in school, and not every Asian
6 migrant parent is a pushy “tiger parent.” In fact, the stereotype of the smart,
7 successful Asian student can be extremely detrimental. Unrealistic expecta-
8 tions create mental health problems for many Asian migrant children, for
9 example (Qin 2008). And assumptions that Asian migrant students are high
10 achievers may prevent many from getting the support they need.

11 Alongside these social risks, another of the dangers of the model minority
12 stereotype is the cultural essentialism embedded within it. Within the ste-
13 reotype, Chinese and other Asian migrants’ behavior is viewed as an inexo-
14 rable product of their deeply rooted “culture.” Traits such as industriousness
15 and accumulative materialism are viewed as “cultural.” Resentment at such
16 traits, as we have shown, then becomes racialized resentment. This resent-
17 ment fuels forms of racism that claim “cultural incompatibility” between
18 Asians and Westerners, leading to a questioning of multiculturalism as a
19 basis for social cohesion.

20 Indeed, some commentators have used the success of Chinese and other
21 Asian migrants in Australia to repudiate the policies of multiculturalism
22 and immigration policy that is not racially discriminatory. For instance, in
23 2019, then NSW Labor Party leader Michael Daley expressed concern about
24 “Asians with PhDs” taking local jobs and driving young people out of Syd-
25 ney (Australian Associated Press 2019). “Culture” is not only a dangerous
26 explanation for Chinese Australians’ and Asian Australians’ success in the
27 education system; it is also inaccurate. These students’ educational perfor-
28 mance cannot be explained simply by reference to cultural factors. There
29 are social and political factors that play as great, if not a greater, role. These
30 factors revolve around Asian Australians’ status as migrants.

31 First, as noted above, Chinese and other Asian migrants in Australia are
32 a “hyper-selected” group (Lee and Zhou 2015). In the last two decades, they
33 have overwhelmingly arrived as skilled migrants, reflecting Australian policy
34 settings since the 1990s that have prioritized applicants’ educational qualifica-
35 tions and occupational skills. Skilled migrants now comprise 70 percent of

1 the overall permanent migration intake (Australian Government 2019). Aus-
2 tralia has seen a dramatic shift in the profile of its migrants, from the “work-
3 ing class ethnics” of the postwar period to the current “multicultural middle
4 class” (Colic-Peisker 2011). As highly skilled individuals who have benefited
5 from education, Chinese and other Asian migrants naturally value schooling.
6 Their emphasis on education therefore is not just a “cultural” phenomenon
7 but a direct product of their class status and the fact that they were selected by
8 the Australian government for admission as skilled migrants.

9 Second, Chinese and other Asian migrants in Australia are respond-
10 ing logically to a competitive education system. Coming from some of the
11 most fiercely competitive education systems in the world—for example, in
12 China—Asian migrants understand how to strategically navigate education
13 systems. Again, their success can be seen as a product of government policy.

14 As described above, over the last two decades, Australian governments
15 have systematically created a market in schooling, with reforms that have
16 created greater hierarchies between schools and heightened competition for
17 places in “desirable” schools. As in the realm of migration, these policies in
18 education benefit well-resourced middle-class families. Chinese and other
19 Asian migrants are particularly well positioned to benefit because of their
20 class status and overseas experience with competitive schooling systems.

21 So while many view Chinese Australian and Asian Australian educa-
22 tional or real estate success as a product of “Asian” or “Chinese” culture, this
23 perspective fails to account for the crucial role played by Australian govern-
24 ment policies. In many ways, the stereotypical successful Asian Australian
25 student or real estate investor is a product of decades of neoliberal policies
26 in immigration, education, and foreign investment. In all of these arenas,
27 Australian government policy has become more selective, more elitist, and
28 more geared toward picking winners.

29
30 **Conclusion: The New Chinese Mobilities and**
31 **Australian Housing and Education**
32

33 In this article, we have tried to illustrate how, over recent decades, succes-
34 sive Australian governments, like many other governments worldwide, have
35 instituted policies encouraging the inbound mobility of Chinese people and

1 capital. Seeking to engage with a rising China, Australian governments have
2 pursued policy programs incentivizing migration and investment from Chi-
3 nese individuals. These programs have worked in tandem with policies that
4 have led to the marketization of housing and education in Australia, such
5 that these arenas are characterized as “markets” within which “consum-
6 ers” participate. As the marketization of housing and education in Australia
7 have occurred alongside the growth of the new P. R. Chinese mobilities,
8 activity within these “markets” has become racialized, with anxiety over the
9 role of “the Chinese” in these increasingly competitive arenas.

10 This article has shown that Australian anxiety that focuses on “Chi-
11 nese” individuals, reflecting global anxiety about the rise of China, fails to
12 recognize the role played by the Australian government in facilitating the
13 mobility of Chinese migrants and capital. Although Chinese migrants have
14 often been beneficiaries of neoliberal policies in housing and education in
15 Australia, they played no part in creating these policies. They simply act
16 within the rules set by government policies. The marketization of Austra-
17 lian housing, where housing becomes a repository for capital and associ-
18 ated capital gain, operating alongside government policies allowing—even
19 encouraging—foreign investment in housing, has created a market whereby
20 investors gain financially from the buying and selling of housing. Chinese
21 investors, or Asian Australians as the case may be, have simply been success-
22 ful operators within this system, as have many domestic investors. Similarly,
23 many of Ho’s Chinese Australian respondents acknowledged the anxiety
24 about their dominance in selective schools but emphasized that migrants
25 had fairly earned their places within a system set by governments. As one
26 recent selective school graduate said, “We feel like we’ve worked in the sys-
27 tem. We’ve done nothing wrong to get to where we are. . . . It’s not our fault
28 that things are a particular way.” Another remarked, “If you want your kid
29 to go to a selective school, there’s a system. . . . It’s like, the world is how it is.
30 You’ve just got to adjust to it.”

31 As such, anxiety about increasing competition or inequality in Australia’s
32 housing and education systems should lead to a questioning of the policies
33 that encourage such trends. In Australia as in other societies where these
34 anxieties arise (e.g., Ley 2010), blaming Chinese or Asian migrants for ben-
35 efitting from the system is unfair and futile. If governments reversed some of

1 the marketization of housing and education that has occurred over the last
2 two decades, many of the strategies used by Chinese migrant families would
3 bear less fruit. Private tutoring to prepare for the selective schools admis-
4 sions test would be useless if there were no selective schools, for instance.
5 Reducing the tax incentives designed to encourage investment property pur-
6 chases, and increasing capital gains taxation, would render property invest-
7 ments a less attractive proposition.

8 Equally important is the fact that anxiety about “the Chinese” within
9 Australian housing and education occurs within the structures of Austr-
10 alian racism. This means that legitimate concerns about housing affordabil-
11 ity and equitable access to high-quality education become uncomfortably
12 mixed with racism. A much more productive public debate could be had
13 with less of an emphasis on culture and race, and more attention on pub-
14 lic policy. This might also take some of the heat out of current debates.
15 For example, the association of Chinese Australian students with selective
16 schools means that some now feel prevented from criticizing the selective
17 system for fear of being labeled racist. Communities need to be able to cri-
18 tique national and state education systems without becoming derailed by
19 a focus on the *occupants* of that system. Similarly, communities need to be
20 able to have a frank public discussion about the purpose and desirability of
21 foreign (and domestic) investment in real estate without becoming fixated
22 on the perceived racial identity of property buyers.

23 Ultimately, these case studies of housing and education in Australia
24 reveal a great deal about intercultural relations, and in particular, the long-
25 standing underlying anti-Chinese racism in Australia that enables racialized
26 resentment against the “too successful Chinese.” As we have argued, not all
27 players active in these markets are identified as problematic. Neither white
28 foreign investors nor white families using private tutoring are rendered visi-
29 ble, despite engaging in the same “problematic” behaviors as “the Chinese.”

30 More broadly, in relation to the theme of this special issue, our case stud-
31 ies of Australian housing and education provide an account of the local
32 social consequences of the changing global order caused by the rise of China.
33 Like many governments, successive Australian governments of all political
34 persuasions have sought to benefit from Chinese economic development
35 by implementing policies to attract Chinese human and financial capital.

1 As we have shown, this has in turn altered local class and ethnic relations
 2 within Australian society, an effect we see especially starkly in the arenas of
 3 housing and education. The anxiety generated by these shifting relations of
 4 power demonstrates at a local level the far-reaching consequences of a rising
 5 China and the new Chinese mobilities.
 6

7 Notes

- 8
- 9 1 We place “Chinese” in quotation marks because the national and cultural identity of these
 10 individuals can be ambiguous and unstable, as will be explained in this article. But in popu-
 11 lar parlance, this ambiguity contributes to an essentializing understanding of “Chinese”
 12 individuals as inherently foreign (see Fitzgerald 2019).
 - 13 2 My School (website), ACARA (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Author-
 14 ity), <https://myschool.edu.au> (accessed January 22, 2023).

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