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Kerry Francis, *Unitec Institute of Technology*

## NZ Chinese/Chinese NZ: Auckland Architecture's Changing Response

Auckland city once had an area that was collectively known as Chinatown. It existed briefly at the foot of Grey's Avenue for approximately sixty years from the turn of the century. In the period from 1959 its citizens were dispersed; some up onto the Hobson Street ridge but most further afield into the Auckland suburbs. This paper briefly reviews that early occupation of Grey Street/Grey's Avenue and then examines Orient Towers, built in 1988, as an overt example of Chinese architectural influence. Attention crosses back to the late 1950s, the last years of Chinatown, to examine the Auckland Chinese Presbyterian Church as the only remaining architectural evidence of that earlier Chinese presence. The flash-back technique is used to throw the muted oriental tones of the church into relief with the overtly optimistic Chinese-ness of the Orient Towers project. Finally the paper looks at the 2014 Lantern Festival in Albert Park and the way that this event confidently asserts its Chinese-ness through the medium of architecture.

Chinese presence in New Zealand originates from an influx of men looking for gold in the 1860s, although there was little easily worked alluvial material available by the time they arrived. Over the next three decades, with New Zealand experiencing an economic recession, those who had stayed returned to the occupations they knew from their homeland: market gardening and associated retail activities, cooking and domestic service. While gardening requires space and generally location away from the urban centre, the market component requires the reverse. It was this trajectory that brought Chinese to Auckland's Grey Street and Grey's Avenue as it was later known.

## Grey Street/Grey's Avenue

Recorded Chinese presence in the Auckland central city occurs around the turn of the century.

"The first Chinese entry I found in the Auckland Directory was in the 1895 edition. A Thomas Humlog was listed as having a 'China Laundry' at the intersection of Grey Street and Shoe Lane. In 1899 the corner of Grey and Queen Streets was chosen as the site for the Town Hall, on the site of Thomas Humlog's laundry. Building began in 1909 and was completed in 1911."<sup>1</sup>

It appears that there was early competition for the premier site in the new city. The permanent presence of Chinese in Auckland's Grey's Avenue most likely occurred because of the proximity of the avenue to Market Square, the site of the first city markets. Regular visits to the markets to deliver produce would have alerted the market gardeners and the entrepreneurial members of the Chinese community to the run-down state of the building stock in this area, whose original residents had left for the better views obtained from elevated sites up the hill.

The Wah Lee family acted as a node for the establishment of a larger community.

"Wah Lee's store was one of the earliest Chinese operated shops in Grey Street. About 1904, it began selling Chinese foodstuffs in premises next to the Market Hotel.

... New arrivals in Auckland would stay in rooms above Wah Lee's until they found other lodgings and work. About 1914, the Chinese Masonic Lodge, the 'Chee Kung Tong', was established in the rooms above the shop next to Wah Lee's. Soon, other Chinese rented buildings and before long Grey Street had Chinese boarding houses, opium dens, fan tan, pakapoo and gambling houses."<sup>2</sup>

This Chinese occupation, initially as tenants, led in time to Chinese property ownership.

In 1927 the Auckland City Council changed the name of Grey Street to Grey's Avenue in an attempt to raise its status.<sup>3</sup> Then in 1959 the Auckland City Council began the process of purchase and removal of the buildings at the foot of Grey's Avenue in order to build the new Civic Administration Building.

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1 Eva Wong Ng, "Grey's Avenue and the Auckland Chinese Scene 1890s to 1960s," a paper presented at the "Crouching Tiger Hidden Banana" Conference AUT, Auckland, 4 June 2005, 3.

2 Ng, "Greys Avenue and the Auckland Chinese Scene 1890s to 1960s," 3-4.

3 Letter from ACC Town Clerk to Patrick Smyth, Secretary, Te Akarana Maori Association advising the change of name. ACC 275 Series, Box 430, Item 56/280 Part 1.

The Auckland City Council Valuation Department Land Purchase Files show that at this time, on the western side of the street a continuous strip of buildings, southwards from the Market Hotel on the corner of Grey's Avenue and Cook Street, were owned by Chinese families.<sup>4</sup> For the second time in 50 years the Chinese community was erased and overwritten by Auckland's Civic Administration. Today there is little remaining physical evidence of this earlier community. The area is now contained within the Aotea (Civic) Square precinct and is dominated by the 19-storey Civic Administration building. The only vestige of that earlier community is the Auckland Chinese Presbyterian Church (designed by the architects J. O. Owen, McKenzie and Foote 1957) located one street to the west, a building to which I will return shortly.

This first section of the paper serves to outline the role of municipal administration in the double erasure of this community. It equally serves to illustrate attendant attitudes of the Chinese community with regard to their role within the larger Auckland (and New Zealand) community. Since 1860 Chinese participation within New Zealand society has been disciplined by prejudice, immigration restrictions, poll taxes and other regulatory discrimination. This resulted in an attitude of careful engagement and of doing business (business as an all encompassing concept) in a quiet way. This quietness is manifest in the architecture and the relationship to architecture evident in Grey's Avenue. The Chinese community took over buildings previously designed and built by the dominant culture. They coded their presence on the street (their public presence), in a manner that, only on the surface and only in a thin and quiet way, identifies them as Chinese. The memory of Chinatown at the foot of Grey's Avenue is a memory of programme (eating, cooking, retailing) and the ephemeral effects of programme (oriental aroma, the sizzling of the wok) but not of any material, formal or spatial conditions of architecture that might be considered Chinese.

The next section addresses the significance of Orient Towers, which is proposed as an assertive architectural counterpoint to that of Grey's Avenue Chinatown. It is followed by discussion of the Auckland Chinese Presbyterian Church that seeks to locate that building as an example of architecture of gentle hybridity where structural, material and spatial conditions acknowledge dual architectural lineage. The paper then moves from observations on individual buildings back to a more complex scale in the final section and examines the 2014 Lantern Festival in Albert Park and the manner in which this event inscribes cultural configurations onto an already heavily figured site in the central city.

## **Orient Towers, Wellesley Street, Auckland**

Orient Towers is located in Auckland city on the corner of Wellesley and Lorne Streets. The dream of Chinese property developers Colin and Frances Chan, the project began with a desire to assert their

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<sup>4</sup> These ownerships were recorded as: 45-49 CM Dick, GM Yew (aka G Wah Lee) and RJ Yen, 51-53 WW and TW Doo, 55-63 Fong Chee, 65 J Young Yut and S Chew, 67-69 Fong Chee, and on the other (eastern) side of the road: 26-28 DLW, ECW and VHW Doo and, at 30, Mrs A Chong.

ethnicity, their Chinese-ness. Designed by architects Fairhead, Sang, Carnachan, construction began in the post-crash real estate desolation of 1988. By December 1989, with the building 95% complete, the main contractors Wilkins and Davies went bust. This event produced a characteristic response from the Chans who immediately set to, with the help of their family and community, to complete the job themselves. While this work ethic was successful in completing the construction of the building, the complicating factor of its deliberately strident Chinese-ness was, however, less easily dealt with.



Fig. 1 Orient Towers, perspective, Fairhead, Sang, Carnachan Architects.  
Auckland Council (EF250DAD-EBEA-4AB0-9AD2-AAAC2451AD5A)

For the Chans the building was intended to be “not just any old glass-fronted tower block. ... No, your building will reflect your origins, your traditions and beliefs in the most emphatic way; a slice of your own culture in a foreign land.”<sup>5</sup> So the question becomes: What architectural elements or strategies might communicate that culture? Chinese architect academic and author, Dr Evelyn Lip identifies the characteristics of traditional Chinese architecture and lists them as being able to be examined in the following categories: built environment, planning, construction, bracketing system, roof form, roof section, roof decorations, colour scheme, walls, columns, tiles, windows, doors and openings, podiums and balustrades.<sup>6</sup> Elements of this schema will be used to review Oriental Towers and the subsequent buildings.

During the initial briefing to Ron Sang, the Chans explained they wanted a pagoda and, recognizing the difficulty of building in the traditional wood, conceded that the building should have the “flavour of a pagoda”. This flavour needed to include compliance with the directives of Feng Shui and the Chans employed an expert from Hong Kong to advise on these matters. Consistent with the clients’ wishes, the building has a clearly discernible pagoda form and a traditional red colour. Thus, “[r]ed, a bright, auspicious colour associated with warmth and the Fire Element, represents good fortune and happiness.”<sup>7</sup> The pagoda form, a discrete tower with a clear verticality, proved to be problematic in the economic milieu of the central city that trends towards maximising site coverage. This cultural

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5 Selwyn Parker, “Mr and Mrs Chan’s Pagoda: The Dream of an Ambitious Immigrant Family Turned into a Nightmare,” *Metro* (October 1991), 114.

6 Evelyn Lip, “Feng Shui, Environments of Power: A Study of Chinese Architecture,” 23.

7 Lip, “Feng Shui, Environments of Power: A Study of Chinese Architecture,” 29.

model produced a building much taller than required by normal economic imperatives of commercial construction. It also produced a building with a floor plate of 300m<sup>2</sup>, a smaller floor area than that required by most commercial tenants.<sup>8</sup>

The floor plate of the tower is an irregular octagon. Lip identifies the octagonal plan as that traditionally used for pagodas.<sup>9</sup> The major circulation system (fire stairs and lifts) forms a rectangular tower which rises at the rear and parallel to the pagoda form. This circulation tower connects to the main pagoda tower on the long side of the octagonal floor plate. It is backed up against adjoining buildings and as such merges with the surroundings allowing the pagoda to read as the discrete form of its tradition. The pagoda sits on a two level podium that covers the whole site and provides for the retail and restaurant functions. While we are quite familiar with the tower and podium typology of the western (modernist) central city, the podium base also forms part of traditional Chinese architecture.<sup>10</sup>

The tower form is cleverly undercut at two points in its vertical travel. Both locations serve to emphasise the discrete pagoda form. Firstly at Level 2, the weathering layer moves back from street line to column line to provide an outdoor balcony for the upper level of the two level restaurant. Then at Level 10, the weather skin moves from being outside the columns to the centre of the column line to provide a small outdoor balcony for the prestige top floor space. The first undercut serves to emphasise the discrete nature of the pagoda form by drawing attention to its point of connection to the podium. The second undercut gives emphatic presence to the roof of the tower, to the dramatic upturned forms that so strongly signal its Chinese-ness. The roof is clad with concrete, slate-profile tiles topped with a stainless steel ball. Through these formal and material devices the roof is activated in a tension between the traditional and the contemporary Chinese manner.

The structural system, while of reinforced concrete rather than the traditional timber, uses round columns that support a ring beam system. The concrete floor slab is poured integrally with this beam. The viewer reads the visible columns at Level 2 and Level 10 and their continuity is maintained by being sporadically visible, through the glazing, at the intervening floors. These intervening floors (three to nine) are composed of alternating, curved aluminium panels and strip glazing which sit outside the column line. It is the modernist 'strip window' bent octagonally. The aluminium panels flare in the manner of the traditional tiled roofs but are materially and formally repressed to serve as spandrels. It is, again, a traditional Chinese form utilizing a modernist design trope.

Orient Towers is located on the corner of Wellesley and Lorne Streets in the city. Its major formal entry is to the south on to Wellesley Street. It is an entry that seems hollow both literally and functionally. Wellesley Street is falling to the west towards the adjacent Queen Street making this entrance physically awkward and little can arrest the downward pedestrian shear. It is on the

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8 Parker, "Mr and Mrs Chan's Pagoda," 117.

9 Lip, "Feng Shui, Environments of Power: A Study of Chinese Architecture," 27.

10 Lip, "Feng Shui, Environments of Power: A Study of Chinese Architecture," 27.

eastern boundary where the building abuts Lorne Street that there is a burgeoning street life. An ad hoc Korean Pancake maker is squeezed into a narrow slot along the edge of the building and a Japanese sushi bar occupies the formal retail space of the corner. These two food stores have been joined recently by another, occupying the loading dock on Lorne Street, and adding pork buns and dumplings to the existing Asian offerings. A steel-framed canopy projects over this space, painted red, vainly, vaguely simulating a traditional timbered and bracketed overhang. It works to identify and shelter this food vending space on Lorne Street but when it turns the corner into Wellesley Street and the street falls away from the canopy, the scale and the spatial quality can no longer sustain the intensity. In Wellesley Street it is the outside surface of the canopy, the traditional, cylindrical tile pattern that now works as an elevational sign and signifies Chinese-ness.

It seems that the small niches that this building provides have proved to be the most successful. These examples of both formal and ad hoc occupation of the architecture at street level have brought an Asian atmosphere to the site. Orient Towers for all its intended grandeur and Chinese assertiveness has not, to date, been the cultural beacon dreamed of by the Chans. But is this judgement, based on the lack of commercial success of the tower, still valid in a contemporary Auckland now composed of multi-ethnic variety in its architecture?

### **Auckland Chinese Presbyterian Church, Vincent Street, Auckland.**

Located in Vincent Street, adjacent to and parallel to Grey's Avenue, this 1957 church by is a relocation of the function of an earlier Chinese Mission Hall that stood at 43 Cook Street diagonally across from the site of the Auckland Central Police Station. During 1924-25, funds were raised by the Auckland Chinese Mission, in connection with the Presbyterian Church, for the purchase and renovations (a total cost of £1600) of a building at 43 Cook Street, near Nelson Street.

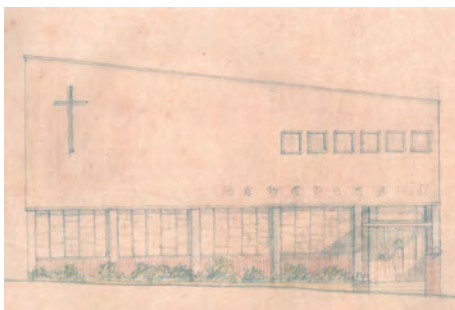


Fig. 2 Auckland Chinese Presbyterian Church, elevation, Owen, McKenzie and Foote Architects, Auckland University Architecture Archive, Owen McKenzie and Foote file.

This building became the Chinese Mission Hall and seated around 200 people.<sup>11</sup>

The Vincent Street building comprises an entrance and two level circulation system at the left-hand side. At ground level and running parallel to Vincent Street is a Chapel seating 120 people. Above the Chapel and running at right angles to it and Vincent Street is a hall terminated at the back by a stage and opening to the north.

The Mandarin lettering above the entrance with the English translation underneath clearly identifies the building as Chinese but at first glance there appears little else in the form or the material of the building façade that would do so. The roof is a mono-pitch at approximately 15 degrees. The façade is divided into two parts. The upper section is plastered brickwork punctured by a row of six small square windows at the right hand side and on the left side a painted wooden cross is fixed, standing off the surface. The lower portion is recessed back from the upper façade. The rectangular columns supporting the upper part are expressed by the recession of building skin that comprises square ceramic tiles to sill level and multi-coloured glazing above.

It is interesting to note the changes between the finished building and, what I presume is, the original sketch design proposed by the Architects.<sup>12</sup> In the earlier version the roof form is an asymmetric gable with the ridge running (at right angles to Vincent Street) on the centreline of the upper level hall space. The cross sits on the façade below the ridge. There is a material distinction between the upper and lower parts but the relationship is uneasy, the top too heavy, the lower part too inarticulate, too weak. There are some freehand pencil marks visible on the print. A faint line is drawn horizontally from the ridge height to its intersection with a line drawn up from the left hand building edge. Another line, more emphatically drawn from that intersection traces a new roof profile, and the eventual mono-pitch.

The mono-pitch changes the register of the building. Whereas the gable, reinforced by the centred cross, formally linked the building to the western (Presbyterian) tradition, the mono-pitch dissolves that association and secularises (or certainly compromises) the reading of the building. The asymmetry of the upper part of the facade is now dynamically balanced, in the finest modernist tradition, formally, functionally and symbolically, with the cross on the left and the horizontal row of the toilet windows on the right.

The lower portion is most strongly characterized by multi-coloured glazing above the sill level. Each structural bay is broken down into 5 glazing bays of equal size. There is a repeating pattern of subdivision within these bays, composed in pink, yellow, blue and grey/white rectangles and subdivided in a modernist (De Stijl-like) pattern, but the choice of hues and their muted tones evokes an oriental atmosphere. There is a screen-like quality to this lower part of the façade that is fostered by the clear expression of the structural columns as load bearing elements and the fineness of the geometric subdivision of the glazing. While post and beam construction (albeit in concrete this time)

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11 [www.historypin.com/attach/uid33636/collections/view/id/2632/title/Chinese communities in Auckland](http://www.historypin.com/attach/uid33636/collections/view/id/2632/title/Chinese%20communities%20in%20Auckland). Accessed 24 March 2014.

12 Auckland University Architecture Archive, Auckland Chinese Presbyterian Church file.



and finely divided screens as infill are characteristics of traditional Chinese architecture<sup>13</sup> it is the muted colour palette that is most evocative of the Orient.

Viewing the construction drawings, oriental atmosphere is largely absent in the architectural elements of the interior. Only the entry door to the ground floor chapel could be read as Chinese. It has panels in its lower section that are patterned beyond the modernist abstraction of ornament. The upper portion of those doors is, however, more explicit. They are clear-glazed, but with an overlaid pattern in steel rod reported to represent the Chinese character for happiness.<sup>14</sup> The congregation is thus given a blessing of double happiness as they first enter and then leave the Chapel.

It is possible to read the entry and circulation system within the church as having been influenced by traditional Chinese domestic courtyard patterns. The entry is at the right hand corner of the building and entry to the chapel requires a turn to the left. Two flights of stairs in the entry foyer give access to the upper floor and again, on arrival at the destination level you turn to enter the hall space. But this time you turn right as you have been re-oriented by the stairs. The north wall of the hall opens to the north onto a balcony. It is interesting to note that in the original sketch design this space is designated (and drawn) as a garden court. This earlier configuration could be seen as aligning more closely with the traditional Chinese courtyard model but perhaps the balcony or deck that eventuated is the New Zealand version.

## Lantern Festival

A process of cultural re-inscription is evident with the Auckland Lantern Festival, now in its 15th year in the city, and located primarily in the Victorian ambience of Albert Park. This site is significant in the history of the city. It is already multi-layered. Showered by a thick layer of ash from a volcanic eruption 600 years ago, the ridge was occupied in the early 1800s by Maori who referred to it as Rangipuke or Te Horotiu. Queen Victoria's Imperial forces occupied the site, then known as Albert Barracks, from the mid 1840s until 1871 when it was given to the Auckland Improvement Commissioners for a recreation ground. The park was laid out according to the 1878 competition winning design of architect James Slater. Construction began in 1881 and the paths, the groundsman's cottage, the flagstaff, the first band rotunda and the ornamental fountain were all completed by the end of 1882. Sir George Grey reappears as a statue in Albert Park in 1922 having been re located from his original site at the foot of the street named after him (Grey Street/Avenue) and the site of the original Chinese urban presence described at the beginning of this paper.<sup>15</sup>

The bombing of Pearl Harbour on 7 December 1941 precipitated the construction of air raid shelter tunnels beneath the park; later, in 1953 the Laidlaw family, founders of the Farmers Trading Company,

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13 Lip, "Feng Shui, Environments of Power: A Study of Chinese Architecture," 31.

14 *Auckland Star*, "Revolution in Church Design," 14 May 1958.

15 Paul Tritenbach, "Botanic Gardens and Parks in New Zealand," *Excellence Press* (1987), 8-14.

donated the floral clock to commemorate the first visit to New Zealand of the newly crowned Queen Elizabeth II.<sup>16</sup> As I have shown with this brief listing above, it has been the site of successive layers of volcanic, Maori, colonial, military, recreational and commemorative occupation. These occupations have engaged its surface, marking it, incising it and burrowing beneath it. It is significant that the current Chinese community have chosen it as a site for a major cultural event that celebrates a new beginning when there were other appropriate sites like Aotea Square (the site of the original Chinatown) or Western Springs (adjacent to Chinamans Hill).

I would argue that Albert Park has been chosen because it is an elevated site within the city, a site that overlooks the city. It is not a site in a depression such as Aotea Square or Western Springs. It is a site of historical significance to the majority culture. It is a site located adjacent to major contemporary cultural institutions; the Auckland City Art Gallery, Auckland University and the Auckland University of Technology. During the festival it expands spatially into the university as people eat and meet in the University quadrangle and take tea in Government House grounds. There is further penetration into these adjacent institutions through performances, exhibitions and late night openings at the Art Gallery, the Musgrove Theatre and the George Fraser Gallery. Chinese presence occurs not just at the centre (that is within the park), but also at the margins.



Fig. 3 Auckland Lantern Festival map 2014.

There is a dual north-south, east-west axiality in the existing Victorian organization of the park. The east to west axis is architecturally reinforced by the presence of the festival. I argue that the significance is two-fold. The Lantern Festival event is significant within Chinese culture but its significance is amplified by its role in this context as representation of Chinese culture. This importance requires an architectural gesture of strong axiality in a Chinese manner. There are three zones within this east-west axial progression that deserve attention. The entrance is marked by a break in the food stalls that line both sides of Princes Street for the duration of the event. Commerce steps aside, briefly, to allow entry into the park and the beginning of the axis is marked by a ritual gateway, described in the Festival guide map as a moon gate. This gate, courtesy of the Hong Kong

<sup>16</sup> Tritenbach, "Botanic Gardens and Parks in New Zealand," 8-14.

Economic and Trade Office, complete with digital images projected onto its façade, foregrounds the significant Chinese interest in economic success. Twenty metres beyond the moon gate, the fountain, one of the original features from the 1881 development of the park marks the intersection of the two axes. Two dragons occupy the pond surrounding the fountain, both facing south. The southern orientation is the auspicious (and major solar) direction in the northern hemisphere. This may account for the orientation or it may be simply that they face the main performance stage located at the southern end of the park. But the point remains. They do have a particular orientation and they mark it out, in a very Chinese manner. The dragons are located at right angles to the major direction of travel along the east-west axis and are thus most visible in this orientation. They draw attention to this cross axis and they work at that formal level without the need for additional signification. However, dragons in Chinese mythology are believed to be the rulers of moving bodies of water, such as waterfalls, rivers, or seas. The location of these dragons within the pool surrounding the fountain reinforces their mythological role.

Beyond the fountain and westward, this axis is reinforced by a powerful combination of travel, community and exhibitions of traditional culture and crafts. On the left hand side, at the beginning and the end of this section of the pathway, are the China Travel Service and Cathay Pacific Airlines. Separating them is a stall containing a fortune-teller. On the right hand side, triangulating with the two airline stalls, is the stall of the Auckland Chinese Community Centre as if providing the grounding-landing of the immigrants delivered by the airlines. Bracketing the Community Centre stall are the Kite-maker's and Calligrapher's stalls triangulating and stabilizing the axis to maintain the relationship to exhibits of traditional culture. This arrangement is terminated, asymmetrically, on the right by one of the many stalls selling lanterns that appear to be part of the Festival organization.

Returning to the significance of this reinforcement of the east-west axis in preference to the traditionally more important north-south version. The east-west direction joins the city with the University. It connects commerce with education but more importantly it joins (institutionalized) commerce (of the city) with a (festival) site of more commerce on Princes Street. Princes Street is packed full of food and craft stalls for the duration of the Lantern Festival. The Festival uses techniques of traditional Chinese architecture to overlay the Victorian planning of the park and to claim it as a connecting device between existing (European institutionalized) commerce and the new (Chinese) commerce. Urban public space did not exist originally in the rigorously planned Chinese city but "residents created spontaneously such places from periodic gathering around a temple or a waterfront."<sup>17</sup> Urban public space in China is also created by the validation of commerce as claims Dieter Hassenpflug.<sup>18</sup> The occupation of Albert Park by the Lantern Festival could be seen to be operating on both these principles.

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<sup>17</sup> Fei Chen and Kevin Thwaites, "Chinese Urban Design: The Typomorphological Approach," (London: Ashgate, 2013), 69.

<sup>18</sup> Dieter Hassenpflug, *Urban Code of China* (Basel, Boston, Berlin: Birkhauser, 2010), 157.

## Conclusion

The original Chinese presence in the inner city of Auckland was twice (1909 and 1959) erased and overwritten by the architecture of civic administration. From the end of that period we have a Chinese Presbyterian Church that exhibits oriental traits but they are mixed with an ecclesiastical modernism and the building shows only muted influence of Chinese cultural traditions. The opportunist atmosphere of the 1980s brought forth a more promising assertiveness where enterprise capital was aligned with cultural ambition to produce a building, Orient Towers, that at the time went against the grain of the city, in many ways. It isolated itself formally, symbolically and commercially from its Auckland context and today the use of the tower as a Backpacker's Lodge signifies its lowly commercial status. However the active Asian street life at the foot of the tower may suggest new beginnings. The Lantern Festival is now in its 15<sup>th</sup> year. This event has arranged itself on a prominent topographical and cultural location in Auckland city. Its occupation of this prominent site provides the opportunity for architecture to rewrite the relationship between the local Chinese and their adopted city.

## Postscript

China has overtaken the United Kingdom for the first time to become the largest source country for total permanent migrants to New Zealand. Immigration expert Paul Spoonley said the trend of "three Asian countries consistently being amongst the top four" largest migrant source countries, and with the UK "dropping back", meant that New Zealand's population makeup could "change more rapidly than anticipated".<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Lincoln Tan, *NZ Herald*, Friday 7 March 2014, A7.