



Fig. 1: Streetscape of Zeedijk (Photo by You Wu, 2020).

The Death and Life of Amsterdam's Chinatown

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Stroll through Amsterdam's city centre and you will be immersed in the splendour of the Dutch Golden Age. You can also immerse yourself in the enigmatic atmosphere of De Wallen, or red-light area. Adjacent to this is a place where some other interesting sights will meet your eyes, sights which do not appear to belong to this place: canal houses ornamented with Chinese lanterns and pagoda features, bilingual street signs (Dutch and Chinese), Western-style columns painted green and red. There is even a Chinese temple, Hehua Temple, opened by Queen Beatrix on 15 September 2000. Despite the fact that there is no official Chinatown, Amsterdam clearly has a Chinese district nestled deep within its historic centre. Why is this? And how can it survive in the face of globalisation?

Chinatowns

Ethnic enclaves known as Chinatown can be found in many places around the world, as we already saw mentioned by Qiyao Hu in his paper, "Planning for African Migrants in Guangzhou." Originally regarded as ghettos by Western culture, in recent decades they have been transformed into fascinating and exotic urban environments and have become "must-see" tourist destinations. The success of ethnic enclaves that have transformed and been accepted by local societies appears to be a given (but often is not, as highlighted by Hu's paper). Under the expansion of cultural consumerism, the monetisation of ethnic cityscapes enabled Chinatowns to break their association with poverty, vice, and social backwardness.¹ Interestingly, Chinatowns all over the world appear to be very similar, yet we cannot associate them with any one location or period in Chinese history. Developers and store owners are marketing authenticity to the general public, but this has brought about misunderstandings and led to a stereotyping of Chinese culture instead. These contradictions invariably lead to controversy, since Chinatowns today can neither express Chinese culture in a "correct" way, nor gather Chinese people spatially. Yet Chinatowns are a record of how Chinese migrants adapted to local society.

The 19th century saw industrialisation and modernisation, and Chinese migrants began to appear in Western countries. China under the Qing Dynasty (1644-1912) found itself forced to open to foreign commerce, particularly after the First and Second Opium Wars (1839-1842 and 1856-1860, respectively). Chinese citizens began to labour in menial jobs abroad, and many shipping lines preferred to engage Chinese stokers and trimmers because they could pay them less. Consequently, the number of Chinese sailors was on the rise in Western countries. Demand for labour fluctuated from day to day, so Chinese workers relied significantly on their compatriots to introduce them to work (exactly the sort of migrant social network we saw in Xiaojun Liu's paper on Hong Kong). As a result, seamen would spend certain days around the docklands looking for job prospects before sailing on to new destinations.² Some older sailors saw opportunity for profit and launched their own businesses, opening boarding houses around the docklands. These businesses also formed a platform between ports with trans-local interactions in addition to providing physical supplies of food and lodging. Shop owners used their social connections to spread the latest news and job opportunities for sailors, which formed a strong social bond among the Chinese. Since then, Chinatowns

have served as a social hub for Chinese employees. Meanwhile, Chinese quarters were sprouting up near several of Europe's city harbours. Some, such as those in Antwerp, Liverpool, and Amsterdam, are still located near the waterfront.

Chinatowns had an impact on their urban settings but also adapted to changing times. At the beginning of 20th century, Chinese quarters and Chinese immigrants were all but invisible, without any meaningful contact with local society. In the Netherlands, several unemployed Chinese seamen sold Chinese peanut cookies on the streets to make ends meet in the lean years of the 1930s. They opened eateries for both Chinese and Dutch customers after accumulating a certain amount of money. Their dishes were a cheaper alternative to the city's restaurants, and they were increasingly accepted by local Dutch, particularly those who had worked in Asian colonies. Following World War II, Chinese restaurants appeared serving a mix of Chinese and Indonesian cuisine. Chinese dishes had been contextualized and integrated to cater to the native Dutch public. Integration is a mutual process: new larger portions and tailored tastes helped a growing number of Dutch people become acquainted with the new urban lifestyle trend of eating out,³ while Chinese groups were gradually

becoming known by their "host" society. Waves of mass migration from China to the Netherlands clustered around the catering industry due to the enormous business opportunities it offered. And Chinatowns were the first destination for newly arrived immigrants seeking to adjust to their new social environments and find a place to stay.

With the restriction of immigration in Western countries over the past 30 years, the primary wave of Chinese migrants has switched from manual labourers to students and employees, with higher levels of education. This has also had an impact on the make up of the Chinese community. Chinese labourers used to rely significantly on their compatriots to provide them with social resources and employment, whereas more recent migrants live in a more dispersed way. Although the social bonding that occurs within a Chinese community is still strong, Chinatowns are no longer considered spatially agglomerated ethnic enclaves purely for Chinese people. They have become less visibly Chinese, with many of their traditional features watered down and replaced by more general tourist fare.

Additionally, overseas students and highly educated personnel would be considered "floating immigrants" – that is, groups which come and go and are better able to keep up with the latest Chinese culture and trends. Unlike earlier manual laborers, these newcomers have a fresh and in-depth understanding of Chinese culture. From their perception, the current representation of this culture in Chinatowns is based on a trite and superficial stereotype. Rather than conveying any positive aspect of the culture to local people, it leads to misunderstanding. In other words, new immigrants' ideas about Chinatowns differs from that of previous generations, those who left China 30-50 years ago.

These more critical voices circling around Chinatowns are not only within Chinese migrant groups, but have also emerged externally. Tourists are easily drawn to the "otherness" of cultural tourism destinations.⁴ Driven by larger profits, Chinese entrepreneurs are using visual manifestations of 'Chineseness' to attract them – e.g., displaying red lanterns, decorating their buildings' façade with pagoda-like ornaments, and constructing Chinese archways to emphasize the ethnic branding of their stores. This easy method of representing exoticness appears to be effective, so much so that this contextualized technique has been widely adopted in Chinatowns around the world, which has caused them to resemble one another. However, this cliché of exaggerating and overemphasizing 'Chineseness' only strengthens Western societies' misperceptions of Chinese culture. Even though all such elements originated in China, these ineffective pairings are unable to adequately depict current Chinese culture. In most situations, Chinese characters are incomprehensible to people in Western urban environments, and the haphazard decorations of Chinese merchants frequently undermines the streetscape's order. Chinatowns are in danger of becoming a "hollow box" due to their meaningless visual characteristics.

Moreover, this strategy is also applied and adopted by non-Chinese merchants, who see the opportunities this commodified landscape offers for their businesses. These same components are used by stores from different cultural backgrounds to "assimilate" themselves into Chinatown's aesthetic. A consequence of this is that more upgraded and non-Chinese businesses are moving into Chinatowns, displacing small, local shop-owners while maintaining the area's ethnic branding. For instance, Pan-Asian, fusion restaurants are embellished with traditional Chinese elements. As a result, this "invasion" is leading to a decline for Chinatowns and a loss of authenticity. Chinatowns seem no longer popular as a destination anymore, either for Chinese or tourists.

Amsterdam's Chinatown

When it comes to Chinatowns in the Netherlands, the one in Amsterdam stands out as unique. While very far from being invisible, it is not recognized by the local authorities. (Compare this to the other two Dutch Chinatowns: The Hague's is clearly identifiable, having been acknowledged and well supported by the municipality, whereas Rotterdam's is all but invisible, having been assimilated into its surroundings.)

Amsterdam's Chinatown, known as Zeedijk (note the zee ["sea"] in its name), is located next to the city's red-light district. Originally, this was a reputable area, populated by wealthy merchants in the Golden Age. It became a popular recreational area for sailors in the 18th century, particularly Chinese sailors, as mentioned above.⁵ The earliest Chinese stores date from the early 20th century, and this Chinese flavour in the district still exists today, despite the ravages of recent tourism. The district's Chinese characteristics identify the ethnic designation of the streets, even though there are some doubts as to why such an exotic ethnic enclave still exists in the heart of Amsterdam, especially with historical canal buildings being embellished with exaggerated Chinese ornamentation. This neighbourhood used to be highly recommended as an essential stop on the red-light district tour on most tourist websites. Despite the "attractiveness" of Chinatown and the distinctiveness of its Chinese characteristics, the number of Chinese stores has decreased in recent years. Today, there is just a small Chinese cluster in the vicinity of the Chinese-style Hehua Temple. Based on research conducted in 2020, there are only 36 Chinese stores remaining in Chinatown (the area between Zeedijk, Stormsteeg, Nieuwmarkt, Geldersekaade, and Binnen Bantammerstraat). Besides this, the business environment appears to be relatively homogeneous and tourist-oriented. Chinese restaurants and massage parlours occupy more than half of all business, often with Chinese restaurants operating side by side, serving similar dishes.

According to Jan Rath, "Local entrepreneurs are not completely free actors."⁶ Although there have been negotiations between Chinese entrepreneurs and the local government on the better promotion of Chinese ethnic identity in the area since the 1990s, this Chinese quarter has never been officially acknowledged by the Municipality of Amsterdam.⁷ In 2007, the municipality started a project to restructure the red-light district and its surroundings (including the Chinatown area). This was intended to restrict criminal activities, confine prostitution to a smaller area, and encourage the upgrade of the shopping and living environment.⁸ With this project, the local government seemed to acknowledge and encourage the presence of Chinatown: "Regarding the emerging market in China but also because Chinatown gives meaning to the so characteristic diversity of Amsterdam, we support the plans that should lead to a healthy Chinatown."⁹

However, these actions led to a decrease in the number of Chinese stores. In the Netherlands, ethnic entrepreneurs tend to concentrate their economic activities in wholesale, retail, and restaurants, which have low barriers to entry in the market.¹⁰ The same goes for Chinese entrepreneurs. Small family-owned businesses face fierce competition from their compatriots due to their general uniformity and a lack of specialization, which is the opposite of what the municipality

desires for local businesses. Besides, there seems to be no follow-up "encouragement mechanism" to increase the appearance of Chinese businesses on the street. Under state-led gentrification, Chinese entrepreneurs are very vulnerable. Therefore, the Chinese "flavour" around Zeedijk is in danger of disappearing.

The future of Amsterdam's Chinatown

As an ethnic enclave, Amsterdam's Chinatown has a distinctiveness that makes it appealing, but it also leads to arguments about ethnic segregation and the question of inclusivity in cities. Various social issues enabled Chinatowns to have a lot of social significance as well as complexity. Overseas Chinese are often considered an inward-looking ethnic minority by Western societies. Although they are distributed around cities, they still maintain their own social circles with compatriots and have limited contact with other groups. This social segregation and the inward-looking aspects of the community sometimes intensify misunderstandings about Chinese people and their culture. Discrimination does occur from time to time. Despite their erroneous interpretations of Chinese culture, Chinatowns continue to be seen as open public spaces. Instead of being referred to as social segregation, this method of embracing difference and variety should be referred to as "voluntary" segregation. Chinatowns serve as a storage facility for their ethnic identities, which also provide platforms for social interaction (like the "Arrival City" highlighted in Gregory Bracken's "Asian Migrations" as well as in Xiaojun Liu's Hong Kong paper).

Rather than abandoning the existence of this ethnic enclave, the local authority and Chinese groups should help it transform and adapt to new contexts so it can be integrated into local society. This does not mean ignoring ethnic characteristics to simply assimilate. On the contrary, integration should protect ethnic groups from cultural dominance by a majority ethnic group (or host society) and should respect and treasure their ethnic "core."¹¹ Meanwhile, instead of resembling one another all over the world, Chinatowns should be contextualized and varied based on their situations. Each Chinatown could be made diverse by its own special transnational cultural identity. In the process, Chinatowns could be transformed into collaborative public spaces rather than tourist-oriented destinations. People from both local society and those with Chinese backgrounds should be involved in the area. Therefore, a distinctive streetscape is not the aim we would like to achieve, which cannot convey any ethnicity and would even make some groups keep away due to not feeling of a sense of belonging.

In other words, Chinatowns should be considered a microcosm of Chinese culture, rather than expressing identity through repetitive stereotype. Chinatowns should contain multiple aspects like economic activities, ethnic culture and social connections. As an agglomerated area of economic activities, they could also be a collaborative public space to promote peaceful co-existence and mutual understanding among different groups. Visually, as an ethnic neighbourhood under the local context of its physical setting, it would mean less decoration with "Chinese" characteristics

on the streetscape. Chinatowns should not be alien to their surroundings. These material manifestations are a double-edged sword. They could be key elements in shaping the social meaning of an urban environment,¹² but an overemphasis on distinctness would enclose the territory within a strong sense of otherness. Compared to creating a completely mysterious and exotic neighbourhood, it is more valuable to reveal the combination of Chinese culture and domestic identity.

Meanwhile, Chinatowns should work as a platform for cultural exchange to propel the mutual understanding and build up a sense of belonging in the host society for Overseas Chinese. Integration between (and combinations of) local and Chinese characteristics have composed the unique transnational identity of Chinatowns. Therefore, their engagement would provide more transnational experience for tourists and the neighbourhood.

Besides Chinese entrepreneurs and tourists, Overseas Chinese and residents should also be involved in this neighbourhood through diverse activities to engage them and create more ethnic-related experiences. Diverse groups could also have many more opportunities for unintended encounters, which would only increase the sense of place. Within this process, the built environment would provide related physical settings for public activities.

Collaboration from a variety of actors is also required for an integrated transformation process. Taking Chinatown in Amsterdam as an example, the local authority, local developers, existing Chinese shop owners, and the business association behind them would be the primary actors driving this development.

It is understandable that the restructuring idea would have a favourable impact on the city centre of Amsterdam and the quality of its streetscape for local government and developers. They should, however, provide some assistance in maintaining the district's Chinese flavour and bringing back Chinese groups. To improve the creative and innovative concept of Chinatown, they could provide co-working spaces or incubators for Chinese artists and creative professionals; to introduce stores filtered by certain conditions, with diverse offers for targeted business, would be effective; to upgrade a business, they should also think about ways to assist existing shop owners with transformation and re-distribution suggestions. It is critical to provide communal activity space for Overseas Chinese populations in terms of social interaction. Meanwhile, the local government should issue design guidelines to maintain the streetscape's consistency.

Existing enterprises, although appearing vulnerable in comparison to the local government and developers, are the most important actors for intervention and can alter things on their own. They should actively engage in the transformation so as to determine whether their company has a chance of surviving. First and foremost, they should start to modify their store's business positioning and include locals as well as Chinese people as target clients. Simultaneously, they may incorporate an engaging Chinese cultural experience to enliven the concept. Rather than emphasising 'Chineseness' through tangible manifestations, they should establish a transnational streetscape by following recommendations from local authorities and experts. Furthermore, rather than fighting for greater recognition, Chinese business

organizations should adapt their position in this dialogue as well. They should serve as a link between local government and entrepreneurs. Using their connections and business networks, they would be able to identify possible funding opportunities and organize additional public activities to involve various groups. These techniques would not only make Chinatown more appealing, but they would also provide more business opportunities for future expansion. Eventually, residents and Chinese migrants could gradually return to this community and become involved in a variety of activities. Organically, various groups may get to know one another better through participation.

When transforming Chinatowns, it is important to consider the spatial, social, cultural, political, and economic implications. Techniques should be implemented in different ways and with a variety of actors. Because many of the issues that have arisen in Amsterdam's Chinatown are also prevalent in other Chinese communities, some of the suggestions made above could be applied to other Chinese businesses in Chinatowns, and they could even serve as a model for other ethnic enclaves that are considering (or are in need of) renovation.¹³

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Notes

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Fig. 5: Impression of ideal Chinatowns (Figure by You Wu, 2020).