The Death and Life of Amsterdam’s Chinatown

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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. 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 replicate Chinese culture in a “correct” way, nor gather Chinese people spatially. Yet Chinatowns are Chinese culture in a “correct” way, nor gather Chinese elements. As a result, this “invasion” of exoticness appears to be effective, so much so that this contextualized technique has become a 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, thus the haphazard decorations of Chinese merchants frequently undermines the streetscape’s charm. Chinatown is in danger of becoming a “hollow box” for its meaninglessly visual characteristics.

Moreover, this strategy is also applied and adopted by non-Chinese fries, who see the opportunities this commodified landscape offers for their businesses. These same problems are also used from different cultural backgrounds to “assimilate” themselves into Chinatown’s aesthetic. A consequence of this is that non-Chinese and non-Chinese businesses are moving into Chinatowns, displacing small, local shop-owners with the commodified and non-Chinese branding. For instance, Pan-Axis, 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.

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. 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 unemploying 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. Chinese restaurants appeared serving Chinese dishes had been contextualized and adopted by non-Chinese merchants, with higher levels of education. With the restriction of immigration in Western countries for the past 30 years, the primary wave of Chinese migrants has switched from manual labourers to students and skilled workers, with higher levels of education. This has also had an impact on the make up of the Chinese community. Chinatown is no longer a “hollow box” due to its commodified and non-Chinese branding. For instance, Pan-Axis, 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, Amsterdam’s Chinatown 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 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. The serving similar dietary data from the early 20th century, and this Chinese flavour in the district still exists today, despite the ravages of recent tourism.

The district contains some of the ethnic characteristics that are not completely free actors.”6 Although the Chinese community in Amsterdam, we support the plans that should lead to a healthy Chinatown.”9

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 inclusiveness. This does not mean ignoring the Chinese business on the street. Under state-government and developers, are the most evident Chinese businesses on the street. Under state-government and developers, are the most

It is understandable that the restructuring idea would have a favourable impact on the Chinese quarter 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 Chinatown area). This was intended to restrict the area’s sexual activities, concentrating it to a smaller area, and encourage the upgrade of the shopping and living environment.7 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 socio-cultural diversity of Amsterdam, we support the plans that should lead to a healthy Chinatown.”8

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.7 The same goes for Chinese entrepreneurs. Small family-owned businesses face fierce competition as to determine whether their company has the constant guidance and support by my dear mentors, Gregory Bracken and Reinout Klaasman. I would like to express my special thanks to Gregory Bracken for identifying this project and organizing additional public activities to involve various groups. These techniques were 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).7

Notes

13. This work was completed in 2020 as my master’s thesis “Chinatown in Amsterdam: A case study in urban design.” My research was guided by the constant support and guidance by my dear mentors, Gregory Bracken and Reinout Klaasman. I would like to express my special thanks to Gregory Bracken for identifying this project and organizing additional public activities to involve various groups. These techniques were 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).7

Fig. 5: Impression of local tourism (Figure by You Wu, 2020).