

Chinatown: Heterotopic Space, Urban Conflict, and Global Meanings*

Barris xinesos: espai heterotòpic, conflicte urbà, i significats globals

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Abstract

Chinatowns, often considered exotic touristic centers, sites of otherness or global incursions, actually highlight both global social movements and complex urban meanings. The mass migration of millions of Chinese across the world since the mid-19th century has fostered distinctive global heterotopias and transnational populations simultaneously localized in myriad host cities and nations. Hence the meanings of individual Chinatowns, including their roles in urban conflict, must be read ethnographically and comparatively through the wider set of Chinese enclaves worldwide. This essay, building on Saussure, Foucault, Lefebvre, and Turner as well as collaborative fieldwork, argues that Chinatowns constitute key symbols of urban problematic of culture, class and morality legible through paradigmatic and syntagmatic readings in a global dialectic.

Key words: chinatowns; space; conflict; heterotopias; Barcelona; Los Angeles.

Resum

Els *barris xinesos*, moltes vegades considerats centres turístics exòtics, llocs de l'alteritat o incursions globals, en realitat desvetllen moviments socials globals i complexos significats urbans. L'emigració massiva de milions de xinesos pel món des de mitjan segle XIX, ha creat diverses heterotopies globals i poblacions transnacionals simultàniament localitzades en moltes ciutats i nacions de destí. Per tant, el significat de cada barri xinès, incloent el seu paper en el conflicte urbà, exigeix una lectura etnogràfica i comparativa, contextualitzada en el més ampli conjunt global d'enclavaments xinesos. A partir de les teories de Saussure, Foucault, Lefebvre i Turner, i del treball de camp en grup, se sosté que els barris xinesos constitueixen símbols claus de les problemàtiques urbanes de cultura, classe i moralitat, descodificables a través de lectures paradigmàtiques i sintagmàtiques dins d'una dialèctica global.

Paraules clau: barris xinesos; espai; conflicte; heterotopies; Barcelona; Los Angeles.

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Introduction

On October 24, 1871, five hundred white and Hispanic men attacked the cramped Chinatown of Los Angeles, murdering at least eighteen Chinese and destroying property. Today, such events seem distant to the thousands of tourists, businessmen, workers and residents, Chinese and others, who live, work and move through the downtown Chinatown or other “Chinese” spaces around Greater Los Angeles as they are to millions of Chinese and their descendants who have spread around the globe in the modern period. Yet, conflict was part of the process by which a collective urban heterotopic space –Chinatown- emerged and revealed fault lines in the city. In the end, surviving conflicts, Chinese found new spaces within the metropolis.

Hence, such events underscore the compelling need to read iconic urban places as counter-sites of imagination and commentary, heterotopias, within multiple frameworks, encompassing the social and cultural construction of the city over time and global connections and communication. The meanings of Chinatowns in Los Angeles demand reference to both symbolic and social constructions worldwide: their heterotopy (Foucault 1984: Lefebvre 2003) entails both global paradigms and syntactic relationships. These must be understood through ethnographic analysis linking the long-examined Chinatowns of Los Angeles to San Francisco, Philadelphia and Paris, as well as the newly constructed enclave of San José, Costa Rica and even the metaphorical *barrio chino* of Barcelona. Such dialectic readings underscore “Chinatowns” not as mere exotic tourist destinations, immigrant enclaves or transnational threats but as key symbols of the modern city.

Conflict provides an urban ritualscape through which to tease out the full implications of these highly condensed living and symbolic spaces. Nonetheless, as Scott Zesch (2012) has shown in his detailed reconstruction of frontier Los Angeles events, peace with difference also forms part of Chinatown life. The small Angeleno Chinese community of 1871 had grown relatively peacefully within the evolving city. 19th century Chinese differed from Anglo and Latin settlers by physiognomy, clothes, language, and customs. Chinese lived apart, but many served in white or Hispanic households; most intended to earn money and return to China. Nonetheless, the Los Angeles News savagely attacked heathen immigrants as multiethnic Los Angeles recast its Spanish colonial and Mexican heritages after 1850 to become ever more “American.”

With 179 registered Chinese, mainly male, in 1871, in a city of 5,728, Chinatown residents often settled conflicts internally but called on urban courts and police as well. The riot’s immediate stimulus was a struggle between Chinese leaders, one of whom hired a Chinese killer from San Francisco (violence was widespread in this frontier city). When urban police sought to arrest this assassin, however, Chinese fired back, wounding a policeman and killing his popular civilian deputy. As this news spread, crowds marched on the tiny Chinatown. The mob grabbed any Chinese trying to escape, despite interventions by police and other citizens; some Chinese reached the safety of jail but others, including a well-known doctor, were lynched. While his clientele included both white and Chinese patients and friends, in the maw of conflict, Dr. Tong became the “other,” scapegoat, threat and victim.

Calm returned shortly thereafter. Subsequently, ten Angelenos –Anglo as well as Mexican/Hispanic- were convicted of the killings, although their convictions were later overturned on a technicality. These events, nonetheless,

foreshadowed rising restrictions on Chinese that would lead to national Chinese Exclusion Acts that denied citizenship for those born in China and precluded immigration by most women (McDonogh & Wong 2005); new ethnic coalitions but similar violence and denigration of Chinese rights reemerged only a few years later in San Francisco (Risse 2012). Yet Chinatowns did not disappear. In subsequent decades, the California Chinese population continued to grow although many activities of the concentrated Los Angeles enclave remained restrained by laws and civic culture. Leaving behind their tragic original location, Chinese were forced from another site by the construction of Los Angeles' Union Station in the 1930s; Chinatown could not resist the modernizing metropolis. New Chinatown projects recognized, nevertheless, that this place already had dual meanings as a mediated downtown tourist attraction and a space of work and residence. Plans called for facades constructed with donated Hollywood sets, an arch included. Other Chinese established stores, restaurants, temples and residences in an area previously identified as Italian.

This enclave, abutting the older Mexican centre on Olvera Street and the later modernist downtown, boomed with acceptance of Chinese as international allies and American citizens in World War II and the end of many racist restrictions on immigration in 1965. Changes brought new Chinese, Southeast Asian and other immigrants into and through Chinatown, which acted as a portal and a node for wider metropolitan connections. In fact, as the old Chinatown became crowded, immigrants followed the second and third generations who had spilled into nearby communities, whether Chinese or not. Monterey Park, for example, nicknamed "America's First Suburban Chinatown," reached a 47.3 % Asian population by 2010. In this and other communities where Chinese have gained control of elective offices, new arenas of less-violent conflict have arisen surrounding language and cultural rights, urban planning and identities in political and social coalitions (Fong 1994).

Beyond Los Angeles, Chinese in North America have gained reputations a "model minority", while Chinatowns have become intrinsic components of urban landscapes from dense downtown highrises in New York and Philadelphia to suburban sprawl in Atlanta, Vancouver and Houston. Conflicts and meanings of Chinatowns have been negotiated via schools, zoning boards, ballot boxes and courts as well as literary, academic and journalistic debates among diverse citizens. Meanwhile, in the Los Angeles riots of the 1960s and 1992, Chinese stood apart from urban violence, partially protected by Chinatowns that were neither battlegrounds nor redoubts of fearfulness. Activist-journalist Elaine Woo, for example, later remembered her desire not to be mistaken for Korean in 1992, since these newer immigrants occupied the frontline for clashes of race and class in black and poor neighbourhoods across the burning city.¹

At the same time, Southern California Chinese citizens, using Chinatown as a politically heterotopic place, have themselves reconstituted social and political organizations that transcend limited interests, evidenced in campaigns for public memory and multicultural presence in schools and media. In June, 2013, for example, Chinese and others organized campaigns against locating a WAL-MART in Chinatown that would challenge local businesses and labour organization.² Yet, the myriad meanings of a single Chinatown become more important when

¹ See: <http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/lanow/2012/04/times-reporters-and-columnists-recall-riots-and-changed-whats-changed-today.html>.

² See: <http://www.equalvoiceforfamilies.org/1-a-chinatown-to-walmart-not-so-fast/>.

elucidated through systematic comparison, a benchmark of the American anthropological tradition. Los Angeles hosts iconic Chinatowns but these have developed in relation to enclaves and conflicts in San Francisco, Chicago, Toronto, New York and other cities. Looking even further, in Barcelona, for example, images of Chinatowns crystallized with the myth of a *barrio chino* of vice and mystery created in the 1920s by journalists drawing on global imageries.³

In the last 30 years, Chinese migration to Barcelona has created a new presence including urban and suburban nuclei and networks of small businesses that permeate the city (Beltrán Antolín 2003, 2009; Beltrán Antolín & Saíz 2006). Throughout the metropolitan area, Chinese families have become neighbourhood fixtures in stores selling “Everything at One Euro,” in Chinese restaurants or as the owners of formerly Spanish bars. While Barcelona today has no “official” Chinatown, the 30-40,000 Chinese residents of the metropolitan area constitute a visible presence and set of meanings in the city. This growth has been generally peaceful despite tensions that arise from neighbour’s responses to economic concentration in wholesale centres or questions about the proliferation of small businesses. Nonetheless, Chinese requests for an arch in the enclave of Santa Coloma de Gramanet were denied by that city’s administration. Everyday unease over Chinese success, exacerbated by media fascination with criminal activities has worried many Chinese residents; these concerns left the city in 2013 with no major public celebration of Chinese New Year, in part a Chinese protest against ongoing discriminations. Again, changing places, interpretation, conflict and futures resonate with the mystification and experiences of Los Angeles.

Chinatowns, as physical places, social constructions and cultural imaginaries embody massive global movements beginning with the expansion of the Chinese nation and Greater Chinese relations, especially in Southeast Asia. The Chinese diaspora outside Asia characterizes a defining social process of the entire modern era: the free and forced movement of millions of people from continent to continent -whether Chinese to the Pacific Rim, Africans and Europeans to the New World or forced migrations around Europe, Asia and Africa- that have reconstituted cities as global nodes of connection and communication (McKeown 2008). Sascha Auerbach (2009) has shown how the first wave that produced the classic Chinatowns of the Pacific Rim and South Africa reflected both the global discovery of new resources and changing opportunities mediated by old and new empires. British imperialism linked southern Chinese labour through colonial Hong Kong as a port with gold in Canada, Australia, and South Africa, while the emergent United States attracted Chinese men in the goldfields of California and Alaska and used them in the building of the nation-state through the transcontinental railroad.

In these settings, Chinese worked alongside and in conflict with Irish immigrants and blacks originally transported as slaves. Other Chinese mined guano in post-imperial Peru and replaced slaves in Cuban sugar fields. While some movements involve mass contracts (South Africa or Latin American coolie labour), other Chinese acted for themselves and their families like millions of young men, European, African and Asian who left homes torn by war and overpopulation to find fortunes. Some were enslaved, others indebted, others poor but free; some succeeded. Both the push factors and local networks and experiences facilitated transformative global urban phenomenon, as Adam McKeown has argued (2008).

³ Cf. Boatwright & Ucelay da Cal (1984), McDonogh (1987), Villar (1996), Maza (1999), Martínez Rigol (2000), Ealham (2005) and Fernández (2012 and 2013).

China, in particular, had been forcibly weakened, drugged into submission by opium, before its sons sought new worlds. Nonetheless, Imperial Chinese and merchant sons soon provided global infrastructures of communication, finance, trade and even governance (Hsu 2000; McKeown 2001). Later, as rules and technologies of globalization changed, new mobilities altered Chinese connections to the rest of the world, including post-World War II emigrants through Hong Kong and Taiwan and post-colonial refugees from former French or British colonies. Today, Chinese emigrants no longer arrive by crowded boats but by plane, bus or truck directly or via global intermediary and connections; they include investors, students and tourists as well as entrepreneurs, workers and refugees. And global Chinese know these worlds not only through nodes like Hong Kong, London, Havana and San Francisco but through multiple digital networks so that news, whether opportunities or threats, travels rapidly.

The highly-marked places that result from Chinese choices and careers, and those of second and third generations of hybrid descendants AND the response of local populations (including those who stepped off the boat or plane shortly beforehand) constitute remarkable set of “laboratories” for the analysis of urban conflict. Hence, this essay reads Chinatowns as heterotopic key symbols, combining Victor Turner (1967) and Sherry Ortner (1973) with Michel Foucault (1984) and Henri Lefebvre (2003). The idea of heterotopias has already appeared in Chinatown studies dealing with American immigrant spaces (Bildmeier 2012) and Barcelona’s metaphorical *barrio chino* (Ealham 2005). Still, many readings of Chinatowns as urban phenomena, have been intensely localized, providing deep historical ethnographic understanding but scarcely questioning how powerful global imagery intersects everyday life where people recreate place and meaning, a balance Lefebvre so clearly insisted on in his tripartite analysis of urban space, especially those heterotopias whose elaboration he shares with Foucault. Anthropological theories of Turner and Ortner also focus on the elucidation of sometimes contradictory intense symbols through rituals, here embodied in forms and dialogues of public urban conflicts. Finally, Saussure’s powerfully generative linguistic model (1916) underscores syntagmatic as well as paradigmatic relationships among Chinatowns, including the creation of metropolitan networks and wider urban action.

The larger study on which this essay draws has argued that Chinatowns constitute generally parallel developments in which proximate concerns of society, culture, economics, politics and even personalities mesh in distinctive forms that form systems of meanings at once global and local, symbolic and changing through daily experience and actions. That project has examined nearly 100 Chinatowns in 40 countries through both fieldwork and wide collaboration with global scholars. In some cases –Los Angeles, Philadelphia, New York, Barcelona, Hong Kong –the study draws on decades of life and varied ethnographic inquiries while in others it relies on focused visits, readings and collaborations with other scholars and citizens, stimuli to comparative thinking.

This essay has an urban focus, taking Chinese globalization as axiomatic. Nevertheless, it still examines the delineation of immigrant populations through nation-states, including exclusions, restrictions and expulsion. Such regimes of mobility, as defined by Schiller and Salazar (2013), shaping flows and rights, have themselves evolved with the dramatically changing roles of modern China, from weakened empire to Communist threat to global semi-capitalist power in a single century. At the same time, transnational violence –Triads and local gangs– whose

images frequently tar Chinese diasporic populations have subverted state frontiers, as have individuals inventing “paper sons.” Meanwhile, it focuses on actors within and across cities, including government or elite strategies and neighbours who have shaped place and meanings. Chinatowns have moved through choice and force, vivisected by highways, destroyed by fire, and gentrified by those seeking new values in central spaces. Local civic factions crystallizing in conflict around ethnicity, class or gender, also shape Chinatowns, through changing definitions of identity (isotopy), economic competition, political agendas and metropolitan planning. Issues of place are equally critical: Chinatowns as refuges, targets, destinations and simply inconvenient spaces anchor ethnicity, identity and conflict. Yet, over time, immigrants and their descendants have transcended such simple spatiality while Chinatowns themselves encompass social divisions among “Chinese” peoples, regions and languages, incorporating different origins, waves of migration and adaptation.

Finally, multiscalar connections underscore the need to read heterotopias within global discourses shared through media, whether Hong Kong movies, global Chinese foodways or discourses that incorporate “trabajando como un chino”, “mafia chinoise” and “Tiger Moms” as images. Urban cultures depend on communication; films, television, newspapers and rumours have created powerful images of Chinatown even before Chinese arrive in an area, as evident in the baptism of Barcelona’s *barrio chino*. Today, digital media allow Chinese and others to communicate immediately within lively global networks that reconfigure Chinatowns. Using these sources as analytic tools as well as ethnographies, this essay explores multiple Chinatowns to speak to both comparative methods and urban symbolic theory, highlighting space, agents, heterogeneity and imaginary as mutually constitutive elements of a powerful set of global places and meanings.

Building Heterotopias: The Physicalizations of Chinatowns

While many nineteenth-century Chinese migrants found themselves on plantations or frontiers, they soon left fields, mines and railroads to construct urban enclaves of work, religion, food, fellowship and contact. These became known for distinctive architecture/ornamentation, foodways, people and activities, legal and illegal. In fact, Chinatowns emerged in similar locations across world cities –near but not in downtowns. Multiple processes converged in this localization: urban growth and opportunities created by abandonment as cities spread outwards, the service niches many Chinese took on that served businesses and travellers (hence, near railroad stations), the need to articulate Chinese extensions across cities and the convergence of homes and workplaces as havens in immigrant societies (McDonogh & Wong 2012). In the 1920s, the Chicago School already recognized that Chinese enclaves illustrated critical urban processes (Park 1928). As McKeown (2001) has subsequently shown, at this time, Chicago’s Chinatown was a seedy neighborhood of bars, prostitution and crime dominated by Irish immigrants whose prosperous children soon began to move out (as did Chinese-Americans when they could). Over time, Chinese put a new architectural and cultural stamp on the brick facades of urban tenements and warehouses near central districts, an invisible gentrification.

In many cases, metropolitan networks of Chinatown have emerged, articulating functions, immigration and opportunities, as in Paris, creating complex webs of visibility, integration and conflict. Unlike the Cantonese migrants who

crossed the Pacific to create California Chinatowns, the first French Chinese cohorts of 100,000+ contract laborers arrived to build trenches in World War I. Most survivors returned to China, but some remained, joined by occasional merchants and students. Perhaps 2,000 Chinese lived in France by the 1920s including future Communist party leader Zhou EnLai (Costa-Lascaux & Live 1995). An initial enclave took shape around the Gare de Lyon, but as in Los Angeles, only a small memorial now recalls that disappeared Chinatown. After French defeat in Indochina in the 1950s, Chinese who had lived for generations in Southeast Asia passed through refugee camps to Paris. Already acclimated to French colonial values and practices, including urban segregation, language and religion, some had occupied middleman roles in Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. In Paris, these multilingual refugees found opportunities in the rather nondescript Olympiade towers of the 13th Arrondissement. These government housing blocks replaced failing industrial plants near the urban periphery but proved unpopular with native-born Parisians. While Franco-Asians account for less than 25 percent of residents around Boulevards de Choisy and Ivry, the visibility of stores, restaurants, Chinese institutions and festivals there underpins lively community and public perceptions of a vibrant Chinatown (Costa-Lascaux and Live 1995).

A later Chinese enclave to the north, in Belleville, has incorporated 1980s and 1990s migration from the mainland, especially Wenzhou. Here, Chinese migration follows the history of social and spatial polarization since the reformation of Hausmannian Paris. Chinese storeowners in Belleville share streets with other Turks, Maghrebi Jews, Arabs, various Africans and Franco-Français (including those whose ancestors were European if not French). Ethnic, class and gender negotiations continue every day in streets, restaurants, parks and markets. Between these two highly visible Chinatowns lie other central but less salient enclaves. One, near the cultural node of Beaubourg/Centre Pompidou, occupies a few streets specialized in wholesale leather goods and jewelry, part of an archipelago of Chinese wholesalers that stretches to Place République. In another concentration, on Rues Sedaine-Popincourt Chinese clothing wholesalers have taken over all street floors, displacing small stores and bakeries with global commerce. Local Franco-Chinese and Franco-Français buyers and customers from Africa and Eastern Europe pack the streets (as in Barcelona's Trafalgar area), while older (French) residents living in the apartments above have vehemently protested the loss of a "neighborhood" character to "foreign" mono-business (Pribetich 2005).

Still other Chinatowns of Paris have coalesced in suburban sites, creating networks of place and meaning as in Los Angeles. Aubervilliers, just across the Parisian périphérique (ring road), has boomed with Chinese wholesalers, whose 700+ warehouses and growing commercial centers represent a bid for primacy for Chinese European distribution among new centers epitomized by Fuenlabrada in Madrid, Gorg in Barcelona and Dragonul Rossu in Bucharest (echoing, in turn, massive Chinese redistributive centers in Africa, Latin America and the Middle East). Here, too, a flourishing new economy has faced complaints and legal actions from older residents and businesses (Chuang and Trémont 2013). By contrast, Lognes represents an almost invisible Chinese suburb. Unlike the banlieues that have become iconic sites of urban conflict in the past forty years, this middle class development on the train line to Euro Disney has become a refuge for second-generation middle class Sino-Français, complete with discreet restaurants and institutions, including a Chinese grocery.

Despite their differences, all these Chinatowns remain connected in languages, goods, families, media and businesses; they embody a syntactic discourse about the city while incorporating sometimes conflictive meanings in each site. Multiple Chinatowns are linked by families, institutions, media and even Tang Frères, founded by the Chinese Lao-Thai Rattanavan brothers in 1976, which now employs 450 people in branches Parisian Chinese enclaves, including Lognes. Tang Frères also supplies smaller markets, restaurants, and *traiteurs asiatiques* (vendors of prepared Asian food) found in seemingly every Parisian neighborhood. It has expanded into cable distribution of Chinese television, bioengineering, and transnational investment, as “Paris” jockeys for further local, regional, and national centrality of Chinese in the European Union ([www. tangfreres.com](http://www.tangfreres.com)). Hence Chinatown businesses articulate peoples, goods and images, while connecting Parisian Chineseness with the world.

Chinatown conflicts in Paris have rarely erupted into public violence despite occasional xenophobic fantasies (e.g. Jean Yanne’s curious 1974 film about a Chinese military occupation, *Les Chinois à Paris*). Highly visible Chinatowns like Choisy and Belleville have peacefully integrated into global Paris. Choisy boasts restaurants, stores, temples, banks, doctors, a Catholic center, and Chinese media as well as Chinese and other businesses that serve Franco-Français clients and neighbors, emblematic of Parisian cosmopolitanism. Nonetheless, Sedaine and Aubervilliers have become flashpoints despite their intense economic focus and more limited visibility. Issues of competition as well as ethnic mono-function and shared space collide in complaints that constitute living dialectics. In Sedaine-Popincourt, Chinese seemingly offer only business, so the monochrome world of the street clashes with the residents in apartments above and the qualities of “good” neighborhoods citywide. Aubervilliers is in the throes of rapid change exacerbated by perceptions of Chinese global dominance. Such divergences of urban places and functions articulate a wide range of Chinatowns, meanings and actions.

Conflictive Neighbors and Multicultural Families: Social Formations of Chinatowns

As noted in Los Angeles, the 1871 massacre foreshadowed state restrictions on Chinese as immigrants that enshrined decades of United States legal identification of Chinese with racial difference, moral inferiority and even disease. The Chinese remain the only population excluded by race from the United States. The special exclusion of Chinese women theoretically allowed only middle class wives and daughters while threatening the citizenship of other American women who married Chinese, fomenting what appeared to be a non-reproducing “bachelor society.” Similar definitions of Chinese at the limits of citizenship spread across the Americas in the 20th century through Canada, Mexico, Central American and South American states. In some cases, laws excluded new immigrants, or lumped Chinese with other unwanted groups including Syrians, Lebanese, Turks and Gypsies. Neighboring states and territories adopted divergent approaches. While Chinese shopkeepers were important mediators for Jamaican contract laborers in coastal Costa Rica, neither group was allowed to move to the highland capital, San José, which celebrated its mythic whiteness. Mestizo Panama, by contrast, has had flourishing Chinatowns in its capital. Only in 2005 did San José city fathers decide that they needed a new Chinatown (Peterson 2009; McDonogh 2008; see below).

From immigrant to center, melting pot to margins, then, Chinese have acted as both agents and symbols in the grammars of identities that define nations and

citizens. National laws have framed urban events while images and practices of state legality shape the rights of Chinese and the actions of those around them, even if individuals have contested or subverted these rules. Any isolation of Chinatowns was a two-edged process, however. Chinese used Chinatowns to maintain transnational ties to China beyond language and culture: overseas Chinese, for example, became actively involved in efforts to overthrow the Qing emperor in 1911. And Chinatowns became places where diverse emigrants from China and other places found homes.

As noted, Chinatowns have been portals and nodes for changing definitions of diasporic Chineseness. The first wave of Chinese migrants came from southern areas around Guangzhou, passing through colonial ports of Hong Kong or Macau. Their Taisan dialects and family associations provided local identities and international connections in Australia, the Americas and South Africa while other populations, such as the Teochiu, established intense networks in Southeast Asia. In recent decades, emigration has come from other areas of China, although often still coastal areas with migratory traditions. Fujian, opposite Taiwan, and mainland areas “near” Shanghai, including Wenzhou, Zhejiang and Qingtian, have dominated recent European migration, establishing Chinatowns without Cantonese hegemony (although still shaped by inherited global imagery). According to Beltrán Antolín (2003), 70% of all Chinese immigrants in Barcelona come from the city of Qingtian, another area with manufacturing and emigrant mercantile experience. A smaller Cantonese cluster in the city sets itself apart in language, culture and business networks. Meanwhile, worldwide, Fujianese have clashed with older Cantonese migrants across the U.S., while Taiwanese have established distinct centers in Flushing (New York City) and suburban Los Angeles.

In all these cases, over decades and generations of co-adaptation, Chinese born outside China and their neighbors have negotiated hybrid skills and identities leading to new class and status identifications. In North America, for example, Chinese (among other “Asian-Americans,” itself an interesting social construct) constitute the so-called “model minority” whose members excel in school, work and finance. Suburban Chinatowns (or Chinese disappearing into stereotypically “white” suburbs) become key places for this middle class population, bringing together autochthonous and hybrid Chinese with wealthier immigrants, often from Greater China, who immigrate directly to suburbs. Meanwhile, American media also stereotype the Chinese as gangsters and Triads, threats diametrically opposed to the model image but evoking experiences and fears associated with many poor new immigrants of diverse backgrounds.

Old and new immigrants also differ in their relations to different conceptions of China itself, from the early immigrants who fought the Qing Empire to modern Chinese and their descendants. Some are linked to Taiwan or overseas locations, while others have been formed by different phases of the PRC and relations to these events and opportunities, from the Cultural Revolution to the current Capitalist one. Chinese share experiences and choices of difference with many other global immigrants. Still, the counterpoint of Chinatowns and “Chineses” forces us to reflect on how cultural constructions still set people and spaces apart while linking Chinese and even transforming them in diaspora and at home. One of the key factors here, in fact, are the rituals of rejection which Chinese experience within the larger city and state. Indeed, identities and boundaries are intertwined. Zesch’s study of the Los Angeles Chinatown highlights tensions of everyday interaction and groups. On the one hand, he underscores the interpenetration of many Chinese with

white households; he also cites the avidity with which Chinese studied English (with no mention of any reverse trends among whites). He also notes the growth of crossover institutions, especially Christian churches. On the other, he underscores social ties and features that isolated Chinese, ranging from dress and language to the absence of crosscutting social ties of family. Chinese remained oriented toward their lineage homes in southern China. Their flattened generational and gender profile –primarily men in their thirties– also meant that important areas of urban interaction were foreclosed: institutions of childcare and education would later assist the Americanization of Chinese and the familiarization of Chinese for others.

That the sudden spark from an internecine Chinatown fight ignited an urban conflagration in Los Angeles shows that everyday conflicts simmer among neighbors, sometimes hidden in jokes or criticism discourses without reaching public conflict. Similar, albeit less destructive, tensions are apparent in Greater Philadelphia (McDonogh & Wong 2005, 2012). Immigrants created this classic North American enclave near the stores and offices of center city around the 1870s. It expanded after the Second World War, anchored by institutions such as the Chinese Roman Catholic church and school, regional associations and businessmen. Immigrants and second or third generations who live far from the cramped busy Chinatown rely on it for services and connections.

Chinatown's churches, associations, political lobbies and commerce also articulate networks of varied immigrants who assured their visa status by buying and operating small fast food restaurants in poor, generally African-American neighborhoods. These stores wear conflict on their facades –dark, small businesses with grates on window and doors to prevent robbery and murder, not always successfully. Unlike the tensions between Korean shop owners and African-American neighbors that flared in the 1992 Los Angeles riots, however, relations between Chinese and African-Americans in Philadelphia have been peaceful although crime, reflecting wider urban and national socioeconomic trends, endangers both Chinese-American families and their neighbors.

Recurrent conflicts over space and use have flared nonetheless around Chinatown and its downtown neighbors. These include arguments in recent decades over the siting of facilities like a downtown mall, convention center, stadium or prison that would limit or damage Chinatown and competitions over parking that sacrificed Chinese needs to such downtown development (McDonogh & Wong 2005, 2012). Many plans share an urban political elite reading of Chinatown as a foreign, fungible space, even an underused or emptied one. More recent debates have erupted over casino gambling, pushed out of gentrified areas into a downtown mall abutting Chinatown. Chinese-American church and civic groups publicly protested, citing the dangers of compulsive gambling in Chinese society. These threats have brought Chinese-American and others to the streets and provoked voices in news and social media.

Chinese also responded negatively in 2012 to a proposal to build bicycle lanes along several major Chinatown cross streets to facilitate commuting between Center City and gentrifying neighborhoods to the North. Within days, placards decrying these plans plastered Chinese stores. Opponents argued that these lanes would disrupt commercial flows in the neighborhood and disturb a largely elderly population walking the streets, while bike advocates preached environmental advantages as well as modernity. Again, for many citizens, these conflicts are perceived to pit Chinatown continuity and development “against” issues valuable for the city as a whole: questions that have a particular impact on Chinatown

because of its central location. Continual debate, protest marches and political and economic campaigns have also fostered wariness among some Chinese-American civic groups about what might come next. It is equally interesting to read the dialogues of opposition around what would seem to be an unobtrusive issue in 2009: the placement of a commemorative plaque for Chinatown's 125th anniversary. Despite the proliferation of such markers throughout a city that sells history as a brand, a local blog suggested that this Chinese claim irritated some other citizens:

It's always healthy for a city to have it's [sic] poorest most insular (racist for any other group), development blocking residents at it's [sic] core.

But they have such nice restaurants so let's ignore all the things they do to hurt the city. It's pretty doesn't cut it for me.

They fight anything that doesn't benefit their CULTURE [sic] directly. Not even if it benefits the city as a whole.

If it was a black neighborhood it would have been razed decades ago.

If it didn't forcefully keep out outsiders...by illegally advertising rentals and violating multiple HUD housing rules.

It would have been gentrified by outsiders before many other sections of the city. But now, now you will always have poor at the core. Enjoy Market East!⁴

Many of these statements suggest that speakers come from a "mainstream" perspective, including white and other middle class families who have gentrified surrounding areas. These agents associate Chinatown with poverty and, paradoxically, with cultural privilege. Rhetorically, Chinese are pitted against other recognizable urban ethnic groups, like African-Americans. Finally, comments evoke mediated specters of illegality and closed populations. Thus, these comments underscore the complexities of Chinatown as space and symbol by the diverse incoherence of their attacks. These data suggest continual potential irritants along frontiers defined by Chinese space and culture, both with regard to immediate neighbors and to larger urban agendas, even as varied Chinese negotiate place and identity. As Saussure noted, in language, difference is everything: heterotopies exist in tension with the isotopy of the changing city. Yet, as in other metropolitan settings, debates over rights to the city played out around divisions of race, class and gender need not erupt in large-scale conflict or urban violence. Indeed, their everydayness seems intrinsic to the definition of places of identity over time, involving potential and action, invisibility and visibility, neighbors and enemies. Here, communication also plays a crucial role, layering key symbols and social arenas.

Culture and Communication

If Chinatowns are not homogenous and most Chinese adapt like other immigrants with their environment, why are so many conflicts in and around Chinatown premised on an absolute polarity? Cultural construction and

⁴ Form: <http://www.philadelphiaspeaks.com/forum/center-city/16977-chinatown-now-untouchable.html>.

reinforcement of boundaries central to urban conflict, whether built through oral myths or disseminated by global mass media. Powerful yet malleable images of difference have made China a potent symbol in the West for centuries, although the meanings and uses of this symbol have changed radically. In eighteenth century England, for example, China represented an ideal of order (Yang 2011). Only with the increasing problems of the trade imbalances, opium and wars in the 19th century did the West –and some Chinese –label the country as backwards and untrustworthy, images that preceded and shaped the lives of emigrants. Soon, mass media images of Chinese men seducing white women with opium and Chinese femme fatales have created cinematic images even for those who never encountered a Chinese person outside novels and theaters (Auerbach 2009; McDonogh & Wong 2005).

This mass-mediated cultural imagery, for example, entered the Barcelona landscape when journalists like Paco Madrid and Angels Marsà, among others, baptized a working class portside neighborhood of the city as “our” *barrio chino*. This sobriquet emphasized the poverty and sins of the neighborhood’s bars and brothels at the expense of many workers and activities there. At the same time, the existence of a *barrio chino* associated Barcelona with other world cities like New York, Buenos Aires and San Francisco where Chinatowns were markers of complexity and modernity. Over time, as many analysts have argued, this “*barrio chino*” became a politicized shorthand for both thrilling vices and urban problems/control, an epithet spreading to other cities across Iberian worlds. Chinese never constituted this area, whose myth has underpinned decades of Barcelona urban reform aimed at eradicating “problems” at the cost of both social and architectonic intervention. In a sense, its role as a heterotopia –a site of alternatives and domination –has remained strong but Chineseness itself as a signifier in this label has been frozen and impoverished.

As Chinese have arrived in Barcelona in greater numbers since the 1990s, this has created more than a toponymic conundrum. Although scattered Chinese stores mingle with those of other immigrants in the former *barrio chino*, Chinese presence throughout Greater Barcelona is generally diffuse, with concentrations of stores and some institutions around Passeig Sant Joan/Fort Pienc, in suburban Fondo and in the warehouse district in Gorg. These lack any ethnic designation in city maps or documents. Spokesman and scholars have even said that Barcelona wants to avoid a “Chinatown”: “Esta palabra aquí es muy sensible. Al gobierno y a la sociedad no le gusta”⁵ (Albarrán Bugié 2009). Still, the condensed global urban imaginary of Chinatowns need not always be negative. If Chinese stereotypes of weakness and duplicity haunted emigrants from a troubled nineteenth-century empire, what images reflect a 21st century global economic and military power? In fact, around the world, “New Chinatowns” recreate established global visions. These projects often involve Chinese, migrant and other investment, promoting Chinese place, attracting tourists and Chinese businessmen, generating heterotopias, albeit not without conflict. In San José, Costa Rica, for example, in 2007, when the national government recognized the PRC as the government of China, the city saw new Chinese investment in infrastructure such as a soccer stadium and highways. At the same time, elites were worried over burgeoning ecological tourism that bypassed the capital in favor of the coast. Hence, the Mayor announced a plan to develop a NEW Chinatown in San José, “con los arcos y todo.”

⁵ In English: “This word is very sensitive: neither the government nor society like it”.

Much of the funding came from the Chinese government, with the hope that private Chinese investment would follow.

The site chosen, between the downtown and the parliament, hosted some Chinese restaurants and stores, along with other more marginal businesses bars, tattoo parlors, porn theaters and a skateboard arena. At the same time, this top down planning ignored other existing Chinese clusters –whether the headquarters of the former Taiwanese mission or Chinese businesses that had constructed a small mall nearer the central city. The project nevertheless imported arches from China and opened with lion dancers in 2012. Still, urban protests accompanied replanning, raising issues of Costa Rican cultural patrimony despoiled by Sinicization as well as disruptions to neighborhood transportation and life, recalling issues of Sedaine-Popcourt or Philadelphia. While relatively few Chinese are involved as residents, the project has made Chinatown itself a symbol –and a spur -- to conflicts over rights, place and imagination.

21st century Chinese elite attention to and clusters in the Middle East, non-Pacific Latin America and above all, Africa have combined political economic investment with extraction of local resources –food, timber and land. This has produced new forms and images of Chinese presence, including gated communities for managers or Chinese workers involved in construction projects and wholesale malls (like those found outside Barcelona, Paris, Madrid and Bucharest). In Zambia and Zimbabwe, whole areas have been set aside as special economic zones under Chinese control. At the same time, merchants, entrepreneurs and service providers have followed cash and people creating incipient Chinatowns as places for the distribution of Chinese goods to Chinese and non-Chinese clients, while restaurants, electronic services, banks, housing and even prostitution have rounded out new Chinese presences and imaginaries. Needless to say, all of these areas already have sparked conflict, including violence, often over issues of inequality and difference. Yet, at the same time, their forms, lives and images represent avatars of a global family of Chinatowns and conflicts, images and realities, where comparisons reveal causes and patterns of conflict in more general terms.

Conclusions

Chinese and Chinatowns are everywhere: the movement and spaces of 100 million or more diasporic Chinese over centuries linked to a contemporary nation of 1,300,000,000 people have provoked xenophobia, curiosity, greed and creativity, moments of fatal violence and celebrations of urban diversity and modernity. The stories of many individual Chinese settlements, successes and failures have been told from multiple Chinese viewpoints and documented by historians, social scientists, artists and journalists within myriad urban settings worldwide. This article argues that this ubiquity and complexity Chinatowns also provides critical insights into urban processes by their global-local counterpoint and the active play of lived, perceived and imagined spaces. Certainly Chinatowns, as evolving spaces embedded in the conflicts that recreate the modern city, also allow us to read more deeply the meaning of such socially-constructed heterotopias as place and people, local and paradigmatic. In the analysis of modern cities Chinatowns represent condensations of meaning and action, far beyond the temptations of symbolic analyses of such iconic places and their pervasive mediated character. At the same time, local key symbols are not enough: Chinatowns embody systems of place, institution, actions and visibility across metropolitan settings, awareness –by both

Chinese and others – that transcend any single context. These connections become especially evident in periods of conflict yet lurk in negotiations of everyday difference. This tension of collective meanings and individual agencies, local and global, that continually reconstitute urban spaces and social movements is the stuff of urban ethnography; Chinatowns, perhaps, stand apart by their multiplicity and resonances over at least the past 200 years.

This does not imply that Chinese are more different than other immigrants or that the issues of race, class, gender and culture that permeate the cases selected here could not be found elsewhere. Instead, these interpretations build on the insights of Foucault, Lefebvre, Turner and Saussure to expand our reading of urban places in crucibles of conflict. Heterotopias do not stand alone nor can they be fully elucidated by a single moment. The essay insists that these urban places must be read as intensely local at the same time as they resonate across the world. Moreover, the complex relations of visible and invisible Chinatowns, centers and peripheries, peaceful and conflictive sites like those of Paris, Philadelphia and other cities illustrate the analysis of a syntax of symbolic meanings that go beyond examination of isolated symbols in multiple trajectories of action and meaning. At the same time, global imagery remains powerful. The experiences of many Chinatowns suggests that immigrants, starting in the poorest of physical and economic spaces, rebuild and even “gentrify” urban spaces but do not achieve recognition or control of places. Chinatowns are mystified, cleaned up, even moved for “the good of the greater city.” Hence, critical readings of Chinatowns as heterotopias must be revindicative as well as analytic, situating Chinatowns at the center not only in an academic sense but also in terms of Lefebvre’s calls for recognition of rights to the city. In this wider perspective, Chinatowns as analytic sites also recall Lefebvre’s broader vision (2003:40-41):

The urban considered as a field is not simply an empty space filled with objects. If there is a blindness, it does not arise simply because we can’t see these objects and the space appears empty. No, the urban is a highly-complex field of tensions, an ever-renewed and always demanding presence-absence. Blindness consists in the fact that we cannot see the shape of the urban, the vectors and tensions inherent in this field, its logic and dialectic movement, its insistent demands. We see only things, operations, objects (functional and/or signifying in a fully accomplished way) [...]. The urban is veiled; it flees thought, which blinds itself, and becomes fixated only on a clarity that is in retreat from the actual.

Chinatowns as global/local key symbols in conflict allow urban anthropologists to lift that veil and read and act within these vectors and tensions in critical and innovative ways.

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