

CITYSCAPES OF DIASPORA: IMAGES AND REALITIES OF LONDON'S CHINATOWN

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Background

This research critically addresses changing understandings of diaspora through a case study of London's Chinatown. In the heart of the city, London's Chinatown is both the public face of an established community and a private space for the expression of ethnic identity and culture and a source of support.

Britain's Chinese population is highly visible in Chinatowns but also in many ways invisible, and relatively little studied. Despite spatial concentrations of economic and cultural activity, they are residentially scattered in London and across Britain. Furthermore, they are generally perceived as successful, a 'model minority' not needing specific policy interventions. China's recent success in the global market is creating new flows of skilled migrants and entrepreneurs, as well as forced migration as a result of uneven development. Many rely on illegal networks and undocumented work often in highly exploitative conditions. Successive migrations have thus created a highly diverse population with different relationships to the idea of a Chinese homeland in cultural, economic and political terms and therefore to notions of diaspora and belonging.

The Chinese diaspora has had a specific relation to space through Chinatowns. They have become the focus of diasporic connections to 'home' and to other Chinese people locally and around the world. They may play a symbolic role in the maintenance of the diaspora as the embodiment of national memory, be an important part of every day social practice and the focus for 'ethnic business' and employment. The project will explore in depth contending images of Chinatown and the extent to which Chinatown 'belongs' to the Chinese community or to other stakeholders. It will examine its importance for different

groups who experience, use and transform this space through visible and less visible activities and practices centred there.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

A). What images of the Chinese diaspora are portrayed in and through London's Chinatown?

1. Who does Chinatown 'belong' to? What is its role in an ethnically diverse capital? How is it viewed by Chinese and other stakeholders?
2. What does 'Chineseness' and the notion of 'homeland' mean for different groups of Chinese people (including British born); how does this relate to Chinatown's representation of Chinese culture?
3. Is Chinatown's development led by the needs and initiatives of Chinese communities or by broader agendas ('branding' as tourist attraction; urban regeneration and business development; management of 'community relations')? How far do these agendas coincide/conflict?
4. Is Chinatown a 'public' face and/or a private space of the Chinese community? What differences and tensions exist in promoting its image and development?

B). What role does Chinatown play for London's Chinese communities?

1. What is the role of Chinatown in the everyday lives of London's Chinese population (differentiated by place of birth, language, occupation, gender etc.)?
 - materially (employment, information, cultural goods/services);
 - symbolically (focus for ethnic identity, sense of belonging)?
2. How does this visible Chinese presence relate to the scattered and 'invisible' community across the city?
3. How does new migration affect Chinatown? What tensions exist between new and old migrants and their organisations?

RESEARCH METHODS

The 18 month study will use an innovative combination of quantitative and qualitative methods to map the space of Chinatown through investigating patterns of use and ownership to produce *physical* maps of the area and its links to the wider community; and exploring issues of identity and belonging to draw *mental* maps of Chinatown's meaning for diverse groups of Chinese

people. In particular it will use:

1. **Interviews with key informants and semi-structured interviews with individual Chinese people** to explore feelings about and experience of Chinatown; its current and past importance in their lives; and of Chineseness and identity.
2. **Street survey** in selected streets, to gather information about land-use, changing patterns of use, the main users of businesses and services, and possible conflicts over space
3. **Ethnographic observation** at several stages and different times to record systematically patterns of use by Chinese, other Londoners and tourists, and to collect visual evidence (A2,4: B3)
1. **Mapping using Geographical Information Systems (GIS) software**, based on the micro survey, ethnographic observation, neighbourhood-level statistical data and other data, e.g. planning applications, land registry (B4). Using graphic coding, and integrating photographs and other visual material, the maps will show the use of space, ownership and location of commercial and non-commercial activities, both “Chinese” and non-Chinese. Where possible, changes in land usage will be highlighted. Chinatown will be mapped onto the rest of London to show its relation to residential patterns and focal points of Chinese communities outside Chinatown (businesses, schools, restaurants etc.).

Access and sampling

Access to interviewees will be facilitated through our established contacts with Chinese community organisations. Sales, Hatziprokopiou, Montagna, D’Angelo and Lin begin a Lottery funded research project in June 2006 with the *Chinese in Britain Forum*. Christiansen and Liang have extensive contacts through previous research. Lin works for a London community organisation. It is anticipated that key informants will also provide access to individual interviewees, which, combined with ‘snowballing’ will secure a representative interview sample. For the street survey, all commercial and residential premises in the selected streets will be approached, if necessary with repeated visits (this method produced a high response rate in other research in London by members of the research team).

Ethical Considerations

The research raises sensitive issues, particularly for participants with insecure legal status. It also explores potential conflicts which will need to be handled with sensitivity. Mutual trust will be promoted through our contacts with Chinese community organisations and the involvement of bilingual Chinese researchers. Information about the project will be provided in bi-lingual leaflets. Individual interviewees will be guaranteed anonymity and confidentiality.

To protect the safety of researchers, two people will work together on the street survey. They will carry University ID, have mobile phones and their itinerary will be known to the research manager.

Approval will be sought from Middlesex University's Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee and the research will be guided by the University's Research Ethics Framework. The advisory committee will provide advice and guidance on ethical issues throughout the project.

1. Detailed maps of London's Chinatown showing patterns of land use and ownership, incorporating visual material
2. Launch of report in London's Chinatown for community organisations and other stakeholders
3. Academic conference at Middlesex
4. Research report available in print and on Middlesex University web site, with summary in English and Chinese language/dialects
5. Academic articles (e.g. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*; *Ethnic and Racial Studies*); papers at academic conferences; co-authored research monograph