Contested Chinatown: the space of Chinese in London and Milan
Nicola Montagna and Panos Hatziprokopiou, Middlesex University

The 2005 Chinese New Year in London was obscured by disappointment and protest over development plans in Chinatown. The Save Chinatown Campaign, launched in 2004 by Chinese activists and entrepreneurs, objected to the conversion of a building into a mall. Campaigners argued that this would push out businesses, increase rents, harm the Chinatown’s character and threaten the cohesion of the community. This community, stereotyped in Britain as “hard-working” and “unproblematic” is perceived as a proof of “successful” multiculturalism.

That was not the only recent event that brought Chinese enclaves to the European public eye. On April 12 2007, some hundreds Chinese migrants clashed with Italian police in Milan's Chinatown. Cars were overturned, objects were thrown from the windows and several police charges were pressed. About 10 police officers and a similar number of Chinese migrants were injured. This was the first ethnic riot in Italy organized and developed by what those generally seen as a “silent community”.

Introduction

The two case studies briefed above are used as a pretext to analyse in a comparative way the space of Chinese migrants in Britain and Italy. We focus on these two types of protest, both related to Chinatowns, in order to go beyond the obvious differences between two countries with varying histories of migration, relations to China and Chinese settlement, and with contrasting policies of immigration and integration. We propose an analytical framework that escapes the limitations of ethnic and migration studies and looks also at broader political and economic factors and their relation to the urban space. At a theoretical level, we are interested in questions linking migration, integration and space, in particular the dynamics at a local city context.

Our empirical focus on Chinese migrant communities in established and emerging host societies gives this comparison theoretical resonance, but is also interested in unfolding trends relating specifically to Chinese migrations to Europe. The relevance to the urban space is rather obvious, as the overseas Chinese have long had a specific relation to space through “Chinatown”, a global phenomenon which makes our comparison possible. The tension in understanding Chinatowns “as real, living, breathing communities” or as imaginary constructions of the West, since Western views has always been ambivalent, may be clear though in different ways in our selected city studies. Whether formed out of forced segregation, discrimination, group solidarity, or economic survival, whether “authentic” or not, Chinatowns have been seen as both dangerous

---

1 E.g. see Benton & Pieke 1998; Christiansen 2003.
2 E.g. Ma & Cartier 2003; Benton 2007.
and exotic⁴. Yet, they become the public face of established communities, the visible concentration of their economic activity and the “concrete localities that viable ways of being Chinese, however impure, must be forged, negotiated and articulated”⁵. In that sense they provide a unique terrain to examine issues of difference and integration at the level of the city.

The focus on London and Milan is not accidental. They exhibit contrasting migratory histories, policies and contexts, and they both featured recently in public discourse in relation to Chinese migrant communities and the development of Chinatowns through the protest events that constitute our starting point. Drawing mostly on literature and background sources, we see these as decisive moments which may explain not only questions about the space of Chinese migrants in European cities, but also, more generally, about the dynamics of integration, coexistence and interaction at the local level. In the case of London, we make use of material from recently completed projects which included fieldwork research (interviews, street survey)⁶. In the case of Milan, we employ secondary sources (literature on Milan Chinatown and Chinese migration in Italy, press and internet material such as blogs of local Italian residents). After a brief report of the two events and their characteristics, we locate them in British and Italian migratory contexts and in the history and trends of Chinese migration and settlement in the two countries. We then move on to the political context, looking not only at immigration policies and different models of integration and the management of ethnic relations, but at the political process at large as reflected on the respective forms of protest in each case. Next we take a different angle, focusing on urban dynamics driven through conflicting interests over space.

**London’s “Save Chinatown Campaign” and the “Trolley Riot” in Milan**

In May 2003, the property developer Rosewheel Ltd bought the lease for the massive Sandrigham building at the east side of London’s Chinatown, with the plan to turn it into a mall aiming at attracting high street brand names. A year later, local Chinese businesses, there for more than 20 years, were given notice to quit the tenancy. A Campaign was set by activists led by Min Quan and supported by major Chinatown organisations, targeting both the developer and Westminster Council, which had sold the lease without consultation. The argument from the developer’s perspective was simply put as a legal matter, shared by a section of the local community that opposed the campaign⁷. Save Chinatown argued against the injustice done to small family enterprises and the danger of rents going up to boost the corporation’s profits; above all, they focused on the disruption of Chinatown’s community and on an overall threat to Chinatown’s “specific character”⁸. After about a year and at least 3,000 Petition Signatures, the

---

⁴ On the one hand, the “myth of Chinatown” as a secluded quarter where and illicit activities take place; on the other, the orientalistic essentialism of western views of the authentic Other; both may be seen as attempts to manage difference and control the Chinese Other (see e.g. Anderson 1991; Christiansen 2003; Ealham 2005; Benton 2007).

⁵ Ang 1998: 5.

⁶ *Cityscapes of Diaspora: images and realities of London’s Chinatown* (AHRC Diasporas Migrations & Identities Programme, 2006-2008). This was a follow up of another project entitled *The changing Chinese community in London: new migration, new needs* (the Big Lottery Fund). Both projects were carried out by a research team based at the Social Policy Research Centre, Middlesex University, including the authors, led by professor R. Sales.

⁷ The main opposing organisations were the London Chinese Community Centre (LCCC) and the London Chinatown Chinese Association (LCCA), the former being a community club and the later a business organisation. Interviews with the LCCC (27.03.07), LCCA (10.05.07) and the Westminster Council’s Chinatown Liaison Officer (14.05.07), AHRC DMI *Cityscapes of Diaspora* project.

⁸ Save Chinatown Campaign, various leaflets and campaigning material, 2004.
campaign gradually faded out as it did not manage to ensure Council support and the plan went on, leading to 20 evictions by March 2005; the mall was built, but no brand names were attracted. Meanwhile, the Council launched its regeneration project announced since 2003 with a clear recognition of the area’s economic potential, but this time with consultation and collaboration with the local Chinese business community.

On April 12, the battle between Chinese migrants and police started with an everyday dispute over a parking fine when two traffic wardens stopped a Chinese trader unloading shoes into her shop in the heart of Milan's Chinatown. According to some journalistic reports, cars were overturned, bottles thrown at police from everywhere and also from some windows, 2-300 people were prevented by police from marching towards Piazza Duomo. The Chinese consul tried to bring calm while some fellow nationals incited the crowd. The unrest went on hours until nightfall when protesters calmed down. About 10 police officers were injured, none of them seriously, and a similar number of Chinese people received hospital treatment. ‘Protesters weaved the red flags of the Popular Republic of China and displayed placards with ‘I love Italy’ written on them. About 10 police officers and a similar number of Chinese migrants were injured.

In short, it was an urban guerrilla in a district which is at the heart of disputes triggered by car traffic created by hundreds of Chinese businesses, although the Chinese community normally keeps a very low profile and causes little trouble to the authorities” (La Repubblica 12 April 2007). The first major ethnic riot since Italy became a relevant destination country for international migration erupted in a district that is at the heart of long lasting disputes triggered by car traffic created by hundreds of Chinese businesses.

Migratory histories and trends: Chinese migrant presence in London and Milan

The first angle of our analysis compares the obvious differences between the Chinese in London and Milan. In the first case, communities are longstanding and largely settled, formed out of colonial links; in the later, they are relatively recent but rapidly growing, built out of more recent migratory trends following late-70s reforms in China. Both cities have a Chinatown: long-established and institutionalised in the former case, in the process of taking shape in the later. As ethnic economic enclaves, the main types of activity in those spaces are also varying, with mostly restaurants and catering in London and mostly clothing, leather and shoes trade in Milan.

Chinese migration to Britain dates back to the late 19th century, with sailors debarking and settling in the colonial framework. With the decline of the shipping industry, the first “Chinese Quarter” of London in Limehouse faded out, and finally disappeared with the area’s intense bombing during the Blitz. The following decades witnessed large scale immigration from Hong Kong and the New Territories, stemmed by British colonial rule, the Chinese revolution and land reform in Hong Kong, at a time when the first Chinese restaurants had just started appearing in what was then the undesirable southern part of Soho. In the 1980s, the area was formally recognised as Chinatown by Westminster Council, and gradually came to become central to its regeneration programme, and Chinese gates, a pagoda and bi-lingual road signs were built. Today it represents an image of the success of multicultural London, an established feature of the city, celebrated in its successful Olympic bid. In 2006, the Mayor London launched the China in

---

9 Field visit, 14.05.07, AHRC DMI Cityscapes of Diaspora project.
10 See Westminster City Council publications, e.g. the Chinatown Action Plan (2003) and Chinatown Economic Development Study (2004).
London celebrations, in recognition of one of the city’s most visited tourist attractions, with over 80 restaurants frequented by Londoners, Chinese and others. Beyond this “branded” image, however, Chinatown remains the base of community organisations and campaigning groups and a significant resource for a community, which meanwhile has been diversified with new migrations from mainland China and other parts of East Asia - linguistically and culturally distinct from the (predominantly Cantonese) established communities.

Chinese migration to Italy is relatively recent. The first Chinese migrants settled in the early 20th century, with Milan being the main destination; but the Chinese population declined dramatically after the War and only around 700 lived in Italy in the 1970s. Since the early 1980s, new flows of migrants started to see Italy and Milan as a place of destination again and since the early nineties Italy turned into the principal new destination of Chinese migrants in southern Europe. According to the 2001 census the officially resident Chinese population was 69,000 representing the 5th largest immigrant group, and increased rapidly since reaching about 150,000 in 2005. It is a relatively young population, 67.4% were between 19 and 40 year old, while women represented 45.9%. Until the early nineties, 95% of the Chinese migrants in Italy originated from Zhejiang province, but since then geographical origins started to diversify: the Fujianese were the first to join the previous immigrant groups followed by the Manchurians in the late 1990s. Migratory routes have also changed: Chinese migrants no longer arrive through France and other European countries but through Eastern European countries (the former USSR, Hungary, Yugoslavia) crossing the Adriatic. The main regions of settlement are Lombardy and Tuscany while the main provinces are Milan, Prato and Florence. Milan’s Chinatown is a semi-gentrified area near the centre of the city. It is neither a predominantly Chinese residential nor a tourist area. It is an ethnic economic and commercial enclave where services for nationals and migrants coexist.

The political context: policy, politics and the political process:

This brief comparison of migratory contexts suggests the rather obvious differences that may explain the background to the two cases of contestation at a first place. But the explicit contrast between the history of Chinese migration to Britain and Italy, the settlement of communities in both countries and the development of Chinatowns do not alone account for underlying questions relating to the space for Chinese populations in the respective cities, societies and polities. After all, new migrations may be driving the Italian case at present, but they are also reshaping established communities in Britain. Furthermore, they tell us nothing about the issues at stake, neither about the kinds of reaction from Chinatown communities in either case. There sharper contrast between Britain as a “traditional” host country of postwar northern Europe, and Italy as a new destination of southern Europe, is reflected on the two countries’ policies towards migrants and immigration, in particular on their varying approaches to integration and the management of difference. It is therefore necessary to also look at the political context.

---

11 See published research findings in Sales et al. 2009a and b.
13 Pieke 2002; Christiansen 2003.
14 Dossier Statistico Caritas 2006.
17 In Prato and Naples respectively one out of two migrants and one out of four migrants are Chinese (Dossier Statistico Caritas 2006).
The British migratory landscape has its roots in colonialism and the decolonisation process. Its development in the postwar era passed from the initial welcome to former colonial subjects as migrant workers to a first tightening of controls with the 1971 Immigration Act, and from the family reunification and citizenship arrangements since the 1970s to the diversification of immigration and asylum that implied a move beyond the colonial pattern in the recent decades. In the meantime, since the antiracism of the 1970s-1980s, the British approach to integration has shifted from the framework of “race relations” to the politics multiculturalism. It is in this context that we have to locate Chinatown’s institutionalisation in the 1980s, as multiculturalism brings difference into the public realm and allows claims to the state through community representatives. Save Chinatown should be therefore understood as a form of protest set in the premises of multiculturalism. The division of the local community over the development is similarly explained along such lines, as different organisations represent different sections of (with different views about) the community. In the context of multiculturalism, community leaders and other stakeholders may then promote public perceptions of the Chinese as a “model minority”, adding exotic colours on the desirable cosmopolitan patchwork of the city. After all, European Chinatowns may have developed as open entities, but they are used by community leaders to offer to Europeans an image that corresponds to their expectations. Multiculturalism becomes itself a source of urban regeneration, in which “one persistently encounters a particular understanding of ethnicity”. The Save Chinatown Campaign, from its part, also focused on certain perceptions of authenticity, with talk over “Chinatown’s specific cultural character”.

Italy is a relatively new immigration country, having undergone a deep transition between the 1970s and 1990s. In contrast to Britain, Italian migratory processes have not have their roots in its (very brief and limited) colonial past. They have greatly changed over a short period of time and are characterised by polycentrism, with migrants coming from a wide variety of countries. The 2001 census recorded about 1.5 million immigrants, but 2008 data show an immigrant population of about 4 millions. Migration in Italy has come to be one of the major political issues and object of contention among political parties. The Italian approach to migration does not imply any sort of cultural recognition of ethnic diversity while the recent legislation (the so-called Bossi-Fini law) regards migrants as ‘guest workers’ rather than full citizens. In many respects, the approach to Chinatown development is an expression of Italian migration policies: economic incorporation and social marginalisation. Coexistence in Milan’s Chinatown has always been difficult. On the one hand, attempts to crack down on Chinese economic activities have increased over the last few months before the riot, and thus Chinese businessmen accused the local authorities of intervening in the market competition playing a major role in support of indigenous shops and business: "It has been really bad the last six months. How can we work?". On the other, local authorities and Italian residents have accused the Chinese community of not following the rules that are in place in the rest of the city and for being a closed community: "It's not just about the carts. The Chinese have taken over the neighbourhood, they have stolen spaces from Italians, but they haven't developed relationships with the residents".

---

19 See Chan 2005: 15.
20 To be employed mainly as unskilled workers in agriculture, domestic services (as cleaners, housemaids in care of children, disabled and older people), the building and manufacturing sectors, particularly in the country’s industrialised North, which in 2001 concentrated 62,5% of the immigrant population.
21 La Repubblica, 12.04.07.
22 International Herald Tribune, 29.04.07.
In order to jointly explain these forms of contestation and protest we need to locate them not only into the framework of migration policy, but also to broaden up our account to understand the wider political context. The political process stems from the relationship between the policy context, institutions and collective action, whereby the civil society is based on rational actors who pursue goals by calculating the structure of political opportunities. In the British case, the framework of multiculturalism is set within the liberal tradition. The liberal state encourages the development of civil society and therefore facilitates peaceful forms of participation in organised action. Acknowledging this may be revealing about the forms of protest the Save Chinatown Campaign engaged with, e.g. picketing, petition, leaflets, etc., in overall “peaceful” and non-confrontational terms. But it provides an additional explanation to the varying interests and views over the space of Chinatown represented among the community’s elite, leading organisations to adopt different political stances in respect to the redevelopment. By contrast, in the Italian case, protest has turned into a riot involving usually quiet residents, workers and businessmen and businesswomen. The closed state and politics of non-recognition provoked a violent reaction.

Urban dynamics: conflict and the economy of space

The diversity of interests over the space of Chinatown is not chiefly explained in political terms. The background and characteristics of the two cases finally bring us to a last line of explanation. Bringing into the picture the dynamics of urban development is essential in order to fully understand such issues of contestation over city space. Our reference point here is Molotch’s (1976) argument about the city as “an aggregate of land-based interests”. Accordingly, “any given parcel of land represents an interest”, whereby each stakeholder “has in mind a certain future for that parcel which is linked somehow with his or her own well-being”.

London’s Chinatown has not accidentally become a symbol of diversity; this stems from its material success as an enclave, not irrelevant to its location at the shopping/tourist heart of the city. Its development intertwines with urban restructuring and regeneration in central London, the West End and Soho, whereby a multiplicity of “stakeholders” have different, competing and often conflicting interests upon its space. The Action Plan, spearheaded by private developers with the support of Westminster Council, announced a “modern and strong brand” for Chinatown, which is also echoed in the rhetoric of Shaftesbury Plc, the area’s major landowner. Lately Chinatown attracts increasing business interest from China, with banks and corporations located there. The urban and transnational elites, local authorities, developers, alongside community groups intervene on physical space, in order to further commodify and commercially exploit this symbolic landscape of “Chineseness”. Chinatown has become a “golden goose” within the revalorised space of central London and discourses of the Chinese as a “model minority” recognise an ethnic group’s right to the city in exchange for revenue and capital.

---

23 As in the literature on social movements. See e.g. Tarrow 1998, following de Tocqueville; also, Ruggiero & Montagna 2008: 139-140.

24 The map of the city, argues Molotch, should then be seen “not merely as a demarcation of legal, political, or topographical features, but as a mosaic of competing land interests capable of strategic coalition and action”.

25 Community organisations refer to it as “part of the city, a small city in London, one of the London's places” (Interview with LCCC on 27.03.07, AHRC DMI Cityscapes of Diaspora project).

26 Interview with Shaftesbury Plc (18.06.08), AHRC DMI Cityscapes of Diaspora project.

27 Interview with Central London Law Centre. Big Lottery New Migrations, New Needs project.
investment\(^28\). This type of exchange is a mutually enhancing game, as community leaders and employers benefit from the way their image is branded and engage in strategies of self-promotion to further induce the commoditisation of Chinatown’s space. This reflects recent trends of ethnic spaces revalorisation and transformation into places of leisure and consumption\(^29\).

Milan’s Chinatown is also a symbol of diversity, but diversity assumes here a negative connotation. According to Italian residents and developers the Chinese and their businesses devalue an urban space which is potentially extremely profitable. The local community (including residents and Italian entrepreneurs) has raised a number of cultural and economic issues, which often overlap and weave with each other. From a cultural point of view, local residents use the usual stereotypes to describe the Chinese community in Milan: “It is an underground world that involves the Chinese community and we do not know… I have not seen it directly, but I know that it exists because some people talked to me about it”\(^30\). From an economic point of view, the area has lost its value in at least two respects. First, Italian clients are no longer shopping in the area. That means that the Milan’s Chinatown has been becoming an ethnic ghetto where ethnic migrant communities set up their activities, shop and resides. Second, the area is no longer economically attractive and properties have lost their value.

**Aftermath**

After the Milan riot, local authorities have started to negotiate with the Chinese community the move to Chinatown to a peripheral area outside Milan, while holding the grip on the Chinese business. Although the move implies negotiations among the two parts, immigration policy towards the Chinese community has not changed. The move to an outside area means that Italy is far from recognising ethnic diversity as a cultural and economic resource.

In October 2007, London’s Chinatown was stricken again: “Operation Zavijava” resulted in more than 30 arrests and was highly advertised as part of a major crackdown on “illegal” migration. The raids were interpreted as a direct attack on the community and its public face; on 3 March 2008, hundreds of Chinese from across the country were brought together at a massive rally in London. Much of the argument centred on tighter immigration controls depriving the catering trade from an essential pool of labour, threatening the community’s economic base.

The history of migrant communities is not alone enough to guarantee Chinatown’s space, especially as this is being shaped by ongoing migrations. Recognition of difference is essential, but multiculturalism does not in itself provide a safety net over stricter directions of immigration control. And even if the “contribution” of such enclaves is acknowledged, the pay off between economic success and immigration deemed undesirable may be accepted no more, as even liberal “tolerance” towards difference finds ultimately its limits. The issues of contestation over the space of Chinatown across Europe hence may have just started to converge.

\(^{28}\) See Chan 2005.

\(^{29}\) Lin 1998; Rath, 1997. To a certain extent, this reflects broader trends and processes of urban restructuring, in which an important role is played by what has been called the “cultural turn” (e.g. Zukin 1998). This is partly attributed to the necessity for investment-attraction and job-creation, as cities are shifting from sites of production to sites of consumption; but also to the fact that “culture” itself - alongside information and financial flows - is part and parcel of the new symbolic economy that produces “abstract” goods (Zukin 1998) – in our case food, tourism, etc.

Bibliography


