London’s Chinatown: integration, identity and diaspora

Rosemary Sales, Alessio D’Angelo, Xia Lin, Middlesex University

1. Introduction

London’s Chinatown is both the public face of London’s Chinese population and a private, or ‘community’, space where Chinese people can build and maintain connections with Chinese people in London and other parts of the world. It thus has an important material and symbolic role in relation to London’s Chinese population.

The Chinese have often been seen as a ‘classic’ diaspora and Chinatowns have been important in representing and organising this diverse population. Chinatowns both reflect and actively construct broader relations between Chinese and local populations and have important implications for integration and settlement. The agenda of migrant integration has acquired growing political importance in Britain and the EU. At the same time, immigration policy is becoming more selective and migrants’ rights stratified according to legal status (Morris, 2002) so access to conditions which would facilitate integration (employment, secure residence status) is becoming more conditional.

This paper is based on the research project, Cityscapes of Diaspora: images and realities of London’s Chinatown funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council through its Diasporas, Migration and Identities (DMI) programme. Our research used mainly qualitative methods, to explore the various – and sometimes competing – uses and meanings of Chinatown and its importance to identity, belonging and notions of home. Interviews were carried out with 29 key informants (from a range of organisations with a stake in Chinatown) and 50 individuals with a range of migration experiences and personal characteristics) to explore participants’ experience, use and feelings about Chinatown.

2. The meaning of ‘diaspora’

The meaning of diaspora has been widely debated (Safran, 1991; Brah, 1996; Anthias, 1998; Cohen, 2008; Dufoix, 2008), including in relation to the overseas Chinese (Christiansen, 2003; Ma Mung, 2000; Song, 2004). We have examined this in more depth elsewhere (Sales et. al., 2009). Brubaker, in a critical overview of the diaspora literature, identified three characteristics of diaspora common to most definitions (Brubaker, 2005:5). They provided a useful starting point in relation to the Chinese case.

- dispersion in space:

The history of Chinese migration has produced complex patterns of dispersion with contemporary Chinese migrants moving not only directly from China but from neighbouring countries.

- orientation to a ‘homeland’:

Chinese people may have multiple ‘homelands’, complicating the attachment to a Chinese ‘homeland’. Regime changes in China have transformed relations between the overseas Chinese and the Chinese state (PRC). Different motives for migration imply different forms of attachment.

- maintenance of group boundaries:

Diaspora implies clear boundaries around those who belong, based on presumed attachment to the ‘homeland’. Many Chinese people draw on racialised constructions of Chineseness, (Christiansen, 2003: 5) to suggest a common consciousness within the overseas Chinese population. But the construction of an assumed ‘diaspora community’ ignores dimensions of power based on class, gender, ethnicity and so
on (Anthias, 1998). Immigration policy also separates people between the ‘acceptable’ and ‘illegal’.

**Chinatowns, diaspora and integration**

Chinatowns are physical manifestations of community, embodying connection between Chinese people and a distinction from others (Dufoix, 2008: 72-3) and allow Chinese populations to present a ‘Chinese face’ to the outside world (Christiansen, 2003: 5). In the West they often originated as a product of institutionalised discrimination and forced segregation (Anderson 1991) but later developed as ethnic enclaves often centred around specific economic niches such as catering. More recently they have increasingly been transformed into places of leisure and consumption (Rath 2007) but also remain ‘cultural spaces’ of wider symbolic and material value (Benton 2007). Official multicultural policies have sometimes involved the ethnicisation of particular spaces and the promotion of ‘Chinatown’ may become a means to regenerate certain areas of the city (Chan, 2005: 15). They are also increasingly a focus for economic and political ties with the Chinese state.

Chinatowns are thus a focus for many contradictions within the notion of diaspora. A ‘Chinese space’, they involve material and symbolic connections with the ‘homeland’ and a space where Chinese people from different backgrounds, interests and attachments to China interact. They are also the visible space where the Chinese population interacts with the local population through everyday encounters and negotiation with official bodies. They thus have an important role in the process of integration.

Integration is a contested (Schnapper, 2007) and multidimensional concept involving both tangible and intangible elements (Niessen and Huddleston, 2007). Different migration histories have produced different pathways (Sales and D’Angelo, 2008). Stereotypes applied to Europe’s Chinese populations reflect the ‘recurrent fascination and repulsion with which the West has conceived of the East’ (Parker, 1998:67). More recently they have been seen as economically successful - a ‘model minority’ (Wong, 2003). Reinvigorated assimilationist discourses emphasising ‘common values’ and adherence to common culture, such as ‘Britishness’ (Sales, 2009) have questioned multiculturalist discourse and practices of which Chinatowns have become part.

**3. London’s Chinatown, belonging and ‘home’**

Our research suggests that Chinatown continues to be important for Chinese people in London, recent migrants, long established or British born. It is a meeting-point (the Pagoda) a place to buy Chinese products, to eat Chinese food, a familiar space within the anonymity of the city. It provides multiple connections: with the Chinese ‘community’ and with ‘home’.

All our participants referred to Chinatown as having a place in their lives, a ‘taken for granted’ aspect of living in London. It often played a crucial role for new migrants

> When I first came, I didn’t know where to go …. I really wanted to find some Chinese people to chat to. At that time there were not many Chinese people here, I hoped to find some friends so I often went to Chinatown. (29)

Many organisations have been established in or close to Chinatown since its location makes it easy to access. It is a source of information and informal networks and many find work in or through Chinatown.

Chinatown has deeper symbolic or ‘spiritual’ meanings, providing a ‘Chinese’ space in a sometimes alienating environment and enabling a sense of belonging, as this asylum seeker reported:

> There are many Chinese people, Chinese restaurants, Chinese shops, all in ‘Chinese style’. If you go to Chinatown, you feel more comfortable, because it looks like China. (16)
Several participants reported that Chinatown’s importance was more symbolic than practical, a feeling some struggled to express:

> It’s an unconscious thing which is hard to explain in a couple of words … [Chinatown’s] existence has brought me no economic benefit, none. But in the depth of my heart I feel that its existence can bring me some benefit (17)

A British born woman explained that Chinatown was important in acknowledging the existence of the community. It was the fact that Chinatown existed which was important rather than attachment to the particular place:

> For myself it isn't important, [but] … without it I feel our Chinese people would lack something … Chinatown is a landmark for our Chinese people. (48)

A few participants saw Chinatown’s visible ethnic space as part of a wider multicultural London. The ability to accommodate ‘difference’- including Chinese – promoted feelings of belonging:

> [London is] very cosmopolitan, different races, a lot of different people. I think there are 70 different languages across London. Yeah it’s good, because you meet different people and know a lot of cultures.

Others, however, felt no great attachment to London. It was the place where they lived their daily lives, not one which evoked any sense of belonging. Many saw Chinatown as connecting them to ‘home’. This woman from China drew explicitly on diasporic notions of connection to the motherland through Chinatown: ‘The overseas Chinese all feel like this; it allows you to return to your own motherland.’ (27) The location of ‘home’, however, differed for different participants.

The changing role of China has changed perceptions of home. Several participants, including those who migrated from Hong Kong or other places, expressed pride in China’s international importance which they felt impacted on how they were perceived by others.

> China is getting stronger now, so everyone wants to know about Chinese culture. … Now when you go out, people don’t call you a bloody Chinese or chink. They respect you. (8)

Informants from organisations spoke of changing relationships with the ‘motherland’ and see their role increasingly as promoting good relations between Britain and China. The informant from the LCCA expressed his identification with the ‘Chinese motherland’:

> Now our motherland has become strong, because we have the support of China in whatever we do. It is easier, people respect you, respect what you say.

Chinatown is thus crucial in maintaining ties to ‘home’. Home is not necessarily a particular place but may be more abstract, a Chinese space which can exist in different locations. With the changing relationships to the government of the People’s Republic of China, however, the ‘homeland’ may become increasingly tied to a particular state which claims to embody the ‘motherland’.
4. Chinatown and the maintenance of boundaries

Although being Chinese was a taken for granted aspect of their identity before migrating, in Britain it became the predominant element for many participants, which they felt fundamentally separated them from non-Chinese people. This shift is part of the migration process, one which often disrupts previous assumptions about who one is and how others see one. For Chinese people, with their 'permanent racial visibility' (Ang, 1998: 3) it may be a constant feature of every day encounters. They face stereotypes both negative (danger, dirt, illegality, secretiveness) and positive (hard work, economic and academic success). Several participants talked of maintaining an image as a Chinese person abroad:

*Most westerners don't know many Chinese people, they know only you, one person, and for them you represent all Chinese people... Here I think of myself as Chinese, in China, I don't think that way.*

(19)

Most sought a Chinese environment in which they could feel at home rather than mixing socially with non-Chinese people. Participants drew on a range of characteristics to differentiate themselves from non-Chinese people. Some involved racialised views of belonging, blood, bones and skin colour. Others referred to differences between Chinese and western values.

*Chinatown embodies the Chinese national values of hard work and struggle. Chinese people survive here because of their hard working values, not like other groups who use the system to get benefit, to fake sickness to cheat insurance companies.*

(24)

The notion of irreconcilable differences was evident in language such as *guilao*, meaning literally ‘foreign devil’. Westerners remained ‘foreigners’ in London while Chinatown was often seen as a refuge from being ‘abroad’. This thinking reduced their willingness to interact with westerners. This separation was also linked to experiences and perceptions of discrimination and racism. One participant who was married to a westerner said:

*Even though I live with a westerner in London, I feel there are some things which will always divide us; we will never have a complete understanding.*

Chinatown was important in representing a Chinese face to the outside world. Several participants talked of its role as a visible symbol of the community which was ‘invisible’ due to its relatively small size and dispersed settlement:

*Chinese people in the UK are quite scattered and more independent. If there wasn’t a Chinatown, there would be less cohesion... The only good thing about Chinatown is that it embodies the unity of Chinese people. ... So Chinatown's existence is very important for all Chinese people in the UK.*

(17)

The unified Chinese face presented by Chinatown hides divisions, for example between new and old migrants which also related to place of origin and language. Recently labour has often come from undocumented workers. Immigration policy has excluded those forced by economic or personal circumstances to migrate without marketable skills or qualifications. For this woman they spoil Chinatown’s image:

*I don't like it that there are so many people standing on the street, those Fujian people always calling you to buy cigarettes. That isn't good. Sometimes they stand there smoking and chatting. I feel that isn't good. To let everybody see that Chinese people’s manners are low-class and coarse.*

(25)

The involvement of the PRC is a source of unity and division. While many participants saw it as increasing Chinatown’s influence and the profile of Chinese people, it inevitably raises problems for
those who do not identify with the PRC as the ‘motherland’. Asylum seekers, whose existence represents an implicit criticism of the current regime, are often seen as an embarrassment.

5. Conclusions

The narratives of our participants revealed the importance of Chinatown in creating a sense of belonging. For many what was important was a ‘Chinese environment’ which could be found in London or in other places with large Chinese populations. ‘Home’ and ‘abroad’ were not necessarily fixed geographical points. Although they may not like the physical reality of London’s Chinatown, its existence was essential to their feeling of belonging, affirming their identity.

The research revealed that, while Chinatown has become institutionalised, it retains its importance for London’s Chinese populations. For the more vulnerable, especially the undocumented, it provides essential support networks and a sense of being ‘at home’. For others it is a place to socialise but retains a wider emotional importance. The different interests involved in Chinatown can be both contradictory and complementary. Although increasingly a ‘branded’ space and a predominantly a commercial place, it remains important in the everyday lives of Chinese people.

The research thus poses important questions about the nature of integration and its multi-dimensional character. For those participants who were economically successful, and therefore ‘integrated’ according to the tangible elements which is the main focus policy makers (Sales and D’Angelo, 2008), deep divisions remained between Chinese and non-Chinese and Chinatown was crucial to their sense of identity. For the undocumented, Chinatown provides crucial elements in their survival. A large population of people live and work there, prevented by their legal status from participating in integration but unable to return to China.

The claims of Chinese people to a specific place within the city fit a multicultural agenda based on the ethnicisation of space as a tool of urban regeneration. The research also revealed the fragility of Chinatown’s acceptance, especially as more assimilationist notions of integration are promoted. The raids of 2007 in search of the undocumented workers who are vital to its success raised the spectre of Chinatown as a dangerous place, representing illegality and uncontrolled activity. Chinatown still carries the weight of orientalist stereotypes and suspicion towards the Chinese ‘other’.

Bibliography


