

Focusing on Chinatowns

—Understanding Chinese Immigrant Culture—

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Introduction

Living in Japan, allows me to take time to enjoy Japanese customs, but I can never forget my mother culture. Sometimes I go to *Nankinmachi* in Kobe to have nice Chinese food and look for the DVD of Chinese films as a reward for an intensive period of study and work. The last time when I went there I found a water bottle was sold in the super market, which was used by the elementary school students in 1980s. Undoubtedly, it already became an antique in China because it is so old-fashioned. I wondered who would buy that. Three years ago I attended a wedding in Manchester's Chinatown, the party was a buffet style and everyone took a pair of knife and fork. I asked the waiter who looked like a Chinese, “请给我一双筷子。” He did not understand me, I said again in English “Chopsticks, please.” then he smiled. I wondered why they did not use the lazy Susan style of rotating table in this Chinese restaurant, and why the waiter could not speak simple Chinese words. And the most surprising is the film *Chinatown* (1974). It is a murder mystery set against the background of the political corruption of Los Angeles during the 1930s when the water supply for the city was constructed. Except for the final scene, none of the action takes place in the L.A. Chinatown. and none of the characters involved in the criminal activity is of Chinese ancestry. Nonetheless, this film equates “Chinatown” with drugs, gambling, sexual depravity,

murder and political corruption, and so the film uses this single word to express the worst aspects of humanity. Needless to say, this is completely contrary to my imagination of Chinatown. As a Chinese, I had been confident that I would know everything about Chinatown naturally, but it seems not to be the case. That is why I plan to write this cultural research paper. Four main conceptions will be discussed here: History of Chinese Migrations, Overseas Chinese, Birth of Chinatowns, and Cultural Identity. I will give the evidences to prove which connect with each other and interact with each other logically. Further, these questions will be answered: Who emigrates aboard and sets up the Chinatowns? Why did they do that? How did they show their cultural identity? This paper is primarily a cultural analysis, so little attention will be given to the economic position of Chinatowns in local cities today.

I. History of Chinese Migrations

There is a long history of Chinese people moving to other countries, but not everyone who moved abroad sought permanent resettlement. Chinese historians divide emigration into three periods: the early period (before 1840), the climax of emigration (1840-1930), and the modern period (1930-present). One of the earliest large migrations occurred in the Qin Dynasty (秦 221-216BC), when the emperor of Qin Shi Huang (秦始皇 259-210BC) sent his court sorcerer Xu Fu (徐福 255-?BC), along with 3,000 virgin boys and girls, over the eastern seas on two occasions. About his final destination, the most popular record is Japan. Even now, there is Xu Fu Park and Xu Fu grave in Wakayama, and many other memorials can be found in other places of Japan. It is quite likely that Xu Fu is remembered because his voyage had a favorable impact on Jomon Jidai Japan (绳文时代 14,000BC-300BC).

Two other stories are conveyed in the official historic record. The first is Zhang Qian (张骞 164-114BC), who is famous for the Silk Road. He was sent by

the emperor Ha Wu Di (汉武帝 156-87BC) to central Asia twice. His journeys promoted a great variety of economic and cultural exchanges between the Han Dynasty (汉 202BC-220DC) and the Western Regions (西域). Because silk became the dominant product traded from China, this great trade route later became known as the Silk Road or Silk Route. In 1877, German geographer Ferdinand von Richthofen used the phrase “Silk Road” in his book *China: The results of My Travels and the Studies Based Thereon* for the first time. As Dr. Ge Jianqiong of FuDan University says, “because the open of Silk Road, from the Tang Dynasty (618-907) many foreign merchants settled in China, meanwhile, the Silk Road allowed the Chinese people to get the chance to emigrate aboard.” (1993:483) When Chinese businessmen sell their silk to the countries in the West Regions, they also introduce Chinese way of life, such as fashion style, food, language and learn different ideas from the local peoples.

The other famous explorer is Zheng He (郑和 1371-1433), who had visited Japan before undertaking his long distance trips. His first voyage departed on 11th July, 1405. Like Zhang Qian, he was commissioned by his emperor Ming Cheng Zu (明成祖 1360-1424) to undertake the voyage. He set sail with 240 ships and 27,400 sailors to achieve seven voyages until 1433. His team went through the Indian Ocean and the Pacific, totally 30 counties. Every voyage of started from Su Zhou (苏州), and the farthest destination was the coast of East Africa. “Their ships navigated the wide sea area from Ryukyu Islands, the Philippine Islands and Maluku Sea to the Mozambican Channel and the coast of South Africa, developing mutual trade, exchanging culture and technologies, communicating traffic on the sea and promoting social and economic development in such countries and areas.” (China Culture. org) It follows from what has been said thus far that moving allows the communication between foreign countries to become possible.

All of the stories about these historical migrations pre-modern times make it clear that people travelled abroad at the command of their emperor in order to gratify his private purpose or ambition. Nevertheless, these voyages became the first step to show China to the world, and the earlier emigrant leaders encouraged the later emigrants that going outside is another way of life. Next section, it is an argument about the founder of the Chinatowns—overseas Chinese.

II. Overseas Chinese (*Hua Qiao & Hua Ren* 华侨华人)

From Ming Dynasty (1368-1644), large populations of Chinese moved from South China to Southeast Asia, which they called *Nan Yang* (南洋). The people who were involved in the wave of emigration usually are called *Hua Qiao Hua Ren* (华侨华人 Overseas Chineses), which refers to all the Chinese living abroad, who were acknowledged to be the founders of Chinatowns. An expert describes the connection between overseas Chinese and Chinatown, "Chinatown is not only a residential area for the overseas Chinese, but a place where they can find a job or exchange information for their career." (Dai, 1991:6) "Chinatown is a kind of urban landscape in the southeast Asia, which is the most remarkable feature in these cities. Overseas Chinese and their ancestors performed a major part to the cities' formation and development." (Dai, 1991:60) Chinese is an ethnic group with a strong awareness of family and relationship. For the most part, the husband went to work in *Nan Yang* and fed his family in China. They leave home in search of opportunities that did not exist in feudal China and get together in Chinatown in search of help.

The first Chinatown in the world located in the middle downtown of Manila, which was founded in 1594. China Central Television (CCTV), which gives a report titled *Real Estate Boom Hit World's Oldest Chinatown* last year in the TV program: "There's no denying the rapidly changing landscape of Manila's Chinatown. The world's oldest Chinatown is finally getting its fair share of the country's economic

progress. But it's also become a delicate balancing act of preserving the old and welcoming new developments." In short, Chinatown still plays an indispensable role in present society. In other major cities in the world, can also find Chinese people have left footprints in the shape of Chinatown today. (See appendix 1)

A multitude of Chinese began to move to the west coast of the US about the time of California Gold Rush of 1848. When the gold fever abated after few years, Chinese miners found ready employment when a decision was made to link the Pacific coast to the rest of the country. Similar to the situation in Asia, Chinatowns in the US have many Chinese traditions, and numerous Chinese live there. It is a necessary place for the early immigrants because "In the early years, most of them are farmers, and they do not understand English, are not accustomed to the American way of life, and they need Chinese food and clothes. They are the persons who have a traditional and conservative mind." (Li, 1990:153) In these Chinatowns, Chinese help each other to find a job and housing, feed the hungry, nurse the sick, bury the dead. They showed a kind traditional spirit of China—solidarity. In Chinatown, they do not need to tolerate the discrimination and can be rescued by either their friends or Chinese social organizations.

The main sources of emigrants were the provinces of Fujian (福建), Guangdong (广东) and Hainan (海南). They were linked not only by southern Chinese customs but also by a shared dialect of the Chinese language. Watson insists, "From their own point of view, it is understandable that the emigrants should be so concerned about retaining close ties to their home community." (1977:153) In relation to *Hua Qiao Hua Ren*, a concept "*Qiao Xiang* (侨乡)" should be referenced, it means the hometown of the overseas Chinese. In the southeast China, there was a large population but few work opportunities. From 1840 (the Opium war)-1949 (the founding of PRC.), there was a big wave of emigrants moving overseas. According to incomplete statistics from Overseas Chinese Affairs Office of the State Council,

at the beginning of 21st century, there are about 40,000,000 Chinese living in about 160 countries, 85.5% of whom are in the southeast Asia; 54% of whom are from Guangdong province.

The overseas Chinese continue to write the history of emigration, and being together continues to be a necessity for life in the beginning. They set up the Chinatown, and extended it. Year by year, Chinatown is no longer a living or business district, it becomes a Chinese community. The main reasons why the Chinatowns were given birth will be mentioned in the section III.

III. Birth of the Enclave-Chinatown

“Chinese who emigrate have the tendency to congregate in their adopted country. They seem to stay together much more than other immigrant groups. There are Chinatowns in every major city in Southeast Asia, and there are Chinese communities on the continents of Australia, Europe, South and North America.” This opinion is observed by Professor Kwong of the Asian American Studies Center in the US, who had a long-time experience in New York’s Chinatown. (1987:11) Unlike other immigrants, the longer Chinese immigrants live in the host country, the more they feel nostalgia for their hometown. As a result, in the large cities, they lived almost exclusively in ethnic enclaves known as Chinatowns, and the populations of Chinatowns are almost totally Chinese. The communal life of Chinese immigrants was distinctly different from that of most other groups in that churches were not major organizations. Instead, district or clan association were the most important organizations.

Another reason for the birth of the Chinatowns is that Chinese immigrants suffered from the discrimination. It is the pattern in the US: “At the turn of the 20th century, large-scale immigration from southern and eastern Europe and the modest

immigration from Asia became the target of much anti-immigration action.” (Perea, 1997:23) The question is they helped American dig the gold and built the railroad, why did they encounter this kind of hostility? The answer is simple to understand that because of their skin color, language, custom, and hair style etc. The racism was reflected on local or federal laws—starting with the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, which forbade the entry of Chinese labors for ten years and prohibited the naturalization of Chinese immigrants as U.S. citizens. In 1892, the Geary Act extended these provisions for a further ten years; and in 1898, the act was extended to Chinese immigrants seeking to enter the Hawaiian Island. Finally, in 1904, the Chinese Exclusion Act was extended indefinitely. Chinese was refused by the discriminatory laws.

Chinatowns have a tendency to create organizations gradually, or in other words, Chinatown is one of organizations in the society of overseas Chinese. No matter in the East or in the West, Chinese communities connected with Chinatowns or located there. In Asia, there were Overseas Chinese Associations (华侨总会, 华人会馆), which helped all the local Chinese including life, hospitals, education etc. The same phenomenon can be seen in the US: Chinese Six Companies, Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association, and Chong Wa Benevolent Association were famous historical Chinese association which were established in various parts of the country. They were a result of the discrimination of the receiving country. In their title, the word “benevolent” also showed that several mentioned above were welfare associations. Chinatowns and the Chinese communities help the overseas Chinese feel “at home”.

Chinese people created Chinatown here and there in the world. In the quite early times, it was famous for the Chinese restaurant and laundry. Indeed, it also takes a role in the formation of Chinese community. Since the Chinatowns are not

located in China, they want to display the Chinese way of life to the world. Three common cultural aspects in the Chinatowns are explained in the last section; they are Archway, Food and Dragon Culture.

IV. Cultural Identity

The entrance of the Chinatowns is always an image of Chinese archway, in Chinese language called Paifang, (牌坊 See appendix 2). If people see the Paifang, it should be the gateway of the Chinatown. It usually has two or more pillars supporting a roof like structure, sometimes which is thought similar to the Buddhist temple. Paifang are often called “Friendship Arches” or “Goodwill Arches,” because they are built by the local Chinese community, Chinatown association, and governments or by the local tourism authorities to serve as a “welcome” sign. It serves to be a symbol of Chinatown and makes Chinatown look more like “China.” “The Chinese have mostly preserved their separate identity and culture wherever they have settled. (Rae, 2008:24)” Paifang are the first marks to indicate the Chinese culture to others.

All the Chinese people know “民以食为天” (People regard food as the most important thing in the life.). This idiom is from the *Book of Han* (汉书 History of the Former Han Dynasty). They are proud of their Chinese cuisine wherever they go. Generally, restaurants serve authentic Chinese food primarily to the immigrant and secondarily to the local people. Without any doubt, for the Chinese perhaps more than for any other group, food is a central feature of ethnicity. In Chinatowns, there are now many large, authentic Cantonese seafood restaurants, restaurants specializing in other varieties of Chinese cuisine such as Hakka cuisine, Szechuan cuisine, Shanghai cuisine, and small restaurants with delicatessen foods. Food can be linked with everything in the daily life to the Chinese people. According to Anderson, “Chinese use food to mark ethnicity, culture change, calendric and

family events and social transaction. No business deal is complete without a dinner. No family visit is complete without sharing a meal. No major religious event is correctly done without offering up special foods proper to the ritual context.” (1988:258)

Though no Chinese knows what kind of creature the dragon is, it may be an image of a snake, because Chinese call snakes ‘Small Dragons’ informally. Dragon culture is deeply rooted in China, by contrast, dragon represents evil in the Bible and Western literature. Traditionally dragons are considered as the governors of rainfall in Chinese culture. They have the power to decide where and when to rain. In ancient China, the Chinese emperors considered they are the real dragons. And Chinese often think they are the descendants of the Dragon (龙的传人). The Dragon dance (舞龙) has a long history, which was already a popular event during the Song Dynasty (960-1279 AD). To celebrate the Spring Festival (春节) and the Mid-Autumn Festival (中秋节), the Dragon dance and Lion dance (舞狮) are the main performance in Chinatowns. (See appendix 3) It is necessary to collect ten to twenty peoples to achieve it—a handful of people are not enough to perform the dance. It also shows Chinese traditional spirit—solidarity.

Conclusion

Chinatowns’ existence is adapted to a Chinese idiom: “*Tianshi, Dili, Renhe*” (天时, 地利, 人和) which means “The right person at the right time in the right place.” This was originally used to describe the most favorable conditions, including time, place and people, to achieve success. Following this theory, Chinatowns can be portrayed as that the overseas Chinese built Chinatowns when they need to stick together in new countries. Here is a remark written in Laguerre’s work, “We are number one because of our history, because of the constant infusion of new immigrants, new business, new groups who would live and work in

Chinatown. It is not just a tourist spot.” (2000:30) Chinese immigrants have made their mark wherever they go, such as the Transcontinental railway, the Panama Canal, and Chinatowns themselves. Among these, Chinatown is the most striking heritage and contribution to the world, which were built by the solidarity and charity of the former immigrants and developed by the will and energies of the new.

De Vos sums up the definition of ethnic identity: “The ethnic identity of a group consists of its subjective symbolic or emblematic use of any aspect of a culture, or a perceived separate origin and continuity, in order to differentiate themselves from other ethnic groups. In time, these emblems can be imposed from outside or embraced from within.” (2006:11) Chinatown is a positive illustration of it. Especially, people can taste the traditional cultures in Chinatowns. In mainland China, everyone knows the firecracker ban, but Chinatown’s New Year celebration is still known for the firecracker which is thought to scare away evil spirits to welcome the New Year as ancient China. Chinese tea culture is also can be seen in Chinatowns, tea-making performance and drinking tea means peace, tranquility. Other cultural aspects, such as 书法 (Calligraphy work), Chinese traditional painting, Chinese Shrine, Chinese drinking, Chinese pottery, any cultural property are collected in Chinatowns.

Life in a Chinatown often greatly resembles life in China. Like Sales remarks, “Chinatown is an urban space for people from different Chinese background at the same time as it is a miniature replica of an imagined ‘China’.” (2009:10) Many tourists visit Chinatowns every year to sample Chinese food, observe Beijing opera, and attend numerous festivals like the Chinese New Year celebration. Chinatown is a positive illustration of it. Chinese people may not consider themselves as foreigners in Chinatown. Even visitors, who can speak Mandarin or Cantonese, buy the goods in stores are imported from China, watch Chinese or Hong Kong films in the cinema, seek out traditional medicine, etc. For the local

residents, it is a mini China by which Chinese culture can be known, even if one has never been in China. This kind of cross-cultural contact allowed different cultures to exist together as an alternative. Chinatown is a success to express Chinese cultural value to the world until today.

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Appendix 1

The Famous Chinatowns in the World



Note: *Chinatowns.*

Many cities around the world have a Chinese quarter or Chinatown. Famous examples include those in San Francisco, Manhattan, Honolulu, Vancouver, Toronto, Singapore, Bangkok, London and Paris. The fact that there are Chinatowns in so many different countries is a sign of the extent and long history of Chinese migration, from Hong Kong, other parts of South East Asia and from the Chinese mainland.

Source: Kim, Knott, "Chinatowns" Moving People Changing Places, Kim Knott 2011.

<<http://www.movingpeoplechangingplaces.org/locations/chinatowns.html>>

Appendix 2

Chinatown Archways



Manila, Philippines



Montreal, Canada



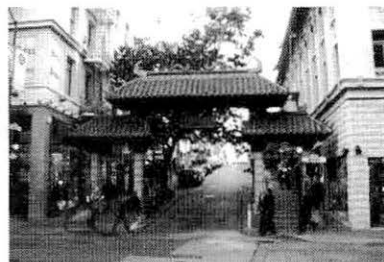
Bangkok, Thailand



Kobe, Japan



Manchester, UK



San Francisco, USA

Note: *Chinatown Archways*

Many Chinatowns have an archway that serves to mark its physical space and to welcome visitors. Here are the archways featured in *Chinatownology*.

Source: "Chinatown Archways", *Chinatownology*, 2007-13.

<http://www.chinatownology.com/chinatown_archways.html>

Appendix 3

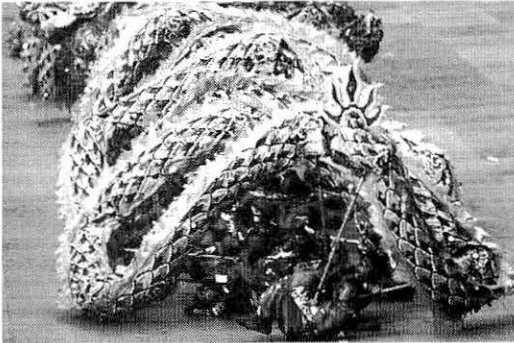
Lion Dance



Note: Lion Dance in *Nankinmachi* in Kobe (Middle Autumn Festival)

Source: <<http://blog.goo.ne.jp/tama-digitalimage/e/df1d4253c0d56455b3a80c0c54e634c4>>

Dragon Dance



Note: Dragon Dance

Source: "Show China"

<<http://en.showchina.org/Features/35/3/201002/t553270.htm>>