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Chinatown 2.0: the difficult flowering of an ethnically themed shopping area

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ABSTRACT

Right in Amsterdam’s picturesque Canal Zone, on and around Zeedijk, Chinese entrepreneurs have carved out a presence in what seems like the local Chinatown. The businessmen have been targeting Asian and non-Asian customers by offering products that – to an extent – can be associated with Asia, China in particular. Since the early 1990s, individual entrepreneurs and their business organisations have campaigned for official acknowledgement of Zeedijk as an ethnic-only district and for governmental support of the enhancement of Chineseness. Following Hackworth and Rekers. (2005). “Ethnic Packaging and Gentrification. The Case of Four Neighborhoods in Toronto.” Urban Affairs Review 41 (2): 211–236, we argue that this case challenges traditional understandings of ethnic commercial landscapes. In sharp contrast to the current orthodoxy, which would conceive the proliferation of such an ‘ethnic enclave’ as part of a larger process of assimilation, we have approached Amsterdam’s Chinatown first and foremost as a themed economic space: Chinese and other entrepreneurs compete for a share of the market and in doing also for the right to claim the identity of the area. What is the historical development of the Zeedijk area, how did Chinese entrepreneurs and their associations try to boost Chinatown and negotiate public Chineseness, and how did governmental and non-governmental institutional actors respond to those attempts?

ARTICLE HISTORY

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KEYWORDS

Ethnic entrepreneurship; ethnic enclaves; urban economy; commercial gentrification; urban politics; mixed embeddedness

Introduction

Anyone strolling from Amsterdam’s Central Station along the shopping strip of Zeedijk till Nieuwmarkt square cannot fail to notice the presence of Asian shops. Zeedijk, a meandering dike, was once part of the seawall that protected the city from the waters of the IJ and the Zuiderzee, which is now a man-made freshwater lake. Today Zeedijk is a narrow, 500-metre pedestrian street with picturesque, 350-year-old houses. At the ground level, stores abound and quite a few of them are Asian named, owned and operated.
These businesses offer goods and services that are associated with Asia – China in particular – and target a clientele of locals, tourists and day-trippers, Asian and non-Asian alike. Restaurants and food outlets have a strong presence, offering a banquet of the senses, representing various Chinese cuisines and to a lesser extent also Thai, Malaysian, Surinamese and other cuisines. Next, there are ‘oriental’ home furnishing stores (selling Chinoiserie), kitchenware shops (selling woks, rice steamers, chop sticks, bowls and so forth), gadget stores, travel agents, hair salons, massage parlours, nail care shops, acupuncturists, herbalists, clothing stores and so on, often displaying Chinese characters on their windows or other symbols of Asianness. Some businesses such as Hoi Tin and Toko Dun Yong have even added pagoda-like architectural elements to their storefront. Halfway Zeedijk the stroller stumbles upon a Buddhist temple: the Fo Guang Shan He Hua temple was officially opened by Queen Beatrix in 2000. The temple tinges the street in a yellowish way and is a highly visible architectural statement, loudly interrupting the historic rhythm of the red brick facades of the adjacent buildings.

Interestingly enough, Zeedijk had a very bad reputation as being the local skid row until recently. In the late 1970s and 1980s, it was the turf of drug addicts and homeless people. ‘Respectable’ people risked mugging and were therefore strongly recommended to avoid the area. But now, travel guides, shopping guides and the Internet describe and promote the area as Amsterdam’s Chinatown. They provide information about the particularities of the area, and welcome visitors to sign up for a one-and-a-half-hour Chinatown walking tour. While the area is much safer now, its Chinese character is much less apparent though. The entry of Zeedijk lies on Nieuwmarkt – a square where Chinese immigrants celebrate Chinese New Year with a myriad of fire crackers creating a deafening racket. But there are no arches, stone lions, pagodas, red phone boots, trash cans and street lanterns, and other sorts of oriental decorative items to mark this entrance. Compared to the Chinatowns in gateway cities such as San Francisco, Manhattan (New York), Vancouver, Toronto, Sydney or Melbourne, the Chineseness of the area is only mildly highlighted. Apart from the lack of obtrusive symbolic markers of Chinese space or oriental otherness, it should be noticed that Asian ethnicities other than Chinese are also represented.1 Moreover, there are quite a few non-Asian shops located in the area, including a number of Dutch ‘brown cafés’, a couple of gay bars, a Dutch fish monger, a Portuguese restaurant and a plethora of mainstream specialty coffee bars and boutiques. Against this backdrop, the label ‘Chinatown’ may even come across as a gross overstatement. Yet, the area has a distinct Asian flavour, also because Chinese businessmen and their associations have been more eager – or more savvy – than others to make the claim that the area has a marked ‘Chinese’ character. Indeed, the special status of Zeedijk is underscored by street signs in Dutch and Chinese characters. No other area in the city of Amsterdam is officially acknowledged and marked in such an ‘ethnic’ way.

Authors theorising about ethnic districts in general or Chinatowns in particular tend to conceive the proliferation of Chineseness or Asianness in terms of ethnic enclave development (e.g. Anderson 1990; Christiansen 2003; Küninemann and Mayer 2001; Li 1998; Wong 1995; Zhou 1992; but not Hackworth and Rekers 2005). According to them, Chinatowns function as migration hubs and as spatial manifestations of ethnic identity and binding, partly due to racist exclusion and social marginality, and partly due to the mobilisation of (transnational) ethno-social networks and the rise of other mutual support
systems. The development of such ‘ethnic enclaves’ would typically start with the appropriation of otherwise unattractive urban places. Those places would gradually become ethnically inscribed, partly due to the migrants’ entrepreneurial drive, and evolve into the residential and commercial nodal point of the migrant community concerned. Theoretically, the emergence of such spaces would be conceived of in terms of minority–majority relations and as a stepping stone in an assimilationist trajectory of sorts.

But, Chinatown in Amsterdam today is not a migration hub, not an area where a large proportion of the Chinese community resides, not a space of marginalisation and certainly not a space where Chineseness is self-evident. Chinese immigrants who recently moved to the Netherlands have had a tendency to gravitate to Amsterdam as well as the other major cities, but very few of them have found their way to Zeedijk. In fact, less than two handfuls of Chinese are currently residing in the area, or less than one per cent of the Chinese and Taiwanese populations in the city (see Table 1, source https://www.ois.amsterdam.nl/).

So, how then are we to understand this situation? We argue that Amsterdam’s Chinatown is first of all an economic space – a lightly themed shopping area – in which Chinese and other entrepreneurs compete with each other for a piece of the pie and for the right to leave a mark on the area. Our theoretical orientation is rooted in the mixed embeddedness approach which emphasises the interplay between (ethnic) entrepreneurs and their resources, the development of economic markets and concomitant emergence (or disappearance) of opportunities, and especially the way in which state and non-state regulatory forces affect those markets and the access to them (see amongst others Kloosterman 2010; Kloosterman and Rath 2003, 2014; Kloosterman, van der Leun, and Rath 1999; Rath 2002; Schutjens 2014). Business opportunities – including the proliferation of an ethnically themed shopping area – are to be explained by the interaction of these components. These processes do not only involve other small entrepreneurs – mainstream and ethnic minority entrepreneurs alike – but also the municipality housing associations and other institutional actors. Also, they have spatial dimensions as ethnic diversity, economic development and urban regeneration articulate in a spatially confined area. In this

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nationality</th>
<th>Amsterdam</th>
<th>Zeedijk</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total population of which Asians</td>
<td>687,499</td>
<td>695,221</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>951</td>
<td>522</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese + Dutch</td>
<td>452</td>
<td>395</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taiwanese</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taiwanese + Dutch</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japanese</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Korean</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Singaporean</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malaysian</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indonesian</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thai</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Filipino</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subtotal Asians</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subtotal Chinese/Taiwanese</td>
<td>1414</td>
<td>942</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Chinese/Taiwanese among Asians</td>
<td>0.21</td>
<td>0.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Chinese/Taiwanese among local population</td>
<td>0.21</td>
<td>0.14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Includes Zeedijk, Binnenbantammerstraat, Geldersekade, Stormsteeg, Nieuwmarkt.
*Includes Persons with dual nationality.
case, specific local institutional conditions apply: commercial gentrification is de rigueur. The municipality and its partners are actively restructuring the 1012 zip code area which includes Chinatown and the adjacent red light district, and are promoting a boutique-like retail landscape. These institutions, to be sure, are resourceful and capable of mobilising serious political forces, so this is obviously not a level playing field! Theoretically, it therefore does not suffice to analyse the emergence of this space in terms of minority–majority relations, as this is first and foremost about urban economic development. And such developments are always embedded in wider social, political and economic relations.

In this article, we explore the difficult flowering of an ethnically themed shopping area by describing and analysing the case of Amsterdam’s Chinatown. What is the historical development of the Zeedijk area, how did Chinese entrepreneurs and their associations try to boost Chinatown and negotiate public Chineseness, and how did governmental and non-governmental institutional actors respond to those attempts? More precisely, to what extent and under what conditions was space given for the proliferation of a Chinatown? Empirically, we addressed these questions by studying numerous policy documents and statistical data, and by carrying out 50 in-depth interviews with (Chinese) entrepreneurs, governmental officials and various other key informants.

In the remaining part of this article, we first discuss the political context, then present the historical background including the deterioration of Zeedijk, followed by a description of the way in which the municipality and partners tried to reclaim and redevelop the area. We pay special attention to the arguments exchanged during the negotiations, and offer insights into the latest developments. In the final part of this article, we reflect on this case and our theoretical assumptions.

**Ethnic diversity and urban regeneration: strange bedfellows?**

In Europe today, few can imagine that ethnic diversity, economic prosperity and urban regeneration can go hand in hand. As things are, ethnic diversity and spatial concentration in inner-city neighbourhoods have come to be perceived as signs of deprivation and failing integration and, what is worse, signs of the immigrants’ unwillingness to become part of the mainstream. The prolonged and institutionalised existence of ethnic and religious particularism and spatial concentration is especially seen as problematic (Rath 2011).

In this context, the buzzwords are ‘integration’ – meaning (in popular parlance) the disappearance or at least the dilution of ethnic difference and all other elements that supposedly negatively impact the livability of cities – and ‘restructuring’ which refers to processes of top-down urban revitalisation. The integration of foreign-born immigrants and their offspring is dealt with in a robust way with compulsory education and imposed adaptation and mixing. In addition, extra investments are being made in the most blighted neighbourhoods so as to restructure the housing sector, revitalise public spaces, improve social cohesion and strengthen the neighbourhood economy. The emphasis on neighbourhoods is rooted in the idea that this scalar level matters most.

These policies also aim at encouraging middle-class people to move into those neighbourhoods where they can dilute ‘skewed’ demographics and promote ‘social mixing’ (Uitermark, Duyvendak, and Kleinhans 2007; Veldboer 2010). Ethnic desegregation is not an explicit aim – that would be unconstitutional – but in the light of the fact that the lower social classes typically encompass a large number of immigrant ethnic minorities
and the middle classes typically many native white Dutch, social mixing boils down to ‘desegregation by stealth’. It is moreover taken for granted that the municipality and the private sector work in tandem to promote immigrant integration and neighbourhood revitalisation. The frantic attempts to involve (private) housing associations in the urban regeneration programmes since the mid-2000s are a case in point. Housing associations possess a good deal of the social housing market, and – certainly before the recent economic crisis – they also have the financial capital and the entrepreneurial spirit to support the implementation of the governmental plans. Small (ethnic) entrepreneurs – the dramatis personae of the private sector – are involved too, albeit as we shall see in a specific way.

Ethnic entrepreneurs have changed local urban streetscapes, soundscapes and smellscapes, and this is especially true for businesses that manifest ethnic diversity in an obtrusive way: greengrocers and supermarkets displaying their ‘exotic’ produce on the streets; clothing stores and draper’s shops offering colourful products; hairdressers, coffeehouses and other joints pleasing their clients – and sometimes also their neighbours – with the melodious sounds of ‘tropical’ music; kebab outlets and falafel take-away places spreading the aromatic smells of roasted lamb; and so forth (Aytar and Rath 2012). These ethnic entrepreneurs are suppliers of goods, services and other amenities, and facilitators of a particular buzz on the street, all aspects that potentially enhance the livability of a neighbourhood. In addition, entrepreneurs are the providers of jobs, and – in a more Jane-Jacobsian way – they can be leaders of local communities, as caretakers of social cohesion and as guardians of the safety in public places.

Yet, in a context of state-led commercial gentrification, these entrepreneurs do not automatically receive a warm welcome. Politicians and (governmental) professionals tend to be sceptical about the entrepreneurial qualities of ethnic entrepreneurs and their influence on the revitalisation of the neighbourhood. Conversations with policy advisors about ethnic entrepreneurship generally take less than a few minutes to reach the point where the ‘problems’ of overcrowding, dereliction or informal practices are put on the table. It is taken for granted that the mushrooming of ethnic greengrocers, halal butchers and mini-markets in a small shopping space is economically suicidal. In oversaturated markets, so it is argued, it is difficult if not impossible to make profits, while self-exploitation and dilapidation looming largely, not to mention the risks of fraud and crime. As a rule, phone shops (offering telephone, Internet and sometimes also money transfer services) are tagged as toxic shops par excellence and the ultimate signs of urban decay.

The municipality and its partners have responded by introducing a wide array of business support schemes to boost the neighbourhood economy, including subsidies to refurbish stores and office spaces, and by appointing ‘street managers’ to mediate between the small business sector and institutional actors such as the municipality itself, developers and housing associations. While the presence of ‘undesirable businesses’ is actively discouraged, positive attention is given to enterprises in the ‘creative sector’ – even if they are economically marginal – and to what Sharon Zukin would label ‘cool boutiques’ (Hagemans et al. 2015; Zukin 2010). And while the establishment of a Turkish ‘bodega’ or Moroccan phone shop are seen as signs of ‘unbalanced’ demographics and urban degradation, the establishment of, say, a hot bakery, an artisanal furniture maker or a specialty coffee bar are seen as positive signs of upgrading and coolness and a fine proof of successful commercial gentrification (Rath and Gelmers 2014; see also Atkinson 2003).
With this political context in mind, let us now examine the development of Chinatown in Amsterdam.

**A brief history**

Zeedijk, Nieuwmarkt and adjacent streets, notably Geldersekade, Stormsteeg and Binnenbantammerstraat, have been associated with Chinese immigrants since 1911. In that year, Chinese seafarers were recruited as scabs on steam ships and despite the unions’ fierce opposition they continued to be employed (Chong 2005; van Heek 1936; Wubben 1986). The seafarers, when ashore, stayed in small boarding houses until they could sign up again, and slowly but surely a small community of predominantly male immigrant workers came into existence. It did not take long before some hole-in-the-walls and other microbusinesses emerged. After a while, these started serving native white Dutch customers as well and soon the area was dubbed the ‘Chinese colony’ (van Heek 1936) (see Map 1).

Zeedijk and Nieuwmarkt’s proximity to the docks meant the area had long been a magnet for seafarers, dock workers and travellers, as well as trashy entertainment seekers. The very fact that these streets were in the vicinity of the *Wallen*, that is, the red light district, added to the attraction. Nightlife – especially after official opening hours – was thriving and legendary, and Chinese businesses were part of it.

Other than that, the conditions were unfavourable. Police raids during the Interbellum, the economic crisis of the 1930s and the Second World War thwarted the economic sustainability of this ‘colony’, and only a few businesses that were located in and around the

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© Map designed by Ana Sala.

**Map 1.** Amsterdam Chinatown area.
Binnenbantammerstraat stayed alive. Chong (2005), herself a descendant of one of the first pioneers, found that what used to be a tight and spatially concentrated network of entrepreneurs and their families had evaporated: most if not all third-generation Chinese had moved out to greener pastures and assimilated into the mainstream.

In the 1950s, new Chinese immigrants again moved into the area and set up shop in the catering sector, mostly serving so-called Chin.Ind. food – Chinese and Indonesian food, after the tastes of the former Dutch colony of the Dutch East Indies – to a clientele of mainly native white Dutch, often people with experience in that part of the world.

In the 1960s, when the economy expanded and eating out became an affordable pastime among the lower and middle classes, Chinese restaurants mushroomed, and so did the number of bakeries, travel agencies, retail stores and wholesale businesses. In those days, most entrepreneurs and workers were Cantonese from Hong Kong – often belonging to the Man lineage (Blom and Romijn 1981) – who enjoyed better opportunities to emigrate compared to their peers from mainland China, but there were also small pockets of Chinese from Surinam, Indonesia and Vietnam (Chong 2005).

In the late 1980s, the number of Chinese businesses was around 25 (Brilleman 2004) – a number that is relatively modest (one third) compared to what it would later be (see Table 2 for an overview of the business development at Zeedijk).

Reclaiming Zeedijk

For a long time, the authorities showed a wishy-washy response, an attitude that without any doubt contributed to the further decay of the area. However, in the mid-1980s, not long after the appointment of Ed van Thijn as the new mayor (Labor, PvdA,}

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme of businesses or nationality of owner</th>
<th>1975</th>
<th>1980</th>
<th>1990</th>
<th>2000</th>
<th>2010</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Asian(^b)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Asian</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total number of businesses in the area</td>
<td>197</td>
<td>173</td>
<td>155</td>
<td>262</td>
<td>297</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^a\)Includes Zeedijk, Binnenbantammerstraat, Geldersekade, Stormsteeg, Nieuwmarkt.

\(^b\)Here: east and south-east Asian.
1983–1994), the municipality decided to make a clean sweep. This was part of a wider campaign to reclaim the city, a campaign in which the private sector got fully involved. It so happened that a hotel chain was developing plans to make new investments at the northern tip of Zeedijk (opposite Central Station) and it urged the municipality to clean out the area and crack down on informal and illegal practices. Soon both parties were sitting around the table together with a housing association (Stadgenoot) and a number of smaller local organisations. A public–private partnership was born, named N.V. Zeedijk, which aimed at converting Zeedijk into an attractive residential space and shopping area for the middle classes. Individual Chinese entrepreneurs and their associations were not involved in this venture, and neither the Chinese’s presence nor their specific interests were high on the N.V. Zeedijk’s agenda.

Anyhow, policing intensified, CCTV systems were introduced, streets were re-streets-caped, street sanitation brought up to scratch and accessibility improved. The N.V. Zeedijk bought property in the area at a large-scale and refurbished the stores and apartments, including more than 70 business premises. In addition, a new property management regime was introduced and from now on business premises were only rented out to ‘kosher’ renters matching the new street profile.

All this had a profound impact on the area. From being the local skid row Zeedijk soon became an attractive place to shop, dine and reside. This is perhaps best illustrated by the average real estate prices (WOZ values) – measured through the national real estate pricing census – which have increased substantially since the 1980s, and particularly the 1990s, making Zeedijk one of the most expensive parts of town (O+S Amsterdam 2012). The overall/residential prices did decline by the end of the last decade, but this seems mainly due to the financial crisis of 2007 (see Table 3).

Despite these accomplishments, the desired ‘cool’ entrepreneurs were slow to move in. Instead, Asian entrepreneurs quickly filled the vacant business premises. A Chinese restaurant owner explained that Chinese were more familiar with the area and less bothered by its bad reputation. Most Chinese businesses were relatively simple, traditional restaurants, but the chefs did move away from the insipid ‘Chin.Ind.’ food and specialised in other cuisines that the general public was less familiar with (Rijkschroeff 1998). This drew the attention of Asian and non-Asian visitors who wanted to taste and experience something different. Indeed, local and international visitors walked along the streets curiously – an activity previously known as ‘slumming’ (see Lin 1998) – and transformed into consumers when they entered the shops and restaurants.

### Table 3. Average real estate prices in Zeedijk as % of the Amsterdam average (1980–2010).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>WOZ values</th>
<th>1979–1981 (%)</th>
<th>1990 (%)</th>
<th>2001 (%)</th>
<th>2010 (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Overall</td>
<td>75.72</td>
<td>82.78</td>
<td>107.24</td>
<td>95.99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Residential</td>
<td>Not available</td>
<td>80.40</td>
<td>104.39</td>
<td>102.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hotels, restaurants</td>
<td>Not available</td>
<td>38.85</td>
<td>68.83</td>
<td>78.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shops</td>
<td>Not available</td>
<td>41.24</td>
<td>56.69</td>
<td>73.53</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Includes Zeedijk, Binnenbantammerstraat, Geldersekade, Stormsteeg, Nieuwmarkt.*

**Negotiating Chineseness**

The clustering of Chinese/Asian businesses did not automatically lead to the development of an ethnically themed shopping strip. To be sure, neither N.V. Zeedijk nor the municipality had such a theming in mind; on the contrary.
In the 1990s, Chinese associations managed to create a little clout. They were not always set up as business associations proper, but since businessmen were calling the shots and many members were entrepreneurial anyways, issues relevant for the business community were naturally advocated (Li 1999). They soon engaged with the municipality in an attempt to consolidate and promote the Chinese character of the area. The discussions revolved around such issues as political and financial support for parades and festivals, the establishment of a Chinese gate, the erection of Chinese street signs as well as the construction of a parking structure.

The zoning scheme did not allow for the development of a Chinatown. Permission was nonetheless given to build the Fo Guang He Han temple (1994) and the municipality even provided half a million guilders subsidies (approx. 225,000 euro) to build the temple in a traditional Chinese architectural style. In a public meeting held soon after its launch, local residents supported the plan; they hoped the temple would lead to less crime and more tourists.

Contrary to the positive reception of the temple, all other claims elicited only a lukewarm response if not outright opposition. While Chinese and other Asian businesses had created facts on the ground, governmental officials and others refused to consent to or acquiesce in its Chinafication. The Vrienden van de Amsterdamse Binnenstad, a heritage protection association, was one of the more active opponents. A governmental official explained: ‘They are pretty powerful in this district. These people know about [bureaucratic] procedures and promote the Amsterdam heritage architecture. They are not very sympathetic to the Chinese community’. The general lack of support for – and in some cases resistance to – acknowledging and further enhancing Chineseness in the area is rooted in various considerations, varying from notions about (i) urban planning, and (ii) business performance, but also (iii) immigrant integration, and (iv) diversity and the right to the city. Let us examine these more closely.

**Urban planning**

- A first consideration is related to the fact that Zeedijk/Nieuwmarkt is an inherent part of the famous ‘historic urban ensemble of the canal district of Amsterdam’. The 350-year-old heritage architecture draws millions of tourists and visitors to the city each year and is therefore of key importance for Amsterdam’s economy. (The cultural significance of this ensemble was underlined by its inscription on the UNESCO World Heritage List in 2010.) An official explained that it is therefore inappropriate or even irresponsible to add a gate or other ‘exotic’ street furniture to this precious landscape. A Chinese businessman: ‘We had proposed to use tiles of different colour in the Zeedijk area and add a Chinese gate at the entrance etcetera, but the municipality rejected us because of preservation reason.’ And indeed, except for the temple, the ‘usual’ ‘Chinatown’ decorations – like gates, lions, red-coloured phone boots, trash cans or street lanterns – have never been established. What is more, an exploration into more subtle ways to mark the area has not been seriously considered. Interestingly enough, there have never been any objections against the display of strings of electric lights and other ‘winter decorations’ during the Christmas season, a fact that suggests a double standard. Eventually, the municipality gave in and did put up street signs
A second consideration pertains to green transportation values. The municipality’s position is that the centre of Amsterdam should be as car-free as possible, a position firmly backed by a substantial green electorate. The claim that the Zeedijk could only thrive if parking facilities would be extended was therefore politically sensitive from the onset. The downtown area is a hotchpotch of small canals and narrow alleys filled with zillions of slightly anarchist bicyclists, and both driving and parking in this area are a driver’s nightmare. Partly for that reason, the municipality has developed a fine-meshed and excellently functioning public transportation system. A new parking structure would be totally at odds with this policy. Some might find it difficult to imagine a connection between a parking structure and Chinafication, but in this particular case it was Chinese business associations – and these associations only – that time after time emphasised the significance of such a provision. A Chinese restaurant owner lamented: ‘In the past, most tourist coaches would park on Nieuwmarkt square as tourists would visit Red Light District and have dinner at Zeedijk. Our restaurant was packed every evening during that time. After the streetscapes were modified, large vehicles were forbidden to park here and we lost all these tourist groups.’ Another one: ‘Many customers used to come with their vans every day. Since the streets in Zeedijk were re-designed, the one outside my store (it is located on Geldersekade) becomes much narrower and almost impossible even for a car to get in. Now these customers do not come here anymore’. So, car accessibility was considered extremely important, especially for entrepreneurs who catered to a non-local clientele: wholesalers and businesses that were dependent on Chinese customers from outside the city and sometimes from outside the country. For them, the parking structure was an essential part of the Chinatown development, and they experienced the lack of support for this plan as a rejection of their presence.

A third consideration is related to the popularity of Amsterdam’s Canal Zone. Tourists and visitors flock to the Canal Zone with its numerous museums, shops and street cafes to an extent that overcrowding has become a serious issue. Making Zeedijk more festive and enhancing its Chinese character would probably lure more visitors to the area, but that would raise livability concerns. Municipal policies have therefore been geared towards enticing visitors to less crowded locations outside the Canal Zone and increasingly outside the city. This dispersing policy was recently boosted when Amsterdam Marketing launched a campaign to promote a large part of the province of North Holland as part of Amsterdam. Locals were puzzled, but the tulip fields were suddenly advertised as the Amsterdam Flower Strip, the beach village of Zandvoort as Amsterdam Beach and the fifteenth century Muiderslot as Amsterdam Castle.8 The point is that any attempt to promote an inner-city neighbourhood as a new attraction does not fit this objective.
Business performance

- A fourth consideration pertains to expectations of the Chinese business performance in Amsterdam. Several governmental officials cast doubts about the economic viability of Chinatown. For that reason, they also responded hesitantly to the plans of a Chinese consortium to invest in an office high rise on the Oosterdok (East of Central Station) under the label of ‘New Chinatown’, fearing that economically more successful businesses would disinvest from the ‘old Chinatown’ on Zeedijk. A spokesperson of the Amsterdam Tourism & Convention Board commented: ‘Jordaan and De Pijp [two popular gentrified neighborhoods – authors] are quite something. They are big, small, all-around areas. But Chinatown is actually … um … well, I am not supposed to say it, of course, but it is just Zeedijk’. The doubts seemed to be confirmed in 2007 when the Chinese Business Association lamented about the ‘fierce’ competition from the newly established Chinatown in the Bazaar in Beverwijk, a popular swap meet in a small industrial town 30 kilometer West of Amsterdam. The Chair of the municipal district thereupon decided to pay a personal visit to this new, cheap shopping bonanza only to see a sad set of languishing stalls. Upon returning to Amsterdam she exclaimed she would not give a tuppence for the entrepreneurial quality of those who dread this sorry competition, a comment that evidently challenged the entrepreneurial qualities of those who lamented.

Immigrant integration and equal treatment

- A fifth consideration refers to ideological notions about the real or alleged unity of the Dutch nation and the incorporation of newcomers. As a senior official of the Home Office once let slip to the first author that the development of Chinatown would be against the central goals of the Dutch integration policy: it would sanction ethnic segregation, he said, and segregation is exactly what the Dutch Government was trying to prevent. The official apparently echoed his Master’s Voice with its narrow take on ‘integration’ and ‘citizenship’. Integration was seen as a process that pertains to individuals who disperse spatially, and as a process that eventually leads to the evaporation of collective identities and group boundaries. More collective and spatially clustered forms of incorporation, as is commonplace in classical countries of immigration, would not fit the bill (cf. Alba and Nee 2003). The development of citizenship practices is considered in the same vein. It could be argued, however, that Chinese entrepreneurs on Zeedijk are displaying advanced citizenship skills: they have established businesses (and in some cases a series of businesses), provided jobs for others, become economically independent, developed relations with the local community, interfaced with the local government and with local politicians, contributed to the revitalisation of Zeedijk and so forth, but these accomplishments apparently tend to be dismissed. The point is that some administrators have chosen to forbear from supporting the claims of Chinese entrepreneurs on the basis of particular notions of ethnic diversity and integration.

- A sixth consideration is related to the previous one, but now refers to other newcomers. Accommodating the wishes and demands of the Chinese business community in this case would then be framed as ‘perhaps not totally unreasonable’, but nonetheless rejected as politically not expedient. It would make it more complicated to refuse similar demands from other immigrant ethnic groups, such as Turks, Moroccans or Surinamese. Chinese
immigrants and other Asians historically received a mixed welcome but today, with more recent immigrants at the bottom, they reached a higher position at the imaginary social hierarchy. The uneasy and in cases even outright hostile responses to the plans of a group of Turkish orthodox Muslims to build a complex with a big mosque, a school, a community centre, houses and shops in the Western part of town – say, a kind of ethnic and religious enclave – are a case in point (Lindo 1999; Rijken 2014). A Chinese owner of an ICT company referred to a letter in Het Parool [a local newspaper – authors] about the Chinese street signs: ‘The author said it did not make sense to put up those signs for us. You are integrated, aren’t you, and besides, now you expect us to do the same in a Turkish or Moroccan neighborhood?’ The businessman thought Chinese deserved a different treatment. Officials, however, felt it better to stay away from these issues irrespective of the category concerned.

A seventh consideration is based on a long-term view. For how many years would a festive Chinatown exist, if supported? For 3 years, 10 years or perhaps eternity? The odds are against the latter. The Dutch Government has been pursuing a restrictive immigration policy for a number of years, resulting in fewer arrivals from China or other Asian countries. Without the continuous flow of newcomers ethnic boundaries may more easily blur, shift or be crossed (cf. Alba and Nee 2003). With that in mind, some Amsterdam officials argued that any investment in what seems to be a short-term endeavour would be a waste of time and money. It is true that assimilationist dynamics are often underestimated. Fact is that 30 years ago Zeedijk was the turf of Surinamese, today the area is associated with Chinese, but which category – if any – it will be associated with in one or two decades is hard to say. Officially legalising and protecting its Chinese character could fossilise this otherwise dynamic process (see also Anderson 1990).

Right to the city

An eighth consideration is to be found in contestations about the right to determine the identity of the place. Chinese entrepreneurs did contribute to the renaissance of Zeedijk and did make their mark on that public space, but the right to claim the area as being first of all Chinese was not taken for granted by all residents or their organisations. One of the more influential store owners complained: ‘My family has done a lot for this neighborhood, or its improvement and for bridging between the Chinese and Dutch communities. […] But I have the feeling that all those efforts are being thwarted. I am being punished for trying to uplift the neighborhood. That is very frustrating’. Some of the old-time (Dutch) residents for example would claim that they have older rights. What matters is not just the legitimacy of such claims, but also the capability to mobilise relevant social networks and political forces. Old-time residents had developed multi-stranded and often informal relationships with a multitude of institutional actors, and promoting their claims (and resisting those of Chinese entrepreneurs) turned out a piece of cake. True, one of the leading Chinese businessmen joined the Liberal Party (VVD) and was even elected as a district councillor, apparently hoping to change the political mood, but he was never able to create sufficient clout, allegedly because of his casual involvement in political decision-making networks. In the end, partly for this reason, Chinese entrepreneurs failed to really make their case.
The very fact that the Chinese business community was small-sized was not helpful either.

- A final consideration is rooted in a specific interpretation of ‘diversity’. ‘Diversity’ is a fuzzy concept, with ‘ethnic diversity’ as just one interpretation. The N.V. Zeedijk, however, cherished a different kind of diversity. It argued that most Chinese businesses are actually just ‘regular’ eateries and restaurants and that such food outlets mainly come into being in the evening. The street, however, needs shops that attract visitors during day time too. So, on the one hand, there was a lack of appreciation for what Chinese entrepreneurs did offer, also in terms of the introduction of innovative shopping concepts from Asia, and on the other hand there was a lack of confidence in their capability to develop a different product range that would make Zeedijk a diverse, high-quality shopping area for middle-class consumers throughout the day.

Together, these (partly overlapping) and mutually enforcing considerations interfered in attempts to accommodate the Chinese business community’s wishes. On several occasions, locals actively supported the enhancement of Chineseness, but this, however, was quite exceptional, as most of the time the Chinese community got half-hearted responses. Initially, the considerations revolved around issues of immigrant integration and ethnic diversity, but as times went by issues or urban planning and economic development came to the fore.

**The selective transformation of Zeedijk**

Since 2007, the municipality has been restructuring the so-called 1012 zip code district, that is, the area encompassing both the red light district and Zeedijk, so as to crack down on a plethora of criminal practices (money laundering, trafficking, dodging taxes), confine prostitution (in itself a legal activity) to a smaller area and create an environment that encourages more upscale shopping and living. The goal is to ‘transform the one-sided economic structure with relatively many quality-poor, nuisance-causing functions into a more diverse and high-value offer’ (Municipality of Amsterdam and Stadsdeel Centrum 2009, 4). The latter in itself could make Zeedijk more conducive to cool boutiques; indeed, more recently a different type of entrepreneurs ventured to Zeedijk including shoe and design clothing shops as well as several specialty coffee bars and hot bakeries.

At face value, a modest acknowledgement of the Chinese presence suddenly seemed to surface. Critical was the decision to select Chinatown as one of the ten key projects of Project 1012 in Basisrapportage Coalitieproject 1012, and the official commitment to ‘cooperate in the Chinatown development through facilitation and stimulation’ (Bijlmer 2008, 11–12). In its Strategienota Coalitieproject 1012, the municipality made it very clear what it had in mind:

Regarding the emerging market in China but also because Chinatown gives meaning to the so characteristic diversity of Amsterdam, we support the plans that should lead to a healthy Chinatown. In programmatic sense Chinatown is at risk of falling below the critical mass. We shall facilitate initiatives that contribute to a good programmatic interpretation, and fit within the goals that have meanwhile been set by the daily board of Stadsdeel Centrum. (Municipality of Amsterdam and Stadsdeel Centrum 2009, 19 – translation and italics by authors)
The category of unwelcome businesses in the 1012 area encompassed souvenir shops and mini-supermarkets, including Asian ones, as well as Chinese massage parlours. As for the latter, police raids performed in 2012 revealed that more than half of the Chinese massage parlours had ‘problems with their administration’ and that quite a few offered illegal sexual ‘happy ending’ activities (Bottenberg and Janssen 2012). Furthermore, there were indications of human trafficking and hiring of undocumented migrant workers (O+S Amsterdam 2012).

In such cases, the municipality actively interfered by approaching the property owners and business managers with the request (i.e. order) to upgrade the business. Sticks and carrots were used. Following a willing response, the municipality and/or housing associations would offer support and subsidies. But in all other cases, the property would be expropriated so as to replace the type of business, the entrepreneur or both. These are arguably drastic measures dramatically impacting entrepreneurial opportunities as well as the identity of the place.

Most Asian businesses were active in the food sector, but now the municipality problematised the real or alleged lack of quality. An official wrote: ‘Despite the substantial amount of restaurants [in and around Zeedijk], there are only few top restaurants’ (Avis et al. 2011, 30), and measures were taken as part of Project 1012. Existing restaurants were urged to change their profile or risked being replaced and, next to that, new (Asian) restaurants were no longer allowed to establish on Zeedijk.

For a while, the municipality did seem willing to accommodate one of the more specific wishes of the Chinese business community: the establishment of the much debated parking garage, another ‘key project’ of Project 1012 (Stadsdeel Centrum 2012). However, in October 2012 the municipality decided against it, a decision based on a complex and bureaucratic set of calculations which pointed out that there would be sufficient parking capacity under the current rules.

All in all, it has become clear that the interventions under Project 1012 have seriously affected the ‘traditional’ looks, smells and flavours of ‘Chinatown’, and the question arises whether they actually procured the opposite of the aim to keep Chinatown above ‘the critical mass’. The authorities maintained that their interventions were not detrimental for Chinatown, as they helped foster Chinese (and other Asian) enterprises. This latter was true, but this support was explicitly confined to endeavours promoting a middle-class shopping experience. A case in point is Asia Station, presenting itself as the ‘first Asian trend store in The Netherlands with an art gallery and coffee counter’, which was established in 2011 with financial support of N.V. Zeedijk. Other efforts included the development of low-rent ateliers for Chinese artists in the centre of Chinatown and a Chinese hotel that was allowed to be established only under the condition that spaces would be created for ‘Asian cultural activities’, for example, artist workshops. These were evidently attempts to transform Chinatown into a less ethnically specific boutique landscape.

Conclusions

Right in Amsterdam’s picturesque Canal Zone, in and around Zeedijk, Chinese entrepreneurs have carved out a presence in what seems like the local Chinatown. The businessmen have been targeting Asian and non-Asian customers by offering products that – to an extent – can be associated with Asia, China in particular. Since the early 1990s, individual
entrepreneurs and their business organisations have campaigned for official acknowledge-
ment of Zeedijk as an ethnic-only district and for governmental support of the enhance-
ment of Chineseness. This article describes and analyses the rise of Chinatown and the
negotiations about the identity of the area. Following Hackworth and Rekers (2005), we
argue that this case challenges traditional understandings of ethnic commercial land-
scapes. In sharp contrast to the current orthodoxy, which would conceive the proliferation
of such an ‘ethnic enclave’ as part of a larger process of assimilation, we have approached
Amsterdam’s Chinatown first of all as a themed economic space. Chinese and other entre-
preneurs compete for a share of the market and also for the right to claim the identity of
the area. Such a process involves not only Chinese entrepreneurs and the Chinese ‘com-
munity’, if such a thing would exist at all, but also other institutional actors, the munici-
pality in particular.

Nowadays, the area is no longer the local skid row it once was, due to a series of far-
reaching interventions by the municipality in tandem with a consortium of (semi)private
institutions such as housing associations. Real estate prices have gone up, and Zeedijk has
developed into a pleasant slumming street, no longer the domain of junkies and homeless.
In the two-and-a-half decades of ‘restructuring’, the authorities never embraced Chinese
entrepreneurs as agents of change, their investments and contributions to the local buzz
notwithstanding. In the same vein, the authorities only offered slow and muted responses
to repeated requests from the (relatively small) Chinese business community to acknowl-
edge their presence and contributions and to enhance Chineseness. Chinese entrepreneurs
have not been able to build up sufficient political clout to reverse this fragility. Amsterdam
Chinatown consequently does not possess the traditional archaic Chineseness that one
finds in other world cities. What is more, the prospects of that happening are bleak as
there are no longer market openings for these kind of businesses. The municipality
does not allow for any more restaurants – unless upgraded to a top-class status – and sou-
venir shops and mini-supermarkets that characterise Chinatowns elsewhere. For as far as
Zeedijk is an ethnically themed shopping area, it is Chinatown 2.0 that is a more upmarket
boutique landscape with just a light Asian flavour.

In theoretical terms, these findings are in line with the ‘mixed embeddedness approach’,
which argues that business opportunities including the proliferation of an ethnically
themed shopping area are – amongst others – subjected to the way in which state and
non-state regulatory forces interfere in the development of markets. In the case of
Zeedijk, this interference is profoundly informed by the goal to fundamentally gentrify
the area.

Slater (2011, 571–572) argues that gentrification commonly occurs in urban areas
where prior disinvestment in the urban infrastructure creates opportunities for profitable
redevelopment, and where an increase in service employment has led to a growing number
of middle-class professionals with a disposition towards central city living and an associ-
ated rejection of suburbia. But in this case, it were public investments that have given this
development momentum. Academic authors from all corners of the world have spelled
out in detail the harmful effects of gentrification, especially for the socially weak, and
underscored the negative consequences for the development of a just city (Bridge, Butler,
and Lees 2012; Fainstein 2011). Smith (2002, 445) even claims that developers,
politicians and financiers shy away from using the ‘dirty’ term of ‘gentrification’,
because it so painfully ‘tells the truth about the class shift involved in the “regeneration”
of the city’. For as far as this was true at all, this is definitely not the case in Amsterdam: the municipality and connected institutions embrace ‘gentrification’ as a smart solution for a series of related urban problems, even when upgrading leads to replacement.

They have been favouring the creation of a particular commercial environment serving the needs of particular entrepreneurs and particular customers. In so doing, it has become more difficult for ‘traditional’ small, ethnic entrepreneurs at the lower end of the market to sustain their business or to open up a new one. What is more, they are seen as obstacles for the beautification of the neighbourhood and for development of an otherwise wonderful retail landscape. True, ethnic entrepreneurs who manage to play the game and break into middle-class markets are seen as legitimate participants in the process of neighbourhood restructuring and they are consequently eligible for support. But, as has been said before, it is often taken for granted that ethnic entrepreneurs lack the skills and competencies or represent the wrong type of cultural capital to embark on such a trajectory.

Notes

1. Some non-Chinese restaurants do have ethnic Chinese owners, but here we emphasize the representation of ethnicity rather than ownership per se.
2. This is the so-called 1012 program, see Aalbers and Sabat (2012).
3. Interviews were held in Dutch, English or Cantonese.
4. This is especially the case in Amsterdam, see van Amersfoort and Cortie (2010).
5. For the sake of brevity, we refer to this cluster of streets as Zeedijk.
8. http://www.simplyamsterdam.nl/Finally_Amsterdam_has_a_beach_and_a_medieval_castle.html (accessed on March 5, 2015).
9. Eventually, permission was given to build a seriously slimmed down version of the contested plan.

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