

“Lisbon’s Chinatown and the ordering of the Other in Portuguese social space”

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Opening Scene

[The Coordinator of the urban renewal project of downtown-Chiado area] considers that one of the first measures *“to stop the decline”* of this area of Lisbon is to declare war to the Chinese shops. *“If they keep on being in that territory it will never be possible to help out the small commerce”* ... also, the City Council should not allow the opening of more Chinese shops downtown. *“The City Council is who issues the commercial licenses, and it could say that the quota for Chinese shops in that area is fully used up.”* In her opinion it isn't even a matter of talking of free market. *“There is no control over the origin of those goods, so, even in terms of market I am not saying it is unfair competition, but I am not totally convinced that it is fair. If in fact those goods are produced by a child who only eats a bowl of rice...”* But in spite of these doubts, [the Coordinator] admits that she buys *“a lot of things in the Chinese shops, from frying pans to Tupperwares, kitchen towels and batteries. And really I cannot be sure from where all that comes from.”* But this would be only half a solution...the ideal would be to concentrate all the Chinese shops in a single area of Lisbon just like in the Chinatowns of other big cities. [The Coordinator] considers the Chinese immigrants to be orderly and hardworking, but she would prefer *“since they are naturally attuned to commercial activities that they should be in a territory that is characteristic of them.”* And she argues that the city council should involve [the People's Republic of] China in that solution. *“All these Chinese arrive with the 'agrément' of their Government. So, there is an official agent; it would suffice to say to the Ambassador of China that the City Council wants to create a Chinatown, and the negotiation goes through.”*

(in *Expresso*, Lisboa, September, 8/09/2007)¹

These were the lines that stirred up Portuguese society in the summer of 2007.

A month later, in October, and after several, frequent and intense comments in all three types of media (newspapers, radio and TV), the Coordinator of the urban renewal program resigned from her post stating that she no longer had the necessary conditions to coordinate the project. She declared all the controversy raised by her Chinatown proposal as “folklore” and “a political manoeuver by left wingers” orchestrated to remove her from the Coordination of the project.

To date, and eight years later, no Chinatown has been constructed in Lisbon.

¹ Quote constructed from 'Zezinha quer expulsar chineses da baixa', *Expresso*, September 08-09-2007, p1, and from Costa, F S, 'Baixa sem lojas chinesas', *Expresso*, September 08-09-2007, p9.

Some context

Immigration is a relatively new phenomena for Portuguese society. Traditionally a sending country, Portugal in the early 2000s saw an exponential increase of foreign citizens with Portuguese national space: in 2000 there were 207.587 foreign nationals residing in Portugal; four years later, in 2004 that number had more than doubled to 447.155 (Fig 1).

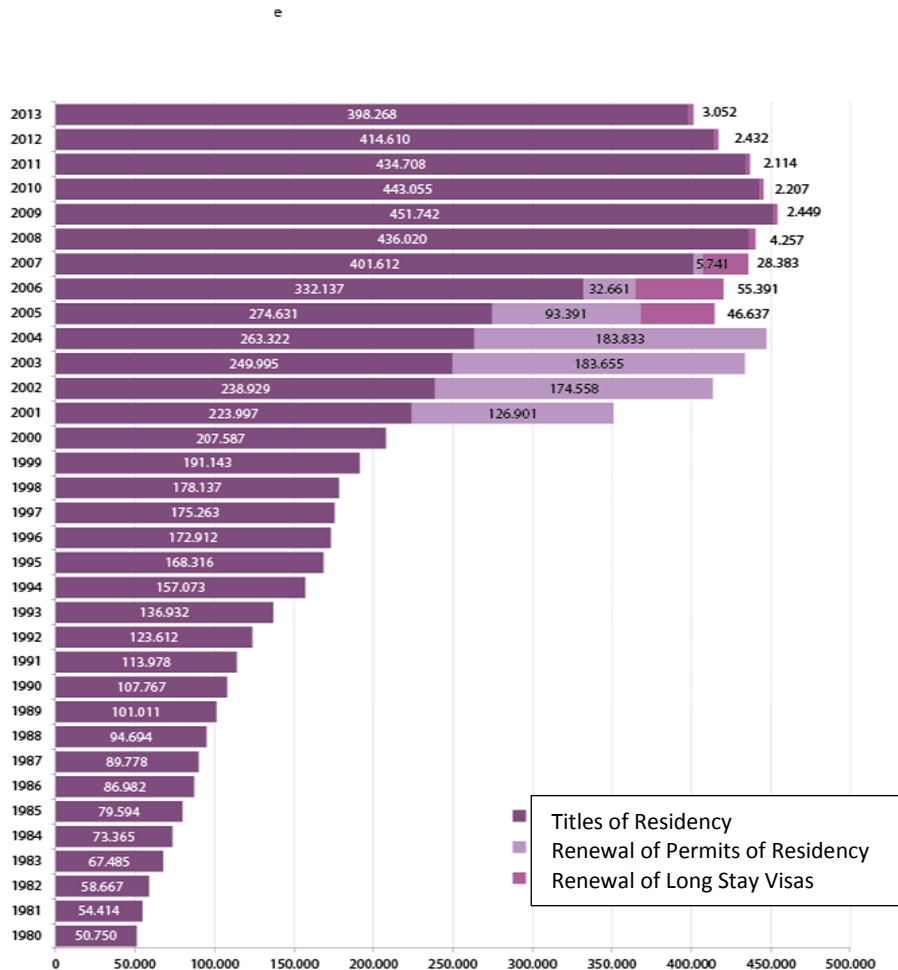


Figure 1 – Evolution of Immigrant Population in Portugal (1980 - 2013)
Source: SEF, Relatório de Imigração – 2013

The proposal presented in 2007 by Lisbon's downtown urban renewal Commissioner could lead to think that Chinese presence in Portugal was massive so as to trigger such 'defensive' reaction to it. However, according to official numbers, in 2007 the biggest immigrant communities in Portugal were from Brazil (73 146 citizens) and Cape Verde (63 925 citizens), both representing roughly 15% each, followed by the Ukraine (9%), Angola (8%) and Guiné-Bissau (5%). The Chinese citizens living in Portugal in 2007 were 10 448 individuals, representing only 2,4 % of the total of 435 736 immigrants registered in Portuguese national space².

So what was at play here? What moved the Coordinator of the Lisbon downtown urban renewal program to suggest an emplacement of a specific immigrant community? What are the social factors at play in this understanding by an official power stake holder that the best management policy for that specific urban area was to spatially circumscribe an ethnic group within a European metropolis?

Globalization and neoliberal capitalism are factors at play in this situation. However, these factors shall not be the main focus of this analysis. Because the symbolic economy features two parallel production systems that are crucial to a city's material life: the *production of space*, with its synergy of capital investment and cultural meanings, and the *production of symbols*, which constructs both a currency of commercial exchange and a language of social identity (Zukin 1995: 23-24), space taken both as a tool and as an outcome will be the kernel of this analysis. It will be argued here that 2007 Lisbon Chinatown proposal is but a *technology of the Other*³.

Being in and out of place

Chinatowns as a specific form of urban space are an outcome of geographies of power.

² Data in http://sefstat.sef.pt/Docs/Rifa_2007.pdf (accessed 15th June 2015)

³ Re-fashioning here Michel Foucault's concept of *technologies of the self* (Foucault 1988).

In his retracing of the history of Chinese immigration in the San Francisco Bay (USA), Wong (1998) lays out a series of legislative acts of the late 1800s that barred Chinese immigrants from having access to certain rights. For instance, Chinese people did not have the right of purchasing property outside the Chinatown; did not have the right to have Chinese children educated in public schools; did not have the right to hold a job in federal, state or local government (Wong 1998: 11-12). According to Wong these and other discriminatory acts account for most of the community's ghettoization and for the ethnic economic niching initially associated with the Chinese community.

The reality of the Chinese presence in Europe differs in many ways from the North American-based reality, as the collected essays on the Chinese presence in European countries edited by Benton and Pieke (1998) show. Although there are clear situations of discrimination against Chinese immigrants described in several of the chapters of this edited book, none of the authors describes discrimination as explicitly written in the text of the law of the receiving country, be it at a national or at a local level, which is a stark contrast to the North American reality referred by Wong (1998). Thus, according to Pieke (1998:13),

'Chinatowns in North America and Southeast Asia were as much a product of residential segregation, ethnic division of labor, and the racism and proclivity for indirect rule of the authorities as they were the natural outcome of Chinese cultural characteristics. In post-war Europe, by contrast, Chinese immigrants suffered negligible racial discrimination, had ample business opportunities, faced only limited competition from other groups, and could rely on extensive government services open to all.'

The more 'open environment' met by Chinese migrants in Europe meant that a newly arrived individual who needed advice or any sort of help in establishing him/herself could rely for such matters mostly on personal connections and individual patronage. This meant that within the European context of Chinese immigration (from the late 1800s onwards) there was never a marked need for strong organizational structures as

there were in the US. These organizational structures became one of the pillars of American Chinatowns' genesis and respective form. If to this specificity of the European context we add the specialization in the restaurant business (a marked trait of the Chinese presence in Europe) with its spatially dispersed location pattern, we can see how early European Chinatowns never assumed the form and characteristics of their North American or Southeast Asian counterparts: they never went 'beyond a collection of shops, restaurants and gambling houses.' (Pieke 1998:13)

According to Wong (2013) the term Chinatown is used in an inclusive sense covering various types of Chinese concentrations in urban areas:

'Most of the European and Australian types of Chinatowns do not have hierarchical, interlocking associational structures like those in Lima, Havana, New York, Vancouver, Chicago and San Francisco.' (Wong 2013:3)

Nevertheless it is generally agreed that North American and Southeast Asian Chinatowns share four functional elements: 1) residential, 2) commercial, 3) services geared mostly to the Chinese community itself and 4) public symbolism. According to Christiansen (2003), of the whole of the European Chinatowns only one of the three Chinese concentration areas of Paris bears some functional similarity to the North American and Southeast Asian Chinatowns: the 13th *arrondissement*, an area to which the majority of Southeast Asia Chinese refugees flocked to in the 70s. In it we find the four functional elements referred to above. An additional and more recent example of an European urban area with marked Chinese presence that might also hold the four functions characteristic of a Chinatown is the city of Prato in Northern Italy⁴. Thus, when comparing the set of European Chinatowns to North-American and Southeast Asian set, there are only two of the four functions that are shared by the two sets: the commercial function and the public symbolism function. The latter function works at two different levels: one for the members of the Chinese community itself (visitors,

⁴ The Chinese community of Prato started to grow in the 1990s and is directly related to the textile business.

consumers and workers, i.e., local members but also those part of the 'Great China' at large); another for the non-Chinese visitor and consumer who heads to such parts of the cities expecting to find a certain kind of ambiance and products/services.

Compared to North American and Southeast Asian examples, European Chinatowns as a particular urban space are thus a recent phenomenon. Although a somehow sizeable Chinese presence in Europe goes back to the late 19th century, and although some present day European Chinatowns do relate to the previous presence of Chinese immigrants in the related urban area (e.g.: Amsterdam, London, Liverpool), the reality is that it is not until the 1960s (e.g.: London) that they assume its contemporary form with some of them only going through such process in the late 1990s (e.g.: Antwerp) or even later. The UK provides a good example of this process. Of the several Chinatowns in the UK the most famous is the one in London's Soho. Although London's Chinatown can be retraced to the 1930s it was only in the 1960s that it began to take its present shape having its first arch was erected only in 1985. It should be noted that the ability to build a Chinatown gate is usually a sign of prestige for the local Chinese community and for its leaders since it is an outcome of the latter's social interconnectedness via their ability to both negotiate with local authorities permission for erecting the monumental arch and to rally financial support for the arch from the local Chinese community, but foremost from Mainland China. Manchester's Chinatown, smaller and more recent than London's, erected its arch two years later, in 1987. Manchester's Chinese gate was thus not the first one to be erected in an UK city, but it boasts being 'the first true Imperial Chinese arch to be erected in Europe'⁵. Liverpool, a city that registered the earliest Chinese community in the UK (late 1800s) only erected its monumental arch in 2000. Standing 15 meters high, built with material imported directly from Shanghai, and produced by 20 craftsmen who travelled from Shanghai to

⁵ <http://www.manchester.com/community/chinatown/history.php> [accessed June 2015]

Liverpool for the effect of carving, decorating and assembling the pieces, Liverpool's monumental arch is 'the largest Chinese Arch outside China'⁶.

This recent tendency in European cities to clearly mark the symbolic space of a Chinatown with a monumental arch can be related to late-modernity attachment to the visual and to capitalist modes of production that anchor their strategies on theming. According to Zukin (1995:9), 'visual display matter in American and European cities today, because the identities of places are established by sites of delectation.' Chinatowns in their present day form can be seen as representing a successful branding of urban space where Chinese culture can be consumed as part of the global and ethnically diverse world (Sales, d'Angelo, Liand and Montagna 2012). A close parallel would be the world fairs that showed cased vignettes of exotic culture from other countries, along with an utopian or monumental construction representing a coherent model of particular worlds. The 2007 proposal of the creation of a Chinatown in Lisbon could be seen as feeding from such themed commercial urban space strand. However, such does not fully account for what is at play in that proposal of urban renewal policy. To fully understand what is at play in the opening vignette, one has to bring into the argument what Said has called "imaginative geography and its systems of representation" (Said 2003:49), namely the way Chinese identity is seen from the West.

The economy of objects and identities

The notion of foreign as we know it today dates from the period post-First World War, time when the State started to become heavily involved in regulating and controlling refugee flows, something that it did not do before to that degree (Sassen 1999:5). According to the European Federation of Chinese Organisations (EFCO)

⁶ <http://www.liverpoolchinatown.co.uk/> [accessed June 2015]

'[m]any elderly overseas Chinese clearly recall that Chinese still met prejudice everywhere in Europe right up to the Second World War. Some whites were unwilling to sit next to Chinese on public transport, some landlords refused to rent their property and some staff refused to serve Chinese costumers in bars.' (EFOC 1996:16)

In the 1930s Chinese citizens underwent difficulties with the rise of Nazism and the outbreak of the Second World War. In 1938 the Nazi regime established a so-called Chinese Department especially to keep a watch on Chinese in Germany, being particular suspicious and against any mixing of German women with Chinese men. In Italy, the Mussolini regime regarded Chinese as 'enemy aliens' and seized their money (EFOC 1996). Some of the narratives collected in the early 2000s through field work with the Chinese community elders in Porto, Portugal, refer in particular to discrimination related to the phenotypical difference. The most frequently referred to situation of discrimination referred to was the addressing of the Chinese individual by Portuguese citizens as '*chinoca*' ('chink'). But it seems that in this particular case the Portuguese State did not translate into the written law the ethnic discrimination, unlike, for instance the United States of America had done almost a century before.

Because mind requires order, and order is achieved by giving to the realities of the material world a role to play in the economy of objects and identities thus producing what Levi-Strauss (1967) has called a science of the concrete, the appertaining of difference implies a classification of similarity (belonging) and dissimilarity (non-belonging) and an ordering, i.e., a poetics and a politics of differential location, an inscription of specific subjects to specific places. The alienness of the Chinese identity in Western cities reflects itself on the representations of Chinatowns by non-Chinese. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries Chinatowns as urban areas were part of the geography of dangerous places. This danger, however, is also coloured by the exotic with Chinatowns seen as the location of the 'Yellow Peril': in the Chinatowns resided 'risky and often illegal activities such as drug taking and gambling' (Sales, d'Angelo, Liand and Montagna 2012:46) and 'movies ... made Chinatown to be exotic, mysterious, gansters filled' (Wong 2013:1).

I have elsewhere (Santos 2013) argued for a pan-European Foucauldian discourse towards the Chinese identity, one that was translated into mass-mediated ritual excesses towards the Chinese presence in European space. One of the most frequent tropes of Chinese identity as an utter-Otherness to be found in European media is the disappearing dead:

‘In 1982 ... most newspapers ... peddled the rumor that the overseas Chinese, in order to get hold of spare ID papers, buried their dead in secret. The national press reported that secret burials did indeed take place in the basements of XIIIth arrondissement tower blocks. Old chestnut like the secret shipment of corpses to China cropped up again. The rumor reached all social circles and was a regular topic of conversation whenever the subject of the Chinese or Asian presence in France was broached. (Yu-Sion 1998:120)

What is being described by Yu-Sion in 1982 France could be applied word by word to the rumor that circulated in Portugal in 2006. With a gap of 24 years the narrative is exactly the same and finding place among exactly the same media: national newspapers. In July 2006 a headline in the front cover of the magazine of one of the most reputed Portuguese weekly papers ‘O Expresso’ read: *Porque não há mortos Chineses em Portugal?* [Why are there no Chinese dead in Portugal?]⁷ (Santos 2013: 230)

These mass-media mediated ritual excesses related to the tropes of a representation of the Chinese identity as an utter-Otherness multiply themselves in number and in European countries (see Santos 2013) and although Nonini and Ong (1997) relate discourses around racist tropes of threat and disorder such as the ones referred above to episodic economic and political crisis of modern capitalism and nationalisms (Nonini and Ong 1997:19), it is argued here that these rumors share from a deeper (pan?) European representational system of the Chinese identity, acting as a technology of

⁷ *Expresso*, Lisboa, July, 13/07/2006.

the Other that aims at excluding the Chinese (the alien) from a space, that of the moral community of the national (and European) citizen.

A city is a place, an ordered space in the sense of structured space, thus a body. Segregation, both social and spatial is a characteristic of cities. The rules organizing urban space are part of historically contextualized regimes of power/knowledge being thus part of a broader regime of representation. Through the enforcement of land use and land development rules we get the enforcement through emplacement (i.e., through putting into place) of social differentiation. The performativity of this binomial enforcement/emplacement offers us a glimpse of how social groups relate to each other, and that is exactly what can be witnessed in the proposal of creating a Chinatown in Lisbon and ensuing heated public debate.

The Lisbon Chinatown proposal: the inverted panopticon

Jeremy Bentham's panopticon was both an architectural form and a model of society. Designed to hold two different populations – those being surveyed/controlled and those surveying/controlling – it was a circular structure that contained two main different spaces – the cells located around the perimeter (the space of the invigilated) and a central tower/inspection house at its centre (the space of those invigilating). The cells have large windows that by allowing the entry of light make the inmate fully visible to the controllers who watch them unseen for the inner darkness of the central tower. The concept of the design is to allow a single watchman to observe all inmates of an institution without the inmates being able to tell whether or not they are being watched (and thus act as though they are watched at all times, effectively controlling their own behaviour). Foucault (1995) expands on Bentham's panopticon and writes on how panopticism as a regime of control and a model of society avoids the danger of conspiracy (prisons), avoids contagion (hospitals), averts reciprocal violence (asylums) and prevents distractions that hinder work or provoke accidents (factories).

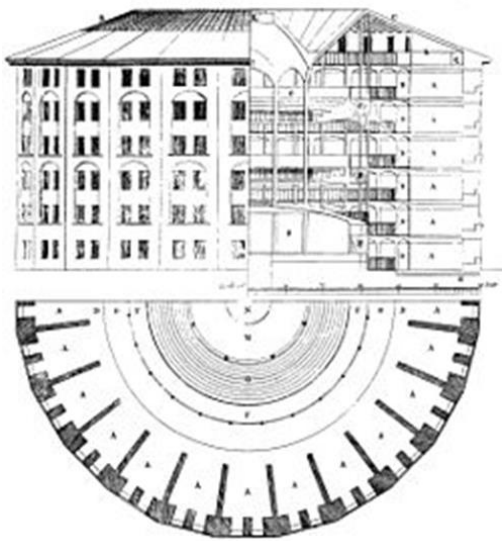


Figure 2. Bentham's panopticon (source:Wikipedia)

The proposed creation of a Chinatown for Lisbon cannot be seen solely as an attempt to seek a strategic advantage within a city regeneration program by trading on exotica as part of place marketing. If the terms in which the Downtown Lisbon urban renewal Commissioner expressed the desire to build a Chinatown in Lisbon can be explained by late modernity's attraction to space theming, we find it also an expression of a desire to control an ethnic other that is seen as harmful to the native population (i.e. the economic competition by Chinese traders and their the highly visible *1Euro* shops over traditional Portuguese shops). Growing stress on autochthony and concomitantly, on the exclusion of the allogène, the stranger – departs from older ontologies of being, belonging and difference; most noticeably from ethnicity that has the capacity to arouse strong affect and to justify the construction of unambiguous social boundaries (Geschiere and Nyamnjoh 2000: 423-25, 448).

It is within this context of heightened autochthony that the mass-mediated ritual excesses inflicted on the ethnic-Other and directed at producing state power and national unity gain their full understanding. It is also within this context that we can take the 2007 proposal for the creation of a Chinatown in Lisbon in the form it was

proposed with its reference to quotas, prohibition of any new shops opening in the city and forceful location of Chinese owned business in a delimited area of the city of Lisbon as a technology of the Other, as the creation of an inverted panopticon: a spatial device that through delimiting, encircling and controlling would prevent contagion and thus would produce a 'purified' city.

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