



CHINATOWN, EUROPE

An exploration of overseas Chinese identity in the 1990s

Flemming Christiansen

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Chinatown, Europe

Is Chinatown a ghetto, an area of exotic sensations or a business venture? What makes a European Chinese, Chinese?

The histories of Chinese communities in Europe are diverse, spanning (amongst others) Teochiu-speaking migrants from French Indochina to France, and Hakka- and Cantonese-speaking migrants from Hong Kong to Britain. This book explores how such a wide range of people tends to be – indiscriminately – regarded as ‘Chinese’.

Christiansen explains Chinese communities in Europe in terms of the interaction between the migrants, the European ‘host’ societies and the Chinese ‘home’ where the migrants claim their origin. He sees these interactions as addressing several issues: citizenship, political culture, labour market exclusion, generational shifts and the influences of colonialism and communism, all of which create opportunities for fashioning a new ethnic identity. *Chinatown, Europe* examines how many sub-groups among the Chinese in Europe have developed in recent years and discusses many institutions that shape and contribute ethnic meaning to Chinese communities in Europe.

Chinese identity is not a mere practical utility or a shallow business emblem. For many, China remains a unifying force while local and national bonds in each European state are of equal importance in giving shape to Chinese communities. Based on in-depth interviews with overseas Chinese in many European cities, *Chinatown, Europe* provides a complex yet enthralling investigation into many Chinese communities in Europe.

Flemming Christiansen teaches Chinese Studies at the University of Leeds.

Chinese Worlds

Chinese Worlds publishes high-quality scholarship, research monographs, and source collections on Chinese history and society. 'Worlds' signals the diversity of China, the cycles of unity and division through which China's modern history has passed, and recent research trends toward regional studies and local issues. It also signals that Chineseness is not contained within borders – ethnic migrant communities overseas are also 'Chinese worlds'.

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Preface

This book seeks to understand how the identity of the overseas Chinese in Europe is structured and changes over time, by examining the main factors that may influence it. It also asks whether there exists a pan-European Chinese identity. This question is, in a sense, frivolous and naive, for one can hardly expect a sensible answer to it. But in another sense it is a central and relevant question with which to begin an examination of how overseas Chinese in European countries fare. They live in countries that treat their ethnic minorities, immigrants, resident 'foreigners' or 'strangers' differently. At the same time the European member states converge into a European super-polity that provides new rights for ethnic groups. China's strengthening in the 1980s and 1990s has inspired the increasing integration of overseas Chinese communities across borders, both within Europe and beyond. One notion that underlies most of this book is that overseas Chinese communities in Europe interact across borders and other lines of division.

The main viewpoint of the research is that *major social actors create ethnic identity in interaction among groups whose rights or access to political, social and economic resources are determined by their ethnic background*. The focus is thus on *interaction* between and within ethnic groups (Barth 1969), the *competition* for economic, social and symbolic resources (Bourdieu 1977), and the *construction* of ethnic identity as a collective response to forces in the economic and political environment.

The book draws on 65 detailed interviews with overseas Chinese in different European countries. These interviews were taken in 1996 by Liang Xiujing, sometimes alone, and sometimes with my participation. They were taken in Mandarin or Cantonese, and transcribed into Chinese text. I used the software package NVivo 1.0 from QSR to extract meaning from the interviews. I have anonymised references to and quotations from the interviews, and do not list them lest somebody attribute statements to individual interviewees.¹ The overseas Chinese community is focused on the initiative and creativity of individuals, and many of the interviewees were keen to be cited without restriction and with full attribution. However, others talked in confidence; interviewees may also find that their words said in the context of an interview in 1996 do not reflect their thinking today. No person interviewed or providing information for this book can in any way be made morally, politically or otherwise responsible for any statement made or conclusion drawn in this book.

The research for this book was conducted under the Pacific Asia Programme of the Economic and Social Research Council.² The research project was carried out jointly with Professor Gregor Benton, who was my colleague at Leeds and later moved to the University of Wales at Cardiff. Gregor Benton was involved in designing and discussing topics related to the research, and he has given advice on and made corrections to the manuscript. After his involvement with the manuscript, I have changed so much that it is more than a matter of form to say that I am solely responsible for any shortcomings in any part of the book. His support and knowledge have been invaluable for the project.

Liang Xiujiing carried out all the interviews and was instrumental in operationalising the research in its early phases. She has laid most of the empirical basis for the research. Without her help, the book would never have been written.

More than one hundred overseas Chinese in all parts of Europe have contributed material used in this book, in the form of interviews, pieces of information, advice, clippings, and written accounts. Without their ready and cordial cooperation this research would not have come true. I am also grateful to officials in the Overseas Chinese Affairs Office under the State Council of the People's Republic of China for informal discussions, to officials of the Overseas Chinese Affairs Commission in Taipei for materials and information, and to Peter Ma of the Hong Kong Representative Office in London who agreed to an interview on the eve of closing down his function and leaving for Hong Kong.

Writing the book I have profited from a six months' leave spent as Visiting Professor at the School for Postgraduate Interdisciplinary Research on Interculturalism and Transnationality (SPIRIT) at Aalborg University, and from a year spent at the Department of East Asian Studies at Aarhus University. Most important for my work, however, has been the fertile and creative intellectual environment of the Department of East Asian Studies at the University of Leeds.

In this book, the Hanyu Pinyin transcription is generally used for transliterating Chinese terms. Chinese expressions that have general currency in Europeanised forms have been retained in those forms, because their use is semantically divorced from the Chinese. For example, Cantonese, Teochiu, Hakka and Hokkien in the European form signify both a dialect group as well as a person speaking the dialect or belonging to a community of such speakers. Names of overseas Chinese are given in the western form (where known), with the Hanyu Pinyin transcription (where known) on the first appearance. Names of Taiwanese and Hong Kong persons are given in Hanyu Pinyin with the westernised form (where known) on the first appearance. The names Sun Yat-sen (Sun Zhongshan, Sun Yixian) and Chiang Kai-shek (Jiang Jieshi) are given only in the western versions, which are based on local pronunciation in China. Chinese geographical names are in Hanyu Pinyin, except Hong Kong (Xianggang) and Macau (Aomen). Names of overseas Chinese and Hong Kong organisations are given in the European form (where known), with the Chinese name in Hanyu Pinyin transcription on the first occurrence. Names of overseas Chinese newspapers often have hybrid titles in characters and the local European language; these titles are retained, transliterating characters

into Hanyu Pinyin, where the European name does not include a different transliteration of the characters (e.g. *Ouzhou Shibao* – *Nouvelles d'Europe*, but *Sing Tao Daily*). Names of official bodies in China are translated throughout.

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Introduction

I have lived in Sweden for 17 years, and I am together with Swedes most of the time. Although I am born in Sweden, my mother is Chinese, and my appearance is yellow skin and black hair. Because of mother, I have gradually developed an interest in Chinese. At home I speak Cantonese and Shanghainese, but when I began to study Chinese, it was Mandarin. So studying Chinese meant that I was studying another 'language' from scratch.

There are not that many Chinese in Sweden, and there are no Chinese in my school, so my contact with Chinese language is small. I can speak Chinese, but I am not good at writing or reading it.

Although I have gone to China several times, the time there was so limited that there was no time to learn Chinese characters. I am very fond of Chinese history, but not knowing Chinese, how can I read Chinese books? Two years ago, I found a Chinese school and began to learn eagerly, and made great strides. Knowledge on China is like an ocean, so rich! It is simply a treasure trove of knowledge, and Chinese is my key to open that treasure trove. I want to learn Chinese, because I want to enter this ocean of knowledge.

Chen Hui (17 years)¹

The question of Chinese identity permeates Chen Hui's life. But is identity determined by belonging to the Chinese race ('yellow skin and black hair'), speaking a Chinese dialect (Cantonese and Shanghainese), mastering China's national language (Mandarin), having knowledge of Chinese history, or being able to acquire knowledge through the medium of the Chinese language? Chen Hui does not distinguish between these aspects of being Chinese. Readers of the overseas edition of the *People's Daily* that published the letter recognise in it a typical problem faced by a second-generation teenager. The editors who selected it for publication did not see its contents as inept or as problematic. In their context, Chen Hui's feelings about identity are normal and coherent, and we can relate to them emotionally. However, if we analyse their meaning, we are likely to discover its many conflicting dimensions and especially the contradiction between identity as genetic or acquired through learning.

When we change the perspective from the individual to the social context, the issue of identity takes a different form. We move away from the individual emotions

of 'being' or 'not being' Chinese or 'belonging' or 'not belonging' to the Chinese ethnic group towards generalised statements about 'what constitutes the ethnic group' and 'how one can determine membership of the ethnic group'.

This book regards Chinese identity in Europe as a social process. It is only marginally concerned with the individual's emotional or existential identifications and instead seeks to explore the Chinese ethnic identity in Europe in the 1980s and 1990s as a dynamic force shaping and transforming communities. Individual ethnic identification, of course, informs this study in important ways, most importantly as the raw material (in the form of interviews) for our understanding of the social dimensions of ethnic identity. Individual affection is an important expression of ethnicity; the anecdote or the individual case contributes to constructing shared feelings. There is a fine line between the existential experience of belonging and the instrumental use of ethnic stereotypes to represent group interest. The effort of this book is not to reduce individual feelings of belonging to calculating utility, but to find out the rich and complex collective processes that bring forth ethnic communities.

There is only now an emerging literature on overseas Chinese in Europe.² Benton and Pieke's (1998) is the first book to include all of Europe, albeit in individual country studies. Campani, Carchedi and Tassinari's book (1994) is mainly on Italy, but also includes parts on overseas Chinese in Paris and Spain. It makes sense to juxtapose overseas Chinese in European countries, but it has rarely been done, probably because the material is scattered in different countries and often in many languages.

The present book ventures into a research area that in most respects is uncharted. Juxtaposing developments in European countries, looking at interaction across borders and identifying causalities and dynamics of ethnic identity-building are at the core.

The book relies on interviews as a major source. Of the total 67 interviews we made, we transcribed and used 65 during the work on the book. In addition, we had a number of informal conversations and telephone contacts that provided background information and clarified details. The interviews had a dual function. They corroborated factual information and provided new empirical data. They also furnished data on feelings and attitudes of the interviewees on their ethnic identity and their situation. Both aspects were needed, for much of the existing published material did not provide the types of information needed for our research. Overseas Chinese media provide detailed information, but its significance only becomes clear when related to information obtained in interviews. The interviews were made with the intention of exploring the forces that create and maintain ethnic identification among overseas Chinese in a number of European countries. Their distribution does not constitute a representative sample in a statistical sense. They were made in 25 different cities in Britain, Denmark, Germany, the Netherlands, Belgium, France and Italy, and also included interviews with a Hungarian (by telephone) and a Spanish overseas Chinese (in Italy). An effort was made to ensure a spread over typologies; of the 65 interviews, 17 were with Taiwan-leaning overseas Chinese. The distribution included people from all the most important

places of immigration origin (New Territories, Southern Zhejiang, Shanghai, French Indochina, Guangdong, Chaozhou, Taiwan and so on). The interviewees included people in catering, commerce and services, top people in voluntary organisations and academics. The analysis does not make any presumptions about representativeness and does not extract quantitative values from the sample. The analysis aimed at understanding the formation of ethnic identity by examining how the interviewees talked about it and which factors stood out as pertinent in the interviews.

Background

The Chinese have arrived in Europe on a certain scale since the 1880s, but only in significant numbers after the Second World War, and with great intensity only since the early 1980s. As a result, their communities have not had the opportunity to mature and integrate, but are constantly upset by new waves of immigrants. They have arrived from many different places in China, Asia, and other parts of the world, and many different dialects are current among them. They live in more than 20 different European states, the largest communities being in France, Britain and the Netherlands. National rules for dealing with communities of non-native residents differ widely in different European countries. Can one claim that they form a community? Is it possible to talk about a shared ethnic identity among Chinese in Europe?

The interaction among those who claim or are claimed to belong to the ‘overseas Chinese’ enables us to understand the meaning of Chinese identity. The category overseas Chinese is not defined by hard external criteria, it is understood through an analysis of their social practice. Who does and does not belong to the group, is an issue of group behaviour and social practice. The main perspective of this book is on how the Chinese manifest themselves as a group by asserting their belonging to the group, socially, politically and culturally.

Mette Thunø (1998, 175–6) has described how Chinese in Denmark in a certain period were dispersed and assimilated (partly due to marriage with Danes), and so became invisible as an ethnic group. By not interacting socially, they did not form a community, and their ethnic identity was not an issue of social interest (although it may be important as a personal psychological attribute). Some people display assimilation with the host society (or the ‘mainstream’, *zhuliu*, as many Chinese call it) in some situations, and emphasise their Chineseness in other contexts. Other people may totally negate their status as Chinese and yet be perceived as overseas Chinese by their environment. Teenage Chinese children sometimes turn their back on their parents and rebel against anything Chinese; yet the racial and ethnic expectations of their classmates and other non-Chinese peers force them to consider their ethnic identity. The pressure from peers may take many forms, ranging from racist exclusion to affirmative emphasis on diversity in specific social settings.

Ethnic identity of the Chinese in Europe takes many forms, and changes over time. For many Chinese, descent in the bloodline from Chinese forefathers is a strong criterion for deciding who is and who is not a Chinese. Yet those who make

this claim readily acknowledge that it fails as a criterion in their own experience. Several interviewees made a distinction between overseas Chinese who know Chinese and Chinese culture, and Chinese who have lost their Chinese identity and language through assimilation.

The norms for group membership are interpreted by the members of the group themselves during their social interaction. Individuals use them to claim their birth-right, or to cast doubt on other individuals' claim to a status within the group. Governments use them to bestow differential rights on people. Membership of the group is constantly reconstructed by its members through their participation in the activities that constitute the group. *This book, accordingly, does not subscribe to the idea that membership of the ethnic group is fixed or is defined by fixed attributes of its members, and does not define the ethnic group in opposition to other ethnic groups.* It rejects the idea that there is a fixed historical, religious, cultural, linguistic or genetic core that defines the ethnic group. History, religion, culture, language and heritage are all interpreted in social interaction, are manipulated collectively by members of the ethnic group, and their meaning, content and significance shift over time and are reflected in a multitude of different situations.

Ethnic identity reflects the quest by members of the ethnic group to achieve social safety and status and benefit by interacting with each other and with people outside the ethnic group. The main tools for this social interaction are shared cultural stereotypes, behavioural assumptions, moral values, references to customs and history, and use of language. Power and status are embedded in a cultural value system that is constantly recreated. The cultural value system, and its behavioural manifestations, do not have an objective ontology; they do not exist as a reality independent of the collective minds of the participants in the ethnic interaction; their relevance is entirely situational, and their power instrumental. They do not exist prior to social relations, but are used by the participants to conduct them; they do not guide the behaviour of the ethnic group, they provide props and backdrops for acting out the ethnic drama, actively moved around and changed by the cast.

How can one assert that the Chinese in Europe share an ethnic identity, given the great differences that exist among them? It is obvious that the large majority of Chinese in European countries form communities and interact socially, using cultural values and symbols distinct from those of other ethnic groups. Why have they not been assimilated and become invisible? It is also obvious that Chinese in all parts of Europe have immigrated from many different parts of China and other places (like Southeast Asia, the South Pacific and South America), and that there are great linguistic differences between them. Why do they overwhelmingly refer to themselves as Chinese and contend for status with Chinese of different provenance and speech? Chinese live in many different parts of Europe, and some are organised in associations that link them to local authorities. Why is it that community leaders in local settings, from Barcelona and Birmingham to Bologna and Bonn, know community leaders across the continent? Chinese in all parts of Europe are naturalised, have permanent or temporary residence, or are illegal immigrants. Why do they interact across these divisions?

The themes of diversity and division must be juxtaposed against the huge homogenising forces that work on the Chinese in Europe. The nature of the European states' and the European Union's relation with their ethnic groups has changed in the 1980s and 1990s, contributing to pan-European community structures. At the same time, the overseas Chinese policies of the People's Republic of China (PRC) and of the Taipei government help forge a general Chinese identity. Europe's Chinese react politically and socially on these influences and they interact with each other across Europe. Their shared conditions and the avenues through which they can assert their identity become increasingly homogenous. The idea of a European Chinese identity reflects one of many dimensions of the Chinese communities in Europe. The fact that Chinese traversed Europe without much regard for national borders, and that they interacted privately and in business in Europe as a whole, made them stand out from other, more parochially based, European populations; Benton and Vermeulen (1987) jestingly referred to them as the 'first and best Europeans'. This proposition can since the mid-1990s be expanded in terms of the overseas Chinese's political interaction in pan-European organisations. As the analysis in this book will make clear, the Chinese communities in Europe also react to and reflect the emergence of global Chinese identity-formation and their active wooing by local governments in China. These multiple and countervailing forces are observed from the perspective of Europe.

The title 'Chinatown, Europe' seeks to capture the many dimensions of Chinese ethnic identity in Europe. 'Chinatown' in the abstract is an emblem of Chineseness constructed and manipulated by the overseas Chinese, an emblem that mobilises cultural stereotypes. 'Chinatown' in the concrete is an urban space for people from different Chinese backgrounds at the same time as it is a miniature replica of an imagined 'China'. The address 'Chinatown, Europe' does not refer to a geographic place, but to an imaginary realm of assets shared and utilised by the Chinese in Europe.

Is there a shared Chinese identity across Europe? The following chapters reflect on conditions for such a shared identity. The Chinese nationalist project is a strong unifying factor; yet the overseas Chinese are, at the same time, divided by seemingly immutable bonds with their native places in China and by differences in speech that impede communication among them. They live under hugely different conditions in a large number of European states. Can there be a shared identity under these circumstances?

The first chapter will set out some of the main issues and approaches of this book. The analysis aims to identify both the interaction with 'host' societies and between the various diverse groups of Chinese in Europe. Identity-formation is, accordingly, regarded as a *social process between ethnic groups and within them* and forms the core of a theoretical debate in the first chapter.

The second chapter, on Chinese migration to Europe, considers some myths on how Chinese arrived in Europe before the Second World War, gives an overview of the main streams of migration, and finally examines some cases of how the migrants' identity was framed by a variety of factors related to their passage. Chapter 3, on Chinatowns in Europe, analyses how symbolic representation,

political expedience and collective status interact to form a 'cultural space' for Chinese identity. Chapter 4 uses two case studies of immigrant communities from China to explore the interplay between general and sub-ethnic Chinese identities. Chapter 5 examines how overseas Chinese associations and their leaders develop Chinese ethnic identity in Europe. Chapter 6 discusses how Chinese authorities influence Chinese identity. Chapter 7 looks at how the economic activities of the overseas Chinese form an important determinant for the formation of ethnic identity. The final chapter draws conclusions from the book.