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Research Article

The construction of Chineseness in the Chinatowns of the Hague and Amsterdam.

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Keywords

Chineseness, Geosemiotics, linguistic landscape, multiculturalism

Abstract

Since the late 1990s, the symbolic economy was coined to describe the economy based on cultural production and consumption. Chinatowns are a typical representation of this new consumption-based economy in which symbols play an important role. The existence of a Chinatown has helped metropolises to label themselves as global and diverse cities but Chinatowns do not always meet the gazers' expectations on its cultural and aesthetic features. Moreover, they rework the concept of Chineseness to achieve the goal of city officials' ideas of an 'ideal' Chinatown. This article deconstructs the intangible and ambiguous aspects around the concept of Chineseness through a geosemiotic lens. By analysing the linguistic landscape and paying additional attention to socio-spatial interactions around signs, this research makes a contribution to the field of Chinatown studies. Moreover, as a comparative empirical study of the Chinatowns of Amsterdam and The Hague, it also contributes to insights into multilingual Chinatowns in a field that is dominated by Chinese and English only. This helps to reveal the functioning and hierarchy of languages and the additional complexity of multiculturalism.

Highlights:

-A geosemiotic lens allows for deconstructing ambiguous aspects around the concept of Chineseness.

-The concept of Chineseness is racially reworked to achieve city officials' ideas of an 'ideal' Chinatown.

-Deconstructing Chineseness illustrates the various connections between the Chinese diaspora and China

-Regulations around signage obstruct innovation in Chinatowns.

-Studying multilingual Chinatowns reveals important insights into hierarchies and functioning of languages within diverse cities.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Since the late 1990s, cities in the Global North have been relying on service and retail industries instead of manufacturing. Zukin (1995) coins the term 'symbolic economy' to describe the new economy based on cultural production and consumption in aestheticised settings, where symbols play a key role. Disneyland, as a typical example, achieved success by providing what is expected by the customers. Similarly, Chinatowns, as Disneylandish symbolic ethnic enclaves, boom the symbolic economy by providing shopping, dining and festival experiences (Pang & Rath, 2007).

The receiving society and migration groups have been working on the construction of 'symbolic' atmosphere but the powerplay remains dynamic. From the perspective of the authorities, the orientation of a Chinatown has been shifted to cater for political needs. Anderson (1988) classifies the history of Chinatown Vancouver from 1880 to 1980, arguing that 'Chinese' and 'Chinatowns' are racially reworked and refined by the receiving society to achieve its goal of 'multiculturalism'. City planners and governmental officials change their blueprint of an ideal Chinatown based on their understanding of the 'Chinese collective' image and adjust it according to political and economic demands; hence, the city landscape changes by state-led revitalisation at both national and local levels (Anderson, 1988, 1990, 2018, Wu, 2020).

From the perspective of their inhabitants, Chinatowns were initially stigmatised ghettos seen as opium dens and for prostitution, endless gambling and undocumented migration (Feng, 1994; Rath, 2015). As Chinese immigrants become more affluent and the politics become more friendly towards them, they seek more residential communities but keep businesses in old Chinatowns (Feng, 1994; Wei, 1998). The first suburban Chinatown is in Monterey Park, California, where middle-class Taiwanese have flowed in since the 1980s. The newcomers bought and reoriented retail stores to cater for Chinese-speakers' needs, turning the mixed neighbourhood into a complex Chinatown (Feng, 1994).

Most case studies have been undertaken in the Chinatowns of large English-speaking cities such as Sydney, Vancouver, Washington DC, London and Singapore which are well-studied (Anderson, 2018; Lou, 2007, 2009, 2017; Phua & Shircliff, 2019). It remains unclear in this single language dominated Chinatown landscape however whether the English signs are aimed at local visitors or international ones, and if they contribute to their acculturation or more to internationalisation.

This article firstly provides answers to such ambiguity by selecting the cases of Amsterdam and The Hague, where Dutch is the *lingua franca* and English – as suggested in the literature – caters for the needs of globalisation. A cosmopolitan ambition is clearly promoted in the two Chinatowns under study, but the Chinese identity is also maintained as one single feature within this ambition (Blommaert & Maly, 2015; Tan & Tan, 2015; Wang & Van de Velde, 2015). Secondly, a bottom-up approach is adopted regarding the territorial borders of Chinatowns. As some 'Chinese' streets are not officially recognised as 'ethnic' clusters or as part of Chinatowns (eg. Amsterdamsestraatweg in Utrecht), as Wang and Van de Velde (2015) mentioned, it is inaccurate to define Chinatowns only by governmental urban plans. In the case of Amsterdam and The Hague, the territorial borders of what entails a Chinatown is expanded, following the density of China-themed shops.

Thirdly and most importantly, this article makes a theoretical contribution by compiling two prevalent concepts: the linguistic landscape and the geosemiotic framework. Ethnographic Linguistic Landscape Analysis (ELLA) is a handy toolkit with which to discover the layered population and flexible infrastructures that cater for the needs of multiple groups (Blommaert & Maly, 2015). The geosemiotics framework of Scollon and Scollon (2003) adds a specific focus on the interaction with and meaning given to the linguistic landscape. Pictures alone are not enough to reveal why signs are placed in a certain way, nor the meaning given to them by audiences. Observations about how people appear and have interactions in a specific setting help to reveal how they sense and make use of the place. Pictures and observations helped us answer the question *how Chineseness is constructed in the Chinatowns of the Hague and*

Amsterdam through signs. But interviews with different stakeholders in both Chinatowns (entrepreneurs, consumers in the area and representatives of entrepreneurial organisations) were crucial for helping us to gain a deeper understanding of how and why the landscape is constructed in this way.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 The linguistic landscape and multilingualism

According to the commonly quoted definition by Landry and Bourhis (1997: p. 23), the linguistic landscape refers to 'the visibility and salience of languages on public and commercial signs in a given territory or region'. Similarly, Ben-Rafael et al. (2006: p. 14) define the linguistic landscape as 'any sign or announcement located outside or inside a public institution or private business in a given geographical location'. Linguistic landscape research has attracted many researchers, who conduct their fieldwork in universities (Haynes, 2012; Yavari, 2012), neighbourhoods and communities (Blommaert & Maly, 2015; Dixson, 2015; Gaiser & Matras, 2016; Gorter, 2007) and tourism sights, including ethnic spaces (Leeman & Modan, 2010; Moriarty, 2014).

Landry and Bourhis (1997) have defined signs as public road signs, public signs on government buildings, street names, place names, advertising billboards and commercial shop signs. The six types are categorised as 'top-down' and 'bottom-up' signs (Dixson, 2015; Fakhiroh & Rohmah, 2018; Landry & Bourhis, 1997; Lee & Lou, 2019). The former four types: public road signs, public signs on government buildings, street names, place names, can be defined as 'top-down signs', which means they are issued by national and public bureaucracy and public institutions. The latter two (advertising billboards and commercial shop signs) belong to the 'bottom-up' category, which can be issued by individuals, social actors, shop-owners and companies (Fakjiroh & Rohmah, 2018; Gorter, 2006, 2007; Yavari, 2012).

All the signs serve an informational function, which includes the basic message conveyed by and the language used in signs (Landry & Bourhis, 1997). Other features – such as the physical locations of signs and their physical qualities such as colour, font, material and style – are also important, because they may indicate the preference in multilinguistic signs (Dagenais et al., 2009). A more profound function than just informing is the symbolic one (Dixson, 2015; Landry & Bourhis, 1997). A linguistic landscape can express the identity of a language community, demonstrating its social, cultural and economic features. The dominant language reflects the language in power of a specific area. Factors relating to symbolic functions include meanings interpreted in relation to cultural affiliation, identity, power relations and language status (Dagenais et al., 2009).

In multilingual cases, the function of the different languages alludes to the different intentions aimed at reader groups. Reh's (2004) four types of multilingualism are introduced as a supplementary code to reveal whether one language dominates: (1) When the text is repeated in several languages, the signs are called *duplicating* signs; (2) when the full information is given in one language but the selected information is addressed in other languages, the signs are *fragmentary*; (3) when only parts of the information are repeated and there are no languages providing the full context, they are called *overlapping* signs; finally, (4) when the different parts of the overall body of information are each rendered in a different language, the signs are *complementary*. This research adds Reh's (2004) typology into the theory of linguistic landscape.

2.2 The Geosemiotic framework

Scollon and Scollon (2003) propose the theoretical framework of geosemiotics in their famous book *Discourses in place: Language in the material world*. They define geosemiotics as 'the

study of the social meaning of the material placement of signs and discourses and of our actions in the material world' (2003: p. 2) where three main semiotic systems are combined: visual semiotics and place semiotics, and interaction order. The main modification lies in the visual semiotics system.

The *visual semiotics* system refers to 'the ways in which pictures (signs, images, graphics, texts, photographs, paintings, and all the other combinations of these and others) are produced as meaningful wholes for visual interpretation' (Scollon & Scollon, 2003: p. 8). In this study, signs and texts with languages are the main focus. This article analyses not only the code preference, inscription and emplacement of selected signs but also the general linguistic landscape and types of multilingualism present. Therefore, a detailed analysis of the local political situation around the two Chinatowns will be presented.

The second system is called *place semiotics*. It is coined to connect the studies of micro-level social interactions and language use with research on social space. It is 'the huge aggregation of semiotic systems which are not located in persons of social actors or in the framed artefacts of visual semiotics' (Scollon & Scollon, 2003: p. 8), consisting of all the physical elements that people sense and interpret the meaning, whether the space is public or private, a regulatory space or a transgressive space where graffiti and homeless hangouts are often seen.

The term of the third system, *interaction order*, is borrowed from Goffman (1983), who works on how people make meaning of and adapt to different interaction settings. The units of interaction order include the characteristics of people, such as whether he/she is accompanied or single, with a vehicle or carrying items. The units are equally important in how people position themselves in relation to others, what their physical extensions are and what activities they are doing in such a space.

2.3 Chineseness through the Geosemiotic lens

Chineseness has been translated as *zhongguoxing*, the nature of being of China, or *huarenxing*, the nature of being a Chinese person, which evokes debates on the relation between Chinese people and China – especially between the Chinese diaspora and contemporary China.

It is necessary to address the complexity of the connection between the Chinese diaspora and contemporary China. Overseas Chinese stand between their assigned racial identity as a 'Chinaman' or 'chino' in their adopted land and the disseminated obligation to be loyal to the home country of China, which leads to their difficulty in integrating (Benton & Gomez, 2014; Shih, 2011). Moreover, Chineseness is highly dependent on Chinese communities themselves. Outside China, among the diaspora, Chineseness is fluid and self-renewed by the community itself, thus adding to the ambivalence of identity (Huang, 2018). Van Ostade, Geuke and Oechies (2020: pp. 5) try to untie the bond between ethnicity and commercial themes. They focus on the origins of entrepreneurs, defining Chineseness as 'the characteristics of ethnic individuals' who have an affiliation with China or their Chinese relatives. However, when there is a mismatch between the cultural themes and the entrepreneurs' origins, a perspective of experienced culture is ignored. A person dining in a Japanese restaurant might enjoy the Japanese culture but be unaware of the Chinese owner behind the bar. Therefore, Chineseness from a geosemiotics perspective is more relevant to the façade than ethnicity.

Moreover, the intragroup nuance has drawn scholars' attention. For instance, Lou (2007, 2009, 2017) pays great attention to the linguistic diversity within the Chinese group. As simplified Chinese is mostly used in Mainland China, Singapore and Malaysia, traditional Chinese is mostly used in Hong Kong, Macao and Taiwan, which gives an indication of their countries of origin.

3. STUDY AREAS AND METHODOLOGY

3.1 Background

The Chinatowns of Amsterdam and The Hague are chosen as cases since they are both non-English-dominated, although they have different migration paradigms, levels of supports from the authorities and positions in city planning. The powerplay between the different language groups and between the authorities and entrepreneurs becomes more visible through comparison.

Amsterdam's Chinatown, one of the oldest Chinatowns in Europe, was established in 1911. It borders the red-light district, which is the city's most notorious area. Like most Chinatowns in the world, it started as an opium den with prosperous gambling and prostitution. In the early 1990s, the municipality tried to renovate the buildings to remove crime and poverty but the outcomes were unsuccessful (Paul, 2018; Pieke, 1988). Then the municipality turned to the Chinese community for help (Haastrecht, 1995). The opening of He Hua Temple in 2000 was evidence of their cooperation. Now the Buddhist temple still functions as the spiritual bond of the Chinese community, where they practice superstition activities during festivals and at weekends.

After the renovation, the ethnic enclave became much cleaner but support from the municipality became limited and controversial. To whitewash its stigmatised label and save spaces for traditional Dutch places such as marine pubs and gay bars, the city council advocate that Amsterdam's Chinatown is supposed to restrain its old Chinese features (Rath, 2005; Rath, et al., 2018, Wu, 2020). The street manager of the Zeedijk and the Chairman of the Chinese Entrepreneurs' Association proposed to install a Chinese gate but this proposal was rejected by the city council. The reason given for the refusal was the lack of space due to the size of the gate. Although the city council acknowledges the importance of Chinese/Asian decorations as one of aspired characteristic features for the Zeedijk district, such a decoration might according to them *'put too much weight on the delicate balance between the typically Chinese/Asian character of the Zeedijk area and the specific historic Dutch neighbourhood of the Zeedijk'*, one of the oldest districts of Amsterdam (Chairman of Chinese Association of Entrepreneurs in Amsterdam). The transformation of Amsterdam's Chinatown has however also resulted in it no longer being a residential area for the Chinese community (Paul, 2018), erasing some of it's 'typical' Chinese characteristics as well.

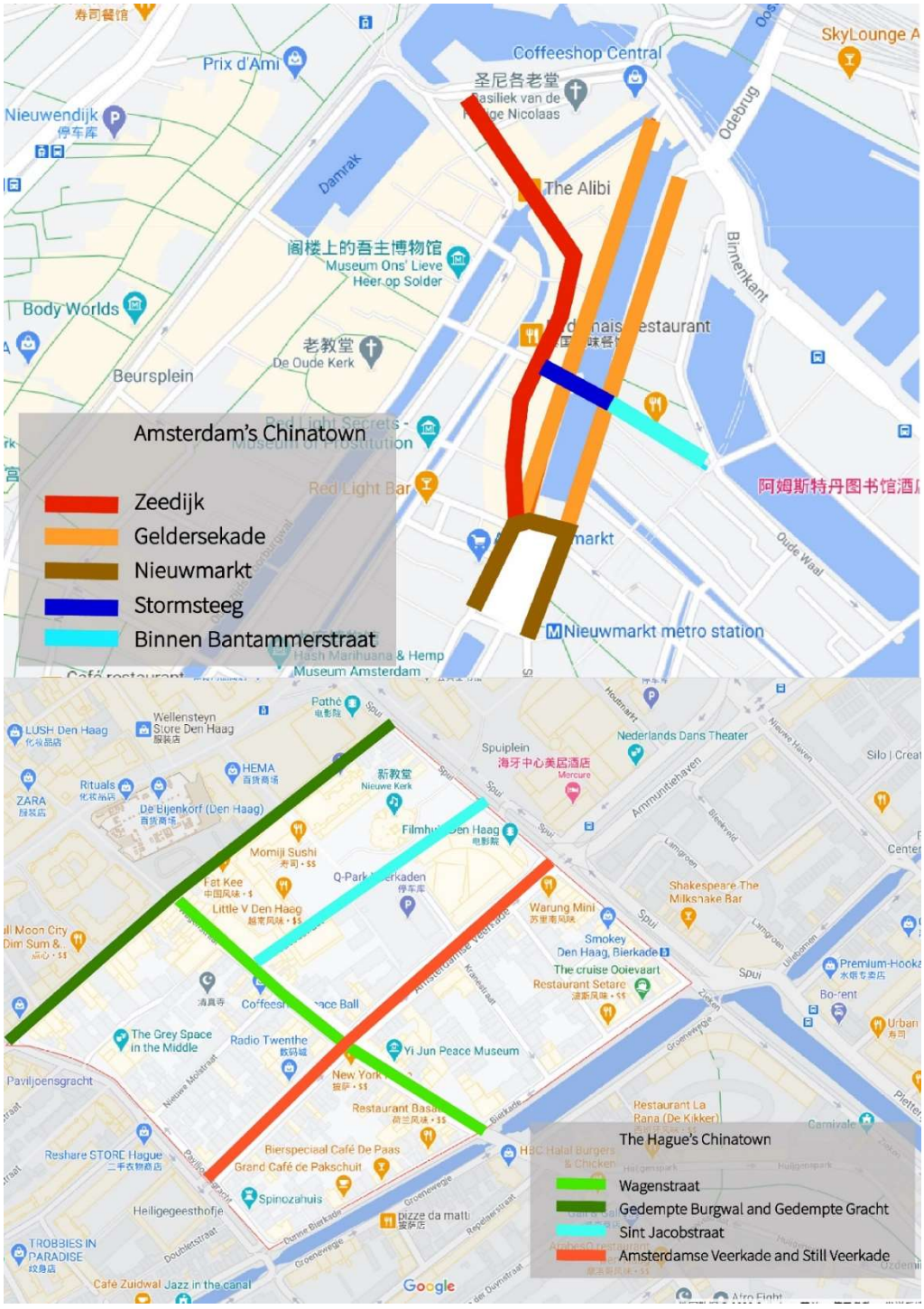
Chinatown in The Hague, built with support from the local authorities, now mainly has a commercial, and not residential function too. When after World War II the Chinese immigrants settled in the former Jewish concentrated area (Cottaar & Or, 2010), the municipality believed that the new visible settlers could make the area 'ethnically' attractive and assisted them in participating in the symbolic economy by mapping 'Chinatown' in the city planning. In the 2000s, The Hague City Mondial (a world city) was proposed when the municipality and Chinese entrepreneurs reached agreements on (1) attracting more Asian companies; (2) constructing Wagenstraat as the main street of Chinatown, as it is also an attractive connection between the railway station and the inner city; (3) contributing to the ethnic theme for more tourists (Cottaar & Or, 2010).

In general, unlike the struggle in Amsterdam, The Hague's municipality approved the changes smoothly and had a stimulating role in constructing a 'Chinese' identity in the area. In 2003, the first national celebration of the Chinese New Year was held with financial support from the city council in The Hague. The Chinatown Foundation (*de stichting Chinatown*) funded the Chinese street signs in 2004 and the Chinese community applied for the construction of Chinese gates in 2009.

3.2 Redefined territories of Dutch Chinatowns

The old Chinese translation of Chinatown is tangrenjie, which literally means ‘Chinese streets’ rather than ‘an enclosed town’. According to GoogleMaps, the Chinatown of Amsterdam is mapped as streets and that of The Hague as an enclosed square. Based on the density of China-themed shops, this research covers the actual range of Chinatowns. Therefore, it includes streets where Chinese shops cluster. Five main streets were defined in Chinatown, Amsterdam and six in The Hague as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Map of study areas in Amsterdam and The Hague



3.3 Methodology

The fieldwork was conducted between September 2020 and March 2021 and started with mapping the linguistic landscapes of the two Chinatowns under study by taking pictures of signs and symbols referring to the concept of Chineseness. However, the details in the pictures are not enough to reveal why signs are placed in that way nor how viewers make sense of the meanings behind signs. Our geosemiotic framework asked for including 1) interviews with entrepreneurs and consumers and an official for each city who could present the authorities' attitude, enabling us to interpret the different stakeholders' perspective; (2) observations in the area during which people's interactions with signs and symbols were noted with descriptions about the surroundings. For an overview of our respondents (19 in total) see Annex 1.

In total, 212 pictures were taken in Amsterdam and 225 in The Hague; 10 interviews were conducted in Amsterdam and 9 in The Hague (Annex 1). The pictures are coded with location information, shop type, types of multilingualism, languages and their corresponding functions, regions alluded to by languages and additional features.

The interviews were conducted in English or Mandarin, as preferred by the interviewees. Categorised by the spoken language, there are three Chinese immigrant groups: (1) the Cantonese group, consisting of people from Hong Kong, Macau and Guangdong, who speak Cantonese much more often than Mandarin; (2) the North-East group, including people from Heilongjiang, Jilin, Liaoning and the eastern part of Inner Mongolia, whose dialect is almost the same as Mandarin; and (3) people from Zhejiang and Fujian, who speak Mandarin and their own minor dialects.

The first author of this paper comes from Hubei, a province in Central China but not the hometown of any interviewed groups. With overseas experience in The Netherlands and the ability to speak English, Mandarin and conversational Cantonese, she became a potential ally of the interviewees, although still an outsider. When she visited the shops door-to-door, language barriers and mistrust existed. In two cases, the Cantonese-speaking business-owners asked their Mandarin-speaking employees to ensure the accuracy of the given information.

The interviewed entrepreneurs gave their consent to note-taking but not to audio-recording, especially of the interviews conducted in Mandarin. Their fear of potential miscommunication and misunderstanding originated from the complexity of relations between overseas Chinese people and China. The interviewed consumers were gathered by snowballing, starting from the first author's acquaintances who often visited Chinatowns. Many of them were university students from mainland China, Taiwan, Russia and The Netherlands. They all had different conceptions of China and Chineseness and the imagined Chinatown differed considerably. However, due to their high educational background and the interviewer's Chinese identity, opinions regarding ethnicity might still have been biased.

4. RESULTS

4.1 The linguistic landscape and the layers behind it

Our results show that most signs do not indicate specific counties or regions. China is the most frequently indicated country and The Netherlands ranks second in both Chinatowns. Other countries such as Thailand, Japan and Indonesia are frequently seen. There are more Italian and Spanish shops in Amsterdam than in The Hague.

Considering the diversity of the Chinese groups, more than half of the Chinese shop signs did not suggest specific Chinese regions. In Amsterdam's Chinatown, except for the Sichuan restaurant, all Chinese restaurants originate from Cantonese-speaking regions. In the Chinatown of The Hague, entrepreneurs from North-East China open restaurants, medical centres and massage shops, introducing large numbers of a Mandarin-speaking population

into this area. The first author was rejected more than five times in Cantonese restaurants with the excusing phrase 'Sorry we only speak Cantonese and Dutch'. Two interviewees in Amsterdam's Chinatown reported being discriminated against by Chinese because they only spoke English and Mandarin and the Cantonese-based community did not provide them with a sense of belonging.

'Look at Chinatown. They are all Cantonese restaurants and supermarkets. Canton and Hong Kong are only a very small part of China. The major part, the North and the diverse China is not represented at all.' (consumer in Amsterdam, Chinese from the NorthEast region)

One entrepreneur who has lived in The Hague since the 1990s shared her story with us on how she adapted to the linguistic landscape. Initially speaking Hakka, which should be a major Chinese immigrant dialect, she learnt Cantonese by DVD and converted herself into the Cantonese-speaking society as 'Cantonese/Hong Kong bosses were more generous regarding salaries than Zhejianger who tended to save money'. In recent years, with the promotion of Mandarin, she switched to it as her main business language. This personal transformation reveals how individuals are sometimes able to strategically position themselves within the multi-layered linguistic landscapes of Chinatown to gain more benefits.

4.2 Place Semiotics: The Preferred Languages

In this research, most signs are monolingual. In Amsterdam's Chinatown, English and Dutch monolingual signs are the most frequent, which fits the assumption that, in Amsterdam's busy city centre, Chinese culture has to fight for its survival, with a Dutch legacy which has already existed for ages. This finding is consistent with the massive number of marine cafés and gay bars to which Dutch people go to enjoy themselves in Amsterdam's Chinatown. In The Hague's Chinatown, Dutch monolingual signs make up one third of all signs, while English monolingual signs rank behind Chinese-Dutch ones.

In both Chinatowns, the Chinese monolingual signs are not encouraged, as one interviewee from DZP, an mediating organization between Chinatown entrepreneurs and The Hague municipality, said, *'I don't think it's allowed to make only Chinese signs'. And entrepreneurs complained that 'they (people from municipality) want to take away the '麵' sign'.* From this interview it became clear that the symbolic function is very important and that communicating too much Chineseness is not considered appropriate. Looking at the languages used in signs it could also be observed that Amsterdam's Chinatown shows more interest in international consumers and The Hague's Chinatown is more focused on the local community. English is the most frequent used language in Amsterdam's Chinatown (35.85%), while it only ranks third with half the frequency (16.89%) in the Hague (Table. 1).

As for multilingual signs, most are bilingual – where information is provided in two languages. Based on the distribution of language frequency, no extreme power structure is found among multilingual signs.

Table 1. The most frequently used languages

	Amsterdam		**The Hague**	
	Language(s)	Frequency (%)	Language(s)	Frequency (%)
1	English	35.85	Dutch	35.11
2	Dutch	23.11	Chinese, Dutch	21.78
3	Chinese, English	17.92	English	16.89
4	Chinese, English, Dutch	7.08	Chinese	8.44
5	Chinese	5.19	Chinese, English, Dutch	5.78

4.3 Spatial factors in Interaction Order

With a bottom-up definition of the territorial boundaries of Chinatowns, we argue that Chinatowns are not enclosed spaces but open streets. This spatial perspective is an important element of the socio-spatial interactions with the constructions of Chineseness in the area that we study.

Firstly, the geographical nearness to other tourist sites might increase both area's popularity synergistically. Amsterdam's Chinatown is featured as 'the Zeedijk', which is a parallel street to the famous red-light district. The effect of nearby tourist sites will always attracts more visitors to visit both sites. The street manager of the Zeedijk believes that the nearby red-light district is possibly one of the key factors in attracting more visitors to the Zeedijk area although the Zeedijk area has its own intrinsic touristic values of a Chinatown in terms of Chinese quality restaurants and businesses. It is very likely that tourists visiting the red-light district will also pay a visit to the nearby Chinatown as well and vice versa which has its implications for who is visiting the area and who the area is catered for.

Secondly, the walking routes have an impact on consumption desires. In Amsterdam's Chinatown, the conjunctions of main and side streets have high exposure, providing more commercial opportunities. The entrepreneurs respond with lingual signs and symbolic decorations but the languages do not always draw more attention from the consumers. Two Cantonese restaurants located at such intersections are discussed in Case 1 and Case 2.

The Hague's Chinatown consists of streets and a square. The DZP-employee acknowledge that *'It's not a very coherent place because you cannot walk in a circle, you'll always have to exit, but the beginning and the end are clearly marked with Chinese gates, authentic ones'.* Two extreme paradigms located near the Chinese gate will be discussed in Case 3 and Case 4.

Thirdly, the accessibility of transportation affects the interaction opportunities. Compared to The Hague's Chinatown, where massive parking spaces are available on the streets, Amsterdam's Chinatown consists of narrowly paved paths for pedestrians and cyclists, where Chineseness is featured as a 'walk/bike to experience'. The entrepreneurs in Amsterdam also reported a rise in parking fees and the shrinking of the number of parking spaces, which means fewer consumers but more interaction opportunities.

4.4 Case analyses

As discussed above, two cases are chosen to show how entrepreneurs and consumers decide when lingual signs and symbolic decorations function together and two cases near the Chinese gate are discussed to reveal how municipalities regulate entrepreneurs' expressions of Chineseness.

4.4.1 Case 1: Lingual signs surpass decorations

The Cantonese restaurant is close to a busy square in Amsterdam city centre, at the junction between a passage near the temple and Zeedijk Street. Even during the pandemic, it was still the most crowded part of Amsterdam's Chinatown.

The menus were written in Chinese, Dutch and English. The dark red and bronze colour, with a dragon on the top and a lit lantern even during the day all gave off a strong sense of an enclosed and traditional Chinese space. The window was blocked by signs and menus, creating an informative wall which prevented the viewers from seeing inside. In so doing, the entrepreneur had control of what information he/she wanted to give away and refused potential prying.

The slogan 'the place where the Chinese eat' had two possible side effects. On the one hand, it indicated its authenticity to tourists; on the other, it might exclude those who were looking for a non-touristic place.

'Where Chinese people eat… it seems written for people who never tried authentic Chinese food, and the decorations just fit the stereotypes so much, so suspicious… I'm not going to spend money on it…' (Amsterdam, a Chinese consumer from Chongqing, China).

For the targeted non-Chinese consumers, the information conveyed by the slogan was confusing and sometimes led to the feeling of being excluded.

*'The place where Chinese people eat', does that mean we (non-Chinese) are not welcomed? And the colour is so dark… we Dutch people prefer huge windows… maybe something illegal is happening in this dark room.' (*Amsterdam, a Dutch consumer)

As shown in the above quotation, miscommunication resulted from the mismatch of outdated stereotypical Chinese decorations and non-Chinese consumers' expectations of a modern or more localised outlook.

Figure 2. A Cantonese restaurant, Chinatown, Amsterdam

Note: In 2021, the wall above was replaced by transparent windows.

Table 2. The geosemiotic aggregate of Case 1

Visual Semiotics	Place Semiotics	Interaction Order
• Commercial signs • Informative and symbolic function • Predominate English signs • Trilingual duplicating menus • Traditional Chinese-style decorations	• On the blocked window • Public/private segregation • For pedestrians	• Encounters mainly outside the restaurant • Consumers in tourist appearances • Few interactions between consumers and entrepreneurs

4.4.2 Case 2: Decorations surpass lingual signs

Figure 3. A Cantonese restaurant with curtains, Chinatown, Amsterdam

Located at the busy crossroad of a passageway and Zeedijk Street, this restaurant suffered from too many tourists observations. The entrepreneur kept the curtains closed in the front window, but left other the sides, especially the one facing the canal, completely open. When asked if they use curtains to cover this much of the window in Hong Kong, the employees replied with a firm 'No'. The owner explained that, because his restaurant is well-known to locals and regular customers, *'There is no need to sacrifice much privacy to attract tourists. We have already built our reputation among the locals. Our regular customers, they will come and promote us to their friends'*.

Table 3. The geosemiotic aggregate of Case 2

Visual Semiotics	Place Semiotics	Interaction Order
• Signs in traditional Chinese and Dutch (duplicating) • Red and white colours (not typical) • Translucent curtains covering most of the window • Chinese traditional patterns on the window	• Translucent public/private boundaries • Predominately considering the insiders' view/feeling	• Cantonese-speaking environment among employees and the employer • Casual encounters in and outside the shop

The unwillingness to be open to the tourist gaze was obvious. However, as the curtains were translucent instead of sun-proof, not covering the whole window, the decoration was reported as 'cosy and mysterious' by interviewees, interpreted as 'inviting whoever is for

serious dining in' and 'protecting their privacy'. Tourists' unfamiliarity with Hong Kong cultural life dilutes the potential tension and adds to the mysterious atmosphere. The neat bilingual sign, only referring to the restaurant's name, became insignificant compared to the symbolic decorations.

In Case 1 and Case 2, entrepreneurs showed some hesitation in welcoming and rejecting customers and applied both linguistic signs and symbolic decorations. Both cases involved the issue of what an 'authentic' Chinese restaurant should look like and what kind of people are welcomed as consumers. In Case 1, symbols and linguistic signs conveyed ambiguous messages, so the communication was not always positive while, in Case 2, linguistic signage took a step back compared to symbolic decoration, showing that languages had given up their communicative function.

4.4.3 Case 3: Complementary multilingualism: space for creativity

Figure 4. A North-East China restaurant, Chinatown, The Hague

This restaurant has been established for less than two years near the same gate. It mainly used Chinese characters. According to the shop-owner, she chose this location because 'My targeted customers are Chinese' and Chinatown has already established a name for attracting Chinese customers.

Above was an old Dutch sign that was left by the former owner. It read 'breakfast-lunch-dinner'. The signs designed by the new owner were mainly in Chinese. As she suggested, *'As long as they (Chinese customers) understand what I'm selling, my business will be fine'*.

The bilingual sign hanging on the left consisted of two parts: the English name, New Taste, and the Chinese name, *dadongbei*, meaning Great North-East. In this complementary sign, the Chinese name indicated the region so that consumers would know which types of food it might offer; the English name was just general.

On the right-hand-side, colourful stickers were placed, which combined the Hong Kong aesthetic style, traditional Chinese characters and the names of North-Eastern dishes. The mix of elements from two Chinese regions added to the diversity of the Chineseness. However, it also runs the risk of potentially losing customers who want a particular type of food.

Other than the content, entrepreneurs sometimes get into trouble because of the framing of the signs. The owner had been fined twice for 'oversized' signs but she was still unaware of the exact regulations, nor did she ask for further explanations. Her reaction of not arguing with the authorities but maintaining her silence was similar to what some entrepreneurs in Amsterdam's Chinatown did – *'People from the municipality came, saying that if we don't take down the oversized signs, they will do so… then they took the one on the back door away but we still have the smaller one at the front gate'.*

The communication between the municipalities and entrepreneurs failed to deliver clear criteria for the signs and the reasons why 'oversized signs' were unwanted by them. Whether the authorities did not want oversized *Chinese* signs or oversized *non-Dutch* signs remains unanswered. Whether the purpose was to limit Chineseness or to construct the Chineseness they expect also remains unknown.

Table 4. The geosemiotic aggregate of Case 3

Visual Semiotics	Place Semiotics	Interaction Order
• Hong Kong-style stickers (various colours, tight patterns, and traditional Chinese) • North-Eastern contents • Bilingual complementary signs (English-Chinese) • Dutch signs left by former owners	• Workers, consumers and outsiders being visible to each other • For people in vehicles and pedestrians	• Service encounters using second language (Dutch) • Employees only speaking Mandarin

4.4.4 Case 4: Monolingual: convention to the receiving society

Figure 5. A medical centre, Chinatown, The Hague

The medical centre is identifiable by the fact that there are only Dutch characters on the window and boards. Inside, all the medical materials were labelled in Chinese and the owner, together with the employees, was Chinese. The workers, products and consumers were hidden behind posters in the window. Located next to the Chinese gate, this store did not significantly contribute to a sense of being Chinese.

Like most medical centres, massage services were offered in several rooms but it was not possible or ethically tolerated to investigate whether or not this shop offered illegal services. Other than the potential administrative problems which the entrepreneur might have with the municipality, she was fined because of the size of and languages she used in former signs. She explains her logic as:

'I have been here for more than 10 years. I don't want to have any more conflicts... If I write Chinese, they (people from the municipality) will come and ask, so why don't I just use something they can understand (in Dutch)? … And my Chinese consumers are so familiar with me and can order online. It doesn't harm my business.'

Table 5. The geosemiotic aggregate of Case 4

Visual Semiotics	Place Semiotics	Interaction Order
• Dutch signs • Colour: avoid Chinese red but apply Dutch orange	• Public/private boundaries • Predominately for outside viewers • For people in vehicles, and pedestrians	• Encounters between customers and employees in Dutch (more formal) • Encounters among employees and the employer in Mandarin (informal)

Both Case 3 and Case 4 revealed how Chinese entrepreneurs struggled with regulations with which they were not familiar. The website of license-free decoration rules is not very accessible and the maximum number of licence-free adverts is only two (Gemeente Den Haag, 2019). Other changes in signs require individual applications but the application includes detailed design sketches, and the selection criteria are not stated, which is the same as in Amsterdam, 'You have to hand in all the designs if you want to apply for a licence, including the interiors that you don't want to change… and it will cost thousands of euros… yes our signs are old and faded but thousands of euros, of course no.' Moreover, although interviewees mentioned that they desired 'magnificent Chinese stores that present Chinese power and fortune', to protect antique Dutch buildings, the Chinese are forbidden to knock down walls to for example combine the ground floors of two houses, so the expected magnificent Chinatown landscape has never been achieved.

From Case 3 to Case 4, the space for creativity is tight and the passion for constructing Chinese characteristics has faded. Located next to the Chinese gate, the two shops do not gain the opportunity to contribute to Chineseness in the way they wanted to.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Although there are stereotypes of how Chinatown should look like and what commercial activities Chinese people do in the area, there are no standard expectations of the perception of Chineseness. Widely accepted essentials for a Chinatown include Chinese inhabitants, Chinese sign boards and large Chinese shops. None of the Dutch Chinatowns are however known for their residential function, so the first essential is questioned in this context. Moreover, as Chinese monolingual signs are not allowed in both the Hague as well as Amsterdam's Chinatown, the loss of the sense of Chineseness is inevitable.

The construction of Chineseness in Amsterdam starts from its historical migration legacy and a strong Cantonese-dominated community. Judging from the regions that shops indicate nowadays in their signs Amsterdam's Chinatown has indeed maintained and constructed a

Cantonese-oriented Chineseness. The construction of Chineseness in The Hague started with support from the municipality but soon became a community-autonomous process, where new intakes of Chinese immigrants contribute to the diversity of Chineseness which is under the suppression by the municipality. The Hague's Chineseness is as a result more dynamic and more diverse, including Chinese features from other regions such as the North-East of China and the province of Zhejiang.

In the Chinatowns of Amsterdam and The Hague, nowadays the immigrant groups and consumers consist of more Mandarin speakers than before. Therefore, the dominant Chinese language has changed from Cantonese to Mandarin, which has resulted in less discrimination towards Mandarin speakers than before. Moreover, national and local integration policies combined with internationalisation as a result of global tourism has resulted in Chinese entrepreneurs needing to decide their preference for the local language or English. In the case of Amsterdam, English gains its prevalent position while, in The Hague, Dutch is the main language of communication. In other words, the Chinatown of Amsterdam is more geared towards international consumers, while that of The Hague is aimed more at Chinese consumers who reside nearby.

The power interplay between the ethnic community and the authorities of the receiving society has resulted in a changing landscape of both Chinatowns under study through signs and languages which in its turn has an impact on the construction of Chineseness. Our geosemiotic lens allowed us to deconstruct the ambiguities and intangible aspects around the concept of Chinesseness, especially in interaction with entrepreneurs, consumers and officials. Regulations by the municipality on designing and furnishing signs and decorations for example often force Chinatowns to maintain the old façades of the buildings, resulting in limitations on the creation of new cultural phenomena. This specific focus on the interaction with, and the meaning given to linguistic landscapes is a valuable approach not only for understanding the signs but also for why the signs are placed and the meaning given to them by various audiences which reveals important insights in the complexity of multicultural landscapes.

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ANNEX 1. GENERAL PROFILE OF INTERVIEWEES

	Interviewees	**Profession**	**Region of origin**	**Language proficiency**
	Amsterdam			
1	Entrepreneur	Supermarket	Hong Kong/Canton	Dutch, English, Mandarin, Cantonese
2	Entrepreneur	Restaurant	Hong Kong/Canton	Dutch, Cantonese
3	Entrepreneur	Snack bar	Canton	Dutch, Mandarin, Cantonese

4	Entrepreneur	Barber shop	Hong Kong/Canton	Dutch, Mandarin, Cantonese
5	Consumer	Student	Chongqing (Southeast region of China)	English, Mandarin
6	Consumer	Local	Amsterdam	Dutch, English
7	Consumer	Student	Liaoning (Northeast region of China)	English, Mandarin
8	Consumer	Student	Russia	English, Russian
9	Official (two interviewees at the same time)	One expert from the Association of Entrepreneurs Zeedijk; One expert from the Chinese Association of Entrepreneurs Amsterdam	The Netherlands	One: Dutch, English One: Dutch, English, and Cantonese
	The Hague			
10	Entrepreneur	Massage shop	Northeast region of China	Dutch, Mandarin
11	Entrepreneur	Chinese medical centre	Northeast region of China	Dutch, Mandarin
12	Entrepreneur	Restaurant	Northeast region of China	Dutch, English, Mandarin
13	Entrepreneur	Restaurant	Zhejiang (Southeast region of China)	Dutch, English, Mandarin
14	Entrepreneur	Fish shop	Fujian (Southeast region of China)	Dutch, English, Mandarin, Cantonese
15	Consumer	Student	Gansu (Northwest region of China)	English, Mandarin
16	Consumer	Student	Sichuan (Southwest region of China)	English, Mandarin
17	Consumer	Resident	Taiwan	English, Mandarin

18	Consumer	Resident	The Netherlands	Dutch, English, Japanese
19	Official	Employee from DZP, a mediating organization between Chinatown entrepreneurs and The Hague municipality	The Netherlands	Dutch, English, Mandarin

ANNEX 2. PICTURES OF CHINATOWN IN AMSTERDAM AND THE HAGUE

Figure 6. Chinatown in Amsterdam (1)

Figure 7. Chinatown in Amsterdam (2)

Figure 8. Chinatown in Amsterdam (3)

Figure 9. Chinatown in Amsterdam (4)

Figure 10. Chinatown in Amsterdam (10)

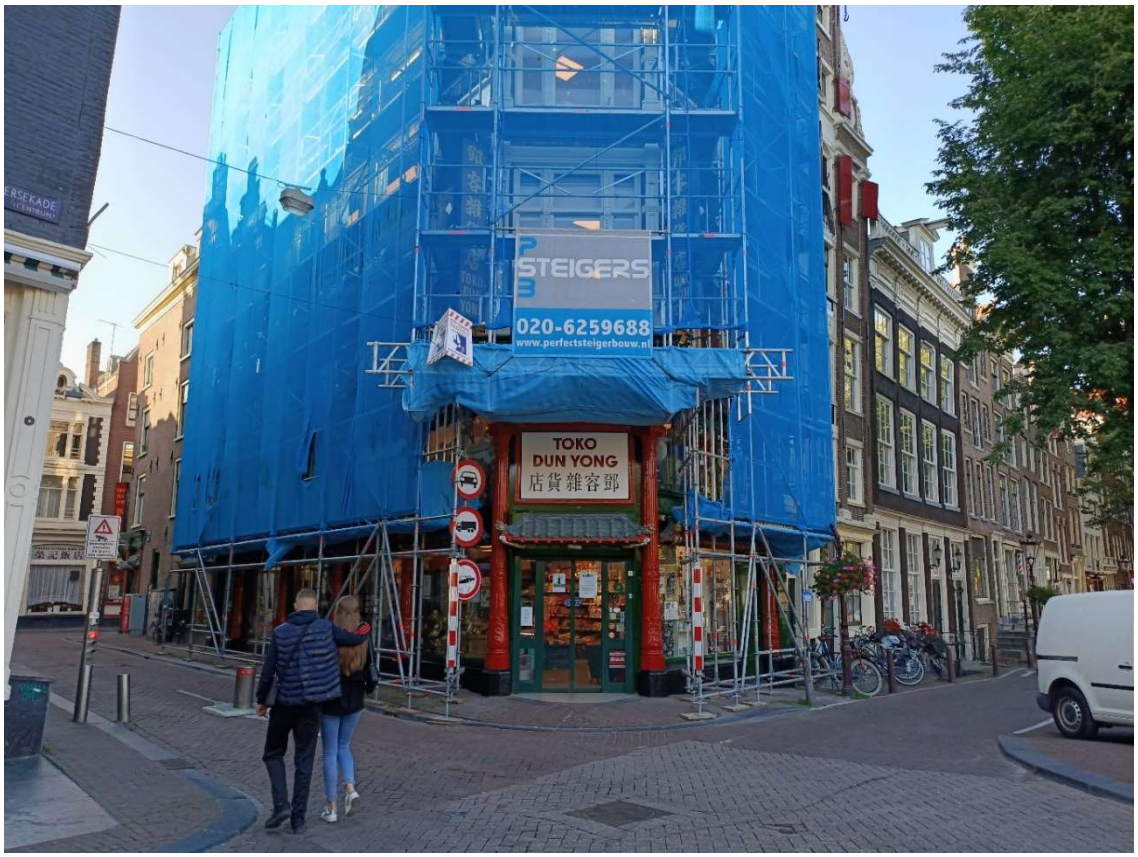

Figure 11. Chinatown in The Hague (1)

Figure 12. Chinatown in The Hague (2)

Figure 13. Chinatown in The Hague (3)

Figure 14. Chinatown in The Hague (4)

Figure 15. Chinatown in The Hague (5)