

## The Visual Culture of Chinatowns

In this last article from the series *The Secret Meaning of Photos*, I will discuss how photo journalism can be used in anthropological studies of culture specific development of diasporic communities. Chinese migration has begun in a small scale since Admiral ZhengHo. He embarked to map out the world and it was rumored that it was his maps that enabled Columbus to discover the New World. Settlements of the Chinese were said to be found in the east coast of West Malaysia as early as the 14<sup>th</sup> or 15<sup>th</sup> Century. Large scale Chinese diaspora was only triggered much later by the colonisation of Southeast Asia by a western-centric concept of modernisation that justified the exploitation of resources and raw materials from other lands to supply the industrialisation programme in the homelands.

It is against this backdrop that I bring your attention to the photo journalistic activities of Zhuang Wubin, a 2<sup>nd</sup> generation Chinese from Singapore. Wubin has been always fascinated by the bustling activities and ad hoc lifestyles found in the Chinatown in Singapore but he is aware of how the history and depth of the Chinese culture influenced the complexity and multifaceted lifestyles that existed there. At the end of 2007 he was approached by the Singapore Chinese Heritage Centre to photo document the Chinatowns that dotted the countries of Southeast Asia. This led him to embark on a journey of self discovery across the archipelago and land mass of over 30000 sq km and half a billion people. All the major religions are present as are the diverse political systems, from communism, monarchy, military, religious and elitist oligarchy, to systems of various permutations of democracy.

Wubin's images centre on issues relevant to everyday life, such as the use of language in the images from Brunei(1) and Bangkok(2). Here the Chinese either learn the dominant language Malay and Thai or try to connect back to their roots. These images reflect the ongoing processes of assimilation. In Thailand, the Chinese have changed their names to Thai names in order to show respect to the King and society; this makes blending in and doing business easier which are important for survival in Thailand. But many of them are disconnected with Chinese cultural practice and language, especially the young ones who need to do some connecting back to benefit from the rise of present day China. The Chinese in Brunei and Malaysia have retained their Chinese names as part of the practice in a multicultural society but still have to master the dominant language, Malay, something essential for integrating into the society and for making life easier for their future.



The adults then seek connections to traditional practices through activities such as music(3) and participation in festive cultural activities. Music associations in the Philippines date as far back as 1817 and serve as sites for new immigrants to network, gather together, and orientate themselves to their new environment, as mentioned by Wubin's text in his website (<http://last-harbour.com/chinatown.pdf>). In this image(4) from Kuala Lumpur, adults are portrayed preparing for the Chinese New Year performances in Chinatown.



New immigrants often participate in local cultural practice as in this image from The Philippines that shows preparation for a wedding in a church(5). These new immigrants are not Christians but the local dominant population are; however it is not a problem for the newcomers to accommodate and make use of the Christian religious site.



The following images gives an impression of the diverse kinds of businesses that various Chinese carry out in the Chinatowns of Southeast Asia, from construction work in Yangon (Burma/Myanmar)(6) to running gold stalls in Phnom Penh,(7) (Cambodia). In the photo on the right, the lady stall owner is shown inspecting a well earned dollar note.



A stall in Bangkok selling both shoes and religious Buddhist statues(8) of Kuanyin (the Goddess of Mercy) is a very rare sight as the combination of these 2 items is considered a religious taboo. In countries where Buddhism is the dominant religion such as Burma and Thailand, shoes are not allowed to be worn into temple grounds and are considered as unclean items. But since this Buddhist statue belongs to Chinese religious practice and not Thai, probably no objections are raised. Business is business I guess, for the Chinese. And in Jakarta's Chinatown (9), the Chinese still embrace traditional rituals such as praying and offering to the dead in the Hungry Ghost Month, the month when dead relatives, friends and strangers get attention from the living.



While these images can be seen as an anthropological view of the coexistent in the present Chinatowns, the history of the Chinese diaspora has its unpleasant past. It occurred during times of violent political change and reactionary actions, as what had happened in Burma in the early 60s or in Malaysia in the mid 60s, when a great number of Chinese were killed because they were perceived to be controlling the economy of their new country and depriving locals from moving forward. This can be seen as a result of the colonial British's practice of "Divide and Rule" where integration and separation of the migrant and the local ethnic groups were socially engineered and there were distinct division of roles according to ethnicity. The Chinese in Indonesia met the same fate when the military regime changed leadership from under the communist friendly Soekarno to Suharto. The Chinese were perceived to be supporting communism and were prosecuted and later in the late 90s when democracy overturned Suharto's military dictatorship, the Chinese were again made the scapegoat for a lot of Indonesia's long term woes. The Chinese in Cambodia who took the side of the Americans in the war against the Viet Cong had to suffer when their country was conquered by Vietnam and the Chinese in Saigon (Ho Chi Minh City) also met with a similar fate when the Americans lost the Vietnam War. Of course not all Chinese are innocent of the accusations thrown at them, but

the general tendency and patterns for Chinese networking and success in business in their new countries have made the Chinese in these countries an easy target for grievances, dissatisfaction and embedded anger of the dominant communities.

Therefore in my opinion, Chinatowns around the world acting as a cultural icon is a double edged sword that brings with it advantages and disadvantages for its supporters and community of users and inhabitants.

It is normal for people of similar cultural background to get together to network, offer and obtain support from one another and seek a sense of community. This also helps immigrants to maintain cultural connections and ties to the country they are born in, as language, cultural practices and familiar food constitute the most basic and direct components that feeds one's sense of identity, heritage and emotional and mental well being. These cultural practices also create meanings for the locals, within whose social cultural structures these Chinatowns are placed. While the Chinatowns serve as a celebratory sign of the Chinese spirit, vitality, and resilience, it also serves as a symbol, space and mechanism that isolates an 'artificial' community from others, a form of 'ghetto-lisation' and isolation. I have known stories of immigrants who never leave the Chinatown they live in, in their entire life in a new country, out of fear of others and inability to communicate in the new language. The locals may see such places and lifestyles as exotic, strange or alienating. Integration may become difficult and interaction may become shallow or just a once a year affair during the festive Chinese New Year. This may seem to be the case in Dublin where activities supported by the Dublin City Council are short term events, celebratory and rather superficial in nature without insights for long term engagement. Continual discursive interactions are needed for conflicts and tensions to be avoided and participation at all levels of society's structures are essential if immigrants wish to become a part of their new society and so as to avoid incidents such as the following that occurred in Milan.

In 2007, in Milan's Chinatown, police clashed with 400 Chinese protesters who felt that they were discriminated against and prevented from using the streets to do business when police began to control the location and usage of the push carts brought in by Chinese merchants.



Italian responded to the incident in interviews with statements such as the following (reported in the New York Times on the 13th and 26th April, 2007):

*"The Chinese have taken over the neighborhood, they have stolen spaces from Italians, but they haven't developed relationships with the residents."*

*"They shop at their own stores - their culture closes them off,"... "And there are small things, like they speak too loudly."*

I think the situation could have been better managed and incidents and reactions such as the above could have been avoided if a platform is available and accessible where intercultural exchanges and discussions can take place.

Wubin's images present interesting insights into the Chinese diaspora in Southeast Asia and open up many entry points for discussion. His images are often presented from a skewed angle, placing the viewer in a somewhat uncomfortable looking position to what they see, as well as making the subjects portrayed look a little less familiar, perhaps so as to request that the viewer see them with 'fresh' eyes, or to solicit a little extra effort into figuring out what it is that is depicted in the photographs. At times, they incorporate certain feelings of discomfort, at times nervousness or tension and at times intimacy and depth, and they are distinctively different from those touristy and superficially grandiose images like this one on Singapore's Chinatown randomly picked from a website depicting Chinatowns.



To know more about this project and to read the previous articles on how images provide meanings to activities of migrant domestic workers, community art, relationships and propaganda, please visit this web links.

<http://readingselfreadingothers.com/>