The Force of Regulation in the Land of the Free:

The Persistence of Chinatown, Washington D.C. as an Ethnic Commercial Enclave

**Paper prepared for the workshop on 'Migrations between East
and West: Normalizing the Periphery', held at the Research
School for Southeast Asian Studies, Xiamen University, China,
April 2-5, 2006**

Ching Lin Pang & Jan Rath

Center for Equal Opportunities and Opposition to Racism
Koningsstraat 138, B-1000 Brussels
Tel. +32-2-233-0718, Fax +32-2-233-0704, E-mail ching.lin.pang@cntr.be
Internet http://www.antiracisme.be/en/kader_eng.htm

&

Institute for Migration and Ethnic Studies (IMES), University of Amsterdam
O.Z. Achterburgwal 237, 1012 DL Amsterdam
Tel. +31-20-525-3627, Fax +31-20-525-3628, E-mail j.c.rath@uva.nl
Internet <http://users.fmg.uva.nl/jrath>

The Force of Regulation in the Land of the Free: The Persistence of Chinatown, Washington D.C. as an Ethnic Commercial Enclave

Ching Lin Pang & Jan Rath

Like many other cosmopolitan cities, Washington, D.C., promotes its Chinatown. This ethnic precinct is roughly located north of a line extending the midpoint of G Place eastward from 9th to 6th Street, only a few blocks northwest of Capitol Hill. Each year, hundreds of thousands of visitors come to the precinct by public transportation—there is a Chinatown Metro Station at Gallery Place—or by other means, and find their way to the cafes, restaurants and shops or the neighboring Verizon Center, home to professional sports teams, pop concerts and family events. The ‘world’s largest single-span Chinese arch’ at 7th and F Streets, the banners and store signs in Chinese characters, the decorative fences and brick pavers, the annual Chinese New Year’s Day Parade, and various other markers help Chinatown play up its ethnic character.

Figure 1 - Map of the Chinatown area

Photo 1 – Chinese Arch at 7 and F St

DC’s Chinatown exemplifies a familiar phenomenon, namely the commodification of ethno-cultural diversity in a formerly derelict ethnic precinct in combination with the proliferation of urban space as site of leisure and consumption. In itself this phenomenon is not particularly new, certainly not in traditional countries of settler immigration, such as the United States, Canada and Australia. As far back as the 1880s, it became fashionable for middle-class New Yorkers to go slumming or ‘rubbernecking’ in Chinatown (Lin 1998). Many others have followed these trendsetters and today, thus more than one century later, various ethnic enclaves or ghetto’s are indeed destinies of mass tourism (Anderson 1990; Bodaar & Rath 2005; Conforti 1996; Rath 2005; Shaw, Bagwell & Karmowska 2004; and various others). Visiting Chinatown, Little Italy, Little Saigon, Finntown, Banglatown or whatever other place has become part of the more general phenomenon of ‘cultural tourism’. Cultural tourism is based on the use of cultural symbols and reflects various societal changes, one of them being the changing perception and appreciation of the cultural Other. While ethno-cultural features were still very much linked to lower social classes in the 1950s and 1960s and in some places even in the 1970s, they no longer stood exclusively for insularism, poverty, inferiority, vice and social backwardness by the mid-1980s (Li 1998; Wong 1995). Another change refers to the transformation of urban economies that are no longer based on

manufacturing industries but ever more on service industries that revolve around the production, circulation and consumption of information (Cf. Tsu 1999). The commodification of real or perceived (ethno-)cultural symbols thus contributes to the expansion of cultural economies and this, in turn, fosters the transformation of dilapidated ethnic streetscapes into places of cultural consumption (Zukin 1995). A growing number of leisure seekers, visitors, travelers and business persons gravitate to these places and enjoy the products and services that are offered in these new economies. In doing so, they strengthen these developments and encourage local entrepreneurs, business developers and city boosters to continue on that track.

At present—and notwithstanding economic recession, threats of terrorism and bird flu in several parts of the world—the tourism and leisure economy is a growing sector indeed. What makes this development even more interesting is that fact that the tourism and leisure economy is one of the few growth sectors that are all-inclusive: it provides numerous jobs and business opportunities to both high- and low-skilled immigrants of both genders. Immigrants are, sure enough, involved in this economy as wage laborers or as entrepreneurs. In their capacity of entrepreneurs, immigrants are active as producers of a range of tourist services and attractions, varying from restaurants, travel agents and gift shops to festivals and street parades. There can be no mistake that these entrepreneurs are central to the transformation of shopping strips or shopping malls into ‘exotic’ ethnic precincts.

An ethnic precinct’s tourist potential is exploited best when it is embedded in a larger tourism industry (Hope & Klemm 2001). Ethnic precincts—except perhaps the manufactured ones such as the Chinatown in Las Vegas or the China Pavilion in Walt Disney’s theme park Epcot in Orlando—are typically the product of immigrant ethnic communities. Most grew without any organized plans. They exist because immigrants have carved out spaces that have served as nodal points of community life. But this does not necessarily imply that immigrants actually live in that area. Leichhardt is Sydney’s Little Italy, but has ceased to be home to the Italian population. The Italian community nonetheless meets in Leichhardt, where the sights, sounds, flavors and irresistible aromas of Italy come alive in numerous Italian bars and cafes (Collins & Castillo 1998). The Eden Center just outside Washington, D.C., is described as the heart and soul of the Vietnamese community for the entire East Coast. Eden Center continues to grow and extend its financial and community support into the surrounding Vietnamese and Asian community. The Center, however, is ‘just’ a shopping mall, not a residential area, that serves a population that shows a dispersed pattern of residential location (Zelinsky & Lee 1998; Wood 1997). What matters is that this shopping mall provides a public space where people can meet co-ethnics and behave in a manner familiar to them.

Shops, that is a particular type of shops, give the neighborhood its ethnic flavor and foster the kind of public life that give cultural tourists an excuse to linger. Imagine an ethnic enclave without shops and businesses. Only a few cultural tourists will be interested in strolling along regular houses or be attracted to, say, ethnic accountancies or car repair centers. On the other hand, easily accessible book and music stores, gift shops, bric-a-brac shops, travel agents, and especially restaurants, groceries, and supermarkets do have the capacity to attract leisure seekers. This is no coincidence, as food is one of the cultural features that people tend to retain over a longer period of time and that may help bridge cultural differences at the same time (Van den Berghe 1980; see also Diner 2001; or Valle & Torres 2000 for more nuanced and critical

perspectives). Ethnic precincts hold additional attraction when visitors are able to visit particular ethnic institutions (such as churches, temples and mosques, but also community center; see Lulich 2003) or attend cultural events, such as New Year parades, food festivals or other public manifestations. Whatever combination of products and services are supplied, the point is that immigrant entrepreneurs are key figures in these developments.

Let us return to Chinatown, Washington, D.C. There can be no mistake that a ‘real’ Chinatown does exist. That is, city maps and ‘official’ tourist guides invite visitors to this ‘colorful, diverse neighborhood’ and its ‘numerous restaurants’. However, key actors involved do not seem to be satisfied with current developments. Community leaders, real estate developers, city planners, business support people, cultural tourism marketers and local researchers express serious concerns about the future of D.C.’s Chinatown. A typical account of the situation is this recent newspaper report:

But Washington’s Chinatown has been surrounded and flooded by dramatic change. Seventh Street NW has been transformed into a strip of restaurants and trendy stores. The block north of MCI Center is home to the 275,000-square-foot Gallery Place with a 14-screen theater, fashionable shops and a spa. Upscale apartment buildings stand to the north and the east. More are on the way. The neighborhood has become a boomtown, but there’s increasingly less ‘China’ in Chinatown. As the area’s Chinese community gathered yesterday for its New Year’s celebration and parade, there was a palpable sense that something is being lost, if not by subtraction then by dilution. “In another few years, you won’t see Chinatown,” said Thomas Lee, past president of the Chinese American Citizens Alliance. “You’ll be hard-pressed to find the arch because it will be dwarfed by everything else.” (*Washington Post*, February 14, 2005)

The critical voices revolve especially around issues of authenticity or the credibility of its Chinese distinctiveness, and thus about the unique selling point of this precinct.

Photo 2 – Verizon Center

Photo 3 Chinatown Garden

Indeed, when visiting D.C.’s Chinatown, one first feels more disappointment than exaltation. This Chinatown is clearly *not* the nodal point of a vibrant community. Strolling along the many stores, one hardly passes by Chinese residents or Chinese consumers. Mainstream chain stores, such as Starbucks and Fadó, but also less swanky places such as Hooters, Fuddruckers, Ruby Tuesday, Radioshack, and CVS Pharmacy, and especially the huge Verizon Center—previously named the MCI Center—,

dominate the streetscape. Anyone can observe how these stores literally and symbolically overshadow the distinctive ‘Chinese-ness’ of Chinatown. The Chinese presence seems to be confined to just one block. There are the Wah Luck House, that is a home for Chinese elderly, a dozen or more inexpensive eateries and a few more up-market restaurants, including the Hunan Chinatown, the Golden Palace, and Tony Cheng’s Mongolian restaurant. New mainstream developments, however, dwarf these places. Some therefore, cynically refer to Chinatown as the ‘China-block’.

Photo 4 – Asia Liaison Unit

Photo 5 – Wah Luck House

The local actors find themselves in a puzzling and paradoxical situation. These actors seem to be searching for credible representation and imaging, but the outcome resembles a makeshift, Disneylandish Chinatown. While the latter is perhaps good for the dollar, it does not represent the dragon they say to be devoted to. What accounts for this paradoxical situation? One cannot escape the impression one is witnessing the inevitable demise of a once vibrant enclave. Ethnic Chinese are conspicuous by their absence and one misses the bustle that is so characteristic for other Chinatowns like the ones in San Francisco or Manhattan, New York. It indeed seems that this precinct has ceased to be the spatial heart of a vigorous ethnic community. Assuming that this is the case, the real interesting question becomes: what accounts for the persistence of Chinatown as a commercial enclave? Why do entrepreneurs continue to attract clients by collectively playing up a real or pretended Chinese character. And what tells this about the structural determinants of small entrepreneurship, ethnic as much as non-ethnic?

In this paper, we will argue that D.C.’s Chinatown continues to exist, albeit in a more symbolic way, first and foremost because of governmental regulation. In what follows, we will first briefly discuss ethnic/immigrant entrepreneurship theory and introduce the mixed embeddedness approach. Thereafter, we will describe and analyze the process of regularization of Chinatown as a one-of-a-kind commercial enclave.

Let us now examine the literature of immigrant/ethnic entrepreneurship. Most studies of immigrant/ethnic entrepreneurship focus on entrepreneurs only and are mainly interested in explaining the proclivity of certain groups toward entrepreneurship and their paths to entrepreneurial success.¹ Scholars studying these questions have developed several theoretical approaches, ranging from those emphasizing the cultural endowments of immigrants (i.e., certain groups are culturally inclined towards risk-taking behavior; see Light 1972; Metcalf, Modood & Virdee 1996), to others that

highlight racist exclusion and blocked mobility in the regular labor market (i.e., marginalized individuals are driven towards entrepreneurialism as a means of escaping unwelcoming labor markets; see Barrett, Jones & McEvoy 1996; Collins et al. 1995; Ram 1993; Saxenian 1999).

A number of years ago, Waldinger and his associates (1990) developed a composite theory that brought together these views, based on the principle that entrepreneurship is the product of the interaction between group characteristics and the opportunity structure. As such their *interactive model* combines ethno-cultural and socio-cultural factors (agency) with politico-economic factors (structure). According to the Waldinger et al., the latter entail market conditions (particularly access to ethnic/non-ethnic consumer markets) and access to ownership (in the form of business vacancies, competition for vacancies, and government policies). This interactive model has been appreciated as an important step towards a more comprehensive theoretical approach, even though it is more of a classification than an explanatory model. However, it has also been subjected to criticism. Its shortcomings included its methodology (Light & Rosenstein 1995), the lack of attention devoted to issues of class and gender (Collins et al. 1995; Morokvasic 1993), insufficient emphasis on processes of racialization of immigrants (Collins et al. *ibid.*), *a priori* categorization of immigrants as ethnic groups and the concomitant assumption that immigrants as ethnic entrepreneurs act differently than mainstream entrepreneurs (Kloosterman & Rath 2003), and the narrow and static way economic and politico-regulatory factors are dealt with (Bonacich 1993; Rath 2000 and 2002). As regards the latter, the authors conceive market conditions in terms of the ethnicization or de-ethnicization of consumer markets, and confine politico-regulatory factors to a shortlist of laws and regulations that specifically apply to immigrants.

Theoretical development has continued and, oddly enough, this has led to a convergence of approaches to issues of *social embeddedness*, that is, the assumption that individual entrepreneurs participate in ethnically specific economic networks that facilitate their business operations (especially in acquiring knowledge, distributing information, recruiting capital and labor, and establishing relations with clients and suppliers). This suggests that the proliferation of Chinatown as a tourist attraction is the result of the mobilization of the Chinese entrepreneurs' ethno-social networks. Their social embeddedness enables them to reduce transaction costs by eliminating formal contracts, gaining privileged access to vital economic resources, and providing reliable expectations as to the effects of malfeasance. Particularly in cases where the entrepreneurs' primary input is cheap and flexible labor, as is true of some parts of the tourism industry, the reduction of transaction costs by mobilizing social networks for labor recruitment seems key. Many students of immigrant entrepreneurship, especially in the U.S., are indeed fervent adherents to a version of economic sociological thought that focuses on the entrepreneurs' social networks and impact on entrepreneurship (see for example Zhou 1992). However, taking advantage of social embeddedness is a complex and dynamic process, is connected to cultural, human and financial capital (Light & Gold 2000), is contingent on the goals pursued and the political and economic forces at work (Granovetter 1995; Kumcu 2001), and is the product of the interaction of structural factors such as migration history and processes of social, economic and political incorporation in the mainstream as well as their spatial variations. These intricacies, however, have not always been adequately addressed.

In recent years, continental European researchers criticized this economic sociological thought for focusing on the supply side of entrepreneurship only. They argued, moreover, that these theories of immigrant entrepreneurialism assume an unregulated and undifferentiated economy, whereas in reality economies are never unregulated and undifferentiated. Scant attention has subsequently been paid to the array of *regulatory structures* that promote certain economic activities while inhibiting others. For example, while virtually anyone can establish a private business in the United States, in Germany and even more so in Austria individuals must apply for special licenses even to sell flowers in restaurants and bars, and they need the approval of a particular organization to engage in most forms of production or service (see for instance Haberfellner 2003). It is thus important to address these highly relevant forms of regulation. Next to that, one must also fully appreciate the *economic dynamics* of a market. It does not require much sociological imagination to see that designers of virtual tourist guides, pencils vendors, or take-out restaurateurs operate in entirely different markets. Different markets obviously offer different opportunities and obstacles, demand different skills, and lead to different outcomes in terms of business success or—at a higher level of agglomeration—a different ethnic division of labor.

Acknowledging the salience of regulation as well as market dynamics, researchers have proposed a *mixed embeddedness* approach to immigrant entrepreneurship (Kloosterman, van der Leun & Rath 1999; Kloosterman & Rath 2001, 2003; Rath 2002). The approach is considered to be more appropriate, since it relates social relations and transactions to wider political and economic structures. It acknowledges the significance of immigrants' concrete embeddedness in social networks, and conceives that their relations and transactions are embedded in a more abstract way in wider economic and politico-institutional structures. While appreciating the relevance of social and cultural structures for economic development, this paper must be situated within this emerging analytical approach.

How does regulation work? To begin with, regulation should not be confused with legislation, as there are two other forms of regulation. There are 'sticks', which Engelen (2001) refers to as 'legislation per se', and 'carrots' (financial incentives and disincentives) or 'sermons' (persuasion), all different forms in complex packages that define what is 'possible' in a market. Nor should regulation be confused with state regulation. A multitude of agents play a role in regulation processes, such as local, national or international governmental agents, unions, quangos, not-for-profit organizations, voluntary associations, and individual and their social networks. Regulation can be manifested in thick or thin ways or, in other words, can either be imposed or enforced or be a matter of voluntary action.

These notions are important, as they make it clear that regulation is not just a matter of repression and constraining, but also of enabling. Suppressing illicit practices such as dodging taxes and labor and immigration laws by prosecuting the perpetrators are important manifestations of regulation (repression), but so are decisions to tolerate these practices and not prosecute them. The plethora of business support programmes also constitutes forms of regulation (Dreef 2004), as these are efforts to change the market landscape.

These notions make it clear that regulation occurs in advanced welfare states, but also in liberal welfare states. The United States federal government, for instance, is admittedly

a relatively lean government that supposedly has less means to regulate economic life, but this is amply compensated for by the regulation of a more voluntary nature. In the land of the free, economic life (and not only economic life) is severely dogged by litigation. In addition, the federal government has various instruments to regulate markets. Its relatively open immigration programmes for professionals and businessmen have enhanced the proliferation of money-makers in Silicon Valley, where immigrant entrepreneurs own a quarter of the high tech companies (Saxenian 1999). In the same vein, local governments or private organizations or coalition of the two may deploy a plethora of instruments to interfere in the market economy, varying from business support schemes, economic development zone programs, zoning laws, place marketing and so forth. The tourism industry, as we will see, is a case in point.

Let us turn now to the economic processes that foster the growth of urban cultural tourism industry. The growth of this industry is intricately linked with the rapid transformation of the manufacturing economy to the informational economy and beyond. Deindustrialization resulted in the need for localities to differentiate themselves in order to attract a share of this spatially mobile capital. In the case of cities in particular, authorities ranging from local governments to marketing consortia have been striving to present localities as attractive to potential investors, employers, inhabitants, and tourists (Kearns & Philo 1993). Urban cultural diversity is then a vital resource for the prosperity of cities and a potential catalyst for socio-economic development, particularly since business investors consider this diversity as one of the factors determining the location of businesses.

Cities, faced with job losses and decay, engage in 'a desperate struggle for survival' and one after the other bets on the tourism and leisure industry, a sector with few barriers to entry and the potential for large returns (Hall 2000; Judd & Fainstein 1999). The commodification and marketing of diversity, i.e. the commercial use of the presence of the ethnic Others or their symbols, fits in well with this process (Halter 2000). The chances of this occurring are obviously contingent on the level of living, lifestyle and consumption patterns of those living in Western cities and the degree to which they develop a distinctive taste for cultural products offered by migrant and minority groups.

Zukin describes the growing enthusiasm for 'interesting' landscapes that have the potential to draw tourists (Zukin 1995), and explores the relationship between industrial restructuring and the deterioration of factory landscapes vs. the growing significance of places of consumption. Zukin (1991: 16; see also Zukin et al. 1998a) reminds us that landscapes are 'contentious, compromised product[s] of society' that create visual order and, in so doing, both reveal and conceal social processes. She is particularly concerned with the growing social polarization evident in many Western societies and devotes much of her effort to understanding places that appeal to affluent consumers. These include landscapes of leisure, such as Disney World, Coney Island or Las Vegas, as well as gentrified inner-city neighborhoods that contain mixed land uses. These places contribute both materially and symbolically to the urban economy and are therefore highly prized by planners and city boosters (Zukin 1998b).

To foster this process, city governments attempt to attract investment (or invest themselves) in high-profile events, institutions, and symbolic land uses, such as Olympic games, international sports teams, and towers or special bridges. Some also emphasize areas of the city that may interest local consumers or tourists, especially

ethnic festivals and ethnic precincts that offer a wealth of goods and services that appear exotic, exciting and authentic. As Zukin notes, this has led to a sea-change in the way these types of areas are understood and represented by the state: 'Elected officials who, in the 1960s, might have criticized immigrants and non-traditional living arrangements, now consciously market the city's diverse opportunities for cultural consumption' (1998b: 836). This process leads to a commodification of diversity and has led to a situation where culture—particularly the more 'sanitized' manifestations of immigrant and minority cultures—can be seen as an economic resource for cities. In practice, governmental and non-governmental regulation may support, or at least not thwart the transformation of ethnic precincts into tourist attractions. This can be accomplished by passing favorable zoning regulations, creating a clean and safe environment and ensuring the area's accessibility.

How did this work out in our case? The Chinese presence in Washington, D.C. dates from the mid-19th century (Chow 1996). The first immigrants came mostly from other American states. They were low skilled, suffered from racial exclusion, and flocked to a neighborhood somewhere between Pennsylvania Avenue, Constitution Avenue and 15th Street, NW. In the 1920s and 1930s, they were forced to vacate their houses and businesses in order to make place for the construction of a series of public buildings in what later became the Federal Triangle government office complex. The Chinese relocated to a neighborhood that was originally inhabited by German and Jewish immigrants, i.e. the location of today's Chinatown. As elsewhere in the U.S., the Chinese faced many difficulties on the labor market and, consequently, gravitated to self-employment. They managed to carve out a niche in laundry services and, when this industry became obsolete, they entered the catering business. Until the 1960s, the overwhelming majority of Chinese in the District of Columbia lived in Chinatown. Many houses and shops were marked with decorative metal latticework and railings as well as Chinese signage.

In the 1960s and 1970s, major societal changes unfolded. At this juncture, many cities, especially those that were dependent on manufacturing economies, were in decline. Washington, D.C., being the center of public administration in the U.S., never had an economy that was strongly reliant on manufacturing industries. Yet, many Washingtonians moved to greener pastures, and in so doing undermined the city's economy and tax base. This had an enormous impact on various neighborhoods, including the residential areas in downtown D.C., as it magnified their sorry plight and enhanced the neglect of its public spaces. Ethnic Chinese residents who could afford it, like many other middle-class city dwellers, moved into the suburbs. This process was fostered by the upward social mobility that many Chinese had experienced, and this held particularly true for better-educated, second-generation immigrants who were increasingly fed up with the rising crime, rising taxes and deteriorating business climate. The average age of the population increased, while the average level of education decreased. Many other ethnic enclaves of ghettos witnessed similar developments (Zhou 1992; compare Wilson 1987). What distinguished D.C.'s Chinatown from other Chinatowns such as the ones in New York, is that only a few new immigrants arrive to fill the vacancies of those who left the neighborhood. Chinatown, consequently, ceased to be the vibrant heart of the Chinese community. Admittedly, Chinese immigration did continue, but most newcomers were college-educated professionals who moved directly into the suburbs. The newcomers did not see Chinatown's symbolic and economic potential in the gentrification of metropolitan

neighborhoods. Instead, heterolocalism became the new way (Zelinsky & Lee 1998), while Chinatown became an ever more unsafe, run-down place.

Next to these spectacular socio-economic developments, there were important political developments. The political leadership of D.C. passed through a serious crisis following major riots in the wake of the assassination of Martin Luther King in 1968. The riots, that affected not only Washington, D.C., but also 110 other American cities, revolved around issues of equal treatment of racial minorities. The civil unrest directly and indirectly devastated the economy of Washington, D.C. It accelerated the closure of many businesses, the redundancy of thousands of workers, and the departure of many city dwellers of all racial and ethnic groups for the suburbs. As a result of this, property values depressed, crime increased, and new investments were discouraged. The blight of the city prompted the local government to take serious steps, thus to address urban decline and to interface with minority groups at last. The interests of minority groups were suddenly on the political agenda and this enhanced the empowerment of African-Americans and various other ethnic minority groups. It is important to note that these events took place in an era in which the assimilationist orthodoxy lost its natural dominance. With hindsight, we know that multiculturalism became *de rigueur* and this too contributed to the empowerment of minority groups that stake out claims for citizenship rights.

The city embarked on an urban renewal process, amongst others in the eastern part of downtown, i.e. Chinatown. Improving the streetscape and attracting businesses were given top priority, so as to stimulate the advancement of corporate businesses in Washington, D.C.'s central business district. One of the plans designed to boost the inner city's economy entailed the development of a convention/sports center, to be located in Chinatown. This plan stirred the Chinese community for obvious reasons: the locals feared that the redevelopment would wipe out their houses and businesses and a new political crisis was lurking that could possibly thwart the process of urban renewal. In a series of meetings, self-proclaimed community leaders and city officials eventually reached a compromise. The way in which ethnic Chinese and leaders and city officials defused this crisis turned out to be critical for all further developments.

First, the ethnic Chinese leaders and the city officials reached a consensus that the Chinatown area needed to be economically revitalized in a city that was becoming increasingly more gentrified and up-market. Secondly, both parties acknowledged the historic and contemporary value of Chinatown as an ethnic cultural area, and subsequently embarked on a plan to preserve and enhance the neighborhood. In so doing, the city officially acknowledged the ethnic Chinese heritage, and also underscores the potential of Chinatown as a tourist attraction. Thirdly, it was decided that the convention center—not a sports center—would be built on the edge of Chinatown. Several blocks of houses had to be demolished, but in return the city supported the construction of the Wah Luck house, an apartment complex designed by a Chinese architect offering affordable residence to elderly Chinese.

This compromise marked the start of a close collaboration of city officials and Chinese community leaders who seemed to share the same objectives. This collaboration was sealed with a series of legal actions securing the protection and enhancement of Chinatown as downtown's only ethnic cultural area, for instance in the Zoning laws and District of Columbia Municipal Regulations. This legitimized the claims of the Chinese

community, legally acknowledged the existence of the precincts, and formally fixed its boundaries. Today, these rules and regulations still exist. They stipulate that the city is to treat Chinatown specially to create a special character through a variety of land use and design guidelines, incentives and special programs. These serve the preservation of the historic character and structural integrity of the precincts:

27	CHINATOWN
927.1	<p>The Chinatown objectives are as follows:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> (a) Retain and enhance Chinatown as a thriving, mixed-use Downtown community including substantial housing with community and cultural facilities, street-level retail with related wholesale operations, supporting office and professional uses, and hotels; (b) Obtain a concentration of land uses consisting of ethnically-oriented ground floor retail uses, substantial housing and office uses, community facilities, and hotel uses as appropriate;
927.2	<p>The policies established in support of the Chinatown objectives are as follows:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> (a) Develop a physical design criteria for new and rehabilitated buildings which will reinforce the definition and identity of Chinatown as a special cultural district; (b) Develop a range of special design guidelines which would include building design guidelines, historic preservation relationships, and streetscape and sign criteria and that are supportive of creating a special Chinatown cultural district;

Figure 2 – Zoning laws

Title 11	District of Columbia Municipal Regulations
1705.1	<p>The principal policies and objectives from the Comprehensive Plan for the Chinatown area are to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> (a) Protect and enhance Chinatown as Downtown's only ethnic cultural area; (b) Maintain and expand the existing concentration of retail uses emphasizing Chinese and Asian merchandise and related wholesale operations serving residents, visitors, tourists, and business travelers; (c) Reinforce the area's economic viability by encouraging mixed use development, including substantial housing, cultural and community facilities, offices, retail and wholesale businesses, and hotels; and (d) Protect existing housing and the most important historic buildings with suitable preservation controls, residential and commercial zones, and economic incentives.

Figure 3 – District of Columbia Municipal regulations

The city-community collaboration had been institutionalized by the establishment of the Chinatown Steering Committee. This committee were to monitor the developments and to act as interlocutor between the community and the government. This collaboration clearly showed the city's willingness to make this project work. it should be noted that no other ethnic group in Washington, D.C., has enjoyed such a favorable position.

In the course of time, many actors actively participated in the reshaping and enhancing of the Chinatown area, including the DC Planning Office, the Downtown BID (Business Improvement District), Mainstreet Development Programs, Heritage Preservation, etcetera. One of the issues pertained the distinctiveness of Chinatown, insofar as expressed in the streetscape. The Chinatown Steering Committee was encouraged by city planners to design guidelines for Chinatown. In 1976, the District government's Chinatown Program called for design guidelines to reinforce the distinctiveness of the precinct. The Mayor's Downtown Committee in 1982 and the comprehensive plan in 1984 once again called for that objective. This resulted in *The Chinatown Design Guidelines Study*, a book written by local consulting firm—the Architects Engineers—to enhance the Chinese character of Chinatown. The guidelines, issued in December 1988, can be seen as the crowning piece of earlier initiatives.

In the book's preface the authors write:

The Chinatown Design Guidelines Study is intended to lead to the adoption of building design guidelines and streetscape standards that will guide and assist architects, developers, and planners involved in development and renovation in Washington, D.C.'s Chinatown. It is hoped that the criteria and guidelines suggested herein will help create an enhanced Chinatown with a strong Chinese character.

This guidebook is a clear attempt to underline and enlarge the distinctive Chinese-ness of the Chinatown by codifying Chinese culture and cultural characteristics. Drafted with care and based on scientific research, the guidelines provide very specific criteria and allow for a range of styles including traditional, modern adaptation and postmodern

adaptation, while referring to existing building in China that have similar features. The near-scientific approach largely neutralizes the critique that enhancing ‘Chinese-ness’ would create a fossilized version of Chinese culture. In fact, the architects sought inspiration in existing postmodern and hybrid buildings in China. The Chinatown Steering Committee and the city planners believed this initiative would make Chinatown appealing to tourist and leisure seekers, but also to overseas businesses people and investors, especially from Taiwan. They also expected local mom-and-pop stores, the ‘local touch’, to flourish and to add to the Chinese ‘flavor’.

While the City Planning Office adopted only a short version of the design guidelines, architects were expected to take into account the symbolism of Chinatown and Chinese spirit, and thus to combine Chinese traditions and modern architecture. In reality, the prominent Chinese architecture—be it traditional, modern or postmodern adaptation—is not noticeable when entering D.C.’s Chinatown (except perhaps the Wah Luck House). The only particularity of D.C.’s Chinatown are Chinese signs for mainstream chain stores including Starbucks, McDonalds, and Hooters, which seem exotic in a Western city.

Photo 6 and 7 - National chain restaurants and stores

Rather than enhancing the neighborhood’s Chinese-ness, these chain stores with signs in Chinese characters look odd and therefore unconvincing. Apart from the incorrect—on purpose or not—rendition of Hooters into Chinese,² a Starbucks with a Chinese roof and Chinese characteristics does not launch us into the Chinese realm. One can even state that the legal provision imposing all storeowners to have Chinese signage has a reverse effect. It actually tends to underline the unconvincing, unnatural nature of Chinatown instead of contributing to it. This is partly due to the fact that there is a lack of continuing input of the ethnic group itself. No progress has been made into the full-fledged development of a Chinatown in which mom-and-pop stores are thriving and larger companies capitalize on the mobilization of transnational business linkages.

Chinatown reached its peak in terms of small-scale mom-and-pop stores and restaurants in the 1980s. Up until that period, D.C. did not offer an extensive choice of restaurants and bars that were open during the night. For the longest time, Chinatown had been the only place offering late-night leisure activities. However, neighborhoods such as Adams Morgan and Georgetown have taken over this role. The expectation of grand-scale investment from Taiwan and the establishment of family-run business have not materialized either. On the contrary, more and more mainstream stores have found their way in the Chinatown area, watering down the ‘Chinese-ness’ of the area. As of 2003,

1500 new residential units have been established in Chinatown and its vicinity. Yet this development has not lead to more Chinese business in the neighborhood, and it seems more likely that high-income gentrification will continue to make its mark in the area that has *de facto* become part of the central business district.

As has been said, nobody seems to be sufficiently satisfied with the outcome, let alone being compelled by it. There is a smoldering conflict about the Chinese character of the area. Some rumors have it that especially the Chinese entrepreneurs in the Chinatown Steering Committee were defending their personal or business interest instead that of the larger Chinese community. The representative nature of the Chinese Steering Committee has been a bone of contention. Unlike other advisory neighborhood commissions, the members have not been elected. Furthermore, members of the committee do not live in Chinatown but in the suburbs. These self-proclaimed leaders have divergent views on the development of Chinatown: one group comprising the more affluent and more successful business persons wants to reach out to mainstream capital and aspires after the development of grand projects that fits into the central business district; the other group comprising leaders of community organizations claim ownership of the ethnic heritage and aspire after a more festive Chinatown. According to the latter group, the members of the Chinatown Steering Committee saw to it that the area would not become too Chinese, as that would deter corporate capitalism.

To sum up, we argued that transforming an ethnic precinct into a tourist attraction is embedded in the symbolic and political economy, which constitutes the dragon and the dollar side of our paper. Although the main actors in this process—city planners and the Chinese community—seem at first sight to support both the economic revival and the symbolic transformation of the Chinatown area, the D.C. case shows us the difficulty of successfully reshaping an ethnic precinct into a thriving business and tourist area.

This reshaping requires a social infrastructure that is able to support the development of a regular precinct into a tourist attraction as well as a proliferation of small-businesses that commodify ethnic features. Both conditions are no longer fulfilled and this is probably related to a combination of social processes, including the social and spatial mobility of second and third generation Chinese and the gradual dilution of ethnic boundaries. Furthermore, new immigration of ethnic Chinese into the Chinatown area hardly occurs. If it did, it could help foster the maintenance of ethnic groups and boundaries and the sustenance of ethnic community life in the way that Glazer & Moynihan (1964) described four decades ago. Ethnic Chinese community life is obviously changing and may even fade away in more advanced stages of assimilation.

This, however, is only one part of the story. There are also changing market conditions, notably the process of gentrification. The ethnic Chinese business community that once constituted the economic structure of the precinct has been shrinking in the past few decades. At the same time corporate business entered the precinct. The city's urban renewal programs and economic development programs enticed private capital to invest in Chinatown, and various mainstream corporations were indeed most willing to spend large numbers of dollars in such a centrally located neighborhood. The establishment of the Washington Convention Center and later also the MCI Center—recently renamed Verizon Center—have had a tremendous impact on the neighborhood. Numerous visitors and spectators flock to Chinatown whenever there is an event and this has certainly helped improving the quality of the neighborhood and the local economy. The

spending power of high numbers of consumers did attract mainstream chain stores and corporations. The flip side of this development was that small one-of-a-kind stores were pushed out of the market, as they could not counter balance the power of corporate capitalism.

These mainstream corporations take the Chinese heritage for granted but hardly include it in their marketing. The Marriot Hotel, for instance, located on 900 F Street, thus on a location that once constituted the heart of Chinatown, does not even bother to refer to Chinatown on its web site:

With its spectacular \$25 million renovation, the Courtyard by Marriott Washington Convention Center has beautifully transformed the historic Riggs Bank Building into one of the most sought after Washington, DC hotels. Sharing a neighborhood with some of the city's finest restaurants, foremost businesses and government offices, you can easily walk to the Metro subway, famed museums and the Verizon Center. Enter this grand hotel, and you'll find the amenities and services that make business travel easier ... ³

Under these conditions, there is no reason to assume that an ethnic precinct such as Chinatown is given a perpetual life span.

Yet, there is a regulatory environment that strongly supports and promotes ethnic theming. Self-appointed Chinese spokespersons—including a number of successful entrepreneurs—have been regarded as representatives and guardians of ethnic authenticity and have, consequently, managed to gain authority. As a result of that, and perhaps at odds with the dominant representation of the United States of America as the land of free enterprise, Chinatown's symbolic economy has been included in D.C.'s regulatory structures. Ethnic theming is not required on the companies' web sites, but it is required on the streets. It is this regulation that accounts for the fact that Chinatown continues to have a 'Chinese' streetscape and that all businesses—including mainstream ones—collectively play up a Chinese character ■

References

- Anderson, K.J. (1990) “‘Chinatown re-oriented’”. A critical analysis of recent redevelopment schemes in a Melbourne and Sydney enclave’, *Australian Geographical Studies*, 28, pp. 131-154.
- Barrett, G., T. Jones & D. McEvoy (1996) ‘Ethnic minority business. Theoretical discourse in Britain and North America’, *Urban Studies*, 33 (4-5), pp. 783-809.
- Bodaar, A. & J. Rath (2005) ‘Cities, Diversity and Public Space’, *Metropolis World Bulletin*, 5, pp. 3-5.
- Bonacich, E. (1993) ‘The Other Side of Ethnic Entrepreneurship: A Dialogue with Waldinger, Aldrich, Ward and Associates’, *International Migration Review*, 27: 685-92.
- Chow, E.N. (1996) ‘From Pennsylvania Avenue to H. Street, NW. The transformation of Washington’s Chinatown’, pp. 190-207 in F.C. Cary (Ed.), *Urban Odyssey. A Multicultural History of Washington, D.C.* Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press.
- Collins, J. & A. Castillo (1998) *Cosmopolitan Sydney. Explore the World in One City*. Annandale, N.S.W.: Pluto Press with Comerford and Miller.
- Collins, J., K. Gibson, C. Alcorso, D. Tait, & S. Castles (1995) *A Shop Full of Dreams. Ethnic Small Business in Australia*. Sydney and London: Pluto Press.
- Conforti, J.M. (1996) Ghettos as tourism attractions, *Annals of Tourism Research*, 23 (4), 830-842.
- Diner, H.R. (2001) *Hungering for America. Italian, Irish, and Jewish Foodways in the Age of Migration*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Dreef, M.E.P. (2004) *Politiek, Migranten en Informele Economie. Politieke en Bestuurlijke Ontwikkelingen ten aanzien van de Amsterdamse Confectieateliers, 1980-1997*. PhD Thesis. Amsterdam: University of Amsterdam.
- Engelen, E. (2001) ‘Breaking in and breaking out. A Weberian approach to entrepreneurial opportunities’, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, Special issue on ‘Immigrant Entrepreneurship’, edited by R. Kloosterman & J. Rath, 27 (2), April.
- Glazer, N. & D.P. Moynihan (1964) *Beyond the Melting Pot. The Negroes, Puerto Ricans, Jews, Italians and Irish of New York City*. Cambridge, MA; MIT Press.
- Granovetter, M. (1995) ‘The Economic Sociology of Firms and Entrepreneurs’, pp. 128-165 in A. Portes (Ed.), *The Economic Sociology of Immigration. Essays on Networks, Ethnicity, and Entrepreneurship*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.
- Haberfellner, R. (2003) ‘The Case of Austria: Immigrant Self-employment in a Highly Regulated Economy’, pp. 213-232 in R. Kloosterman & J. Rath (Eds.), *Immigrant Entrepreneurs. Venturing Abroad in the Age of Globalization*. Oxford: Berg.
- Hall, P. (2000) ‘Creative cities and economic development’, *Urban Studies*, 37 (4), pp. 639-649.
- Halter, M. (2000) *Shopping for Identity. The Marketing of Ethnicity*. New York: Schocken Books.
- Judd, D.R. & S.S. Fainstein (Eds.) (1999) *The Tourist City*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.
- Hope, C.A. & M.S. Klemm (2001) ‘Tourism in difficult areas revisited. The case of Bradford’, *Tourism Management*, 22, pp. 629-635.
- Kearns, G. & C. Philo (Eds.) (1993) *Selling Places. The City as Cultural Capital Past and Present*. Oxford: Pergamon Press.

- Kloosterman, R., J. van der Leun & J. Rath (1999) 'Mixed embeddedness. (In)formal economic activities and immigrant business in the Netherlands', *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 23 (2), June, pp. 253-267.
- Kloosterman, R. & J. Rath (2001) 'Immigrant entrepreneurs in advanced economies. Mixed embeddedness further explored', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, Special issue on 'Immigrant Entrepreneurship', edited by R. Kloosterman & J. Rath., 27 (2), April, pp. 189-202.
- Kloosterman, R. & J. Rath (2003) *Immigrant Entrepreneurs. Venturing Abroad in the Age of Globalization*. Oxford/New York: Berg/University of New York Press.
- Kumcu, A. (2001) *De fil en aiguille: Genèse et déclin des ateliers de confections turcs d'Amsterdam*. Amsterdam: Thela Thesis.
- Light, I. (1972) *Ethnic Enterprise in America. Business and Welfare among Chinese, Japanese, and Blacks*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Light, I. & S.J. Gold (2000) *Ethnic Economies*. San Diego, CA: Academic Press.
- Lalich, W.F. (2003) *Ethnic Community Capital. The Development of Ethnic Social Infrastructure in Sydney*. PhD Thesis. Sydney: University of Technology Sydney.
- Li, W. (1998) 'Anatomy of a new ethnic settlement. The Chinese Ethnoburb in Los Angeles', *Urban Studies*, 35 (3), pp. 479-501.
- Lin, J. (1998) *Reconstructing Chinatown. Ethnic Enclave, Global Change*. Minneapolis and Globalization and Community Volume 2. London: University of Minnesota Press.
- Metcalf, H., T. Modood & S. Virdee (1996) *Asian self-employment. The interaction of culture and economics in England*. London: Policy Studies Institute.
- Morokvasic, M. (1993) 'Immigrants in garment production in Paris and Berlin' pp. 75-96 in I. Light & P. Bhachu (Eds.), *Immigration and Entrepreneurship. Culture, Capital, and Ethnic Networks*. New Brunswick and London: Transaction Publishers.
- Ram, M. (1993) *Managing to Survive. Working Lives in Small Firms*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Rath, J. (Ed.) (2000) *Immigrant Businesses: The Economic, Political and Social Environment*. Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire, and New York: Macmillan Press and St. Martin's Press.
- Rath, J. (Ed.) (2002) *Unravelling the Rag Trade. Immigrant Entrepreneurship in Seven World Cities*. Oxford: Berg.
- Saxenian, A. (1999) *Silicon Valley's New Immigrant Entrepreneurs*. San Francisco: Public Policy Institute of California.
- Shaw, S., S. Bagwell & J. Karmowska (2004) 'Ethnoscapes as spectacle. Reimagining multicultural districts as new destinations for leisure and tourism consumption', *Urban Studies*, 41 (10), September, pp. 1983-2000.
- Tsu, T.Y. (1999) 'From ethnic ghetto to "Gourmet Republic". The changing image of Kobe's Chinatown in modern Japan', *Japanese Studies*, 19 (1), pp. 17-32.
- Valle, V.M. & R.D. Torres (2000) 'Mexican cuisine. Food as culture', p. 67-99 in V.M. Valle & R.D. Torres, *Latino Metropolis*. Minneapolis/London: University of Minnesota Press.
- Van den Bergh, P.L. (1980) 'Tourism as ethnic relations. A case study of Cuzco, Peru', *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 3 (4), October, pp. 375-392.
- Waldinger, R., R. Aldrich, R. Ward and Associates (1990) *Ethnic Entrepreneurs. Immigrant Business in Industrial Societies*. Newbury Park: Sage.

- Wilson, W.J. (1987) *The Truly Disadvantaged. The Inner City, the Underclass and Public Policy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Wong, K.S. (1995) 'Chinatown. Conflicting images, contested terrain', *MELUS*, 20 (1), Spring, pp. 3-15.
- Wood, J. (1997) 'Vietnamese American Place Making in Northern Virginia', *Geographical Review*, 87(1), pp. 58- 72.
- Zelinsky, W. & B.A. Lee (1998) 'Heterolocalism. An alternative model of the sociospatial behaviour of immigrant ethnic communities', *International Journal of Population Geography*, 4, pp. 281-298.
- Zhou, M. (1992) *Chinatown: The Socioeconomic Potential of an Urban Enclave*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Zukin, S. (1991) *Landscapes of Power. From Detroit to Disney World*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Zukin, S. (1995) *The Cultures of Cities*. Cambridge MA and Oxford: Blackwell.
- Zukin, S. et al. (1998a) 'From Coney Island to Las Vegas in the urban imaginary. Discursive practices of growth and decline', *Urban Affairs Review*, 33 (5), May, pp. 627-654.
- Zukin, S. (1998b) 'Urban lifestyles: Diversity and standardization in spaces of consumption' *Urban Studies*, 35 (5-6), pp. 825-839.

Notes

- ¹ The literature is inconclusive as to the use of concepts such as immigrant entrepreneurship and ethnic entrepreneurship (Cf. Rath 2002a: 23-24).
- ² The translation in Chinese is 'owl'.
- ³ <http://marriott.com/property/propertypage/WASCN>