

Dans le cadre d'un de mes cours universitaire à McGill en avril dernier, j'ai écrit une dissertation ayant pour objectif de répertorier et de prendre sens du symbolisme et de la valeur patrimoniale du quartier chinois du 19ème siècle à aujourd'hui.

Cette article pourrait vous donner une perspective sur quelques points que j'aimerais citer et discuter lors d'émanant présentation orale le 9 juin 2022.

Merci d'avance,
Estelle Mi

Estelle Mi
260946762
INTD 358

From Urban Signs to Individual Plural Voices:
The Symbolism of Chinatown in Montreal through the 20th
Century

I would like to thank my friend May Chiu, leader of the Chinatown Development Project in Montreal, who invited me to participate in this project and inspired this essay

The identity of Chinatown in Montreal seems to have always been there. Marked by the arches that guard the entrance to the neighborhood, our sensory stimuli are activated by the smell, the large horizontal signs with Chinese characters, and the people jostling each other and speaking in different languages. This was one of the topics of conversation I had with my friend May Chiu, former director of Chinese Family Service, when I met her at a panel on anti-Asian racism in April 2022. Right away, she told me about this development project she is doing with her teammate Andy Hiep Vu. She then invited me to the discussion that was held on April 3, 2022 in a building in Chinatown. It was then that I remembered the Chinatown 2021 exhibition, where testimonies on large panels were held in the Sun Ya-Tsen Square. This exhibition highlights the importance of revealing the faces of the actors of Chinatown in the urban transformation of the neighborhood. But then, how did Chinatown, perceived as an ethnic urban enclave, become a strong identity symbol of the Chinese diaspora in Montreal? I argue that through its forced creation by institutional racism, Chinatown became, at first, an economic and social shelter for the community from the racism it faced. However, it is to its near disappearance by the policy of erasure and neoliberal expansion of the city of the 60s that the Chinese spirit deepens by applying politics of cultural visibility in the creation of Chinese urban signs within the neighborhood. Today, the Chinese urban markers of the neighborhood are only the vestiges of a past, which is preserved by the collective memory of the inhabitants, while the symbolism of the neighborhood is embodied by the inhabitants themselves through their plural and heterogeneous voices.

First, Chinatown's history is marked by forced "self-isolation" (Chan, 1996, p. 69) due to the institutional and individual racism that the Chinese community has faced. The Chinese have been targeted as the immigrant group most subject to official racism in Canada (Morrison, 1992, p.1). In the early part of the twentieth century, Royal Commission reports

indicated that the Chinese were "undesirable and unassimilable immigrants because of their many cultural and social peculiarities" (Morrison 1992:14). These politics of cultural assimilation led to two periods of institutional racism against the Chinese community in Canada. The first period between 1885 and 1923 is characterized by "restricted entry" (Morrison 1992:12) for Chinese migrants. In 1885, the federal government proclaimed "the Chinese Immigration Act requiring every person of Chinese origin immigrating to Canada to pay a head tax of 50\$." (Morrison, 1992, p. 12-13). This tax increased to 500 \$ in 1903, and was in effect until its repeal in 1923 (Morrison, 1992, p. 13). From this year, the head tax was replaced by the Chinese Immigrant Act, that "prohibited people of Chinese origin from entering the country except for those in exempted classes: consular officials, children born in Canada, students, and merchants." (Morrison, 1992, p. 15)

In a sense, this institutional racism stems from the racism and stereotyping that occurred in part due to the colonial economic exploitation of the Chinese during the 19th century. Chinese immigrants arrived in large numbers in the mid-19th century in the western part of Canada, in response to the opportunity "promised by the Frazer Valley gold rush". (Morrison, 1992, p. 1), and to work on the construction of the Canadian Pacific Railway. While they were subjected to wage discrimination, where they were paid half the wages of white workers¹, they began to experience even more intense discrimination when the railroad was completed. The sudden "shortage of labour in the West" gave rise "to intense feelings of prejudice and discrimination among Canadian workers and unions against the tens of thousands of Chinese imported to Canada in the 1880s and enlisted as labourers" (Chan, 1986, p. 68). This resulted in massive racial protests that occurred in Vancouver between 1887 and 1907 (Morrison, 1992, p. 1). To escape these racial economic attacks, many Chinese migrated from the West to the East, where some immigrated to Montreal "to escape organized and institutional discrimination and to seek work" (Chan, 1986, p. 68). However, when they arrived in Montreal, the same racism occurred for the same economic

¹<https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/governments/multiculturalism-anti-racism/chinese-legacy-bc/history/building-the-railway>

reasons, where their individual identities were erased by a racist and homogenous vision of the white supremacist narrative. Since the majority of Chinese were laundry owners, the media started calling Montreal the “capital of Chinese laundry in Canada” (Cha, 2004, p. 4). Through this creation of a false representation of Chinese monopoly on the laundry market (Cha, 2004), white business laundry owners became to feel threatened and created a symbolic narrative on Chinese immigrants. "John Chinaman" (Cha, 2004, p. 4) embodied the yellow peril of Asians in Montreal in everyday discussions within the society.



Fig 1. "John Chinaman", Portrait of an unknown Chinese man. Montréal 1895. (Cha, 2004, p. 4)

The image of *John Chinaman* reflects an ambient orientalism toward the Chinese community, where this "Other" has been "made" (Said, 1994, p. 6) by the Western society. The symbolic narrative is thus characterized by the uncanny and strangeness of the Chinese. Their customs, their mode of dress, their smells, their perfumes and” their particular way of life definitely represent the unknown, the exotic, the picturesque, the strangest wilderness experienced by the Montreal society.” (Cha, 2004, p. 4). With the immigrant act in place, their very identity was erased. Chinese who held false identities were called "fils à papier". One of the testimonies in the exhibition, Timothy Chan, was able to immigrate to Canada with documents purchased by his uncle, where he had to pretend that he was born in Canada.

Therefore, with this erasure of identity, the creation of Chinatown was not only a way to fulfill the economic needs of the community by serving the Chinese community and

workers with Chinese restaurants and shops (Cha, 2004, p. 4), but also to affirm their symbolic identity with Chinese urban signs that was attempted to be erased. Signs, as “the material structures of Chinatown” (Morrison, 1994, p. 51) became the very affirmation of the cultural identity of the neighborhood; in the 1920s, restaurants were created, with Chinese Romanized names such as the Sun Café or the Montreal Shop Suey (Cha, 2004, p. 8). The first visual signals appeared, with the emblematic horizontal signs that were originally limited to Chinese characters.



Fig 2. Example of a sign, in Chinatown. “Early signs were primarily horizontal, plain, and limited to Chinese characters” (Cha, 2004, p. 8). (Photo: Estelle Mi)

Hence, the elaboration of the Chinatowns was, at the beginning, a neighborhood that was made by Chinese for Chinese, in great part to escape the ambient discriminations that they faced at an institutional and individual level. This "urban ethnic enclave" (Morrison, 1992, p. 2) with its Chinese signs was a way of asserting the community's existence against white supremacist narratives; it succeeded in attracting Chinese immigrants, growing from 2,000 in Montreal in 1924 to 10,000 in 1964. (Cha, 2004, p. 8).

In the 1960s, a paradoxical phenomenon occurred, where the affirmation of the Chinatown spirit was even more apparent as the neighborhood experienced the city's urban expansion project. This period has been characterized as Montreal's "golden decade" (Chan, 1986, p. 66), where the city implemented "politics of erasure" (De Boeck, 2011, p. 272) involving the massive construction of buildings and infrastructures around Chinatown in the name of modernization (Cha, 2004, p. 10). In 1982, Montreal's downtown was characterized by three distinct zones: "zone en expansion", "vieux montréal" and "zone de développement". It is in the latter that Chinatown is located.

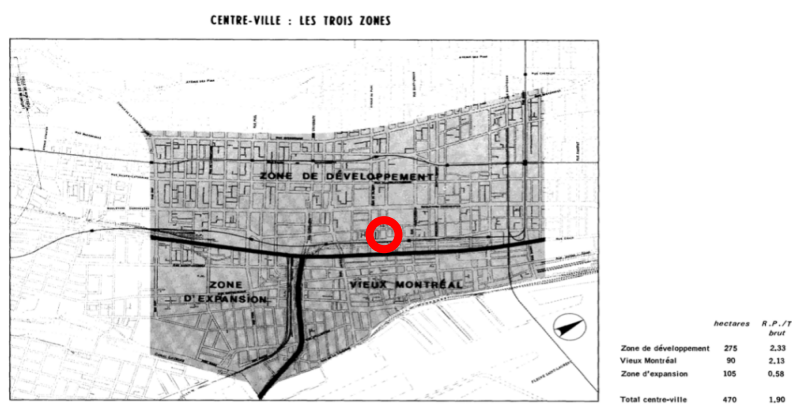


Figure 3

Fig 3. 1982 downtown's map. In red circle, where the Chinatown is located (Demers, 1983, p. 210)

LE NOUVEAU CENTRE-VILLE DE MONTREAL

213

This development area needed to be mapped and planned to be inscribed in the "political economy" (Mitchell, 2002, p. 99). In Mitchell's idea of an economy that needed to be governed, the marking of Western boundaries was primordial to assess its institutional and political hegemony inside Chinatown. In the 1960s, the neighborhood experienced the construction of "two large-scale provincial government buildings", that took up "altogether two city blocks along Dorchester Street" that physically limited the "northern boundary of Chinatown" (Chan, 1986, p. 70). The most prominent one is the Guy-Favreau Complex, a federal office building that is still present to this day.



Fig 4. & 5.
the Guy Favreau Complex, 200
meters away from the Parc Sun
Ya-Tsen (photo: Estelle Mi)

This building needed to clear important pre-existing infrastructures. The widening of Jeanne Mance and St Urbain Street was needed, followed by massive demolition of “two Chinese churches, a school, several Chinese grocery and arts and crafts stores, a Chinese food processing plant and about 20 dwellings.” (Chan, 1986, p. 70).

Therefore, the very material of Chinatown, the signs that were constructed throughout its decades of existence disappeared to affirm the political power of Canada, embodied by the construction of these federal offices.

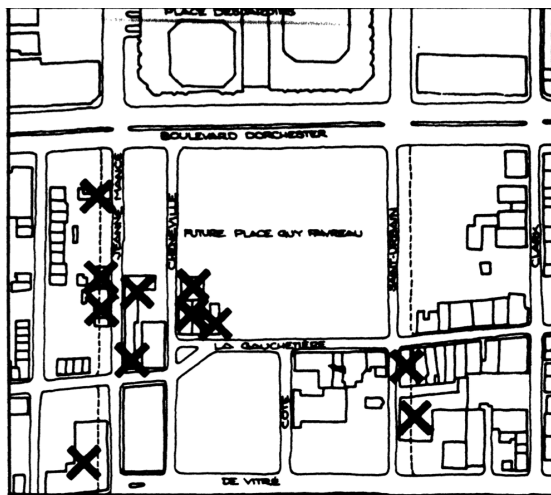


Fig. 6.
Map of Chinatown with the building that was
demolished around the Guy Favreau Complex.
(Chan, 1986, p. 70)

The “cleansing” process of the city in enforcing its “politics of erasure” (De Boeck, 2011, p. 272), created ruins of these development projects (Weiss, 2021). The only remaining Chinese church reminds the community that they are subject to Canada's political hegemony by showing these gigantic federal offices. Acting as tombstones, these modern buildings

mark the memory of the inhabitants that “the days of their urban space are numbered” (Chan, 1986, p. 70).



Fig. 7.
The church of the Chinese Catholic Mission of the Holy Spirit at the West Side of Chinatown. The only remaining church among the four original churches. (Photo: Estelle Mi)

Moreover, this process of colonization in reinforcing Canadian hegemony has “generated a number of chain effects” (Chan, 1986, p. 70), one being the affirmation of the monopoly of the neoliberal order in Chinatown’s lands. The creation of the complex gentrified the neighborhood, where government workers (Chan, 1986, p. 70) actively occupied the space around Chinatown. In doing so, it attracted investors and speculators who actively purchased land and demolished old buildings as their value increased (Cha, 2004, p. 10). In this idea, the neoliberal war against these “illegal” structures became also a war “against the very bodies of those who perform or embody them” (De Boeck, 2011, p. 273). Therefore, the right of the city was synonymous with “rights to private property” (Harvey, 2003, p. 940); the Chinese community has been forcibly relocated to the outskirts of the city center because they do not fit the neoliberal order of having the purchasing power to satisfy their property rights. Instead, they are replaced by the country's neoliberal political and economic actors. Therefore, in Foucault's idea of biopolitics, where the state actively manages the bodies of its citizens, bodies that cannot insert itself “into the machinery of

production” (Foucault, 1978, p. 140-141) are seen as parasites. In Montreal's Chinatown, the victims of these neoliberal imperatives were primarily elders who were "long-time residents" of the neighborhood (Chan, 1986, p. 66). As these people are seen as not active in the economy, elders, who traditionally occupied a pioneering role in the Asian family model, were seen as useless, ejected by these policies from their own communities and subjected to long-term "psychological trauma" (Chan 1986:66).

However, the community did not remain silent to these “politics of erasure”. They have actively opposed these politics by enforcing their own “politics of *visibilité*” (De Boeck, 2011, p. 272). The community visibility was most apparent in raising their voices inside the media. In order to preserve the last Church in Chinatown, three pastors Chan, Tou and Ngai prepared a “submission to government and municipal authorities”².



Fig. 8.

1976

“Sauvons Montréal : ne détruisez pas le quartier Chinois” (Save Montreal : Don't destroy Chinatown)

In the newspaper *Le Jour*.

² <https://ville.montreal.qc.ca/memoiresdesmontrealais/sauvons-chinatown-la-communaute-chinoise-face-aux-grands-projets-des-annees-1970>

But most importantly, Chinatown symbolism began to be embodied by the urban signs and infrastructures. In a sense, saving Chinatown is to save the material environment of the neighborhood. A process began to appear, where an *enchinoisement* of urban places was more relevant than before. *Enchinoisement* refers to Cha's idea of "rendre un caractère chinois à l'objet, au lieu ne l'étant pas au départ, par une réinterprétation se voulant manifeste, mais non pastiche"³ (Cha, 2004, p. 7). This process was a way to serve the local distinctiveness of the community, in delimiting the frontier of Chinatown against these projects of nonlinearization and globalization (Cha, 2004; Morrison, 1992). To revitalize the neighborhood against the destruction of these buildings, a committee was created to recover the symbolism of Chinatown. They were convinced that aesthetics was the solution to attract attention at a societal level. This committee, created in 1981, organized a project in which they called upon Chinese artists in China to participate in the reinterpretation of Chinese identity in Montreal (Cha, 2004, p. 12). In a syncretic process of Chinese art encountering Montreal infrastructures, buildings are deliberately given a new face to give them a more demonstrative Chinese character (Cha, 2004, p. 9). As a palimpsest, the most visible part of these buildings is the Chinese layer (Cha, 2004, p. 8).



Fig. 9. Bas-relief "The Monkey King" by artist Pang Ting Neon, located at the intersection of de La Gauchetière and Saint-Urbain streets
(Photo: Estelle Mi)

³ to give a Chinese character to the object, to the place not being Chinese at the beginning, by a reinterpretation wanting to be manifest, but not pastiche.

The most emblematic infrastructure that still permeates today is the park Sun Yat-sen. Created in this process of *enchinoisement* in the 1980s, the park is located at the heart of Chinatown. Formerly a parking lot, it became the meeting point for all signs of Chinatown. The bust of the former president of the Republic of China and the temple dedicated to him diversifies the human-scale landscape of the neighborhood and represents the gathering point of the Chinese community and spirit (Cha, 2004, p. 13). Hence, these development projects that “threatened” the Chinese “structural boundaries” paradoxically increased the “symbolic activities” of the Chinese community (Morrison, 1992, p. 54). Urban planning has become an "*architecture de communication*" (Cha, 2004, p. 8) by making visible the cultural identity of the Chinese as a resistance to these neoliberal projects.

From the 1980s to the present, the struggle for the symbolic construction of Chinatown continues, where the material objects and buildings that once represented the very heart of the neighborhood have been replaced by individuals who have become the very symbol of Chinatown. More than ever, the importance of cultural representation of Chinatown is becoming an issue for discussion in contemporary debates; the symbolic framework must acknowledge Chinatown not as a homogeneous identity, but a plurality of actors and voices. During Chinatown’s roundtable discussion, the aim of the project that will be concretized in June 2022 is centered around caring “a shared vision for the development of Chinatown by creating a spirit of collaboration among the various stakeholders”. In a sense, this motto emphasizes not only the reappropriation of development by the Chinese community outside of its economic norm, but also the fact that this development must be carried by the actors of Chinatown through their heterogeneity and differences. The roundtable project will consist of 20 administrators, each representing a sector of Chinatown: community organizations and social services, residents, students and workers, family clan associations, group organizations, the business sector and the cultural and heritage sector.

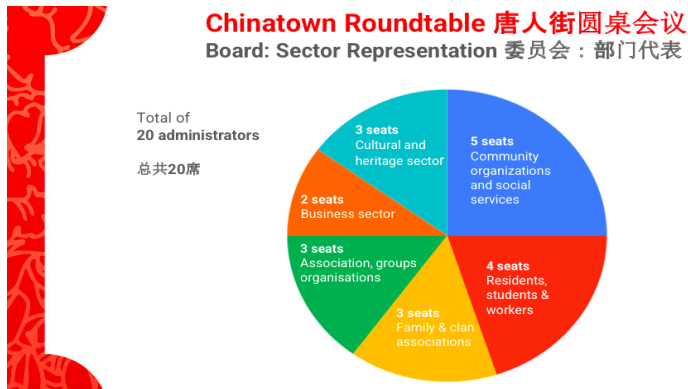


Fig. 10. 2022Chinatown Roundtable sector representation.

From roundtable's slides

This diversity of actors is all united around four core values: “Community consultation”, “Quality of life, housing and public spaces”, “Commercial vitality” and “Identity, cultural influence and heritage”. In a sense, the enunciation of these values acts like symbols of the Chinese community, where all actors embraced them despite their differences.

By creating these symbols, an urban sociality is shaped through these new development projects that are carried by the community. Symbols, "unlike signs, represent something that they are not" (Morrison, 1992, p. 51). They are immaterial and manipulated by individuals, who not only do not respond "passively" to them, but are the very engines of the creation and re-creation of the world in which we live (Morrison, 1992, p. 51). In Harvey's idea of “urban sociality” (Harvey, 2003, p. 941), the symbols we create allows us to use our right to “make the city different, to shape it more in accord with our heart's desire, and to re-make ourselves thereby in a different image” (Harvey, 2003, p. 941). During the Q & A session, the Chinese community was still skeptical of the project, as they referred mostly to the past of the city in their involvement in development projects of the community. However, many participants expressed joy when they saw that a large number of local newspapers and television stations were filming the discussion. For the first time, the media did not film the urban spaces of Chinatowns as an embodiment of the neighborhood. Their voices, long erased from social attention, have become the center of discussion around the Chinatown issue.

Therefore, the “quartier chinois” was made and remade not in urban planning, but through voices and languages. It is the “place of language” and the “architecture of word”

that allows the city to “be inhabited and constantly being built” (De Boeck, 2011, p. 279).

Last year’s exhibition *Dialogue avec la communauté sino-montréalaise* that presented some actors of Chinatown embodied the new shift in the perception of Chinatown.

“An understanding of the role of Chinatown in the Chinese community as seen through the eyes of community members, contributes to a better understanding of the processes involved in community boundary maintenance” (Morrison, 1992, p. 54)

From Andong Wong's work exploring the notion of Chinese aesthetics within globalization, to Timothy Chan's "fils à papier" desire to preserve the memory of Chinatown's earliest generations, to young Shu De He's struggle to accept his double culture, all have inscribed the symbolic boundaries of Chinatown by acknowledging the legitimacy of their voices and histories over previous homogenous white narratives. Their individual experiences and relationship to Chinatown expand the symbolism of the neighborhood beyond questions of territorial boundaries, but embodied in a broader framework of issues of multiple identities and collective memories.



Fig 11. 2021. From Left to Right: Andong Wang, Timothy Chan and Shu De He. *Dialogue avec la communauté Sino-Montréalaise*.

In conclusion, the history of Chinatown as a construction of the Chinese community to defend itself against the erasure of their ethnic identity allows us to understand the importance of symbolism within the neighborhood. In a sense, Chinatown embodies the spirit of Chinese identity, where it is a social and economic refuge that was built to save the community when the city itself was persecuting it. Therefore, the large development projects of the 1960s were perceived by the community as a second aggression on their soil. By removing their infrastructures and the material environment of the neighborhood, the creation of a boundary against these globalization projects of the Chinese diaspora was perceived to be achieved through the creation of Chinese urban signs. Today, we are witnessing new development projects, where now, individuals are taking ownership of the spirit of the neighborhood. Their plural voices are the architects of the neighborhood they desire; they create their territory through the diversity of their individual experiences. Thus, I take up May's phrase that concluded the discussion on the Chinatown Roundtable: "Heritage is not just about buildings. It's about people, about community."



Fig 12. 2022.

Andy Hiep Vu and May Chiu at the roundtable presentation discussion.
From left to the right: Andy Hiep Vu, May Chiu.

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