

# **Chinatowns in a Transnational World**

Myths and Realities of an  
Urban Phenomenon

**Edited by  
Vanessa Künnemann and  
Ruth Mayer**



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**Routledge**

Taylor & Francis Group

New York London

First published 2011  
by Routledge  
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

Simultaneously published in the UK  
by Routledge  
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

*Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business*

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Typeset in Sabon by IBT Global.  
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*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data*

Chinatowns in a transnational world : myths and realities of an urban phenomenon /  
edited by Vanessa Künnemann and Ruth Mayer. — 1st ed.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

1. Ethnic neighborhoods. 2. Chinatowns. 3. National characteristics, Chinese.
4. Culture and globalization. I. Künnemann, Vanessa. II. Mayer, Ruth, 1965–  
HT215.C45 2011  
307.3'362089951—dc22  
2010049789

ISBN13: 978-0-415-89039-7 (hbk)  
ISBN13: 978-0-203-81473-4 (ebk)

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# Acknowledgments

*Chinatown in a Transnational World* owes its existence to the research project “Diasporic Self-fashionings. Exchanges of Chinese-American and American-Chinese Identities,” which took place from 2006 to 2010 and was generously funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG).

In many respects, this volume aggregates our research efforts of the past years, and it constitutes a point of departure for future studies. Several of the contributors to *Chinatown* have been involved in our project from its inception and have informed it significantly with their expertise and enthusiasm. The volume was first conceived in the wake of the conference “Chinatown: Myths and Realities of an Urban Phenomenon in the United States and China,” which we organized in September 2008 at the Leibniz University Hannover.

Our special thanks go to Janna Wanagas, our research assistant in the project: her exceptional organizational skills, critical reflection, discrimination, and capacity of eliminating problems before they even occurred, smoothened the bumpy road toward publication and allowed us to focus on our research rather than editorial details or administrative problems. We would also like to thank our research assistant Lena Specht, whose thorough proofreading and editing got the manuscript off its ground in the summer of 2009. Our final thanks go to the two anonymous readers who recommended *Chinatown in a Transnational World* for publication and to the people at Routledge for their interest, input, and support.

Vanessa Künnemann and Ruth Mayer  
Hannover, Germany  
December 2010

# Introduction

## A “Bit of Orient Set Down in the Heart of a Western Metropolis”: The Chinatown in the United States and Europe

*Ruth Mayer*

Chinatowns are sites of mystery and sites of fascination. At least, this is what the mix of public perception and public ascription around these ethnic quarters both in the United States and in Europe suggests. But of course Chinatowns have always also been sites of everyday life. They are complex urban phenomena shaped by immigration politics, racialized discourses revolving around public health and citizenship, tourism, trade relations, commercial exchanges, missionary ambitions, labor exploitation, and cultural self-fashioning. Both in the United States and in Europe these “urban enclaves” (Wilson and Portes 1980; Zhou 1992; Lin 1998) have come to represent Chineseness and orientalism. And still, to reduce the reality of the Chinatown to its stereotypical representations would be to perpetuate the stylizations of the past and to underestimate the extent of agency and self-determination in the daily lives of Chinese expatriates and migrants—the “internal vitality of Chinatown,” as Yong Chen wrote (2000: 47; see also Wong 1995). Especially second- and third-generation Chinese diasporic subjects were socialized in such ‘miniature Chinas,’ and shaped the general outlook, economic, tourist, and cultural set-up as well as the educational and religious backgrounds of Chinatown communities in many ways.

The Chinatown has always been a transnational phenomenon. While Chinatowns differ markedly depending on their geographical and societal situatedness, due to divergent immigration policies, international relations, colonial histories, and demographic developments, they are also part of a network of real-life diasporic exchanges and informed by what might be called a complex transnational imaginary. Feeding from shared political and cultural frameworks of segregation, marginalization, and exoticization, the image and myth of the Chinatown evolved into a transnational fantasy, based on ‘invented traditions’ (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1984) such as deliberately implemented architectural styles, holidays, foodways, and practices of consumption. The channels of dissemination of this fantasy were manifold, but literary and filmic narratives acted as particularly powerful means of mediation for Chinatown images and myths across cultures

and continents, as we shall see. The mythification of Chinatown was contingent upon the global networks of migration which spanned the Atlantic and the Pacific, upon the American and European political, economic, and missionary engagements in China, and upon the emerging structures of international mass tourism at the turn of the twentieth century. In all of these processes of travel and takeover, contact invariably cut both ways. Cultural contact zones, as theorists as diverse as Mary Louise Pratt, James Clifford, Arif Dirlik, and Prasenjit Duara, to name only a few prominent voices, remind us, are impossible to contain; hierarchical constellations of military power and state control tend to generate subversion; religious and political missions tend to affect the missionary as much as the target group; and tourist trips can constitute the point of departure for expatriate life stories. For the context of the Chinatown, this means that Chinese immigrants did not sever their ties with China, that political ideas and political movements traveled across the globe, and that the missionary engagement in China hit home in the United States and Europe as well, affecting the Western Chinatowns in the form of 'home missions' (Ma 1990; Dirlik 1998; Chen 2000; Manela 2007; Conrad and Mühlhahn 2007; Sachsenmaier 2007; Künnemann and Mayer 2009).

In this volume, authors from various disciplines explore the many facets of past and present Chinatowns in a comparative and historical perspective. We are interested in disclosing the important European backdrop to a phenomenon commonly associated with North America. It is also our objective to introduce the work of well-established European scholars in the field, some of whom have published important studies in languages other than English, to an English-speaking audience. Most of the contributors to our volume have multidisciplinary and multilingual backgrounds and are familiar with several different instances of the Chinese diasporic experience. As a consequence, many chapters in our volume proceed comparatively, interrelating different locations or breaching timeframes and thus disclosing the numerous analogies, but also the fascinating differences which characterize the myths and realities of Chinatowns in Europe and the United States. With its triangular approach to the developments between China and the urban Chinese diasporas of North America and Europe, our book discloses connections and interlinkages which have not been addressed before.

One important backdrop for many of our contributors will be San Francisco's Chinatown—the largest and historically most dynamic Chinatown in the United States and the urban constellation which most obviously shaped the self-fashioning and the perception of many other diasporic Chinese communities in the United States and in Europe. San Francisco's Chinatown shaped the very idea of what a Chinatown should look like—even if other Chinatowns underwent markedly different immigration histories and processes of urban development. Orientalist clichés, which played a fundamental role in the architectural, cultural, and political history of San Francisco's Chinatown (Ma 1990; Chen 2000; Lee 2001), left their mark

on the urban diasporic communities in Europe as well. The iconic function of this American Chinatown can be exemplarily traced with regard to the urban planning and public relations work around London's Chinatown in the 1980s. But even earlier, at the beginning of the twentieth century, representations of the Chinese quarters in Europe drew heavily on a vocabulary and imagery which first came into being decades earlier in California, even if (or precisely because) the British, Dutch, and German Chinese communities were tiny by comparison to their equivalents in the United States (see Christiansen 2000; Seed 2006; Gütinger 2004; Amenda 2006; Yu-Dembski 2007; see also the chapters by Ruth Mayer, Anne Witchard, Lars Amenda, and Dagmar Yu-Dembski in this volume). These European communities demonstrate powerfully the variegated workings of established imageries and discourses in the formation of Chinatowns the world over. Yet with this volume we not only aim at showing correspondences and similarities, but also seek to explore the local variations, appropriations, adaptations, and translations—the often almost unnoticeable transformations which practices, traditions, ideas, and images undergo once they travel.

It would have been interesting to widen the scope of this comparative approach to other areas of the world. The rich history of the Chinese diaspora in Latin America and the Caribbean comes to mind, Canada suggests itself as a North American counterpoint, Australian Chinatowns present fascinating case studies. In Europe, Paris would have constituted an interesting contrasting sample to London, Rotterdam, and Berlin, to mention just some basic facets of a global mosaic. In addition, a comparative perspective on the fascinating history of Chinatowns in Asia could have been conceivable (see Ma 1990; Anderson 1991; Hu-DeHart 1991; Curtis 1995; Benton and Pieke 1998; Christiansen 2000; McKeown 2001; Ramsay 2003; Lee 2005; Benton 2007; Albiez et al. 2007). Still, given the disciplinary variety (history, sociology, literature, film) and wide historical scope (from the early nineteenth century to the present time) of our approach, we opted for a certain regional restriction in order to ensure that what we see as the most interesting aspect of our topic—its function as a case study on the emergence and dissemination of a transnational urban history and imaginary—would be underscored.

This introduction will map the global Chinatown, exploring how the very concept of Chinatown came into being, how it was realized, and how the realities and imageries of Chinatown were produced, experienced, appropriated, and mobilized in the course of the twentieth century. The American and British components of this global history have been widely discussed before; the German Chinese past, however, is considerably less explored. Partially, this lack is due to the particularities of German history: after all, the Nazi regime in the 1930s and 1940s forcefully terminated Germany's history of Chinese immigration, which had only unfolded slowly to begin with (see Amenda 2006; Gütinger 2004; Yu-Dembski 2007; for more recent developments see Leung 2007). But as Dagmar Yu-Dembski

and Lars Amenda show in their chapters in this volume, while the Chinese quarters in Berlin and Hamburg were too small and too unorganized to merit the designation as ‘Chinatowns’ even before the 1930s, they did invoke the rich cultural imaginary around China and the Chinese in a manner that resonates interestingly with conditions and representations of Chinatowns elsewhere. In what follows, observations on the case of Germany shall function as counterpoints to my approach to the transnational Chinatown, while San Francisco will serve as my central point of departure. These contrapuntal interventions, the interspersed anecdotes and asides on the German situation, may serve to illustrate the ramifications of Chinese diasporic history—into sites as daunting as Imperial Germany and as remote as Pomerania at the turn of the twentieth century, as metropolitan as Berlin in the 1920s, or as provincial as parts of the state of Brandenburg these days. The German examples may also illustrate that the urban history of the Chinese diaspora worldwide cannot be reduced to a history of Chinatowns: in order to address the Chinatown phenomenon one needs to bear in mind that in Europe, but also in many American cities, the community organization for the Chinese diaspora did not necessarily always fit smoothly into the ethnic enclave pattern. Many Chinese diasporic communities lacked the “residential density of the North American Chinatowns” (Benton and Gomez 2008: 25) and many of them were shaped by “more fluid and geographically dispersed immigrant population[s]” than given in the Chinatown (Lui 2009: n. p.). All of them, however, tended to be represented and probably also perceived of themselves at some point or other in terms of the iconology and the imaginary of the Chinatown.

Diasporic strategies of self-fashioning, marketing, and ethnic transformation, which register in the current layout and perception of Chinatowns worldwide, need to be seen in close connection with measures of containment, restriction, supervision, and control as they were enacted by state and regional authorities in the past. The San Francisco Chinatown which was (re)constructed after the earthquake and firestorm of 1906 can be seen as an exemplary case here—Chinese merchant elites and the municipal authorities both cooperated and tried to get the better of each other in the effort to establish a quarter which would both comply with the requirements of the residents, with tourist fantasies, and with the desire of the authorities to maintain control over the area.

The alliances and enmities in such collaborations and conflicts were further complicated by the fact that the ‘Chineseness’ of the Chinatown was and is far from uniform or homogeneous. Chinatowns were and are sites marked by diversity, dissent, and struggle—by rifts that open up not only between people of Chinese descent and other ethnicities, but also between people stemming from different Chinese regions, representing different classes, engaging in different professions or politico-cultural projects, and practicing different religions. These large- and small-scale conflicts are further complicated by gender differences. In addition, they tend to be translated into discourses of

gender (Yung 1995; Shah 2001; Lui 2005)—after all, economic, political, ethnic, and cultural differences as they mark Chinatowns are often couched in the symbolic repertory of gender differences (effemination vs. masculinity, softness vs. hardness, feeling vs. brain, ornament vs. rigor).

## TRANSNATIONAL CHINATOWN: SAN FRANCISCO, THE FORMATIVE YEARS

The Chinese constituted the first minority which was excluded from immigration and naturalization in the United States explicitly and formally on the grounds of a racial ideology. In 1882, Congress passed the First Chinese Exclusion Act, which was re-enforced and extended in 1924 in the course of the Immigration Act, aiming more generally at migrants from the Asia-Pacific triangle. It was due to the exclusion policy that the history of Chinese immigration (in fact, Asian immigration in general) to the United States evolved parallel *and* in contrast to other immigration histories, as Sucheng Chan pointed out:

Unlike their European counterparts, [Asian immigrants'] upward climb was impeded not only by a poor knowledge of the English language, a lack of familiarity with the American way of doing things, limited education, and the absence of relevant job skills, but also by laws that severely limited—on racial grounds—the opportunities they could pursue. Like other people of color, they were victims of legally sanctioned color prejudice. (Chan 1991: 61; see also Salyer 1995; Hsu 2000; Lee 2003)

One particularly salient result of the policy of exclusion for American Chinatowns was the formation of the nineteenth-century 'bachelor society' due to immigration and naturalization restrictions—American Chinatowns became predominantly male sites in their initial stage. In addition, the American laws triggered a huge industry of identification and registration and processes of migration restriction and border control all over the world (Gyori 1998; Caplan and Torpey 2001). Most of today's common techniques of managing the flow of transnational travel and surveying the processes of (im)migration can be traced back to the formats and devices which evolved in the early times of Chinese exclusion (Mayer 2009a). And finally, exclusion policies brought about intricate diasporic networks of community organization and management based on kinship (Hsu 2000; McKeown 2001; Lee 2003). Eventually, the Pacific world relied upon complicatedly interlinked national and diasporic, official and informal structures of transnational commerce and communication, as I have argued elsewhere (Künnemann and Mayer 2009).

The formation of the American Chinatown took place against the backdrop of such legal and political measures and Chinese American counter-strategies,

and against the backdrop of the anti-Chinese movement and the ‘driving out’ which forced Chinese laborers to leave mining towns and jobs in agriculture or railway construction and to move to the urban centers in acts of self-protection. Although it is important to keep in mind that it is “Chinatown’s vitality, rather than hostile outside forces, that created [San Francisco’s] Chinatown” (Chen 2000: 55), the anti-Chinese movement’s impact on the urban history of San Francisco—and, in fact, the formation of Chinatowns all over the United States, and by extension, in Great Britain—needs to be acknowledged. In San Francisco, Chinatown’s population grew from little more than 8 percent of the overall population in the 1860s to almost 30 percent in the 1870s, not counting the high number of undocumented Chinese residents at the time (Chen 2000: 55), and this fast growth was certainly not only or primarily due to the attractions of city life. At this stage of its development, Chinatown was established as a sphere of protection and withdrawal, and it was its fortified structure that should appeal most to its residents:

[By the 1870s] Chinatown had become [...] almost impregnable. [...] Chinatown had become a fortress. [...] The ghetto [...] was armed. While outside San Francisco’s Chinatown the Chinese seldom attempted to protect themselves by force, on their own ground they would doubtless have done so. An attack on this citadel was hardly an inviting prospect. (Saxton 1995: 148–9; for references to many other Californian settings and Chinatowns see Pfaelzer 2007)

In the following decades, this sense of being under siege receded, even though hostilities and apprehensions vis-à-vis San Francisco’s Chinese diaspora did by no means disappear. To deal with the policies of exclusion and an overall atmosphere in which Chinatown was, at best, exoticized, yet generally subjected to racist and xenophobic vilification, the Chinese community in San Francisco turned to measures of active self-promotion. After the earthquake of 1906, San Francisco’s Chinatown was rebuilt as a tourist destination (see on this development Chen 2000: 186–217; Lee 2001: 148–99; Yeh 2004). And still, it is important to bear in mind the conditions of its beginning. The mutual mistrust and the sense that Chinatown, like its inhabitants, may be “‘with us, but not of us,’” to cite the assessment of the early Chinese American publicist and writer Edith Maud Eaton (quoted in Ferens 2002: 50), persisted: Chinatown remained to be seen as a city in the city, a world of its own (on the implications of this logic for the formation of diasporic communities see Mayer 2005: 123–67).

## IMAGE MAGIC

The history of San Francisco’s Chinatown needed to be delineated in this detail because it is exceptional—but also exemplary. The Chinese exclusion policy was developed and particularly geared to the situation in the



United States, yet in the wake of this policy's implementation, similar measures of immigration restriction and border control were established the world over (Zolberg 1997, see also Lars Amenda's chapter in this volume). In turn, the rhetoric of the 'yellow peril,' of 'cheap' Chinese labor, their moral laxity and incapability to assimilate proved popular in Europe as well as the United States. The discourses of eugenics, social hygiene, national surveillance, and border protection were omnipresent in the western world of the early twentieth century (Gollwitzer 1962; Parker 1998; Mehnert 1995; Shah 2001; Stern 2005; Conrad and Sachsenmaier 2007; Auerbach 2009).

And it was by way of visual images—press and art photographs, caricatures, illustrations, graphs, sketches, filmic documentations and narratives—that the ideological work of such discourses was most effectively conducted. Visual images seem to convey cultural knowledge immediately and unmistakably, where verbal expression appears circuitous and cumbersome. Images have been ascribed with the power to infiltrate, to manipulate, to trigger unconscious fears and to mobilize atavistic impulses. Kaiser Wilhelm II, who prided himself (wrongly) on having introduced the term “Gelbe Gefahr” [yellow peril] into international political discourse by way of a note of warning to Czar Nicholas II in 1895, characteristically makes reference to a picture when enthusing over the slogan's popularity and omnipresence in the early twentieth century. It all began, the Kaiser claimed, with a sketch drawn by himself which inspired the painting *Völker Europas. Wahrt eure heiligsten Güter* [*Peoples of Europe, Protect Your Most Sacred Possessions*] by Hermann Knackfuß. Neither Kaiser nor painter used the term ‘yellow peril’ at the time of the painting's conception; nevertheless, the imperial reasoning is not all flawed: the painting did become famous as *Die Gelbe Gefahr*, and it certainly contributed its share to the infusion and circulation of anti-Asian sentiments in Europe at the turn of the twentieth century. It constituted, in the words of Ute Mehnert, “the beginning of an unprecedented propagandistic experiment” directed against Asia (1995: 111; see also Gollwitzer 1962: 42–3).

But the history of Chinatowns in the United States and in Europe exemplifies that propaganda efforts did not go unchallenged. And again, visual constellations played a major role. Images—and by extension, myths—are “dialectical,” as W. J. T. Mitchell points out with reference to the terminology of the Frankfurt school:

[D]ialectical images [are] “social hieroglyphs,” ambiguous syntheses whose “authentic” and “inauthentic” aspects cannot be disentangled by a question-begging invocation of the “real social process” or our essential nature. The essence of the dialectical image is its polyvalence—as object in the world, as representation, as analytic tool, as rhetorical device, as figure—most of all as a Janus-faced emblem of our predicament, a mirror of history, and a window beyond it. (Mitchell 1987: 205)



Mitchell did not write about Chinatowns, but the visual history of the Chinatown constitutes an excellent case in point for his observation. The architectural, photographic, theatrical, and filmic icons of Chineseness, which first might have come into being in an effort from the side of mainstream societies to mark the alterity of the Chinese and to keep them at bay, are Janus-faced; indeed, they can be infused with highly diverse interests and open up to all sorts of readings. This, too, is part of the ideological power or—to put it more positively—‘image magic’ emanating from pictures. Pictures which were produced for blatantly ‘orientalist’ purposes thus may be seen as “bearing traces of different kinds of agency, even though, or indeed because, we have so few early images by the San Francisco Chinese themselves,” as Anthony Lee concludes in his excellent study of pictorial representations of San Francisco’s Chinatown (2001: 8). The traces which these pictures carry may very well be called ‘ghostly’—they enter the text of the image unbidden and on the sly, and they are hard to etch out, even if the producer tries to do so, as we will see.

### A CHINESE GHOST IN GERMANY, AROUND 1880

In 1880, at the time when in the United States the anti-Chinese movement held sway over the debates around Chinese immigration and at around the time that Kaiser Wilhelm first formulated his concerns of an impending Asiatic invasion of Europe, “a total of 63 persons of Chinese descent were registered [in imperial Germany]” (Gütinger 2004: 111). The census data might not have been comprehensive, but still, figures like these are hardly alarming, even to the most paranoid nativists. Of the sixty-three persons recorded, twenty-one lived in Berlin, seventeen in Hamburg, the rest of the group was dispersed mostly over the northern part of Germany and resided almost exclusively in urban settings. There was no Chinatown to speak of, in any sense of the term. Two Chinese, Erich Gütinger notes, lived in Pomerania in 1880, and one might wonder whether any of the two inspired the arguably most influential manifestation of a Chinese in the German literature of the day. In 1895, Theodor Fontane published his popular novel, *Effi Briest*, the story of a young girl who is transplanted early in the 1880s from the metropolitan province of Brandenburg, close to the capital of Berlin, to the fictional town of Kessin, at the northeastern outskirts of the German empire, in Pomerania. She dreads this dislocation to what she considers the end of the world, and when her husband, Baron von Innstetten, mentions the cosmopolitan background of the Kessin population, she eagerly grabs on to this piece of information:

“But that’s delightful, Geert. You’re always talking about it being a dreary hole and now I see that unless you’ve been exaggerating there’s a whole new world to discover. All sorts of exotic people. That’s right, isn’t it? You meant something like that?”

He nodded.

"A whole new world, then, perhaps a Negro or a Turk or perhaps even a Chinaman."

"Even a Chinaman. How clever you are guessing. It's possible that we may still have one, but in any case we did have one. Now he's dead and buried on a little plot of earth enclosed by an iron fence, right beside the cemetery. [. . .]"

"[. . .] I should quite like to know more about it. But perhaps I'd better not, because I'll immediately have dreams and visions, and as I hope to sleep well tonight I shouldn't like to see a Chinaman heading for my bed straightaway."

"Nor will he."

"Nor will he. D'you know that sounds strange, as if it were a possibility all the same. You want to make Kessin sound interesting for me, but there you're going a bit too far. [. . .] I think there's always something a bit creepy about a Chinaman." (*Effi Briest*: 48–9)

In the next days and weeks, Effi gets to piece together parts of the 'Chinaman's' story: he came to Kessin as the servant of "an old captain, a so-called 'China run' sailor" (*Effi Briest*: 97) and then disappeared mysteriously, to reappear as a ghost. Effi witnesses an appearance, although we are left in the dark about the scene's reality status—it may or may not have been a nightmare. It is significant, though, that the Chinese ghost first materializes on a picture stuck to the back of a chair in Innstetten's estate—"a tiny picture, only half an inch or so high, depicting a Chinaman in a blue tunic and baggy yellow breeches with a broad flat hat on his head" (*Effi Briest*: 62). The seemingly trivial depiction takes hold over Effi's imagination and then prefigures her further fate—her demise from respectable Baroness to desolate divorcee. The "Chinese spook," Fontane wrote in a letter about his novel, functions as "the pivotal point of the entire story" (quoted in Jeong 2001: 126).

For Fontane, the Chinaman is a symbol of unacknowledged desires, a truly orientalist fantasy. More recently, the figure has been read as an allusion to Germany's colonial engagement in China and to Fontane's ambivalent position on German imperial politics (Utz 1984; Parr 2002; Jeong 2001; Dunker 2008). I won't enter here into what has been called a "minor industry in Chinaman interpretations, which is not currently in danger of going out of production" (Chambers 1997: 10), since Fontane's Chinaman interests me not so much as a symbol, but in his tangibility and materiality—as an indication of a Chinese presence in Pomerania and in imperial Germany at large, and as an acknowledgment that trivial images and trite clichés may acquire momentous implications. Moreover, Fontane's novel relates—intentionally or unconsciously—that in the 1880s even the most remote areas of Germany are no longer 'pure,'—"[t]he whole town consists of foreigners, of people whose parents or grandparents lived somewhere quite different" (*Effi Briest*: 49), claims Baron von Innstetten about the

population of Kessin, and with this he addresses a point of fascination and anxiety which reaches far beyond the novel and far beyond Pomerania. We have to return to San Francisco's Chinatown to trace its effects.

## PRODUCING CHINATOWN

In 1887, eight years before the publication of *Effi Briest*, the young Arnold Genthe traveled from Hamburg to Berlin to meet his mother's cousin, the famous German society painter (and close friend of Theodor Fontane) Adolf Menzel, in order to get his advice whether to embark on a career as a painter by studying art. Menzel looked at his paintings and sketches, Genthe recalls in his memoirs, and then advised the young man to study philology like his father and grandfather before: "You will paint, of course, but not for fame or profit" (1979: 10).

The encounter was important in several respects. Genthe studied philology and earned a doctorate in classical languages—but he did not become a scholar. Nor did he become part of the Berlin-Brandenburg bourgeoisie around artists such as Menzel and Fontane. Moving to the United States in 1895, he turned to photography instead of painting and in the following years documented what constituted for him the most fascinating side of American modernity: San Francisco's Chinatown. Arnold Genthe clearly recognized Chinatown's image magic, in fact he may be said to have contributed substantially to the concoction of this magic through his photographic work.

Chinatown seems to have presented the first occasion for Genthe to meet, or watch, Chinese expatriates. He could have come in touch with Chinese diasporic culture before, though, since his mother had taken in international boarders in Hamburg after his father's death in 1886, in an effort to stall the family's rapid economic demise. In his memoirs Genthe mentions "two Indian princes, the son of the ex-King of Burma, and the son of the president of Venezuela, all eager to learn German" (Genthe 1979: 10). But none of the forty-three Chinese registered in Hamburg by 1890 seemed to have moved in with the Genthes, although several of them pertained to a similarly educated and affluent scene as the family's boarders and lived in similar settings of domestic respectability (Gütinger 2004: 112; see also Amenda 2006; and Amenda's chapter in this volume). Genthe does not mention Chinese either when he recounts his studies in Berlin in the late 1880s, although Berlin at the time featured the second-largest Chinese community in Germany next to Hamburg (Gütinger 2004: 113–14; see also Yu-Dembksi 2007; and Yu-Dembksi's chapter in this volume). But even if Genthe did not meet real Chinese at the time, he must have gotten in touch with imaginary Chinese and Chinese images of the sort that haunted *Effi Briest*. These trivialities, then, must have mixed with more respectable fantasies of China and the Chinese as they were doubtlessly familiar to a

young intellectual who remembers growing up in a house in which “the library was the most lived in room [. . .]. On its walls, reaching to the ceiling, and only broken by the wide fireplace, were rows and rows of books” (Genthe 1979: 5). China and the Chinese figure as notable presences in German literature since the classical era (Rose 1981; Schuster 1988; Tan 2007), and this presence would have affected Genthe’s approach to San Francisco’s Chinatown. The Baedeker travel guide, at any rate, which he took along on his first trip to the United States and which warned that “[i]t is not advisable to visit the Chinese quarter unless one is accompanied by a guide” (Genthe 1979: 32) seemed to have had little effect on him:

As soon as I could make myself free I was on my way to Chinatown, where I was to go again and again, for it was this bit of the Orient set down in the heart of a Western metropolis that was to swing my destiny into new and unforeseen channels. (Genthe 1979: 32)

Much has been written about Genthe’s techniques of rendering Chinatown as authentically Chinese as possible. He has been praised for capturing the spirit of a world that has disappeared, and (more recently) blamed for his desire “to make Chinatown look especially exotic and picturesque” (Vogel 2004: 105) and for being part of a scene of “bohemian slummers” (Teng 2002: 55). On one of Arnold Genthe’s famous photographs of *Old Chinatown*, titled *An Unsuspecting Victim* when it was published in 1913, we see the young photographer himself with his camera. John Kuo Wei Tchen has commented on the differences between the photograph’s retouched and original state—the fact that in order to publish the photograph, Genthe eliminated the white man standing next to him and a youngster of unclear ethnic background in the corner, ending up with a carefully composed photograph of himself, looking down on the camera in his hands, a little Chinese boy in traditional festive garb in the background, and a Chinese man with queue, cotton tunic top, cloth shoes, and hat on the left-hand side of the photograph (Tchen 1984).

Seen in conjunction with Genthe’s general strategy to eliminate ‘western’ features of Chinatown as much as possible in his photographic rendition, the photograph turns into an exemplary instance of ‘authentication’:

the viewer gets the distinct impression that Tangrenbu [the Chinese quarter] was indeed an exotic, picturesque “Canton of the West,” a totally Chinese city within San Francisco. The truth of the matter is that this ideal “pure” Chinese quarter never existed, except in the imagination of its non-Chinese nonresidents. (Tchen 1984: 14)

In his groundbreaking commentary to Genthe’s photographic œuvre, Tchen goes on to delineate how Genthe, in spite of these obvious manipulations of his subject matter, still revealed a “poetic beauty” in San

Francisco's Chinatown—presenting in his best images an “honesty and directness [which] take us beyond even Genthe's own limited knowledge of Tangrenbu to gain glimpses into the radiant soul of its residents” (1984: 15; see also Lee 2001: 101–5).

Genthe's *An Unsuspecting Victim*, like many other photographs in *Old Chinatown*, can thus be seen as an interesting document of the long and complicated history of picturing Chinatowns—a history which certainly underwent its formative phase in San Francisco, but shows traces of a long-standing European imaginary just as well, and then can be pursued further in its reach all over the North American continent, back to Europe and its emerging Chinatowns. This history can be seen as a multifaceted and Janus-faced production process which involved numerous actors and agents from all sorts of cultural fractions and interest groups. Seen in this way, the evidence of manipulation on some of Genthe's rediscovered photographs—the ghostlike figures of white visitors or residents of Chinatown that he tried but did not always manage to eliminate—resonates interestingly with the theme of Fontane's spectral Chinaman: here it is whiteness haunting Chinatown, there it was Chineseness that haunted the German hinterland. In both cases, our ideas of authenticity and purity beg to be reexamined.

Genthe might not only have eliminated his white companion on the photograph in order to render the image more authentic. He might also have meant to foreground his own singular role in the process of representation, the role of an artist who ventures into uncharted territory, breaks with old conventions and formats, does away with the “pretense of the disinterested empirical survey,” and instead celebrates the fact that “in Chinatown photographers could explore unmediated Chinese subjectivities and their own self-conscious artistic expression,” as Anthony Lee surmised (2001: 104). Genthe makes himself out as an artist rather than as a documentarist—his photographs' authenticity claims are always complicatedly enmeshed with their gestures toward their producer's creative genius. It is on the grounds of such mixed messages conveyed by the photographs of *Old Chinatown* (much more than by the accompanying text composed by journalist Will Irwin), that Genthe's work should be seen not only in terms of authentication and Sinicization, but just as well in terms of its hybridizing effect. Indeed, one might subsume that whenever Chinatown's Chineseness is being particularly emphasized this is actually an indication of another surge of hybridization—both in the sense of aesthetic enactment and strategic marketing (Tchen 1999; Christiansen 2000: 67–85; Chen 2000; Lee 2001; see also Vanessa Künnemann's chapter on Pearl S. Buck in this volume). The fabricated authenticity which comes to the fore in Genthe's photographs, at any rate, would constitute an important point of reference for the Chinese American efforts of re-establishing and marketing Chinatown after the earthquake of 1906. “[T]he physical look of today's Chinatown is a direct result of decisions made [in the wake of the earthquake] when Chinatown was Orientalized and transformed into a spectacle for capital,” writes

Anthony Lee (2001: 252). Orientalism was clearly not only at the heart of Genthe's repertory of representation:

[T]he invention of Chinatown by its own merchants should remind us that Orientalism, though primarily a product of the Western imagination, is not a monolithic force moving from the West to the East or from non-Chinese to Chinese. It is, like any discourse, multilayered and multivocal. (Lee 2001: 253)

The practices of self-orientalization and strategic communal hybridization register first and most blatantly in San Francisco, but they should come to characterize the urban history of Chinatowns all over the United States. By the 1940s, the American Chinatown was firmly established as a business venture in which stakes were held by Chinese, Chinese Americans, and white Americans alike. The quarters' Chinese features were often exchangeable, recognizably trite, and amalgamated so intricately with American mainstream entertainment culture that only the very provincial or naïve would seek authentic Chineseness in a Chinatown outing.

It was precisely the Chinatowns' hybridity which appealed most strongly to many visitors, as the following account of a trip to Washington's Chinatown in 1943 illustrates. The setting of the scene is a Chinese American restaurant—and thus a site which Yong Chen rightfully identified as a central element of the “Chinatown experience” (see his chapter in this volume, see also Kwong and Mišćević 2005: 320–21)—and the visitor in case was the renowned anthropologist and sociologist Fei Xiaotong who approached the phenomenon of Chinatown during his research trip to the United States at the invitation of the American State Department in 1943 and 1944 in the spirit of an ethnological case study:

The Chinese restaurant my friend and I went to had entertainment and was a little like a small nightclub. The waiters were Chinese, dressed neatly in tuxedos. They spoke the Toisan Cantonese dialect, which is the language common among the Chinese-Americans. I spoke to them in Mandarin, which did not surprise them, only they apologetically replied in English that they could not understand me. [. . .] It was called a Chinese restaurant but, except for the overdone and offensive Chinese décor, nothing made me feel the slightest at home. The names 'chop suey' and 'chow mein' on the menu, seemingly half-Chinese and half-Western, are in fact peculiar dishes and neither Chinese nor Western. [. . .] The table setting was completely Western, with knife and fork, except that because I was a newly arrived countryman they brought me some bamboo chopsticks stamped 'Made in China.' [. . .] Looking up from the table, I saw right in front of us a troupe of half-naked women doing Spanish dances. [. . .] The music accompanying the Spanish dancing was jazz, which is currently popular in America.

I do not claim to know much about music but cannot understand why these sounds are considered music at all. Suddenly the dancing stopped and, to the same kind of ‘music,’ a young woman whom one would guess to be Cuban came on and in a loud voice sang one of her country’s folk songs. Constantly moving about on the stage and announcing the numbers with a megaphone was a man whom one knew at a glance to be a product of southern Europe.

At that moment, in that spot, various cultures of different origin came helter-skelter together and were arrayed, as though oblivious to the fact that these were Chinese waiters, Oriental embroidery, Spanish dancing, Cuban songs, jazz music, a south European face. A great number and variety of elements inextricably mixed—a merry laugh, a hearty drink, a new culture! As we came out of the restaurant my anthropologist friend asked me what I thought of it. What could I say? “Truly bold! A young culture!” (Fei 1989: 172–3)

It does not require the expertise of a Chinese national to unmask this set-up as a construct. But it is interesting to correlate this scenario with the ‘Old Chinatown’ fantasies of Arnold Genthe. Genthe’s symbolic repertory has not been completely abandoned, it is rather submerged in this overblown and overdetermined assemblage of hybrid cultural markers—among them markers of Chineseness. For Fei, the Chinese restaurant figures as the epitome of Americanness precisely because it is not pure, because it attests to a heterogeneous and odd assortment of traditions, practices, styles, and people. From today’s vantage point—and looking beyond the evidence of only the American Chinatown—one might take Fei’s diagnosis even farther, and argue that to read the Chinatown either in terms of Chineseness or Americanization is to miss much of what constitutes its fascinating appeal: the Chinatown presents a truly global phenomenon, an urban constellation marked by the forces and energies of transnationalism long before this term was fashionable. From early on, Chinatowns have in fact been vanguards of postmodern geographies in the sense of Edward Soja or of the global city in the sense of Saskia Sassen (Soja 1989; Sassen 1991; see also Lowe 1996: 120–26; Mayer 2005: 123–67; Chen 2000; 2009; see also Ruth Mayer’s chapter in this volume): far from being pre-modern or timeless, the Chinatown has long been an exemplary site of urban modernity.

## CHINATOWN, EUROPE

Contemporary Chinatowns need no longer be residential quarters; in North America some of them have turned into multiethnic commercial centers on the one hand and tourist attractions, based on invented traditions rather than lived experience, on the other. In Europe, strictly speaking, the concept of the Chinatown was problematical to start with, as Gregor Benton and



Edmund Gomez pointed out. What they write about Chinatowns in Great Britain could be extended to many Chinese quarters throughout Europe: “The revamped and commoditised Chinatowns that adorn some British city centres have little in common with their transatlantic counterparts beyond a few external trappings” (2008: 25). And yet, the enactment of and the representational patterns around Chinatowns on both sides of the Atlantic are entangled in such a close-knit texture of formulas and schemes that it does make sense to use one word for all of them. Chinatowns from the very beginning were never only realities, they were also mythical constellations, fraught with communal and individual fantasies and ascriptions. Seen that way, the Chinese urban settings in Europe do replicate an American pattern, even if they often follow markedly different trajectories in their development and with their social functions.

These developments go back to trends which formed with the very emergence of ‘Chinese quarters’ in the western world, but they have reached an unprecedented scale in the last decades. In the course of this transformation, the Chinatown gains an immense global significance—not only because the people and businesses established in and around it are connected with China in many ways, but also because Chinatowns have become a standard inventory of global cities (Christiansen 2000; see also Flemming Christiansen’s chapter in this volume). To fulfill their function as urban markers, Chinatowns the world over strive to correspond with certain expectations regarding their architectural makeup and their cultural life. Flemming Christiansen mentions “[a]rches, dragons and lion dances as well as public festivals with public processions and firework” as important features signaling a Chinatown’s ‘rank’ vis-à-vis other (and in particular American) Chinatowns worldwide, he illustrates the logic with the example of the arch:

In Antwerp they have a dream of building a Chinatown arch. Manchester, London, and Liverpool have an arch. There is none in Amsterdam or Paris (except for a small one that serves as the entrance to the Chinese-owned conference centre Chinagora). There may only be few Chinatown arches in Europe, but there are many in North America and in East and Southeast Asia, in places like New York, Boston, Philadelphia, San Francisco, Washington, Victoria, Yokohama and Penang [...]. Vancouver raised money for one in 2000, and even the Santo Domingo Chinatown in the Dominican Republic plans to get one. These arches are invariably linked to prestige, and having the ‘first’ and/or the ‘largest’ is an important asset for a Chinatown. (2000: 79)

Arches, pagodas, stone lions, temples, and all sorts of oriental decorative items these days do no longer necessarily gesture toward authentic Chinese-ness, they rather seem to function as universal signs of ‘Chinatownness,’ sharing “the symbolic reference to an imaginary archetypal Chinatown that



is manifest in names, rituals and decoration” (Christiansen 2000: 79). The history of London’s Chinatown may serve as a case in point: this Chinatown existed before the 1980s, of course, but the quarter was developed and marketed in an organized manner in the late 1980s, with the inception of a Chinese New Year parade in 1985, the demarcation of a pedestrian zone around Gerrard Street some years later, and the redecoration of the entire area with the arch, a pagoda, gates, and stone lions at around the same time (see London Chinese Chinatown Association). As most other initiatives involving Chinatowns, the development in London emanated from the local community, in this case the London Chinese Chinatown Association, an assembly of Chinese British entrepreneurs, retailers, and restaurant owners who had and have an interest in drawing tourists to the neighborhood and who closely cooperate with the City Council of London (see “Chinatown London”). But London’s Chinatown is by no means only a front; it is also a diasporic grassroots organization for many Chinese of different backgrounds and origins to this day (see Benton and Gomez 2008: 321–60; see also the chapters by Flemming Christiansen and Rosemary Sales, Panos Hatziprokopiou, Alessio D’Angelo and Xia Lin in this volume).

Hence London’s Chinatown can be seen both as a projection surface and as a lived reality—and this oscillation also characterizes the quarter’s history. The interrelating forces of projection and strategic fashioning most obviously show in the fact that and how Chinatown moved within the city. The quarter’s location, too, was very much subject to the negotiation of divergent political, economic, and cultural interests and interest groups. From 1900 to about 1940, London’s Chinatown was not associated with and located in Soho, but in the riverside district of East London called Limehouse, a slum area with strong maritime connections, which was, in the words of historian John Seed, at the time “the most cosmopolitan district of the most cosmopolitan city in Britain” (2006: 59). The district housed indeed most of the city’s Chinese residents, but Limehouse was by no means exclusively Chinese: “[f]rom the 1890s through the 1950s, the Chinese were a small minority in a mixed community of tradesmen, casual labourers and transient sailors” (Seed 2006: 68; see also Benton and Gomez 2008: 21–8). The fact that many of the Chinese migrants living in the quarter were seafarers is emphasized in the Cantonese term *Huabu*, which the Chinese themselves tended to use for Limehouse and other Chinese quarters in Britain. *Huabu* means ‘Chinaport’—and this term was used for ‘Chinatown’ much longer than it was appropriate, as Gregor Benton and Terence Gomez point out:

Chinaport suggests a world of seafarers, but the settlement stabilised only by turning its back on the sea. [. . .] Even as late as 1901, 61 per cent of Britain’s China-born residents were classed as seafarers. Yet as life ashore became more agreeable and the Chinaports swelled into real communities, more quit the sea. If three out of five of Britain’s Chinese

were seafarers in 1901, by 1911 less than two out of five were, Chinese switched to the land at a faster rate in London than in other British cities. By 1901, only 42 per cent were seafarers. (2008: 26)

This persistence in the association of Chinese diasporic settlements with a maritime framework is telling, because it points to the fact that the Chinese diaspora in Europe just as in the United States was very much determined by seaways, the spirit of port cities, and harbor towns. To write the history of Chinatowns only on the grounds of the national territory to which they happen to belong, is to ignore the interesting maritime interlinkages which connect cities such as Rotterdam, London, Liverpool, and Hamburg with New York, Philadelphia, or Boston. This refocalization on “port cultures” directs our attention toward transnational channels of intersection and interaction and away from the fixed parameters of the nation state or local minority status, as John Kuo Wei Tchen has argued (Tchen 2002; see also his chapter in this volume).

## FLOATING SIGNIFIERS: IMAGE MAGIC, MYTHOLOGIES

Like many other Chinatowns, London’s Chinatown is a floating signifier. In the many representations of Limehouse, the district’s maritime spirit always played a central role. This, together with the circumstance that the Chinese sailors in the area seemed to exemplify the seafarers’ alien and exotic character, may very well have been the reason for the quarter’s almost exclusive association with its Chinese residents. Due to fantasies and phobias around the Chinese in Britain which were disseminated just as they were in the United States through the anti-Chinese movement, but also through pictures and narratives which addressed and expressed more diffuse desires and fears than the radical racist movements allowed for, the size of the Chinese community in Limehouse was routinely exaggerated in all sorts of estimates. By the 1910s, when, according to John Seed, no more than a hundred families of Chinese descent could possibly have lived in Limehouse, rumors had it that “the Chinese population [in Limehouse] had grown from 1,000 to 8,000, and a large number of British seamen were pushed out by them” (*East End News*, quoted in Seed 2006: 75).

Certainly, Sax Rohmer’s hugely popular Fu Manchu narratives, Thomas Burke’s successful Chinatown stories such as *Limehouse Nights*, as well as films such as *Twinkletoes* (1926) or *Piccadilly* (1929) very much contributed to the Chinatown craze of the 1920s and 1930s (Seed 2006; see also Case 2002; Witchard 2007; Seshagiri 2007; Auerbach 2009; and Anne Witchard’s chapter in this volume). This craze took on transatlantic dimensions, and often it is hard to tell where a certain story originated—Sax Rohmer was popular and lived on both sides of the Atlantic, the success of Burke has much to do with the filmic adaptation by the American star