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How Chinese is The Hague's Chinatown?

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ABSTRACT

Tiny though it is, The Hague's Chinatown is clearly presented as such, with Chinese lanterns, municipal street signage in Chinese characters, and sayings in Classical Chinese lining the streets. Doing fieldwork in the area, however, has shown that it proves to be less Chinese than its visual representation suggests. Few Chinese still inhabit the area, which used to flourish after it had ceased to be a Jewish neighbourhood. Now, only about forty per cent of the establishments – primarily restaurants, nail parlours and food shops – are of Chinese origin. Despite municipal attempts to present Chinatown as a tourist attraction, the area has become more generally Asian in character than Chinese, while it also includes establishments that represent The Hague's other major ethnic communities (Moroccan, Turkish and Surinamese). Though the Chinese language is clearly visible throughout the area, the script predominantly used proves to be informational rather than having a symbolic function, in contrast to what is found in Chinatowns elsewhere. The answer to the question in the title of this paper therefore proved to be negative, while the ongoing changes are typically characteristic of superdiverse cities elsewhere in the world.

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Introduction

In the summer of 2019, we noticed a change in the window of the Moroccan restaurant Bab el Medina in Wagenstraat, The Hague. The restaurant, whose name appropriately translates as 'Gate to the City Centre', is situated just inside Chinatown, an area occupying four streets in The Hague's city centre (Wagenstraat, Gedempte Burgwal, Gedempte Gracht and Sint Jacobstraat). On the map in [Figure 1](#), Bab el Medina is situated at the bottom, on the corner of Wagenstraat and Amsterdamse Veerkade.

The window had been covered with the words for 'Welcome' in twenty-four languages, as shown in [Figure 2](#), ranging from *isten hozott* (Hungarian), *faillte* (Irish), *bienvenuto* (Italian), *velkommen* (Norwegian) to *witamy* (Polish) and *hoşgeldin* (Turkish).

All these languages are spoken in The Hague (Extra et al. 2001, 17–18), but not necessarily in Chinatown, though Chinese is there as well. What made the owner apply these multilingual welcoming signs, we wondered?

Compared to the Chinatowns in Washington DC, New York City, San Francisco and Vancouver in North America (Lou 2010, 97; Pang and Rath 2007) and Manchester, Liverpool and Birmingham in the UK (Gaiser and Matras 2016; Amos 2016; Huang 2018), The Hague's Chinatown is tiny,¹ but it is clearly marked out as such: bounded by two large dragon gates, one at each end of Wagenstraat

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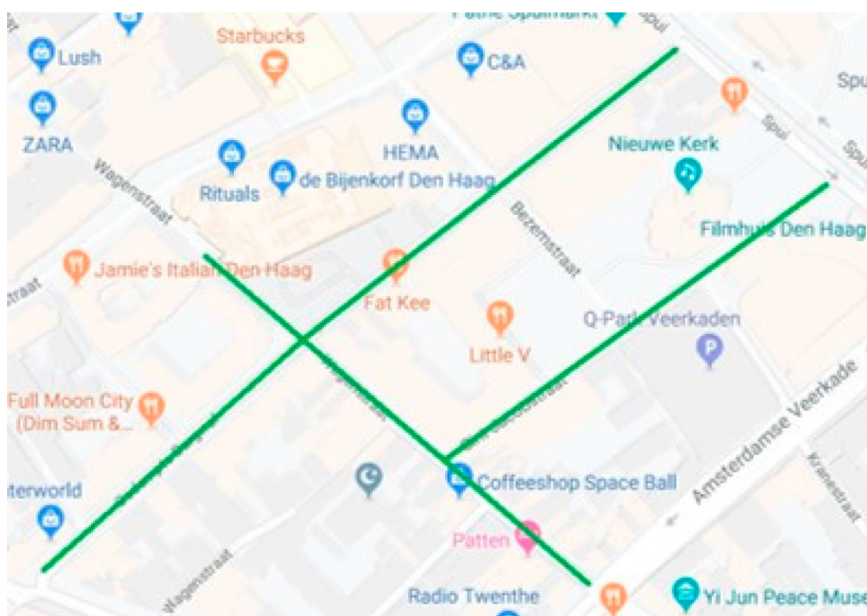


Figure 1. The four streets making up The Hague's Chinatown (Google Maps).



Figure 2. Bab el Medina's shopfront (Wagenstraat).

(Figure 3), all four streets are lined with Chinese lanterns, the street signs are bilingual, in Dutch and Chinese (Figure 4) – unusual for The Hague, where street signage is always monolingual Dutch, no matter what language is dominant in a particular neighbourhood – and the kerbstones are engraved with sayings in Classical Chinese (Figure 5).

At both ends of the area, moreover, there are municipal information boards describing The Hague's Chinatown in four languages, Dutch, English, French and German. Chinese is conspicuous by its absence: the boards' target readership evidently does not include (monolingual) Chinese readers. Does The Hague's Chinatown merely function as what Leeman and Modan (2010, 184) call a 'themed ethnoscape'? Chinatown's street signage, in black, rimmed with gold and with golden



Figure 3. The dragon gate at the entry of The Hague's Chinatown.

lettering (Figure 4) is identical with tourist signage elsewhere in the city centre, directing visitors, for instance, to the Mauritshuis museum, or the parliament buildings nearby. In Grote Marktstraat, The Hague's city centre High Street, a tourist sign indicates the direction towards Chinatown (Figure 6).



Figure 4. Bilingual street sign (St. Jacobstraat).



Figure 5. One of the kerbstone sayings: 道可道非常道 *dào kě dào fēicháng dào* 'The path that can be described, is not the true path'.

Compared to Amsterdam or Rotterdam, and despite these cities' larger numbers of Chinese inhabitants, The Hague's Chinatown is unique, according to Willems, Cottaar, and Or (2010, 223) in their bilingual Dutch–Chinese historical account of the area between 1920 and 2010. Not only is it visually presented as such, as described above, but this was also done by the municipality, which aimed to develop the area's ethnic authenticity in order to showcase the city's multicultural nature and stimulate national and international tourism. If The Hague's Chinatown is indeed laid out as a tourist attraction, and given the presence of the ethnically different establishment mentioned



Figure 6. Tourist sign in The Hague's main shopping street showing the direction to Chinatown.

at the beginning of this paper, the question arises as to how Chinese the area actually is. Chineseness, according to Huang (2018, 183), is an ambiguous concept; here, we define 'Chinese' as referring to the characteristics of ethnic individuals originating from China and Taiwan, including second and third-generation migrants who may no longer speak Chinese, who may carry Dutch nationality, and – for the purpose of our investigation – are enabled to set up as entrepreneurs or are otherwise employed in The Netherlands.

Lou (2010, 97) notes that with the commodification of Washington DC's Chinatown as a commercial centre, the original residents moved away to its periphery (cf. Pang and Rath 2007, 204). How does the history of The Hague's Chinatown compare with its American cousin in this respect? And what about Bab el Medina's changed restaurant window: was it perhaps an attempt to profile the place as less Moroccan (since there are many Moroccan restaurants just outside Chinatown) and more international in order to attract a larger clientele? Previous casual observation suggested that the restaurant was not doing very well, so this may have been an attempt to survive in what Blommaert (2013, 50) describes in his study of the Antwerp suburb Berchem as 'an arena of human and cultural action' (cf. Stoicheva 2016, 85). Rapidly changing commercial enterprises, he argues in *Ethnography, Superdiversity and Linguistic Landscapes* (2013), are typical of superdiverse cities, a characterisation that fits The Hague as well (Tieken-Boon van Ostade 2019). What types of restaurants and other establishments do we find in the area apart from this particular Moroccan place? And how do they fit in with the rest of the neighbourhood?

These are the questions we will address in this paper, and we will do so by reporting on the linguistic-landscaping fieldwork we carried out in the area in the autumn of 2019, cataloguing larger and smaller businesses found there as well as other matters that might shed light on the current ethnic identity of The Hague's Chinatown. In adopting Linguistic Landscaping as a framework or aim was not, in contrast to Amos (2016), for instance, to identify Chinatown's boundaries since these were already clearly marked out as such, as described above. Instead, by performing a quantitative analysis of the presence of Chinese shopfronts in the area, we wish to assess its actual Chinese character, which, as the Bab el Medina example suggests, may be less strongly evident than is warranted by the municipal characterisation of the area as a 'Chinatown'. Before presenting and analysing our findings, we will discuss The Hague's Chinese community – not an easy task given the difficulty of retrieving relevant demographic figures (cf. Carson and King 2016, 8) – and provide a brief historical description of the neighbourhood, largely based on Willems et al.'s account published on the occasion of the completion of the dragon gates in 2010. Such an approach necessarily informs any study of this kind (Blommaert 2013), while Hall (2012, 31) notes in her study of London's Walworth's Road that 'past and present urban landscapes [tend to be] palpably interwoven' (cf. Gaiser and Matras 2016, 2–35). This is true for The Hague's Chinatown, too.

Chinatown in its historical context

Perhaps the most conspicuous feature in The Hague's Chinatown is the Mescidi Aksa mosque. Even more striking is the fact that down to the mid-1970s this Turkish mosque was a synagogue, which closed down because of the significantly diminished Jewish population in The Hague after the Second World War. The synagogue was subsequently occupied by the Turkish community in the city, a situation which gained official municipal recognition in 1982 (Cottaar 2005, 228). The presence of the synagogue in the area is one of the last visual remnants of the fact that today's Chinatown used to be an old Jewish quarter before the war (Willems, Cottaar, and Or 2010, 27).² Another testimony of this is the Jewish Children's Monument on Rabbijn Maarsenplein, situated on the edge of Sint Jacobstraat opposite Nieuwe Kerk (Figure 1), which commemorates the deportation and death of 1,700 Jewish children from The Hague during the war. The subsequent settlement of a Chinese population in the area since the 1950s is described by Willems, Cottaar, and Or (2010). With the immigration of Chinese people into The Hague starting around the 1930s, the first Chinese restaurant in Wagenstraat opened in 1949 (2010, 44, 104). Willems et al. traced thirty Chinese restaurants

in the area that were established between that year and the date of publication of their book, many of which have disappeared since. One of the reasons why Chinese restaurants flourished there, they argue, thus eventually giving rise to today's Chinatown, was the poor neighbourhood, where no shopkeepers were willing to settle (or indeed return) after the war, but also the presence of many prostitutes nearby, who patronised the restaurants which offered cheap food after late-night working hours. During the 1970s, the area was still largely a no-go area,³ but since then, prostitution was moved elsewhere, and combined with major municipal renovations of the district this has considerably upgraded Chinatown's status today.

Willems, Cottaar, and Or (2010, 173) note that The Hague's Chinatown was the first proper ethnic neighbourhood in The Netherlands. The Hague is generally known as the most segregated city of the country (e.g. Cornips, de Rooij, and Smakman 2018, 165), and the current status of Chinatown as an officially sanctioned, clearly visible presence in The Hague confirms this. Compared to the Chinese community in Birmingham, however, which according to Huang (2018, 182–183) originally comprised Cantonese and Hakka-speaking immigrants and, more recently, immigrants from the People's Republic of China, the Chinese population in The Netherlands is much more diverse. Ethnic Chinese originate not only from China or Taiwan, but also from the former Dutch colonies of Indonesia and Suriname (Willems, Cottaar, and Or 2010, 32). Their distinct backgrounds are, moreover, reflected in different settlement patterns, based on economic circumstances and national rather than strictly ethnic origins (Stal 2005; Noteboom and Taal 2007), with Surinamese immigrants living largely in Transvaal and more affluent Indonesians in Statenkwartier. Chinatown, as Willems et al. describe, was where the Chinese from China or Taiwan settled originally, though, as we will see, this is no longer so today.

Around the turn of the century, Chinatown began to attract significant numbers of tourists, and the bilingual street signs (Figure 4) were put up in recognition of this in 2004 as well as to further profile The Hague's multicultural nature (Willems, Cottaar, and Or 2010, 215; cf. *The Hague City Mondial*); the dragon gates (Figure 3) were erected by The Hague's Chinese community five years later to demarcate the area (Willems, Cottaar, and Or 2010, 220), while the sayings in the kerbstones (Figure 5) presumably date from the same period. But Chinese people no longer live there (Willems, Cottaar, and Or 2010, 224; Kullberg 2011, 104). There used to be a special school for Chinese children, which since moved to a nearby street (Zuidwal), where there is also a designated home for the elderly. Possibly, as with Washington DC's Chinatown (see above), the original Chinese residents moved away when the area developed a more general commercial function, and was officially profiled as a tourist attraction. Today, restaurants and other establishments line the streets virtually from door to door. Above some of them, apartment buildings were erected as part of the urban renovation of the area, but counting the names on a selection of publicly visible doorbell boards showed that only about five per cent of them were identifiably Chinese (Figure 7).⁴

It is hard to estimate the number of Chinese living in The Hague. The databank of the website *Den Haag in Cijfers* ('The Hague in numbers') only provides information on the number of Turkish, Moroccan, Surinamese and Antillean citizens; other ethnic groups are listed broadly under 'Other non-Western' and 'Western' (cf. Cottaar 2005, 227). Unlike in countries like the UK or Russia, there is no longer a regular census in The Netherlands (*Volkstellingen 1795–1971*). Cottaar (2005, 217) lists 2,863 ethnic Chinese inhabitants in The Hague, which, compared to the city's total population for 2004, i.e. 469,564 according to *Den Haag in Cijfers*, comes down to 0.6%. Willems, Cottaar, and Or (2010, 33) show that this figure had almost doubled by 2009, when 5,130 Chinese were living in The Hague (1.06% of the 482,510 people then living there). Kullberg (2011, 103) cites a slightly higher figure, 1.3%, adding that the Chinese population in The Hague was at that time the third largest of the country, after Rotterdam and Amsterdam. One problem in trying to calculate the number of Chinese living in The Hague, Willems, Cottaar, and Or (2010, 33) write, are the many unregistered Chinese residents, with as many as ca. 25,000 in 2009. Kullberg notes that the Chinese community is spread out over The Hague, with a slight



Figure 7. Apartment building in Wagenstraat, showing doorbell boards with inhabitants' names.

majority living in one of the city's poorer districts, Laakkwartier (Kullberg 2011, 104). Today, in other words, Chinatown is not a Chinese residential area in The Hague, something which is likewise typical of Chinatowns elsewhere in the world.

Collecting our data

The fieldwork for this paper was conducted in November 2019. During one afternoon, we walked along both sides of all four of The Hague's Chinatown streets identified in Figure 1, altogether almost a kilometre in length, listing all the establishments we encountered, such as restaurants and shops, leaving private homes out of the inventory. In addition, we recorded the linguistic landscape by taking pictures of the shopfronts along the way. Landry and Bourhis (1997) define 'Linguistic Landscape' as 'the visibility and salience of languages on public and commercial signs in a given territory or region' (1997, 23, 25–29). Simply put, the linguistic landscape of an area comprises all instances of language that one can see at a given time. In their account of this framework, the authors distinguish between informational and symbolic functions of signs within a linguistic landscape. Signs with an informational function communicate functional information to their readers, like a shop's opening hours or business offers. Such signs serve as markers of the geographical territory inhabited by a given language community relative to other communities, thus informing in-group and out-group members of the linguistic characteristics and language boundaries of the region. From a practical perspective, the linguistic landscape of an area indicates which language(s) can be used to communicate with its inhabitants. One of the reasons for analysing Manchester's linguistic landscape precisely served this function (see Gaiser and Matras 2016). Signs with a symbolic function, on the other hand, contribute to the positive social identity of communities speaking the same language, giving them the feeling that the in-group language is vital and has value and status relative to other languages used in the area. This may encourage members of the community to use their language in various settings, including outside the private sphere. Thus, symbolic signs are an important contributor to ethnic identity. An example of a symbolic sign on a shopfront is a sign saying 'Welcome', as in the case of Bab el Medina, or *Fijne feestdagen* ('Happy holidays') in Figure 17 below. Both functions, however, may complement each other within a single sign. As explained above, we adopted Linguistic Landscaping as a framework in this study to assess the Chineseness of The Hague's Chinatown.

Reh (2004, 8–15) proposes several other characteristics of signs within an area's linguistic landscape, such as multilingual arrangement, which refers to the specific combinations of languages in relation to the information provided on multilingual signs. She thus distinguishes four types of multilingualism:

- (1) Duplicating signs: 'exactly the same text is presented in more than one language [...] acknowledg[ing] the existence of societal multilingualism' and ensuring comprehension of the intended message.
- (2) Fragmentary signs: 'the full information is given only in one language, but in which selected parts have been translated into an additional language or additional languages', assuming an understanding of at least the main language used.
- (3) Overlapping signs: 'only part of [the] information is repeated in at least one more language, while other parts of the text are in one language only'. There are no languages that provide all the information presented.
- (4) Complementary signs: 'different parts of the overall information are each rendered in a different language [...] display[ing] complementary multilingualism', thus combining separate messages into a single text.

Furthermore, Gaiser and Matras (2016, 18–20) discuss the visual dominance on signs of one language over another, which may be caused by factors like the amount of text, its position within the sign (central or peripheral), its relative font size, or the nature of its colouring (e.g. red) (see also Kress and van Leeuwen 2006). According to Landry and Bourhis (1997, 26), the visually dominant language on public signs is often the language of the majority group of the region, although it is also possible that a dominant minority imposes its own language on a larger language community. In view of all this, we labelled every instance of language in our inventory of the linguistic landscape of The Hague's Chinatown according to its function (informational/symbolic), type of multilingualism (duplicating/fragmentary/complementary) and visual dominance. In doing so, we did not include the type of overlapping multilingualism distinguished by Reh because the instances identified during our fieldwork often coincided with fragmentary multilingualism. Monolingual signs were labelled as 'monolingual'.

In the signs featuring Chinese characters, we distinguished between the use of traditional characters (繁體字 *fántǐ zì*) and simplified characters (簡體字 *jiǎntǐ zì*).⁵ The differences between these sets are caused by a series of script reforms during the second half of the twentieth century, which aimed to reduce the number of strokes per character. Some characters were simplified drastically, e.g. 鬱 *yù* 'lush' → 郁 and 靈 *líng* 'spirit' → 灵, while others remained unchanged, e.g. 先 *xiān* 'first' and 瓤 *ráng* 'flesh of fruit'. These reforms were seen as a crucial step in modernising the Chinese script and 'reducing the rate of illiteracy in the country' (Lou 2007, 177). The use of simplified characters is standard practice in education, in print and on the internet in the People's Republic of China and Singapore today. Traditional characters, however, have come to be associated with positive connotations like affluence, good taste and cultural pride and prestige, which is why they are still used occasionally in commercial and other signs. In Hong Kong, Macao and Taiwan, however, the traditional script has remained the standard, although most readers can read simplified characters fluently (Wiedenhof 2015, 359–401). Traditional characters are still said to be used in these regions in order to steer away from the revolutionary discourse of mainland China (Lou 2007, 177).

It is important to keep in mind, however, that the Chinese script is used not only for well-known languages like Mandarin and Cantonese, but also for smaller languages like Hakka and Min, and even languages which are not spoken anymore, such as Classical Chinese. This means that whenever found, the script could reflect several different languages, rather than 'the Chinese language' (which does not exist as such anyway). Because these languages can be very hard to identify based on their written form only, we did not distinguish between different languages in our inventory. Instead, and

following the practice adopted in publications like Amos (2016), we will use the term ‘Chinese’ as a cover term for all languages encountered in our area in Chinese script, though we will distinguish between whether the text is represented in traditional or simplified characters for reasons explained above.

In addition, the establishments we encountered in Chinatown were classified on the basis of the following characteristics:

- (1) Name of the street and street number
- (2) Type of establishment
- (3) Name of the establishment
- (4) Language(s) on façades, advertisements, posters, menus placed outside and other related texts, including their functions (informational/symbolic), ordered according to visual dominance
- (5) Type of multilingualism (duplicating/fragmentary/complementary), if not monolingual
- (6) Owner’s country or region of origin

By way of illustration, one of our entries looks like this:

- (1) Gedempte Burgwal 39
- (2) Restaurant
- (3) Full Moon City
- (4) Simplified Chinese (symbolic), English (informational), Dutch (informational)
- (5) Complementary multilingualism
- (6) China

Figure 8 shows the entrance of this restaurant, with text decorating the doorway in simplified, symbolic Chinese characters, meaning ‘full moon food square’.

Most of the above-mentioned characteristics proved to be relatively straightforward to determine, even without having to enter the establishments. Many of the signs, posters, menus and advertisements visible on a single establishment had different languages and functions, all of which were recorded. Languages were identified based on our recognition of them; Chinese characters were easiest to recognise.

During our fieldwork, we were sometimes treated with suspicion by some of the owners of the establishments we were classifying. If we were unable to find the house number of an establishment, these were later identified with the help of Google and Google Maps. Decisions on the function of each visible language and the type of Chinese characters used were based on our own judgements and knowledge of the Chinese script. We decided to base our understanding of the ethnic diversity of The Hague’s Chinatown on the owners’ expected countries or regions of origin. In doing so, we primarily based our judgments on language proficiency, not country or region of birth, so that second or third-generation Chinese people who were born in The Hague were also characterised as ‘Chinese’. Occasionally, it proved complicated to classify the owners: a speaker of the Chinese Hakka language from Suriname could be listed under China and/or Suriname. In such cases we mostly consulted the people inside the establishments, but to avoid addressing potentially sensitive issues about ethnicity, we simply asked what languages were spoken by the people working at the establishment. Often, combining the answers to this question with the languages that were visible from the street and the presence of other features like regional flags or decorations turned out to be enough to determine the owner’s origin with some degree of certainty. In other cases, we made an educated guess or noted down ‘unknown’. Establishments that communicated a clearly supranational or international identity in terms of their services, clients or owners were marked as ‘international’. The Redeemer Church, for instance, advertised itself as an international church by displaying many different national flags. What was not considered while classifying the



Figure 8. Chinese restaurant Full Moon City on Gedempte Burgwal.

establishments was the direction of writing in the signs, i.e. running from left to right, from right to left or from top to bottom, in contrast to, for example, Lou (2007).

Our findings

During our fieldwork trip, we identified exactly one hundred establishments, nine of them situated in Sint Jacobstraat, 22 in Gedempte Gracht, 25 in Gedempte Burgwal and 44 in Wagenstraat; all these will be analysed below. The types of establishments found are predominantly restaurants (34), though there were also 21 nail parlours, hair dressers, massage and other beauty salons. Other types include shops (23), supermarkets (10), bars or cafes (7), two offices and a hotel. There are also an international church (cf. Blommaert 2013, 90–106), and, as already discussed, a mosque. As for the regions of origin of the owners of these establishments, as interpreted from their shop fronts or from conversations with their owners, China, with 40 out of 100, predominates, followed by The Netherlands (16). Here, The Netherlands as a region of origin includes people born in The Netherlands, excluding immigrants with Dutch nationality. Other regions, like Thailand (4), Japan (3) and Suriname (2), were found as well, though far less frequently. The category ‘unknown’ was also quite large: twelve establishments could not be assigned to a particular region. Figure 9 shows the distribution of the regions identified, with all those occurring only once being combined under ‘other’: Colombia, the Dominican Republic, the Dutch Antilles, Eritrea, Kenya, Lithuania, the Philippines, Sri Lanka, Vietnam, Asia (more generally) and the United States. In one case we found an interesting discrepancy between our expectations and the actual situation: Scally’s in Wagenstraat, an ‘English lunchroom’ offering sandwiches, ploughman’s lunch as well as ‘full high tea with scones’ (www.scallyslunchroom.nl/), proved to be run by an Eritrean who also spoke Italian. But since the language used was English, and since our aim was to classify establishments rather than their owners, that was how we classified it.

The most frequent language used on the signage in Chinatown was Dutch, which was predominantly found in an informational context. 81 per cent of the establishments included information in

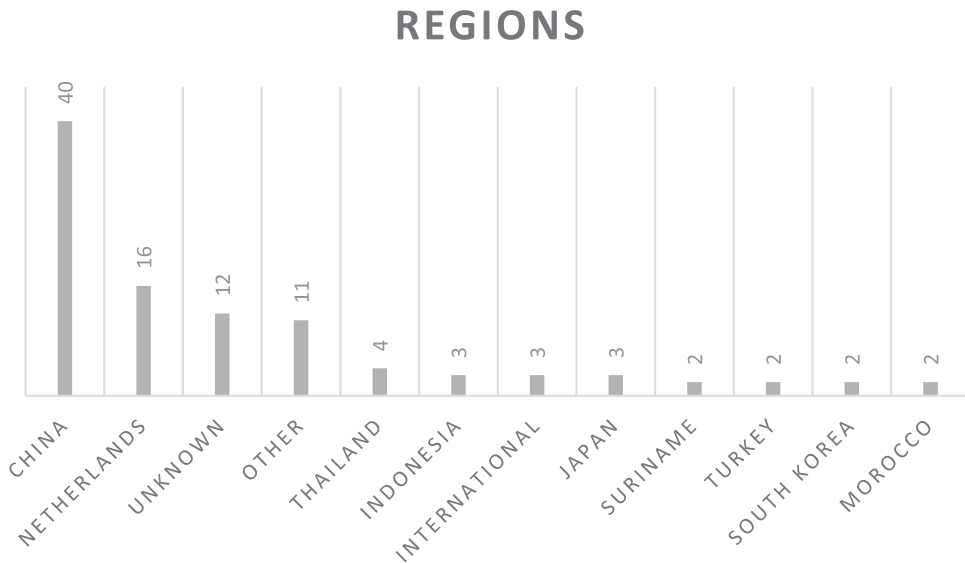


Figure 9. Region of origin of the establishments' owners in The Hague's Chinatown ($N = 100$).

Dutch about the shop, restaurant or their services or products. Next on our list is English, with 59 establishments using this language on shop windows and freestanding advertisements in informational English, as compared to eleven instances of its symbolic use, e.g. a pancake shop with Dutch owners calling itself 'Will's Pancake House'. As for the use of Chinese, 38 establishments included signage in this language, with eighteen instances being categorised as informational, like a restaurant providing the opening hours in Chinese, fourteen as symbolic, such as Chinese restaurants like Kaa Lun Palace⁶ that display their name in Chinese on the façade, and six as both informational and symbolic. Besides these three languages, we identified six other languages: Turkish, Arabic, Indonesian, Japanese, Korean and Thai (once each). Interestingly, all except Turkish were used only in a symbolic context, like the Thai restaurant saying อินดีต้อนรับ 'Welcome' on the front door. See Figure 10, in which informational instances of language use are marked with 'I' and symbolic ones with 'S'. Because multiple languages were used in the signage analysed, the total number of instances in the table below is higher than that of the number of establishments identified.

For the purpose of discussing language dominance in the Chinatown signage, we drew up a table displaying the relative dominance of all languages encountered, i.e. used as first, second, third or fourth language on a particular sign (Table 1).

Most establishments used only one or two languages, while four of them used more than three, in all cases informational English, as in prices of services in beauty salons or on restaurant menus. Dutch was used almost equally often as a first and as a second language in the signs, 38 and 37 times respectively, but was included as a third language only eight times – always for informational purposes. As for informational English, we see an interesting difference in that English is most often used as the first language (43 times), but also occasionally as a second (8), third (5) or fourth language (4). Symbolic English, as in the case of 'Welcome to Scally' on the window of lunchroom Scally's in Wagenstraat,⁷ appeared five times as both first and second languages, and once as the third language used. Informational Chinese was most frequently found as the second most dominant language on the shop or restaurant fronts, but also occasionally as first and third languages. The same goes for the symbolic use of Chinese as the third most dominant language. One instance of symbolic Arabic was found at the mosque, where we also noted the use of informational Turkish. The four remaining languages, Indonesian, Japanese, Korean and Thai, were used only in a symbolic context, with Thai occurring in second order of dominance, and the other three in third place.

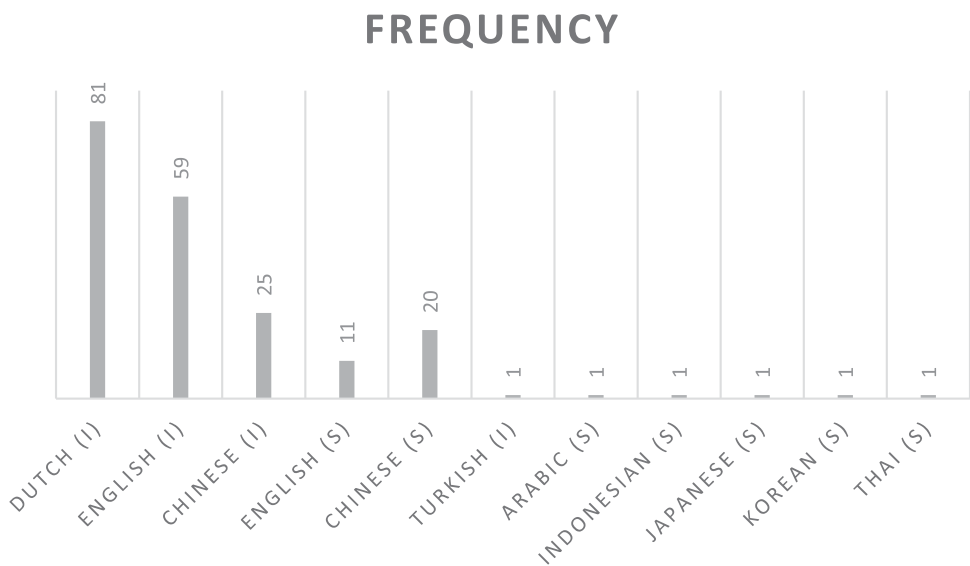


Figure 10. Languages present in the linguistic landscape of The Hague’s Chinatown.

The last part of our analysis of the languages identified in Chinatown’s linguistic landscape is the type of multilingualism found within an establishment’s signage. One-fourth of the signs were monolingual (see [Figure 11](#)), seventeen of which were in Dutch and eight in English; no other languages were found in a monolingual setting, not even Chinese. 47 signs featured complementary multilingualism, with different parts of the messages occurring in different languages; for instance, the Japanese restaurant Suzuran had posters with Japanese text displayed in the window, next to menus in English and an open/closed sign in Dutch. Our dataset contains only five instances of duplicating multilingual signs, found for instance at the Rainbow Hairstyles hair salon that displayed all information including prices in both Dutch and Chinese. The remaining signs contain fragmentary translations of the texts, mostly resulting in the co-occurrence of three different languages. Fragmentary multilingualism has already been illustrated at the outset of this paper in [Figure 2](#), with ‘Welcome’ occurring in 24 languages, including Chinese.

Focusing on the type of Chinese writing in the Chinatown signage, we found that as many as 38 establishments showed at least one sign in clearly legible Chinese characters. Each of these instances was categorised according to the following three main variables:

- Character type: traditional (T^{rad}), simplified (S^{impl})⁸
- Function: informational (I^{form}), symbolic (S^{ymb}), both (B)
- Street: Sint Jacobstraat (SJ), Gedempte Gracht (GG), Gedempte Burgwal (GB), Wagenstraat (WS)

Table 1. Dominance of the languages on the Chinatown signage, arranged from first to fourth position, including frequencies (divided into informational and symbolic functions) (Key: AR = Arabic, CH = Chinese, DU = Dutch, EN = English, IN = Indonesian, JP = Japanese, KO = Korean, TH = Thai, TR = Turkish).

FIRST		SECOND		THIRD		FOURTH	
EN (I)	43	DU (I)	37	DU (I)	8	EN (I)	4
DU (I)	38	CH (I)	13	CH (S)	6		
CH (I)	9	CH (S)	9	EN (I)	5		
CH (S)	5	EN (I)	8	CH (I)	4		
EN (S)	5	EN (S)	5	EN (S)	1		
AR (S)	1	TH (S)	1	IN (S)	1		
		TR (I)	1	JP (S)	1		
				KO (S)	1		

TYPE OF MULTILINGUALISM

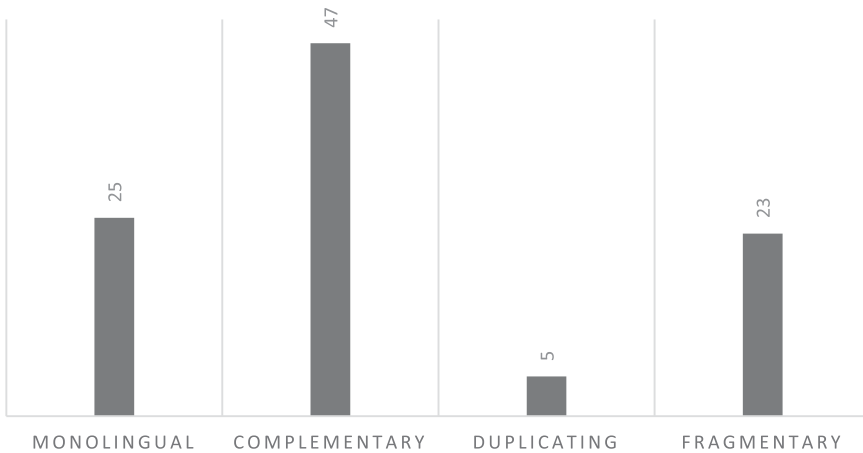


Figure 11. Types of multilingualism in the signs analysed ($N = 100$).

The first two variables allow for six possible combinations: $T^{rad} - I^{inform}$, $T^{rad} - S^{ymb}$, $T^{rad} - B$, $S^{impl} - I^{inform}$, $S^{impl} - S^{ymb}$ and $S^{impl} - B$. The category ‘both’ (B) applies to signs that are informational and symbolic at the same time. An example of this is shown in [Figure 12](#). This sign on a Chinese restaurant in Gedempte Burgwal displays the simplified characters 东北小吃 *dōngběi xiǎochī* ‘northeastern snacks’ in a large font, while the Dutch equivalent *NOORD-OOST CHINEES EETHUIS* ‘Northeastern Chinese dinery’ is given in a much smaller font. The duplicating nature of this bilingual text, targeting (monolingual) Chinese and Dutch readers, thus suggests that the function of the Chinese text was informational. Additionally, the greater visual dominance of the Chinese text, highlighting the restaurant’s Chinese identity, confirms its symbolic function.

[Table 2](#) shows all 38 instances classified according to these six categories and the streets they occur in. Surprisingly, not a single sign in Sint Jacobstraat (SJ) included any Chinese characters.



Figure 12. Sign with both an informational and a symbolic function (Gedempte Burgwal).

Table 2. Frequencies of signs with Chinese characters per category and street ($N = 38$).

	SJ	GG	GB	WS	TOT
$T^{rad} - I^{inform}$	–	3	3	1	7
$T^{rad} - S^{ymb}$	–	3	3	4	10
$T^{rad} - B$	–	–	1	–	1
$S^{impl} - I^{inform}$	–	–	3	8	11
$S^{impl} - S^{ymb}$	–	1	–	3	4
$S^{impl} - B$	–	–	4	1	5
TOT	–	7	14	17	38

Table 3. Frequencies of signs with informational or symbolic Chinese characters per character type and function ($N = 32$).

	I^{inform}	S^{ymb}	TOT
T^{rad}	7	10	17
S^{impl}	11	4	15
TOT	18	14	32

The combined frequencies for all four streets in Table 2 can be reinterpreted according to character type and function of the signage. Focusing on the distinction between signs with either a purely informational or a purely symbolic function, 32 instances in all, Table 3 shows the division of these signs according to the combined categories $T^{rad} - I^{inform}$, $T^{rad} - S^{ymb}$, $S^{impl} - I^{inform}$ or $S^{impl} - S^{ymb}$. The table shows that in roughly two-thirds of all 32 instances the Chinese characters are either traditional and symbolic, or simplified and informational. The association between both variables is visualised in Figure 13, showing that, indeed, most traditional characters are symbolic and most simplified ones informational.

The diagram illustrates that simplified characters are more often used for informational than for symbolic purposes, while the reverse is true for the use of traditional characters, though less clearly so. Traditional characters are thus more often used for both informational and symbolic functions, while simplified ones tend to be preferred for informational purposes only.

The following two pictures are examples of the association between character type and function. Figure 14 shows the name of a travel agency in Wagenstraat, indicated by a sign with simplified characters which are used for informational purposes: 蓝天国际旅游商务中心 *Lántiān guójì lǚyóu*

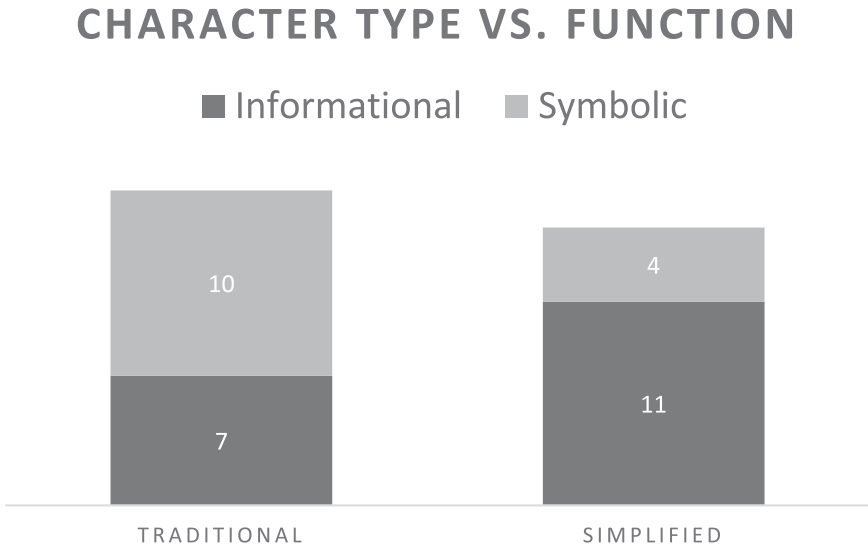


Figure 13. Character type (traditional/simplified) vs. function (informational/symbolic).



Figure 14. Sign with simplified characters used for informational purposes (Wagenstraat).

shāngwù zhōngxīn 'Blue Sky international travel business centre'. The sign in Figure 15, which is the Chinese translation of 'Welcome' on the window of Moroccan restaurant Bab el Medina in Wagenstraat, reads 歡迎 *huānyíng* 'Welcome'. The characters used are traditional and have a symbolic function, as appears from the many other translations surrounding it.

Another interesting example is the sign in Figure 16 on the door of a shop on Gedempte Burgwal: it displays characters used symbolically: 歡迎光臨 *huānyíng guānglín* 'Welcome'. However, the characters are neither traditional nor simplified but are given in Small Seal script, which is an archaic writing form. The difference in shape between the traditional characters shown above and the Small Seal characters is shown very clearly.



Figure 15. Sign with traditional characters used for symbolic purposes (Wagenstraat).



Figure 16. Sign with Small Seal characters used for symbolic purposes (Gedempte Burgwal).

Our findings interpreted

To begin with, our findings show that The Hague's Chinatown is less Chinese than its designated character led us to expect. Only 40 of the 100 establishments on our list proved to be Chinese. Moreover, many more regions are represented in the area, including Thailand, Indonesia and Japan, while Sint Jacobstraat contained not a single identifiably Chinese shop or restaurant. Furthermore, establishments from elsewhere were present as well: from Morocco, Turkey and Suriname. These three countries represent the largest population groups of The Hague apart from its native Dutch citizens: 5.9, 7.5 and 8.6 per cent, respectively, according to the figures in *Den Haag in Cijfers* for 2019. The presence of these establishments in an officially designated Chinatown area confirms that the area is no longer viewed as exclusively Chinese, despite its visual representation as such. An example of such a narrow visual representation was found in December 2019, when Christmas trees decorated all Chinatown establishments (Figure 17), even though Christmas is not traditionally associated with Chinese culture. The accompanying sign is bilingual, with the Chinese characters appearing in simplified script. The general message does not correspond with any functional information, merely expressing a wish to potential clients; hence, this sign is symbolic.

Chinese, moreover, is not even the most frequently encountered language on the establishments in our collection. If we look at the figures in Table 1, adding up the occurrence of the languages irrespective of their prominence on the signage, we notice that Dutch is used most frequently (83 instances), followed by English (65), with Chinese coming third with only 46 instances. In this light it is striking to see a hybrid translation of the Chinese message for 'Welcome' in Figure 16: the word is neither Dutch (*welkom*) nor English (*welcome*). In his analysis of Berchem (Antwerp), Blommaert (2013, 56, 75), too, found that Dutch was the most visible language in the area, and he similarly found spelling errors in the Dutch on the signage there.

As for the type of Chinese characters used in The Hague's Chinatown, our data shows that Chinese characters are used somewhat more frequently for informational than for symbolic purposes (18 vs. 14 instances), but that there is a difference between the application of traditional and simplified characters (Figure 13): with virtually identical numbers, i.e. 10 for traditional – symbolic and 11 for simplified – informational use, the two scripts serve different ends, agreeing with current usage in mainland China. This suggests that most of today's speakers of Chinese in The Hague's Chinatown are from mainland China (cf. Section 2). Another possibility would be the accommodation



Figure 17. Christmas trees about to be distributed among Chinatown's shopkeepers (December 2019).

by the owners of establishments from other Chinese-speaking areas, like Taiwan or Hong Kong, to the people from mainland China. What we find in The Hague's Chinatown thus differs from the function which Chinese characters have in Manchester: although some signs are used there to convey information to readers of Chinese (Gaiser and Matras 2016, 72–74), they are primarily used 'for decoration and effect' and to provide 'aesthetic value' to the area (2016, 69, 70).

Conclusions

Our linguistic landscape analysis of The Hague's Chinatown has thus shown that the area is considerably less Chinese than its name suggests. Not only do Chinese people no longer live there – not uncommon in the historical development of Chinatowns elsewhere – the number of actual Chinese establishments makes up around forty percent of the ones currently there, with the other sixty percent being non-Chinese establishments like the Moroccan restaurant mentioned in the Introduction. Willems, Cottaar, and Or (2010, 210–211) list nine Chinese restaurants in the area around 2010, only four of which are still there, although new restaurants have opened since. Calling the area 'Asian' would do greater justice to its current nature. For all that, its visual representation, with

Chinese lanterns, sayings in Classical Chinese on the kerbstones and bilingual street signs, continues to allow visitors to identify the area as Chinatown.

The Hague's Chinatown was officially designated as a tourist area, a common development affecting similar areas around the world as well (Pang and Rath 2007). The Manchester City Council, too, according to Gaiser and Matras (2016, 71), 'officially recognises and celebrates Chinese culture', thus turning Chinatown into 'an ethnically defined place' where multilingual signage was adopted for marketing purposes (2019, 92) (cf. Stoicheva 2016). In The Hague, this is not only reflected in the visual representation of Chinatown, but also in the tourist information signs aimed at the general public. These days, also Chinese visitors are an important target group: The Hague's official website, <https://denhaag.com/nl>, now provides information in three languages, Dutch, English and Chinese. The municipality is evidently very keen to attract this group of tourists. Unlike for Washington DC's Chinatown, however, there are no official rules regarding the use of Chinese characters on shopfronts or restaurant windows (see Pang and Rath 2007, 204–211). Such official regulations might stipulate the use of simplified and traditional characters, or the presence of Chinese translations of informational signs, such as opening hours. Their absence has allowed Chinatown in The Hague to develop a more generally Asian character, thus in practice reducing its nature as a themed Chinese ethnoscape. It also led to the establishment in the area of restaurants and other businesses that reflect The Hague's current ethnic makeup, like the restaurant Bab el Medina with which this paper began. Carson (2016, 61) discusses shopfronts as 'individual discourses' or 'expressions of the shop owner's local or global identity': this is indeed how we should interpret the addition of the words for 'Welcome' in many of The Hague's languages on the window of Bab el Medina. Sadly, however, the attempt at drawing in a wider clientele, which we suspected might have been the reason for this initiative, proved unsuccessful: when we were completing this article, the restaurant was closed and awaiting a new owner. It will be interesting to see what linguistic background the new establishment will prove to represent.

Notes

1. Manchester's Chinatown is 'the second largest Chinatown in the UK and third largest of Europe' (Gaiser and Matras 2016, 35); Liverpool's Chinatown includes eleven streets (Amos 2016).
2. Pang and Rath (2007, 204) note that Washington DC's Chinatown, too, used to be inhabited by Jewish (as well as German) immigrants. See also Huang (2018, 185).
3. Personal observation by Ingrid Tieken, who lived in The Hague as a teenager between 1970 and 1973 (cf. Pang and Rath 2007, 193).
4. For privacy reasons, these names could not be reproduced here. However, since the name boards are publicly visible from the streets, they can easily be checked, though it should be noted that residence in the area is not permanent, and that the figure quoted, like the overview of the establishments in Chinatown that will be discussed below, represents only a snapshot in time. This is another characteristic of superdiverse cities (Blommaert 2013, 6). Furthermore, it should be noted that Chinese names found on the doorbell boards do not necessarily reflect language proficiency, since the carriers of these names may well be second or third-generation immigrants who no longer speak or write Chinese.
5. All romanisations of Chinese characters are given in the *Hànyǔ pīnyīn* system. Here, both Chinese notations 繁體字 and 簡體字 are given in the traditional script.
6. The spelling of this restaurant's name varies: we found *Kaa Lun Palace*, *Lun Palace*, *Kee Lun Palace* and *Kalun*.
7. All other signage on its window is informational English. Because of the similarity to other welcome signs in Chinatown (cf. Figure 2), we classified 'Welcome to Scally' as symbolic.
8. Because many characters remained unchanged after the script reforms, certain character combinations can be interpreted as both traditional and simplified. But since we only encountered signs that were clearly either traditional or simplified, we did not add 'both' (B) as a third category.

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Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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