CHAPTER SEVEN

Problematizing “Chinatowns”: Conflicts and Narratives Surrounding Chinese Quarters in and around Paris

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When asked whether there is a Chinatown in Paris, one often thinks of the Thirteenth Arrondissement, or more precisely, the “Triangle de Choisy” (Tabola-Leonetti and Guillon 1985; Raulin 1988), which is mainly inhabited by the massive wave of refugees that arrived from Southeast Asia at the end of the 1970s. However, several additional areas with a high Chinese population density can be found within the city of Paris, among which some have a longer histories of settlement, and all are more distinctly Chinese than the Thirteenth. They are located in parts of the Third Arrondissement (Temple — Gravilliers, Ma Mung 2000:107-111), in Belleville, at the crossroads between the Nineteenth, Twentieth, Tenth and Eleventh arrondissements, as well as parts of the Eleventh (Sedaine-Popincourt) and Nineteenth arrondissements (Flandre).¹ These areas were formed as a result of successive waves of migration; they started with the arrival of several Wenzhou merchants in the mid-19th century, continued in between the two World Wars with immigrants from Wenzhou and Qingtian, and resumed after the opening of China in 1978 (Poisson 2004, 2005). As migration intensified in the 1980s and 1990s, these areas have become more densely Chinese, both from the point of view of the percentage of the resident population, and the number of restaurants and shops offering Chinese food and goods. These immigrants originate predominantly from Zhejiang province, and secondarily from Fujian and Northeast China (the latter being known as Dongbei). Pockets of recently immigrated Chinese population can also be found in the Paris suburbs, in towns such as Ivry-sur-Seine, Bagnolet, Pantin, Aubervilliers, La Courneuve and Lognes. Approximately 90% of the estimated 400,000 Chinese in France live and work in Paris and its suburbs.²

¹ The City of Paris is divided into twenty arrondissements (districts), each of which is run by a municipal council and a mayor (maire d’arrondissement).
² This is only an estimation. For several reasons it is difficult to calculate precisely the exact numbers of ethnic Chinese in France. First of all, ethnic Chinese emigrating from Laos, Vietnam
This chapter does not aim at giving a comprehensive tableau covering the whole of the Chinese presence in Paris and the wider Paris region (Île de France). Its focus is on two reputedly Chinese areas, one in Paris’ intra muros (inner city), Popincourt, and the other on the outskirts of Paris, Aubervilliers. Both share a common feature that sets them apart from the other Chinese quarters. They are specialized in the clothing and leather manufacturing industry and wholesale business. Their clients are mostly French-owned clothing and shoes retail chains and trade-marks, and, to a lesser extent, Chinese retailers in other French cities and retailers from other European countries (Belgium, the Netherlands, Germany, Spain, Italy). Despite a small number of goods produced in local sweatshops run by ethnic networks, the goods they sell are mostly imported from China, and a smaller proportion from Italy, where there is also a voluminous Zhejiang community specialized in textile industry.

Our overall question is how these quartiers chinois (Chinese quarters) emerge as such, that is, how they are spatially constituted and socially defined as “Chinese” — or not. Building on the material gathered in the course of a wider ethnographic study of the Chinese in Paris, we take a comparative perspective to examine how, in both areas, social problems have emerged in relation to the high concentration of Chinese wholesale shops, and how they have been dealt with. More precisely, what we refer to here are the sequences of actions undertaken by local residents, entrepreneurs and politicians in order to counter the extension of wholesale businesses and/or to fight against their consequences in terms of street traffic jams, noise and pollution, and alteration of the city landscape. We will describe the differing ways in which this “problem” has been defined and addressed. Thus, rather than taking the “problem” as a given set of objective conditions, we draw inspiration from the sociological literature (Blumer 1971; Gusfield 1981; Kitsuse and Spector 1973a, 1973b; and Cambodia are difficult to extract from the total population. Secondly, census data on French citizens does not separate different ethnic groups, thus if both parents have already obtained French citizenship, their children will be automatically counted as French. Finally, the large number of undocumented immigrants and their children are not accounted for in the statistics. A very prudent estimate is around 400,000 persons in France (Ma Mung 2009), whereas some other sources claims roughly 600,000 to 700,000. In all cases, Paris is often referred to as the biggest “Chinatown” in Europe.

3 Except for Temple-Gravilliers quarter, which also has a dense concentration of wholesale shops, the other Chinese quarters such as Choisy and Belleville are specialized in food supply (Chinese groceries, supermarkets and restaurants) and offer a range of commercial activities and services aimed at their Chinese residents (banks, real estate, libraries and music/DVD stores). Our analysis of the process that Popincourt is undergoing is largely applicable to Temple-Gravilliers.

4 This includes Chuang’s doctoral research which focuses on the economic and spatial mobility of Chinese migrants in the Paris region since 1978 and Trémon’s study of the Aubervilliers municipal government’s policy of incorporating Chinese migrant entrepreneurs.
problematizing “chinatowns”

Schneider 1985; Cefai 1996) that treats “social problems” as definitional activities, constituted by the particular acts and interactions participants pursue, and by the process of such activities through time. According to Kitsuse and Spector, sociologists should study the “emergence and maintenance of claims-making and responses to these activities” (1973a, emphasis in original). Drawing from this “constructionist” perspective, we are less interested in what Kitsuse and Spector refer to as the “imputed conditions” — the traffic jams etc. Rather, we offer a comparative analysis of the assertions or grievances and claims made by groups with respect to these conditions. We look at how the problems have been causally defined, the solutions that have been offered, and how the problem has been put on the public agenda.

In both cases the facts that are imputed can be considered as derived from the density and high number of Chinese-run wholesale businesses. However, in one case (Popincourt), the situation has been causally attributed to the clustering of wholesale suppliers or “mono-activité”, a categorization that bears a negative connotation and refers to a problem to be solved — the “singleness” and “uniformity” of wholesale business. In the other case (Aubervilliers), this “singleness” in itself is not an issue and it is rather viewed with a positive eye; it is only the undesirable consequences of this situation — the traffic jams — that are at stake.

In the course of the solution-seeking process, the degree of publicization of these social problems varies accordingly. This is the reason why we chose to use the term “social problems” rather than “public problems”. Although Kitsuse and Spector situate “attempts to transform private troubles into public issues” in stage one of the “natural history” of social problems, Gusfield (1981:5) distinguishes “public problems” from “social problems” by the fact that the claims are made not in the name of private persons or interest groups, but in the name of the public good.5 Here we will see that in both cases, mobilizations against problems of traffic and street occupation by the Chinese are made on behalf of individuals and groups who defend their private interests. This does not imply that there are no dynamics of publicization of the “social problem”; the mobilized groups do call on public institutions (municipal governments, police and justice) to solve the problem — the social problem is put in the public arena and on the agenda of public institutions. Our ethnographic material shows that there can be a publicization of “social problems” without any reference to the “public good” — in the process of this publicization, what occurs is a “privatization” of the public institutions’ intervention.

This analytical focus on social problems is intended to reach a better understanding of the place of the Chinese in the making of these urban areas. Indeed, in retracing the processes whereby solutions to these problems have been sought and negotiated between the Chinese wholesalers, neighborhood residents or other economic actors, and the public institutions, we shall analyze how the Chinese-related aspect of the social problem has been dealt with. In both cases, we argue a “culturalizing” narrative has emerged, proclaiming Sino-French friendship, intercultural dialogue, and the great input of Chinese culture for the local territory. Following Cefai (1996: 47), we consider this discourse as the frame of reference within which the social problem is “stabilized, thematized and interpreted”. It is “acted out in a dynamic of production and reception of interpretative and descriptive narratives” (Cefai 1996: 47).

Racism, in France, is primarily directed against immigrants from Northern and Sub-Saharan Africa and there is currently a tide of “Islamophobia” stirred up by the extreme-right National Front Party. The Chinese are generally viewed as “model immigrants”, hard working, low profile etc. Indeed, in the cases we present, the actors were very cautious about their actions against mono-activity and traffic-jams not being interpreted as the expression of xenophobia. Hence the form and scope of “culturalizing narratives” differ in Popincourt and Aubervilliers. In inner Paris (Popincourt) it comprises mainly the promotion of Chinese culture through festivals and exhibitions, and inscribes the Chinese in the multi-layered migration history of the neighborhood. It is explicitly destined to soften what could otherwise be interpreted as an outcome of sino-phobia, namely the fight against the high concentration of wholesale shops. In outer Paris (Aubervilliers), by contrast, there is an attempt not so much to limit the concentration of wholesale activity, but on the contrary, to promote this area as one specialized in trade with China; the cultural promotion of the area as a “Sino-French platform of exchange” is framed in the history of Aubervilliers as a city of immigration and serves the mayor’s policy of international relations that is expected to raise the profile of the city. There are also further implications in terms of the “otherizing” operated by these narratives that we shall return to in the conclusion.

As the comparison between inner and outer Paris reveals, the differing ways in which similar “problems” are expressed and handled can be explained by diverging municipal policies and in accordance with the sociological and economic proprieties of each territory’s occupants. Indeed, what is at stake in these social problems is a struggle for the occupation and management of urban space. One important difference is that Aubervilliers is an economic area and not a residential area, while the reverse is true for Popincourt. Another
striking difference is that in Aubervilliers, the authorities have decided to co-opt some Chinese elite entrepreneurs in their pursuit of the “urban growth machine” (Molotch 1976). Whereas in Aubervilliers a few persons own large pieces of land and their interest lies in renting this space to a maximum number of wholesalers, in inner Paris the local residents view the Chinese wholesale shops as a threat to the value of their apartments. Yet these characteristics are not natural features of these territories. They are the result of policies that define them as such — and in this respect the increased numerical presence of the Chinese acts as a revelation, for it pushed the local authorities toward decision-making. They have chosen one or the other option, the economic or the residential, (favoring activity or protecting “neighborhood life” (vie de quartier)) and in so doing, they have participated in the bricolage of an image and a narrative of the territory.

However, there is more to this comparison than just the outline of these differences. Although our chapter is formally organized following a parallel examination of each case study, it is also our intention to examine the connections between the two by taking a more global perspective. Indeed the relation between the two territories under study is underwritten by the relation between Paris and its banlieue (suburbs). Several studies have revealed the general trend toward the gentrification of inner Paris, with ever higher housing prices and commercial space rents, which translates into the eviction of the working classes and migrants toward the banlieue, and a tendency toward the disappearance of economic activities within the inner city (Corbille 2009; Clerval 2011; Collet 2008; Préteceille 2007; Vermeesch 2011). Under such logic, in Paris like in other world cities, cultural consumption has gained a central position in the formation of “urban lifestyle” (Smith 1987; Zukin 1998), and “diversity” has become the key element in the making of a cosmopolitan city (Corbillé and Lallement 2007). As a result, production — textile industry and wholesale commerce — is considered less “valuable” than cultural consumption — cafés, restaurants, bars, shops of luxury goods etc. — by political and economic actors. Or at very least, the activities of a lesser status that pose threats to the tranquility of Paris’ inhabitants and the value of their apartments.

One important element of historical contextualization is the textile activities of the Chinese, mainly import and wholesale and to a lesser extent manufacturing. These in fact became a quasi monopoly of the Chinese by the end the 1990s. The Sentier, long known as the main clothing manufacturing and wholesale area in Paris, run primarily by Jewish entrepreneurs, went through a crisis beginning in the 1990s. This begun after a series of police raids against sweatshops and the uncovering of a massive scandal, but the primary impetus
was increasing competition by the Chinese who started importing clothes and accessories from China. This intensified after China’s entry in the World Trade Organization in 2001 (Pria et Vicente 2006). As the Sentier turned into an area for high-tech and electronic media start-ups in the 1990s, the Chinese replaced the Jews in Paris’ clothing industry. Thus, Popincourt became known as a part of the “Chinese Sentier”, and now Aubervilliers has caught up with it. The Chinese in Aubervilliers and Popincourt share the same features: they mostly originate from Wenzhou, run family businesses in the textile and leather industry, and they migrated during roughly the same period, either to join their families who had arrived before 1949 or in the early 1970s, or as first generation immigrants, in the 1970s and 1980s. Some of the Aubervilliers’ wholesalers have arrived more recently, in the late 1990s and early 2000s, but most of them have moved from inner Paris to Aubervilliers as a result of the municipal policies aimed at reducing the number of wholesalers. The Chinese in both quarters are thus homogeneous in terms of their occupation and cultural and social background, and they form an interconnected web of social relations straddling two generations (even three in some cases).

Therefore, it is against this general background and the center-periphery relation between Paris and its banlieue that our ethnographic descriptions and analyses must be understood. One distinctive feature is the fact that in Popincourt, the Chinese wholesalers have the possibility to own their shops, whereas in Aubervilliers, they rent them. The policies, not stated as such, but that amount de facto to this, of displacing the wholesale shops to the suburbs therefore also amounts to turning them into dependents of those to whom they rent their shop floors.

This chapter is divided into three sections, following three logics: the production, the construction, and the rescaling of space. The production of space bears a materialist emphasis that is useful to analyze the historical emergence and the political and economic formation of space. The construction of space denotes the phenomenological and symbolic experience of space as it is mediated by social relations of exchange, conflict and domination; this notion seeks to capture the transformation of space in meaningful scenes and actions (Low 1999: 112). A third dimension in the case of Popincourt and Aubervilliers

6 The Sentier was famous as an area with a concentration of sweatshops with migrant workers from many nationalities. Thus, it was also regularly visited by labor inspectors and police looking to crack down on illegal labor practice. The rise of “Popincourt” can be seen as an extension of the Sentier’s model of production. Faced with price competition from the Popincourt neighborhood, the entrepreneurs who chose to stay in the ready-to-wear industry tended to transform their target to the high-end market. See “Un quartier sur emprise chinoise”, Le Figaro, 15/10/1998, “Pas de Quartier pour le Sentier”, Libération 06/06/2005.
is the situation of space — the scalarity process of situating that portion of space at the more or less local or global level, thereby attaching a specific image to it — ‘the neighborhood’ ‘the international center for . . .’ etc. Whereas the process of conflict-resolution in Popincourt occurred at the local level and consisted — partly at least — in inscribing the Chinese in the history of the neighborhood, in Aubervilliers it jumped from neighborhood relations to the global scale of international relations. In the first section, we shall examine what has led to these situations of conflict in both areas (the production of space); in the second section, how it has been dealt with and negotiated (the construction of space); and finally, how these attempts at solving the conflict have both implied “culturalizing” narratives whose meaning and scope differ according to the scale at which they situate these spaces: the neighborhood in the case of Popincourt, the level of international relations in the case of Aubervilliers.

The Making of Chinese Wholesale Areas

Popincourt

The “Popincourt” neighborhood is located in Paris’ 11ème arrondissement, in the eastern part of Paris intra-muros, between the Bastille and Nation squares, and is delimited by five streets: rue de la Roquette, avenue Parmentier, rue Lacharrière, boulevard Richard-Lenoir, rue Saint Sabin in an area totaling 34 hectares (APUR 2001). The street “Popincourt” is in the heart of this area and is with highest concentration of wholesale shops. Today there are more than 600 wholesale clothing shops in this neighborhood, mostly owned by migrant entrepreneurs originating from the region around Wenzhou, in the Zhejiang province. Like the other neighborhoods of east Paris, it is historically a working class quarter where large waves of immigrants7 from the rural regions of France, especially peasants from Auvergne,8 who settled down during the 19th century. In the 1920’s, about 3000 Sephardi Jews escaping from the decomposition of

7 As Harvey (2003) has vividly illustrated, the socio-spatial structure of modern Paris was formed in the 19th century out of Haussmann’s renovations, aiming at transforming Paris into a center of consumption and capitalism and thus driving the working poor out of the city. Therefore, several department stores and shopping boulevards meant for bourgeois and tourists were built in Western Paris. On the other hand, the neighborhood to the east of Boulevard Sebastopol, one of Paris’ central axes that traces the boundary between the western and eastern parts of the city, was left with small industries and mainly populated by workers and rural migrants.

8 A region in central France famous for its tradition of emigration in the 19th century (cf. Tardieu 2001).
Ottoman Empire arrived here and launched a variety of small commerce: cafés, restaurants, hotels and linen shops. Numerous buildings with Jewish symbols such as butchers, grocery stores, synagogues and cults were also part of the neighborhood landscape (Benveniste 1999). The social composition of Eastern Paris experienced a transformation from the 1980s onwards, consisting in a gradual process of gentrification in the 10th, 11th, 12th and 19th arrondissement of Paris, following urban renovation. As a result, young middle class become neighbors with workers and migrants, sharing sidewalks and cafés in the same quarters (Clerval 2008, 2011).

Chinese wholesalers started to settle down in Popincourt in the mid-1990s. Most of the Zhejiang shop-owners had family members already in Paris before World War II, and arrived in Paris in the early 1970s and 1980s. Like migrants in other global cities, many of them were quickly absorbed by the ready-to-wear industry and joined the supply chain by running family-based workshops or working in the factories (Green 1997; Waldinger 1984). Many were taught their first lessons of the clothing industry in the Sentier, a wholesale clothing market created by Ashkenazi Jews before the war and then dominated by Sephardic Jewish merchants in Paris’ 2nd Arrondissement, less than 10 minutes’ drive from Popincourt. For example, consider the trajectory of Mr. J. Upon his arrival in Paris in the 1980s, he launched a family textile workshop manufacturing clothes for Jewish wholesalers in the Sentier. After five years as a restaurant owner, he said that he had found himself “more passionate (Reqing) with the world of clothes,” and therefore started his wholesale shop on Rue du Chemin Vert, in Popincourt, in 1996. As he explained,

In the 1980s, there were already several linen and wholesale shops in this area, some of them owned by Jewish entrepreneurs and others by ethnic Chinese from Indochina. Many Chinese worked for them as manufacturers, and it was through this contact that we (Zhejiang natives) got to know the ready-to-wear industry. We learned everything from the Jewish people... not only the logic of the clothing industry, but also that of life: hard-work, driving nice cars, and being discreet.9

At the beginning of the 1990s, several Wenzhou migrants started buying shops from the Jewish merchants. At the same time, the continuing migratory flows from Zhejiang joined the home-based workshops and became a huge “industrial reserve army” as suppliers. Eyeing the model of the Jewish Sentier, in the space of a few years the Zhejiang migrants rented (and less often bought) hundreds of commercial floors in the neighborhood and transformed them into

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9 Interview 18/02/2011 with Mr. J, age 50, who arrived in Paris in 1985 and started his shop in Popincourt in 1996.
wholesale shops. In 2001, the number of wholesale shops in the area reached 332, amounting for 52% of the commerce in the neighborhood (APUR 2001). By 2010, the number of clothing wholesale shops had reached 621 and has expanded to the adjacent streets.10

Chinese entrepreneurs’ rapid arrival has not only changed the urban landscape, but also the quality of neighborhood life. The local shops marking “artisanship” such as bakeries, butcheries, cafés and restaurants have been replaced by wholesale clothing shops targeting clients all over Europe, the Middle East and Africa, bringing traffic jams and plenty of garbage. More discreetly, illegal workers (mostly undocumented migrants from Zhejiang, sometimes with family relationship with the shop-owners) have moved into basements and apartments where they manufacture clothing night and day.

Aubervilliers

What has become known as the “district of Chinese wholesalers” in Aubervilliers is adjacent to Paris. It lies in the South of Aubervilliers, just across from the boulevard périphérique, the highway that encircles Paris. For the past several centuries the area has functioned as a warehouse for the town of Paris, and it took part in the urban transformations of the 19th century and the emergence of Paris as an economic center (Backouche 2006: 3-5). The configuration of the site as it looks now owes much to the canals that were built during the first half of the century by the Hainguerlot, leading to the formation of a huge estate in the hands of this family. In 1874 the grounds located close to the canal in Aubervilliers were bought by the Société Anonyme des Entrepôts et Magasins Généraux d’Aubervilliers et Saint-Denis, a company whose purpose was the management of customs and duties on colonial products stored in the warehouses. The company became the Compagnie des Entrepôts et Magasins Généraux in 1879, presided over by Baron Haussmann. Thereafter the site was extended from porte de La Villette to La Porte de La Chapelle. In the early decades of the 20th century, paper and chemical industries established themselves in the area, but from the 1960s on, there was a general shift to the service sector.

Today, these former warehouses are owned by a company named ICADE. It was at first a sub-branch of the state-owned Caisse des Dépôts et Consignations (CDC), specializing in investments deemed strategic for the French economy. After it was privatized and went public in 2006, the company turned toward its most profitable activity, commercial real estate. Within the area under study,

10 Statistics provided by SEMAEST during an interview 08/03/2011.
ICADE owns roughly 3/4 of the land, and part of it is now rented to companies who need office space rather than storage space. ICADE leases commercial space to businesses that need both the space and the proximity to Paris.

One of ICADE’s biggest clients is Eurasia Company. Its director, Mr. Wang, has been instrumental in the shift of this area from warehouses to wholesalers. The company was created in 1993, and during its first years the economic growth of the company relied on its import activities from China. From 2000 onwards, Mr. Wang started to be active in real estate market. He bought what was then Europe’s biggest import center the “LEM 888”. He subdivided this space into sub units which he rented to Chinese wholesalers. As far as we know, he also imported goods and sold them to these same wholesalers. And as this strategy of fractioning left no space for storing the goods, he bought new warehouses further north, in La Courneuve, which he also divided into parts to rent to these same wholesalers.\(^{11}\) Mr. Wang’s strategy reflects an overall tendency toward pushing warehouses further away from Paris and this is a general pattern in upward economic trajectories. He has followed the model of several Jewish entrepreneurs who were there before in Aubervilliers, and several smaller Wenzhou businessmen have tried to follow his footsteps.

These trends and strategies account for the current morphology and physical aspect of this area. In less than a decade, the number of showrooms (the shops where wholesalers exhibit their goods) has grown from a few units to several hundred. There is today an estimated figure of more than 700 wholesalers in what has become known as the Chinese wholesalers’ area. This does not mean that they live there, as they live in Paris or in the suburbs. Neither are all of them Chinese nationals. We have not yet done a systematic survey but we can estimate that more than half of the so-called “Chinese wholesalers” are the sons and daughters of immigrants whose parents have helped them start a business in Aubervilliers. Their employees are more recent immigrants. We maintain the label ‘Chinese wholesalers’ to the extent that their wholesale business consists of selling clothes, shoes, and all sorts of goods that are made in China. The numeric growth of what the French media refer to as “la communauté chinoise d’Aubervilliers” is visible at the time of the New Year, as the dragons are supposed to enter each shop. More dragons are needed each year and it takes more time for each dragon to tour the shops. A new construction project named “Fashion Center” has started in spring 2012 and is expected to attract a great number of wholesalers in Popincourt neighborhood to move in 2014.

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Mobilizations

Popincourt

Beginning in 1995, a series of mobilizations and campaigns aimed at preserving the Popincourt neighborhood’s quality of life and commercial diversity were launched separately by residents and the arrondissement’s government. The concept monoactivité, which generally refers to the specialization in a single economic sector, was singled out to designate the target of these mobilizations — wholesale shops and garment factories held by the Chinese.

Firstly, among the residents, an association was created in August 1995 with the name Sauvegarde du Quartier Popincourt (“Safeguarding the Popincourt Neighborhood” hereafter ASQP) to put pressure on the municipal governments (both the 11th arrondissement district government and the Paris Municipal Government) to engage in negotiations with Chinese entrepreneurs. We can identify two axes that guide its action: “how to cope with monoactivité?” and “what would be a better commercial implantation for the neighborhood?”

From its creation in 1995, residents’ action was largely focused on the concrete problem of environmental degradations in the neighborhood. A long list of degradation resulting from concentration of wholesale shops was made, including traffic jams, noise, air pollution, obstruction of sidewalks, risk of fire, illegal transformation of residential space into workshops, and a lack of respect towards neighborhood heritage.

Mr. G, one of its former members vividly described the shock brought by these “strangers”: “People are aggressive all the time. They honked their horns, they parked in all directions, they are always in a hurry from here to there, and the streets are in a permanent state of tension.” The high proportion of unlicensed drivers heightened fears of accidents. In fact, in May 2001, a car accident in a residential courtyard killed

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12 In Paris, the concentration of a single activity is not only visible in the Popincourt neighborhood. In Gravilliers-Temple neighborhood in the 3rd, the oldest Chinese neighborhood in Paris, there is also a high concentration of textile/accessories/leather product wholesale shops.

13 Although Popincourt is a residential area, few Chinese wholesalers live in the neighborhood where they work. According to a random survey conducted by Chuang among the Chinese, approximately 30% of the entrepreneurs live in the 11th Arrondissement (not necessarily in the Popincourt neighbourhood but for example in Belleville). However, many workers have moved into the apartments in the neighborhood. The Chinese are therefore visible in the neighborhood as both “entrepreneurs” and “residents”, but the residents’ association refers to only French residents.

14 Flyer “Sedaine-Popincourt” distributed in 2007.

15 Interview on February 18, 2011 with an ex-member of ASQP, a manager in his late 40s. He had arrived in the neighborhood in 1992 with his wife, and upon the birth of their first daughter, they bought their current apartment in Rue Popincourt in 1995.
a guard of Mr. G’s place, and thus provoked a lawsuit. Thereafter trucks were prohibited from entering the building’s courtyards.\textsuperscript{16}

To highlight these problems, the residents sought to negotiate with the wholesale entrepreneurs through official mediation of the arrondissement district government. Under the pressure of residents, the Chinese shop-owners have established their own association: Association des Commerçants Chinois du Prêt-à-Porter en France, (hereafter ACCPPF). After a difficult first encounter, other contacts led to the writing in September 2000 of a joint announcement entitled “The hygiene of the neighborhood is everyone’s business”, which was translated into two languages and diffused to the shops by the members of two associations.\textsuperscript{17} The Chinese shop-owners have selected five representatives, each one responsible for one street as a correspondent to dialogue with residents. A first step between residents and Chinese shop-owners was thus made. However, the number of wholesale shops continued to grow. Since 2000, residents’ claims have thus shifted to “delocalization” of the wholesale industry and have called for “commercial diversity” in the neighborhood. This implied a politicization of the problem, as well as its increased publicization. Several demonstrations were organized to highlight the disappearance of local shops.\textsuperscript{18} Inspectors of work and custom officers have come to the neighborhood to close down sweatshops where illegal workers assemble clothes and shoes. A petition was addressed to Betrand Delanoe, the Paris city mayor, to ask for the Municipal Government’s intervention. In addition, the association

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\textsuperscript{16} On May 3, 2001, a guard who was on duty in the inner court of a building was killed by a truck that was driving in reverse. It turned out that the truck’s driver was an undocumented worker hired by a transportation company and did not have a driver’s license. After the accident, the driver fled immediately. The building’s co-owners’ council (syndicat de copropriétaire) filed a case against the wholesale shop owner and asked that the gate be closed permanently and that only the side door be left open during work hours. In return, the latter required that the co-owners’ council to compensate the financial loss of transport company on a daily basis. The co-owners’ council won the case in 2005. (Cour de Cassation 3ème chambre civile, Arrêt No. 558 FS-D, 11 May 2005).
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\textsuperscript{17} ASQP’s president recalled the first contact with ACCPPF as such: “We learned about the establishment of ACCPPF. I went to Mr. Wang’s shop several times to invite him to participate in our associations’ general meeting. But on that day, another Chinese businessman who spoke little French came. He was apparently angry at us and the exchange was not good at all. It was a difficult encounter.” Interviewed on 15/02/2011.
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\textsuperscript{18} For example, in May of 2000, the residents organized a silent public meeting in front of a recently closed bakery to highlight the fact that it was bought by Chinese merchants. See “Le Quartier Popincourt ut se préserver sa boulangerie”, \textit{Le Parisien} 08/04/2000. In March 2001, another demonstration was organised to demand the departure of wholesale activity to remote suburbs. ASQP’s members went on the road on a Monday morning with a huge banner reading “Delocalisation”.
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has conducted a series of studies to outline the alternative services that the neighborhood is in need of (Cohen 2003; Pribetich 2005).

On the other hand, the politicians of the 11th Arrondissement have taken legal initiatives to restrain the development of wholesale activity. George Sarre, the left-wing city mayor affiliated to the MRC party, made a legal proposition in 1998 to demand the protection of commercial diversity by allowing arrondissement mayors to decide on transactions concerning commercial floors so as to preserve the interest of local artisans and small enterprises in the face of the unification of business activity.19 The law was opposed by the right-wing party, and was finally judged “against commercial liberty protected by constitution” by the Constitutional Council in 2003. Irritated by such a decision, Mayor Sarre organized two “strikes” in the name of Mairie en Colère — “The Arrondissement Government in Rage” — to attract public attention.20 According to him, the action is to protest against the Constitutional Council’s decision and to highlight the local district government’s need for a law to stop monopolization the wholesale business.21

During this confrontation, it was the combination of the ethnical and the economic dimensions that hardened the conflicts. Ostensibly, the residents and the politicians have focused on monoactivité, the concentration of a single industry in the city center and its impact on everyday life. However, lack of knowledge on this migrant community, convenient stereotypes such as “the mafia”, “suitcases of cash” or “human slavery” were evoked in media reports about the Chinese.22 These comments have, of course, annoyed the Chinese

19 The political party Mouvement Républicain et Citoyenne (Movement of Republican and Citizens) was the outcome of a split from the Socialist Party in 1991. MRC’s main agenda is to oppose the expansion of a supra-national system and a call for the defense of national sovereignty, economic protectionism and welfare for the working class.


21 See Le Parisian 23/05/2003, “En colère, George Sarre ferme sa mairie.” “This is a necessary action that I am forced to do to challenge the government. For over ten years, the monopolization of the textile wholesale trade has been growing. The Popincourt neighborhood has become an industrial zone where the shops are gone. We cannot allow such areas to settle in the heart of the city. It’s crazy! Especially since there is the same problem in other areas of Paris, such as that of the Gravilliers, the 10th, and the 18th Arrondissement. It is this law that we urgently require from the government.”

22 See Le Figaro 23/05/2003, “La révolte gronde dans le quartier Sedaine-Popincourt”. In this article regarding the arrondissement government’s strike, a journalist mentioned that George Sarre had said “There are only Chinese here!”, and was immediately corrected by his colleagues from the Socialist Party, saying “Don’t use that word. It’s the monoactivity that we denounce, not the people”. Later in the article, George Sarre added, “according to our information, the wholesalers are all from the same province in China and are organised through a certain mafia system with the help of smugglers.”
entrepreneurs. One shop-owner in the neighborhood regarded it as xenophobia, “it was pure discrimination! You read through all the laws in France and you won’t find a single article that mentions monoactivité. Not even the state has the power to do this. How could the mayor of an arrondissements prohibit us (from buying shop floors)?”

Another entrepreneur, also one of ACCPPF’s former presidents commented retrospectively: “We were just regular businessmen, but the district government labeled us as the mafia. This was very traumatizing. Even now there is a new arrondissement mayor, we still feel that we are working in a sensitive neighborhood and have to be very cautious about what we say.”

What engendered the mutual misunderstanding here is the different visions on the “know-how” of migrants’ survival strategies in contrast to the French public opinion on the informal economy. For the migrant entrepreneurs, “the mafia” represents a violent criminal organization and is thus a serious insult. To defend their image, the entrepreneurs had even filed a law suit against Sarre for “public defamation”, but this was ultimately withdrawn.

The hostility provoked by Mayor Sarre’s dramatic protest was pacified due to three changes. First, under the pressure of a crack down on illegal workshops, many entrepreneurs stopped manufacturing in Paris and turned to importing from China following China’s entry in WTO in 2001. The disappearance of workshops reduced the environmental problems a lot. Second, within the residents’ association, following the departure of several members who were in favor of more drastic means of protests such as sit-ins and demonstrations, the name of the association was changed to “Agir Solidairement pour le Quartier Popincourt” (“Solidarity Act for the Popincourt Neighborhood”) in June 2002, and an approach preferring “dialogue” was adopted. More importantly, following the veto of the law against monoactivité mentioned above, the Paris Municipal Government assigned a municipally owned public enterprise, the Société d’Économie Mixte d’Aménagement de l’Est de Paris “SEMAEST”, to execute the “right of preemption” to intervene in the commercial implantation in the neighborhood since the year 2004. In October 2000, ASQP met Betrand Delanoe, then still a candidate for the mayorship of Paris, promised that the Paris Municipal Government would adopt the right of preemption to purchase ground floors. As a result, in 2003 after Sarre’s legal proposition was

23 Interview on 08/02/2010 with Mr. Q., a wholesaler who arrived at Rue Breguet in 2000.

24 Interview on 18/02/2011 with M. J., a wholesaler and former president of ACPPF who launched his wholesale shop on Rue Chemin Vert in 1996.


26 “Mixed Economy Enterprise of Planning of Eastern Paris”. It was created in 1983 by the Paris Municipal Government to conduct urban renovation plans in several Eastern Parisian neighborhoods especially in the 12th Arrondissement.
vetoeed in parliament, the Paris Municipal Government decided to incorporate Popincourt in the project “Vital’ Quartier” which aimed at promoting “commercial diversity” in 11 neighborhoods in Paris. With a budget of 87.5 million Euro, SEMAEST adopted the right of preemption by purchasing vacant commercial floors and publicly selecting commercial propositions to suit the area’s needs. Between 2004 and 2011, 43 ground floors were bought by SEMAEST and were converted into cafés, restaurants, supermarkets, hair salons, bookshops, etc. Restrained by such measures, the number of wholesale clothing shops in the Popincourt neighborhood decreased for the first time in 2010, from 631 to 621.

**Aubervilliers**

The concentration and densification of the area of wholesalers in Aubervilliers has led to traffic problems which have arisen from the fact that this space as it was historically produced was not made for such a usage. It was to be used by a small number of actors necessitating large spaces. Instead it is presently occupied by several hundred wholesalers. Moreover, the area is made up of large private business parks, owned by ICADE, and there is thus very little public space. The ‘business parks’ are enclosed by gates and cannot be crossed by those who do not work there. There are only a few narrow roads including Avenue Victor Hugo that crosses the canal and links the zone to downtown Aubervilliers, Quai Lucien Lefranc along the canal, Rue des Gardinoux, east/west, and the most important one, Rue de la Haie Coq that runs north/south and that one cannot avoid driving through when reaching the *boulevard périphérique*. This road infrastructure was not intended to be used by the private cars of the wholesalers and their wives and children, the lorries and trucks of their deliverers, and those of their clients who come from all over France and Europe. The growth in the number of wholesalers has led to a situation of almost permanent traffic jams on the Haie Coq road. One of the main reasons for this is the tendency to load and unload trucks at all times in the middle of the road because the off-street delivery spaces are occupied by private vehicles. To make matters worse, in the northern part of the Rue Haie Coq there is a large RATP bus depot, from where buses heading to Paris depart.

Approximately halfway down the Haie Coq Road, there is a large steel and glass building, which houses the research and development center of Rhodia, a multinational company that specializes in the production of specialty
chemicals. It is ICADE that rents this building to Rhodia. In early 2011 we met Mrs. Paquet, who at that time was the director of this Rhodia site and is now the head of Rhodia facilities for all the company’s sites in France. During the interview, she told us how when she returned to Aubervilliers in 2007 after having worked on another Rhodia site in Lyon for several years, she found herself suddenly surrounded by wholesalers who, as she put it, “occupied every corner of the street.” Her mailbox was filled everyday by angry emails from her employees and clients who complained about the difficulties they met in reaching the office, and the trouble they had concentrating on their work because of the constant blaring of horns that rose from the street.

She described the whole process of the establishment of what she calls le collectif “the collective” of the Rue Haie Coq, the purpose of which is to tackle the problems of traffic. We will here only give a brief summary of this sequence of events. One day, Mrs. Paquet decided to take action. She went down and walked through the street where she met with agents from the bus and metro company who were imposing fines. They started talking, and then the police came along and they all started discussing the situation together. They decided to meet on a more formal basis and they held a few gatherings. She tried, without much success, to get into contact with several Chinese wholesalers. “In the beginning we held several meetings only to make an assessment of the situation,” she said. After a few months, she got into contact with the authorities of Plaine Commune, an urban political structure above town level, of which Aubervilliers is a member, and which is very important because it is this political entity that has the power to act in the domain of road infrastructure, but also because it is this entity that promotes the economic development of the whole territory and raises business taxes. It has, therefore, close relationships with the local economic players.

It was through this channel that Mrs. Paquet met Mr. Wang, the head of Eurasia. He organized several encounters with the main Chinese association, AFCC. The first meetings were tense due to the fact that many wholesalers felt threatened and were afraid that they would be asked to leave the area — they knew that this process was occurring in inner Paris neighborhoods. It was when Mrs. Paquet arrived with a photo album of pictures that had been taken by Rhodia’s security agent of terrible situations in the street (such as huge trucks unloading and blocking the street) that the atmosphere became less tense and inspired more confidence. These pictures allowed an objectification of the problem: instead of placing one another in the position of accusers and

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29 Its worldwide headquarters are located in La Défense, the main business district.
30 Interview, 31/03/2011.
accused, they conveyed the feeling that they were all facing the same problem. Regular meetings started to take place at Rhodia’s office building between Rhodia, the RATP (bus company), the police, Plaine Commune and Mr. Wang or other representatives of Chinese associations to discuss the measures to be taken. Except for Plaine Commune, whose representative came from further away, all participants could walk to Rhodia. Its central position in the neighborhood is crucial in this respect, as it is where they have lunch before they gather around a table to discuss problems and solutions. Some measures have been taken (i.e., trucks above a certain size are not allowed to unload during office hours) and although the traffic situation is still very difficult (every time we were there since February 2011 to February 2012, when the article was written, the street was always jammed) there has been some improvement. The main consequence of these informal meetings that have been going on for four years has been the creation of neighborhood relations. The participants kiss on both cheeks and call each other by their first names, and stop to talk when they happen to meet each other on the street.

Fig. 1: Dragon dance during the Chinese New Year demonstration at 11e arrondissement district government (Photograph by Ya-Han Chuang, 7 February 2011).
Fig. 2: A typical traffic jam on the Haie coq street. (Scan of a photo taken by Rhodia, 2009).
However, in spite of its name, the “collective” exhibits a dual structure. There are clearly two sides, the Chinese on one side and the Europeans (as they refer to themselves) on the other. This is apparent in the way the meetings are prepared in advance by Plaine Commune and Rhodia. The proposals for measures to be taken do not emerge spontaneously during the meetings but have been discussed prior to them. This is because, according to Mrs. Paquet, the Chinese could not stand the endless discussions between “us Europeans”. Therefore, we try to reach an agreement between us before we meet”. During the meetings of the Rue Haie Coq Collective, other issues were discussed. These issues were not directly related to traffic, but to problems faced by the Chinese wholesalers, in particular problems of insecurity, and violent robberies that target the Chinese. The “collectif de la rue Haie coq” is a body of mediation between the local political authorities and the Chinese wholesalers, through the intercession of a private enterprise, Rhodia.

Culturalizing Narratives as Part of the Solution-Seeking Process

Popincourt

SEMAEST’s intervention as the official response to monactivité has pacified the conflict. What remain unsolved are the daily relations between the residents and the Chinese wholesalers in the neighborhood. How can they live together with the residents? What role do the Chinese entrepreneurs play in the neighborhood? To bridge the link between the wholesalers and the residents, ASQP, the residents’ associations, has played a significant role by initiating cultural activities to incorporate Chinese entrepreneurs in the neighborhood’s life. As a sociologist specialized in Jewish religion as well as an activist for human rights, ASQP’s president was vigilant of the xenophobic potential of the residents’ mobilization and its possible association with the fear of the “yellow peril”. With the expansion of wholesale activity being restrained, ASQP turned to work with ACCPF in order to bridge the entrepreneurs and residents. Through the mediation using Chinese culture/festivals and their migrant history, an atmosphere of coexistence gradually nurtured in the neighborhood.

The ice-breaking step was taken in 2008. ASQP, together with members of another Chinese association (Hui Ji 汇集), co-organized a movie night for a documentary entitled “Le là-bas des Chinois ici” (literally, “The there of the Chinese people here”) with ASQP. This initiative attracted many Chinese families, and the newly-elected mayor of 11th arrondissements attended the event. On the basis of such success, in 2009 ASQP proposed another festivity: the
Mid-Autumn Festival. “We realized that the problem was that the residents never had the chance to interact with the wholesalers because the activity was not open to the residents. So why don’t we celebrate Mid-Autumn Festival together?” ASQP’s president explained. The event included tasting of moon cakes and presentation of traditional Chinese songs, and it attracted several hundred Chinese and French families. The Chinese Ambassador also participated to show his support. Since then, the “Mid-Autumn Festival” and the “Chinese New Year” have been routinized with the participation of ASQP, ACPPF, and the 11th arrondissement district government. In addition, the 11th arrondissement district government has abandoned its hostile position and become a partner of these cultural activities. The new arrondissement mayor described as follows the Chinese entrepreneurs’ role in the district in the official speech of 2011 Chinese New Year in front of the Chinese ambassador and a mixed crowd of Chinese wholesalers and French residents:

The Spring Festival along with the Moon Festival is one of the most important events of the Chinese calendar. Thus, it is normal that the 11th Arrondissement, which has a significant population of Chinese residents, celebrates it. This is the opportunity to incorporate the festivals in the collective calendar. The 11th Arrondissement with its own history was a terrain for immigrants from all over to find a good and prosperous place to make their living here. It has been the model of tolerance where people share their lives and cultures and share a common ideal.

Different from the former arrondissement mayor who portrayed Chinese wholesalers as foreigners who threatened to destroy the neighborhood’s atmosphere as an “urban village”, the new mayor’s discourse presented the Chinese shop-owners as the new arrivals who joined the arrondissement’s everyday life, as successors to Auvergnats, Jewish and Armenian merchants. According to this narrative, the Chinese wholesalers were no longer “strangers” who threatened to deprive the neighborhood’s heritage, but were welcomed “new guests” on the way to integration. Such a position was further affirmed by ASQP in a series of public discussion entitled “Popincourt here and elsewhere — woven memories, woven voices” in spring 2011, including two concerts that presented the fusion of Chinese and Turkish traditional music, preceded by an event inviting Jewish merchants to speak about their life in the Popincourt neighborhood alongside the Chinese wholesalers.

31 Interview, 15/02/2011.
32 Abstract of the mayors’ speech, 04/02/2011. Chuang’s translation from French.
33 The event entitled “Rencontres des mémoires migrants” (Encounter of Migrants’ Memory) was held on 26/05/2011 at the 11th arrondissement’s district government.
From the 11th Arrondissement government’s point of view, to highlight cultural festivals could be a diplomatic approach to show its tolerance towards migrants and to restore a multicultural image for Paris. Above all, the Chinese community is not only an economic actor in the 11th Arrondissement; it is also composed of school-going children and future citizens. However, if cultural activity does allow more exchange between residents and entrepreneurs, it cannot completely solve the troubles incurred by wholesale activity. At a recent meeting concerning the neighborhood’s traffic circulation at the arrondissement district government, several residents expressed their frustration concerning the coexistence with Chinese wholesalers. Some complained about everyday parking difficulty. Others suggested that the neighborhood was much more “lively” before the wholesalers’ arrival. Moreover, in addition to the association’s employee who participated in the meeting by “curiosity”, the Chinese entrepreneurs were all absent. This seems to indicate the lack of concern for the neighborhood’s public life. Although the bypassed confrontation was euphemised as “cultural dialogue”, the presence of wholesale activity remains a potential source of dissatisfaction.

Aubervilliers

The participation of political authorities and public institutions (i.e. the mayor of Aubervilliers and the vice-president of Plaine Commune) is part of a policy of “inclusion” toward the Chinese in Aubervilliers. The formation of the “Haie au coq collective” must be understood against a larger background of Aubervilliers’ urban policy that may be termed multicultural but also multinational insofar as it addresses categories of the population of Aubervilliers that hold foreign citizenship (more than a third of the total population). Aubervilliers

34 Chuang, field-notes from the meeting on 09/02/2012. The meeting’s subject was to announce a new experiment in which the 11ème arrondissement’s government would change the direction of traffic circulation on several streets in the Popincourt neighborhood. Approximately 50 residents of the neighborhood were present. However, many entrepreneurs were in China during that week, so the only Chinese participant was the ACCPPF’s employee. According to her, she came to the meeting only out of curiosity and not because of the entrepreneurs’ instruction. She was apparently annoyed by the complaints expressed at the meeting and tried to speak at the end asking the public to understand the entrepreneurs’ effort. Upon leaving, she said that “the French people are just picky. I will never come to this kind of meeting again!”

35 This is how the Mayor of Aubervilliers termed his policy, which received rather negative comments in the French media. For example in an article in the major French journal, Le Monde: “700 wholesalers and their 4,000 employees lie at the core of the Mayor’s strategy of ‘inclusion’. The huge area they occupy at the entrance to the city (…) has taken such a proportion that it hampers projects for urban development.” Le Monde 30/01/2011.
is the second town in France after Paris in terms of its Chinese population figures, and its Chinese population ranks second only to Algerians. There is an obvious and deliberate continuity between municipal policy in the cultural domain and in the international domain. Within the town administration, the director of “vie associative” (the translation of which could be “community policy”) is also in charge of international relations. It is he who organizes the Chinese New Year in cooperation with the heads of associations, and who coordinates international relations and contacts at the local level. As part of the process of décentralisation that started in the early 1980s in France, a process whereby the state devolves decision-making powers to the local administrative levels, towns and municipalities have recently acquired enlarged powers in matters of international partnership and cooperation.36 This phenomenon reflects to the general trend in today’s globalization toward a descaling of international relations and increased economic competition between local territories which some have termed “glurbanization” (Jessop 1998).

During the year 2009, the newly elected mayor of Aubervilliers, visited the Wenzhou district of Ouhai, the qiaoxiang (hometown) of many of the established wholesalers in Aubervilliers.37 A “protocol for the establishment of a friendly relationship of exchange between the district of Ouhai and the town of Aubervilliers” was signed in July. This was a preliminary to the establishment of a treaty of friendship which was to be signed in the following year. Then there was the idea of holding the ceremony at the World Expo in Shanghai in order to generate maximum impact. An association was created for this purpose, “Aubervilliers Plaine Commune Shanghai 2010,” of which Mrs. Paquet became the president. The association members included the town of Aubervilliers, the community of Plaine Commune, Rhodia, ICADE, and several big enterprises established in Aubervilliers and owned by Wenzhou businessmen such as Mr. Wang. It has been placed under the patronage of the Embassy of the PRC. As the town of Aubervilliers had no money to spend on this trip, the association received a helping hand from Alain Destrem, a representative to the French national assembly, who was the president of the influential Club Europe-Chine cooperation. This club gathers politicians and business leaders of major French companies; it is close to government circles and seeks to promote Sino-French bilateral relations. Thanks to these linkages to the national echelons, the delegation from Aubervilliers was offered free exhibition space on the Expo site and held the treaty signature ceremony in the French national

36 Laws of 06/02/1992 and 02/02/2007.
37 A socialist who started his political career as a Maoist and who for that reason claimed that he had a special relationship with China.
pavilion. (During this trip, the delegation travelled to Wenzhou and a second treaty was established with another Wenzhou district, Yueqing.) This journey in China received abundant media coverage and the mayor of Aubervilliers declared on every occasion that Aubervilliers had become the first European import-export platform with China. The entrepreneurs from Wenzhou echoed the official discourse that was being espoused by the PRC embassy: “we must turn Aubervilliers into a Chinese showcase in France”.

The relationships that have been created between neighbors within the “collectif de la rue Haie coq” have thus been rescaled. In other words, they have taken the aspect of international partnerships between Chinese and French economic and political actors. This is particularly apparent in the fact that the association created for the purpose of participating in the World Expo has become permanent. The meetings of its executive board are often held just after the meetings of the Haie au coq collective, which is understandable, as the participants are more or less the same persons. That the “collective” has become an elite club linking local economic and political actors was evident from the gala that was held on a Saturday evening in September 2011. All the members of the Aubervilliers-Shanghai association gathered for a charity dinner auction at the royal Dinasty (sic.) restaurant of Aubervilliers, the owner of which was also a regular participant to the Haie coq collective.

Conclusion: From a Comparative to a Global Perspective on Paris’ Chinatowns

This parallel account of recent happenings in two areas both in and outside of Paris has shown how their “Chinese” character has been problematized and accounted for in terms of a narrative of “Sino-French” cultural dialogue. Our analytical focus on social problems highlights the place of the Chinese in the making of these urban areas. Indeed, by retracing the processes in the course of which the high concentration of Chinese-run wholesale shops has been defined as a social problem and solutions have been sought, we have shown how these problems have been defined differently, and accordingly, different solutions have been sought and negotiated. The striking resemblance between these two cases is the emergence of a “culturalizing” narrative as part of the solution-seeking process.

39 Trémon, field-notes, 24/10/2011.
We may now define more precisely what this culturalizing narrative consists of. It is the interpretation of the social problem in terms of an encounter between two cultures, French and Chinese, and the assertion of a necessary dialogue and exchange between the two. This narrative does not lie “outside” the social problem but is part of its “natural history”. It is not merely an instrumental discourse legitimizing the actions undertaken by those who have identified and put the problem on the table. It is the frame of reference within which the “problem-posing” individuals and groups, not the Chinese wholesalers, but the neighborhood residents in Popincourt and the “French” entrepreneurs in Aubervilliers, situate their action. These actions then simultaneously reassert the statements they make. Even though the Chinese entrepreneurs do not highlight their Chinese belonging in doing their daily business (there is a quasi-total absence of any Chinese symbols or names in these two areas) they have become part of the configuration of local actors seeking a solution together, and part of the shared picture that is portrayed of these areas and their respective histories. Our article thus illuminates how the migrant merchants and the area’s “Chineseness” are both dealt with through the formulation of social problems related to their increased presence.

This commonality between the cases should not, however, elude the differences that have been underscored throughout this chapter. Firstly, the problems have been defined differently. In Popincourt, the problem has been defined as one of *monoactivité*, a categorization that euphemizes the Chinese-related aspect of the problem and emphasizes the residents’ wish to preserve their neighborhood’s everyday quality of life. In Aubervilliers, this was not an issue. Rather, the definition of this area as specializing in trade with China was seen as a strategic asset and only the traffic problem that was formulated as a social problem. Secondly, the means and methods of solving the problem were also different. Although in both cases public institutions were called upon, the degree of both publicization and politicization was higher in the case of Popincourt. There the “problem” was resolved by the Paris Municipal government’s official intervention to restrain wholesale business’ development, with the backing of the residents’ association. In Aubervilliers, the traffic problem has remained unsolved, but is still being regularly discussed through a process by which different users of this space have formed a group that meets 4-5 times a year. At the same time, it functions as a body of mediation between the local political authorities and the Chinese wholesalers through the intercession of a private enterprise. Here the public authorities, once hailed and urged to do something, did not turn the problem into a political problem and did not diffuse it widely throughout the public arena. Rather, the problem remained in the private sphere as one that concerns only a restrained group of local actors.
At the same time, the Chinese in Aubervilliers are considered to be key economic actors, and therefore they were able to convince the public authorities that they should try to do something about them. In this process of trying to involve the public institutions and public institutions limiting their intervention, the problem has remained in the grey zone, somewhere between the private and the public, and the “Haie au coq” group has remained informal.

Finally, the narratives whereby the stories of these social problems have been told and interpreted, although similar in content, are different in form and scope. In Popincourt, the residents’ had to seek a solution to coexist with the entrepreneurs, and the migrant history of the neighborhood became the narrative to incorporate these strangers. In Aubervilliers, the relationships that have been created between neighbors within this informal group have been rescaled to the level of an international partnership between Chinese and French economic and political actors and reframed in the terms of a “cultural dialogue”. The “culturalization” of urban conflict allows the actors to reinterpret the neighborhood or city’s history and image, but its significance is not the same in the two neighborhoods. In Popincourt, as the conflict on the appropriation of urban space was translated as sinophobia, cultural dialogue was appropriated as a sort of antidote to soften the confrontation between “autochthones’ and migrants. Through the civil associations’ bridging, the Chinese entrepreneurs’ presence was incorporated into the neighborhood’s history as the successor of a migration wave, and therefore re-affirmed the French ideology of the “assimilation” of migrant foreigners. In Aubervilliers, although there was also a succession between Jewish and Chinese migrant merchants, this history was not emphasized. On the contrary, as the participants of the dialogue were not residents but economic actors, the inter-group dialogue was presented as a “platform” of exchange and as a “showcase” (vitrine) of Chinese’ integration, which connects the local and the global, rendering possible international economic cooperation. Nevertheless, the boundaries between ‘French’ and ‘Chinese’ have sharpened as their relationship has been rescaled, and reinterpreted in terms of a Sino-French international dialogue. In both cases, the “otherness” of Chinese entrepreneurs was reinforced.

Through the contrasted reception of Chinese wholesalers, we can further emphasize the movement of capital and symbolic value from Paris to Aubervilliers. As much research has observed, since the 1980s Paris has experienced a slow and decentralized movement of “gentrification”. With the enlargement of “middle-class Paris” which has surpassed the traditional center-peripheral frontier, the commerce of consumption has acquired a symbolic place superior to that of production. Therefore, the presence of textile manufacturing and wholesaling in the Paris intra-muros is perceived as a threat to real-estate
prices since it contradicts the image of the “Fashionable City” (La Ville Branchee, Van Criekingen and Fleury 2006) that the Paris Municipal Government and real-estate actors have attempted to forge. On the other hand, situated in the semi-periphery zone, Aubervilliers is in the process of being incorporated into the city center and is eager to erase its historical reputation as a working-class quarter. Thus, the Chinese’ wholesale business was considered a creation of value and a window of opportunity to redefine the city’s image. Through the production, construction and rescaling of this piece of urban space, Aubervilliers has emerged as a trans-local city that has not been the case for Popincourt, which has chosen to re-affirm its image as an “urban village”. We can therefore suggest that the process in Aubervilliers is a typical example of what Harvey Molotch (1976) has termed “the urban growth machine”. Through the interaction within the “collectif de la rue Haie Coq”, links between powerful economic actors and political leaders have been nurtured and have generated a coalition between economic and political elites.

The result is the clientelization of urbanized capital and the emergence of new elites in the community. In December of 2011, a monthly magazine Megapolis chose Mr. Wang to be on its cover with the headline “Will he purchase all of Paris?” The alarming tone seemed to present Wang as the future “owner of Paris”. As has been shown in this article, these merchants are not Chinese-born entrepreneurs. Rather, they have become Chinese through interaction with other local actors. With the relocation of boundaries between Paris and Aubervilliers and the tendency for entrepreneurs to locate in Paris and then to delocalize to outer Paris, it is worthwhile to follow how the implantation of Chinese’ import-export commerce will arouse different public perceptions, and thus may lead to a new process of problematizing “Chinatown”.

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Glossary

11ème arrondissement: 11th arrondissement
Mairie de 11ème: 11th arrondissement district government
Maire de Paris: Paris City Mayor
Maire de Paris: Paris municipal government
ASQP: residents' association in Popincourt
ACCPPP: entrepreneurs' association

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