無所不在也無處可循：重新審視倫敦萊姆豪斯中國城 1900-1930

Nowhere and Everywhere: Rethinking Limehouse Chinatown, London 1900-1930

周伸芳*  Sheng-Fang Chou

摘要

「中國城」(Chinatown)，這個形容海外華人聚集地的名詞被廣泛使用，並且根深蒂固地在西方歷史和文化的思維中，存有著既定，無法改變的刻板印象。針對二十世紀初倫敦早期的中國城萊姆豪斯（Limehouse）的形成與設計，本論文使用物質文明和物體分析的研究方法，將重新詮釋當時的中國城僅僅是兩個商業街道（Pennyfields and Causeway Street）而非所謂的中國「城」，這樣名不副實的稱謂。通過對語言的涵義討論，及商業街的「世界都會」流動屬性考量，即是無所不在；相較於當時舊金山的中國城，倫敦「中國城」更是明顯缺乏中國建築和特點，又是無處可循。倫敦萊姆豪斯「中國城」呈現出對「他者」文化的圖像想像勝於真實景象，本文探討為何此地長久以來被稱為「中國城」的因與果與其關係。

由當地的報紙，倫敦塔橋地方歷史圖書館的建築和街道照片檔案，以及現存於倫敦政治經濟學院，由社會科學家查爾斯布斯在 1900 年所繪製的倫敦地圖手稿等舉證。探討這些對倫敦「中國城」無所不在，無處可循的屬性：挑戰「中國城」長久以來的刻板分類，及其根植於現代化，全球化移民運動中，華人聚集地的想像與設計。本研究期能有助於二十世紀初中國與西方設計的歷史課題，以及社會文化研究論壇的跨文化比較。

關鍵詞：中國城、中英視覺與物質文明關係、設計史、聚集地、全球史

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Abstract

The widespread use of the term “Chinatown” lies at the root of an unchallenged stereotype within Western historical and cultural thinking. By using a material culture and object-based analysis approach, a new interpretation of the area will emerge that affirms the use of the term “Chinastreet” rather than “Chinatown”. Evidence will be drawn from a range of sources including local newspapers, Chinese texts, architectural and street photographs in the Tower Hamlets Local History Library taken between 1900 and 1930, and the notebooks of social scientist Charles Booth composed during his London map project (ca. 1900) now in the London School of Economics archive. This material will demonstrate how Chinatown became an imaginary manifestation that was applied to the Limehouse area, at this time comprised of two streets, Pennyfields and Causeway Street.

In summary, this paper places London’s Chinatown within a social history with a consideration of environmental design factors that contribute to the argument that “Chinatown was misnomer”. I argue that London Limehouse Chinatown was a commercial site that was both nowhere and everywhere; it functioned as a designation of “China” and “Chineseness” to Britons in a manner that deeply engaged with the sphere of global and cosmopolitan experiences both for the British and for overseas Chinese audiences.

Keywords: Chinatown, Anglo-Chinese Visual and Material Culture Relations, History of Design, Diaspora, Global History
Introduction

With an increase in research concerning overseas Chinese communities since 1960, the term “Chinatown” has been widely adopted by sociologists.\(^1\) Lawrence W. Crissman offered this definition, “Chinese living in big cities overseas tended in the past to form compact and comparatively exclusive settlements known as Chinatowns, in which they resided, worked, and traded.”\(^2\) Nevertheless, the case of London’s Limehouse Chinatown, defies the categorization with which sociologists and historians have approached their study and explanation of the Chinese community. Central to this discussion are challenges to the definition of Chinatown found in British scholarship relating to the Limehouse Chinese community. Sociologist Ng Kwee Choo, in his 1968 study, *The Chinese in London*, states, “the term “Chinatown” was a misnomer since it did not by any means cover an extensive area in which all the Chinese were clustered together.”\(^3\) He presented to his readers the issue of using “Chinatown,” with reference to the area, as problematic. We do not know if Choo considered the linguistic implications of “Chinatown” further, especially because no such ‘town’ existed: thus, why do we call this specific area “Chinatown”?\(^4\) How do we define or categorise this specific place; is it a real town that contains a border? Or, despite only a few Chinese people having lived in the area, what did its architectural design suggest with reference to the label? In order to answer these questions, I will consider not only texts and census records but also visual resources such as maps and street photography.

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Finally, there are two main factors that cut across class and culture and framed this area as “Chinatown,” despite the lack of Chinese design features. Chinese sailors founded various small businesses and restaurants in the area. London’s Chinatown was nowhere and everywhere; it was the only Chinese residence and business locale at the time, and their lives as well as impressions of their lives became a themed spectacle. These findings challenge the stereotypical classification of Chinatown that has grown in the modern imagination along with the global diaspora and design practice of Chinese people.

A False Tale: Chinatown in Limehouse?

Before turning to the examples of Chinatown’s social and architectural history, it may be instructive to review the existing secondary literature and the state of the field. Contemporary views continue to be influenced by Choo’s 1968 study, however, sociologist Gregor Benton has addressed the Chinese immigrant history of Limehouse and elaborated upon its community.5 Historians such as Jon Burrows and John Seed struggled with similar questions

of Chinatown being a figment of British imagination. None of these studies question the name of “Chinatown” in linguistic terms nor do they explore its material cultural aspects. Issues of self-identity and integration, both culturally and in the built environment, have not been and must be addressed.

Central to this discussion are challenges to the definition of “Chinatown” found in British scholarship relating to the Limehouse Chinese community. In his aforementioned 1968 study, Choo states:

*The term “Chinatown” was a misnomer since it did not by any means cover an extensive area in which all the Chinese were clustered together, like the Chinatowns of San Francisco and New York; it consisted only of two small streets, Pennyfields and the Limehouse Causeway.*

Similarly, film scholar Jon Burrows, in “A Vague Chinese Quarter Elsewhere: Limehouse in the Cinema 1914-36” (2003), wrote about film, such as D.W. Griffith’s *Broken Blossoms*, that were shot with scenes in Limehouse. He asserts that this locale has little to do with real Chinese people by arguing that, “…the image of Limehouse could be seen as another transatlantic import, no more indexically linked to native reality than a Western film.” We may add comments by John Seed to these critiques. In a recent article entitled “Limehouse Blues: Looking for Chinatown in the London Docks, 1900-40” (2006), he powerfully argues that, “it is that imaginary relationship, its very fictive dimensions, which made Chinatown so potent and flexible a signifier, adjustable to a variety of social and political cries in London at the end of the First World War.”

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According to Seed’s research involving census records, references to Chinatown is misleading, since in reality, only a few Chinese people resided in the area. The 1901 census records show a total population of three hundred and eighty-seven Chinese-born aliens in England, one hundred and twenty in London and only fifty-five in Limehouse. In 1911, the Chinese population of Limehouse grew to one hundred and one. By 1921, the census indicated three hundred and thirty-seven Chinese residents, and in 1931, the population dropped to only one hundred and sixty-seven. Only ten percent of London’s Chinese population lived in Limehouse between 1901 and 1931 (Table 1). Seed consequently proposed that Chinatown in Limehouse was construed as a heterotopia – “a space which cannot be reached by any normal means”. He refers to the space that newspapers and modern authors manipulated into being a sort of “Chinatown” that represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence. John Seed is not the first scholar to interpret the idea of “Chinatown” in Limehouse in this way, but he sheds light on how existing writing must be reconsidered.

Table 1 Source: Chinese in London, 1881-1931. Data collected from the decennial census reports. Graph by Shengfang Chou.

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<tr>
<th></th>
<th>National</th>
<th>London</th>
<th>Limehouse</th>
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<tr>
<td>1881</td>
<td>224</td>
<td>109</td>
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<td>1891</td>
<td>767</td>
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<td>1891</td>
<td>387</td>
<td>120</td>
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<td>1911</td>
<td>1,120</td>
<td>247</td>
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<td>1921</td>
<td>2,419</td>
<td>711</td>
<td>337</td>
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<td>1931</td>
<td>1,934</td>
<td>1,194</td>
<td>167</td>
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In addition to these statistics, Ng Kwee Choo highlighted that Chinese residents lived in the two streets, Pennyfields and Limehouse Causeway. There was not a territorially distinct and ethnically homogenous community, instead, beginning in the 1890s through to the 1950s, there was a small Chinese minority in a mixed community of tradesmen, casual labourers and

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transient sailors. Limehouse was a cosmopolitan district with Swedish, Danish, German, Italian and Russian households crowded into narrow streets. It was not uncommon to find shops and cafes amongst the Chinese boarding houses where English working-class families ate. For reasons discussed in subsequent sections, the Chinese identity of this area prevailed.

In 1905, the journalist George Sims referred to the two streets of Pennyfields and Limehouse Causeway as “China Town” in the British press for the first time. Influenced by previous writers (most notably, Thomas Burke, and Sax Rohmer), Sims imagined this area of Limehouse as a town populated by Chinese residents. Limehouse’s Chinese community was destroyed in 1940 by German bombing during World War II. The new buildings were built immediately after the War, so we have no opportunity to explore extant evidence. The community of Limehouse, however, was recorded photographically, and this evidence remains. Photographs of the Limehouse community between 1900 and 1930 are held in the Tower Hamlet Local History Library and Archives (THLHA) collection. Among these documents is an image that depicts an anonymous, well-dressed Western man wearing a working-class hat, gazing at the daily Chinese bulletin displayed on a public wall in Pennyfields Street (picture 2). The Chun Yee Society (正義工商會), a Chinese association in Limehouse that catered to the Chinese community, printed this bulletin. This particular edition advertised a meeting held on the 18th of April 1920, thus producing a sort of spectacle in the area using Chinese writing of the most basic level. Such photographs tell us that there was a Chinese community in Limehouse, but what was the nature of this community? Scholars have argued that London’s Chinatown was a false facade, a claim that leads us to look at the social history of the Chinese community at the time, which I intend to do.

The Chinese in Britain and London

Chinese people first visited Britain in the seventeenth century. Few in number, they were either Christian missionaries or independent travelers. Later, in the nineteenth century, after the Napoleonic wars, a small group of Chinese sailors arrived in Britain to replace the British sailors who had been called into Navy service. The British discovered that the Chinese seamen offered cheaper labour and were better disciplined. British shipping companies, therefore, recruited Chinese seamen from Hong Kong, China, and Southeast Asia. These seamen arrived in Britain as itinerant labourers and waited in the dock areas of Liverpool and London for engagements.

In 1813, the National Register archived an investigation into riots between two Chinese sects; the documents state the East India Dock Company employed five hundred Chinese seamen at the time. Some temporary crewmembers were known to jump ship or were

14 “Police,” National Register, October 13, 1813. The international headquarters for the company was established at East India House in Leadenhall Street, London.
dismissed after reaching British ports, but a more settled group gradually developed on shore (picture 3).\(^{15}\) The East London Observer indicates that a permanent Chinese community was not yet established in the Limehouse area by 1890. According to Choo, there were thirty Chinese shops and boarding houses located in the Limehouse area, which then constituted Chinatown.\(^{16}\) The British regarded this area, and its Chinese merchants, as subjects of attraction. Although we do not know exactly when the Chinese community was established, the above records suggest that the Chinese community was specifically located and began to be recognised as China-town around 1900.

Chinese residents of Limehouse settled along two distinct streets. Chinese boarding houses, patronized by sea crews between voyages, were the first establishments in these settlements. According to the 1894 Ordnance Survey, the Chinese settled along Pennyfields

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and Limehouse Causeway — a mixture of lower-class housing and shops. These two streets served as a buffer between the respectable High Street, West India Dock Road, and the immigrant settlements. For the Chinese, this separation was psychological as well as physical. Immigrants from Shanghai populated Pennyfields Street whereas Chinese from Guangdong province and Hong Kong inhabited Causeway Street. In an edition of the Evening News (1920), an article entitled “Chinatown as I know it: Glimpses into the Life of Yellow Men’s Wives”, included an interview with a Chinese man’s English wife, Laura, who explained, “if you take up with a Hong Kong man, you mustn’t make friends with a chap from Shanghai, or you’re in for it.”

“Shanghai-ness” seemed to infer interest in economic advances while “Canton-ness” implied political concerns. Before the treaty of Nanking (1842), Shanghai was considered an important trading place for Western markets. Shanghai City moderated between traditional and modern aspects and became the “background of the Shanghai educated class”. Natives were well known for their modern urban lifestyle, which may link with their economic interests and success. In comparison, the Cantonese in Limehouse, according to Min-Ch’ien Tyau, in his book London Through Chinese Eyes (1920), held the most imperfect knowledge and childlike views of public affairs. The majority professed themselves admirers of Dr. Sun Yat-sen, who is generally believed, in some vague way, to have done much for China, and to be Cantonese. Thus, despite a language difference and a changing political-economic background, the Chinese population, contrary to British perception, was not homogeneous.

The cultural differences outlined above exemplify the complexity of this Chinese district where two streets were mentally segregated and different immigrant groups structurally negotiated the city to shape a particular human or cultural geography. One should not overlook the physical signs of these two distinct streets, which deny the consideration of these Chinese communities as a single unit (picture 1).

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As indicated by the shipping trade in the global market, the Chinese seamen became a conspicuous presence in London in the early twentieth century, and they became a distinctive group in Britain overall. The basis for this identification was not altogether new, however. A lithograph from 1877 reveals Chinese labourers separated from British men in queues. They are identifiable only by their appearance, skin colour and traditional clothing. By the 1920s, the Chinese were not merely strangers, but they were suspected to be an economic threat. In the East London Observer, a journalist reported in 1916, “the undoubted superior ability is turned away from shipping offices because their jobs are given to the cheaper ‘Chink’.”20

After the First World War, with the British economy in crisis, many British citizens could not find jobs. The term “Chinaman” became synonymous with those who would accept work at any wage.21 Chinese seamen soon became scapegoats in the eyes of British Trade Unionists. Mr. Chambers, as Treasurer of the Sailors and Firemen’s Union, claimed that twenty per cent of British seamen were unemployed during the war due to Chinese labourers.22 These economic conflicts encouraged anti-Chinese sentiment. An article in the Star, dated 17th June 1919, ran the headline “Chinaman’s Home Smashed”. The story reported:

Before the war the Chinese were mainly grounded round Pennyfields and Limehouse Causeway, but since the war the yellow population of the East End has increased, in many of the streets around the East and West India Dock-roads there are Chinese families now living. As Englishmen joined the Army, Chinese came in to replace them in many instances in the factories and in the kitchens of hotels and restaurants. The Chinaman gave up the sea for a shore job, earned good money, and then he and his compatriots overflowed from his original quarter, forming alliances in some cases with white women.23

This report claimed that Chinese men had taken what should be English jobs during the First World War, regardless of the fact that such jobs were comprised of small businesses within London’s Limehouse district. Gregor Benton stated:

*The switch to petty entrepreneurship was hastened by new laws restricting immigration, especially the 1905 Alien Act, which confined immigrants to 14 ports (including Cardiff, Liverpool, and London) and the 1919 amendment to the 1914 Aliens Restriction Act, which admitted only self-supporting immigrants.*

Benton’s research proves that the Chinese established small businesses because they were not offered job opportunities in Britain due to the Alien Act.

Here arises another question: how many Chinese seamen and merchants worked in Britain? It is difficult to calculate the exact number of Chinese seamen in Limehouse since the census reports highlight the national population, and foreigners are collectively classified as “aliens”. The mobility of seamen as a transient population further complicates the census results. A comparison between the rate books of the Chinese and non-Chinese occupiers of Pennyfields, between 1905 and 1935, provides a valuable insight. Table Two illustrates that Chinese immigrants had occupied the street since 1910, before which there was no record of Chinese occupants in the area. Despite a slight population decline, there were twice as many Chinese occupants as non-Chinese occupants by 1920. A British government report, *Chinese Quarter: Report of Public Health and Housing and Maternity and Child Welfare Committees*, for the Borough of Poplar Town Council, dated 28th October 1920, notes that ninety-five houses in Poplar were registered as “House Let in Lodgings”. These records, however, do not give a clear idea of how many Chinese residents lived in the area at the time. In an effort to solve this question, I will investigate the nature of Chinese occupations at the time.

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26 The Rate books after 1935 were destroyed during the War. See also records in the Tower Hamlets Local History Library, Borough of Polar, 1920.

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In her study, *The Construction of London’s Chinatown 1900-1990* (2000), Joanna Herbert exposes an interesting source in an Application for Ration Book dated to 1918 Pennyfields. This record states there were 182 Chinese in Pennyfields, nine wives, and seven families with children. Only three houses contained non-Chinese residents, among which was a non-Chinese woman living with other Chinese immigrants. The record also identifies sixty-three Chinese men whose main occupation was defined as “cook”. The next significant occupation was that of shopkeeper or manager, of which there were twenty such employed. Only thirteen seamen were recorded, as well as two clerks, two firemen, two carpenters and an interpreter. This record not only corrects the census reports and rate books previously mentioned but also redraws the portrait of the Chinese community in Limehouse. Furthermore, the ration books highlight the variety of occupations found within the small Chinese community. As a researcher, it is important to understand the function of the community, for with this evidence, one can better understand the Chinese character of the region in the twentieth century. The occupational diversity in the region is revealing. The decreased proportion of sailors suggests the Chinese population was no longer a predominantly transient one.
Clarifying the truth of Chinese occupations in Limehouse in the early twentieth century helps draw a picture of the reality for Chinese male immigrants. By opening restaurants in this area, Chinese people established the area as an entertainment site for Londoners. In the following section, I will discuss the environmental design of the area, which I refer to as “Chinastreet,” and how this aspect became an important force in the British imagination.

**Chinastreet: Pennyfields and Limehouse Causeway**

The early period of the Limehouse community saw the area become an entertainment and commercial site for Chinese sailors on shore leave. Later, Chinese people opened small business and restaurants thus altering its labour-class tone to one of leisure and spectacle. As noted above, the Chinese community of London settled along two main streets, Pennyfields and Limehouse Causeway, which I refer to as Chinastreet. The Chinese population grew in these areas since 1880. According to the 1881 census, of the six hundred and twenty-two residents of the area, thirty-seven were of Irish descent and twenty-three of German and Scandinavian origin - a rather cosmopolitan demographic before the Chinese population arrived. Walter Besant, in his monograph *All Sorts and Conditions of Men – An Impossible Story* (1882), writes about this area of London in the chapter entitled ‘Sunday at the East End’:

*Strange and wonderful result of the gathering of men in great cities! It is not a French, or an English, or a German result—it is universal; in every great city of the world, below a certain level, there is no religion—men have grown dead to their higher instincts; they no longer feel the possibilities of humanity; faith brings to them no more the evidence of things unseen. They are crowded together, so that they have ceased to feel their individuality.*

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27 GLRO, LRB, Property Services Dept, Register of Property 3780/3, 4, 11, 45, 50, 51.
Besant does not mention a Chinese demographic, suggesting a Chinese community had not yet settled in the East End at the time of his book’s publication in 1882. Besant describes the East End as a manifestation of cosmopolitan multi-culturalism. His writing expresses a positive view in its celebration of the expanding terrain of London as it reflects a “Modern Babylon”. London began to connote the “universal” and “international” as it became a global city.\(^{30}\) Besant’s work hints at the emerging, fashionable style of travel writing and touring in the city.\(^{31}\) If the East End was “one of the handsomest suburbs of London,”\(^{32}\) it naturally attracted journalists and novelists in search of new ways to express their vision. Writers believed that, by experiencing the urban life and city, they could gain a sense of the world; visiting the communities of those poor immigrant areas was an important part of this experience.

The area of Limehouse lies in “the origins of Pennyfields [which] are obscure, hidden in the landholding complexities of the manor of Stepney. Some properties were held by manorial tenure well into the twentieth century.”\(^{33}\) There was little development in Pennyfields before 1650, although Limehouse Causeway appears in a map of 1573 and was built before Pennyfields.\(^{34}\) In 1652, a goldsmith named Abraham Chambers purchased six cottages with adjoining land including sixteen acres “commonly called Penny Field”.\(^{35}\) By 1668, Abraham’s son had extended his property holdings by purchasing forty-three tenements and twenty-seven cottages in Poplar and sixteen acres of ground called Pennyfields.\(^{36}\) Building on this property increased dramatically during the 1650s and 1660s. Structures were raised in similar style including three rooms placed one above the other. There were seventy-seven

\(^{34}\) Ibid, PRO, MPB 31.
\(^{36}\) Ibid.
buildings built in the Pennyfields area by 1868. A map dated 1894 suggests there were forty-three houses in Limehouse Causeway (picture 4 and 5).

The similar building developments of Pennyfields and Limehouse Causeway appeared in the early or mid-nineteenth century with some surviving into the 1960s. Over half of the houses were of dual occupation in 1850, including residential and commercial tenancies, while lodging houses accommodated numerous resident families. Most of the houses were small two-storey buildings constructed using plum-coloured bricks, their most attractive

37 Hermione Hobhouse (General Editor), ‘Pennyfields’ in Survey of London: Poplar, Blackwall and Isle of Dog, 43-44, TH 3733, GLRO, M93/132, f.75.
feature being a wooden doorframe with an open pediment. These features are often seen in photographs of Limehouse during the early twentieth century (picture 8 and 9). The 1894 ordinance survey demonstrates how the houses were similar in size and arranged close to one another. The houses were utilized for different purposes over time, but the building façade was often maintained. Take for example, house number forty-one, which, according to the record of *Survey of London*:

...was of two storeys plus attic, of plum-coloured brick, with red-brick dressings. Facing the street was a later brick parapet, behind which was a hipped gable. At one end was an attractive small stone-dressed porch, thought to have been built in the late eighteenth century. During the nineteenth century No. 41 was a boarding school and later a lodging house. In the 1930s and 1940s it had become a rag-and-bone merchant's store, but retained a “charming interior” on its upper floors. The house was demolished in 1968.\(^{38}\)

This text supports the idea that the buildings in Limehouse were built for an initial purpose but remained unchanged even if put to different uses by their owners. Between 1850 and 1880, the houses and the streets changed very little. The migrant residents went forth and started to become involved in local small business: there was much activity and movement from the residential households to the commercial stores. The movements of residents, rather than the physical design of this area, gained attention amongst the British. Academic research related to studies of the Limehouse Chinese community also focuses on sociological contexts rather than on architectural or design history.

Remarkably, the Limehouse Chinese community, in comparison to other communities such as San Francisco’s Stockton Chinatown (1890-1920), lacks a Chinese or Oriental design style. Local merchants engaged the American architect Charles Beasley to design Stockton’s Chinatown as a few remarkable buildings with pagoda towers, Greek motifs, and Oriental ornaments. One might argue that these styles did not embody Chinese building designs but

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rather a western Chinoiserie aesthetic. Nevertheless, this Chinatown had its own multiple-design canon and was a new town where a new hybrid urbanism developed. In her study, (Charles Beasley, Architect (1827-1913): Issues and Images (1980)), Karen Weitse wrote:

    Beasley’s design could be understood to represent the Chinese community; it appears, in fact, that the architect so intended... In all discussions the exhibition hall (Agricultural pavilion in the Stockton Chinatown as an landmark) was referred to only as “the pavilion” while the Chinese quarter was “Chinatown” (picture 6 and 7).  

Particular buildings become urban artifacts that give a community its unique identity. In 1887, the Agricultural pavilion, designed by Charles Beasley, occupied the Stockton city block bound by Lafayette, Hunter, Washington and San Joaquin Streets, where the Chinese stores and residences were settled. In this sense, it led the area to be known as Chinatown because the specifically designed buildings evoked the cultural and ethnic differences meant to elicit a sense of “otherness”. The idea of “Chinatown”, therefore, can be recognized in Stockton and can be understood through its material cultural history. In contrast, the Chinese community in Limehouse was formed in an area where the buildings followed the British standard style and lacked Chinese models or design features, however contrived.

【picture 6】Source: Charles Beasley, Agricultural Pavilion, Stockton, California, Pioneer Museum and Haggin Galleries, Stockton, California, 1887.

However, of the two streets in Limehouse, Pennyfields’ Chinese shops, with their Oriental decorations, seemed to be more attractive to British visitors. In his article, “Chinese London and its Opium Dens,” published in *Gentleman’s Magazine* (1895), John Platt described Pennyfields’ Chinese shops as having colorful interiors, an exotic contrast to the grey streets of Poplar. He wrote:

*The Chinese shops are the quaintest places imaginable. Their walls decorated with red and orange papers, covered with Chinese writing indicating the ‘chop’ or style of the firm, or some such announcement. There is also sure to be a map of China and a hanging Chinese Almanac.***

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The façade of the Chinese stores, with their Chinese writing, was pleasing to British tastes, but there is little evidence about the exact nature of interiors in the Chinese shops. Platt’s description may suggest that visitors came to the area expecting a Chinese-like decor that separated them from surrounding establishments. In 1905, the journalist George Sims, who referred to this area as “China Town” for the first time in the British press, wrote about the community in his article, “In Limehouse and the Isle of Dogs”, published in The Strand magazine. He wrote, ‘close at hand is the Causeway, the Chinese quarter. Now that a considerable portion of it has been pulled down, the Chinese element is not so prominent as it used to be.’

Take, for example, a photograph of a Chinese store in Limehouse (picture 8). The store advertises the shop’s name only, and it lacks signage indicating what kind of business the shop provides. When Sims saw the façade of such stores, he wrote:

But first let us make our way through narrow, winding China Town.
There is no mistake about the Chinese element. The Chinese names are up over the doors of the little shops, and as we peer inside them we see the unmistakable Celestial behind the counter and Chinese inscriptions on the walls... Here is a Chinese grocery store. Some of the canned goods are familiar to European eyes, but all are labeled in Chinese characters. (picture 9)

Other texts and photographic evidence suggest that Limehouse Chinatown’s shops and commercial design did not follow a particular Chinese style, but “there is no mistake about the Chinese element”. It seems that the “Chineseness” of Limehouse’s Chinatown suited British assumptions rather than Chinese character. However, this still does not satisfy the question as to why the term “Chinatown” was applied to the Limehouse community and how the attraction to this area manifests in the urban gaze as “Chineseness”. By considering the idea of “Chinatown” in San Francisco’s Stockton district, the suggestion arises that the use of

42 Ibid.
43 Ibid.
44 See footnotes 20.
this term was not merely engaged with the imaginary but also involved the design and structure of the urban environment, as evidenced by the Chinese-style design buildings that mediate the area’s identity.
Conclusion

Limehouse’s Chinastreet did not attract British visitors because of its Chinese-style design. Most of the Chinese storefronts appeared to be Western in style, with the occasional Chinese character discreetly displayed. Chinastreet did not showcase a particular Chinese-style such as that of San Francisco’s Stockton pavilion, nor did it have Chinese-style façades. Using authorial and journalistic observations, I suggest the area was evoked in this specific way due to ‘alien’ Chinese residents. Their activities in the community became something for the British to discover and experience as a spectacle of “otherness”.

With increased levels of research focused on such communities since 1960, the term “Chinatown” is still widely adopted by academics. In his 1967 essay on The Segmentary Structure of Urban Overseas Chinese Communities, Lawrence W. Crissman offered his own definition of the term:

> Chinese living in big cities overseas tended in the past to form compact and comparatively exclusive settlements known as Chinatowns, in which they resided, worked, and traded.

This acknowledgement of Chinatown as a significant settlement of Chinese residents suggests sociological scholarship has been especially interested in the history of immigration: “Chinatown” conjures a mental image of a diasporic community. The categorization of spaces as Chinatowns necessarily raises questions: “how does it function within the larger urban environment and beyond?” and “who lives there?”. Questions regarding material culture are often neglected. Barbara L. Voss, in her essay “the Archaeology of Overseas Chinese communities,” claims that, in order to better understand a special community, it is important to examine its object culture. Such an investigation can help researchers draw out how residents live in a specific place, and in addition, may expose a different narrative than those revealed via conventional sociological methodologies.

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In an effort to contribute to existing research, I have presented a range of literature and visual resources concerning the Chinese community in Limehouse. By using architectural history and photographic resources, I have also undertaken to solve the puzzle of how Chinatown became a misnomer in the work of British scholars. In doing so, I argue that “Chinatown” is a term that designs the space in Limehouse to conform to British expectations. It is more suitably labeled “Chinastreet”, was nowhere and everywhere; given its commercial and mobilized urban character. The manner in which Chinese people lived and operated their shops in this area became an attraction to British “visitors.” However, referring to Limehouse as “Chinastreet”, is still problematic. The area lacks Chinese architectural or other explicitly exotic design features. Only the Chinese residents, their everyday lives and the images that documented them, became a themed spectacle. The issue of “Chineseness” as spectacle may be understood as a result of the British consumption of Chinoiserie. My analysis of images and texts and the complex relationships between objects, people, and the social interactions within the Limehouse Chinese community complicates and uncovers alternate narratives to the nature of this dynamic.

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Plate

【picture 1】Tower Hamlets Local History Library and Archives, London Map, 1920. The street to the right of West India Dock Road is Pennyfields, and the street to the left is Limehouse Causeway. Photograph by Shengfang Chou.

【picture 2】THLHL, Photograph collection on Limehouse Chinese community, 1920, Ref. LH 00/4. Photograph by Shengfang Chou.

【picture 3】THLHL, Chinese Cooleys in the London Docks, 1877. Photograph by Shengfang Chou.

【picture 4】THLHL, Pennyfields, Ordnance Survey, Scale: 5 feet -1 mile, 1894. Photograph by Shengfang Chou.

【picture 5】THLHL, Limehouse Causeway, Ordnance Survey, Scale: 5 feet -1 mile, 1894. Photograph by Sheng-fang Chou.

【picture 6】Charles Beasley, Agricultural Pavilion, Stockton, California, Pioneer Museum and Haggin Galleries, Stockton, California, 1887. Photograph by Shengfang Chou.


【picture 8】THLHL, Photograph collection on Limehouse Chinese community, 1924. Photograph by Shengfang Chou.


Tables

【table 1】Chinese in London, 1881-1931. Data collected from the decennial census reports. Graph by Shengfang Chou.

【table 2】Rate Books, Borough of Poplar, 1905-1935. Graph by Shengfang Chou.
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