Urban Chinatowns in Europe: with Cases in London and Paris

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Urban Chinatowns in Europe: with cases in London and Paris

London and Paris are comparable in their wealth of ethnic diversity, and the amount of Chinese population is impressive. As a result, the presence of Chinatown in these two cities is understandable, and they are the only significant Chinatowns in Europe. Then, the question such as which Chinatown is larger often comes to people’s minds. However, from the available information, there is no standard answer, and the debate for making different selections is warrant.

In the past, I had the pleasure to travel to these two great cities, and my keen interest in Chinatown had taken me to set my foot on those territories. After extensive self-guided tours, I tended to think that making a ranking between them is like comparisons of apples and oranges, because they exhibit distinctive characteristics, and their strengths and weakness are usually unique. With this understanding, describing them, side by side, from different angles seems a constructive way to better appreciate them. Unfortunately, literature with this fashion seems, to the best of my knowledge, lacking.

This essay is my attempt in this kind of approach, along with some photos, to the quest of learning more about urban Chinatowns within these two cities. Learning this topic is a personal joy, so is the writing of this article. Therefore, narratives and reflections, except some facts about history or statistics which have sources listed, are the writing format throughout the essay.

HISTORY OF ORIGINAL CHINATOWNS

London (source 1)

1. In the 18th century, Chinese employees of the East India Company, also known as sailors, made their homes in the East End of London with a name as: Limehouse, which has been regarded as the original Chinatown. Around 1914, there were a few hundred Chinese in Limehouse, and it was often seen as a slum.
2. Limehouse was destroyed by London Blitz of the German bombing around the period of WWII. In the meantime, the decline of British shipping also presented threats to the Chinese community.

Paris (source 2)

1. During World War I, a huge group of ceramics workers were recruited from Wenzhou region of China to work in Paris, and, subsequently, they established a small community, bound roughly by Rue au Maire, Rue Volta, Rue du Temple and Rue des Gravilliers, in the 3rd arrondissement. This community has been considered as the first Chinatown of Paris.
2. With time passing, this Chinatown neither grew nor disappeared. Presently, there are still some Chinese establishments to be seen in that area.

**CHINATOWNS OF TODAY (Source 3)**

London

1. During the 1950s and 1960s, there were huge waves of Chinese immigrants mainly from Hong Kong because, due to the land reform in Hong Kong, Chinese people were trying to pursue a better life in London.
2. As a result, in the 1960s a few restaurants started small business in Gerrard Street in the West End of London. It marked the birth of present Chinatown.
3. Early 1970s, more land on the east side of Gerrard Street was acquired to contribute Chinatown’s development further.
4. From mid-1980s, a great number of immigrants from mainland China and Vietnam, when China introduced more relaxed restriction on emigration and Vietnamese wanted to leave the control of communist regime, flocked into the City of Westminster. They also settled down along Gerrard Street.

*London Chinatown’s Gerrard Street*
Paris

1. In the 1970s and 1980s, there were overseas Chinese refugees fleeing from Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia to Paris.

2. When the new comers were hunting for affordable housing, those dozens of high rise buildings in the 13th arrondissement, constructed by the Government’s urban development program, provided the opportunities, because the rent was much cheaper and there was plenty of space for expanding.

3. In 1982, the first Chinese store opened its door. This beginning led to the birth of Paris’s 2nd Chinatown, which was also termed as Indo Chinese Chinatown.
**BOUNDARIES**

London

It is a T-junction character, with Shaftesbury Avenue to the North; Leicester Square to the South; Charing Cross Road to the East; Rupert Street to the West. Gerrard Street (爵祿街) and Lisle Street (儷人街) are two major thoroughwares.

Paris

The City’s main (2nd) Chinatown is in the triangle formed by Avenue d’Ivry, Avenue de Choisy and Boulevard Massena.

**PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION**

London

1. London underground train to either Leicester Square or Piccadilly Circus.
2. Bus routes do not travel through Chinatown

Paris

1. Subway: Metro 5, 6, or 7 lines to the stop “Place d’Italie”
2. Bus: Metro Tolbi to the stop “Rue Tolbiac”

**SATELLITE CHINATOWN**

London

There is no other significant Chinatown in City of Westminster, London.

Paris (source 4)

Paris’s 3rd Chinatown—Belleville Chinatown (also known as 美麗城 by Chinese residents)—emerged in the 1980s in Belleville of the 20th arrondissement, along Rue de Belleville and Boulevard de Belleville. The major difference in ethnic groups between main Chinatown and 美麗城 is that the vast majority of Chinese population in the latter one came from Wenzhou and northern part of China.

Belleville area, with many immigrants from Greece, Africa, and Jewish community, is the “melting pot” of Paris, and is also known as the heart of an artist colony. At Rue de Noyez, there are many walls of paintings.

![Colorful wall at Belleville Chinatown](image-url)
**CHINESE POPULATION** (Source 5)

London
There were 124,250 Chinese people throughout the City, or 1.5% of the City population in London.

Paris
There was roughly a population of 700,000 Chinese in Paris, or 0.94 % of the City population.

**CHINATOWN GATEWAYS**

Paris
There is no Chinatown arch in any of those three Chinatowns.

London
There are four gateways in total.
1. In the 1980s, one was erected at the north east end of Gerrard Street. In the meantime, a similar one was set up at the south west end of the same street.
2. In the 1990s, the 3\textsuperscript{rd} one was built at Macclesfield Street in the Soho area.
3. The 4\textsuperscript{th} gate was officially unveiled on January 12, 2016. It is located on Wardour Street of Chinatown.

*London Chinatown’s 4\textsuperscript{th} arch with Chinese words*

中國太平 (on one side) 英倫呈祥 (on the other side)
**INSTITUTIONS**

**London**

1. **London Chinese Community Center** (華人社區中心)

   Located at Leicester Court, and was founded in 1980, it has served tens of thousands Chinese people when they needed help at many aspects when immigrants started new chapters of their lives at this City.

2. **London Chinatown Chinese Association**

   was formed in 1978. It was the driving force to have the 4th gate built in Chinatown. The construction of that gateway improves tremendously the visibility of Chinatown within the West End.

3. **The Charing Cross Library** (查寧閣圖書館)

   Located at the East end of Chinatown, it holds one of the largest collections of Chinese materials in UK public libraries.

**Paris**

1. **L’Amicale des Teochews de France** (法國潮州會館)

   Established in 1986, it is a Buddhist temple with oriental façade. In fact, this cultural and religious association is the only place with Chinese styled architecture in Paris Chinatowns.

2. **Bibliotheque Nataionale de France**

   Located in the 13th eme, this national library is in a walking distance from Chinatown, so it serves the purpose of enhancing the visibility of this community. It holds a sizable Chinese collection.

3. **Association D’Union des Indochinois en France** (旅法印支華人會館)

   Created in 2010, it is best known as “A.U.I.F.”. Its mission is to promote the wellbeing and as a vehicle of communications of Indo-Chinese in Paris.

**SUPERMARKETS, MALLS, HOTELS**

**London**

1. **New Loon Moon** (新龍門行)

   Situated at Gerrard Street, this is a 4-floor shopping mall, with a variety of food shops, dried food, Chinese herbals, and bakeries.

2. **See Woo**

   Founded in 1975, it started as a grocery shop. It is now a supplier with three outlets across United Kingdom.

3. **Loon Fung** (龍鳳)

   This is the newest one among these three. Also located at Gerrard Street, it is the only supermarket which has a fresh meat counter, somewhat like the open markets in Asia. This could be the reason contributing to a long queen of checkout line.
Paris

1. **Tang Freres (陳氏百貨商場)**
   This mega supermarket was established in 1976 by brothers from Laos Chinese. Through aggressive development, it is now one of the largest Asian shopping malls in Europe. It is also engaged in import, export, catering, and media, and is definitely a draw of extensive shoppers in the main Chinatown.

2. **Paristore (巴黎士多集團)**
   Opening its door in 1977, this Asian supermarket is a Franchise with more than 20 branches in Paris. There are two stone lions sitting in front of the store in main Chinatown.

3. **Les Olympiades**
   Started in 2007, it features dozens of Asian shops. It is also a favorable meeting point for many Asian youths in Paris.

4. **Paris International Hotel**
   Located at Belleville Chinatown, it started the operation in November 2014. There is neither French nor English signage of the hotel name. As the largest hotel among all the Chinatowns in Paris, this attractively looking hotel is reportedly enjoying good business.
**STATUS QUO AND SOCIAL PATHOLOGY**

**London**
1. It boasts over 80 restaurants, a few Chinese supermarkets, some fancy bakeries, herbal stores, bars and pubs. There is a gorgeous pagoda, and a sizable stone lion near pedestrian Gerrard Street. Throughout the area, traditional Chinese retail stores still exist, and a bustling Chinese community is evidenced. This beautiful area is also a major attraction to London locales or tourists.
2. In 2008, Prince Charles paid a visit to Chinatown and gave a high remark for its achievement.
3. The existence of Casinos and the prevailing gambling are reportedly two major social problems.

**Paris**
1. The Chinatown of 13th arrondissement, mixed with good and bad neighborhoods, is actually an Asian Chinese community, so it explains why Chinese architecture is not highly visible. Nevertheless, this weakness does not have an impact on its attraction.
2. With the arrival of new immigrants from China to Belleville, 美麗城 has more in touch with modern life in China.
3. However, the residents of 美麗城 are concerned about frequent occurrences of robberies, attacks, violence, and prostitutions.
List of sources


