“Mixed race,” Chinese identity, and intercultural place: Decolonizing urban memories of Limehouse Chinatown in London

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ABSTRACT
London’s Limehouse Chinatown was often negatively portrayed in the media and popular fictional works, which stigmatizes and racializes the Chinese community. There has been little scholarly studies about the memories of the original Chinese residents in Limehouse Chinatown. As a project of de-imperializing city, I situate this article in the contested field of postcolonial cities in relation to decolonizing imperial legacies with a focus on contesting a racialized ethnic minority space, i.e., Limehouse Chinatown. By reframing the racialized Limehouse Chinatown from a bounded Chinese space into a shared place beyond the Chinese community, I seek to re-inscribe the memories of Limehouse Chinatown into the narrative of the postcolonial intercultural city of London with some original interview-based accounts from the Limehouse’s mixed race residents. In turn, the role of writing about ethnic minority spaces such as Chinatown is also examined.

KEYWORDS
Race; mixed race; urban memory; intercultural Chinatown; decolonization; London; interracial place

Introduction

The history of Limehouse Chinatown is arguably one of London’s best hidden gems in terms of its migrant community narratives. From the 1860s, some Chinese seamen began to build up a Chinese settlement around Limehouse. Limehouse Chinatown and its Chinese inhabitants caught the attention of the host society, and often negatively portrayed in the media and popular fictional works which were fueled the construction of a Limehouse myth with opium dens and crime, thereby stigmatizing and racializing the Chinese community. This urban myth of a racialized and dangerous Chinatown was at its peak during the 1920s and 1930s with the publication of popular fictions (Case, 2002; Rohmer, 1913). After the demolition of the Limehouse Chinatown buildings during the 1960s regeneration project, the Chinatown that is most familiar today has relocated to the West End of London, whilst little remains of the original Chinese population in Limehouse.

The article rethinks the conception and racialization of ethnic minority space using Limehouse Chinatown as case study. As an effort of contributing to a project of decolonizing and de-imperializing city, I situate this article in the contested field of postcolonial cities in relation to decolonizing imperial legacies (Hosagrahar, 2012; King, 2003; Loo, 2017; Sidaway, 2000) with a focus on contesting racialized ethnic minority spaces such as Limehouse Chinatown. I have pointed out elsewhere that it might be useful to investigate
some relatively neglected areas such as “race” and “immigration,” and view them as shifting “sites” in the shaping of cities and global culture (Loo, 2017, p. 636). Therefore, this article challenges conceptions of the postcolonial intercultural city and ethnic minority spaces such as Chinatown—which keeps the identity and spaces of the ethnic minority groups in the shadow of the city or nation (Loo, 2012, 2013)—by reframing the racialized Limehouse Chinatown from a bounded “Chinese” space into a shared place with memories beyond the Chinese community. In this way, I seek to re-inscribe the minority memories and spaces, i.e. Limehouse Chinatown, into the narrative of the postcolonial intercultural city of London (Jacobs, 1996; Rapport, 2003) in order to maintain that ethnic minority place such as Chinatown can contribute to the making of intercultural cities.

Based on a place-based oral histories project in 2010–2011 in London, I have interviewed and collected some stories from the former residents of Limehouse Chinatown (Personal Communication with Leslie Hoe, Connie Hoe and Jane Lamb). My interest in this article is to use some of these collected memories to reconstruct a place of Chinatown from these Chinese residents’ perspectives—which is different from the dominant official narratives and documentations—through piecing together fragments of memories from various individuals. In contrast to popular representations of Limehouse Chinatown being a mysterious place filled with opium dens and crimes, the memories selected for this article focuses on reconstructing a sense of community and placeness, and this counter-narrative stresses Limehouse Chinatown is actually an interracial place—rather than a “Chinese” town—with a closely knit community. In this way, I challenge the racialized Chinatown with the inclusion of some original interview-based firsthand accounts from the Limehouse’s mixed race residents about the place, and in turn to ponder the role of writing the memories of ethnic minority place in the making of an intercultural city such as London.

This article consists of three parts. It will first explain in more details the research aims and postcolonial perspectives in relation to “race,” “mixed race” and “Chinatown,” including justification why I used mixed race children memories as a focus in this article. The second part provides a context of how the urban mythologies and racial discourse constructed Limehouse Chinatown as a racialized Chinese place and its impact onto the vanishing of Limehouse Chinatown. The third part—which is the key part of the article—draws upon the memories from three mixed race original residents to provide everyday life stories to counter the dominant racialized myths of Limehouse Chinatown so that more realities about the place could be revealed. The concluding part outlines some observations from this study and speculates their potential contributions to the understanding of the place and memories of globalized intercultural cities such as London and its ethnic minority spaces.

**Part 1: Research aims and methods; interrogating “race” and “Chinatown”**

This section shows how this article situates itself in the studies of decolonizing ethnic minority space and postcolonial cities and might contribute to the existing scholarships on the subject of “Chinatown” and “race” (including “mixed race”) in relation to identity of urban spaces in cities. As stated earlier, this article challenges a conception of the (post)colonial city which keeps the identity and spaces of the ethnic minority groups such as Chinatown in the shadow of the city or nation (Loo, 2012, 2013). This is important as discussion on decolonizing cities focuses more on formerly colonized cities and nations, there is a continuing lack of attention
to studies of decolonizing the imperial metropoles such as Jane Jacobs’s study of London (Jacobs, 1996). Moreover, most existing scholarships on intercultural city pay little attention to the project of decolonization of imperial legacies in cities of former colonial powers such as imperial London (Wood & Landry, 2008). I contend that the conception and construction of ethnic minority identity and space, in both Global North and Global South countries, need to be called into question so that the power and domination can be made transparent in order to craft a space for the dominated. This is important for, as Chen (2010, p. 209) has argued clearly, the decolonization project in the Global South cannot be complete without the decolonization project happening in the Global North and vice versa. Therefore, using postcolonial perspectives, this article proposes a recuperative urban history, seeking to re-inscript the minority memories and spaces into the narrative of the postcolonial city of London (Jacobs, 1996; Rapport, 2003) in order to construct shared public memories. In challenging the London’s dominant urban memories of Limehouse Chinatown, this study hopes to contribute to a part of a wider project of decolonizing or de-imperializing London. In particular, this article uses “ethnic minority” space of Limehouse “Chinatown” as strategy to interrogate the conceptions of “race” and “mixed race” in relation to “Chinatown” in London to provide a different view of London’s history, identity and memory.

This article is theoretically in line with re-inscribing minority memories and spaces into the making of intercultural city (Loo, 2013) and contribute to the studies of Chinatown. One key strategy I use is to re-inscript Limehouse Chinatown from a racialized “Chinese” urban imaginary to a narrative of interracial Chinatown. Hence, it is important to outline some of my working concepts of “race” and “Chinatown.”

The concept of “race” defies simple definitions (Kobayashi, 2004). In a general sense, the study approaches the concept of “race” in two ways. First, it is a way of life, deeply embedded in the European and British colonial past, lived out in the present as a taken-for-granted reality (Jacobs, 1996; King, 2003). Second, it is an analytical concept that has conditioned both academic and everyday ways of interpreting the world around us (Kobayashi, 2004). Taking a social construction point of view, “race” can be referred to as a process of “racialization” which takes place and changes through time and place. In this sense, racism is highly variable and adaptable. Therefore, this study treats racialization and spatialization as an ever-changing entity. It is important to highlight the race factor in the making of urban space and histories, but more so, the importance of alternative histories to reclaim the place for the ethnic minority (in this case, the Chinese community) in the making of the built environment (Limehouse Chinatown; Barton, 2001; Judin & Vladislavic, 1998; Lokko, 2000; Loo, 2013). Informed by the writing of bell Hooks (1990) and Stuart Hall (1996) on the theorization of race and identities, the article sees the conception of “ethnicity” and “identity” as performance and process. In other words, it concerns the process of identification with place, and privileges the idea of reading the built environment as the “stage” in which certain meaning is invested by collective and individual behavior of certain group. Therefore, in this article, the stories and spaces chosen can be viewed as the “stage” in which the Chinese community in Limehouse as the social actors have invested particular meanings and, in turn, find a sense of belonging to the place, and hence to contest, invent, appropriate and reconstruct the identifications associated with Limehouse Chinatown.

In particular, this article uses strategically the memories from mixed race (“Chinese”) community. “Mixed race” is a controversial term. Many scholars have highlighted the danger of fixing a racial category as a non-changeable social group or condition
(Anzaldúa, 1987; Root, 1992, p. 3; Parker & Song, 2001; Song, 2012; Tamai et al., 2020). All individuals are mixed. Recent studies of race point to racial mixture, rather than racial authenticity, is a norm rather than exception. These studies focus on how individuals, families and communities can remake their racial identities. In the case of Limehouse Chinatown, my informants use their memories to negotiate the stereotype and social condition of “Chinese” and “mixed race” with their dual-identification with the British and Chinese identity. It is interesting to note that my informants use the term “mixed race” without much hesitation and to a certain extent, portrayed a sense of pride due to the fact that they can associate with more than one identity. Part of the reasons I used “mixed race” as analytical tool is to situate this article into the highly contested public discourse of the issues facing the mixed-race people in Britain (Ali, 2014) which might help problematizing and breaking the stereotyping of Chinatown. (During my research, I have introduced my informants to the media (such as the BBC) and their stories have appeared in public media such as BBC program and The Guardian paper focusing on mixed race people in Britain (The Guardian, 2011, October 5).

“Chinatown” as a racialized category and space with single “race” should be challenged. Inspired by Spivak (2003), Cairns (2004, p. 8), Hooks (1990), Hall (1996), and Anzaldúa (1987), I treat “mixed race” as a strategic essentialized and provisional identity to help unpack and break the stereotype of Limehouse Chinatown as a “Chinese” urban space. In response to Gayatri Spivak’s (2003) questioning of “Can the Subaltern Speak?” I treat the mixed race (Chinese residents) as one form of subalternity. It is largely because most of the writings on Limehouse Chinatown focuses on the “Chinese” and less on revealing stories of the mixed race “Chinese” residents. My concern is “How does the subaltern speak?” by investigating how the mixed-race Chinese community in Limehouse makes sense of themselves using their own memories. For Gloria Anzaldúa, “mixed race” people are the people of the future who embody most directly the transgressive theoretical motifs of hybridity, nomadism and border crossing. In this sense, mixed race might act as a “drifting” and “migrating” identity to allow a freer association with more options of social and self-identification (Cairns, 2004). Hence, “mixed race” identity can be employed as a way to reconcile multiple cultural influences and identifications to Limehouse Chinatown and its residents to help breaking the long-held notions about the biological, moral and social meaning of race attached to “Chinese” and “Chinatown.” Narratives from mixed race informants collected for this article aim at articulating their multiple heritage and cultural-attachment and counter the notion of Limehouse Chinatown as a place lived only by “Chinese men.”

There are many scholarly works published on Chinatown. It is useful to state a few relevant studies of Chinatown and Limehouse Chinatown to compare with my approach. For this purpose, I will only briefly outline those studies which address the construction of the “insider” and “outsider,” but attempt to construct a liminal space which blurs the division of insider/outsider to give a voice to the Chinese community. New research complicates “Chinatown” with an idea of porosity physically and conceptually. In this sense, there is no uniform structure such as racial divisions in the insider/outsider model. Instead, the porous structure of Chinatown, the agency and voices of Chinatown residents are highlighted. Perceiving “Chinatown” belongs to the “white” European cultural tradition, in The Idea of Chinatown, Kay J. Anderson (1987) points to powerful agents, such as the state and argues the concept of “Chinatown” reveals more the insider than it does the
outider. However, Kay Anderson’s analysis of Vancouver’s Chinatown reveals that “even as Chinatown evolved into a ‘European commodity,’ it become so with the acknowledgement and participation of certain Chinese themselves.” In *Chinese Chicago*, Huping Ling uncovers the fact that Chinese Americans are not a total outsider. Chinatown, in this sense, “were localized expressions of ethnicity, situated in and interacting with specific urban contexts.” (Wilson, 2019). In an attempt to subjectify Chinese immigrants by placing them in their own perceived spectrum of race and identities, David Torres-Rouff (2016) argues that, although Chinese worldviews are carried with these immigrants overseas, their racial boundaries become porous in commercial and social relationships after their move. Similarly, in London’s Chinatown and the Changing Shape of Chinese Diaspora, the authors present the multifaceted “Chinese faces” through London’s Chinatown by recognizing the agencies of the Chinese community in shaping their identity and economy (Sales et al., 2011).

In Chinatown dis-oriented, Anderson (2017) gives an overview of how Chinatown’s figuration shifted over the years and maintains that the new conceptualizations of Chinatown is understood to be “enactments of white racialized regimes, deployed in the interests not only of white domination but also by Chinese origin people themselves” (Anderson, 2017, p. 3). This includes a framework of the transnational movement that breaks the dualism of the West and the East such as the studies of Flemming Christiansen (2011) or Venessa Kunemann and Ruth Mayer (2011). However, Anderson argues that Chinatown is still regarded as anomalous to its host environment, despite its transnational setting. The author insists that there is a need to complicate the conception of Chinatown beyond a parochial Anglophonic canon. However, the author does not explain how to address Chinatown when it loses its anomaly and, if it loses this, is Chinatown still Chinatown? This remains as an unanswered question. This article responds to this questioning—and in contrast to the useful referenced studies outlined above—with a different focus, i.e., it reveals how the mixed race “Chinese” community’s story-telling makes sense of the place and their identity. I have also elsewhere highlight that the construction of “Chinatown” itself could be an act of minoritizing the “Chinese ethnic group” and “ethnic space.” (Loo, 2012). Therefore, using “mixed race” community memories as instrument to makeshift the dominant identity, my aim is to recast Limehouse Chinatown from an ethnic minority space into a shared place of Limehouse and East End in order to contest the dominant urban history of London which fixes “Chinatown” as a minority space. Relatively, research focuses on Limehouse Chinatown and its people is comparatively fewer to the vast amount of studies on Chinatown.

Fictional writings and representations about Limehouse Chinatown have been widespread. In the 1920s and the 1930s, opium dens, gambling and crime were the recurring themes of fictional works by authors such as prolific English novelist Sax Rohmer (1913, 1916a, 1916b, 1917) and Thomas Burke (1915, 1916, 1921). These depictions in novels fueled the construction of an unknown, dangerous and exotic space of racialized Limehouse Chinatown. Hence, most of the existing scholarly studies on Limehouse Chinese focus on the analysis of fictional representations of Chinatown and their meanings (Case, 2002; Witchard, 2009). Though these excellent studies help in problematizing the myth attached to Limehouse Chinatown, they do not reveal the actual Chinese place and community. In contrast, a few scholarly works focus in telling more records about the residents. Notable studies include historian John Seed (2006) and Sascha Auerbach (2009), who examine the
actual number of Chinese population and the laws discriminating the Chinese respectively. Another good example is Gregor Benton (2007)’s study which highlights some valuable accounts of early Chinese migrants in relation to the transnational nature of migration, but the study was not focused on Limehouse. Thus far, there has been scarcity of scholarly work or near-absence on including first hand memories and stories from the original Chinese residents in Limehouse Chinatown. This article seeks to fill this gap by including some first-hand accounts of the memories of Limehouse Chinatown to counter the dominant “official” documentations of Limehouse Chinatown as a homogenous racialized Chinese space. I make no claim that the use of oral history is a new method. However, these firsthand accounts are rich accounts and important as pointed out by Anthony King the significance in including specific local voices and politics to de-imperialize the impact of postcolonialism. (King, 2003)

**Part 2: The racialized landscape of Limehouse Chinatown**

This section briefly historizes how racial association is attached to Limehouse Chinatown and its impact upon the vanishing of the original Chinese settlement. This would set the scene and provide a context for the next section which aims at offering counter-narratives to these racial construction with the residents’ memories.

The forming of a concentrated Limehouse Chinatown was a gradual process. During the 19th century, especially after the Opium War, when the trade between the British and China was booming, many Chinese seamen—recruited mainly from the southern coastal provinces of China—were employed by the East India Company and other shipping companies. When they arrived in London’s Docklands, these seamen clustered in the area of Limehouse, staying in temporary lodging houses and boarding houses, and forming a temporary community. At the same time, many seamen from other parts of the world settled around this docklands area, making it one of the most cosmopolitan and multiracial places in London. Toward the end of the 19th century, more Chinese seamen began to settle around the two main “Chinese” streets—i.e., Limehouse Causeway and Pennyfields (Figure 1)—resulting in the colloquial naming of Limehouse “Chinatown” (Sims, 1905). In the 1910s, at the peak for Chinatown, there were thirty Chinese shops and restaurants and the streets were almost entirely inhabited by the Chinese (Shang, 1994).

The segregated Limehouse Chinatown was also constructed through urban myths. From the late 19th century until the 1950s, whenever Limehouse Chinatown was mentioned frequently in newspaper reports, it was often related news or stories about Chinese involvement in opium dens, gambling and crime. In particular, the news on Limehouse published from the 1900s to 1930s was dominated by negative portrayal of the area and its Chinese residents (‘STAR,’ 1919; *East End News*, 1924; *East London Advertiser*, 1936; *Montreal Standard*, 1924; *News Chronicle*, 1918; *Times*, 1918). In general, this news revealed little about the reality of the daily lives of the seamen and workers in Limehouse. According to the study of John Seed (2006) and Sascha Auerbach (2009), the occurrence of crime and opium dens existed in reality, but their negative impact to the neighborhood and the city was largely exaggerated. Through my own research, I find that in newspaper reports, there were rarely any photographs showing the interior of the houses and buildings in Chinatown. Despite all the curiosity, there were few interviews with the Chinese residents. In other words, the actual stories of this so-called “Chinese colony” and “Chinese world” in
Limehouse were almost unknown. Even before the settlement of the Chinese around Limehouse, the ideology of “Yellow Peril” plagued the mind of the British. The threat of “Yellow Peril” refers to the fear that the mass immigration of Asians to various Western countries threatened white wages and standards of living and they would eventually disrupt Western civilization and ways of life and values (The Evening News, 1920; Yellow Peril, 1920). This fear of the Yellow Peril and the Chinese invasion was imagined as a global trend—what happened in Limehouse would spread throughout the world as “Chinatowns” were to contaminate modern Western cities (Künneemann & Mayer, 2011; Waller, 1985).

This urban myth of Yellow Peril and Chinese threat in London was perhaps most powerfully constructed by fictions. It was materialized and localized in Limehouse Chinatown through a most representative fictional character Dr. Fu Manchu. In a series of novels created by novelist Sax Rohmer first published in 1913, this fictional Chinese criminal genius Fu Manchu’s evil empire’s headquarters was in Limehouse. Since then, Fu Manchu’s stories and character were featured extensively in mass media forming an archetype of the Chinese evil criminal genius. Ruth Mayer argues that “Dr Fu Manchu imports a complex Oriental praxis into London, making the imperial metropolis a site of dizzying instability and racial chaos.” (Mayer, 2011, pp. 121–122; Seshagiri, 2006, p. 182). In early 20th century, reports of rapidly expanding immigrant communities in London’s East End intensified the fears of urban proliferation of diseased. In that context, Limehouse Chinatown represented a spatial and geographical imaginary (Campkin, 2013) which materialize the ideology of Yellow Peril encompassing a range of prejudices, i.e. criminality, opium, moral degeneracy, uncanny, exotic and threatening. The size of the Chinese population in Limehouse was much smaller than what had been projected by the media.
and fiction at the end of the 19th century and early 20th century. John Seed argues that the real figure for the Chinese community is probably about 300 and the portrayal of a "huge" number of Chinese people and their activities taking over the entire character of the East End or even London itself was nothing more than a stretch of the imagination culminating into a myth. (Seed, 2006, p. 76)

These forms of negative imaginary "Chinatown" have its spatial implications i.e. the vanishing of Limehouse Chinatown. In the 1910s-1920s, there was a judicial campaign—including the 1914 Alien Restriction Acts—against Chinese gambling and narcotics use in the East End and a media frenzy about white girls engaging in interracial sex with Chinese men (Daily Express, 1920; The Evening News, 1920). Sascha argues with evidence, that a systematic discouragement of the Chinese settlement with tough law control was in place for policing the behavior of the Chinese in Limehouse. A report titled "Chinese Exodus from Limehouse" published by The Times (1921) captures the dire situation of the Chinese in the 1920s. Numerous news reports about the raids and policing, crime and deportation of the Chinese culminated in a media campaign that persuaded the government to enforce a full measure of law against the community and blotted out the Chinese presence from the district, in particular, discouraging Chinese settlement with deportation (Church Chronicle, 1920; East End Herald, 1941; East End News, 1920; Malpass & Murie, 1999, as cited in Stone, 2003, p. 5).

Chinese settlements were not encouraged. The anxiety against the presence of the Chinese was always accompanied by the physical occupation of the streets of the East End. Common media descriptions used to denote the Chinese presence and spaces were "the colony of the Chinese," "expanding to occupy our place," "preventing the spread of this [Chinese] colony," etc. (Daily News, 1920). Through the use of language and metaphor, Chinatown was constructed as an "Other place" and an "outsider colony" which had invaded the spaces of "our" East End. The discouragement of Chinese settlement in London was carried out in other ways. In 1925, in allocating council houses, London County Council (LCC) was found to have given preference to British subjects. For example, a council letter issued in 1925 showed that Poplar Borough council letter (1925) had refused to accept Asiatic (including Chinese) tenants in its rehousing schemes. By the mid-1930s, Limehouse had changed dramatically. Many Chinese residents were deported or assimilated, resulting in a displacement of the Chinese neighborhood. In the 1930s, the official authority findings declared that "practically all Stepney is a slum," which included Limehouse (Evening Standard, 1933). Hence, the dangerous and degenerate area of Limehouse Chinatown (as part of Limehouse) was officially categorized as part of the slum to be cleared. The postwar housing estates in the early 1950s marked the beginning of a total transformation of much of Poplar. Following this plan, in 1956, the LCC decided to clear the Pennyfields area for the postwar development scheme of the Birchfield Estate and marked the "death" of Chinatown (Evening News, 1955).

In conclusion, the first death of Limehouse Chinatown occurred as early as the 1920s. This was a time when strong policing was implemented in Limehouse, resulting in the deportation and dispersal of the Chinese from this area. The threats of the place of the Chinese were exaggerated with racial prejudice constructed indirectly contributed to the displacement of the Chinese. The 1920s policing of the Chinese, the slum clearance and redevelopment projects in the 1930s to 1960s were likely linked to the earlier negative stereotype of the Chinese place and community. We now turn our attention to stories collected from some original residents in Limehouse Chinatown to show contrasting views in comparison to the racialized Chinatown.
Part 3: Memories of interracial “Chinatown”: stories from three mixed race residents

The intention and selection of stories

Limehouse Chinatown in reality, was characterized by its mixed-race component. Limehouse Chinatown was never at any time occupied solely by the Chinese (Seed, 2006, pp. 67–68). Many Chinese seamen who stayed in London ended up marrying English women of working-class background, usually non-locals or daughters of dock workers and stevedores (Evening News Reporter, 1920). These Chinese-English households with their mixed-race children mainly lived on Limehouse Causeway, Pennyfields and later including West India Dock Road (Shu-Yeng, 2008, p. 17). However, existing news reports and studies rarely, if not made absent, in telling us the life of these Chinese-English families. Therefore, the story-telling from the residents of their everyday life is crucial to dismantle the dominant racialized myths in order to recover some realities of Limehouse Chinatown.

The stories selected focus on reconstructing a sense of “place” or “placeness” of Chinatown as an intercultural place. This aims at deconstructing the two dominant myths, i.e. Limehouse Chinatown was a monocultural “Chinese” space, and Chinatown as a nondescript place absent of any sense of community. The everyday life stories retold here shed new light on a more realistic picture of a friendly and closely knit community that lived closely together. These life stories and memories are grouped in six subsections—i.e., Family and Home, Games and Childhood, Schooling and Chinese Culture, Street and Social Spaces, Medicine and Healthcare, and finally Identity of Place—and each subsection is structured to link the personal residents’ narrative to counter a particular dominant myth.

The restoring of “placeness” of Limehouse Chinatown employs personal accounts including some seemingly banal details such as interiors of the house or family dinner and home addresses. This is to counter the absence of everyday life stories of the residents. Indeed, the notorious fictional stories in fictional depiction. My research finds that there are no photographs or images showing the real household or interiors of the house of the Chinese community. This is a precarious finding in view of the presence of many photographs available in the local archives showing the poor living condition of the East Ender. In general, the Chinese lived peacefully with their neighbor and in fact they formed families with the locals. This is rarely portrayed positively in the media. The narratives of placeness is also countering the stereotype of a drifting transient Chinese community with no real sense of belonging to the local place of East End. The stories of the residents give us a sense of home identified by the Chinese, i.e. they are part of the East Ender. The Chinese and their mixed-race children are part of the local East End community. All these re-telling of residents’ stories is a form of remapping and re-inscripting the Chinatown into an integral part of the local geography and community of London’s East End.

Selection and context of oral histories

This section, i.e. Memories of Interracial “Chinatown,” forms the key part of this article, hence it is imperative to provide some background and context of my collection of memories. I have carried out an oral histories project in the year of 2010–2011 where I managed to talk to some residents who has intimate links with Limehouse Chinatown. It was, at that time, a difficult task due to lack of information to identify original residents of
Limehouse Chinatown for interview. Most of the original residents had passed away. I had contacts with many leaders of Chinese community centers in London, but there was not much information about people who lived in Limehouse Chinatown and the stories of Limehouse Chinatown was little known to London’s Chinese community. I started to research the history of Limehouse Chinatown and did guided walks of the area in 2008 while completing an archive project on the history of migration of the Chinese in London in 2007–2008, I was amazed how little the London’s Chinese community know about Limehouse Chinatown. Indeed, majority were not aware or knew little of another Chinatown other than the Soho’s Chinatown near the city center of London.

Partly based on luck and co-incidence, I managed to talk to seven people with stories closely related to Limehouse Chinatown. For the purpose of this article, I choose to use the stories from three mixed race informants; they are all mixed-race children—i.e., Leslie Hoe, Connie Hoe and Jane Lamb—born out of union between Chinese men and English women. Their stories are intimately linked to Limehouse Chinatown and helpful in building a narrative of interracial Chinatown as I explained in earlier section. The accounts from these three informants are sufficient to construct my main argument within the length of this article. Another important reason is that these informants have made their stories public before. For example, Leslie and Connie has shared their stories in public media on BBC (I have introduced them to a BBC’s broadcaster), The Guardian and some local Chinese media. Similarly, Jane Lamb has shared stories of her father once to a public audience. Hence, my accounts of these informants’ stories in this article are all based on my own interpretations of their voices during interviews on several occasions—i.e., Leslie Hoe and Connie Hoe (2010 and 2011) and Jane Lamb (2011)—coupled with crosschecking with their stories presented in public. Moreover, the records of these interviews are kept in the Tower Hamlets Local History Library and Archive. It is worth mentioning the other informants I have interviewed, but not quoted here, informs and supports my arguments. These story-telling of personal memories to the public is important as a political act in when personal memories have been de-individualized and made public. This is in line with what Hannah Arendt suggested on storytelling: “Compared with the reality which comes from being seen and heard, even the greatest forces of intimate life . . . lead an uncertain, shadowy kind of existence unless and until they are transformed, derivatized and deindividualized, as it were, into a shape to fit them for public appearance. The most current of such transformations occurs in storytelling.” (Arendt, 1998 [1958]). What I intend to do is to further reframe their narratives into an academic discourse for the first time to counter the dominant public discourse of Limehouse Chinatown as part of a larger project of subaltern voices of minority places in London.

To begin, some background of these three mixed-race residents is explained to provide the context to their stories. Leslie Hoe is of Anglo-Chinese heritage, born in 1919. His father was a Chinese seaman originally from Zhoushan, China, and his mother, an English woman. Leslie grew up in Pennyfields. He has served in the navy, and later worked as a cook specializing in French cooking in London. He eventually opened his own restaurant. Leslie is married to Connie Hoe, who was born in 1922, also of Anglo-Chinese heritage. The memories shared by Leslie and Connie Hoe formed an important legacy of Limehouse Chinatown. Another Anglo-Chinese mixed-race child, Jane Lamb told the story of her father, Dr. Philip Lamb, who came from Hong Kong and worked and lived in Limehouse providing medical service to the local community from 1920 to 1968. These personal memories are organized into six themes to build a narrative of interracial place of Limehouse Chinese, in which we now turn to.
Six themes of memories of Limehouse Chinatown

Sense of family and home

The stories from my informants divulges in the presence of “a sense of family” and “home” in Limehouse Chinatown instead of a generic term of “Limehouse Chinese.” This is important to counter the dominant racialized representations of Limehouse Chinatown which dehumanizes the “Chinese” community and provides no detailed accounts of the people’s everyday-life. Hence, in this subsection, some accounts—which include mundane and banal accounts of the interior spaces and life-stories of the family members—allow us to hear their “voices” and feel their “realities.”

Leslie’s childhood memories give a glimpse into the everyday home life of a mixed-race family. The home life of a mixed-race family with its Chinese characteristics came out strongly from Leslie Hoe’s stories. For Leslie, Limehouse Chinatown was a unique place formed by Chinese seamen who settled on land, who then married local English women and made the Limehouse Causeway and Pennyfields area into a place they identified as home. Leslie himself is a child out of such union and his childhood experiences were of Chinese and British culture. Leslie’s father worked as a chef in a Chinese restaurant in the West End of London. He remembers that the best food he has ever had in his life was the food prepared by his father at home. After coming home late from working in the restaurant, he would usually prepare Chinese food for the family. On his days off, his father would take care of all the family’s meals because, according to Leslie, his mother’s cooking was not good.

Leslie recalled some interiors of the house he once lived, for example, in his family home, the front room was referred to as the “Prized Room.” His father used to play the er-hu (a two-stringed Chinese ethnic music instrument) and the Chinese flute. He usually played his instruments in the front room where no one was allowed in. In the Prized Room, there was a gramophone which was rare at the time, in the form of a cabinet, with shelves inside which was full of records. Some of them were recordings of traditional Chinese Opera. Leslie still remembers a tune that his father played and a couple of Chinese songs.

Chinese women were absent from Limehouse before 1960s, with exception of only a couple of Chinese wives who came together with their husbands. Hence, the English mother is the backbone of the so-called Chinese community in Limehouse. Growing up in Limehouse in the 1920s and 1930s, Leslie did not remember seeing any Chinese women in Limehouse when he was a child. All half-Chinese or mixed-race children—Eurasians—had English mothers. For his parents’ generation, people tended to go to parties to look for their future partner. For Leslie’s generation, they went to dances organized by the local church or they would go to cinemas such as Troxy on Commercial Road. All the mixed race children ended up marrying each other. In this sense, the original Chinese residents (mainly seaman) and their children (mainly mixed-race children) has close interaction with the locals.

The children in Chinatown: Play and games

The place of Limehouse Chinatown formed part of the Chinese children playground. This playfulness of everyday life of the residents counter the dominant views of Chinatown as a dreadful place full of crime and risk. The stories of the mixed-race Chinese children mixing with the local white children also help in providing an alternative stories which might dislocate the popular portrait of the threat and fear of the inter-marriage of the Chinese with white woman.
In Leslie’s eyes, his Limehouse Chinatown was a playground when he was a child. All of Leslie’s memories in Limehouse were filled with happy encounters, games and childhood fun. Leslie is fond of telling stories about how he mixed and played with the Anglo-Chinese and British children. He thought the Chinese tended to have big families. Children would play knocking on people’s door, and when the residents opened the door, the children would make a noise and run away. There was a big open area where the children would play baseball. Children also used to play football in the street, which was made of used paper tied up with a piece of string as no one could afford buying a football at that time. The children would only play around Pennyfields and would not go over to Limehouse Causeway as there was a wide road with trams going down it which would be dangerous for the children to cross on their own. Local children used to engage in street gang fights. Each gang was comprised of a dozen or so kids. The gangs were divided between groups of half-Chinese and English children, but it was not an indication of animosity between the Chinese and English. Leslie recalled: “We used to fight them with sticks. You have a gang, in your street and you fought the next street with sticks.”

There was a community consisting of some Chinese senior members who used to visit a Chinese club. Leslie recalled vividly his memories of meeting the Chinese elder members in a Chinese Club where they played cards. He called these Chinese men who were much older than him as “uncles” out of respect. They would, on New Year’s Day, Christmas and the Chinese New Year, give him a cash gift as present. Leslie has clear memories of Chinese uncles who were members of tongs and freemasons, all dressed in western attire. The young Leslie liked seeing these Chinese men in smart suits. They had a handkerchief in their pocket, and they would use it to blow their nose, then folded it up nicely and put back in their pocket. They were well-mannered and clean and were regarded as kind and generous. They also liked English music. In Leslie’s memory, the Chinese uncles were very kind to him and other children. Leslie and other children would play with them and liked to watch them reading street posters in Chinese reporting news about China. Leslie also remembered the Chinese Embassy would send people to help them improve their knowledge on China. On one occasion, they were taught the Nationalist Chinese Marching Song. He thinks it was not easy to learn Chinese properly as everyday life was dominated by the use of English.

**Cultural Chinatown: Chinese school and culture**

One of the greatest stories came out from interviews is the presence of Chinese school which taught Chinese culture. This account of Chinese school reframed Limehouse Chinatown as an intercultural space of learning Chinese Culture and destabilize the dominant representation of Chinatown as a non-cultural site with its residents as “uncivilized” foreigners.

Experience of learning Chinese culture is the core of Connie’s story-telling. Quite different from Leslie, Connie’s childhood in Limehouse in general was an unhappy one. Also from an Anglo-Chinese family, Connie does not have clear memory of her father. After the death of her mother when Connie was eight, Connie’s father left for Hong Kong and never returned to England. Connie was later raised by her foster mother, Kitty Wing, also an English woman with a Chinese husband. Connie called Kitty her auntie and she lived with Kitty at No. 12, Limehouse Causeway until Connie got married at 19. Although her childhood experience was not so memorable, Connie recalls her experience of learning Chinese culture as the happy moment. She continued her interest in Chinese culture into her old age.
though she could not read Chinese. Connie was part of the generation of mixed-race children born after 1920s who forms an important legacy to the history of East End. These children received English education in a mainstream school and learned about Chinese culture outside school. Connie went to Dingle Lane Junior School in Limehouse, then Millwall Central School in Dockland, aged 11. Connie recalled that there were only two Chinese in her class. She had the chance to learn Chinese language and culture by listening to BBC Chinese programs on China in one of her geography lessons.

In Connie’s memories, the mixed-race children in Limehouse were greatly helped by voluntary worker such as those from the Methodist Church. The Methodists were interested in carrying out missionary work in China, but they later found out about Limehouse and decided to offer their services to the Chinese and half-Chinese children there. Started in 1929, Limehouse Methodist Church for children’s club was run on Monday, normally for two hours. This provided a facility for the children to go to, where every week they would get lessons in handicrafts and religious instruction. There were over 50 students and they were all mixed-race children.

However, a Chinese club called Chung-Hua Club formed the more significant memories of the learning of Chinese culture in Connie’s childhood. The club was set up by a lady called Irene Ho, to teach children of their Chinese heritage. In Connie’s memory, Irene came from a famous family in Hong Kong and had come to England to study for her PhD. Irene had sympathy with Limehouse’s mixed race children because she was also of mixed-race background. Irene later bought a small house in Pennyfields which became Chung-Hua Club where the children were taught about Chinese culture, language and other things about China. The Chung-Hua Club building was destroyed during the Second World War air raids.

**Mapping of an intercultural Chinese street and social spaces**

The remapping of Limehouse Chinese place as a region or place beyond the two main streets portrayed in dominant representations is helpful to construct a place where the Chinese social space and physical occupation were integral to the East End’s Limehouse. In fictional representations and dominant literature, Pennyfields was dominant as the heart of Chinatown. We know little about what happens to the spaces beyond this street. Hence, my mapping of the Chinese place (Figure 1) shows the interlink between the Chinese and the locals. For example, the shops were serving the community and neighborhood rather than just the Chinese. There are evidences that there was a rich community life in this place.

Chinese boarding-houses and shops and cafes existed side-by-side with English working-class families, pubs, shops and tradesmen and a multinational population catering for sailors of a hundred different nations. However, we know very little about the stories of the Chinese shops from recollections of the user (i.e. the residents). The memories of Leslie and Connie provide us a glimpse into this disappearing world. In their accounts, the Chinese shops also served as “community” place for the Chinese and the locals.

In Leslie’s recollection, there were one or two sweet shops and a few restaurants where vessel crew would go when they were ashore. There was a big restaurant in 60 Pennyfields, and a couple of famous ones called Sam Sam Sing and Chung Chu. Popular dishes were Chop Suey, chicken soup and noodles. There was a place of gathering where people could go to play mahjong. Leslie used to play snooker with his father and used the place as a club.
Connie had firsthand experience of living in a “Chinese” shop as she lived in Connie’s foster mother (i.e. Kitty Wing) who ran a shop on Limehouse Causeway. The shop was like an English corner shop and she would sell things like butter, cheese, tea, sugar, biscuits, sweets etc. It was not a shop that sold Chinese provisions. The shop was frequently visited by all seamen. Connie could remember seeing well-behaved Chinese and Indian seamen dressed in western trousers and jackets coming into the shop for different things. The Indian seamen (lascars) who lived in the Stranger’s Home in West India Dock Road would “come in and buy Lifebuoy Soap, the only one item they would ever buy . . . Chinese seamen always seemed to wear trousers that were too short, and as they did not understand English, they would just point at the goods that they wanted to buy.” Children visited the shops quite frequently. Connie recalled that children in those days used to be sent out into the street to play because the houses were small and over-crowded and contained more than one family. Instead of going out to play, children liked to come into the shop and congregate. When the children were at school, the mothers used to come in and use Kitty’s shop as an informal chatting room.

**Spaces of medicine and healthcare**

The stories of a Chinese professional doctor and also healthcare service in Limehouse Chinatown is important to provide different views about the fact that Chinatown is not just a space of seaman, shoppers and laundry man, which are the dominant stereotype of Chinatown. With the presence of a Chinese doctor, it gives us a different picture about the “Chinese community” as there was a professional who had network with the local white professionals and wider society.

My informant, Jane Lamb told the story of her father Dr. Philip Lamb, who was the Chinese doctor in Limehouse. The presence of Dr. Lamb breaks the stereotype of the Chinese from a seaman background. He could speak Chinese and was capable of integrating some “old-fashioned” and traditional Chinese approach in his consultation. Dr. Lamb studied at Edinburgh University. In the 1920s, he moved to London to set up his practice at 62 East India Dock Road. Dr. Lamb offered a free service to the Chinese community in the area had no medical care and did not have the ability to explain their symptoms in English. In 1927, he moved his surgery to 82 West India Dock Road. He married Christina, Jane’s mother, in 1939, a Scottish girl who happened to live just two minutes away from his house. Unfortunately, the surgery was destroyed by bombs in 1940. Undeterred, he moved again a short distance to 90 West India Dock Road and remained there until 1968. Throughout the Second World War, Dr. Lamb continued to look after the Chinese community. The Chinese patients of Dr. Lamb remained loyal to him. He established a rapport with the families of these patients and the fact that he could converse with them in Chinese was reassuring for many Chinese people. He was their doctor as well as friend whom they trust to make appropriate referrals to specialist hospital consultants. Connie Hoe, was one of his patients, recalled “at the back of the chemist was Dr. Lamb. He was a Chinese doctor and attended Edinburgh University so he must have been very clever. And if you had a cough and nothing could cure—he would . . . he was a magician.”

According to Jane, her father had a network of non-Chinese friends, for example, the Cambridge sinologist Dr. Joseph Needham (1900–1995). Needham became Master of Caius College, Cambridge from 1966–1976 and was the author on the subject of science and
civilization in China. The pair first met in the 1930s. Dr. Lamb and his family were invited frequently to stay with Needham and the two highly educated men would discuss medical topics and other intellectual matters.

**Chinatown as urban village and dual-identity of place**

From the stories collected here, it is evident that Limehouse Chinatown appeared more like an “urban village” (Leslie’s quote)—i.e., situated near the center of London with a “village feel.” In this sense, Limehouse Chinatown has a dual-identity where English and Chinese culture interacted. For my informants, they identified themselves as both Chinese and British. In Leslie’s view, Limehouse Chinatown should be honored as a Chinese space with a Chinese name. His view is that there is no contradiction in being half-Chinese and half-British as everyone is equal in a democracy. He says, “I’m pro-Chinese and I’m pro-English. And I resent writing down on a list on forms when I apply for something from the state ‘What Nationality are you.’ Born over here, I’ve always accepted myself as a native of this country and I resent the making a difference with me being accepted as one of the people here. By and large, living here as being brought up here is a fine experience. As poor as we were and as humble as it was, it’s a rich experience.” (Leslie Hoe, Personal Communication with Leslie Hoe, Connie Hoe and Jane Lamb). To Leslie, Limehouse Chinatown had a strong sense of community and place with the Chinese presence.

Connie shared the same feeling about the place of Limehouse Chinatown. She wanted people to remember Limehouse as a village: “As an English village where everybody knew everybody else and try to help the families help each other. That they did, they supported each other. I would like them to think of it as Chinatown, like a Chinatown village, well-integrated with the local community. From our perspectives it was mainly half-Chinese children, Eurasian.” (Connie Hoe, Personal Communication with Leslie Hoe, Connie Hoe and Jane Lamb). Now in her old age, when Connie looks back to her unhappy childhood in Limehouse, Connie Hoe remembers Limehouse as a place where all children were like one happy big family. She still remembers the places with great affection. Connie felt proud of being mixed race even as a child since she felt special compared with other children. Jane Lamb feels proud of her Chinese heritage. She thinks this is the cornerstone of her identity. Growing up as a mixed-race child, she was not as aware of her “Chineseness” then as she is now. She feels a strong affinity with the Chinese people.

**Conclusion**

In contrast to the dominant racialized image of Limehouse Chinatown as a “Chinese” space, I have used oral histories from the original residents to provide accounts of their everyday life and experiences. From the memories collected in the interviews, we can conclude that the so-called “Chinatown” has had a sense of intercultural place and community—there are interactions among the mixed-race community, the Chinese and the locals—which is different from a racialized and monoculture Chinese “Chinatown” or space projected in particular by most of the fictional reports in the 1920s–1940s. In this way, I suggest that Limehouse Chinatown could be reinterpreted as a place of shared memories and experiences for all Londoners, in particular the East End inhabitants, and
not a space merely used by the Chinese. These shared histories of interracial and mixed-race “Chinatown” could be invaluable memories for imagining the future of a diverse society of London.

This study of Limehouse Chinatown in London may have a wider reach to more general understanding of the relationships between race, ethnic minority space, Chinatown and urban memories. In line with some concern of the studies of Chinatown as outlined in Part 1, I further problematize the conception of ethnic minority place such as Chinatown as merely a racialized ethnic or minority space. Instead, I contend that ethnic minority place such as Chinatown may play a key role in shaping contemporary intercultural cities. This re-framing of ethnic minority space and Chinatown is done in three ways. Firstly, an ethnic minority space such as Chinatown could be interpreted as a shared and intercultural place for cities, where the impact of colonial and imperial racialized legacies could be acknowledged or historized. The racialized histories of ethnic minority place should be challenged to avoid further minimizing the ethnic space and community. Therefore, the urban memories of Chinatown should not be treated as just memories for the Chinese community but they should be reframed as shared public memories for all citizens. The use of postcolonial perspectives could be useful to help decolonizing the ethnic minority space and memories, as well as enriching the studies of ethnic minority spaces which do not engage with colonial and imperial legacies.

Second, it is useful to explore a more hybridized histories for the ethnic place or community such as the interracial histories of the inter-mixing of the ethnic minority with the host society in all forms. Instead of focusing on analyzing the institutional construction of the dominant representations (Anderson, 1987), it is equally, if not more important to include the subaltern voices and power of the ethnic minority community themselves. To emphasize racial or cultural difference such as “mixed race” group within Chinatown and its community could be beneficial to question the containment of a monoculture and single racial identity, as well as to reveal more marginalized voices within the ethnic minority space. Third, the power of the ethnic minority group in constructing a sense of place as demonstrated in this article is important to provide an experiential and spatial account of the space against the racialized histories which often ignoring the particularity and materiality of the ethnic minority. In this, an interdisciplinary approach could be useful incorporating methods from cultural studies, architecture, geography, urbanism and race studies—which is crucial for re-inscribing their contribution to the making of the city.

Racial and cultural prejudice have their spatial and physical implications for the Chinese settlement in Limehouse and its disappearance. I suggest that in analyzing the redevelopment of a city and its urban spaces, racial and cultural prejudice do matter, in particular when relating to minority place. Of the two Chinatowns in London: the vanished Limehouse Chinatown and the present Chinatown in the West End, there is a discontinuity in terms of their histories and memories. Today, only a few Chinese street-names still remain in Limehouse, the original site of Chinatown, is now a place with no significant Chinese neighborhood. The Chinese residents who came to this place in the postwar period are mostly newer migrants who are unrelated to the former residents and today, and the Chinese community in London does not have a great deal of knowledge about Limehouse Chinatown. I maintain that acknowledging the earlier imperial histories of Limehouse Chinatown is
important in building a sense of belonging to London for the Chinese community, and at the same time for all communities to embrace a much richer history of London. The limitation of this article is obvious as I have only used three informants’ memories strategically to construct intercultural memories, and was not meant to provide comprehensive stories about Limehouse Chinatown. It is equally important to know more about other stories and memories of Limehouse from the non-Chinese communities.

The histories of ethnic minority places are an integral part of the multiple histories of contemporary cities such as London, so it is important to seek ways to re-inscribing them into the making of London. For example, Limehouse Chinatown is an integral part of the London’s East End. I use “Limehouse Chinatown” and “mixed race Chinese memories” as a strategic tools to re-inscribe this minority place to the place-making of intercultural London. In this way, culturally, minority place can contribute to remaking the conception of London. It will be interesting to see how the multi-racial histories of the East London can be recaptured and what roles they can play in the making of the future of London.

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