

**Reopening of the Museum der Kulturen Basel  
6 September 2011**

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**Chinatown**

**For the people of Chinatown, "Chinatown" is synonymous with everyday life, a place of work, living and "contact with home". Outsiders, on the other hand, often perceive Chinatown as a virtually impenetrable district. Neither perception is static; both have continually adapted to new developments in the course of time.**

Third-generation Chinese workers, strolling tourists, newly arrived immigrants: all of them approach and experience Chinatown in different ways and are part of a microcosm as diverse as it is fascinating. By illuminating individual aspects, the Chinatown exhibition underscores the complexity of a Chinatown. The exhibition has chosen to focus on questions of spatial organization, affiliation and forging identity. Realities, perceptions and interpretations are subject to constant flux and change. The label "Chinatown" is continually being redefined in the ongoing interaction between old and new attributions.

**The Chinatown phenomenon**

At the entrance to the exhibition, a pair of wooden shoes of the type worn by Chinese immigrants serves as a classic metaphor for immigration and leads visitors into the world of those who have left the Middle Kingdom. "A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step." (Chinese proverb). Wall texts provide historical background that brings the phenomenon of Chinatown alive for us – and, in particular, leaves us amazed. Next door, an impressive paper dragon overlooks the open, light-filled, two-storey space. The dragon, an instantly recognizable emblem of the brand image of China, is entirely in white and offers us a surface on which to project all the images and imaginings that we associate with Chinatowns and their traditions and symbols. Only his fiery red eyes remind us of the beast's unfettered nature; otherwise, the paper monster is inconspicuously "chilling out".

**Insights into everyday reality**

A large gold nugget in the exhibition refers to the gold rushes in Australia, South Africa and North America, which triggered an enormous increase in Chinese emigration from the mid-nineteenth century onwards. The first port of call for immigrants was Chinatown, a centre where they could find a familiar economic and administrative infrastructure. Furthermore, they were places where they could establish and nurture social contacts and relationships and, consequently, kept contact with home alive. Large-format photographs by the Taiwan-born photographer Chien-Chi Chang and a slide show of historical and contemporary images convey an impression of life in Chinatowns around the world. The power and immediacy of Chang's documentation is electrifying.

**Kaleidoscope of happiness**

The route through the exhibition passes through a golden "Paifang", a typical arched gateway that has become a symbol of Chinatowns all over the globe. Here, the impressive, spacious gate contains a number of niches in which objects are placed, objects from the world of commerce on the one hand and the world of religion on the other – a true kaleidoscope of happiness; for, depending on their

nature, the objects represent wealth and happiness, two concepts that in China go hand in hand, like Yin and Yang.

Opposite the gate, visitors can view Chien-Chi Chang's media installation "Chinatown", in which he contrasts snapshots of the life of Chinese immigrants with photographs of their families that they had to leave behind them in China. The images, underlain with statements by those affected, leave a lasting impression of the inner turmoil, the in-betweenness of Chinese immigrants as well as the problems they face with identity and integration.