

The Economist

More yin than yang

Europe's oldest Chinatown fights for survival

Chinese migrants founded Liverpool's Chinatown in the 1860s. But the latest arrivals are uninterested

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Exit the dragon

AT 13.5 metres high, the dragon-themed archway that marks the entrance to Chinatown has become a Liverpool landmark. Built in 2000, it is the tallest such gate outside China, local officials like to boast. Walk through the grand archway, however, and an inconvenient truth emerges: the oldest Chinatown in Europe appears to be on its last legs.

Nelson Street, its hub, is quiet on a balmy early afternoon. Its dozens of restaurants look empty, and a cluster of Chinese professional-services firms have shut early. One of the few shops with more than ten customers inside is an American-style bagel joint. The only other people in sight are a handful of tourists snapping selfies. The two other streets that make up Chinatown look just as barren. "Chinatown is not just in decline, it is destitute," laments Brian Wong, co-founder of the Liverpool Chinese Business Association, who nonetheless believes things can be turned around.

Although they are still the biggest minority group in Liverpool and its environs, ethnic Chinese residents (excluding students) have seen their numbers halve since the mid-20th century, to around 12,000. The first wave of Chinese migrants, the founders of Chinatown, arrived in the 1860s, when Liverpool established itself as Europe's main trading post with China. A second phase came in the 1950s and 1960s, as refugees fled communism. Both waves of migrants faced discrimination in the job market. Partly due to this hostility from the host population, the Chinese lived closely together and literally minded their own business, opting for self-employment.

The declining fortunes of Liverpool's port and the local economy more broadly in the ensuing decades spurred young, British-born Chinese Liverpudlians to seek greener pastures in Manchester and London, whose Chinatowns have since eclipsed Liverpool's. As

they left, many of the laundrettes, restaurants and legal firms that had catered to them folded. Simon Wong, a local shop owner, predicts that more Chinatown businesses, particularly in the catering industry, will be forced to close down in future.

Two remedies have been suggested. The first is to convince the city's 10,000 Chinese students to spend more in the enclave. That may be difficult, however. Manchester's much larger Chinatown is just a short ride away, and in any event "Liverpool's Chinatown is too grimy," says Li Jinzhu, who is studying at the University of Liverpool. Moreover, because Liverpool's Chinatown specialises in Cantonese fare (reflecting the culture of its earliest settlers), it has struggled to attract Mandarin-speaking students from other parts of China, whose palates are radically different.

A more ambitious idea, proposed in 2015 by a local property developer and supported by the council, is to build a £200m (\$265m) "New Chinatown", replete with luxury flats and glossy office towers, on a tract of wasteland by the historic Chinatown. The goal was to create Europe's first modern Chinatown, marrying Chinese culture with City of London-like architecture. But the plan evaporated when the developer pulled out last year, after finding itself in legal trouble with the city council. Another developer has since bought the leasehold, but scrapped "New Chinatown" as originally conceived.

The grand archway on Nelson Street is said to have been built according to the principles of *feng shui*, thus bringing good luck. Clearly no one bothered to raise the point that the height of the arch in feet, 44, means "double death" in Chinese.

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