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**Localizing Ethnic Entrepreneurship:
“Chinese” Chips Shops in Belgium, “Traditional” Food Culture, and Transnational
Migration in Europe**

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Abstract:

This article explores the causes, dynamics, and theoretical implications of the “localization” of ethnic entrepreneurship through “traditional” food businesses in Europe. Based on fieldwork conducted in 2014 and 2017, it analyses the emergence of “Chinese” chips shops in the Flemish province of Antwerp, Belgium. Highlighting the history of Chinese migration to Europe, it argues that a specific set of “contexts of exit” and “contexts of reception” explain this development. Important among these are Dutch language skills and long-term residence or citizenship in the Netherlands and Belgium, market saturation, and the global financial crisis of 2007-2008. The article posits that these Chinese entrepreneurs are neither “enclave entrepreneurs” nor a “middleman minority”: entering a “traditional” food sector, they must leverage on their “integration capital.” However, with this, they also become entangled in Belgian gastronomic nationalism and gastropolitics. Finally, this “localization” also has a transnational dimension as many of these entrepreneurs re-migrated from the Netherlands.

Keywords: ethnic entrepreneurship; localization; “Chinese” chips shops in Belgium; “traditional” food culture; Chinese in Europe; transnational migration

Introduction: Contexts of Exit and Reception and the “Localization” of Ethnic Entrepreneurship

In 2012, the word “frietchinees” (*chips Chinese*) was voted Word of the Year in Flanders, the Dutch-speaking region of Belgium, in a campaign organized by the publishers of the *Van Dale Great Dictionary of the Dutch Language* and the Flemish Radio and TV Broadcasting Corporation (VRT) (VRT online, 18 December 2012). The word was

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defined as “Asian chips shop owner” (*Aziatische frituurhouder*), but in practice, these “Asian” chips shop owners were Chinese entrepreneurs (Van Dale website). It is relevant to note that Italians, Turks, and Moroccans had been running chips shops in Belgium for several decades, but the terms “chips Italians,” “chips Turks,” or “chips Moroccans” had never emerged.ⁱ What was behind the appearance of the word “chips Chinese”?

In engaging with this question, this article contributes to the broader debate on ethnic entrepreneurship. It builds on arguments by scholars who have highlighted both structural and motivational factors to explain ethnic entrepreneurship, as famously put forward in the concept of “mixed embeddedness” (Kloosterman, van der Leun, and Rath 1999). With respect to Chinese ethnic entrepreneurship, scholars have argued against the essentialization of “Chineseness” and an emphasis on ethnic networks only, highlighting instead the relevance of sub-ethnic, class, and other factors (Benton and Gomez 2008; Leung 2002; Wu and Liu 2014). This article builds specifically on the notion of “contexts of exit” and “contexts of reception” (Portes and Rumbaut 2006 (1990))—or, what migrants bring with them in terms of forms of capital, and to what economic, social, and cultural context they bring this capital—to underline the interaction between individual, group, and structural factors in explaining the emergence of Chinese chips shop holders in Belgium.

The article also seeks to move beyond the “mixed embeddedness” model, however, in that it analyzes ethnic entrepreneurship in relation to food businesses in the mainstream economy that are considered “traditional.” The entry of Chinese entrepreneurs into these businesses is not only visible in Belgium, but also in other European countries, as exemplified by *tapas* bars in Spain, *pizzerias* in Italy, or *bistros* in France. This “localization” of ethnic entrepreneurship brings the question of what is “ethnic” about ethnic entrepreneurship to a new level because there is arguably nothing “different” about it. In other words, does this “localization” signify a “de-ethnicization” of ethnic entrepreneurship? I argue that a certain amount of “integration capital” is a prerequisite for entering this sector, a “localization” process that challenges some of the assumptions behind ethnic entrepreneurship. The article also adds a transnational dimension to the discussion because various forms of capital acquired in the original host society, the Netherlands, are now employed to set up businesses in a third country, namely Belgium.

Primary sources include participant observation, informal conversations, and semi-structured interviews with Chinese chips shop owners in the Flemish province of Antwerp and with key actors in the Belgian chips sector in 2014 and 2017. The article also relies on content analysis of sources such as Flemish and Dutch newspapers, industry newsletters, websites pertaining to the chips shop sector, books on the history of Belgian chips, and social media reports.

Case Studies from the Flemish Province of Antwerp

We first need to understand why the term “chips Chinese” became popular in Flanders around 2012 and to what extent it was spurred by an actual rise in the number of Chinese chips shop owners. Since only data on the total number of Belgian chips shops nationally and regionally are available, I turned to representatives of the chips trade to find answers. According to Bernard Lefèvre, the President of the National Union of Chips Shop Owners Navefri/Unafri (*Nationaal Verbond van Frituristen/Union Nationale des Frituristes*), by 2014, Chinese entrepreneurs only owned around 50 out of 4500 to 5000 “frietkoten” (chips shops) in Belgium (Interview with Bernard Lefèvre, Leuven, 3 July 2014).ⁱⁱ However, an unofficial list compiled by an enthusiast on Foursquare last updated in December 2012 already listed thirty-nine Chinese chips shops in the region of Flanders, the majority of which were located in Antwerp province. In 2013, the province of Limburg alone had around thirty Chinese-owned chips shops, as compared to about ten two years earlier (*Het Belang van Limburg*, 16 November 2013). By April 2016, this had risen to forty-seven Chinese-owned chips shops in that province, meaning that the number had doubled within a period of 2.5 years (*Het Belang van Limburg*, 2 April 2016). In a conversation dating from July 2014, one of the interviewees stated that he knew of at least twenty Chinese-owned chips shops in and around the city of Antwerp only (Interview, Borgerhout, 5 July 2014). In relative terms, the number of Chinese chips shops in Flanders hence remains limited, with a concentration in the provinces near the Dutch border, such as Antwerp and Limburg, but there has been a rapid rise in their numbers during the last decade.

In the summer of 2014 and in the winter of 2017, I conducted semi-structured interviews and informal conversations at Chinese-owned chips shops in the Flemish province of Antwerp. Antwerp was chosen because it is the province with the highest number of chips shops in Belgium (756 in December 2017), which means it was relatively easy to locate Chinese-owned chips shops based on online information from enthusiasts and reviewers (De Graeve, VRT online, 1 December 2017). Also, Antwerp has a sizeable Chinese community. Questions centered around personal and family background, professional and educational qualifications, network and motivations, trajectory and strategies, and responses from society. All conversations were conducted in Flemish (Dutch).ⁱⁱⁱ I will first describe the most relevant content of these conversations before moving on to a more in-depth analysis.

At a chips shop in the suburban area of Zoersel, one of the owners, a Chinese couple, had Dutch nationality and was middle-aged. The female owner spoke and wrote basic Dutch. Her parents had been born in Hong Kong and had worked in restaurants as chefs. They had migrated to the United Kingdom and then to the Netherlands, where they had also been employed in the restaurant business in the city of Nijmegen. About four years before the interview, she came to Belgium to run a chips shop because it did not require hiring extra staff or educational qualifications. She had not completed her

secondary education and running a chips shop was hence easier compared to a restaurant (Interview, Zoersel, 3 July 2014).

In a chips shop in the city of Turnhout, the family of the owner, also a middle-aged female, had migrated from Shanghai to the Netherlands, where they had owned a sandwich shop in the city of Arnhem. She had come to Belgium because some of her family members were already living there. As for why she chose to run a chips shop, she also listed the reason that it required no extra staff, whereas opening a restaurant did. Her parents had taken over the shop from another Chinese entrepreneur who had run it for four years, after which her parents ran it for another two years. She herself had been running it for the last three years (Interview, Turnhout, 5 July 2014).

In Arendonk, near Turnhout, a chips shop had been in Chinese hands for four years. The owner was originally from Wenzhou, but he had first lived in the Netherlands for ten years. He had run a Chinese restaurant and sandwich shop in the vicinity of Eindhoven, near the Belgian border. Limited personnel was also his major reason for taking over a chips shop (Interview, Arendonk, 5 July 2014). Also in Arendonk, another Chinese owner of a chips shop had been running it for nine months at the time of the interview. His family was also from Hong Kong, but he had been born in the Netherlands. He indicated that he moved to Belgium because some of his relatives lived there (Interview, Arendonk, 6 July 2014).

At a chips shop in Borgerhout, a suburb of Antwerp, the owner said to have run the chips shop for six years. His family was from Wenzhou and had migrated to the Netherlands when he was eight years old. He had moved to Belgium because the market in the Netherlands had become saturated. He also complained about the rise in take-over prices of chips shops because certain Chinese businessmen had bought and sold chips shops for profit motives. His primary reason was that a chips shop did not require extra staff, but also that there was simply too much competition in the Netherlands, where each village had its own Chinese restaurant (Interview, Borgerhout, 6 July 2014). In another chips shop in the same area of Antwerp, the owner had been in the shop for about two years. His parents were also from Wenzhou and had migrated to the Netherlands, where they had owned a snackbar in Groningen. His main reasons to take over the chips shop were the competitive environment in the Netherlands and that he already had family members in Belgium (Interview, Borgerhout, 7 July 2014).

In a chips shop in Wijnegem, near Antwerp, the owners were first-generation Chinese immigrants from Wenzhou. However, they had initially migrated to the Netherlands in the early 1990s, where the male owner had worked as a chef in a wok restaurant for over two decades, before they took over the Belgian chips shop in 2015. They decided to run a chips shop in Belgium because there were less educational requirements than in the Netherlands. They also listed differences in renting regulations and taxation between the two countries. In the Netherlands, running a chips shop was

overall more expensive, and there was also more competition (Interview, Wijnegem, 28 February 2017).

In Berchem, Antwerp city, a chips shop was run by a second-generation Chinese with Belgian nationality whose father had migrated from Hong Kong to Belgium in the 1960s to work in a restaurant. Before taking over the chips shop in 2010, he had first run a Chinese catering shop in a suburb of Antwerp (Interview, Berchem, 1 March 2017). Finally, another chips shop in Wijnegem was run by a second-generation Chinese couple from Wenzhou. Their parents had owned a Chinese restaurant in the Netherlands and they both held Dutch citizenship. The family had also spent twenty years in Belgium, where they had owned a Chinese restaurant before taking over the chips shop in 2013. Apart from the saturation of the restaurant and snackbar sectors in the Netherlands, they also mentioned the presence of an uncle in Belgium as one of the reasons for the move across the border (Interview, Wijnegem, 1 March 2017).

The Chinese in Europe and Implications for Ethnic Entrepreneurship

In the cases above, most entrepreneurs had re-migrated from the Netherlands. Hong Kong and Wenzhou, Zhejiang province, constitute common places of origin. First, we need to grasp the composition of the Chinese community in Belgium and the historical background of Chinese migration to Europe. The Chinese community in Belgium is smaller than that of the United Kingdom, France, or the Netherlands. In a 2013 report, Latham and Wu (2013, 27) estimate that there were about 45.000 Chinese in Belgium in 2011, up from 23.000 in 1998. In comparison, the largest Chinese communities in the European Union in the report were those in the UK (630.000 in 2011), France (540.000 in 2011), Italy (330.000 in 2011), Spain and Germany (each 170.000 in 2011), and the Netherlands (160.000 in 2011).

There is relatively little scholarship on the Chinese in Europe as compared to North America or Southeast Asia (see for example Benton and Pieke 1998; Pieke, Nyíri, Thunø, and Ceccagno 2004). Pieke (1998) distinguishes between five major groups of Chinese in Europe. Firstly, small traders from Wenzhou and Qingtian in Zhejiang province came during the late nineteenth century or joined the war effort during World War One. Secondly, Cantonese from the Pearl River Delta reached the major European ports as seamen during the early twentieth century. After World War Two, other Cantonese from the New Territories of Hong Kong came to Europe through Britain, where they worked in the emerging post-war catering trade. A third group of Chinese re-migrated from former European colonies to European countries. Fourthly, Chinese from Northern Fujian province came to Europe during the 1980s. Finally, with the end of the Cold War, Chinese from cities in Northern China arrived in Eastern Europe as contract workers or traders. Since many of the “new migrants” who left China after 1978 established their own catering shops, restaurants, or businesses, this trend has been termed “new entrepreneurial migration” (Østbø Haugen and Carling 2005, 642).

Similar to this European picture, in Belgium, the first generation of Chinese, mostly consisting of seamen from Guangdong and Zhejiang, arrived between the 1930s and the 1950s in the port of Antwerp. The first Chinese hotels and eateries emerged to provide food and accommodation to the sailors (Pang 1993). The second generation, mostly from the New Territories in Hong Kong, and often having come through Britain, arrived in the 1960s and 1970s and opened restaurants in the suburban areas (Pieke 1998). This dispersal of Chinese across Europe was connected to family reunification and the spread of Chinese catering businesses in the UK (Cheung and Gomez 2012, 52-53). During the 1980s, when the economic situation in Hong Kong improved, emigration from this area decreased, whereas new migrants from the PRC arrived in Belgium with economic reform in China (Pang 1993, 17-23). This overview already demonstrates that the Chinese community in Europe is far from homogenous, which has implications for a discussion of ethnic entrepreneurship in Belgium, to which we will turn now.

Ethnic entrepreneurs are “simultaneously owners and managers (or operators) of their own businesses, whose group membership is tied to a common cultural heritage or origin” and who are “intrinsically intertwined in particular social structures in which individual behavior, social relations, and economic transactions are constrained” (Zhou 2004, 1040). Two major frameworks in research on ethnic entrepreneurship are those of “middleman minorities” and “enclave entrepreneurs.” The former “trade in between a society’s elite and the masses” but “have few intrinsic ties to the social structures and social relations of the local community in which they conduct economic activities.” The latter are “bounded by coethnicity, coethnic social structures, and location” and used to be located in immigrant neighborhoods. In a present-day context, however, some entrepreneurs can play both roles at the same time given that ethnic enclaves can be multiethnic (Zhou 2004, 1041-1042).

Both the terms “enclave entrepreneur” and “middleman minority” are problematic if applied to a Belgian context. As Pang (1993; 2007) notes, the assumption of a high ethnic demographic concentration and specialization in the products of the own culture are absent for the Chinese in Belgium. There are few ethnic Chinese neighbourhoods, Chinese restaurants have mostly been targeted at non-ethnic minorities and tourists, and community organizations are less relevant. There is also little ethnic cohesion. With the entry into “traditional” food sectors, the notion of “middleman minority” becomes all the more problematic as entrepreneurs *cannot but* be connected to the local community. In other words, economic and institutional links with the host society are just as important as family connections. These findings strengthen earlier criticism of the “middlemen minority” model for putting too much stress on the sojourner mentality of immigrant entrepreneurs (Zhou 2004, 1045). It also ignores generational factors. With this background in mind, we shall now address the respective contexts of exit and reception.

Contexts of Exit

Individual “Integration Capital”: Dutch Language Skills and Citizenship or Long-term Residency. As noted above, Chinese restaurants in Belgium mostly cater to Belgian clients and tourists. This is no different in the Netherlands. The chips shop owners in this study mostly built on their earlier experience of interaction and familiarity with Dutch, or in some cases, Belgian customers. As is clear from the interviews, many of them are second-generation Chinese, mostly from the Netherlands, who are fluent in the Dutch language. Even first-generation immigrants have some level of Dutch fluency because they have already spent a number of years in the Netherlands or Belgium. In addition, many hold Dutch citizenship and can hence freely move across borders in Europe.

Being born in or having spent considerable time in Europe, these Chinese entrepreneurs are familiar with local markets and highly integrated. In this case, ethnic entrepreneurship is hence not necessarily associated with structural disadvantages such as limited knowledge of the local culture (Volery 2007, 33). In terms of cultural capital, it is expanded knowledge of the local culture, what I call “integration capital,” that helps Chinese entrepreneurs to enter the trade. Often, using experience and cultural literacy obtained in the original host society of the Netherlands, they make use of their “bicultural literacy” and “binational experiences” to set up new businesses in a third country, in this case Belgium (Zhou 2004, 1059). The findings hence confirm what Zhou (2004, 1060) argues regarding transnational practices, namely that they require a more profound “localization” on behalf of ethnic entrepreneurs. Their connections to Belgian society are especially important because not only do they take over pre-existing Belgian clients, but they also rely on Belgian potato suppliers and other business relations when running Belgian chips shops (fieldwork, Antwerp, 2014 and 2017).

Social Capital: Family Connections and Finances. Secondly, on a group level, rather than relying on “ethnic” networks, Chinese chips shop holders in Belgium mostly draw on the family network for social and financial capital. As gathered from the interviews, the presence of family members in Belgium influenced the decision to cross the border. In addition, as opposed to Chinese communities in the United States or Southeast Asia, given the lack of common origins and dispersal of Chinese communities in Europe, Chinatown organizations are less relevant in these communities and for business practices.

Also, there is a group-specific element at work: only families that already have built up sufficient capital, expertise, and knowledge regarding the Belgian market have the finances and know-how to take over a Belgian chips shop. Those who buy into the chips shop sector in Belgium are mostly those who previously ran businesses in the Netherlands, or sometimes in Belgium, which requires a considerable financial capital. Whereas in the 1970s, a capital of around 12.500 Euros would suffice to open a small Chinese restaurant in Belgium, by the late 1980s, a ten-fold capital of 125.000 euros was required for a restaurant in the suburbs, a price that would not include the actual property

(Pang 2002, 151, 153). For those who are able to transfer financial capital gained from earlier businesses, running a chips shop in Belgium also offers more flexibility in terms of investment capital. The transfer price of Belgian chips shops varies based on yearly turnover, location, and property value, among others, and it could range from a few 10.000 Euros to a few 100.000 Euros. Buyers can find properties for takeover on websites such as www.overnameweb.be or www.kapaza.be.

Even within this group of those who have the appropriate financial means, however, there are considerable differences. Less wealthy entrepreneurs struggle to compete with true chips shop “kings.” For example, the family of Zhao Xiandong, originally from Shanghai but having spent over twenty years in Europe, was first successful in the restaurant business in Belgium and reportedly owned about twenty chips shops by 2012 (*De Volkskrant*, 19 December 2012). More than one interviewee also complained about Chinese entrepreneurs who bought and sold chips shops for profit, driving up prices (Interview, Borgerhout, 6 July 2014; Interview, Wijnegem, 28 February 2017).

Structural Factors: The Global Financial Crisis, Market Saturation, and Market Opportunities. An important economic consideration for Chinese to enter the chips shop sector in Belgium was the global financial crisis of 2007-2008. Historically, the spread of chips shops and *cafeterias* in the Netherlands also occurred during periods of food scarcity and economic crisis, reaching a peak after World War Two (Ilegems 2005, 146-147). Small businesses selling cheaper food with no extra staff to be hired in a lucrative market became more interesting in the context of economic crisis. A good running chips shop could make a turnover of up to 100.000 euros per year (Balduyck, *Made in Kempen*, 19 November 2012). At the same time, local Belgian entrepreneurs have been less willing to put up with the long hours and the physically demanding nature of the work.

A second relevant factor, as also indicated by interviewees, concerns the saturation of the market in the Netherlands. The global financial crisis led to a decrease in migration to countries such as Italy and Spain in favour of economically stronger countries such as France, Germany, and the Netherlands, reinforcing economic saturation in these countries (Latham and Wu 2013, 28). Apart from the proliferation of Chinese restaurants in the Netherlands in recent decades, the chips shop sector has also already become relatively saturated and employs many Chinese. Numbers on this vary, depending on what constitutes a “snackbar” and how “Chinese” is defined. According to one report, in 2006, fifteen per cent of Dutch snackbars and *cafeterias*, or about 800 out of 5200, was in Chinese hands. Reasons for the shift to snackbars were, among others, the competition of more hip “wok” establishments, the more flexible working hours, and the shortage of Chinese chefs in the Netherlands (nu.nl, 24 April 2006).^{iv} According to

another report, about seventy per cent of chips shops in the Netherlands was in Chinese hands as of 2014 (Interview with Bernard Lefèvre, Leuven, 3 July 2014).

The dynamic of market saturation driving Chinese migration is in fact a common phenomenon. As Pieke (1998, 11) notes, because both old and new Chinese immigrants in Europe continue to seek employment in existing economic niches, they are obliged to move to where markets are less saturated. In a study on *baihuo* businesses in Cape Verde, Østbø Haugen and Carling (2005, 643-646) outline a typology of responses to market saturation based on the European case of “Chinese entrepreneurial migration.” They discuss the responses of geographical expansion, price wars, sectoral expansion, and innovation respectively.

Historically, geographical expansion has been combined with price wars in a European context: in Chinese businesses, the number of employees was cut or illegal workers were employed. Between 1982 and 1987, the number of employees per restaurant in the Netherlands dropped from 4.6 to 2.7 in response to the restaurant crisis that emerged following the 17 percent annual growth in the number of restaurants between the 1960s and the 1980s (Pieke and Benton 1998, 144-147). This also relates to the growth of the Chinese community in Europe. Whereas in 1955, there were an estimated 14,000 Chinese in Europe, by 2007 this had increased to 1,144,000 (Li and Li 2011, 142-143). Latham and Wu (2013, 27) give a higher number and estimate that the Chinese population in the EU grew from 939,720 in 1998 to 2,307,200 in 2011. In addition, the Chinese were faced with increasing competition from and policies directed at other ethnic groups, the arrival of new immigrants, and racism (Pieke 1998). In response, Chinese entrepreneurs in Europe set up new niche sectors, such as clothing manufacturing and distribution, leather goods production, import and export businesses, and wholesale distribution of products made in China (Latham and Wu 2013, 23).

The phenomenon of Chinese entrepreneurs entering the Belgian chips shop sector manifests some of the same responses. Because of sectoral expansion and the saturated market in the Netherlands, a cross-border geographical expansion has been taking place. The shift from the restaurant to the chips shop can be considered another manifestation of the price wars response: it is a way of cutting costs by saving on staff expenses. The new niche in this case are businesses associated with “traditional” or “authentic” national products. Latham and Wu (2013, 44) also note that diversification into the mainstream economy and Chinese running “traditional” Italian bars and restaurants that serve the local community has become common in the city of Milan. This response is hence not restricted to Belgium, but can be found across Europe.

Contexts of Reception

Institutional: Immigration Policies, Regulations, and Taxation Policies. Up to the 1970s, labour migration to Belgium was relatively unrestricted. The so-called “guest workers” from Italy, Spain, Greece, Morocco, Turkey, and elsewhere were recruited to

solve the post-war labour shortage (De Bock 2014). This was followed by stricter immigration policies in EU countries during the 1980s, a relaxation of these policies during the 1990s, and a renewed tightening of policies in the 2000s (Latham and Wu 2013, 24, 41-42). With the relaxation of policies in the 1990s, a new wave of Chinese migrants found their way to the EU, including Belgium, many of whom engaged in catering. From the late 1970s onwards, whereas those from EEC (European Economic Community) countries who sought self-employment did not need to apply for a “professional card” (*beroepskaart*) anymore, this remained in place for non-EEC nationals, and the card was only valid for two years (later for a maximum of five years) (De Bock 2014, 43). For those with citizenship in a EU country, such as second-generation Chinese, there were and are less obstacles and restrictions.

In addition, requirements in terms of qualifications in Belgium are also lower for chips shops than for restaurants. To open a restaurant, a diploma *kok-traiteur* (chef-caterer) is required as per the Royal Decree of 13 June 1984, with the exception of chips shops and hotels, restaurants, and bars that offer light snacks only (13 Juni 1984: Koninklijk Besluit, *Belgisch Staatsblad* online). Since January 2018, “specific professional knowledge” (*specifieke beroepskennis*) is also not required anymore to run a chips shop (UNIZO website).

According to Zhao Xiandong, owner of several chips shops in Belgium, taxation policies also matter (Balduyck, *Made in Kempen*, 19 November 2012). Historically, in the UK, taxation policies also impacted the spread of takeaways. With the Selective Employment Tax (SET) of 1966, many restaurants closed because seating capacity determined tax, whereas takeaways were exempted from it. When the SET was replaced with the VAT (Value Added Tax) in 1973, small enterprises were exempted from this tax on business transactions (Cheung and Gomez 2012, 57). Similarly, in Belgium, chips shops were not subjected to the VAT tax, which made them more attractive than restaurants. It should be noted that VAT was reintroduced in Belgium in 2016 for chips shops that have a seating capacity, which might lead to the further transformation of the existing chips shops into takeaways.^v Apart from stricter tax regulations, regulations regarding hygiene, food safety, and sustainability have also increased in recent years, leading Bernard Lefèvre to predict that 25 per cent of chips shops in Belgium will disappear (*Het Nieuwsblad*, 8 March 2015). As will be discussed below, these factors also influence the gastropolitics surrounding the chips shop sector in Belgium because it is perceived as being under threat.

Economic and Social: The Belgian Chips Shop Sector and Responses in Society. Chinese have also entered the Belgian chips shop sector because other small food businesses such as snackbars or *pizzerias* in Belgium have been run by immigrant entrepreneurs for decades. Immigrants from the Mediterranean came to Belgium after World War Two and initially set up various types of “ethnic” eateries. These businesses

catered more to the majority population, however, with economic assimilation. In the 1980s, Turkish *pizzerias* with an ethnic clientele emerged, but in the 1990s, to this became added *friteries*, Belgian chips shops that also sold ethnic foods such as *kebab* or *döner*, and *pitta* houses. Similar shops were run by Maroccans, Greeks, and other immigrants, but these developed into more internationalized snackbars (Kesteloot and Mistiaen 1997). The “traditional” Belgian chips shop sector, on the contrary, had long resisted the entrance of immigrants. This was an opportunity structure in terms of lower costs and accessibility of the market now that the trade had become less attractive to locals. In addition, it is known that Belgians consistently consume fries, and the risk was hence low.^{vi}

A “mixed embeddedness” approach that outlines the connections to Belgian society disguises tensions that have emerged. Whereas media reports suggested that Chinese were “taking over” the sector, representatives of the sector have overall taken a more prudent attitude. They have emphasized that nationality does not matter, as long as the owners “know the trade” (Meulemans, *Het Nieuwsblad*, 25 June 2009). Nevertheless, because Chinese chips shops often operate seven days a week, this could be perceived as a form of unfair competition. In addition, few of the Chinese chips shop owners have thus far become members of the main professional organization in the sector, namely Navefri. Of the between 4500 and 5000 chips shop owners in Belgium, in 2014, around 1500 were members. Of those 1500, only a handful was Chinese (Interview with Bernard Lefèvre, Leuven, 3 July 2014). One interviewee indicated that she was not a member and had no contact with other chips shop owners because her shop was open seven days a week and she had no time (Interview, Zoersel, 3 July 2014).

As for society at large, here, responses have been mixed. Some explicit discrimination has been expressed on social media platforms. In 2010, a Facebook group mocked the “chips Chinese” by referring to stereotypes regarding Chinese pronunciations of the *r* in the Dutch language, replacing it instead with the *l* sound. Chinese chips shop owners were similarly confronted with customers asking for *flies* (chips, “flieten”) and *lice* (rice, “lijst”) and noted that some customers were “shocked” to see Chinese in the shop (Interview, Zoersel, 3 July 2014; Meulemans, *Het Nieuwsblad*, 25 June 2009). Fieldwork also indicated that some Chinese chips shop owners had faced racist comments, or were even confronted with customers leaving the chips shop (Interview, Wijnegem, 28 February 2017 and 1 March 2017). There have, however, also been initiatives to promote inclusiveness, and the media also reported on positive local responses. In 2011, in the province of Limburg, the prize for “fryers of the year” (*frituristen van het jaar*) was awarded to a Chinese couple, Ming Chen and Benny Wu, after strict selections on provincial level (*Het Belang van Limburg*, 23 November 2011). In May 2013, when the Chinese couple He Yan and Qingfeng Zhu, who had resided in Belgium for ten years and who had run the local chips shop *Lisa* in Hofstade, was threatened with eviction, local

residents organized a protest march and petitions (Deleebeeck, *Gazet van Antwerpen*, 11 May 2013).

Cultural: Gastronationalism and Gastropolitics. We also need to relate the mixed social responses to Chinese chips shop holders to the gastronationalism and gastropolitics that surround the sector in Belgium. Gastronationalism “signals the use of food production, distribution, and consumption to demarcate and sustain the emotive power of national attachment, as well as the use of nationalist sentiments to produce and market food” (DeSoucey 2010, 433). The nationalist attachment to the “Belgian chips” (*frietten*, *fritten*, or *frites*) is very strong; it serves to unite a politically divided country. For example, on 17 February 2011, when Belgium arguably broke the world record of government formation with 249 days without government, students in major student towns organized a “chips revolution” (*frietrevolutie*) and distributed free chips because they were the “symbol” of Belgium (*Knack*, 16 February 2011). Chips are also promoted in Belgium at the level of the Flemish, French, and German communities through “Chips Week” (*Week van de Friet*). Since 2008, Bruges even has its own “Chips Museum” (*Frietmuseum*), which gives the visitor the opportunity “to discover the origins of one of the greatest Belgian culinary specialties” (Chips Museum website). By 2014, the museum attracted about 80.000 visitors a year, mostly from the Netherlands, Northern France, and Flanders. In the adjoined building, workshops teach participants the art of “Belgian frying” (Interview with Eddy van Belle, Bruges, 2 July 2014).

Apart from the identity element, the commercial interests of the main stakeholders in the industry also matter, especially since the trade has faced challenges in recent years due to, among others, stricter regulations and increases in rent. The main organization behind the promotion of Belgian chips, Navefri/Unafri, was founded in 1984 by Lucien Decraeye, the “Godfather of Belgian frying,” and is currently headed by Bernard Lefèvre. Navefri seeks to represent the interests of all Belgian fryers, improve and guard the quality of Belgian chips, and promote the “Belgian chips culture” (*Belgische frietcultuur*) (Ilegems 2005, 91, 93). Through their efforts and following a petition, in 2014, the “frietkot” (chips shop/chips stall) was also recognized as cultural heritage in Flanders. In 2017, national heritage recognition followed, and Prince Laurent and respective Ministers signed the “Charter in Defense of Belgian Chips Shop Culture.” With this national recognition, Belgium also became eligible to apply for the inclusion of Belgian chips in the UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage list. Much reference was made to this in the media, especially since Belgian beer culture had been included in the UNESCO list in 2016 (Maenhout, *De Standaard*, 1 December 2016; *Snackblad*, September 2017).

According to Navefri, which was involved in the national recognition efforts, the Belgian “chips shop culture” firstly includes the “craft” (*ambacht*) of making chips, which requires not only the use of carefully selected ingredients and equipment, but also the adherence to certain procedures. For example, the fat used for frying should ideally

contain two thirds of ox fat (*blanc de boeuf*) and up to one third of horse fat. The chips, made from potatoes such as the *Bintje*, should be hand-cut based on certain measurements, fried once when raw at around 150 degrees for a period of between four and eight minutes before “resting” and then fried a second time at a temperature of around 180 degrees for a period of between two and three minutes (Ilegems 2005, 94, 98-99, 102, 109). In practice, however, there are variations, especially in terms of the ingredients, but the frying when raw-resting-frying again procedure at different temperatures is overall closely followed (fieldwork, Antwerp, 2014 and 2017). More common methods of frying outside of Belgium would involve the use of *blanched* (briefly boiled), pre-fried, or frozen chips that are then fried a second time rather than using raw chips.^{vii}

The Belgian “chips shop culture” also involves the “experience” of the chips shop, referred to as the *frietkotcultuur*, which is conceived of as a complete experience of “popular culture” (*volkscultuur*) by trade insiders. Bernard Lefèvre refers to its atmosphere as one of “distant cozyness” (Interview with Bernard Lefèvre, Leuven, 3 July 2014). In his words, “A chips shop lives. Along with its owner, it radiates a certain atmosphere and nostalgia. It has a soul” (Immaterieel Erfgoed België website). Paul Ilegems, a chips specialist and author, associates the *frietkot* with individualism, identity, small-scale, popular culture, and the “Bourgondic” life style, whereas fastfood is international, urban, impersonal, uniform, industrial, and “Calvinistic” (Ilegems 2005: 139). Since 2013, the “chips shop council” (*Frietkotraad*) has brought together stakeholders from the chips and heritage communities, and specialists and enthusiasts (Navefri website).^{viii} In 2017, a centralized website on chips shop culture was also set up (www.frietkotcultuur.be) to serve as an information platform for “*frietkot* enthusiasts” and the “heritage community” (Immaterieel Erfgoed België website).

The rise of the term “chips Chinese” is situated in this “context of reception” of gastrationalism and gastropolitics: the discursive construction of a “Belgian” chips culture, in itself a response to globalization and fast food culture, distinguishes perceived “insiders” from “outsiders.” However, behind this binary construction lie the complexities and fluidities of what the quest for cultural heritage recognition implies: commercial and economic interests, the attraction of tourists, and further integration into a global system (Di Giovine and Brulotte, 2014). What happens if “ethnic entrepreneurs” become involved in the production of “heritage” food? Who are the “creators” and “consumers” of “authenticity?” Answers to this question vary. For certain sections of Belgian society, food serves to reaffirm ethnic identity boundaries that are fixed. For others, in the spirit of the UNESCO Intangible Heritage List, cultural heritage is about the “craft” of chips making, and perceived outsiders can become insiders if they master the craft.

This leaves us with the question of how Chinese chips shop owners position themselves in relation to Belgian gastrationalism. Here, responses have been equally

varied. Many chips shop owners informed me that acceptance by customers was tied to the quality of food: if the chips were good, the customers would return. Some chips shop owners would become directly involved in the gastropolitics of the Belgian chips shop by taking part in and winning Belgian frying competitions, or by setting their eyes on taking over what was voted the “best chips shop” of Flanders. Some would preserve the décor of the “Belgian” chips shop, recreating the ambiance of the “distant coziness.” Others, however, did not engage in the performance of “authenticity” and reinterpreted the Belgian chips shop along the lines of the international snackbar, sometimes inserting elements from Chinese catering. Some added sandwiches, a repertoire of Chinese sauces, Chinese-Indonesian snacks and dishes that are commonly found in Chinese restaurants in the Netherlands and Belgium, such as *loempias*, *bami goreng*, and *nasi goreng*, and Western take away food to the menu. Some of the shops I visited were also renamed as “frituur-snackbar” (chips shop-snackbar), “Chinees frituur” (Chinese chips shop), or “Frituur-restaurant-traiteur” (chips shop-restaurant-caterer) (fieldwork, Antwerp, 2014; 2017). For these chips shop owners, chips were simply chips, and a chips shop could be many things.

Conclusion

To explain the rise of Chinese chips shops holders in the Flemish province of Antwerp, Belgium, in recent years, both the history of Chinese migration to Europe and a number of contexts of exit and reception need to be taken into account. Firstly, as long-term residents, citizens, and speakers of the Dutch language familiar with Dutch and Flemish culture and experienced with catering to the majority group, these entrepreneurs are neither “enclave entrepreneurs” nor a “middleman minority.” On the contrary, “integrative capital” is required to enter “traditional” food businesses such as the Belgian chips shop. Secondly, rather than building on “co-ethnic” networks, family members often motivate the move and provide capital and information. In addition to these individual and group factors, there are the factors of the global financial crisis and market saturation in the Netherlands, the latter of which has led to the continuation of existing patterns of geographical expansion and cost reduction. Being associated with “traditional” Belgian food and hence more resistant to immigrant entrepreneurs, but also having become less attractive to local entrepreneurs, the Belgian chips shop sector offered market opportunities. On the reception side, apart from policies and regulations, I have also discussed the flipside of the coin: entering a “traditional” food business was met with mixed social responses and confronted Chinese entrepreneurs with the challenges of gastronationalism. Here, responses varied from racial discrimination to the belief that inclusion was based on mastering the “craft” of “Belgian frying.” Chinese entrepreneurs equally dealt with these challenges in various manners, with some performing the desired “authenticity” while others created hybrid versions of the more internationalized snackbar.

Overall, these findings challenge notions of ethnic entrepreneurship as based on a deficit of skills, experience, or knowledge of the local culture. It also shows that this “localized” entrepreneurship has transnational characteristics. In many cases, these Chinese entrepreneurs rely on various types of capital, obtained in the host society of the Netherlands, before moving across the border. With the importance of “localization” in this pattern of entering “traditional” food businesses, debates on ethnic entrepreneurship have entered a new level. What does the “ethnic” in ethnic entrepreneurship stand for if Chinese chips shops are run by husbands and wives conversant in Dutch who rely on Belgian clients and product suppliers and even take pride in mastering the “art” of “Belgian frying”? Perhaps the adjective “ethnic” is reaching a “distant coziness” from the noun entrepreneurship.

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ⁱ The word "chips Iranian" (friet Iraniër) did appear in the newspaper *De Morgen* on 6 June 2015 when an Iranian entrepreneur tried to buy several chips shops in the city of Leuven.

ⁱⁱ According to the Navefri website, there were 4643 chips shops in Belgium in 2016. See <http://www.navefri-unafri.be/nl/de-frietkotcultuur/frietkotcultuur-in-cijfers>. Accessed 26 June 2018.

ⁱⁱⁱ To protect the identity of the interviewees, I only include the location of the chips shop where the interview was held.

^{iv} The shortage of Chinese chefs was not only an issue in the Netherlands, but also in, for example, Germany, because of restrictive employment policies. See Leung 2002.

^v January 2016 witnessed the introduction of a registered cashier system (*geregistreerd kassasysteem*, GKS), also referred to as "white cashier" (*witte kassa*), required if the turnover from restaurant and catering (excluding drinks) constituted at least ten percent of the total turnover. As of July 2016, the white cashier was required in those businesses that had a turnover of more than 25.000 euros per year for locally consumed meals (Royal Decree nr. 1, new art. 21 bis, § 1).

^{vi} Based on 2016 data from VLAM, over 60% of the Flemish population ate chips at least on a weekly basis. Around half of this (52%) was consumed outdoors or purchased. "Frietkotcultuur in Cijfers" [Chips

Shop Culture in Numbers], <http://www.navefri-unafri.be/nl/de-frietkotcultuur/frietkotcultuur-in-cijfers>. Accessed 12 July 2018.

^{vii} The “raw frying” has recently led to debate because the EU has tried to ban acrylamide from food products.

^{viii} The stakeholders from the chips sector include Navefri, VLAM (Flemish Center for Agro and Fisheries Marketing), ApaQW (Walloon Agency for the Promotion of Quality Agriculture), Syntra (which provides training for entrepreneurs), Belgapom (Belgian Potato Trade and Processing Industry Association), Unizo (Union of Self-Employed Entrepreneurs), and the Boerenbond (Farmers’ League, a professional association of farmers). From the heritage sector, it includes CAG (Centre for Agrarian History), the Chips Museum, and the Erfgoedcel (Heritage Department).