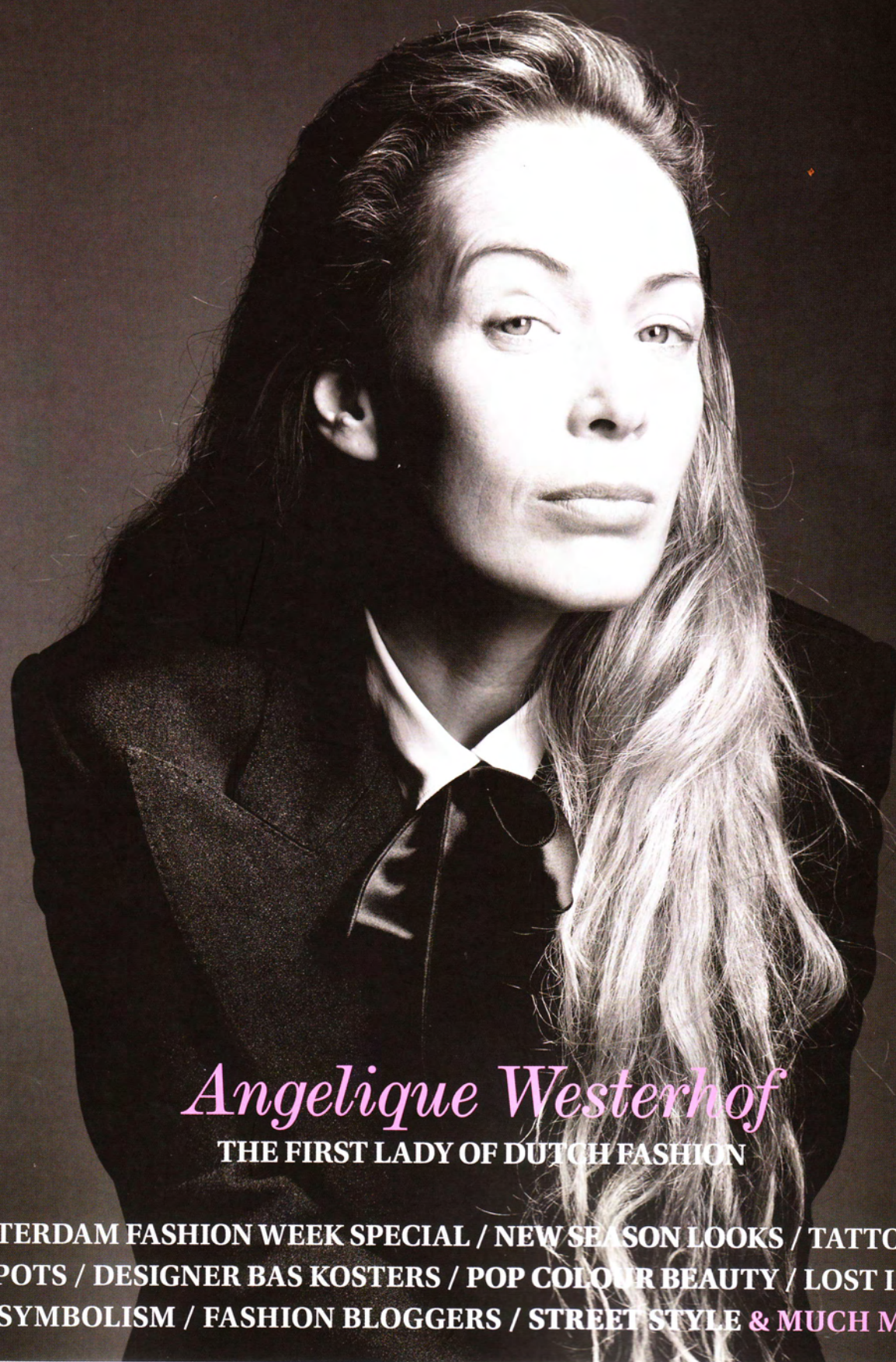


# LOST & FOUND

MUSIC, FASHION & LIFESTYLE



*Angelique Westerhof*

THE FIRST LADY OF DUTCH FASHION

AMSTERDAM FASHION WEEK SPECIAL / NEW SEASON LOOKS / TATTOO AS ART  
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SYMBOLISM / FASHION BLOGGERS / STREET STYLE & MUCH MORE

...IN AMSTERDAM

# Dragons on the Zeedijk

The firecracker blasts echo through the decades of over one hundred years of the Chinese community in Amsterdam. But before you ring in this Dragon year, *Lost & Found* peeks into the red envelope of this global-local history.

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*Images* Then Sem Presser/MAI Now Venus Veldhoen

## PERSISTENCE AND THE PAST

On 23 January, Chinese New Year, the Year of the Dragon was heralded at the Nieuwmarkt, the bustling hub of Amsterdam's Chinatown. According to tradition, the New Year was heralded with fireworks to scare away evil spirits and with a Lion Dance, symbolizing happiness and prosperity. In order to really work the Lion Dance, the two dancers who share one elaborate costume need persistence, strength, flexibility, and solidarity – the very same qualities the first generations of Chinese in Amsterdam needed to build their lives here.

The history of the Chinese community in Amsterdam goes back over one hundred years, but Dutch-Chinese ties are much older. The Dutch East India Trading Company had already set sail for Canton in 1728, and established a trading post for tea and porcelain there. Chinese trade and agricultural settlements had been built in Indonesia even before the area was colonized by the Dutch, and the two business-oriented bodies cooperated there in many ways. In the nineteenth century, a few Chi-

nese traders and students came to Amsterdam to do business or study, but this group was small and ephemeral, with most of them staying in Amsterdam only briefly.

Toward the end of the nineteenth century, Europe started seeing more and more Chinese men as large shipping companies would employ them as stokers on steamships. Through the first decade of the twentieth century, Amsterdam hardly noticed them, because if they would even set foot on shore at all, it would only be to stay at, say, the KNSM docks on the periphery of the city to wait for the next ship to leave.

## STRENGTH TO STROKE

The history of the Chinese community in Amsterdam really begins in 1911. Amsterdam's seamen, sailors and stokers had been fighting for better wages for years and during summer of 1911 finally went on strike. The army brutally cracked down on the rioters on 5 July, evocatively known as the Kattenburg Blood Night. For their part, the shipping companies, practical as they were, broke the strike simply by starting to hire Chi-

nese men from Canton to replace the Dutch stokers. Even when the strike ended they continued to hire the Chinese workers. This wasn't not only because Chinese stokers would work hard without complaint – in fact, a Dutch politician referred to the Chinese seamen as “class-unconscious, stone-cold, highly adaptable, climate-proof, willing workers and non-strikers” – but also because they would work for roughly 70% of what their Dutch co-workers would earn.

Despite being valued for their work ethic, Chinese workers had little independence onboard and on land. Onboard, the Chinese stokers were led by the so-called ‘number one’, a Chinese worker with some basic English and Dutch abilities, appointed and in turn led by the shipping master. The shipping masters recruited the men and, for instance, made sure the entire group spoke the *same* Chinese dialect. Often the shipping master would also open up a boarding house on land, where men would lodge between trips. This way, the shipping master could easily take 90% of a stoker's wage for rent, expenses and employment.



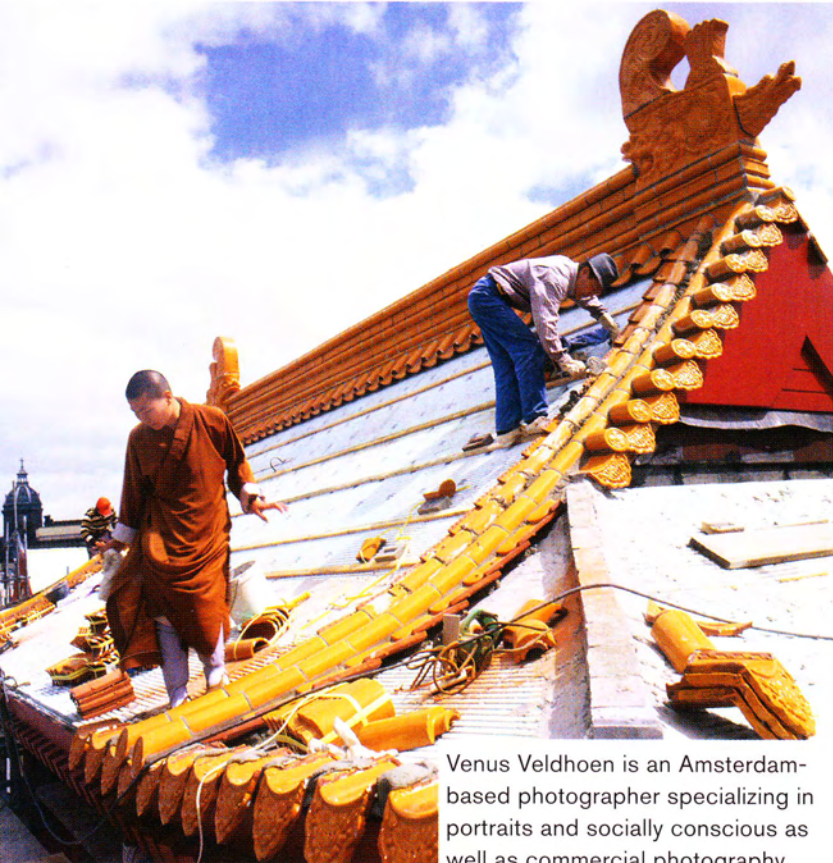
The first boarding houses were opened at the Binnen Bantammerstraat, a narrow street leading onto the Nieuwmarkt, thus laying the foundations for Chinatown Amsterdam. It was a world of its own, albeit as yet a small world. As soon as the stokers set foot on shore they were taken in by the Chinese network of boarding houses and shipping masters. Numerous boarding houses, Chinese 'canteens,' Chinese barbers, gambling facilities, and opium dens popped up on the Binnen Bantammerstraat. What else was there to do, in between shipping gigs, for these working men? They had hardly any contact with locals, despite

living on adjacent blocks, though they could not avoid the attention of Amsterdammers. Fear of the unknown made Amsterdam locals suspicious, to say the least, about this new group of immigrants, referring to them as 'the yellow danger.'

#### FINDING FLEXIBILITY

Though they lived in many ways apart from their European neighbours, the Chinese workers were not immune to changing economic conditions. During the Great Depression of the 1930s many Chinese stokers lost their jobs and, unable to get back to China, were forced to stay in Am-

sterdam. The number of ships departing from Amsterdam's harbour decreased dramatically and furthermore, steam engines were gradually being replaced by oil-driven engines, which did not need to be stoked. Left completely to their own devices, without any help from their former employers, the state, or the city, the Chinese stokers had to devise a new way to make a living. Many of them started selling peanut cookies on the streets. These 'peanut-Chinese' were the first face-to-face encounters many Dutch had with the Chinese at all, and to their surprise, they turned out to be not so threatening.



Venus Veldhoen is an Amsterdam-based photographer specializing in portraits and socially conscious as well as commercial photography. Snatching moments of lives in flux with integrity and creativity, she coaxes forward the empathy and narrative inherent in each image. In 2000 she produced the *A Dragon Awakes* series on Amsterdam's Chinese community, which was acclaimed for conveying the exotic alongside the established and everyday character of the setting.



## The first Chinese eatery opened on the Binnen Bantammerstraat in 1928 but it was only after the wars that Chinese restaurants became really popular

The local government, however, was still not thrilled about their new subjects. The Chinese community had been mostly invisible during the first decade of their stay, but in time Chinese opium-smuggling gangs had given a bad name to the entire community. Amsterdam had become the opium-smuggling capital of Europe and according to the authorities, all Chinese were suspect. Without residence permits, sharing passports, and 'all looking exactly alike' (in the eyes of the Dutch), the Chinese were difficult to keep tabs on. The government obliged the shipping companies that had brought them over in the first place to take back not only all Chinese men caught smuggling, but also the ones that were simply considered 'useless.'

### INDIVIDUALS WITH IDEAS

When the Depression was over, about five hundred Chinese people remained in Amsterdam. One of them was Dun Yong. Dun Yong rented a small room on the Recht Boomssloot where he met Stientje, who lived there with her sister. Dun Yong and Stientje were wed in the 1940s and lived happily ever after, even though – apart from a few basic words in Dutch – they could hardly converse with each other.

One day in 1957, Stientje and Dun Yong had what must have been one of their most lucid conversations. Dun Yong had noticed a little shop that was vacant on the Stormsteeg and told Stientje: "You ask, I buy." And so they did. In that little store Stientje sold tea and spices but also porcelain, which Dun Yong imported himself from Canton. 'Toko Dun Yong' was the first Chinese shop in Amsterdam. Over the years, Toko Dun Yong continued to grow and now occupies the entire lot along the Stormsteeg from the Geldersekaade to Zeedijk.

Toko Dun Yong wasn't the only establishment to sate the growing hunger for things Chinese. Also in the 1950s, in the years after World War Two and the Indonesian War of Independence, Dutch taste for Chinese cuisine burgeoned and Chinese restaurants started to go mainstream. The first Chinese eatery had already opened on the Binnen Bantammerstraat in 1928, and although 'Kong Hing' was a huge success – Lady Gaga of her time, Josephine Baker even visited a couple of times – it was only after the wars that Chinese restaurants became really popular amongst the Dutch. At first primarily aimed at repatriated Dutch, demobilized soldiers and Chinese Indonesians from the former Dutch Indies, the first restaurants were more oriented toward Chinese-Indonesian fusion flavours. Later on, the exclusively Cantonese kitchen came into vogue.

### SOLIDARITY AND OYSTERS

'Chinatown' was at that time still concentrated at the Binnen Bantammerstraat, which remained the centre of Chinese life in Amsterdam until the construction of the metro in the late 1970s and early eighties. The introduction of the metro turned the entire Nieuwmarkt area almost literally upside-down. The city council had plans to tear down the entire neighbourhood and then some, in order to construct a highway above the underground metro to accommodate growing populations in Amsterdam Zuidoost and Noord. Some of these plans were executed, and loathed by all. (Take a look at the Weesperstraat and you'll understand why.)

Residents of the Nieuwmarkt area protested heavily – and, in the end, successfully – against this 'urban renewal' process in the so-called *Nieuwmarktrellen*, or 'Nieuwmarkt riots', of 1975. In the course of a decade, however, the Chinese community had already fled from the construc-

tion chaos and the threat of demolition and so Chinatown shifted towards Zeedijk. This was also where Nam Chan opened the first of three 'Nam Kee' restaurants in 1981, famous for its oysters – perhaps you saw the 2002 movie, *Oesters van Nam Kee?* At the original Nam Kee, Nam Chan cooked all meals himself and made sure the dishes were Cantonese originals, not concessions made to accommodate Dutch taste! A wise decision, because today, Nam Kee remains an icon of the Chinese community.

More and more Chinese entrepreneurs continued to move towards Zeedijk, but the hard times weren't over. In the seventies heroin junkies and dealers had carefully selected the picturesque environment of Zeedijk to combine business and pleasure, making the area, frankly, not the best place to go for an evening walk. But in some cases, gentrification is a virtue and in the nineties and 2000s Zeedijk, the Geldersekaade, the Nieuwmarkt and all surrounding alleys were swept and renovated, in large part by the Chinese entrepreneurs who joined forces to improve the area, a great example of the enduring Chinese 'solve-it-yourself' mentality.

In 2000 Chinatown got its own place of worship, the Buddhist Fo Guang Shan He Hua Temple – but you can just call it He Hua. It is the largest Chinese-style religious building in Europe, and was built using Chinese imported ornaments and roof tiles.

### PRESENT-DAY PROSPERITY

Today, over one hundred years after the first Chinese stokers arrived in Amsterdam, Chinese Amsterdam is more alive than ever before. Evil spirits have been scared away and hopefully, the coming Year of the Dragon will bring prosperity and happiness. Kung Hai Fat Choi!