

# REPORT:

# CHINESE RESTAURANTS IN THE NETHERLANDS

## INTRODUCTION

This report offers ethnographic insights into customized work relations in Chinese restaurants in the Netherlands, shedding light on the various social, cultural, and economic factors that contribute to the establishment of this dynamic work system. The report is written based on the master's thesis of "Navigating the Dutch Standards: Chinese Restaurants in the Netherlands" from the 2022/2023 MA programme of Applied Anthropology at the University of Amsterdam, in cooperation with FairWork. Besides the research project, this report also combines the researcher's (me, also the writer of this report) experience of interacting with Chinese cook clients during volunteer work as a FairWork Chinese culture mediator. Combining these two parts, this report aims to provide practical recommendations on improving FairWork's assistance for their Chinese (cook) clients, and provide possible directions for future policy-making regarding the Chinese Horeca industry in the Netherlands.

## METHODOLOGY

To gain an insider perspective, I conducted three-month fieldwork while working part-time in a Cantonese restaurant – referred to as Restaurant Red in this article – in one of the biggest cities in the Netherlands. My background as a native speaker of Cantonese and Mandarin facilitates communication and rapport-building with people working in Chinese restaurants and Chinese clients of NGOs, most of whom barely speak English. Abundant data were collected through participant observation and small talks during fieldwork, recorded in field diary throughout the three months. Besides, I conducted in total 23 interviews, 14 of which were with people of various backgrounds related to the Chinese Horeca industry, including Chinese cooks - clients of FairWork and other NGOs - who experience work exploitation, specialized NGO workers, Chinese restaurant owners across the country, scholars and government officials, etc., and 9 of which were with people working at Restaurant Red.

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## THESIS SUMMARY

### Work relations in a Chinese restaurant

During fieldwork, the researcher observed family-work relations in Restaurant Red that reflects a mutual-dependent relation between Chinese restaurant owners and workers. Restaurant Red is a family-owned restaurant passed down to its third generation. In this restaurant, workers believe that they are not only colleagues, but also part of a big family. Many of them share strong emotional attachments and a sense of responsibility to the restaurant business that are commonly seen only on business owners.

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This sense of family is cultivated in daily cultural practices and built upon the shared interests in money among different people working in the restaurant. Despite this not being the case in Restaurant Red, informants admitted that it is common for Chinese cooks to accept working for long hours above regulated time in exchange for a higher salary. This is because, for many migrant workers, their main purpose of working in the Netherlands is to make money and provide for their family. Research shows that many Chinese cooks have immense financial pressure from the responsibility to support their family, buy properties, and save up for pension. Meanwhile, they are also expected, by Chinese cultures, to provide emotional care to their parents, therefore, are under time pressure to return home. This creates a mentality of “earning as much money possible in the least time”, thus resulting in the mentioned phenomenon of working overtime. The pressure from family duty is usually empathised by Chinese restaurant owners, as they also share the same Chinese familial responsibility. Many restaurant owners agree with these semi-compliant practices as they not only understand the workers’ family duty from their shared Chinese ethnic background, but also because Chinese restaurants have been in labour shortage for an extensive time. Moreover, in order to guarantee that cooks have extra money to send home or save up, it is almost standardised that restaurant owners should provide free accommodation and food for their cooks. It is also not uncommon for restaurant owners and cooks to informally agree on paying salaries partially in cash to avoid high taxes, creating a win-win situation for both sides. This sheds light on why the Chinese community in the Netherlands value informal agreements more than formal/legal work contract.

The mutual help creates a sense of collectiveness and emotional attachment beyond regular work relations. In Restaurant Red, the owner family builds a sense of family among all workers by engaging them in their daily family activities. This connection became the key for Restaurant Red to survive the pandemic lock-down. A group of workers – that the restaurant owner now refers to as “family” – accepted a salary cut down to stay at the restaurant during pandemic and, furthermore,

offered voluntary help on restaurant renovation, even extra free labour at their day-offs during the early post-pandemic stage, when the restaurant was short of staff yet still could not pay back economically due to the huge financial shock from the covid lock-down.

**In summary, it is evident that there is a mutual dependent relationship between restaurant owners and workers. This dependency can transform into a healthy system built on informal arrangements that provide room for negotiation to fulfil the diverse demands of different members in the restaurant. Furthermore, the lived experience of emotional bonds cultivated in such relations are overlooked by the Dutch labour regulations, yet in reality, crucial for a restaurant business to survive through difficult times.**

However, the researcher also discussed stories of exploited Chinese cooks during covid and old cooks abandoned by the restaurant before retiring age, pointing out the vulnerability and instability of this system built upon dependent relations and informal arrangements: the restaurant owners depend on workers for business purposes, yet workers depend on restaurant owners for their income plus – in the cases of newly arrived migrant workers – daily tasks (due to language barrier), or have built strong emotional attachments to the restaurant, as years of extensive working hours have turned work into a dominant part of the cooks’ personal life. The former dependency is business orientated, thus affected by multiple figures, such as changing market demands or the workers’ physical decline, yet the latter is much more personal and long-lasting. Therefore, many cooks who experience unfair treatment by restaurant owners do not only suffer financially but also emotionally/mentally.

### **Contextualisation: being Chinese in the Netherlands**

To understand why such dependent relations exist (instead of another form of relations), it is important to examine the broader social context of Chinese restaurants in the Netherlands. The researcher does so by investigating the reasons for people working there. On the one hand, the researcher detects a vicious circle of stigmatization and social isolation of the Chinese community by mainstream Dutch society, (historically) built around the Chinese restaurant business. Some recent or first-generation migrants rely on Chinese restaurants as their safety net in the Netherlands

when they could not find a job outside of the ethnic networks due to language barriers or a lack of education. However, the researcher also underlines that social exclusion and isolation continue to be experienced by (Dutch) Chinese people who master the Dutch language and obtain higher education degrees. Some of these people turn back to the Chinese catering business as a method of (identity) resistance. Dutch society's rejection of the Chinese community further demotivates the restaurant workers' will to integrate into Dutch society. Furthermore, the researcher notices a self-deprecation attitude among the Chinese cooks: they do not believe in their ability to learn Dutch nor connect with mainstream society. This mentality emerged under the joint effect of the workers' reflection on their unfavourable social-economic background, the reality of intense daily workload, and the awareness of long-lasting racial discrimination in the Netherlands. The researcher further points out how exclusion and rejection are experienced by Chinese cooks who suffered work exploitation and took great risks to reach out to Dutch institutions for help. Before connecting to an NGO, the informant failed to get assistance from the police officer, bank, Dutch Chinese politicians, and lawyers. The lack of social awareness of the Dutch Chinese community from mainstream Dutch society and the absence of infrastructure of help deepen the barrier between Dutch society and its Chinese community.

On the other hand, the researcher presents the bright side and attraction of working in Chinese restaurants, specifically, for the young generation Dutch Chinese restaurateurs. As Dutch-born Chinese, young owners of Restaurant Red have integrated their resonance of Dutch culture and regulations into business management: from setting regulated closing time and employee benefits, to improving service standards and renovation, and furthermore, making active inclusion of vegetarian dishes, etc. The researcher argues that through implementing innovations, young generation Chinese restaurant owners are redefining what is a Chinese Restaurant and the meaning of being Dutch Chinese, transforming traditional Chinese restaurants into an inclusive platform where Dutch and Chinese culture/rules can co-exist, communicate, and appreciate each other through the enjoyment of food.

By pointing out the changes, the researcher argues that instead of discussing the Chinese catering industry as a unified static group, Dutch institutions should confront its dynamics and recognized big changes that took place over time and generations that are still undergoing.

## VOLUNTEER EXPERIENCE

### 1. Specific vocabulary

Chinese cooks have their own Chinese vocabulary for Dutch legal documents, which usually differs from its literal translation. In this sense, they might not know the corresponding names of legal documents they have in hand. Therefore, it is important to have an in-person intake (with documents) at an early stage to clarify used terms. Learning their vocabulary is also helpful, as it can greatly smoothen future conversations with clients.

### 2. Remain connected

It is important to remain available and connected to clients even when there is no progress on their case. The absence of connection creates a sense of abandonment and helplessness for the clients. Due to the lack of updates, when I reconnected with FairWork's clients, they told me they "almost gave up" or "thought no one cared about us anymore". Such insecurity and anxiety echo the financial pressure and social isolation discussed previously. The disconnection was also one of the reasons why clients hesitated to refer other exploited workers to the organization.

### 3. Stable person of contact

Clients show immense gratitude towards individual volunteers who have assisted them for an extended period, instead of the organization. The same phenomenon is observed from clients of other NGOs. They talked about these volunteers as "they never left or deserted us". With the discussion of traumatization and the difficulty of getting help, I argue that having stable personnel that knows how to provide assistance with care is crucial for trust and confidence building, encouraging clients to go through the long legal procedure.

### 4. Boundaries setting

As discussed, clients tend to perceive interactions with volunteers in a personal way. Some clients I interviewed reached out to my personal account when FairWork's volunteer team delayed replying, regardless of time and date. Understanding clients' vulnerability might lead to a sense of responsibility that pushes volunteers to provide help. Therefore, it is crucial for volunteers to know how to draw boundaries, and for FairWork, to establish a system that facilitates boundaries setting while providing care.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

## Recommendations for FairWork

- Collect and build a *shared vocabulary* to facilitate communications with Chinese clients.
- Inform the clients transparently about the legal procedure before and during the process. *Maintain contact* throughout the process by, for instance, scheduling monthly (short message) updates about the case.
- Set up fixed working hours and expected reply time on all contacts to facilitate *boundary settings* (for volunteers) and *expectation management* (for the clients).
- Designed education materials according to the general language and education level, especially in terms of explaining legal terminologies.
- Used English for record-making to *facilitate case transactions* among volunteers.
- Expanding contacts and increasing exposure by inviting clients to share their sources of information in the *(Dutch) Chinese networks*.
- *Financially invest* in part-time or full-time specialists to guarantee *stable personnel*.

## Policy recommendation

### Redefine signals of human trafficking and work exploitation

As discussed, living in the restaurant owner's property is a standardised practice in the industry, including opening bank accounts and other administration tasks that require basic knowledge of the Dutch language or Dutch system.

### Establish regulations and inspections on work packages

Instead of limiting restaurant owners from engaging in worker's private life, inspection should focus on *regulating* the standards of offered job packages, and *preventing* owners from taking advantage of workers' personal information. For instance, specifying workers' right to stay in their accommodation if they were involuntarily dismissed, methods of collecting bank PIN without passing the employer, etc.

### Improve infrastructure and networks for quick access of help

This includes raising *social awareness* of social issues about *the Dutch Chinese community*, so that when potential victims reach out for help, citizens or institutions know who/where to refer to for help. This includes also strengthening the *cooperation between institutions and local NGOs* that have already established a network with the community and are experts of providing assistance.

### Provide information regarding labour/basic rights and social system upon arrival

Providing such information can fill up the *knowledge gap* in the Dutch social system commonly seen in workers. This can be done at their first contact with Dutch authority (at the embassy or customs). It is advised to cooperate with related NGOs for content design. The information about *where and how to get help* in case of work exploitation and human trafficking is recommended to be included in these materials.

### Invest in research projects and initiatives on Chinese community in the Netherlands

This includes *reevaluation* and *differentiation* among Chinese restaurants. Research shows that significant changes are happening in the Chinese catering industry, which Dutch legal discourse is yet unaware of. Investing in research projects or social initiatives can help institutions to gain an *updated, accurate understanding* of the community and industry, thereby establishing *effective policies* accordingly.