

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHAMPTON

FACULTY OF LAW, ARTS AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

Winchester School of Art

From South China to South London

A Journey in Search of Home Through Fine Art Practice

By

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ABSTRACT

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My research explores issues of cultural identity. What does it mean to be of Chinese ethnicity and living in Britain today? I employ autobiography as my methodology, using my artworks to examine questions such as where do I belong and how do I fit in the world? My research is conducted primarily in studio practice with a written element of twenty-five per cent in support of that practice.

When we think of the Chinese in Britain, one of the primary images that comes to mind is the Chinese takeaway/restaurant. I have therefore elected to focus on Chinese food, not only as subject matter but also as the raw ingredients with which to make artwork. I argue that Chinese food can be employed as the tool with which to interrogate British-Chinese relationships. In order to do this I have looked at the interchanges between the two countries, examined the rise of the Chinese stereotype in the West and suggested that the shared site of appropriation might hold the key to the making of British-Chinese identity. I discuss the strategies that I use and the subversive actions I carry out to overcome British cultural barriers.

With regard to British-Chinese Art, I cite the formation of the 'Number Six' art group as the birth of this movement and also look towards current Hong Kong artists for guidance. As the British-Chinese movement is in its infancy, I have turned to the more established scholarship coming out of the Black-British community and used its critical writing and debates to inform the making of a new British-Chinese identity.

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EXHIBITIONS:

2004	Strangers to Ourselves , 201 St. John Street, London ¹
2003	Entertaining Mr Soane , PM Gallery & House ² Strangers to Ourselves , Whitstable Museum and Art Gallery ³
2002	Walcot Chapel , Bath ⁴ A&D Gallery , London ⁵
2001	Osaka Triennale 2001 , Osaka, Japan. ⁶ The Self-Spacing & Transforming Exhibition , Oriental City, London ⁷
2000	Shanghai Arts Fair , Shanghai, China. ⁸ Nothing but the Truth , Aspex Gallery, Portsmouth. ⁹ Unframing Process , CAS gallery, Osaka, Japan. ¹⁰
1999	Artist of the Day , Flowers East Gallery. ¹¹ Empire & I , Axiom Centre, Cheltenham. ¹² Between Borders , Toyota City, Japan. ¹³ Empire & I , Pitshanger Museum & Gallery, Ealing. ¹⁴ Sauce , Chinese Arts Centre, Manchester. ¹⁵

(Work shown at each exhibition is listed below)

¹ Jerusalem

² Repatriation

³ Jerusalem, Trespassing

⁴ Walcot Chapel

⁵ Soy/Ketchup, Peking Duck

⁶ Wok/Satellite Dish

⁷ Trespassing, Free Delivery

⁸ Wok/Satellite Dish, Three Lions on a Shirt

⁹ Chips with Everything

¹⁰ Three Lions on a Shirt, Free Delivery, Soy/Ketchup

¹¹ Three Lions on a Shirt, Free Delivery, Soy/Ketchup, Bread/Noodles, Wok/Satellite Dish, Peking Ducks, Chopstick/Knife Fork

¹² Free Delivery, Great Wall

¹³ Three Lions on a Shirt, Chopstick/Knife Fork

¹⁴ Free Delivery, Great Wall

¹⁵ Free Delivery, Wok/Satellite Dish, Gold Mountain, Chopstick/Knife Fork, Yellow Peril, Three Lions on a Shirt

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Soup Won Ton

Introduction

Won Ton recipe ¹

Ingredients

250g prawns
80g peeled water chestnuts
250g lean minced pork
2 teaspoons light soy sauce
2 teaspoons Shaoxing rice wine
1/2 teaspoon salt
1/2 teaspoon roasted sesame oil
1/2 teaspoon freshly ground black pepper
1 teaspoon finely chopped ginger
1 1/2 tablespoons corn flour
30 square won ton wrappers

Sauce

1 tablespoon pork fat
1 tablespoon light soy sauce
1 tablespoon mushroom flavoured soy sauce
2 spring onions, green part only, finely chopped

¹ Hemkow Sing Key, own recipe.

Swallowing a Cloud

My favourite food is won ton. Home-made, boiled, drained, then lightly stir-fried in a small amount of ground nut oil to which pork rind and finely chopped garlic has been added - just enough oil to coat the won ton and prevent them from sticking to each other. This is then flavoured with light and mushroom soy sauce, spring onions (green part only) and finally finished off with sesame oil and ground Sichuan pepper.

Won ton served this way is a specialty from my mother's small village in South China; I have not come across it anywhere else. The most common way to serve won ton is as a soup starter or more traditionally as a large single bowl meal with noodles in a chicken broth. One reason why won ton became my favourite is simply because it was not rice, which was our staple diet most days. The making of won ton took a long time and involved most of the family so this activity marked special days, holidays/festivals /birthdays or simply Sundays when our family shop was closed.

This dish is associated with many childhood memories of South Africa, which in the 1950s was a comparatively primitive and basic place. There were no shops where you could purchase dried noodles and certainly not fresh noodles or won ton skins. Everything had to be made from scratch using provisions bought locally or especially imported from China.

On a clean table, my dad would pile up the wheat flour into a circular mound about 30 - 35cms in diameter, depending on how much he was making. He would then hollow out the mound from the centre until he had made a crater with the flour. Into the centre of the crater he would break a number of whole chicken eggs. Using the tips of his fingers he would very gently erode the flour bank, which was in immediate contact with the eggs, and continued to work the flour systematically into the eggs until he landed up with a dry-ish flaky mass. This mixture was then kneaded initially with his fists and then with a heavy rolling pin. The process required a lot of effort but eventually resulted in an integrated dough mixture about 2cms thick x 30cms in circumference. From this main body of dough he would break off a 15cm square chunk. Using the rolling pin he would roughly roll out the dough to a shape, size and thickness that would fit into our mien (noodle) machine.

This noodle machine was imported from China and it was the first machine that as a child, I was conscious of intimately understanding. It was about 40cms tall and had a skeleton leg structure made out of cast iron. The machine had an open platform base which was designed to be screwed or bolted directly and permanently to the work surface. However, my dad attached the machine to a board of wood that was approximately 5 cm. larger than the machine base itself and then fixed the wood to the kitchen table with the help of two 'G' clamps. This way we could remove the machine easily without harming the table. From both sides of this base/platform rose two iron legs about 30cm high on top of which sat the main body of the machine. The working part of the machine resembled a scaled down washing mangle. It consisted of pairs of

adjustable brass rollers and cutters connected by cogs, which were driven by a long handle that was cranked manually. As a small child I tried to turn this crank but failed, although in later years this became my job.

The batch of dough was fed through the machine's roller, initially at the thickest setting then repeatedly passed through the machine at a reduced setting until what emerged was a 1mm. thin silky ribbon of pasta about 20cm wide. Each time this ribbon of pasta re-entered the machine it was folded on itself because this stretching developed the gluten in the flour into long strands that brought the pasta to life. This act of 'laminating' is a process used in other crafts. For example when forging Samurai swords – a malleable lump of metal is beaten under great heat into lengths and folded back onto itself to be once again stretched. The process is repeated many times until the blade 'comes alive', giving the sword its strength and ultimately its soul. Once laminated, each silky ribbon of pasta was dusted with flour before the next layer was placed on top of it. This procedure continued until all the dough was used up. The pile of skins was then cut once lengthwise and then across into 8cm squares. After resting for a while, the won ton skins were ready to use.

Mincing the Pork

Before we managed to acquire a mincing machine, my dad had to chop the meat by hand. Using an original Chinese chopper, I watched my dad expertly slice the pork into thin slivers and then cut across the slivers to produce smaller pieces of meat. He would then take another Chinese chopper, so that he had one in each hand. He would alternately chop at the pile of meat as if he were drumming on a heavy Chinese chopping board, the type that is a cross section of a tree with a band of metal wrapped around the circumference to stop it from splitting. Every so often he would stop to scrape the advancing tide of meat back towards the centre of the chopping board, mix it up and resume chopping until the texture of the meat was judged to be just right. Over-mincing produced a pasty texture that was considered undesirable, yet too coarse a grain produced a too robust bite.

When we did acquire a manually cranked mincing machine my dad stopped chopping by hand even though we all knew that we preferred the old chopping board method. The mincing machine cut the meat using a cross - shaped metal cutter that turned and pressed against a circular shaped metal disc, which was perforated with holes. The metal disc was interchangeable with other discs with different size holes, which allowed my father to regulate the size of the mince. This mechanical method of mincing cut the meat in a tearing fashion, which produced a less 'clean' texture than the old fashioned two-chopper method.

Making the filling.

My mother peeled and de-veined the prawns, then placed them in a tea towel and squeezed out as much moisture as possible. She minced the prawns into a coarse paste using a chopper.

The water chestnuts were blanched in boiling water for about a minute, then refreshed in cold water, drained, patted dry and roughly chopped. The prawns, water chestnuts, minced pork, soy sauce, rice wine, salt, sesame oil, black pepper, ginger and corn flour were all placed in a mixing bowl and combined vigorously.

Folding the Won Ton

Folding and filling the won ton is one of my fondest memories. Most of the family would sit around the kitchen table helping to make what my mother termed 'gold fish'. We were taught a special way of folding won ton, which was how my mother herself was taught in her village in South China. She took a won ton skin in her left hand and then with the aid of a lollipop stick she picked up about a centimetre of meat filling from the bowl that was placed in the centre of the table. She placed the filling towards the corner of the square of skin then loosely rolled the corner diagonally over the filling and continued to roll until she reached the opposite corner. Taking the two ends of the package, she crossed them over and with the aid of a dab of water pressed and slightly twisted the ends together close to the filling so that the result resembled a round head and a split trailing tail. This was placed in the central bamboo basket with the growing school of gold fish being produced by other members of the family. We could all recognize each other's won ton.

When enough won ton was made, batches of it were put into a large saucepan of boiling water. When the boiling water returned to a rolling boil, a cup of cold water was added to it to cool it down. When the water returned once again to the boil and the won ton rose to the surface, they were ready. They were then scooped out with a wire sieve-like implement and placed into a large serving bowl containing soup or served up as described earlier with soy sauce. At this point patience was required, as eating a hot won ton would certainly scald your mouth - we all did this at least once. A ritual that helped to cool down hot food was to offer the meal first to our ancestors before eating it. We did this by placing the family meal before 'the kitchen god', which had a special altar just off the kitchen. Finally, placing a freshly made won ton at the right temperature into your mouth was sheer bliss, like 'swallowing a cloud' (the literal meaning of won ton).

Thesis Outline

This snapshot of my childhood contains the necessary ingredients of how I think about 'home' - family, security, ritual and food. It is also my first creative experience that I can remember that might have some bearing on the type of artist that I have become. Observing my dad prepare and cook food and also the machinery and tools he developed towards this end was a lesson in how to perform and make installation art. At the time I had no idea of the gifts that he was subliminally leaving for me to discover. It was only much later when I became an artist that I realized the richness of my cultural background and the potential source materials that were available from which to make art.

Home can be thought of as the place where our basic bodily needs are met, such as sleeping, washing and most importantly of all, cooking and eating – where 'proper meals' are prepared, cooked and eaten together as a family, and where 'identity is forged in relation to its specific cultural location'.² Having experienced this sense of home and lost it due to the pressures of change, I have longed to recapture its conditions. Trying to get back to the past is in a sense what drives us forward into the future. Perhaps it can be thought of as an instinct, as defined by Freud in his 'compulsion to repeat' theory:

"It seems, then, that an instinct is an urge inherent in organic life to restore an earlier state of things which the living entity has been obliged to abandon under the pressure of external disturbing forces." And that "having departed from an earlier state it is striving to return by the circuitous path along which its development leads."³

Having lost my initial home in South Africa through the pressures of growing up and seeking better opportunities overseas, I have been forced to move forward in search of another place where the conditions of my childhood could be remade, another place to call home. As described above, early cultural identity is forged in the home – home and identity are linked. In my quest to make a new home I am also in the process of forming a new identity. This thesis describes that process. My childhood story contains all the themes that have become central to my search for my identity. Among these are two of the most important issues, namely 'Chineseness' and food. An example of how deeply embedded food is in Chinese culture is that we use as a greeting 'Have you eaten yet?' as the Chinese equivalent of 'How are you?'. This inquiry derives from an obligation to invite one's guests to join in the family meal. The custom started in China as a result of recurring bouts of famine when villagers were obliged to share what little food they had.⁴ These mutual customs and 'gifts' serve to strengthen and hold a society together.⁵ The combination of Chineseness and food are the basic ingredients that I have used in my art practice to make work with and to investigate my changing identity. My

² David Bell & Gill Valentine, *Consuming Geographies: We Are Where We Eat* (London: Routledge, 1997), p. 59-60.

³ Sigmund Freud, *Volume 11. On Metapsychology: The Theory of Psychoanalysis* (London: Penguin Books, 1991), pp. 308-9.

⁴ Hemkow Sing Key, personal communication.

⁵ Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: The Form and Reason For Exchange in Archaic Societies*, translated by W. D. Halls (London: Routledge, 1990), p. 8.

(troubled) Chineseness is not fixed but is forever changing in relation to what I now understand as my 'Englishness'.

This thesis is about a journey in search of 'home' and identity through Fine Art practice. In the process it helps to establish a position for what might be called 'British-Chinese' Art in Britain.⁶ This term, as used in this thesis, applies to people of Chinese descent who now live in Britain and who were previously from former British colonies such as Hong Kong, Malaysia, Singapore, South Africa etc. - countries where the British influence shaped their lives and altered their original identity. This is similar to the conditions the Black-British population experienced in the West Indies from British colonization and therefore I have drawn from the experience of many Black writers and commentators on the subject of the formation of new cultural identities.

In the thesis I use autobiography as a methodology. I have done this because we get to know ourselves in part by comparing ourselves to other people – observing and reflecting on others is a way in which we can also observe ourselves.⁷ If one of the aims of this thesis is to explore my cultural identity, then autobiography is an appropriate vehicle to use in order to achieve this. Some commentators have argued that the autobiographical model is problematic in that it speaks from a 'privileged source of authority' and therefore cannot be easily challenged or amended.⁸ This argument supposes that a non-privileged, neutral position exists. However, all positions are privileged, including the position that theory occupies – for example, Sartwell has argued that all theory comes out of autobiography by virtue of the fact that it has a standpoint, a position that is concealed but nevertheless is usually European and male; that 'the neutral theoretical subject', whose tone is apparently "transparent to the argument is itself a raced and gendered construction", and that, "this whiteness of authorship is, for us, a form of authority".⁹ This viewpoint is echoed by others such as Stuart Hall who has stated that "... in order not to be authoritative, I've got to speak autobiographically".¹⁰

Therefore, in order to explore my cultural identity I need to speak from an autobiographical point of view. I agree with Janet Gunn when she says that autobiography is not only a "private act of a self writing" but can also be thought of as "the cultural act of a self reading".¹¹ My autobiographical standpoint is therefore not necessarily a self-indulgent activity but is a form of 'self-reading; an examination of where I belong and how I fit in the world. Writing (or what one might consider its visual equivalent, making art) is normally thought of as a more active undertaking than reading. However, I consider the reading of my work an equally active

⁶ 'British-Chinese' is a term agreed upon at the conference, *A New Vocabulary for Chinese Arts*, held at the Place Theatre, London, on 3 October 1998.

⁷ Paul de Man, *Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), pp. 9-10.

⁸ Ien Ang, 'On Not Speaking Chinese: Postmodern Ethnicity and The Politics of Diaspora', *New Formations*, 24 (1972), 1-18 (p. 3).

⁹ Crispin Sartwell, *Act Like You Know: African-American Autobiography and White Identity* (London: University Chicago Press, 1996), p. 6.

¹⁰ Stuart Hall, 'Cultural Studies and its Theoretical Legacies' in *Cultural Studies*, ed. by Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson and Paula Thiebaut (New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 277.

¹¹ Janet Gunn, *Autobiography: Towards a Poetics of Experience* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982), p. 8.

operation. The making of the work serves to define the question and the subsequent reading of it is an active and difficult process that informs as well as transforms me. Autobiography can therefore be thought of as the making of an identity, a constructed 'self' for public not private purposes, 'an identity which can be put to work'.¹² A large part of that work is discovering where and how I fit into the British-Chinese context.

My primary research for my PhD is in studio art practice; that is to say that the research is led by the 'making' of the art. This making is not there to model or illustrate the theory but the converse - in most cases the art works came first and the written element, which makes up twenty five percent of my research, is in support of that making. I have used photographs in the thesis to illustrate the written word and also as a form of photographic essay – the photographs work with each other on a visual level to communicate something extra. Although I initially made the artwork to convey certain cultural narratives, fuller understanding of the work occurred in the process of doing the research for the writing. I am of the belief that the artwork already contains much of the meaning but is concealed and that in researching it, further knowledge was revealed. The purpose of this document is therefore to unpack my artwork, to draw out its meaning and to locate my practice in the wider context of art and cultural histories.

In Chapter 1 I examine the history between Britain and China, in order to set the background against which my artwork is made. I describe the unequal trade links that led to the Opium wars and which resulted in Hong Kong becoming a British colony, leading to Chinese emigration to Britain. I discuss the formation in the West of the Chinese stereotype in popular culture, described the negative effect this produced and end with examples of more positive Chinese role models that enable me to perceive a more optimistic future. Chapter 2 covers the start of my art career that followed my arrival in Britain, and my first attempts to discover an art language of my own. This art language has Chinese food as its basic staple and is a fusion of various styles, cultures and religions, including minimalist architecture, Pop Art, Surrealist Art, Buddhism and the formation of the British-Chinese identity. I also outline the artists that influenced my transformation. In Chapter 3 I describe some of my work that explores the cultural barriers experienced by the Chinese in Britain and strategies we developed in order to bypass them. Other work in this Chapter reflects the contrast between immigrant dreams and their realities. I tackle the question of the British-Chinese identity using re-appropriation as a device for change, and cite the Number Six art group (of which I am a member) as a milestone for British-Chinese Art. Chapter 4 I have entitled Arrival and Acceptance, in which I explore 'coming home', being comfortable in myself and in Britain. I use two of my larger works as examples of 'being visible'. I end with *Dolly*, a work that I initially did not fully understand but whose meaning revealed itself during this research. I now think that *Dolly* embodies much of my journey in search of identity.

¹² Ang, p. 4.

Chapter 1. Background. A Brief history of the Chinese in Britain.

" Many years ago we copied your porcelain and called it china. We adopted your passion for tea. And more recently, the local Chinese restaurant has become a familiar feature of life throughout this land".¹³

In this chapter I describe the conditions in the Britain I emigrated to. This is done from the point of view of a Chinese person born in the West and its purpose is to set and understand the background against which my work is made as well as the cultural climate in which it operates. I explore the history between Britain and China, how and why the Chinese immigrated to Britain and the formation of London's Chinatown. I look at the 'Chinese stereotype' as portrayed in the Western popular media, which I have deconstructed in my work. I then consider more positive role models from a range of Chinese artists/film makers, who fostered a change in Western attitudes and encouraged me to examine my Chinese identity.

Trade Links

The British have adopted many traditions and products from the Chinese and have over time incorporated them into British culture. This process started in the mid 1700s when Britain and other European countries founded shipping routes for trade with China. This resulted in a steady flow of Chinese goods to these shores.¹⁴ Consumer products such as tea, porcelain pottery, silk fabrics and lacquered furniture began to find their way into the lives of the British people. In the beginning this influence was small and only reached the wealthy but in time products became more affordable, especially when British manufacturers copied the style of these articles and began to manufacture cheaper versions locally. This mimicking process led to a form of decoration known as chinoiserie. British designers borrowed Chinese motifs and incorporated them into existing Western designs. This period of furniture making became so established that it eventually produced the 'British' classic Chinese Chippendale (an item of furniture combining square and angular outlines with Chinese motifs).¹⁵ A similar adaptation of Chinese styles for English tastes occurred in the pottery industry. Dinner services portraying hand-painted Chinese scenery or oriental flower patterns were very popular in the 1900s and even today some established pottery firms still carry a Chinese range. As the Queen mentioned in her welcoming speech (above), this appropriation has entered the English language and fine porcelain today is called 'china'. This has also permeated the local slang – 'me old china' in Cockney rhyming slang means 'mate' as in 'my old china and plate'¹⁶

¹³ Ian Black & Julia Hartley-Brewer, 'Tea and Takeaway Praise from Queen' *The Guardian*, 20 October 1999. Report of HM Queen Elizabeth II welcoming Chinese President Jiang Zemin to Britain.

¹⁴ Melanie Yap and Dianne Leong Man, *Colour, Confusion and Concessions: the History of the Chinese in South Africa* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1996), p. 26.

¹⁵ *Miller's Antiques Encyclopedia*, ed. by Judith Miller (London: Octopus Publishing Group, 2003), p. 37.

¹⁶ *The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary, Volume 1*, ed. by Lesley Brown (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 387.

The borrowing of cultural values and ideas from the Chinese by the British is one of the main areas of focus for my artwork. My work is designed to operate within and to interrogate this hybrid space where things are both British and Chinese. As I demonstrate in later Chapters, I have made work that explores how to make the transition between cultural identities as successfully as the consumer products did. In other words, how does this process work, how does someone of Chinese origins become truly British?

Opium Wars and the colonisation of Hong Kong

Although consumer products from China could easily be copied and supplied locally the importation of tea into Britain could not find any substitute. This was a time before Britain managed to grow its own tea plantations in India. In the year 1785, Britain had imported tea to the value of £15 million. Tea drinking had become a way of life in Britain, fast becoming the national beverage. At this time China was exporting goods without importing anything in return from Western countries. Huge pressures were applied on the Chinese government to open its trade borders with Britain in order to offset its balance of payments, but the Chinese were not interested in British products. Emperor Chi'en Long wrote this to King George III in 1790:

"...Our Celestial Empire possesses all things in prolific abundance and lack no product within its own borders. There was therefore no need to import the manufactures of outside barbarians in exchange for our own produce." ¹⁷

Britain was dissatisfied with the growing trade deficit and began a campaign of smuggling opium into China from India (Fig. 1). Opium had been banned in 1729 by the Chinese but became widely available as a result of the British activities and by the 1830s purchases of opium by the Chinese had risen to more than the value of all Chinese exports.¹⁸ In response, commissioner Lin Tse-hsu ordered the destruction of all opium stores held by foreign merchants in Canton. This action was seen by the West as an act of aggression and in 1839 the first of two Opium wars began. After being defeated in these wars, China was forced to sign the Treaty of Nanking and had to cede Hong Kong Island to Britain. The British government forced China to open up five of its southern ports to foreign trade and also leased mainland Kowloon from the Chinese on a 150 year lease.

Emigration and the formation of Chinatown

By the end of the nineteenth century, foreign powers dominated China. One consequence was that these countries organised large numbers of Chinese labourers and shipped them abroad to their other colonies to work in the mines and plantations of Malaysia, New Caledonia, South Africa and the West coast of America.¹⁹ This marked the beginning of Chinese emigration to the

¹⁷ Yap and Leong Man, p. 26.

¹⁸ Conrad Schirokauer, *A Brief History of Chinese and Japanese Civilization* (New York: Harcourt Brace Javanovich, 1978), p. 383.

¹⁹ Yap and Leong Man, p. 28.

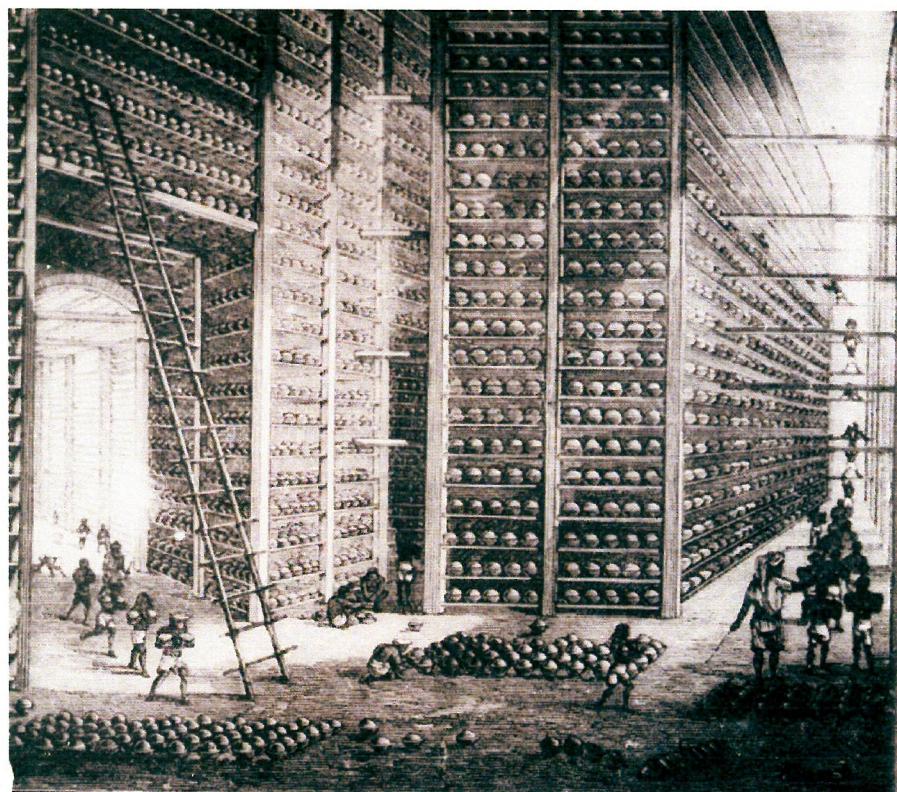


Fig.1 *Opium Warehouse India 1837*



Fig.2 *Chinatown London 1911*

West. Although the British were responsible for transporting Chinese labourers to its colonies it had not brought them directly to Britain. The Chinese who initially came to the United Kingdom were ship-hands working on board the ships of the British East India Company, who now operated a direct route between Britain and Hong Kong.²⁰ Chinese seamen became a regular sight in the major ports of London, Liverpool and Cardiff. In the 1880s a Chinatown began to develop in London's Limehouse area around West India Dock. By 1921 this community had grown to 2419 inhabitants and the more enterprising members opened up boarding houses, grocery shops, laundries and restaurants. There were thirty shops and cafes for Chinese people in the area of Limehouse Causeway and Pennyfield Street – hence Chinatown was born (Fig. 2).²¹

By the 1930s, as a result of the slump in shipping, a few Chinese restaurants left the area and opened up further afield. The first of these was 'Choy's' in Kings Road, SW3 (set up in 1937) and in the 1950s 'Old Friend' established itself in Commercial Road, E14, where it remains today.²² By the 1950s, attracted by the theatre trade, Chinese (Cantonese) restaurants moved to Soho in London, where they were joined by several Mandarin diplomats who established Peking-style restaurants. Soho grew into the new Chinatown but the area did not take off until after the Second World War when American servicemen, having acquired a taste for the Orient while on overseas postings, introduced local English girls to Chinese food. Other ports around Britain such as Cardiff, Manchester and Liverpool also produced their own Chinatowns and in time restaurants, having to find their own patch, began to move to other areas. This marked the beginning of the takeaway restaurant as a repeatable business formula for Chinese immigrants. Today there are about 7600 takeaway/restaurants in all parts of the British Isles with an estimated turn over of £1.7 billion per annum.²³

The Chinese stereotype as portrayed in popular culture

The newly arrived Chinese were a self-sufficient and insular people who did not mix with the British locals. The British treated them with suspicion, as alien people who gambled and smoked opium. The fact that the Chinese immigrants were mostly men and some of them inevitably took up with White women added to the sense of threat. In local newspapers, stories of crime, violence and the seduction of White girls through drugs and mysterious hypnotic powers were reported (Fig. 3).

In the Sherlock Holmes story 'The Man with the Twisted Lip', the opium dens of East London are used to portray the legacy of the Opium wars.²⁴ The story is set in 1889, where an Englishman of essentially good character is described as sinking into opium addiction. Dr Watson rescues the victim from an opium den; the attendants are Oriental. Thus by omission

²⁰ Jenny Clegg, *Fu Manchu and the 'Yellow Peril': The Making of a Racist Myth* (Stoke-on Trent: Trentham Books, 1994), p. 6.

²¹ Clegg, p. 6.

²² Anon, 'The History of the 'Ethnic' Restaurant in Britain', <http://www.menumagazine.co.uk/restauranthistory.html>.

²³ <http://www.menumagazine.co.uk/restauranthistory.html>.

²⁴ Arthur Conan Doyle, *The Penguin Complete Sherlock Holmes* (London: Penguin Books, 1981), pp. 229-243.

the East is made wholly responsible for the degeneracy of opium, for destroying innocent Westerners. The full truth of the history of opium addiction and the responsibilities of the British in its spread are conveniently turned round. This is an example of manipulating another nation's history in order to disempower its citizens. As Fanon argued: "Colonisation is not satisfied merely with holding a people in its grip and emptying the native's brain of all forms and content. By a kind of perverted logic, it turns to the past of oppressed people, and distorts, disfigures and destroys it".²⁵

Western fears and suspicions of the Chinese coupled with an 'exotic' atmosphere of mystery and the Orient resulted in the journalist Sax Rohmer inventing the 'Fu Man Chu' stories, which were later transferred into comic book and film (*Fig.4, Fig.5*). In these stories he described Chinatown and the Chinese as a no-man's land of dark and threatening streets full of opium dens, occupied by "shadowy yellow-faced forms" who were largely criminal.²⁶ Here lived the ringleader of this alien race, the super-villain Dr Fu Manchu who he described thus;

"Imagine a person, tall, lean and feline, high-shoulder, with a brow like Shakespeare and a face like Satan, a close-shaven skull and long magnetic eyes of true cat-green. Invest him with all the cruel cunning of an entire Eastern race accumulated in one giant intellect, with all the resources, if you will, of a wealthy government, which however, has already denied all knowledge of his existence. Imagine that awful being, and you have a mental picture of Dr Fu Manchu, the yellow peril incarnate in one man".²⁷

The yellow peril alluded to in the quote reflects the fear that British workers were about to lose their jobs to the 'coolie trade'.²⁸ However a cheap Chinese labour force invading Britain never materialized. Nevertheless, the threat persisted that these shores would be over-run by Chinese more than willing to work for less money and longer hours. Fears of being contaminated and the resulting loss of self leads to hatred of the 'other' and attempts to re-establish boundaries to protect 'self from non-self'.²⁹ This fear returned in 1997 with the hand-back of Hong Kong to China. It was believed that thousands of Hong Kong Chinese with British passports would want to claim their domicile rights to live in Britain. This scenario was foreseen and avoided by the British government by changing the legal status of the British Hong Kong passport, denying landing rights to most Hong Kong Chinese citizens except those who were directly in British government employment.³⁰ Again, this threatened invasion was averted.

Rohmer's books were fiction but played a prominent part in portraying Chinese people as exotic and evil, connecting them with crime, vice and cruelty. Further stereotypes of the Chinese are

²⁵ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (London 1963), p. 170.

²⁶ Cay Van Ash & Elizabeth Sax Rohmer, *Master of Villainy: a Biography of Sax Rohmer* (London: Tom Stacey, 1972), pp. 74-5.

²⁷ Quoted in: William Wu, *The Yellow Peril: Chinese Americans in American Film Fiction, 1850-1940* (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1982), p. 165.

²⁸ Yap & Leong Man, p. 29.

²⁹ Jonathan Rutherford, 'A Place Called Home: Identity and the Cultural Politics of Difference', in *Identity, Community, Culture, Difference*, ed. by Jonathan Rutherford (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1990), pp. 9-27 (p.11).

³⁰ Home Office, 'The British Nationality (Hong Kong) Act 1990', <http://www.ind.homeoffice.gov.uk>.



Fig.3 Film clip *The Dividend* USA c.1916

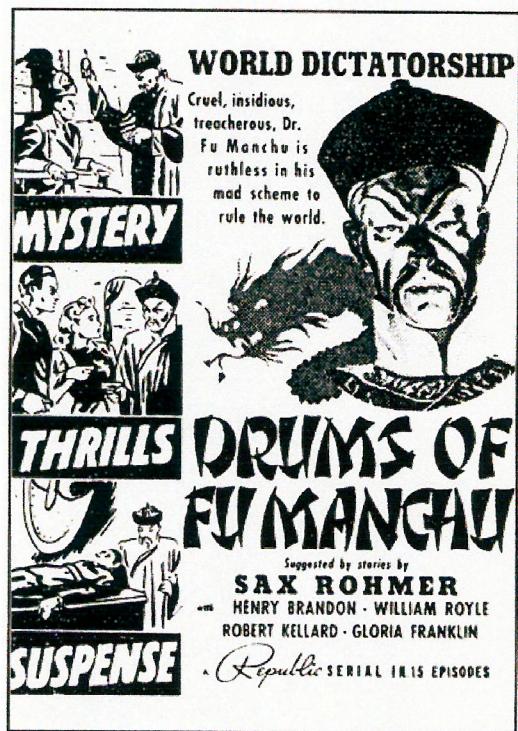


Fig.4 Poster. *Drums of Fu Manchu*

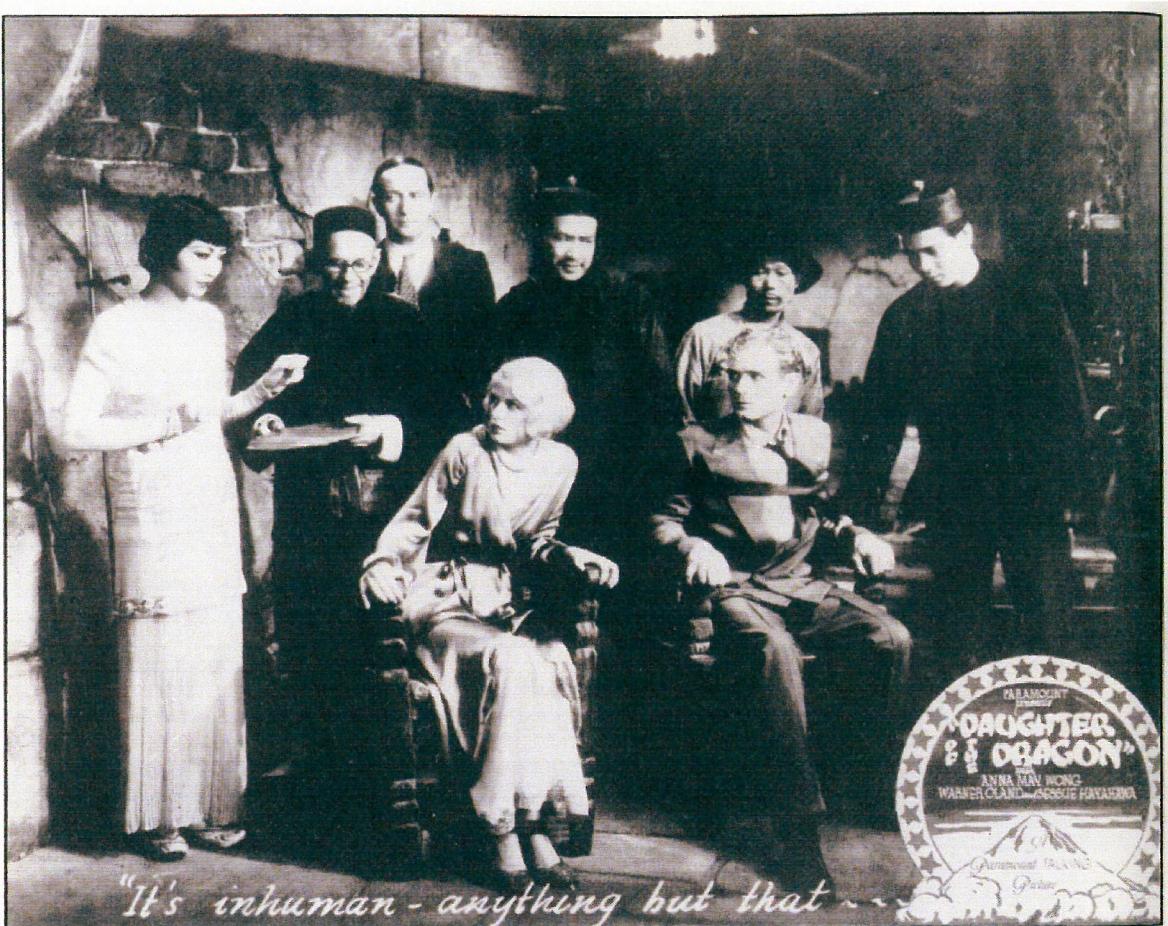


Fig.5 Film clip. *Daughter of the Dragon*

that we all look the same, do not say much and we are 'inscrutable'. This unknowable quality is exemplified by another comic strip villain, 'Ming the Merciless', from *Flash Gordon*.²⁸ Ming was supposedly from another planet although was obviously portrayed as Oriental; he confirms the notion that the Chinese were 'alien', with mystical evil powers and intent on world domination.

The stereotypes described above portrayed the Chinese people as a threat. However, another group of stereotypes developed that turned us into insignificant characters or harmless clowns, perhaps in order to neutralise the threat. This second stereotype largely originated from American films and television. For example, in the cowboy Westerns of the 1930s and 1940s, Chinese characters were usually given subservient roles, running laundries or working as cooks, and often ridiculed as cowardly ('yellow'). It was common to see signs on saloon doors in these movies which read 'No dogs or Chinee allowed'³¹ The fictional Chinese detective Charlie Chan appeared in a number of 20th Century Pictures 'B' movies. In the original novels by Earl Derr Biggers, Chan was portrayed as a sympathetic character in an attempt to counteract the racist yellow peril stories of the time.³² Unfortunately the movies that were produced after his death turned Charlie Chan into a stereotypical Oriental clown. Another comedy figure in the American media was Bert Kwok, 'Japanese' karate-crazy manservant to Peter Sellars in the *Pink Panther* movies. In the TV series '*Hawaii Five-O*' two white cops had to be imported into the US state with the largest Asian-American population to solve all the Asian crimes.³³ A fat Chinese and a fat Hawaiian stereotype whose character development was minimal simply drew guns and kicked down doors, quite clearly there to serve the whites. Chinese women on the other hand were typically depicted by Hollywood as prostitutes or as bits of exotic decoration, to serve men's every need. The comedienne Anna Chen wrote this when referring to her search for women role models;

"I got occasional glimpses of someone called Anna May Wong in the old black and white movies but she always lost out to whoever the blond in the movie was (...) Nancy Kwan (...) was stuck in this dick-head role playing a Hong Kong hooker called Suzy Wong (...) and Juicy Lucy in the *Virgin Soldiers!* Who in their right mind wants to grow up as Juicy Lucy? Yet another "fuckee, fuckee" chinky hooker! Gee. Thanks a bundle for that role model!"³⁴

These Chinese stereotypes played an extremely negative role in my formative years. As a result I was secretly ashamed of being Chinese. When I came to Britain I thought that I had escaped racist attitudes, as London seemed such a liberal place. After a few months I began to realize that although Britain had no apartheid laws, racial prejudices certainly existed but on a much more subtle and surreptitious level. The history and mis-portrayal of the Chinese left me with no

³¹ Irvin Paik, 'That Oriental Feeling: A Look at the Caricatures of the Asians as Sketch in American Movies', in *An Asian-American Reader*, ed. by Amy Tachiki, Eddie Wong, Franklin Odo with Buck Wong (Los Angeles: UCLA Asian American Studies Centre, 1971), pp. 30-36.

³² Earl Derr Biggers, *Charlie Chan: The House Without a Key* (New York: Bantam, 1974).

³³ Douglas Heil, 'The Construction of Racism Through Narrative and Cinematography in *The Letter*', *Literature/Film Quarterly*, 24 (1996), 17-25.

³⁴ Quoted in: Diana Yeh, 'Ethnicities on the Move: 'British-Chinese' Art – Identity, Subjectivity, Politics and Beyond', *Critical Quarterly*, 42 (2000), 65-91 (p.90).

positive role models and persuaded me to remain invisible in my adopted country. Even today, when attitudes towards the Chinese community in Britain have improved considerably, certain racist views persist. In April 2001 Britain experienced an outbreak of foot-and-mouth disease and the media widely reported rumours that the epidemic was started by meat illegally smuggled into Britain by a Chinese restaurant and then sold on as pigswill. As a result, Chinese restaurants and takeaways suffered a 40% drop in business.³⁵ After the Chinese community delivered a protest petition to Downing Street, Nick Brown (the Agriculture Minister) was forced to condemn the accusations as racist, stating, "I absolutely deplore the scapegoating of the Chinese community".³⁶ Similar fears of a 'yellow peril' invasion via infection reoccurred during the 2003 outbreak of SARS, when rumours arose implying that staff working in Chinese restaurants had imported the SARS virus into Britain and were a source of infection³⁷

Positive role models

In the mid 1970s, more positive role models started to appear in popular culture and this helped to combat the negative image of the Chinese. One of the most important was Bruce Lee, whose Kung Fu movies established a genre in the West. Here was a character who was a hero to Whites and Blacks alike, who had street credibility. He was my first modern Chinese super hero who demanded respect and could physically look after himself and who made it 'cool' to be Chinese. His legacy is colossal and he placed martial arts on the Western map, another Chinese phenomenon that rapidly became integrated into world culture.

Gradually other Chinese voices began to emerge. Authors in America such as Maxine Hong Kingston (*The Woman Warrior*) and Amy Tan (*The Joy Luck Club*, *The Kitchen God's Wife*) chronicled the exodus of our forebears to the West and our experiences of growing up there as outsiders. In this country, Timothy Mo (*Sour Sweet*) and Meiling Jin (*Gifts From My Grandmother*) documented our history and voiced our experience of racism in restaurant culture and elsewhere. One of the first major British – born Chinese actors on British television was David Yip, who starred in the series '*The Chinese Detective*' and later appeared in the soap opera '*Brookside*' in storylines encompassing mixed race relationships and inter-generational conflicts.³⁸

In post – Mao China a 'Fifth generation' of Mainland Chinese film directors, together with others from Taiwan, Hong Kong and Chinese Americans started making movies on their own terms. These filmmakers include Wayne Wang (*Dim Sum, The Wedding Banquet*), Ang Lee (*The Joy Luck Club*, *Eat Drink Man Woman*), Wong Kai War (*Chung King Express*, *Days of Living Dangerously*), and Zhang Ye Mo (*Raise the Red Lantern*, *To Live*). Their films bring the Chinese experience to Western audiences and help to change the stereotype. Directors such as John Woo have influenced the way action scenes are now shot in Hollywood via his

³⁵ Paul Kelso, 'Chinese restaurants feel the pinch' *The Guardian*, 2 April 2001.

³⁶ Kelso, 2 April 2001.

³⁷ Jeevan Vasagar, 'Chinatown hit by Sars rumours', *The Guardian*, 18 April 2003.

³⁸ *Brookside*, Devised by Phil Redmond, Granada Television. 1991.

collaborations with Quentin Tarantino.³⁹ Ang Lee (director) has collaborated with Emma Thompson (writer/actor) in the quintessentially British (and Oscar winning) ‘Sense and Sensibility’.⁴⁰

All these Chinese artists are positive role models who encouraged me to explore my Chinese identity. However I am Western born and this leaves me in a curious position because I have internalised both cultures. Initially I found this to be a problem. However over time I realised that it did not signify a ‘lack’ of one or the other culture but a bonus in having both. This area of duality and hybridity became the specific cultural position in which to locate my work, as I describe later. In the next Chapter I document my initial search for an art language of my own and the artists who influenced my transformation.

³⁹ Tony Williams, ‘John Woo’, in *Fifty Contemporary Filmmakers*, ed. by Yvonne Tasker (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 404.

⁴⁰ Emma Thompson, *Sense and Sensibility - Diaries* (London: Bloomsbury, 1997).

Chapter 2. Search for Identity and Art Language.

In this Chapter, I describe my first attempts at formulating a visual art language that I could use to explore issues of cultural identity. I explain my reasons for using food in my art and the artists that influenced my practice. I consider further British appropriation of others' cultures, and the use of humour as a tool to form an accessible language.

The first soy sauce painting I made was based on a memory from childhood (*Fig.6*). I remembered my mother cooking with soy sauce - the particular brand of soy she used (Pearl River) came in a large bottle with a plastic spout that limited its flow but spurted its contents across a wide area. Having used the soy, a small amount of liquid would run down and collect on the bottom of the bottle, leaving a dark ring of sauce that stained the work surface it was placed on. To prevent this happening and to keep the work surface clean, my mother would place a newspaper to line the surface next to the cooker. Over time the newspaper got covered with rings of soy. I reproduced this piece of work as a poetic gesture to the power of the everyday ritual of cooking to obliterate the violence of the outside world that was being reported in the South African newspapers. After making this particular piece of work I began to realise that this was my first genuine artwork using food, not derivative or borrowed - it came out of my own childhood experience, using a medium that was true to my culture and history. It revealed to me the power of food as an art language.

I first discovered art after many years working as a designer in the relative safety of Britain when I felt safe enough to re-experience unresolved traumas from my childhood in South Africa and began to rebuild my life with the help of psychotherapy. My early art dealt with issues of invisibility where I attempted to 'paint' myself into the picture and back into existence. The period I am focusing on for this thesis follows this initial time and involves discovering my identity through the practice of art. Therapy and art were complimentary in this process - the therapy helped me to find the 'missing' person and the art helped me to discover this person's identity. My art practice became a vehicle through which I could grow because of its healing properties, as experienced by other artists such as Joseph Beuys.⁴¹ This holistic approach is in keeping with traditional Chinese medicine where the whole person is treated rather than the physical symptoms alone. Art and Chinese medicine are linked in other ways. To quote the Chinese Artist Chen Zhen:

"Chinese medicine is very close to art. Chinese 'dialectic diagnosis' is a very creative process via the 'association of ideas and imaginations', a kind of 'figurative' evolution inside a chaotic arena."⁴²

The story of making won ton in the Introduction describes many of the tools and themes that I later utilised in my art practice. When confronted with the problem of identity, I returned to that

⁴¹ *Social Sculpture Colloquium*, ed. by Shelley Sacks (Glasgow: Goethe-Institute, 1997).

⁴² *Chen Zhen*, ed. by Lisa Corrin & Leigh Markopoulos (London: Serpentine Gallery, 2001), p. 11.

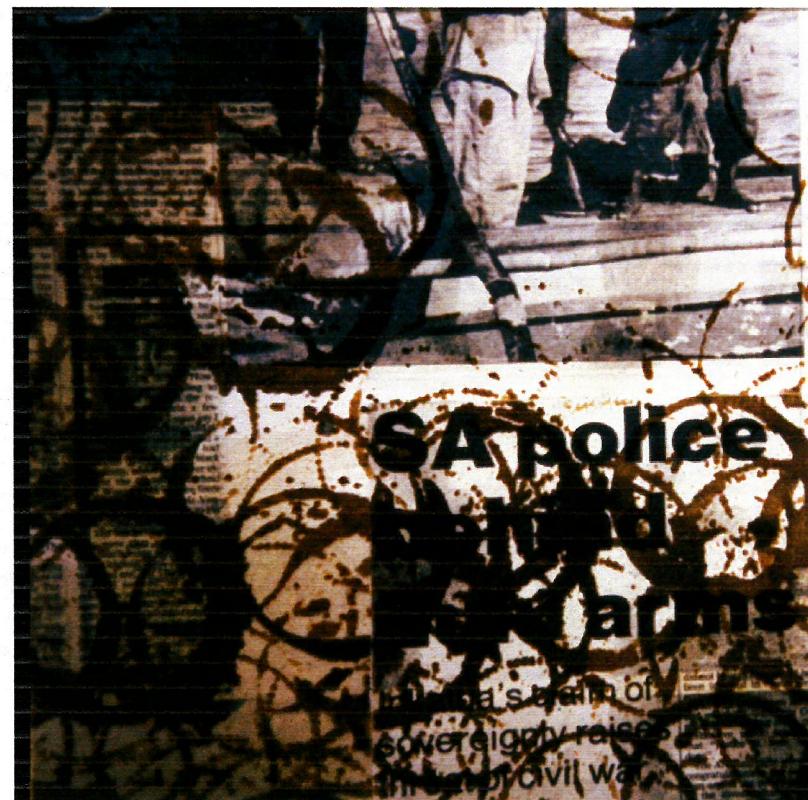


Fig.6 Anthony Key *Soy/Newspaper Painting* 1995 60x40cm

memory as a secure time with my family, my first idea of 'home'. The kitchen god in our house provided early experiences of everyday Buddhism that included the offering of food. Food has always been central to my family upbringing; my relationship with Chinese food defines who I am and how I differ from others around me. It therefore seemed logical that when I looked for a personal art medium the natural area for me to explore was food.

My first attempt at discovering my own art language using food was a 'colour field' painting which consisted of a 4ft x 4ft canvas covered in rice. The purpose of this was to reproduce an abstract Minimalist painting. My choice of rice was also prompted by seeing Vong Phaophanit's *Rice Field* at the Tate Gallery. He was the first British-based artist with an Oriental background that I had encountered and his work gave me permission to explore art materials that were culturally relevant. Another experimental painting I made was a noodle painting (Fig. 7), rectangles of dried noodles glued onto the canvas to form grids. Both of these works were inspired by the mathematical monochrome paintings of Agnes Martin (Fig. 8). Martin describes her painting experience as 'wordless and silent' and in this I recognised a form of spirituality that echoed the ideas of Buddhism in its purity, silence, order and repetition.⁴³

Agnes Martin's paintings introduced me to the American Minimalist art movement. I was already familiar with the Minimalist movement in architecture from my interior design studies where the Bauhaus and the International Style attracted my attention. Architects such as Mies Van Der Rohe and Le Corbusier advocated a style of design devoid of extraneous decoration. The central teaching of the Bauhaus movement was 'form follows function' which, when combined with Van Der Rohe's statement of 'less is more', sums up this pared down vision of building.⁴⁴ In Europe, Mondrian was influential in introducing these ideas into painting while in America they were taken up and developed by painters including not only Agnes Martin but also others such as Mark Rothko and Barnett Newman. In Rothko's work there is a wish to find a painting equivalent to prayer, not attached to any form of organised religion but as a 'spiritual otherness'.⁴⁵ American sculptors, especially Donald Judd and Carl Andre, adopted this style and developed it into what we understand as minimalism.⁴⁶ This discipline has become one of the central influences on my practice. My intention for my new work was to use minimalist ideas but to discover an art language of my own that was true to myself. This led to the decision of making artwork with Chinese food.

Another major influence was the philosophy and work practice of Robert Rauschenberg. I was drawn to his belief that art is found on one's own doorstep.⁴⁷ His practice consisted of scrounging from the streets one block around the vicinity of his studio for junk that he found interesting. Once he had chosen his objects, Rauschenberg avoided interfering too much with

⁴³ Ned Rifkin, *Agnes Martin: The Nineties and Beyond* (Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2002), p. 25.

⁴⁴ Robert Hughes, *The Shock of the New: Art and the Century of Change* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1991), p. 168.

⁴⁵ Rifkin, p. 27.

⁴⁶ Hughes, p. 369.

⁴⁷ Branden Joseph, *Random Order: Robert Rauschenberg and the Neo-Avant-Garde* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), p. 2.

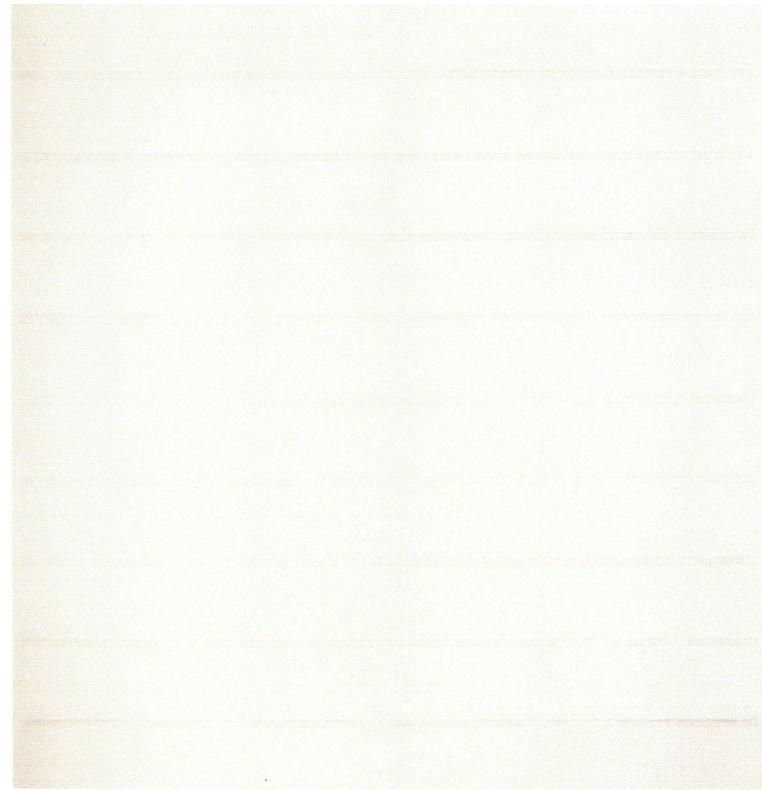


Fig.8 Agnes Martin *Untitled no. 1* 1993 acrylic on canvas
150x150cm



Fig.7 Anthony Key *Noodle Painting* 1995 noodles on canvas
120x120cm

them, allowing their given qualities to speak for themselves. He believed that ' materials have a reserve of possibilities built into them'.⁴⁸ An example of this strategy was the time he found some discarded cans of unlabelled household paints in the street and he decided to make a painting, using whatever colours he discovered inside the cans. From Rauschenberg I developed my own system of working. I embraced the idea of doing less to the material and I agreed that the language of my artwork metaphorically lay on my own cultural doorstep. For much of my work I have limited my territory to a single block, namely London's Chinatown.

Self-Portraiture

Having identified a way of working, I decided to get back to a making practice and a more familiar medium of object-based work. Up to this point in my art I had been teaching myself to paint, but I realized that I had developed a three dimensional making skill from my design career and wanted to transfer that method of producing work to my new art. Therefore, instead of using soy sauce as a pigment and painting with it, I started to use each raw ingredient as itself - a bottle of soy sauce remained a bottle of soy sauce. By adopting this direct approach, I could convey more clearly the cultural narratives already inherent in the ingredients. This way of making work was more like shopping than making art – it enabled me to returned to basics and ask simple questions about who I was and what was my relationship with my work. In other words I turned to a sort of self-portraiture. An example of this approach is a piece called *Soy/ketchup* (Fig. 9). It is a tomato ketchup bottle whose original contents have been removed and substituted with soy sauce. By combining elements of the two iconic sauces from the West and East, the one contained within the other's body, I am metaphorically making the statement that I had realised that although I looked Chinese on the outside, I felt Western on the inside because I had been brought up in the West. For this statement to be accurately portrayed by the work, tomato ketchup should really be in a soy sauce bottle. However, on making this version it looked ordinary, as if it were simply a bottle of Chinese chilli sauce. By adopting artistic licence and reversing the values of the ingredients (soy sauce in ketchup bottle) I made a more recognisable dramatic object without compromising its meaning. The work represents a body in conflict with its contents, not yet having integrated.

Continuing with the theme of self-portraiture in *Bread/noodles* (Fig. 10) I utilise the basic ingredient of wheat to explore how the two cultures employ this grain. The work consists of a generic bread wrapper in which the slices of bread have been replaced with blocks of dried noodles. Once again I am posing the question of the exterior and the interior being culturally at odds with each other. I was not interested in answers at this point but was attempting to define the questions through the work. My question for the future was how to combine these two identities – how to be British-Chinese. These artworks have become a barometer by which I constantly measure myself against in order to gauge my personal growth.

⁴⁸ Lawrence Alloway, 'Rauschenberg's Development', in *Robert Rauschenberg* (Washington: Smithsonian Institute Press, 1997), p. 20.



Fig.11 Andy Warhol Coca-Cola 1962 print on canvas 183x132cm



Fig.9 Anthony Key Soy/Ketchup 1997 soy/ketchup assembled 20x10cm



Fig.10 Anthony Key Bread/Noodles 1997 assembled 12x30x10cm

Both *Soy/ketchup* and *Bread/noodles* were influenced by pop art, especially the work of Andy Warhol and Jeff Koons. The 'ready-made', in the form of mass-produced food products, a modern interpretation of Duchamp's idea, is an appropriate vehicle for investigating modern cultural identity.⁴⁹ Pop art allowed the banal and the everyday object to be considered as artwork. Ordinary supermarket groceries, so familiar as to become invisible, became possible subject matter to make art from. Andy Warhol's *Campbell Soup Cans* (1962), *Brillo Boxes* (1964) and *Coca-Cola* (1962, *Fig. 11*) were prime examples of this ready-made art. In my own art practice I have hijacked the aesthetic and humour of these works and transformed them into an art language with which to explore cultural identity.

Humour, like food is social. We laugh with others in the same way as we might share a meal with them and this can help to strengthen social bonds.⁵⁰ Another characteristic of humour is its ability to transcend barriers by its use of surprise, because by the time you 'get' the joke it is inside you whether you want it there or not and it can then unfold. In my work I use humour as a hook to grab the viewer's attention and to entertain whilst the meaning follows. Jokes, like dreams, are believed to operate in a form of 'condensed meaning' because they allow repressed sexual or hostile impulses to be aired in public under the shelter of 'it's only a joke' – in this respect the best jokes contain unconscious truths.⁵¹ My installation *Yellow Peril* (a work that I deal with in greater detail in the following chapter) is an example of the use of irony. It is a joke told from a cultural insider's point of view. If the same joke were used by an outsider it would be offensive. Humour is an extremely powerful tool when used in this way because it can reverse the power relationships between participants.

Three of my other works, *Chopstick/knife fork* (*Fig. 12*), *Wok/satellite dish* (*Fig. 13*) and *Peking Duck* (*Fig. 14*) start to explore the transition from Chinese culture into a British one and the idea that in today's multi-cultural Britain one needs to develop the ability to learn and to adjust to a different cultural climate. In *Chopstick/knife fork*, I carved a knife and fork onto the ends of a pair of chopsticks to make them even more useful in this new landscape - to mutate and grow a different set of limbs to cope with the changing territory. In *Wok/satellite dish*, the original parabolic dish has been replaced by its immigrant counterpart, a wok. The narrative describes immigrant aspirations, reflecting the dream of material wealth and prosperity in the new world. The wok represents the means and the tool by which this ambition will be achieved, through hard work and long hours working in the catering industry. In *Peking Ducks*, the kitsch British ceramic flying ducks are replaced by Chinese takeaway cartons. Normally the British ducks fly from left to right, but in this case they are coming from the East and so fly in the opposite direction, making the link between migratory birds and human immigration. All these works are pared down. They are intended to act as one-liners – to provoke shock/humour and then expand to reveal their meaning. They are influenced by Surrealist artists, especially Salvador Dali, Marcel Duchamp and Meret Oppenheim (*Fig. 15*).

⁴⁹The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Art and Artists, ed. by Ian Chilvers (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 136.

⁵⁰Michael Billig, 'Freud and the Language of Humour', *The Psychologist*, 15 (2002), 452-455 (p. 452).

⁵¹Sigmund Freud. *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* (London: Penguin Books, 1991).



Fig.12 Anthony Key *Chopstick/Knife Fork* 1997
carved 25cm



Fig.13 Anthony Key *Wok/Satelite Dish* 1997 35cm

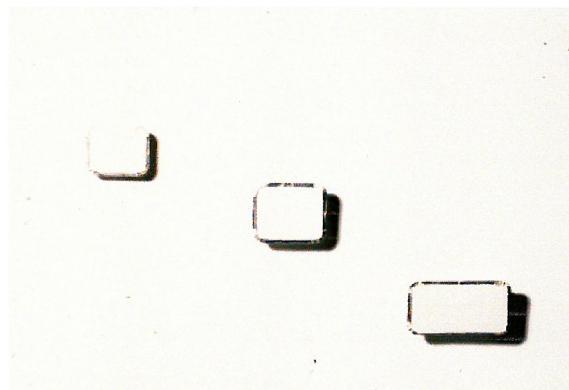


Fig.14 Anthony Key, *Peking Ducks*, 1997 variable



Fig. 15 Meret Oppenheim, *Luncheon in Fur*, 1936 Fur-covered cup 20x7cm

Appropriation

"Cannibal psychosis involves the consumption of real bodies. But it is also useful to extend the definition of cannibalism to forms of consumption that occur beyond the physical body of the individual or even the community. It is possible to consume somebody's spirit, somebody's past or history, or somebody's arts and to do so in such a way that the act of consumption appears beautiful and heroic. The sites where this consumption takes place can be some of the most cherished institutions in Western culture: art galleries, libraries, museums, universities." ⁵²

British appropriation of Chinese culture was not confined to antiquities. One of the most important ways in which immigrants can affect dominant culture is through their food. In the 1960s TV series 'Till Death do us Part', Alf Garnett called non-British food "that foreign muck".⁵³ However, 'British' food is made up of a range of naturalised foods that arrived with immigrant cultures and were appropriated and adapted by the local population.⁵⁴ In an article called 'The Culinary Aspects of Anglo-Jewry' John Shaftesley mentions that in 1968 the National Federation of Fish Fryers gave a commemorative plaque to Malin's of Bow in the East End of London for being the oldest shop to sell fish and chips together in Britain.⁵⁵ Joseph Malin was a Jewish immigrant who founded his fish shop in 1860. Fried fish in batter had already become a classic Jewish way of cooking fish, brought to Britain by Portuguese Ashkenazi and Sephardi Jews. The combination of the immigrant Jewish fish shop and the Irish potato shop produced the British national dish of fish and chips as we know them today.

Thirty years on from Alf Garnett's pronouncement, Chinese foods are sold in every supermarket as ready made frozen meals and the Chinese takeaway has become part of British eating culture. Ironically many of the present day fish and chip shops are now run by Chinese families, either combined with the takeaway or as separate establishments, a sure sign that cultural boundaries are being further eroded. The Chinese takeaway and restaurants have been absorbed into the British way of life. 'Going for a Chinese' has become part of colloquial English language almost as much as 'going down the pub' - it is not uncommon for these two activities to follow each other.⁵⁶

This shared area between British and other cultures and the acquisition of others' customs are of interest because they may hold clues as to how to make the transition between cultures. The potato originates from Peru and was brought over to Britain by Sir Walter Raleigh in the 1500's.

⁵² Deborah Root, *Cannibal Culture: Art, Appropriation, & the Commodification of Difference* (Oxford: Westview Press, 1996), p. 18.

⁵³ *Till Death us do part*. Creator Johnny Speight. London Weekend Television for ITV. Originally The Ramsey's, Comedy Playhouse, 1965.

⁵⁴ Quoted in Claudia Roden, *The Book Of Jewish Food: An Odyssey From Samarkand And Vilna To The Present Day* (London: Penguin Books, 1999), p. 169.

⁵⁵ Roden, p. 100.

⁵⁶ David Parker, 'The Chinese Takeaway and the Diasporic Habitus: Space, Time and Power Geometries', in *Un/Settled Multiculturalisms: Diasporas, Entanglements, 'Transriptions'*, ed. by Barnor Hesse (London: Zed Books, 2001), pp. 72-95 (p. 81).

In my work entitled *Chips with Everything* (Fig. 16), a number of growing potato plants are positioned as if they had just entered the country fresh off the boat, and are waiting at immigration to be processed. This was a site-specific installation for the Aspex Gallery in Portsmouth, which was formerly a potato warehouse. The question that this work poses is: how did the foreign Peruvian tuber become so much part of the British staple diet as to become the national dish – how does a person of Chinese descent become truly British? Foreign foods are perhaps the precursor to the foreigner becoming accepted and integrated into the mainstream.

I discovered an entry in the Oxford Dictionary that states that ketchup ('k' e chap') is in fact a traditional Chinese Cantonese recipe. "A spicy sauce of thick consistency made from tomatoes, or from mushrooms, walnuts etc"⁵⁷ So what I considered to be quintessentially Western turns out to be an appropriation of a traditional Chinese recipe by the West. This alters the reading of my self-portrait piece, *Soy/Ketchup*. At the time of making, I thought that I was contrasting the two classic sauces that signified East and West – metaphorically suggesting that my identity was split and that I was a Westerner trapped inside an Eastern person's body. I later discovered that both soy sauce and tomato ketchup were originally Chinese. The work now suggests that I am wholly Chinese but like tomato ketchup I was reinvented in the West. If this is true then it means that I am also a product of appropriation. Like tomato ketchup, I have been altered to suit local taste, repackaged and reproduced as a product of the West. This suggests that if I want to reclaim my Chineseness from the West I have to re-appropriate myself. So how do I do this? I believe that by being aware of my appropriation, I am already re-appropriating myself. It is impossible to separate my British from my Chinese influences but by understanding how these areas operate I can mediate my future. The new reading offered up by the work has altered my perspective on myself and I now consider this a more accurate interpretation as a self-portrait.

Pablo Picasso reportedly said, in reference to ownership of ideas: "Lesser artists borrow, great artists steal". Perhaps Picasso himself stole this saying from Igor Stravinsky who was also reported to have said the same thing, but earlier. In other words, appropriators possess an idea completely, rework it and make it their own. Could I follow this pattern of appropriation and thus become British? If so, is it better to be 'borrowed' or 'stolen'? The Chinese takeaway meal illustrated in (Fig. 17) is an example of borrowing where the cultural dynamics of ownership are still in play. This product was found in the frozen food section of the supermarket Safeway marketed as *New York Take Out*, Beef with Black Bean Noodles and wrapped up in the style of the great American take out experience for the British consumer. On the side of the carton are the seals of approval from the Queen, the Queen Mother and the Prince of Wales, lending authority to the British ownership of this product. Nowhere is the Chinese origin of this food mentioned although there is a picture of a pair of chopsticks on the carton. Is the Chinese takeaway being colonised by America heading towards the same fate as Chicago pizza?

⁵⁷ *The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, p. 1481.



Fig.16 Anthony Key *Chips with Everything* 2001 potato plants, desk, chair, lamp variable



Fig.17 New York Take Out 2000 20x10x10cm



Reverse angle

A more convincing example of stealing is the appropriation of noodles by the Italians. Marco Polo introduced pasta to Italy, having discovered noodles on his travels to China.⁵⁸ Today this link is hardly visible as spaghetti has become so undeniably Italian. One further example is the Chinese tea ceremony, which has become a traditional British custom. In a recent survey to determine what symbol represented Britain most accurately in the eyes of foreigners, the icon of a cup of tea came top of the list and was even more popular than a picture of a bowler hat.⁵⁹ Tea drinking has been adopted by many other countries including the Japanese, who have transformed the custom and also made it their own. Paradoxically, this ritual is seen to be so totally British that Japanese tourists consider having high tea at Fortnum & Masons high on the list of things to do whilst visiting London.

Being borrowed or stolen are passive positions for immigrant culture. However, although appropriation can be an instrument of conquest it can also be the shared area where cultures actually intersect. For example Japanese tourists sampling a British high tea at any posh establishment do so because they understand something about the custom from their own tea ceremonies. The partaking of tea is therefore similar enough to be familiar, yet different enough to be an exotic experience. Tea drinking can therefore be thought of as the point of entry for the Japanese to infiltrate and begin to understand the British culture from the inside. My initial reaction to appropriation of Chinese culture by the British was simply to try to repossess what I considered stolen. I now realize that this site of appropriation allows me special access, and once inside I can affect conditions from within. This has become a strategy for many of the works dealt with in this thesis. A further point of interest is what is shared between cultures rather than what is radically different. It is within this area of what is the same yet different that we can find out more about each other.

In April 2002 I attended a three-day conference called 'Contemporary Chinese Arts in the International Arena', held at the British Museum. The vast collection housed in this institution clearly illustrates the scavenging nature of British explorers and their appropriation of others' cultures. I thought it ironic that a conference organised to discuss the future of contemporary Chinese art was being held in the institution that had taken away a vast quantity of our cultural past. Having recorded the conference proceedings onto audiotape, I decided to mark the occasion with a work that I entitled *Culture to Go* (Fig. 18). I cut up the audiotapes of the conference into eight-inch strips to represent brown soy noodles, and then placed these noodles into the new-style, microwaveable, plastic takeaway cartons. The eight ninety-minute audiotapes of the entire conference were transformed into eight takeaway dishes – in Chinese eating culture, eight dishes signify a banquet. I placed the takeaway dishes in a British Museum carrier bag, not unlike the plastic carry bags used by Chinese takeaways, to suggest that the British Museum is the biggest Chinese takeaway in Britain, taking away our culture.

⁵⁸ Jonathan Friedman, 'Being in the World: Globalization and Localization', in *Global Culture: Nationalism, Globalization and Modernity*, ed. by Mike Featherstone (London: Sage, 1990), p. 83.

⁵⁹ Naked Translations is a survey carried out by The Department of Culture, Media and Sport, 14 June 2004.



Fig.18 Anthony Key *Culture to Go* 2002 assembled

Deborah Root has suggested that appropriation is a instrument of conquest that works by 'commodifying' cultural difference, 'aestheticizing' this exotic difference and turning it into a style product that can be consumed and taken home.⁶⁰ *New York Take Out* is an example of this. It is also a way of managing the danger that this cultural contamination can produce by containing the fear of the other into neatly packaged manageable products. In this way immigrant culture is kept alive and at the same time anchored firmly and safely in the past. In light of this I found the British Museum's Chinese Arts conference disturbing. My initial suspicions were that having controlled our past, were institutions like these attempting to have a say in our future as well? I recognize that this is a post-colonial standpoint and that perhaps today I am in a position to take a post post-colonial view. Individuals as well as institutions can change; they are forced to if they want to remain relevant to their continuously changing audience. Perhaps the British Museum has adopted the position of what Paul Gilroy identified as "the changing same"- engaging difference without being overwhelmed by it.⁶¹ In this respect the British Museum is now dealing with its own ethical role, having to adopt a self-reflexive position in the mediation of Chinese culture in the past and the future. Is this the way forward for collaborative, hybridised cultures?

In this chapter I have presented examples of early attempts at formulating an art language of my very own, using food as a vehicle to examine self-portraiture, and have discussed the appropriation of immigrant culture by the British. In the following chapter I explore the dreams and aspirations of Chinese immigrants, the cultural barriers we experienced and the use of reappropriation as a strategy to overcome these barriers.

⁶⁰ Root, p. 68-70.

⁶¹ Quoted by Stuart Hall, 'Globalisation From Below', in *Connecting Flights: New Cultures of the Diaspora*, ed. by Richard Ings (London: British Library, 2003), pp. 5-14 (p. 14).

Chapter 3: Cultural Barriers

Growing up in South Africa made me acutely aware of cultural barriers. Under the apartheid regime the Chinese were classified as non-White and certain areas of the town in which I lived were officially 'off limits' to us. 'The Group Areas Act' of 1950 meant that we could only live in the area designated for Chinese, well away from other cultural groups.⁶² Further legislation such as the Immorality Ordinance (no.46 of 1903) and the Prohibition of Mixed Marriage Act (no.55 of 1949) forbade interracial sex and marriages.⁶³ I carried an identity card and I had to apply to the government for permission to enter university. I grew up knowing exactly where I belonged and what I was allowed to do – then I came to London.

In this chapter I examine the difference between the dream and the reality of Chinese immigrants' lives once they become established in Britain. The works I use to portray that dream are *Gold Mountain* and *Hong Kong Shanghai Bank*. *Jerusalem* on the other hand deals with this reality once immigrants arrive in Britain - the lure of the former two pieces measured against the stark reality of the latter. I go on to explore the Chinese takeaway as a self contained space, an island within an island. I discuss food as a transforming vehicle to overcome cultural barriers and re-appropriation as a tool of protest. I examine other Chinese artists with a British connection including the other members of the Number Six group. Finally, I consider the problem of cultural entrapment and alternative ways forward.

Dreams and Realities

My grandfather was one of the many economic migrants who left China in the early 1900s. Attracted by stories of 'Gam Saan' (Gold Mountain - the name given to San Francisco during the gold rush of 1849), many Chinese men from my grandfather's family village left to find their fortune in the new world. My Grandfather may have landed up in South Africa purely by accident, as the location of this fabled 'Gold Mountain' was unclear. Gold had recently been discovered in Melbourne (Australia) and Johannesburg (South Africa) and these places were subsequently called 'New Gold Mountain'. My grandfather may have boarded a ship bound for 'Gaam Saan' and thought that he was headed for San Francisco only to find himself mistakenly in South Africa.⁶⁴

My piece *Gold Mountain* (Fig. 19) was made in response to the dream of finding one's fortune overseas. The work consists of a pile of empty but assembled tin foil Chinese takeaway cartons, inverted and neatly stacked onto a wooden pallet. The silver coloured 'ingot' bars are arranged in a formation that resembles a gold mountain of freshly minted gold bullion bars. Although finding gold was the unachievable dream, many Chinese immigrants discovered an alternative

⁶² Yap and Leong Man, p. 326.

⁶³ Yap and Leong Man, p. 368.

⁶⁴ Yap and Leong Man, p. 39



Fig.19 Anthony Key *Gold Mountain* 1997 tin foil cartons pallet
120x80x70cm

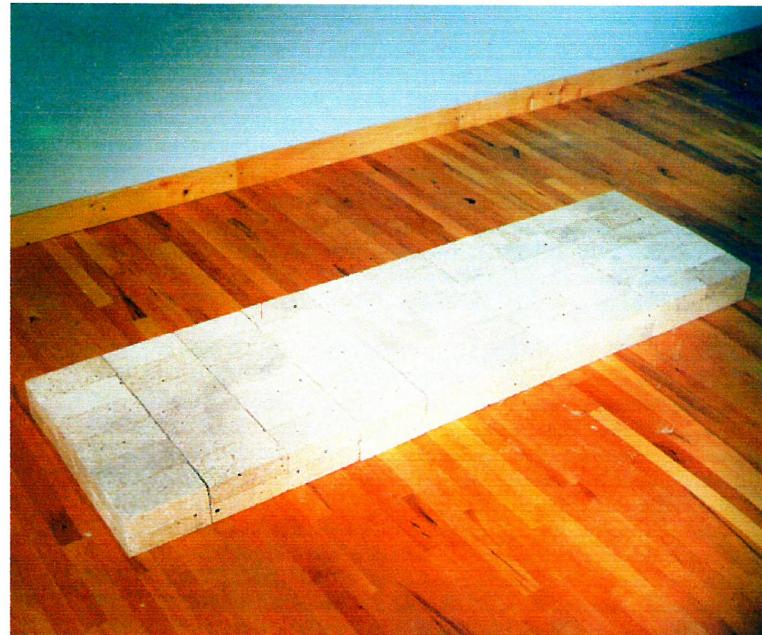


Fig.20 Carl Andre *Equivalent VIII* 1978 bricks 10.3x70x230cm

currency in the guise of the takeaway/restaurant business. Visually, this piece echoes Carl Andre's minimalist work, 'Bricks' (equivalent V111, 1978) (Fig. 20).

Another work in keeping with the theme of immigrant aspirations and finding one's fortune overseas is *Hong Kong Shanghai Bank* (Fig. 21). This work practically made itself whilst I was constructing *Gold Mountain*. The foil cartons I was using are bought in quantities of 500, packed in cardboard boxes for distribution. Opening a cardboard box reveals the foil containers packed tightly into each other, similar to the way disposable cups are assembled – the white cardboard lids come in a separate box. When I removed a stack of cartons from the box and placed it upright on the floor (open side down) it resembled a bright new shiny miniature skyscraper, echoing the minimalist style of Van Der Rohe's architecture. I was familiar with the famous Hong Kong landmark, the Hong Kong Shanghai Bank (designed by Norman Foster), and so I saw instinctively the possibility of this moment – an example of the philosophy that the art already exists and that part of the artist's job is to prepare him/herself to see it (discussed further in Chapter 4). My only interaction with the work was to describe the hallmark feature of the building by etching the graceful triangulated beam-like structure onto the surface of the tin foil skyscraper. The idea that I wanted to communicate with this work was immigrant aspirations – the small businessman in his takeaway restaurant dreams of becoming as wealthy as the Hong Kong Shanghai Bank.

Today, a hundred years after my grandfather travelled to the West, the lure of Gold Mountain remains alive, as immigrants continue to attempt to escape poverty by seeking their fortune overseas. As national borders become closed to legal immigration, a network of illegal human trafficking grows to satisfy demand. This underground practice has already led to two major tragedies. Firstly, in the 'Dover 58' incident, fifty-eight Chinese people were found suffocated to death on board a container lorry at Dover docks, having sought to illegally enter Britain.⁶⁵ Secondly, twenty-two Chinese migrant workers drowned in Morecambe Bay this year in an attempt to earn a living by harvesting cockles in dangerous waters under the cover of night.⁶⁶

Instead of finding the streets paved with gold, the reality for many immigrants entering Britain has been one of hardship and struggle. In my next installation, *Jerusalem* (Fig. 22), I incorporated both the dream and the reality of immigrant Chinese life in Britain. The title is taken from William Blake's poem, which promises an England that is a 'green and pleasant land'.⁶⁷ The term *Jerusalem* is also used more generally as "an ideal and heavenly place or situation" – in this respect *Jerusalem* evokes similar promises to *Gold Mountain*.⁶⁸ However, when immigrants arrive in Britain they are faced with a rigorous Immigration Department that

⁶⁵ Paul Kelso, 'Search For a New Life Ended in a Cauldron of Death' *The Guardian*, 6 April 2001.

⁶⁶ Felicity Lawrence, Hsiao-Hung Pai, Vikram Dodd, Helen Carter, David Ward and Jonathan Watts, 'Victims of the Sands and the Snakeheads', *The Guardian*, 7th February 2004.

⁶⁷ William Blake: *The Complete Poems*, ed. by Alicia Ostriker (London: Penguin Books, 1977), p. 514.

⁶⁸ *The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, p. 1445.



Norman Foster *Hong Kong*
Shanghai Bank 1985

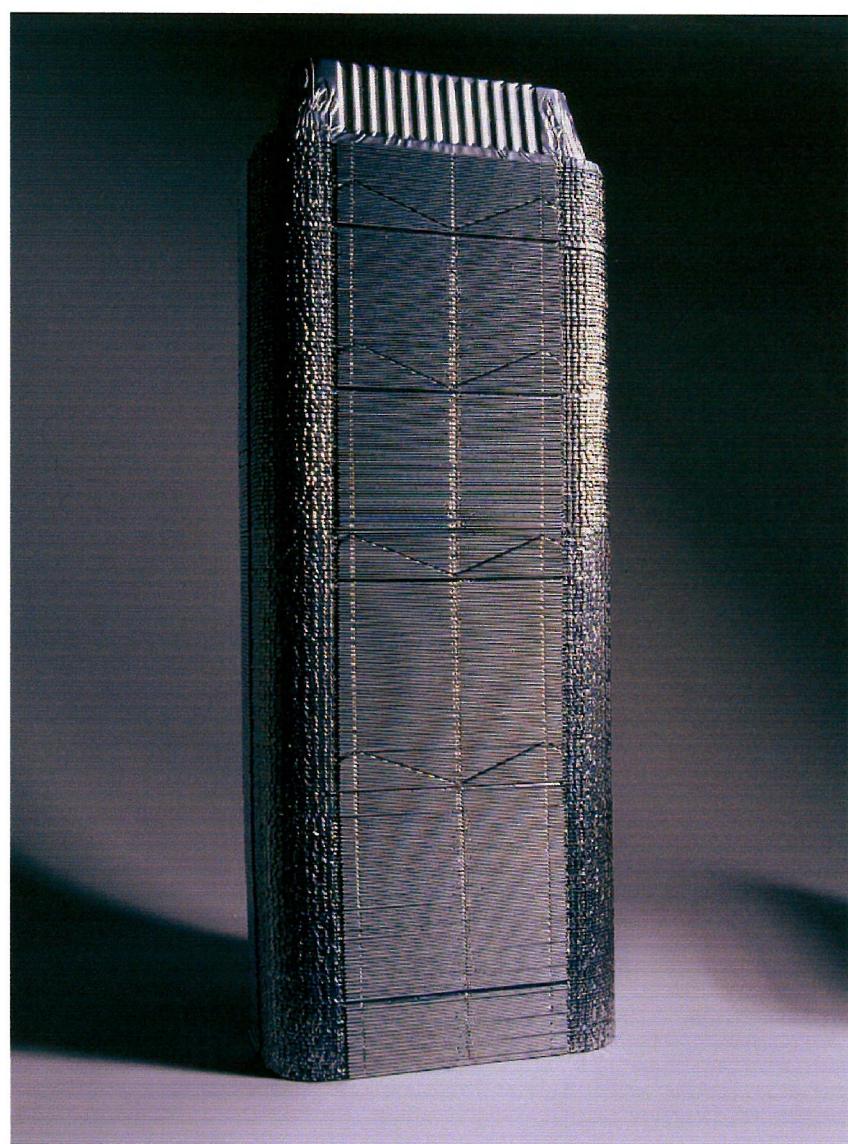


Fig.21 Anthony Key *Hong Kong Shanghai Bank* 1996 tin foil cartons
20x10x50cm

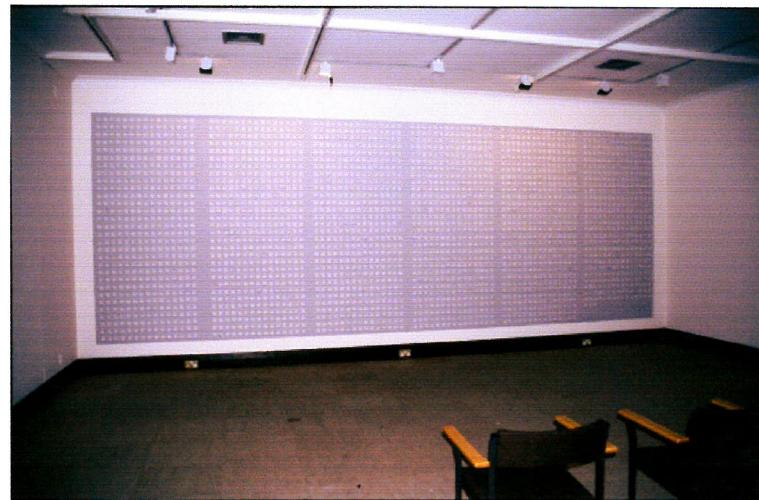


Fig.22 Anthony Key *Jerusalem 2003* Home Office tickets variable



Fig.23 Maya Lin *Vietnam War Memorial* Washington D.C.

demands a list of conditions that are difficult to satisfy.⁶⁹ Necessary requirements include job prospects and enough money to survive without being a burden on the state. The more successful applicants are allowed entry on temporary visas whilst their cases are processed and the unsuccessful are denied entry and sent back. *Jerusalem* consists of thousands of the numbered queuing tickets that are dispensed from a ticket machine upon arrival at Lunar House (the Croydon branch of the Home Office). Having acquired a ticket, immigrants are required to wait for hours until their numbers are called so that their applications to remain in Britain can start to be processed. It is this human lottery experience that I am alluding to in the work, the power to make or break dreams.

The Home Office tickets are glued precariously to a wall in the gallery, suggesting fragility - the possibility that these identities might become detached and lost. The tickets are arranged in neat rows within panels to cover most of the wall. This aesthetic echoes Buddhism in its simplicity and repetition. Only the top of each ticket is attached allowing the rest of the ticket to stand away from the wall, suggesting a more three-dimensional (bodily) presence. The lighting is sombre, the atmosphere is still and a couple of seats are provided to encourage the audience to spend time with the work and their thoughts. *Jerusalem* represents a memorial to immigrants in the past, present and future. It invites contemplation of the helplessness and randomness of immigrant lives in the hands of bureaucrats. The piece also echoes the sense of loss as unsuccessful applicants' dreams and hopes for a better future are thwarted. The format of the work follows in the footsteps of war memorials in general, but particularly the Vietnam Veteran's War Memorial (*The Wall*) designed by Maya Ying Lin.⁷⁰ (Fig. 23)

Barriers

Great Wall (Fig. 24) is a work I made about barriers and the protection of one's territory from foreign colonisers, the prime example of this being the Great Wall of China. In this work the wall is built from bricks that have been cast in plaster using the aluminium takeaway carton as their mould. The wall of takeaway bricks represents a cultural barrier, the equivalent of the takeaway counter. It keeps 'foreign devils' at arm's length in the daily exchanges in the catering industry, while at the same time imprisoning immigrants within this territory. Another reading of the wall is that it is a metaphor for the invisible barrier erected by the British to keep foreigners from contaminating their culture. However, in this instance the British brick has already mutated into a foreign cell, as the Chinese stealthily invade the host via its mouth and change it from within. This is a strategy towards making a home in Britain in the face of a reluctant host.

The Chinese takeaway has been the point of entry for many Chinese immigrants to Britain. It provided a ready-made opportunity, a repeatable business formula to Chinese immigrants. These self contained catering establishments were usually started up with family money or loans granted by extended family and have many advantages for newly arrived immigrants.

⁶⁹ Home Office, 'Immigration Rules', <http://www.ind.homeoffice.gov.uk>.

⁷⁰ Hughes, p. 369.

Firstly the whole family could work together as a unit. Secondly, the business required very little English language, and this explains why the numbered menu was invented. Thirdly, cooking is a skill most Chinese families already have due to the central role food plays in Chinese culture.

Today, the Chinese takeaway/restaurant is still one of the few places where the British meet the Chinese on an everyday basis. It is therefore an important interface between the two cultures and a vital site to comment and make artwork from. With the exception of 'Chinatowns', the placing of Chinese takeaways is usually determined by avoiding the competition of other similar establishments. This can mean that Chinese families running their businesses find themselves in remote parts of the country where they are the only ethnic minority residence. This can make them easy targets for racial abuse, especially at weekends after pub closing hours. The site of the takeaway therefore becomes a battleground that David Parker calls a 'diasporic habitus'... where 'economic, political, cultural and psychic processes are proclaimed and contested'.⁷¹ From the Chinese migrant position the takeaway shop is a self-contained space whose only contact is over a high counter/barrier.⁷² The takeaway counter becomes the focal point over which power between the Chinese family and their customers are enacted.

This self-contained space is therefore both haven and prison. How can this situation change? How does someone on the service side of the counter make the transition to the other side and what happens to them culturally in the process? It is this transition that I am exploring. Perhaps part of the answer is financial. Although the takeaway is the economic point of entry for many immigrant Chinese families, it has also proved to be the point of departure for the younger members of the family as the means by which they can afford education and eventually leave the catering industry for other professions.

Although tense at times, these islands of Chinese culture allow the immigrant to deal with the outside world on his/her own terms. A British person visiting a Chinese takeaway must feel like they are entering a foreign space, that they have crossed a cultural barrier. David Parker suggests that this is a form of 'internal tourism', and that it is the most rewarding and easiest ethnic line to cross.⁷³ My question is: what happens when that line is crossed, when the British consume Chinese food? Can people change as a result of experiencing foreign foods – is it true that 'we are what we eat'? Kelly Oliver suggests that newborns, whilst being breast fed, take in food from the other and make that nourishment part of themselves, and that this also happens with language and social customs.⁷⁴ This suggests that the British are becoming more Chinese by the amount of Chinese food they eat. Unlike past British appropriation of Chinese culture and products that they transformed and made their own, Chinese takeaway food in this case is provided directly by the Chinese for British consumption. It could be argued that Chinese food is changing the British from within. Lupton pointed out that food is a 'liminal substance' which

⁷¹ Parker, p. 74.

⁷² Parker, p. 76.

⁷³ Parker, p. 77.

⁷⁴ Kelly Oliver, 'Nourishing the Speaking Subject: A Psychoanalytic Approach to Abominable Food and Women', in *Cooking, Eating, Thinking*, ed. by Deane W. Curtin and Lisa M. Heldke (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1992), pp. 68-84 (p. 69).



Fig.24 Anthony Key *Great Wall* 1999 cast brick assembled

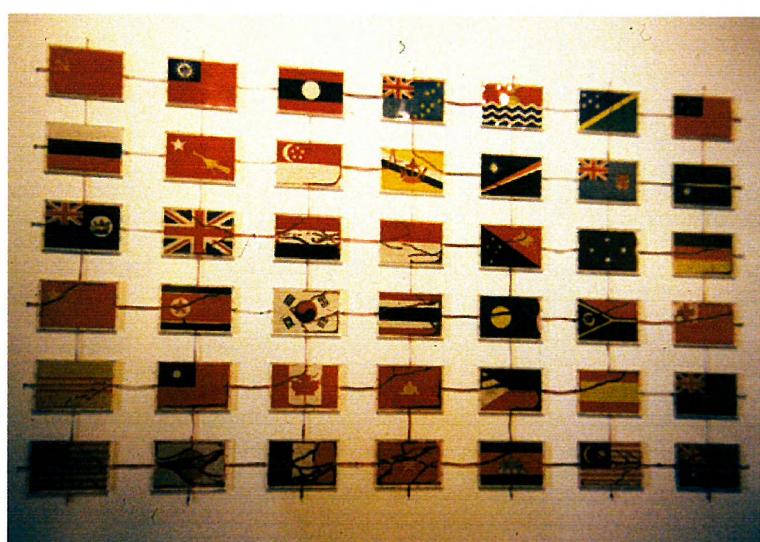


Fig.25 Yukinori Yanagi *Pacific* 1996 perspex boxes, coloured sand ants variable

bridges the gap between “nature and culture, the human and the natural, the outside and the inside”⁷⁵ In order to allow food to pass from outside to inside the body we must vet our choices as to what is edible, not only in terms of what is physically ‘safe’ but also what is culturally acceptable. Non-Western foods that initially may have appeared threatening could be sampled in a more familiar form – many Chinese restaurants in the British suburbs westernised the taste of their dishes by employing less strong flavours and narrowing the range of ingredients. As Kalcik suggested about the uptake of Oriental food in the USA:

“In the first a food stereotype is used as a weapon against an intruder: the formula appears to be ‘strange people equals strange food’. In the second process the new group presents its food in acceptable, safe arenas where some Americans try it out and learn to like it The formula here seems to be: ‘not-so strange food equals not-so-strange people’, or perhaps, ‘strange people but they sure can cook’.”⁷⁶

The British have seemed to overwhelmingly accept Chinese food to be both safe and desirable. In 1993, a food report stated that the Chinese restaurant was so prolific and accepted throughout the land that it “could now claim to be the archetypal British restaurant”⁷⁷

Breaching barriers

The theme of barriers and national boundaries has been explored by a number of artists. For example, Yukinori Yanagi made *Pacific* (1996, *Fig. 25*), a work consisting of 49 shallow Perspex boxes mounted on a wall in rows of seven across by seven down with an overall dimension of 2820x4050x18mm. Each picture box was filled with coloured sand in the formation of a national flag and the flag boxes were interconnected by a series of clear plastic tubes. The 49 flags depict the free trade countries of the Pacific Rim. A colony of ants was introduced into the maze of flags and this resulted in the ants burrowing into and carrying away the sand. Over time the individual national identities and boundaries were eroded and contaminated by the ants, illustrating that nature does not respect man-made boundaries. What follows are two examples of my work where national boundaries are also threatened and finally breached. I explain the specific cultural mechanisms by which this is achieved.

As described in Chapter 1, a barrier that Chinese immigrants face is that of the stereotype. I conceived an installation called *Yellow Peril* (*Fig. 26*), with the purpose of deconstructing the Chinese stereotype using humour. I use the term ‘deconstruct’ in the Derrida sense, to shock and dislodge the meaning from its centre so it can be replaced by another.⁷⁸ The work is a parody of Anthony Gormley’s *Terracotta Field* (1996, *Fig. 27*) and is an installation of thousands of identical bottles of soy sauce (suggesting that all Chinese look the same) marching out of

⁷⁵ Deborah Lupton, *Food, the Body and the Self* (London: Sage, 1996), pp.17-18.

⁷⁶ Bell & Valentine, p. 114.

⁷⁷ Quoted in Parker, p. 79.

⁷⁸ *Deconstruction and Philosophy: The Texts of Jacques Derrida*, ed. by John Sallis (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), p. 4.



Fig.26 Anthony Key *Yellow Peril* 1997 soy sauce bottles variable



Fig.27 Anthony Gormley *Field* 1996 clay figures variable

immigration centres to overrun Britain. This echoes past Western fears of invasion that resurfaced with the return of Hong Kong to China. My intention was to use humour to demonstrate the absurdity of this irrational fear and thereby rob it of its power. My hope is that when the stereotype arises in the future it will be defused by the memory of my installation. Other artists have subverted and made fun of mechanisms that were designed to keep them in their place. To quote Lucy Lippard:

"Irony, humour, and subversion are the most common guises and disguises of those artists leaping out of the melting pot into the fire. They hold up mirrors to the dominant culture, slyly infiltrating mainstream art with alternative experiences – inverse, reverse, perverse. These strategies are forms of tricksterism, or 'Ni Go Tlunh A Doh Ka'- Cherokee for 'We Are Always Turning Around... On Purpose'." ⁷⁹

Although the *Yellow Peril* invasion never materialised in the way the West imagined, it did manifest itself on a much smaller scale as the Chinese takeaway/restaurant. I portrayed this in my work *Free Delivery* (Fig. 28), which I made for the exhibition 'Empire and I'. I first researched the sites and names of Chinese takeaways/restaurants in Great Britain.⁸⁰ I then assembled a map of Great Britain with the names of the thousands of Chinese takeaways printed on little red flags, each pinned onto the appropriate town or city. The table is made to resemble a war manoeuvres operation where all the red flags indicate the enemy, and these can be interpreted as a silent invasion or colonisation in reverse, 'the recently migrated re-conquering the land of former colonisers'.⁸¹ All the flags are blowing from the East, the direction from which the first immigrants arrived, literally blown here on sailing ships belonging to the East India Company. There are three different heights to the pins: the shortest pin is used where a village had a single takeaway, the next level where the town had more than one takeaway and finally the tallest pins represent the largest cities with many takeaways (here I limited the flag to four names). The map also serves as a visual document to illustrate migration patterns of the Chinese throughout the United Kingdom. Due to the fact that each small town or village could only support one or two takeaway outlets, Chinese families constantly moved further afield to establish their own patch, making them one of the most regionally dispersed ethnic minorities in Britain.⁸²

Whilst researching this piece I discovered an interesting correlation between the naming of the restaurants and the location. In the more remote areas of the UK such as the Scottish Highlands the restaurant names remain very traditional, for example 'Bamboo Inn' or 'Jade Palace'. In the more cosmopolitan areas of Manchester, Liverpool and London, the names change to 'Wok Around the Clock' (a 24 hour takeaway), 'Wok This Way' or simply Mrs Wong -

⁷⁹ Lucy Lippard, *Mixed Blessings: New Art in a Multicultural America* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1990), pp. 199-242. *Turning Round on Purpose* was the exhibition title of a group of American artists organised and curated by Jimmie Durham and Jean Fisher.

⁸⁰ Multiple searches were carried out of the electronic and paper copies of the 86 geographical regions covered by Yellow Pages Directories, 1999.

⁸¹ Susan Pui San Lok, 'Anthony Key', in *Empire and I*, ed. by Terra Incognita (London: Terra Incognita, 1999), p. 3.

⁸² Yeh, p. 66.



Fig.28 Anthony Key *Free Delivery* 1997 assembled 90x140x80cm



Close up *Free Delivery*

this suggests that established Chinese communities feel more at home and are able to take some control over the language and empower themselves through humour – a sign of integration at work.

Hong Kong artists and re-appropriation

One way in which immigrant communities can give voice to their grievances is by protesting politically. This can take the form of re-appropriation, reclaiming cultural territories taken from them by dominant powers. In this section I examine reappropriation, focussing on Chinese artists in former British colonies. This may provide clues about what Chinese artists in Britain can do to claim a 'British-Chinese' identity. For this purpose I have chosen to look at Hong Kong artists, because their relationship to Britain reflects that of Chinese artists living in Britain.

Tsang Tsou Choi (*Fig. 29*) is more of a phenomenon than an artist. He is in his mid-eighties and for the last 50 years has been writing his claim on public buildings and street furniture for the return of territory that he accuses the British Crown of stealing from his family. His graffiti, written in Chinese calligraphy, long before the graffiti movement developed in New York, draws attention mainly because the defacing of public buildings is not a act that normally occurs in Hong Kong. Tsang, like every other graffiti artist, is marking his territory and staking his claim by informing the public of their grievance and what they are prepared to do to make you notice them.⁸³ In Tsang's case he is claiming back from the colonisers at a time of uncertainty due to the run up to Hong Kong being handed back to the Chinese, and so his actions became even more relevant – he is staking a claim not only against the withdrawing British but also against the Chinese Communist government. His actions reflected a growing desire of the Hong Kong Chinese to be considered as a separate identity within the 'one country, two systems', philosophy of mainland China.⁸⁴ The perpetual efforts of Tsang (the 'King of Kowloon') have been acknowledged by leading artists, and recently he was included in the 2003 Venice Biennale as part of Hou Hanru's *Zone of Urgency*.⁸⁵ His work has also entered popular culture with designer bed linen being produced from his writings.

Warren Leung is another artist whose work lays claim to the specific identity of 'Hong Kongness'. In his piece entitled *Vis(/)ta* (1996-7, *Fig. 30*), he has produced a sculpture that consists of three pin hole cameras placed on top of each other. Each camera enclosure is scaled in proportion to one of the three areas that make up Hong Kong, namely Kowloon, the New Territories and Hong Kong Island itself. The cameras had earlier photographed a popular tourist scene from each of the three areas but these images were removed from the sculpture as an act of reclaiming possession and refusing to share the territories with foreigners. A further device was used to snub the 'outsider' - instead of using the official names for these locations, Leung inscribed the local Cantonese names onto the sculpture but wrote them using a

⁸³ Stephen Powers, *The Art of Getting Over: Graffiti at the Millennium* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999), p. 6.

⁸⁴ Julius Fortuna, 'Is One Country, Two Systems Succeeding', *The Manila Times*, 16 September 2004.

⁸⁵ David Clarke, 'Subaltern Writing Tsang Tsou Choi: The King of Kowloon', *Arts Asia Pacific (Australia)*, no.29 (2001), 68-71 (p. 69).



Fig.29 Tsang Tsou Choi (*King of Kowloon*)

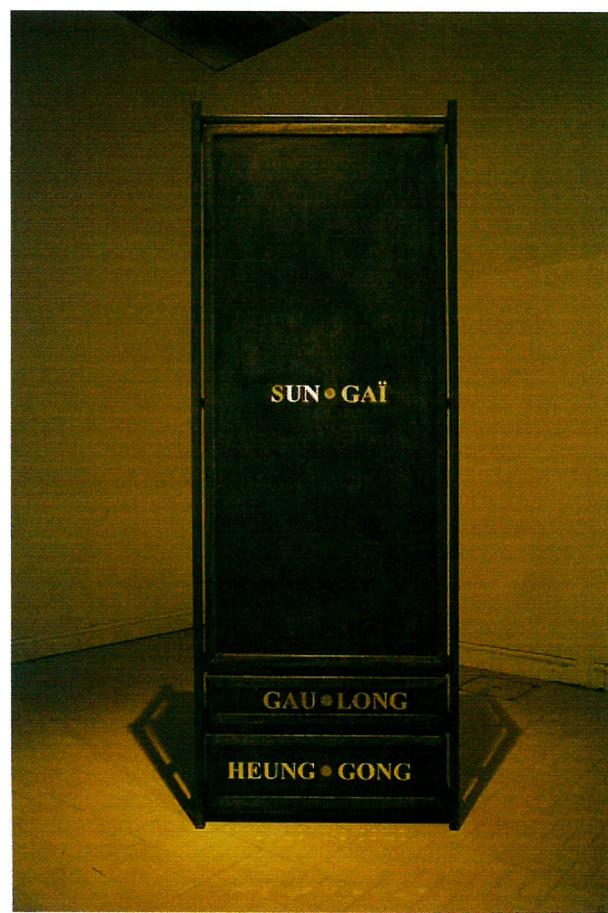


Fig.30 Warren Leung Vis(l)ta 1996-97 wood, zinc plate, mirror, iron, liquid light

romanized script - 'Gau Long' (Kowloon), 'Sun Gai' (New Territories) and 'Heung Gong' (Hong Kong). Thus they are made unreadable to both the British and the Mainland Chinese (the two powers that have control over Hong Kong), metaphorically denying them access. By utilising a creolised version of the Cantonese dialect as a means of marking out 'Hong Kongness', Leung, together with other artists and film makers, are rejecting claims to Hong Kong by 'foreign' powers and demanding that Hong Kong be considered as a separate state with its own identity.⁸⁶

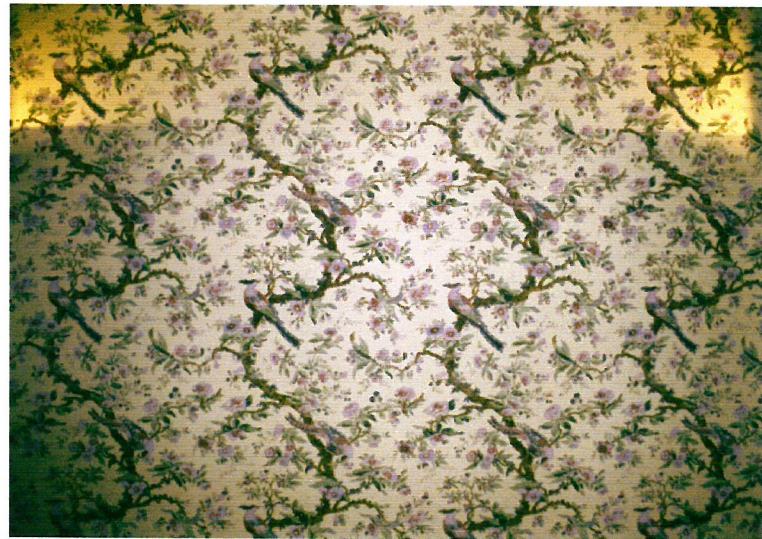
Like the Hong Kong artists, my installation *Repatriation* (Fig. 31) is also an attempt to reclaim my Chinese culture from the British. Where my situation differs is that I am not reclaiming a physical territory but a futile demand for all things Chinese to be returned to us. The process of forming ones cultural identity is not necessarily a linear one. This protest, dealt with in Chapter 2 in the section under appropriation, is still in play even while more recent thoughts on shared differences are entertained. This non-linear process also mirrors the timing of installation exhibitions in that certain thoughts can only be voiced when the appropriate site-specific opportunity arises, even though your thinking has progressed beyond that point.

An exhibition called 'Entertaining Mr Soane' was devised to coincide with the 250th anniversary of the birth of the eminent Royal Architect and art collector, Sir John Soanes, and was staged in his country residence (Pitshanger Manor in Ealing, London). Within the mansion I chose to make an installation in the drawing room, which was an elegant proportioned space with a Adam-styled ceiling and decorated in the typical 'British' country manor style of the time. The walls of the room were papered with a hand-printed chinoiserie wallpaper that depicted a repeated pattern of a pair of pheasants perched on a branch of a tree. In my installation I replaced every pheasant (a bird that originated in China) throughout the room with a black crow (a bird indigenous to the British Isles), by pasting a paper facsimile of the substitute bird on top of each original one. In doing this, I was re-appropriating from the British our cultural history that had been previously taken from us. In effect, I was saying 'Use your own birds'. This work can be read as a 'Turning around... on purpose' strategy, not only reminding the British of their past colonial scavenging of our culture but also mirroring dominant attitudes towards minorities in the idea of repatriation - 'Go back to where you belong' is a comment often directed at immigrants.

British-Chinese Identity

The artists described above who are calling for an independent Hong Kong are indigenous to their country and so are fighting to attain recognition of their separate identity. In contrast, many first-generation Chinese artists in Britain have not yet evolved a British-Chinese identity and thus are in the process of defining and carving out a separate position. In 1997, I co-organized an exhibition called 'Number Six', together with five other Chinese artists living and working in Britain. The other members of this group were Erika Tan, who was largely responsible for

⁸⁶ David Clarke, 'Found in Transit: Hong Kong Art in a Time of Change', in *Inside Out: New Chinese Art*, ed. by Gao Minglu (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), p. 176.



Original Wallpaper, Drawing Room, Pitshanger Manor, Ealing



Fig.31 Anthony Key *Repatriation* paper birds covering original birds
Installation

bringing this group together, Susan Pui San Lok, Meiling To, Yeu Lai Mo and Tony Ward. In our experience, 'Chinese art' had been presented as traditional art, i.e. ink and brush, calligraphic or framed within the 'Exotic'. Although our contemporary art practice did not fall within these categories we were often inappropriately lumped together with more traditional practitioners.⁸⁷ We set up 'Number Six' to control the context in which our art was seen and express our everyday concerns. For example, Yeu Lai's work revolved around issues of working in her parents' Chinese takeaway restaurant. An installation/video work entitled *House* (1997, Fig. 32) consists of an sectional mock up of the area immediately in front and behind the takeaway counter. A life-size cardboard cut-out of the artist stands in front of the counter, striking an ironic welcoming and subservient pose while the ubiquitous television placed high on the counter plays one of her video pieces *Service, Kissing and Licking* (1997). The video portrays Yeu Lai standing, serving, kissing and licking the counter as she parodies the expectations of her largely white, British male customers. Her ironic actions return the gaze back across the counter, registering a defiant presence of the 'not so timid' Chinese in Britain. Mayling To also echoes the feminist position in her work *Waitress Not Included* by simply and elegantly inscribing these words on to a side plate that would normally contain the bill.

Erika Tan's work approach is more oblique than Yeu Lai's and uses games as a strategy to deconstruct cultural classification. In *Sites of Construction* (1996; Fig. 33) she avoids the subject matter of specific 'Chineseness' and employs her background in Anthropology to explore how different communities are constructed, named and identified. In this piece the familiar solid colours of the six sides of a Rubik's cube are replaced with anthropological photographs, inviting the audience to participate in a game of re/constructing where people belong and challenging the notion that specific nationalities 'belong' in their own countries. In *Boat Race* Tan invites her gallery audience to participate in making Origami paper boats, the end result of which is a boat race on a nearby river, echoing the (very British) game of Pooh sticks.⁸⁸ Those taking part are not informed that the choice of colours of the boat paper corresponds to a Victorian anthropological racial code. *Boat 'Race'* offers up questions on tribal origins as well as competition between nationalities and hierarchies, illustrated by participants' colour choices and the colour of the boat that wins.

A work I made called *Three Lions on a Shirt* (Fig. 34) explored the issue of belonging and the decisions facing immigrants about allegiance to their original versus their host countries. This was prompted by the 'citizen's test' devised by the Thatcherite cabinet minister Norman Tebbit in 1990 and aimed at the British West Indian population.⁸⁹ The test, framed within the sporting arena, was that when England played the West Indies at cricket, who did the British West Indian population support? The inference was that if they could not support the English team, a question mark was cast over their English citizenship. This test, aimed only at the black population, carries racial overtones – nobody would think of posing this cricket test at the many Australians living in Britain and even if they did the answer would no doubt be that they support

⁸⁷ Number Six, press release, 1997.

⁸⁸ A.A. Milne, *The House at Pooh Corner* (London: Methuen, 1975), p. 92.

⁸⁹ Anon, 'Tebbit Bowls a No-Ball' *The Observer*, 22 April 1990.



Fig.32 Yeu Lai Mo *House* 1997 performance installation



Fig.33 Erika Tan *Sites of Construction* 1996 rubic cubes variable



Fig.34 Anthony Key *Three Lions on a Shirt* 1997 silk embroidery badge 60x65cm

Australia. Furthermore, during the recent European football championships in which the England team got to the finals but the Scottish team did not, questions were asked as to whether the Scottish would support England in the competition. There was interest but no inference that if they did not then they were questionable British citizens. Why is it that there are certain expectations from some cultural groups whilst others escape such attention? The title *Three Lions on a Shirt* is taken from the official English football team song of Euro 1996 when England was the host country for the tournament. The song describes the virtues of wearing the three lion badge of England proudly on one's chest.⁹⁰ In the artwork, I substituted the three English lions with 'Chinese lions' in the form of a replica badge embroidered from Chinese silk thread. These Chinese lions (Foo dogs) are traditionally found in the form of two stone statues one on each side of entrances to temples or public buildings. They are guardians against evil spirits and thus have become symbols of good fortune. The English lions on the other hand have a much more interesting history, originating from France. These three prancing lions, sideways on with full face, represent the Duchies of Normandy, Maine and Aquitaine.⁹¹ Henry II, through his wife Eleanor, inherited the three lion crest and this has been in the English heraldry ever since. This is another example of cultures appropriating from each other in the formation of new identities. *Three Lions on a Shirt* focuses Tebbit's test on the British-Chinese population. When China plays England at table tennis or badminton, which country do they find themselves supporting? The song goes on to announce that 'Football's coming home', and this further poses the question: where or what is considered 'home'?

A key issue amongst members of the Number Six group was how they approached the question of a British-Chinese identity. There were two positions that came to light, those who favoured a stable identity such as Yeu Lai and Mayling and others who avoided such notions, for example Erika and Susan, considering this to be a 'ghettoizing' position. My view at the time was that the British-Chinese position could prove useful by harnessing the 'tension' in the space between the two cultures.⁹² It is the creativity of this hybrid space that has produced much of the work in this thesis. Of the Number Six artists, Erika and Susan rejected this viewpoint, demonstrating in their work the impossibility of recapturing 'essential identities' and considering themselves to have already progressed past this point.⁹³ The predicament we found ourselves in echoed earlier experiences of other immigrant groups as they faced similar situations.

Paul Gilroy has stated that two opposing views have been identified in relation to the advancement of Black identity in Britain - these are the 'Essentialist' and the 'Pluralist' standpoints. The Essentialist view is the usual way nationalities are understood, which is the desire to "acquire a supposedly authentic, natural and stable identity".⁹⁴ On the other hand the Pluralist position is that there is no 'unitary' idea of a race because its members re-invent themselves

⁹⁰ *Three Lions on a Shirt*. Composed by the Lightning Seeds, recorded by I. Broudie, F. Skinner and D. Baddiel. 1996. England's football song for Euro 96.

⁹¹ Brewer's Concise Dictionary of Phrase & Fable, ed. by Betty Kirkpatrick (Oxford: Helicon, 1995), p. 615.

⁹² Ien Ang, 'On Not Speaking Chinese: Postmodern Ethnicity and the Politics of Diaspora', *New Formations*, no.24 (1994), 1-18 (p. 16).

⁹³ Yeh, p. 84.

⁹⁴ Paul Gilroy, 'It Ain't Where You're From, It's Where You're At... The Dialectics of Diasporic Identification', *Third Text*, 13 (1990/91), 3-16. (p. 4).

continuously and they are forever changing. I was sympathetic to both viewpoints and was reluctant to make a choice, as I could see the advantages of both positions. I felt that the Essentialist position for the British-Chinese had not yet been established and I wanted to help create this by adding my body of work to a nascent Essentialist position. Paul Gilroy went on to stress the importance of the Essentialist position as a power base from which to negotiate with dominant culture e.g. government funding bodies, the police etc. as opposed to the elusive and changing nature of Pluralist individuals. At first glance, much of my work fits into the Essentialist position, but I am wary of its traps both for my work and for my personal growth. My own way of resolving this is that my work practice needs the Essentialist position, not as a point of entry but as a point of departure. I make the work and this drives me forward to the next work and so on. If I am constantly changing and moving forward then perhaps I am a Pluralist; one who needs the Essentialist position, not to join but to resist – as a point of reference.

Cultural Entrapment

In order to make a new home in Britain, the Chinese immigrant has to step over the takeaway counter into the host's territory. Forging a new identity involves relinquishing some of the old cultural identity that was brought from the 'homeland'. A basic belief in Chinese philosophy is that 'chi' energy should constantly flow through the body and not stagnate, and that holding onto unresolved traumas or unfulfilled dreams creates blockages that can cause an individual to become unreceptive to their changed environment.⁹⁵ However, this 'letting go' is complicated for Chinese immigrant communities that were brought up outside China, for whom China represents the 'mythic homeland' the mother country that they have never experienced first-hand.⁹⁶

My experience of this mythic homeland took the form of a hope or dream that in a parallel existence I could have been brought up in China. Growing up in South Africa, a country that was hostile to a non – white culture, amplified this desire to the extent that I began to believe that my dream was possible. I now realize that this was also a form of denial, an escape from the bleak realities of everyday life. I hung onto this hope throughout my adolescence and adulthood, until I was invited to show in Japan in 2000. My Japanese trip had two profound effects on my cultural positioning. The first was the realisation that for the first time in my life I was in a country where everybody else looked like me and I no longer stood out in a crowd. It was a relief to not be a target and I felt as if I was amongst my own kind. However this initial comfortable feeling of belonging was short-lived as it soon became apparent how 'foreign' I was, and then (surprisingly) how 'English' I felt. My father's generation (who were also born in South Africa) believed it necessary to spend some time living in China to strengthen their 'Chineseness'. However, for my generation the notion of returning 'home' to China seemed no longer possible. It took a journey East to dispel my childhood desire of becoming truly 'Chinese'. Because my 'mythic China' was formed very early in my childhood, I did not realize that I was

⁹⁵ *The I Ching or Book of Changes*, translated by Richard Wilhelm (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1977), p. lv
⁹⁶ Ang, p. 16.

doing this until the Japanese experience dislodged my delusion. I believe that many Western-born Chinese of my generation carry a 'mythic China' within them, and that it is what we measure our Chineseness against. We always fail to measure up to the myth, until such time when we are ready to see it for what it is, let go of it and move on.

On my return, having dispelled the myth of becoming 'truly' Chinese, what Benedict Anderson calls 'an imagined community' (one that you literally cannot go home to)⁹⁷ I gradually began to feel much more at peace in Britain and to start to consider it as home. I realised that holding on to the idea of the mythic homeland had prevented me from putting down roots in Britain before this point. This experience was made manifest in a work entitled *Trespassing* (Fig. 35) It comprises 100 meters of noodles that I first boiled, then plaited, knotted and wound onto a large wooden cable reel to resemble barbed wire. The noodles were a Japanese type that comes in the form of straight dry brittle sticks 220mm long. These were chosen for their gauge and gluten content. After many examples were experimented with, a batch of noodles was boiled in salt water to act as a preservative, drained, oiled, allowed to cool in the fridge until dried to a leathery state then tied to each other in pairs, twisted and then knotted onto the reel. The gluten content of the chosen noodle was just right, elastic enough to knot without breaking but not so much that would make it un-knot on drying. Also the final thickness of the noodle when dry resembled the gauge and springiness of barbed wire. The work represents the possibility of being trapped by one's own culture and the labour-intensive process involved in realising it, metaphorically reflects the traumatic process I went through whilst relinquishing my cultural baggage. Or as Diana Yeh writes about this work:

"For while enclosing us within the safety of the familiar, our own culture might equally bind and contain us, transforming 'home' to a site of imprisonment, a place from which to flee. The painstaking process of rehydrating noodles to make them supple, in order to twist, entwine, knot, wind round into a new form, before allowing them to dehydrate again might testify to the arduous and protracted contortions undergone in the reverse procedure of unmaking oneself in order to become." ⁹⁸

In this chapter I have explored the various cultural barriers that the immigrant Chinese have experienced, have discussed deconstruction of stereotypes and re-appropriation as strategies to breach these barriers and then described moving away from a purely Chinese identity into a British-Chinese hybrid space. In the next chapter I further examine the positioning of my identity and the experience of being more comfortable in Britain, and finally question the significance of my work *Dolly*.

⁹⁷ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Rise of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983)

⁹⁸ Diana Yeh. 'Intimate Immensities', in *Anthony Key*, ed. by Laura Corballis (Bristol: Eddie Chambers, 2002), pp. 8-27 (p. 22).



Fig.35 Anthony Key *Trespassing* 2001 wooden reel, noodles
40x25cm

Chapter 4. Arrival and Acceptance.

The work *Trespassing* in the previous chapter led me to believe that I might have come closer to identifying a 'home', and had chosen to move out of the 'Chinese' space into the 'hybrid' space. Britain became where I chose to be rather than simply where I found myself. This seemingly slight change in perspective had an enormous impact on my sense of presence, and I began to feel comfortable in Britain. This in turn resulted in larger and bolder installations, as if it was necessary to take up space to announce that I was no longer invisible. In this chapter I examine one of my larger works in terms of its physical presence and describe the making process that seemed to mirror my protracted journey in search of identity. Finally, I discuss a recent work entitled *Dolly* that has lost all obvious cultural symbolism, and suggest what this change might mean.

Walcot Chapel

Walcot Chapel is a deconsecrated chapel in the centre of Bath, an elegant building with white painted walls, polished wooden floorboards and no furniture. In 2002 I was invited to install a site-specific work in the Chapel. Eddie Chambers, the curator of this project, put forward the idea that he had imagined my work 'Great wall' in this space, as the character of the material (cast plaster) that I used in that piece was architecturally sympathetic to the local Bath stone. However, rather than building the wall again, I thought that the exhibition provided a good opportunity to construct something new that was more appropriate to the site as the moulded bricks that I was thinking of re-using could be built into any form I desired. My initial idea was to construct a Far Eastern religious building within the chapel, for example a temple or tearoom, in order to juxtapose and contrast the architectural religious orders of Christianity and Buddhism. Over time this idea evolved into a statue of a giant Buddha (Fig. 36). By placing a monumental Buddha in a Christian church (a foreign God in somebody else's house) I could comment metaphorically on the displacement that Chinese immigrants feel as foreigners in a strange land. However, this old strategy of contrasting Chinese and British positions changed over the course of making the work into a more collaborative and shared situation.

The logistics of the project were daunting. I had never attempted a work as large as this before. I calculated that I needed about 6000 bricks to make a solid statue of approximately 8 to 10 feet in height. This translated into 140 bags of fine casting plaster or 3.6 tons of raw materials. I did consider making a hollow Buddha to save time, effort and money, and because there is a branch of Madhyamika (Middle-Way) Buddhism that asserts that "The Buddha did not teach anything to anyone at any place", an 'empty' form of Buddhism ⁹⁹ - this could highlight the contrast between the solid Christian structure of the chapel and the non-material nature of the immigrant religion. However, I decided that building a hollow statue of this size and weight in a public space could lead to major constructional problems, and so chose a solid construction.

⁹⁹ CW Huntington, Jr., *The Emptiness of Emptiness* (Hawaii: University of Hawaii Press, 1989), p. 207.

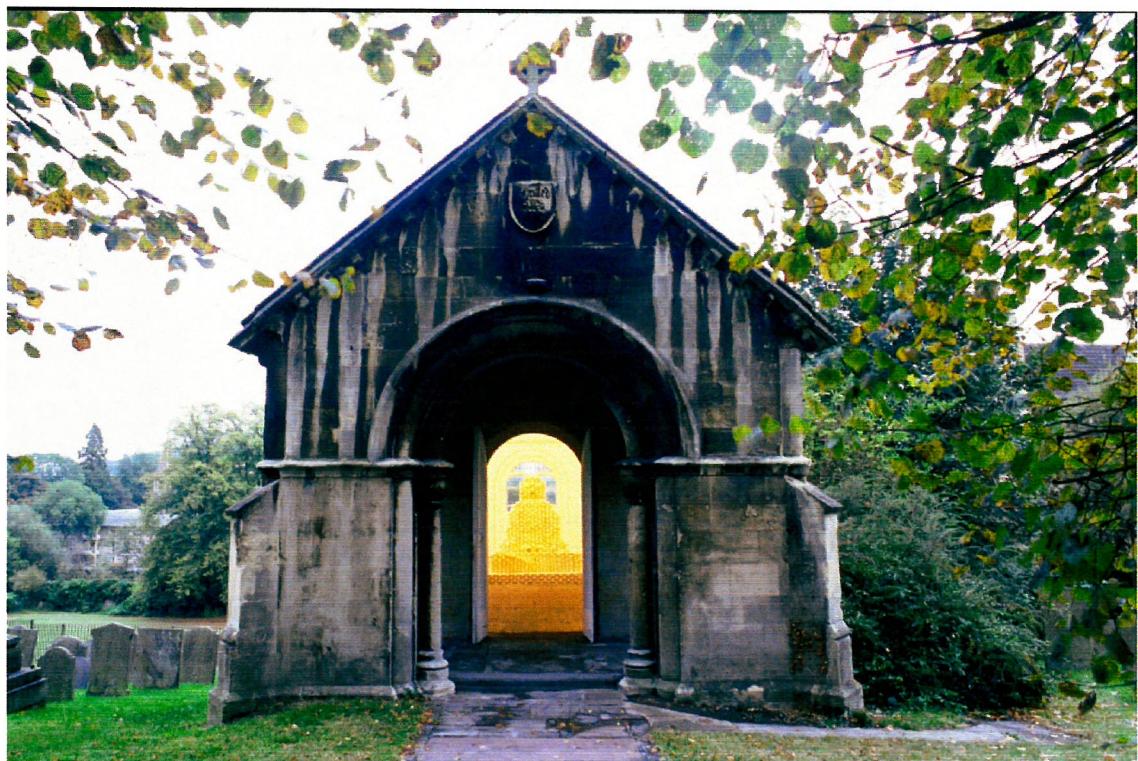
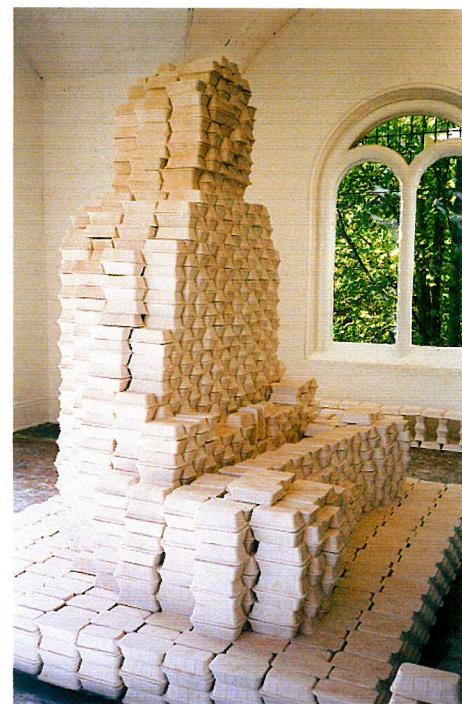
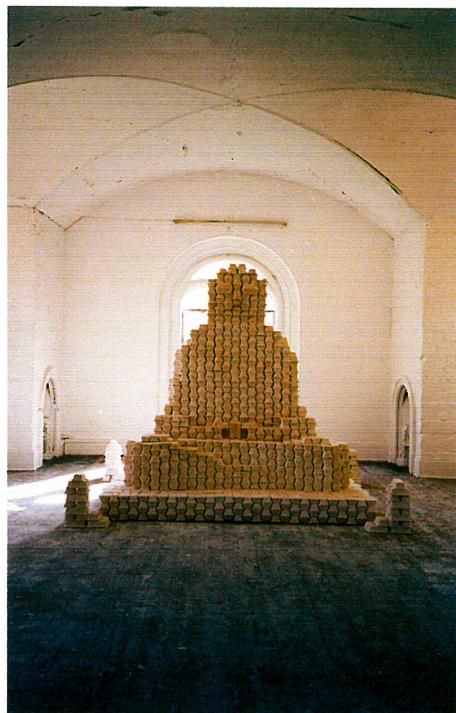


Fig.36 Anthony Key *Walcot Chapel* 2002 Buddha made out of bricks cast from tin foil carton

Two months before the site installation I began casting the bricks. The mixture of plaster and water was poured directly into the tin foil containers until full and the containers were then tapped gently to release any air bubbles adhering to the sides. When set, the foil container was peeled off to reveal the newly cast 'take-away brick'. The damp bricks were then stacked onto pallets in a such way as to allow maximum airflow between them in order to assist in their drying. This action was repeated until the target of 6000 bricks was reached, which took about three weeks with help of three assistants. The work was extremely physically demanding, but the repetition involved in pouring the liquid plaster into the tin moulds, peeling and knocking out the hardened bricks became in itself a meditation on Buddhism.

I spent the morning of the first day of installation in the chapel, feeling my way around its architecture and history. The placement of the Buddha within the chapel was crucial, and it became apparent that I should work with the building rather than in opposition to it. In retrospect, I think that this decision illustrates that I had moved beyond purely resisting dominant culture and was exploring ways of existing within it. The most sympathetic position for the Buddha was plumb in the centre of the intersecting sections of the cross (as seen in plan view). This position was also the highest point of the vaulted ceiling. I had earlier decided that the Buddha would sit on an integrated plinth, and therefore started to mark out the floor space, bearing in mind that the sculpture was free standing and required enough space to allow visitors to walk around it. The dimensions, volume and elegance of the building largely dictated the size and scale of the work.

Once I had determined the plinth size, I started to place the bricks together a layer at a time in an interlocking fashion, every other brick upside down so that the sloped sides mated intimately and the structure became solid. I was building the sculpture as a 'dry wall' without any mortar. It was therefore critical to choose each brick carefully because they were hand-made and differed slightly from one another. This also seemed a reflection of Buddhist thought, where each moment is the same yet different to the next. The intention was to persuade the stacks of bricks to fall inward towards the centre in the same way in which a dry wall construction gets its stability. However, because I was not using any interlocking stretcher bonds to tie in the various courses, the outer stacks became unstable at about four feet high and threatened to fall away from the main body. To rectify this, bands of canvas fabric were stapled across the top of courses at various interval heights to tie in the outer stacks, and then further bricks were placed on top of those to hide the fabric. Thus I proceeded, modelling and sculpting the Buddha layer upon layer, adding, considering, removing, brick by brick. This turned out to be a very slow and deliberate process.

I had originally planned a squat, male mountain of a Buddha. However when I started building on site the chapel's identity exerted an influence on the growing sculpture. I felt that the chapel was 'female' - it had slender window proportions with slim glass beading around the panes of glass. As the sculpture rose from the ground I became aware that the arched top of the window and elegant sides were a natural backdrop to the work and that the arched top of the window and elegant sides were a

perfect framing device. After taking this into consideration, the Buddha became more female in form and character, more upright and slender. It felt as though the Buddha belonged there, as if the work already existed and that all I had to do was find it. This reminded me of something that Heidegger wrote about art: that art already exists in the world but is concealed and it is the artist's job to 'unconceal' it.¹⁰⁰ This implies that the art only reveals itself when the artist is ready to see it. Perhaps I was now ready to see how I could belong in my new country. Helene Cixous has similarly argued that writers are in a position to "do this work of digging, of unburying, and this entails a long period of apprenticeship" – was my British identity beginning to be excavated.¹⁰¹

The philosophy of finding one's art by unearthing it might work for the creative process but is not so easily adapted for the building of identities. Although the formation of identities also requires digging into history to uncover the 'truth', unlike art the discovery is not complete, it requires the further step of re-interpreting one's finding. Stuart Hall states that identities are formed not so much by "... the rediscovery but the production of identity. Not an identity grounded in the archaeology, but in the re-telling of the past".¹⁰² This suggests that cultural identity is as much becoming as being. It belongs to the future as well as the past and requires making rather than simply discovering something that already existed. Cultural identities, like all histories, are transformed in the re-telling and "are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past".¹⁰³ It seems that this process of becoming was happening to me through the accumulation of my work.

I knew from its inception that the 'skin colour' of the Buddha was an important issue. I wanted the colour of the bricks to simulate the tone and distressed look of the local Bath stone, in order to avoid confrontation between the Buddha and its surroundings. The problem was how and when to colour the bricks. I initially experimented with a yellow ochre pigment in the water/plaster mix at the casting stage. This produced a brick which too uniform in appearance – weathered Bath stone has an uneven pigmentation to it that mostly affects only the surface. Ultimately I decided to spray the sculpture after it had been built, using a strong solution of Orange Pekoe tea. This was both culturally appropriate and produced the desired effect. A reviewer of the show mentioned that having read the press release, she was expecting a more jarring work and was surprised at how well the installation blended into the surrounding Georgian architecture.¹⁰⁴ In a critique of this work, Eddie Chambers suggested that this was perhaps the greatest compliment that could be paid to an immigrant, that "he or she blends in perfectly".¹⁰⁵ However, the Buddha is not just blending in – it also retains its own identity.

¹⁰⁰ Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought: The Origins of the Work of Art*, translated by Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper & Row, 1991), pp. 17-87.

¹⁰¹ Helene Cixous, *Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing*, translated by Sarah Cornell and Susan Sellers (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), p. 6.

¹⁰² Stuart Hall, 'Cultural Identity and Diaspora', in *Identity, Community, Culture, Difference*, ed. by Jonathan Rutherford (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1990), pp.222-237 (p.224).

¹⁰³ Stuart Hall, 'Cultural Identity and Diaspora', p. 225.

¹⁰⁴ Amber Cowan, 'Amber Cowan's Best Shows Nationwide' *The Times, Play*, 12–18 October 2002, p. 25.

¹⁰⁵ Eddie Chambers, 'Anthony Key', in *Vicinities: The Collision of the Global, the Intimate and Identity*, ed. by Laura Corballis (Bath: University of Bath, 2002), pp. 5-15 (p. 14).

Interestingly, this piece does not appear to signify a hybrid position between 'Chinese' and 'British' space. The monumental yet non-confrontational presence of the Buddha in the British chapel suggests that I have re-embraced my Chineseness, but at the same time have a new sense of being comfortable and belonging in my British surroundings. The work may be a statement of arriving 'home', but this home does not necessarily have to be limited to a geographical place as the 'other home' I have discovered is within me – a situation of being comfortable with myself.

Dolly (Shopping trolley)

"For individuals, as for communities, it may be said that memory is identity. At least it is an essential part of it. To lose your memory is, quite literally, no longer to know who you are".¹⁰⁶

Dolly (Fig. 37) is a mnemonic sculpture. She is the manifestation of all my revisited memory. Each one of the ten thousand five hundred spikes represents an instance of memory on my journey to find my cultural identity. Because *Dolly* does not contain any of the obvious cultural signs that I have employed in all my previous pieces (Chinese food or related objects), I have interpreted this as an end of a natural cycle, a temporary conclusion in the making process of this particular series of artworks.

The idea for *Dolly* came about by a coalescence of three disparate experiences. Firstly, I have been aware for some time of the 'pigeon spikes' that are attached to horizontal surfaces or street furniture in public spaces such as railway platforms. These are used to prevent pigeons from sitting on the surfaces and fouling the pavement/platforms below. On the surface level of some train platforms, the proliferation of these spikes has become so advanced that they appear to be some form of mutant organic growth that particularly thrives in conditions where the atmosphere is damp, cold and gloomy. It seemed as though the electronic timetable boards, steel gantries and parapets had over time developed spikes, like cacti, to protect themselves from being used as perching posts. I was drawn to these spikes because of their symbolism as barriers, although they did not specifically relate to cultural boundaries.

Secondly, my attention to the cable tie (the plastic strap developed for tying bundles of electronic cables together) came about by being scratched constantly by them as I attempted to cross the street at any number of pedestrian crossings in Central London. The ties are used to attach notices or unofficial advertising to traffic light poles. They are usually too long and never trimmed, so the excess strap protrudes beyond the boundary of the pole and remains there long after the poster has vanished, soon to be joined by the ties from other equally short-lived

¹⁰⁶ Neil MacGregor, 'Preface', in *The Museum of the Mind*, John Mack (London: The British Museum Press, 2003), p. 8.



Fig.37 Anthony Key *Dolly* 2002 shopping trolley, cable ties
100x80x100cm

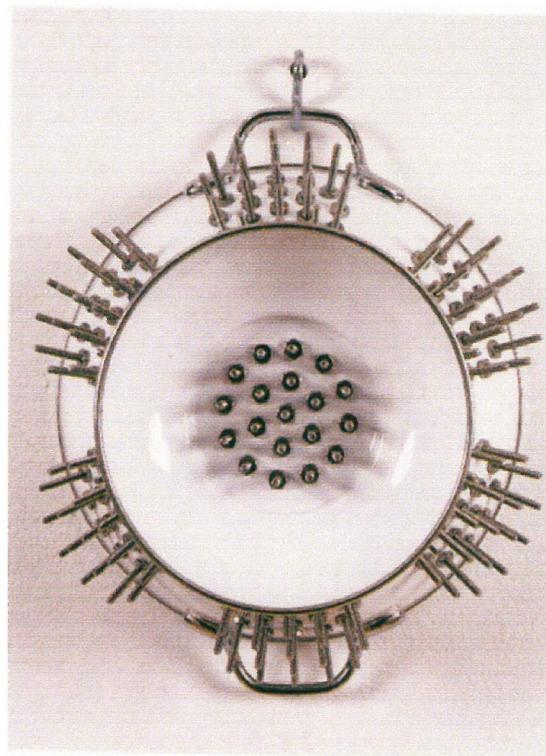


Fig.38 Mona Hatoum *No Way II* 1996 stainless
steel, enamel 27x22x13cm

posters. Over time the ties accumulate and again begin to resemble a mutated defence mechanism developed by the traffic light pole to protect itself. Both the ties and the pigeon spikes echo the psychological defences humans develop to defend themselves from living in a hostile urban environment.

Thirdly, the general look of the piece came from observing the white fuzzy mould that grows on food that has been kept too long in the refrigerator. I imagined what a mouldy mountain of food might look like if it were still packed in a shopping trolley and then transferred this white mould onto the trolley structure itself, resulting in the image of a shopping trolley that had been overtaken by 'foreign' organisms, echoing earlier concerns illustrated by *Yellow Peril*.

I acquired a shopping trolley and began to attach various sizes and colours of cable ties to the wire ribs of the trolley before deciding on a tie that was 200mm long with a colour that was an opaque whitish tone. I started to 'zip' the cable ties to the skeleton of the trolley using a process that was not unlike weaving or knotting a carpet by hand. I worked laterally starting at the bottom and completing one whole side of the trolley before attaching the next row above the last, so that the attached ties did not hinder my progress. As the work evolved I decided to point every other tie in towards the interior of the trolley because it seemed that this would more accurately represent an organic growth. As with *Walcot Chapel* and other earlier pieces, repetition was inherent in the making of this piece. Ten thousand five hundred knots and many weeks later what looked like a 'funky sheep' appeared. It made me think of the first cloned sheep produced by scientists at The Roslin Institute, in Scotland (1996), which they named 'Dolly'.¹⁰⁷ This seemed to be an appropriate title for my piece as it too was man-made. Once completed, I could see the visual influences of other artists. These include: Eva Hesse's perforated metal cube sculpture *Accession II*, in which transparent plastic tubing is doubled-up and pushed through the holes so as to protrude inward from every pore; Mona Hatoum's rivet filled, spiky colander sculpture (1996, *Fig. 38*) and Tony Crabb's piano and wood installation covered in silver cup hooks.

The fetish-like spiky quality of the piece is reminiscent of the ritualistic sculptures called nkisi that are found in the Congo (*Fig. 39*).¹⁰⁸ These African nail sculptures each comprise a wooden idol bristling with metal nails or blades that have been hammered into it, covering its entire surface area. Local villagers in the presence of the operator make a pledge or promise and then ritually hammer a metal spike into the wooden sculpture to act as a tangible witness to their particular oath. Another memory aid called a Quipu, used by the ancient Inca, consists of a knotted string object where a system of knots represented instances of memory (*Fig. 40*).¹⁰⁹ The plastic cable tie from which *Dolly* is made reflects both nail and knot. It is spiky like a nail but instead of being driven into the sculpture it has been knotted to it. She is the manifestation, the end product of the journey that I have undertaken in search of my cultural identity through

¹⁰⁷ KH Campbell, J McWhir, WA Ritchie, I Wilmut, 'Sheep cloned by nuclear transfer from a cultured cell line', *Nature*, 380 (1996), 64-66.

¹⁰⁸ John Mack, *The Museum of the Mind* (London: The British Museum Press, 2003), p. 49.

¹⁰⁹ Mack, p. 44.



Fig.39 *Nkisi* Congo Nineteenth century

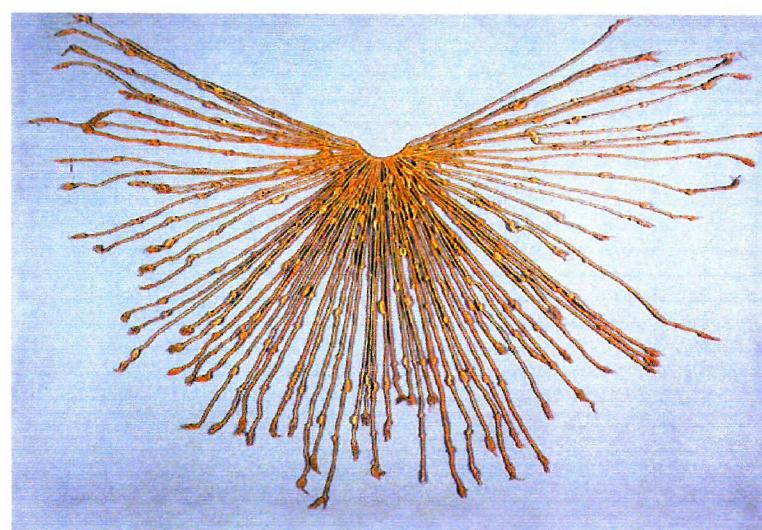


Fig.40 *Quipu* Inca Andes

my art practice. Each one of her spikes represents a revisited moment from my history, re-examined and, to repeat the words of Stuart Hall, 're-told' to form my future. *Dolly* reflects all my practice-based work from early rice paintings to *Walcot Chapel*, every book researched and every word written in the formation of this thesis. At the same time *Dolly* is detached from these other pieces in that she is not herself about the subject of cultural identity but instead describes and records the process of this journey – she is my memory device.

Chapter 5. Conclusion

“So Oz finally became home; the imagined world became the actual world, as it does for us all, because the truth is that once we have left our childhood place and started out to make up our lives, armed only with what we have and are, we understand that the real secret of the ruby slippers is not that ‘there’s no place like home’, but rather that there is no longer any such place as home: except, of course, for the home we make, or the homes that are made for us, in Oz: which is anywhere, and everywhere, except the place from which we began.”¹¹⁰

My Grandfather left China in 1900 and so set in motion a journey that was to culturally impact on his immediate family and all of us that followed. Being born and raised outside of one’s mother country can present problems such as a lack of sense of belonging and uncertainty about where/what to consider ‘home’. When the country of birth was a South Africa where racial hierarchies determined one’s status and future, issues of identity were even further complicated. As Stuart Hall wrote in relation to the Caribbean experience of slavery and the rift of separation from Africa, this “loss of identity only begins to be healed when these forgotten connections are once more set in place”.¹¹¹ It was only in the relative safety of Britain that I began to explore my forgotten connections as well as re-tell my history through my art practice, and this made me realize the complexity of the cultural journey I was undertaking.

When I was a student, I became aware of the necessity of locating my art practice within the canon of the history of art, of identifying my influences and finding out where I belonged within this history. This placement of myself as an artist within art history mirrors my journey to find a place for my self in today’s multicultural Britain. In the construction of my art practice I have appropriated the aesthetic of Minimalism, added the humour and everyday-ness of Pop Art in the form of shopping and employed the shock value of Dadaism. I have combined these movements with food as a cultural vehicle to interrogate issues of identity. An example of this is the Self-Portrait series, as described in Chapter 2. These works uncovered my sense of unease about my Chineseness and persuaded me to examine the reasons for this, including the history of British–Chinese relations and the stereotyping of the Chinese by the British.

Having found a place to locate my art practice, the next pressing question was where do I belong and how do I think about myself in regards to the British-Chinese construct? I have identified the two major positions pertaining to this question, namely the Essentialist and the Pluralist standpoints. The Essentialist position, the fixed, stable and supposedly genuine one, is a place that I have found useful as a reference point. However, in resisting its comforts I am compelled to grow towards the Pluralist’s viewpoint. The latter asserts that there is no unitary

¹¹⁰ Salman Rushdie, *The Wizard of Oz* (London: British Film Institute Publishing, 1992), p. 57.

¹¹¹ Stuart Hall, ‘Cultural Identity and Diaspora’, p. 224.

idea about identity, but that identity should be allowed to remain dynamic to the forces of change. This condition mirrors the Modernist versus the Post-modernist debates of the 1970s, where the Modernist desire to converge towards an ultimate truth was opposed by Post-modernist theory that fostered conditions where many 'truths' could exist at the same time.¹¹²

In a recent public debate, Trevor Phillips (chairman of the Commission for Racial Equality) seemed to argue for an Essentialist position on cultural identity. He said that multiculturalism in Britain was no longer desirable, and that all cultures should unite under the colours of the Union flag. He went on to say that 'separateness' is over and that all citizens should "assert a core of Britishness".¹¹³ In response to Trevor Phillips' article, one British citizen said:

" I am a British Muslim of Indian extraction. There is no part of me that does not feel British. There is no part of me that does not feel Muslim. There is no contradiction."¹¹⁴

This echoes what I feel about my British Chineseness. As I conveyed in *Walcot Chapel*, I feel both Chinese and British simultaneously. Perhaps this is more of an Eastern philosophy, where opposite concepts (for example, wrong and right) are considered not as separate entities excluding each other but polarities contained within the same body. It is therefore possible to be both British and Chinese at the same time. Earlier works (such as *Soy/Ketchup* and *Bread/Noodles*) that I interpreted initially in terms of a body in conflict with its content can be re-employed to demonstrate the new position that I have grown into. These pieces now portray a body integrated with its contents. The artwork has not changed, but I have. Stuart Hall wrote in relation to artist Armet Francis's photographs of dispersed black people from three different continents that by bringing these photographs together his work "...is a act of imaginary reunification".¹¹⁵ This process of reunification is the function of my work, to identify, gather up and re-construct my identity by the re-telling of my cultural history.

Trevor Phillips seems to desire a neat and resolved unitary solution to the issue of multiculturalism. We all have a yearning for a sense of belonging and familiarity. Difference has the ability to de-centre us. But in today's Post-modern Britain there are many hybrid and personally constructed identities in play. The problem with this situation is that we no longer feel that we automatically belong to a particular cultural group and (worse still) we are aware of a disruption in the relationship to ourselves. Not belonging and feeling lost leads to a terrifying sense of being out of touch with the world we inhabit. However once we have begun to dismantle and reconstruct ourselves, a sense of coherence begins to emerge. As Jonathan Rutherford put it,

¹¹² Rosalind Krauss, *A Voyage on the North Sea: Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition* (London; Thames and Hudson, 1997), p. 9-10.

¹¹³ Tom Baldwin, 'I want an integrated society with a difference', *The Times*, 3 April 2004, p.9. (Interview with Trevor Phillips).

¹¹⁴ Zamila Bunglawala, 'How British do you want to be?', *The Observer*, 11 April 2004.

¹¹⁵ Stuart Hall, 'Cultural Identity and Diaspora', p. 224.

"Only when we achieve a sense of personal integrity can we represent ourselves and be recognised – this is home, this is belonging."¹¹⁶

In an interview, the Black American singer Eartha Kitt described her isolation at a time when she faced white racism as well as being rejected by the black community. In response to the question 'Where is home?', she responded by saying, 'Home is within me'.¹¹⁷ Perhaps the idea of home being within you, the home that you carry around with you, is akin to the Pluralist's idea of identity, one that is not fixed but is forever on the move. This would suggest that the home as a stable physical place is the position of the Essentialist. When these two positions of identity are interpreted in this way their usefulness becomes clear. This again reflects Buddhist philosophy by combining two seemingly opposing positions into a useful whole. The physical home is a safe place from which to negotiate. One is more likely to take risks (as a Pluralist) from a position of safety. The Essentialist and Pluralist positions are therefore linked. The Pluralist's actions filter down and eventually affect the Essentialist's standpoint, which is not as static as we imagine. It is this movement of a traditional position which Paul Gilroy has called 'the changing same' - the ability of established organizations to reluctantly modernise themselves when faced with the threat of extinction.¹¹⁸ The formation of new identities therefore needs both positions, and it is the tension between these polarities that gives birth to the new vibrant culture.

I now recognise that my work and this thesis has taken me on a journey to find and locate myself both culturally and personally. I had originally thought that home was a place that already existed for me and that I only needed to find it. I now realise that this is not entirely true and that home is a place you have to make for yourself, a place within yourself. In my thesis outline I quoted Freud's theory about the compulsion to repeat. I mentioned this in relation to creativity being born out of an instinct to reproduce a previously, meaningful and joyous experience. It is this desire to repeat that drives us forward. In my case I have chosen my Dad making won ton as the memory of home that I longed to return to and this has fuelled my psychological journey. However in terms of my voyage to discover my identity, this quote from Stuart Hall is more appropriate:

" These Symbolic journeys are necessary for us all – and necessarily circular. This is the Africa we must return to – but 'by another route': what Africa has become in the New World, what we have made of 'Africa': 'Africa' – as we re-tell it through politics, memory and desire."¹¹⁹

Both Freud and Hall seem to suggest a cyclic journey, and that in order to progress into the future we have to return to the past. Only when we have integrated and remade connections with our lost identities can we move forward. My loss of identity stems from the China that I

¹¹⁶ Rutherford, p. 24.

¹¹⁷ Rutherford, p. 24.

¹¹⁸ Quoted by Stuart Hall, 'Globalisation From Below', p. 14.

¹¹⁹ Stuart Hall, 'Cultural Identity and Diaspora', p. 232.

never knew. I was brought up in the West and did not experience China first-hand. I imagined China to be my 'mythic homeland' and this prevented me from feeling British until the myth was dislodged by a trip to the Far East. Since then I have put down roots in Britain, and paradoxically at the same time I have discovered my true Chineseness. In relation to China, the mythic homeland is no longer the unachievable dream against which I will measure my cultural identity. The idea of Chineseness has become 'an open signifier'. ¹²⁰ Free from its tyranny, I am able to develop my own form of Chineseness within a British cultural environment. This I am beginning to achieve.

With respect to my future work, I suspect that this process will continue in a similar vein and perhaps get even deeper - as discussed above, identities are not fixed but continue to evolve. My art process and my identity are inter-dependent. In this sense my art is not something I do, but is something I am. Melanie Klein stated that the healing aspect of creative art work functions by making whole one's fragmented inner world - art as an act of self-repair.¹²¹ I do consider that through my artwork I have gone a long way towards repairing myself. However fixing one's past is only half the story; remaking my past has also provided me with the necessary tools, understanding and opportunity to make my future. It is this future that I can now look forward to making.

My work has contributed to the growing debate about cultural identity in today's multicultural Britain. More specifically, I have produced work that continues to challenge and inform an evolving British-Chinese identity. In order to do this, I have introduced Chinese food as an innovative vehicle with which to explore the British-Chinese situation. Each of my artworks poses a set of questions about belonging that Chinese immigrants face at different stages of their quest to discover 'home'. These works are stepping stones, formed and left behind for others to use.

¹²⁰ Ien Ang, p. 16.

¹²¹ Melanie Klein, 'Infantile Anxiety Situations Reflected in a Work of Art and in the Creative Impulse' in *Love, Guilt and Reparation and Other Works 1921-1945* (London: Vintage, 1998).



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