

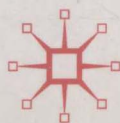


# **The Chinese in Britain, 1800–Present**

## **Economy, Transnationalism, Identity**

**Gregor Benton and  
Edmund Terence Gomez**

Palgrave Macmillan Transnational History Series



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# The Chinese in Britain, 1800–Present

华人中心

Economy, Transnationalism, Identity

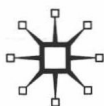
Gregor Benton

and

Edmund Terence Gomez



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# Foreword

This book magnificently fills a puzzling gap: until now, there has been no full, historically grounded study of one of Britain's most important, if smaller, migrant communities: the Chinese. Covering the ground from 1800 to present day, the authors have combined historical research of great depth and rigour with an analysis that questions received wisdoms, and refuses to accept easy answers about the nature of an immigrant population's relationship with the country in which it settles.

This book is a welcome addition to our series in transnational history, for it has something powerful to say to both parts of the series description. For historians of Britain and China alike, there is plenty here to shatter assumptions about the history of either of those countries being enclosed within borders. How many readers will have known about the Chinese presence at the Normandy landings, the moment of Europe's deliverance from tyranny, for which the Chinese were praised at the time, only to be forgotten and discarded a few years later by racist British immigration law? How well known are the attempts by both the Nationalist and the Communist parties to place activists in groups not only in Britain but in a variety of other European countries in the 1920s and 1930s?

The book makes powerful and provocative challenges to the field of transnational studies. The authors stress the importance of historicizing our understanding of transnational phenomena, saying that 'a major shortcoming of transnational studies is their failure to work more consistently in historical depth, without which diasporic communities cannot be fully grasped'. The book questions the nature of ethnic identities proposed by more present-centred analyses of transnationalism among overseas Chinese communities. As it points out, there are clear cross-border influences that have shaped the Chinese community in Britain, such as information from the larger Chinese-American community, whose experiences were reported and transmitted to their British counterparts. However, other frameworks which undermine the idea of a monolithic national or ethnic identity, such as class or provincial differences, have also shaped the community in notable ways. Not all readers will agree completely with the arguments made here, but at the same time, they will undoubtedly have to engage with the depth and seriousness of the scholarship that underpins them. This series takes

pride in taking transnational studies forward by publishing a work which questions key tenets of transnationalism as a framework: for as in other elements of the scholarly enterprise, it is only through such questioning that the sharpness and usefulness of such theoretical frameworks can be maintained, rather than simply becoming a new orthodoxy. Furthermore, we welcome this book as it takes its place as the state-of-the-art study of the Chinese experience in Britain.

Rana Mitter

Akira Iriye

Oxford, February 2007



# Preface and Acknowledgements

This book is the outcome of nearly a decade of collaboration and friendship. The ideas that animate it can be traced back to 1996, when we won funding from the British Academy for a study on the Chinese economy in contemporary Britain (carried out by Gomez). Our primary interest was to find out whether or to what extent culture and shared identities determined the economic activities of ethnic communities, in this case Britain's Chinese community. This aim sprang from our concern that numerous theories based on essentialised patterns of enterprise development among minority Chinese communities in various national contexts were beginning to gain currency. These studies tended not only to homogenise the business styles of Chinese communities of the diaspora but brought into question their claim to national identity in their countries of residence. We felt that a corrective to these studies was needed, as they dangerously distorted the processes of identity formation, particularly the emergence of national affiliations and identification within immigrant groups and their descendants. Some of these ideas were first developed in Gomez's study on the economic history of the Chinese in Malaysia.

Our ideas on the links between culture, identity, economy, and transnationalism were broadened in 2000 when we began a comparative study on Chinese economy and society in Europe, Southeast Asia, and Australia, as part of the Transnational Communities programme run by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC Award No. L214252046). In 1999, Benton received funding (from the AHRC) for a study on the history of Chinese settlements in Western Europe that also tackled these issues. These projects have resulted in numerous publications, listed in the bibliography under Benton or Gomez or both.

While the ESRC and AHRC projects were underway, Benton proposed a book on the 200-year history of Chinese migrations to Britain to show that Chinese migrants to the United Kingdom had come from different regions in Asia, to capture identity shifts over time, and to trace how these different identities served to divide more than unify this community. Benton intended his research to encompass several related topics, including the early economy of these migrant communities, their social, cultural, and political institutions and transnational activities, the

ethnic identifications of ethnic Chinese born and raised in Britain, and the causes and effects of British sinophobia. Our earlier research findings and writings helped clarify issues central to the present volume, enriched it factually and conceptually, and provided some illuminating comparative perspectives. We collaborated on the book's theoretical framework and on formulating its research questions and methods. Benton researched and produced Chapter 2, Chapters 4 to 7, and the historical section of Chapter 3, which deals with the economy in the period before Chinese immigrants and ethnic Chinese began joining the professions and the business mainstream in large numbers; and he collected the photographs. We jointly wrote those parts of Chapter 3 which deal with the contemporary non-catering sector, largely on the basis of Gomez's research. We also co-authored Chapters 1 and 8. Those chapters authored solely by Benton benefited from Gomez's commentary and input and drew on our earlier publications on ethnic and migrant Chinese in Britain and other countries. In that sense, the book is a collaborative undertaking throughout.

We would like to thank a number of people who helped us with this volume. The ideas for it were first formulated when we were both based at the Department of East Asian Studies in Leeds University. Fleming Christiansen helped prepare the proposal for the ESRC project and provided in-depth comments on the manuscript. We would also like to acknowledge the help and support of Don Rimmington, Delia Davin, Penelope Francks, and Tom Wingfield, all members of the Department of East Asian Studies when we first began formulating our ideas for this study, and of Steve Vertovec and Jeffrey Henderson, leaders of the Transnational Communities programme. The issues raised in the volume have been presented at numerous conferences and seminars over the past decade. We are grateful to colleagues at these meetings for helping us refine our arguments. The staff at Companies House were extremely helpful when Gomez sought their advice for his research on business enterprises in the United Kingdom owned by ethnic Chinese. We would also like to thank the businesspeople and members of the Chinese Chamber of Commerce in the United Kingdom who kindly consented to be interviewed. Deng Lilan of Nankai University spent some time at Cardiff University working with Benton on the history of Chinese transnationalism in Britain, and provided much useful data that Benton incorporated into the study. (Deng Lilan's stay in Britain was funded by the Sino-British Fellowship Trust and the K. C. Wong Fellowship scheme.) Benton also visited the Overseas Chinese Office in Tianmen, Hubei. Finally, Benton would like to acknowledge the support

of his friends and colleagues in the School of History and Archaeology at Cardiff University, where much of the book was written.

The research was done at the libraries of the London School of Economics, the School of Oriental and African Studies, Leeds University, Liverpool University, and Manchester University; the archives sections of Bethnal Green Public Library, Liverpool Public Library, Manchester Central Library, and Cardiff Central Library; the Public Records Office and the British Library; the Tower Hamlets Local History Archive; the National Archives of Singapore; the Hong Kong Public Records Office; the National Library of Australia; the National Museum of Labour History, Manchester; the Modern Records Centre at Warwick University; the Working Class Movement Library at Salford; the Institute for Social History in Amsterdam; the Gemeentearchief in Amsterdam; the Centre de Recherches sur la Chine Moderne et Contemporaine, the EHESS Centre Chine, and the Bibliothèque Inter-universitaire des Langues Orientales in Paris; Prato's Centro di Ricerca, Documentazione, Servizi per la Comunità Cinese; Beijing Library and Shanghai Library; and the Free China Centre in London.

Other individuals who helped in various ways include Bobby Chan, Graham Chan, Thomas Chan, Chen Yandong, James Chin, Jenny Clegg, Charles Foley, Judith Gordon, Polly Green, Mary Heidhues, Jiang Guowei, Barbara King, Richard Kirby, Jabez Lam, Tony Lane, Kam Lee, Tong Soon Lee, Li Wei, Rubin Lien, Andrew Potter, Bill Shang, Shen Yuanfang, Wilfred Sng, Pamela So, Frank Soo, Dylan Sung, Kenny Tam, Harry Tharp, Geoff Wade, Wan Hong, Ian Welch, Wen Liangsheng, Ye Zhen, and Zhou Nanjing. To all of them, our grateful thanks.

We are grateful to Akira Iriye and Rana Mitter, editors of Palgrave's Transnational History series, for recommending this study for publication. We thank Michael Strang, History publisher at Palgrave, for submitting our manuscript to the series editors for review and Ruth Ireland for preparing it for publication. We are extremely indebted to Padma Narayanan, a most gracious Project Manager at Integra, who dealt patiently with our many questions and problems when the manuscript was being copyedited.



**Plate 1** Portrait of Shen Fuzong (1687), probably Britain's first Chinese visitor by Sir Godfrey Kneller (1646–1723). The Royal Photograph Collection.



**Plate 2** Chitqua (fifth from left) in a portrait by Zoffany, late eighteenth century. The Royal Photograph Collection.



**Plate 3** Limehouse Chinatown, early twentieth century. From Anthony Shang, *Chinese in Britain* (London: B.T. Batsford Ltd, 1982).





**Plate 4** A Hubeinese family in Europe, bound for the United States at around the turn of the twentieth century. Reproduced with permission of Pam So.



**Plate 5** A Chinese immigrant family from Tianmen, Hubei, 1915. Reproduced with permission of Pam So.



Plate 6 Chee Kung Tong in Limehouse, 1926–1928.





Plate 7 Current Headquarters of the Chee Kung Tong or Chinese Freemasons, Liverpool. Photograph by Song Yingxian, reproduced with permission.