

# “Oriental” Interculturalism in the UK

Conferencia, 25 de noviembre de 2011, en el Seminario Internacional “Procesos Interculturales de Asia Oriental en la sociedad internacional de la información”, Fundación CIDOB, Barcelona

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I want to talk today about interculturalism. This idea belongs in the same field as multiculturalism, but whereas the latter tends towards the preservation of cultural “heritage”, interculturalism promotes exchange and mutual transformation. In my work on

the Chinese in the UK and Europe, done mainly in the 1990s, I looked at interculturalism in two main senses, one essentially political and the other cultural. The political angle concerned pan-ethnic movements, which usually have a political agenda, striving towards greater freedom and inter-ethnic solidarity, although they also have undeniably cultural concerns. The other, cultural angle concerns syncretism and hybridisation, the emergence of new inter-cultures resulting from creative interactions, either spontaneously enacted in everyday life or designed and performed consciously.

Both topics, pan-ethnicity and syncretism, have for a long time been important themes in ethnic studies in the UK, but such studies have nearly always focused on blacks and “Asians”, meaning South Asians in the UK context, and on interactions between them and whites. Until recently, they have focussed hardly at all on Chinese and other East and Southeast Asians. New work by the British scholars Diana Yeh and Tamsin Barber has provided findings that enable us to extend this discussion to those groups.

Why have Chinese and related groups barely featured until now in this discussion about ethnic interaction? Partly because of the special circumstances in which migrants Chinese communities in the UK – and, for that matter, elsewhere in the world – developed. Chinese in the UK in the early twentieth century, and even earlier in the US, where the sinophobic mould shaped in East Asia in the nineteenth century was elaborated, were for a while the main target of racists, during the Yellow Peril scare at the turn of the century. This experience drove them, or caused them to withdraw, onto the margins of society in the US and the UK, where they tried to pursue a path of self-reliance and seclusion and to become for most purposes invisible. The collective memory of this persecution shaped Chinese attitudes for generations. This path of self-reliance was intended to avoid competing economically (in commerce or on the labour market) with the white male. In time it turned the Chinese into a seemingly unproblematic group, and even a success story. The economic solution they devised in the UK to deal with their exclusion was the resort to catering, restaurants and take-aways, a sphere in rich countries the whole world over of impoverished and industrious migrants from poor countries. This choice necessitated their extreme dispersal, equal in extent to that of native whites, an astonishing fact. This was the main reason for the long-term failure of Chinese in the UK to achieve cohesion and a collective identity. The Chinese in the UK had no substantial

Chinatowns, unlike the residential concentrations of “overseas” Chinese in other parts of the world – and they had no church, unlike South Asians in the UK, whose coincidence of religion and ethnicity consolidated their communities. The Chinese became more an ethnic category than a community. And since ethnic awareness and solidarity is essential for pan-ethnic awareness to become a possibility, Chinese participated exceedingly rarely in efforts by other peoples, non-white and white, to establish to establish pan-ethnic movements.

There were exceptions. In the early twentieth century, Chinese from the colonies arrived in Britain to work or study. Their experience of racial discrimination at home and anger at British actions in China led many to join anti-colonial movements, which were ethnically mixed and internationalist in spirit, and internationalism must surely count as one of the great inter-ethnic syncretisms of modern times. Eugene Chen (from Trinidad), fluent in English and used to a multicultural environment, linked up with activists from Africa and Asia; he later became Sun Yat-sen’s advisor on foreign advisors, and China’s Foreign Minister. Sam Chen (from Jamaica) spearheaded the Chinese seafarers’ alliance with British unions. But on the whole, this did not happen. For most of the time, Chinese workers and petty traders had no common venues, either with black or South Asian workers or with whites, or even among themselves, as Chinese, for that matter. One might also argue that they cherished a sense of their own cultural superiority over other races, and this too inclined them to stay aloof. But the main reason for their aloofness, and for their striving after invisibility, was racist persecution and exclusion. Just as in North America, this exclusion was not just by majority whites but also by other migrants, notably the Irish, who identified Chinese as the weakest group and strove to cast them to the bottom of the social heap, a place previously occupied by the Irish themselves.

This racist exclusion persists even now, though not in the same form. Today, the Chinese are called a “model minority”, like American Asians. But the term has the same defects and reactionary implications in Britain as in America. It obscures the persistence of discrimination that even Chinese professionals suffer. It pits Chinese against “problem” minorities. It stereotypes Chinese as swots, a label few embrace. And it renders invisible the “failures”, for young Chinese are polarised between those with best qualifications and those with worst: between those four times as likely as whites to become professionals, and those – raised in Hong Kong – four times as likely to be caterers. In Britain now, Chinese still feel British less than most other Asians. This detachment partly reflects the preponderance of foreign-born among Chinese in Britain, but many whites treat even British-born minorities as “second-generation immigrants”, and British Chinese are more likely to have their identity denied than British Asians. Some react by trying harder to blend in, but others (as Ien Ang has pointed out in the Australian context) are beginning to appropriate the alienation to create new cosmopolitan or diasporic identities.

Another reason for the failure of Chinese in Britain in past times to join pan-ethnic movements was because of their racial isolation under the British system of racial and ethnic classification. Unlike in the United States, they were not classed as Asians. Moreover, until recently they were Britain’s only sizeable East Asian group. Although the so-called “Chinese” category included so-called “others”, meaning non-Chinese East and Southeast Asians, these “others” were until recently very few in number, and anyway a majority of them were actually of Chinese descent, so again the grounds for a pan-ethnic as opposed to a Chinese identification were absent. This kindled a perception, and self-perception, of Chinese as a group apart. In the United States, young Chinese increasingly re-identify as Asian Americans, but the Yellow Power movement that radicalised them in the 1960s did

not catch on in Britain, in part because of its leftwing politics, but also because Chinese in Britain were too isolated. In Australia too, where the term Asian features strongly in racist discourse and is applied to Chinese as well as other Asians, Len Ang has argued that there is little tension between being Chinese and Asian, and the category Asian is seen as desirable by young Chinese. In Britain, this has not happened. However, recent research notes the emergence of a new hybridised pan-ethnic consciousness binding British-born Chinese to other “Orientals”. This reflects the rise of a generation more at home in mainstream culture, as well as Britain’s growing ethnic diversity.

Syncretism and hybridisation is the other main dimension of interculturalism in my work on it. In the UK, notions of cultural syncretism and hybridity have tended to be used to describe the experience of South Asian and Black British groups, and research on cultural syncretism has tended to focus on interactions between black and white groups. Tamsin Barber and others have raised a number of recent criticisms of these approaches on the grounds that they have not taken account of other new and emerging groups such as mixed race and newer, less established, minority groups. Three studies that did explore changes in the identity of young Chinese in Britain in the late twentieth century concluded that a creolised Sino-British culture had not materialised. James Watson said it was because of their recent arrival and segregation. David Parker said the Chinese “mythic narrative” was too closed to permit a culture of hybridity, and that polarisation into a Chinese world in the takeaways and a British world at school promoted segmentation rather than mixing. Miri Song also found young people’s identities were polarised between “Chinese” and “Western”, and explained it as a result of the family-business strategy and racial marginalisation. So young Chinese, while perhaps not resistant to cultural mixing, were less given to it than other migrants’ descendants.

I concluded from these findings, and from my own research, that the fragmentation of Chinese community in the UK, as a result of its extreme economic dispersal, was a main reason for the failure of Chinese youngsters for many years to develop a hybridised culture. Hybridisation requires self-confidence and fluency in one’s own culture, which Chinese children in the UK lacked. Groups that resisted the Chinese tendency to fragmentation were the exception. One example is Chinese migrants from Ap Chau Island in Hong Kong. Originally scattered, they were brought together in a community by the True Jesus Church, which has a base in Ap Chau. The community is endogamous and tightly bound. Li Wei’s linguistic study of the Ap Chao community in the UK supports my theory that strong, well-knit, solidaristic communities are more likely to experiment with hybridised identities than weak communities. Research on code-switching, for example, would seem to bear this supposition out. On the whole, Chinese children in the UK were more likely to use English rather than Chinese among themselves, and found it harder to code-switch than other second generations. But the Ap Chau children are an exception: they speak good Chinese and mix it creatively with English. They are excellent code-switchers.

However, recent work suggests Chinese youth culture in Britain is now starting to converge with that of other groups. Instead of the old stereotype of Chinese introversion, it shows a blending of cultures. One study, by David Parker and Miri Song, finds a new “sense of connection” and of “belonging and citizenship” among young Chinese, who give Britishness a Chinese inflexion, by combining the cultures of their parents’ and their own places of birth. British nationality has proved surprisingly good at accommodating ethnic difference. The rise of Englishness and its equation with whiteness changed Britishness, which no longer excludes colour and neither requires nor rules out a cultural

transformation. This is partly why non-white immigrants are more likely to change their national identity in Britain, with its layered nationality, than in assimilationist France, or in Germany, with its “community of descent”.

A new European identity is also possible for non-white minorities, more so in Britain among non-whites than whites, and among non-English British than among English British, though perhaps less so in Britain than on the European mainland. Chinese in Europe are fragmented between Britain’s Cantonese and the continental Chinese groups, but they have always moved about more than other Asians, because of their economy. So a demographic base exists for a European Chinese identity. So does an institutional base: in the past, among the seafarers and students who stayed in touch by sea or through politics; and today, in elite lineages like the Man, originally from Hong Kong’s San Tin; in Beijing and Taipei’s competing for “overseas Chinese” in Europe; in the European Union’s funding of minorities; and in Chinese churches, which are pan-European because of their thin spread and universalist perspective. All this makes a new Chinese European identity imaginable.

Studies often analyse the collective identities that migrants, including Chinese, display abroad as a simple product of migration and re-settlement. Migration is conceived as a straightforward process of movement from sending place to receiving place, in the course of which the non-migrant with a fixed, homogeneous culture and no horizons mechanically changes into a migrant with horizons and then a settler, who may become a cosmopolitan. Yet many of the “novel” views and practices of migrants preceded migration, or were the occasion for it. In the past, migrants formed new attitudes and relationships while awaiting migration and during the passage abroad (which could last years), as well as at the destination. Chinese seafarers in the early twentieth century did not pick up their politics overseas but exported them from home ports. Many future migrants awaiting shipment in the Treaty Ports learned Pidgin English, a lingua franca produced not by migration but by the early spread of globalisation to China, as a tool and cosmopolitan identity useful for life abroad. The politics of early Chinatowns were bound up with the birth of Chinese national identity: they developed in step with events in China and were spread by seafarers and others acting for China-based parties. The best example of a universalist belief with a disproportionate Chinese input was Esperantism, the campaign for a world language championed by Chinese radicals in Tokyo and Paris. But their endeavours can only be understood in the framework of the movement in China to reform Chinese and promote the vernacular. Internationalist creeds, which I have already mentioned in another context, have also often inspired migrants, including Chinese. Although seen as opposites, nationalism and internationalism don’t rule each other out. Much early nationalism, including early Chinese nationalism, had an international dimension. A belief in borderlessness, universal brotherhood, and the oneness of all under heaven is rooted in China’s high and low cultures. Chinese in many countries have been inspired by internationalist ideals, including in Britain, where Chinese seafarers’ leaders sought to unite with British workers in the 1930s and early 1940s. Migrant identifications are speculative, sceptical, opportunistic, or conditional, qualities that count on the outer margins of society, where migrants often live in relative hardship. But where circumstances permit, they are more likely than non-migrants to join schemes to transform society in utopian ways. The projects of the local-born are more prosaic than poetic, more existential than imagined, complex rather than abstract, and organic. They too live on margins, but their margins are internal and more permeable.

Another modern or postmodern non-national identity is cosmopolitanism, defined as a worldwide society of individuals. Cosmopolitanism is often seen as something new and contemporary, but like internationalism, cosmopolitanism too is an old Chinese habit. In European colonies in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, Chinese settlers had citizenship rights, spoke European and local languages, identified only loosely with China, and lived in multicultural societies. Some travelled the world and became cosmopolitans in that way – but as Ben Anderson has pointed out, you could become one in the colonies even without travelling. For such Chinese, colonial nationality was a convenience, not a marker of self. They were called re-migrants, implying an origin in China, but their identification with China was not necessarily stronger than with their place of birth or even with the colonial “mother” country.

I noted earlier the perception and self-perception of Chinese in the UK as a group apart, but recent research notes the emergence of a new hybridised pan-ethnic consciousness binding British-born Chinese to other “Orientals”. This reflects the rise of a generation more at home in mainstream culture, as well as Britain’s growing ethnic diversity.

Old China hands wince at the word Oriental, with its exotic and racialised connotations, so it is instructive for those of us wedded to old ideas of political correctness to see that young East and Southeast Asians are not worried about it, and although it has been imposed on them, ultimately, by racist and imperialist thinkers, they understand it in their own way and are happy to wear it as a badge, turning what was bad into something good.

I want to end my talk by looking briefly at this new development, and to suggest possible reasons for it.

Oriental youngsters in the UK are better integrated and more assertive, self-confident, and knowledgeable than their parents, and many of them are relatively prosperous consumers. Recently, there has been more East or Southeast Asian migration to the UK from more places, ranging from Japan and Korean to mainland and maritime Southeast Asia and, of course, from mainland China.

The internet has played an indispensable role in the emergence of this new identity. Internet forums helped make possible a British Chinese identity, by creating virtual sinews to link a typically fragmented and dispersed community. So did the arrival at university, year after year, of cohort after cohort of well educated and self-confident Oriental young men and women who, in their younger lives, had had far less contact with co-ethnics than children of other migrant groups. These internet groups both burrowed below and reached beyond the old British Chinese identity. Sub-ethnicity (for example, the various Cantonese and Vietnamese or Vietnamese-Chinese identities) and parents’ migration history became important for their members to delve into. Forum members discuss racism and form a new collective identity, and create a new culture and intra-ethnic friendships and networks.

An important prerequisite for the creation of a real as well as a virtual community has been the spending power of these now prosperous children of formerly impoverished migrants. Some night clubs cater specially for Oriental nights, at which hundreds and even thousands of young Orientals meet and socialise.

Cultural globalisation has facilitated and accelerated this development of an oriental “scene” in British cities. As Diana Yeh has shown, Hong Kong, China, Korea, Japan and other countries export their young singers, dancers, and DJs across the world, and provide outlets for some of the better and more successful cultural entrepreneurs produced in Britain.

From the youngsters’ point of view, probably the main use of the new Oriental category is that it allows the creative stretching of East and Southeast Asian identity in ways that strengthen it and accommodate their needs. Tamsin Barber has shown that from the point of view of many British Vietnamese, the largest non-Chinese Oriental group, to “pass” as a Chinese is a useful strategy, since they are physiognomically compatible with Chinese and Chinese are widely perceived as professional, prosperous, and middle-class. This enables the Vietnamese to evade the worst excesses of white discrimination. For all Orientals, the category is a means to empowerment and recognition. Chinese are by far the biggest category of Orientals, but being Oriental permits a further stretching of the Chinese category. For example, fashion-minded young Orientals adopt Japanese manga hairstyle, carefully sculpted by expert hairdressers, and thus take advantage of the Western Orientalist perception of a homogenous East Asian culture to acquire Japanese culture and associate themselves with a powerful, modern economy and a desirable culture.

Finally, the Oriental category makes it possible to put an end to the damaging compartmentalisation into British and Chinese lives, in which the Chinese side was necessarily hidden. To be an Oriental, and moreover a British Oriental, allows one to negotiate and redefine oneself at several levels, creating communities that are both intra- and inter-ethnic. The meaning of oriental is creatively diversified. It can refer to Chinese, British Chinese, British-born Chinese, or the infamous category on the Census, “Chinese and other”, meaning East and Southeast Asians from outside China, not necessarily ethnically Chinese. For some, Oriental is a British category, but for others it transcends the UK and has a rich transnational or cosmopolitan flavour.