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Outside Chinatown: the Evolution of Manchester's Chinese Arts Centre as a Cultural Translator for Contemporary Chinese art

中國城之外：曼特斯特華人藝術中心之變革作為當代中國藝術之文化轉譯

In light of the Chinese Art Centre (CAC)'s recent rebrand to the Centre for Contemporary Chinese Art (CFCCA), this case study endeavours to trace the organisation's ontological trajectory from its origins in Manchester's Chinatown to its current location, considering how its purpose and focus have changed in relation to how it identifies and translates Chinese Art to a local and/or global audience. Furthermore, I consider how the organisation has both addressed and embodied changing diversity discourses in Britain through its mission to represent Chinese culture.¹

KEY WORDS

agency, arts policy, 'British-Chinese,' diaspora, diversity, globalisation

INTRODUCTION: ORIGINS

The Chinese Arts Centre, initially called the Chinese Arts Association, was established in 1986 in Chinatown, Manchester, as a registered charity by Amy Lai. Lai was an artist and Hong Kong émigré who wanted to engage the local ethnically Chinese community with arts and education programmes that worked to explore Chinese cultural identity. This can be contextualised in relation to the history of Chinese immigration to Britain, which began with China's defeat to Britain in the Opium War of 1840. Other notable points in history that were linked to further immigration peaks include: the wave of migrants following the 1948 British Nationality Act in the post-war, post colonial period; the response to governmental oppression and unrest surrounding the Tiananmen Square protests in 1989 and the lead-up to, and aftermath of, the end of Britain's colonial rule of Hong Kong in 1997. Manchester, in

¹ I would like to acknowledge the time and support of those individuals interviewed for this study: Amy Lai, Kwong Lee, Yuen Fong Ling, Ying Tan and Elizabeth Wewiora. Thank you also to Sarah Fisher – current acting Director of CFCCA – who referred me to Ying Tan and for Tan's and Wewiora's helpfulness regarding knowledge of former employees. In particular, I am indebted to Yuen Fong Ling – with whom I had additional, stimulating conversations about 'British-Chinese' art and Kwong Lee, who lent me his extensive archive of leaflets and notes from his time working at Chinese Arts Centre. Since working at the Chinese Arts Centre, Kwong Lee has become director of Castlefield Gallery, Yuen Fong Ling has been involved with a range of art and curatorial projects and he is currently Senior Lecturer and researcher in Fine Art at Sheffield Hallam University and Amy Lai attained a PhD in Chinese Cultural Studies from the University of Manchester and currently works as a qualified acupuncturist in Manchester.

particular, has received a steadily growing Chinese population – the third biggest in the UK, with a Chinatown of restaurants and shops that developed in the 1970s when immigration was particularly high (Manchester Chinese Archive.

<http://www.manchesterchinesearchive.org.uk/index.php?p=5>) Lo's research stipulates that, '(A)ccording to the 2001 Census, of 247403 Chinese in Britain, 26887 were reported living in the North West (0.4% of the total population in the area' (Lo 2010). More recent figures suggest that the Chinese population in Britain has continued to grow (see top five immigrants from census 2011 data; <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/rel/migration1/migration-statistics-quarterly-report/november-2013/world-map.html>), including to Manchester (see A23 Ethnic Group Estimates 2001-11 for Manchester, Population Estimates by Experimental Ethnic Groups, Office for National Statistics, http://www.manchester.gov.uk/downloads/download/4220/corporate_research_and_intelligence_population_publications).

In Manchester, unlike in some cities with significant Chinese populations, many Chinese people live outside of Chinatown (and this was particularly true prior to the 1960s, according to Ahmed Iqbal Ullah Race Relations Resource Centre research, based on census data). Instead, we more certainly find a concentration of restaurants, bakeries and supermarkets there, or what Laurence Brown has described as 'a gateway of consumption' (Brown 2014). In the mid 1990s, the Chinese Arts Centre relocated from Manchester's Chinatown to its 'bohemian' Northern Quarter district. This article traces what this physical shift may symbolise ideologically, as well as how the organisation's trajectory, oriented through changing directorial hands, has panned out in terms of the way that it represents and translates contemporary Chinese art for a British or wider audience.

Since the Chinese Arts Centre's original conception, its creative and practical vision and drive has altered, moving through a series of reinventions leading up to its recent manifestation and rebrand as the Centre for Chinese Contemporary Art (CFCCA), launched in autumn 2013. I examine the Chinese Art Centre (CAC) / CFCCA as a case study of an institution that both addresses and embodies diversity issues in Britain and whose organisers are concerned with translating Chinese identity to a culturally engaged audience. In light of the centre's new rebrand - which now includes the word 'contemporary' within its name - I try to trace the centre's movement from its local origins to its current global position, considering what this signifies in terms of the organisation's function and in relation to current cultural interpretations of Chinese art. Whilst this essay's focus is to interrogate the organisation's positioning of itself in relation to 'Chinese art', it is worth noting that usage of the term 'contemporary' is also problematic for translations of late twentieth and early twenty first

century art from China, as it undoubtedly intersects with particular Modernist or Post-modernist paradigms of Western aesthetics in relation to trajectories of cultural and material production. Such concerns are outlined by commentators, such as Gladston who suggests that usage of the terms ‘contemporary’ and ‘contemporaneity’ in relation to Chinese art should be used with caution and viewed with criticality (Gladston 2012). Whilst there is not the scope within this paper to discuss the Centre for Contemporary Chinese Art’s application of the word contemporary within its title, due to its focus on the British-Chinese diaspora and associated notions of Chineseness, I share Gladston’s concerns regarding the usage of the term contemporary within the global sphere of cultural criticism. By contesting notions of Chineseness within the CFCCA’s framework, however, some of the same issues around debates of centre/periphery are played out.

The key questions that I asked the interviewees during winter 2013-14 concerned the purpose of the centre in terms of its representative capacity regarding Chinese art in Britain and within the globe more generally. The questions can be categorised into themes including: who has worked there; the ways in which the centre’s mission, income and creative vision has changed since it was established; how the centre connects to notions of the Manchester or British based Chinese diaspora; what the centre has contributed to the dissemination of Chinese art in Britain or on a global scale; why Chinese Art needs to be categorised and considered institutionally as such and how the centre – in relation to its directorships - has translated concepts of Chinese art to its audiences. After the methodology, the paper is divided into sections that engage with each of these concerns, while synthesising the perspectives of the Chinese Arts Centre’s former and current employees, contextualised in relation to discourses concerning ‘British-Chinese’ art and diversity issues.

In order to comment on the processes of the Chinese Arts Centre’s lifespan, this study aims to navigate its organisational facilitation, by drawing from interviews with staff from the Chinese Arts Centre who worked there under five significant stages of directorates: Amy Lai; Wendy Hee/ Joanna Tong/ Kwong Lee; Sarah Champion, Sally Lai and Sarah Fisher. The ideological positions of the centre’s directorship are, in some sense, already recorded within online statements and other documents that are representative of the centre and so other key staff who worked or who work under these directors are interviewed for this case study in order to provide a more nuanced commentary on its mechanisms. Further, there are records of interviews with directors, in particular Sarah Champion – the longest running director of the centre – that are available in newspaper articles. However, there are missing stories from the organisation’s history and this is evident when reading information about the centre, taking, for example, its Wikipedia and BBC entries. The date of origin listed in such sources for the

centre changes between 1986, 1987 and 1989. This is partly due to the fact that between 1987 and 2014 there have been countless staff at the organisation, three location moves and there is no current employee who is in established contact with the original line up and so no in situ narrator of the centre's history. Similarly, the exhibitions that have been archived digitally or as library leaflets within the CFCCA only go back ten years to the time when the centre moved to its current location in 2003. Prior to that, the centre was in a smaller Northern Quarter location on Edge Street, around the corner from its current Thomas Street site. The centre had moved to Edge St from Chinatown in 1997 under the direction of Sarah Champion. After passing this transitional stage, Champion – who was director from 1997 to 2008 (<http://www.dellam.com/02137427-CHINESE%20ARTS%20CENTRE.html>) - explained how she pushed for this move in a significant BBC interview in 2003 (which will also be addressed later):

“What we found was that people's expectation of what Chinese art would be was very traditional, brush painting and calligraphy, where actually we represent younger British/Chinese and International Chinese artists who tend to produce much more contemporary work. Because of that we wanted to get that in an arts and cultural setting rather than a Chinatown setting.”

(http://www.bbc.co.uk/manchester/arts/2003/11/28/chinese_arts_centre.shtml)

The lost archive material that appears to be the result of the centre's move from Chinatown to the Northern Quarter² highlights a disconnectedness within the Chinese Arts Centre's historical trajectory but this disjuncture can also be viewed symbolically, in relation to the organisation's more ideological vision. This will be discussed in more depth in subsequent sections of the article but what is relevant to note, here, on a practical level, is that since the centre's move to the Northern Quarter, the people who are connected to the Chinese Arts Centre's history are not always easy to locate. This includes not just the staffing but also the artists who contributed to the centre's exhibitions. This factor, perhaps, indicates a wider concern around the centre's vision as a public facing organisation that represents and reflects Chinese art. Within this context, the human presence of Chinese-ness at the centre has perhaps formed a lesser part of its identity since it became removed from the Chinese émigré business hub of Chinatown and, perhaps, because – at the same time – it came under the direction of someone who is not ethnically Chinese (Champion). It is significant to note, for the purpose of this study, that the ways in which the Chinese Arts Centre / CFCCA can be attributed to the cultural translation of Chinese Art are interconnected with the ways in which

² It is also worth noting that there was a fire at the Edge Street location in 1998, according to Yuen Fong Ling, but there were no substantial archives lost as it was in the exhibition area of the building.

the interview participants remember, deconstruct or reconstruct their experiences of working at the centre. In this sense, the cultural translatability of the organisation intersects with its historical translatability – yet both of these factors are synchronically (and diachronically) contingent upon the individual experiences of the organisation's former and current staffs.

METHODOLOGY

The case study, conducted between December 2013 to February 2014, takes secondary material from a range of sources including: the current online CFCCA archive, digitally archived newspaper and magazine articles about the centre and exhibition catalogues as well as leaflets provided by a former employee (and interview participant) – Kwong Lee. Additionally, the research also integrates an analysis of primary data attained from interviews with five key participants who were current or former employees of the Chinese Arts Centre and the CFCCA. The interviews were structured around twelve – predominantly open-ended – questions that addressed the institution's changing mission in relation to the representation of Chinese art and which included the addition of some semi-structured conversational commentary with the participants. All were conducted in person, except in the case of Elizabeth Wewiora, where the interview was completed via email due to time constraints. A further two conversations took place and were recorded with Yuen Fong Ling, due to his interest in the study, which relates to his own current research; for this reason there may be a more expansive and developed commentary from Ling within this case study, as compared to the other participants. The interviews and conversations with staff, added to the data collected from online and archival sources, work to highlight the centre's ideological and pragmatic course as an arts organisation that works to represent Chinese art. In order to analyse different potential stages of the Chinese Arts Centre's development I contacted a mixture of present and former directorial, curatorial/exhibitionary and educational staff that I was directed towards through conversations with current staff. Such staff were chosen due to their conceivable impact upon the creative, educative – or socially responsive, logistic and public-facing elements of the institution's identity and infrastructure. The current acting director, Sarah Fisher, was not available for interview but suggested that it would be useful if I talk to the current exhibitions and engagement officers. Previous directors, such as Sally Lai and Sarah Champion, were similarly not available for interview, so, instead, I drew from interviews and exhibitions with which they were involved, sourced from archives. I also interviewed staff that overlapped with these two directorships: Yuen Fong Ling in relation to Sarah Champion and Elizabeth Wewiora in relation to Sally Lai. The interviewees include: Amy Lai, former founder and director of the Chinese Arts Centre (1989-1991); Kwong Lee,

former centre attendant then acting head/director (1992-1996); Yuen Fong Ling, former exhibitions officer (1996-1998); Elizabeth Wewiora, Programme and Engagement Co-ordinator and Ying Tan, current Exhibitions Organiser.

One of the issues raised by researching into the Chinese Arts Centre, is the methodological problem of locating an organisational, historical overview based largely on oral histories - albeit a history that only spans the last three decades. Technically, this study does not contain oral histories as such as they were not voice recorded. The interview participants spoke and I recorded what they said - as notes - as accurately / verbatim as possible. As Tuchman suggested (see Ritchie 2003: 111) and as I have found through conducting art-sociological research previously, audio recording interviews can both encourage the speaker to 'ramble' and at the same time inhibit them emotionally. Arguably, more of the tone becomes lost through the process of transcription because the initial voice is re-translated, out of its initial context, and into words on paper at a later stage, rather than there and then. However, as with oral histories generally, three of the interviews are based on the participants' self-historicising - remembering and translating these memories into meaningful narratives about the Chinese Arts Centre. As with oral histories such accounts are useful for enabling a voice to be given to individuals whose thoughts and intentions have not been recorded officially or publically through print, audiovisual or digital media. The purpose of this research is, in part, to endeavour to piece together a multiplex trajectory of an organisation's mission by considering its contingent factors and formations affecting it from the outset. In order to observe some of its more nuanced paths of development, the histories need to be articulated from a range of sources. Hence, Perks and Thompson suggest:

'...for some practitioners oral history has not just been about making histories. In certain projects a primary aim has been the empowerment of individuals or social groups through the process of remembering and reinterpreting the past, with an emphasis on the value of process as much as historical product.' (Perks and Thompson 2008: ix)

WHO'S WHO: CHINESE ART IN MANCHESTER - TRANSLATING HISTORIES

When Amy Lai established the organisation in the late 1980s, she wanted to connect with first and second generation Chinese communities who were living in Manchester, whom she felt had been somewhat side-lined from the city's cultural environment. She employed some artists of Chinese ethnicity to assist her in her mission. When I asked her the reasons for

setting up the centre she described how she felt that there was a specific need for it within the local context.

‘In the late eighties there was nothing. No Chinese art. One, people didn’t believe there was any Chinese art around. Secondly, they were secretive, closed. I was involved with local radio and arts and I thought there needs to be more culture here. My purpose at that time was that Chinese should have something going on. If you look at Asian and Caribbean communities they were more active with various programmes. I believed there should be something and that it can be organised. If you think about the centre now it has changed a lot. Once that belief was established what was the next step? I started to set up an event – the Lord Mayor event has an annual parade so I got involved with that and with some Chinese children and a very simple dragon dance and a parade. At the time it was outrageous to do this as the Chinese culture thought that this kind of thing was a shameful thing to do, embarrassing. So when I organised it, I got a group of parents and they were pleased at what the children could do. In order to have Chinese cultural development in this country it had to be very different to the more traditional representations or centres of activity – like Chinese language study centres, which were secret. I thought you can’t do that. My philosophy at that time was it has to be open door, inclusive and involved in the mainstream community. I employed a couple of Chinese artists and we went into mainstream schools to create a dragon. It started with that kind of school activity and involvement. Then after the parade it gained so much support. That’s how it started.’ (interview, Didsbury, 20 January 14)

Kwong Lee – who started at the centre in 1992 as a centre attendant but who also worked as an acting head and as an exhibition officer until 1996 – echoes Amy Lai’s memories of the centre’s community focus. Amy Lai left in 1991 to work at the V & A in London and was replaced by Wendy Hee and so Lee and Lai did not overlap. However, whilst Lee was there, the centre was in Chinatown and was involved with the community - performing and visual arts activities - including plays and operas with a Chinese aspect to them, though not necessarily directed at a so-called British-Chinese audience. In response to the question of why he thought the centre was initially established, Lee reflected on his own ethnically Chinese identity as a young artist looking for experience of working in the arts in early 1990s Britain.

‘My perception was that it was quite unique – a centre for Contemporary Chinese Art. It had potential – I say potential because before that there were few Chinese artists working in the UK. For example, there was Lesley Sanderson but few others. I was searching for something due to my own development. It was small – the space was not great for exhibiting – it was a display type community centre. I like the aims of it.’ (interview, Castlefield Gallery, 10 February 14)

Lee described some of the activities with which he was involved in the early Chinese Arts Centre, demonstrating the organisation's connectedness to the Manchester Chinese community. In the early 1990s the staff who were involved with the centre and its activities appear to have been mainly 'British-Chinese,' although Lee also comments on how connections were made with Manchester's black community – including with the poet, Lemn Sissay.

'We did Cantonese opera. We had poetry by people like Lee Yan. The Siyu Chinese newspaper was based in Chinatown. We connected with the performance poetry people. Lemn Sissay even came as there was a Black and Asian kind of scene. Tan Ling who worked at the library who wrote poetry was involved. We did lots of stuff – we did plays. We did creative writing workshops. It functioned as a lab for British Chinese culture. Very small numbers though. We connected locally with local people.... We did also do more traditional Chinese art. When I was centre attendant I remember we had brush paintings shows and origami exhibitions. Mary Tang was into origami in a big way. I was trying to follow that a little bit but I was more interested in the British Chinese experience. It was exciting because it was new. There were still workshops for making lanterns, etc, for school kids – not just ethnically Chinese. It was ACE and AGMA funded and so had to have a public function.' (interview, Castlefield Gallery, 10 February 2014)

Yuen Fong Ling arrived at The Chinese Arts Centre in 1996 towards the end of Lee's time there and during the same year that Sarah Champion took over as director (until 2007). Ling also describes the centre's role within the 'British-Chinese' arts scene by locating himself and his own artistic practice within it.

'It was the first place I went to as an artist to show my work – a hybrid of art, printed textiles and fashion. The first person I met was Kwong Lee. It was my first point of arrival. When I visited it, we chatted, and he straightaway put me on file and plonked my slides in a file with my name on it and it felt like I'd arrived. I was then in a show – New Generations in 1996. Me and Han Fang Li.' (interview, Castlefield, 13 January 2014)

Ling recalled how the centre archived artwork by artists of British-Chinese origin. His sense of having arrived appears to relate to the acknowledgment of his art in a way that connects to his identity. Moreover, Lee's classification and cataloguing of Ling's work at an organisation that was concerned with representing Chinese art in Britain enabled Ling to reaffirm links

between his practice and his ethnic origin. This occurred in a cultural climate where there still seemed to be a predominantly white, contemporary art mainstream – although this was changing somewhat by the mid 1990s. Up until 1996, the centre showcased works by British artists of ‘Chinese descent’. Lee later describes how he wanted to ‘open it up’ more in terms of what contemporary art at a Chinese Arts Centre might constitute. However, initially, Lee – like Ling – who had also trained in art - saw the centre as a vehicle through which to explore his own cultural identity.

‘When I worked there the majority [of artists] were UK based. I have a personal archive from ‘92 to ‘96. My thing was to learn how the gallery worked and how the art world works. The Chinese arts centre was a way in for me. It was part of my education in project management including in curation. It was a way for me to connect with my Chineseness in a way. I found out that I evolved with it as it grew. I went there and I wanted to learn about Chinese culture in Britain. What drew me to the Chinese Arts Centre was that it was unique. I was looking for places I could find that looked at Chinese Art. Even in London INIVA hadn’t started yet... If I had been offered a way in by two organisations then I would have gone with Chinese Arts Centre as I wanted to think about my practice – I didn’t merely want a job in art management.’ (interview, Castlefield Gallery, 10 February 2014)

Lee’s reference to how he evolved with the centre will be examined in the next section but in terms of the personalities involved with the organisation’s evolution it would appear that the director, Sarah Champion (who was not available to be interviewed for this paper), transformed the centre’s creative and practical operations. Up until this point, the centre had been initiated and led by artists and facilitators whose origin was ethnically Chinese whilst the content of its exhibitions and educational programme worked to showcase ‘British-Chinese’ art – including both traditional and contemporary practices – and to engage with the Chinese community in Manchester. The appointment of a non-ethnic Chinese director appeared to lead to a more mainstreamed, less ethnically orientated Chinese arts focus. The methodological difficulties I found in terms of sourcing exhibition materials from before the last decade and in piecing together the centre’s staffing over its duration may also be indicative of this change in the direction of the organisation, which also included its relocation beyond Chinatown. Clearly, too, no organisation can remain unaffected by the personalities, artistic visions and missions of those individuals who work within its remit and the decisions they make over time and space – from the visual appearance of the building to the types of activity with which it engages. For example, we have already seen how Sarah Champion’s appointment as director led to both a change in focus and a permanent move away from Chinatown. Anthony Giddens’ seminal work on structuration theory (1984) is

relevant here as it considers the symbiotic relationship between agency and structure; the structure of an organisation such as CAC and the broader social structures under which it operates cannot be separated from the agency of those who work towards implementing them. Those structures, then, in turn, influence the way people act. Such concerns are, thus, not exclusive to the Chinese Arts Centre nor would research of any institution be an easy task where a contingent historical overview is at its heart. The older an institution, the more piecemeal the trajectory is likely to become as it relies on dwindling oral histories and a potentially decreasing archive comprising of documents selected and kept by those personalities who choose to keep them. The researcher tries to see what is absent whilst working with what is present, in the present.

The current Programme and Engagement Co-ordinator, Elizabeth Wewiora, is the longest running member of staff on the present team. She reflects on the last four years of being at the centre, whilst her knowledge of its history beyond this is based on secondary information that has been accumulated via written sources on the centre and through people she knows – such as Lee, Ling, former curator – Ying Kwok – and others. When asked about how she thought the Chinese Arts Centre was established, her response is fairly standard in that it tallies with the information available on the current website – which references a ‘proud 27 year history’ (<http://cfcca.org.uk/about/>), as well as with local and national newspaper/blog articles written about the centre for example, no date or author:

<http://www.creativetourist.com/venues/chinese-arts-centre/>; (Ward 2003):

<http://www.theguardian.com/uk/2003/nov/28/arts.china>; (Preece 1998):

<http://www.artdesigncafe.com/chinese-arts-centre-manchester-1998>);

the Wikipedia entry and in exhibition catalogues and other publications produced by the centre. Wewiora summarises (January 2014):

‘CAC was established in 1986 by a group of local British based Chinese artists, many first generation British born in Manchester’s Chinatown. The aim of the centre was to act as a visual culture venue in Chinatown, support local artists in their work and create an organisation which better represented and promoted the work of Chinese contemporary artists.’

Through conversation with founder, Amy Lai, it seems that the Chinese Arts Centre only actually became a designated place from which to physically display art in 1989, when Princess Diana formally opened it. In 1986 – or 87, as Lai remembers, it was a small organisation that went to the community rather than the other way round and which worked on outreach programmes, many focused on education. Lai established this focus herself

though she also employed a group of British based Chinese artists to work on the community projects. This was then cemented by the organisation's securing of some premises above a restaurant on Charlotte Street in Chinatown. British artists of Chinese Ethnicity, - though not necessarily 'first generation' as suggested by Wewiora - such as Lee and Ling (both of whom consider themselves to be second generation) continued the focus on 'British-Chinese art' in terms of the representativeness of the staff as well as of the exhibitions. As already highlighted, this changed with the appointment of Sarah Champion as director in the mid 1990s, transmogrifying the focus on British-Chinese art towards Chinese art more generally. The Centre for Chinese Contemporary Art today is more in line with this kind of persuasion although, as will be seen below, changes to the centre's mission have been implemented due to the organisation's recent re-branding as well as through the work and vision of Champion's successor, Sally Lai. The current director, Sarah Fisher, implemented the rebrand, which highlights the centre's current outward looking focus on art from China. By tracing the Chinese Art Centre's directorships, from Amy Lai to Sarah Fisher, we gain a picture of how agency both influenced and was shaped by the organisation's structure as well as by broader structures at play within the art world, including the presence of postcolonial polemics around diversity and culture, changes to public funding and organisational and curatorial trends in the way that small art spaces are run. As Yuen Fong Ling reflected during interview:

'Whoever is in charge of the centre has to mediate and translate a range of intersecting concerns, ideas, and existing structures. These are according to the needs of its audiences, the community it serves, governmental agendas, shifts in economics, and culture, etc. These intersubjectivities of what the role of the director does, have to constantly switch and respond to meet a range of different needs, all convening within the one headspace. Directors act like prisms of information, both in and out, through which to understand the role of the centre and what it does. To me, Directors are translators, who negotiate, interpret and even reconfigure information, in which this mindset becomes transformed into the exhibitions, education programmes, initiatives, resources, priorities, agendas of the centre. The role of a cultural translator has to mediate, gate-keep, adopt, and even adapt governmental, instrumentalised agendas to meet and service its audiences, stakeholders etc.' (interview, 13 February, 2014)

Key dates timeline		1987	1991	1992	1996	1997	1998	2008	2010	2013
		<i>China Town</i>	<i>Edge St, NQ</i>	<i>Thomas St, NQ</i>						
Key staff /role + venue + developmental stage	1	Amy Lai: 1987 – 1991			Founder/Director					
	2	Kwong Lee: 1992- 1996			Various including Acting Director					
		Yuen Fong Ling: 1996- 1998			Exhibitions Officer					
	3	Sarah Champion: 1997- 2008			Director					
		Sally Lai: 2008- 2013			Director					
		Elizabeth Wewiora: 2010-			Engagement Officer					
4		Ying Tan: 2013-			Exhibitions Organiser					
		Sarah Fisher: 2013-			Director					

Shaded areas denote interviewees

Proposed significant stages of development (as highlighted in the analysis) – numbered down left axis.

The list of directors is not exhaustive and, instead, the numbered stages reflect significant findings from this case study in relation to participants' responses relating to the centre's ontological outlook. Kwong Lee, for instance, worked under Wendy Hee and Joanna Tong during his time at CAC.

I. Diagram showing timeline of key directors and staff referred to in this case study

MISSIONS: FROM MULTI-CULTURALISM AND DIVERSITY TO GLOBALISATION

‘[It was about] bringing Chinese art to the territory of Chinese diasporic students and integrating minority ethnic communities. It was all politics, tick boxes. You had to involve the mainstream. The public funders would not fund you if it was just about the local communities.’ (Amy Lai interview, Didsbury, 20 January 2014)

‘I felt that I became a victim of multiculturalism. It seemed to be a double-edged sword – multicultural policy suited those who were happy to stay within the boundaries of "their own culture"; it seemed better to segregate in order to secure arts funding.’ (Bancil 2008)

The Chinese Arts Centre of Manchester’s Chinatown was formed at a time when arts funding policies focusing on multiculturalism were a necessary topic for debate in terms of the obvious need within British culture for ethnic minority artists to be equally represented. Rashid Araeen, the founder of *Third Text* – a journal and organisation that was established in 1987, the same year as CAC - and which aimed to expose the limitations of the mainstream cultural scene, redressing its relationship to the so called periphery, reflects on multicultural arts in Britain:

‘The main issue was not just the artists' exclusion from the art scene, but the ignorance and suppression of the whole history of their contribution to mainstream developments.’ (Araeen 2000: 2)

This can be further contextualized in relation to postcolonial debates around not only the hegemonic injustices of European colonialist pursuits but also in terms of the global, social conditions and consciences of people living in a world that is largely post-colonial. We can place within this discourse Hong Kong immigrants, who relocated to Britain in the post war period when Britain was outwardly undergoing a period of depression that included a dearth of resources and a shortage of male workers because of WW2. Britain both needed and wanted new business. The Hong Kong mass immigration wave to Britain from the 1960s occurred for several reasons including; the 1948 British Nationality Act enabling colonized or formerly colonized people to become Citizens of the United Kingdom and Colonies (CUKCs) and the further 1981 British Nationality Act, the spate of political riots in newly industrialized Hong Kong in 1967 onwards and, later, the Hong Kong handover to China in 1997. British artists of Chinese Hong Kong ethnic origin in the 1980s were able to position themselves as post-colonial artists – artists who were not only living in Britain as a result of British colonialism but who were becoming aware of their lack of representation as a large migrant group within Britain’s cultural landscape - a lack that also could be viewed as more broadly attributed to a colonialist-style mentality. As Araeen goes on to state,

‘The end of colonialism also liberated artists from their colonial bondage, and when they began to arrive in the West about fifty years ago they wanted to test and prove, as they were no longer the colonial subjects, that they had the same freedom to express themselves as their white/European contemporaries.’ (Araeen 2000: 6)

However, much of the postcolonial cultural discourse that was so essential to developing an awareness and equalisation of ‘multicultural’ identity formations and their associated cultural outputs in 1980s Britain was focused on the plight of artists of black (then, sometimes referred to as Afro-Caribbean) and South Asian diasporas. This was - in part – due to the rapid arrival of migrants from Caribbean, African and South Asian former British colonies (the 1948 *Windrush* ship from Jamaica to Tilbury typifies this move) in the immediate post war period and the associated birth of second-generation migrants who began to enter the cultural sphere in the subsequent decades. The umbrella term ‘Black Art’ was applied to artists of non-white ethnicity to denote and connote the need for the visibility of artists that had been formerly excluded from or ‘othered’ in relation to mainstream exhibitions and art institutions. In Diana Yeh’s essential essay on so called ‘British-Chinese’ art she examines how artists in Britain of Chinese ethnic origin had to grapple with their identity in relation to the Black Art movement but also – and sometimes conflictually – in relation to their own culturally specific diasporic experiences.

‘Artists of Chinese descent, emerging only in the late 1990s, must negotiate their positions in the British art world in relation to a series of consequences arising from the recent black struggle over representation. The intense period of identity politics in the 1970s-80s improved the structural conditions of British black art, and culminated in the concept of a ‘multicultural’ Britain.’ (Yeh: 67)

However, at the same time, multicultural Britain can be viewed as a ghetto in itself and, moreover, one that did not always think or wish to include Chinese culture. Kwong Lee articulated in an interview with David Parker in 1995 (221), and during his interview for this study, how he identified with artists of black ethnic origin, such as Sonia Boyce – who was showcased at the groundbreaking ‘The Other Story’ exhibition of ‘alternative Modernism’, curated by Araeen at the Hayward Gallery in 1989, (see Fisher 2009):

‘I looked at The Other Story – it’s a seminal exhibition. Sonia Boyce was inspiring because she looked at identity, for example with ‘She Aint Holding Them Up, She’s Holding On (Some English Rose).’ There is a strong connection to the audience. In my second year at college I did something similar with my Dad holding a wok in a suit. It spoke to me in terms of how art can communicate something different and new. It wasn’t necessarily that I was identifying with black culture, it was how they were employing art to explore cultural identity.’ (interview, 10 February, 2014)

Yeh (2000: 66) suggests that an exhibition called *Number Six* representing artists in Britain of Chinese ethnicity, shown in a gallery space at Trafalgar Square in 1998, nearly ten years after ‘The Other Story’ - helped to make the more critical experiences of so-called ‘British-Chinese’ artists visible whilst highlighting what had gone before. How could British Chinese artists position themselves in relation to the pursuits of so called multiculturalism and black artists in the 1980s which – as with Sonia Boyce’s polemical artworks and others such as Eddie Chambers’s *Destruction of the National Front* 1979–80 in ‘The Other Story’ exhibition – used necessary confrontational or makeshift tactics to question racism and its connection to colonialism? Artists of Chinese ethnicity, arguably, had differing concerns because of their less earmarked or historically aggressive connection to British colonialism. Yeh references the ‘the confrontation of stereotypes’ (69) seen in the artworks of black artists such as Boyce. Lee, during interview, also referred to the militancy of Eddie Chambers, whom he had met. ‘He opened my eyes to the ethnic British experience. Art can be a conduit for different ways of looking at things. His art was militant. I connected more with Sonya Boyce who was more confrontational’ (interview, 10 February 2014). Lee, however, positions his experiences in relation to a cultural climate that was prior to the founding of the Institute of International

Visual Arts (INIVA), which was established to represent ‘contemporary visual arts which reflect the diversity of contemporary society’ (http://www.iniva.org/about_us) or Decibel (a ‘diversity’ Arts Council England initiative). Unlike the ‘British-Chinese’ artists of the mid 1990s, Lee – whilst at college and university in the late 1980s - was beginning to make art at a time when the Black Art / multicultural agenda was prevalent. Located within this sphere, Lee considered his identity in relation to British notions of Chineseness. After graduating, he then discovered other artists, such as Susan Pui San Lok and Anthony Key, who were exploring issues of cultural migration and beyond. When I asked Lee in response to his biographical remembering, ‘What were your motivations for wanting to explore your identity? Personal or more widely political (e.g. as a response to Decibel)?’ he replied:

‘The positive action stuff I didn’t really engage with. It was pre Decibel. My impetus when I was growing up there wasn’t really any art about the Chinese in Britain, other than static nostalgia about the heritage. I wanted to explore the gap between those two. I still, in a way, look for those gaps. At first I wanted to speak to other second-generation Chinese immigrants. People like Susan Lok, Anthony Key and Erika Tan. We had a commonality in that we were wrestling with Chinese culture – going back thousands of years; how Chinese or how British can you be? How do you exist as one or the other? We were all exploring different aspects of being an immigrant.’ (Lee interview, 10 February 2014)

In the late 1980s and early 1990s it would seem that ‘Black art’ (later to be replaced by BME: Black and Minority Ethnic) was a cluster term that worked to highlight the artistic plight of people of African, Caribbean or South Asian origin in terms of ‘positive differences’, whilst either ignoring or only half-heartedly engaging with artists of Chinese origin. The former groups, perhaps, took priority due to their more graphically historicised post-colonial status – for example, references to slavery on school curricula - and their need for both clemency and resolution. At that time, artists such as Rashid Araeen and Sonia Boyce suggested that a visibility that involved difference and which exposed historical oppressions was a necessity in a white and, arguably, still orientalist looking Britain. One of the problems highlighted by commentators such as Diana Yeh and Erika Tan is that artists of Hong Kong descent were not consciously made visible using such a polemical format. Rather than them being the invisible who needed to be made visible, it was more that they were invisible altogether; unseen in British imperialistic histories, absent from the ethics of diversity discourse, ethnically ‘discreet’ in British spaces and, thus, prone to cultural contextualisation and archotyping that revolved around the Chinese take-away or ‘chippy’. Artists of Hong Kong descent responded to this by parodying themselves with a knowing, subverted ‘oppositional gaze’ (hooks 1992 <http://www.umass.edu/afroam/downloads/reading14.pdf>) in order to expose others,

organising exhibitions around food and takeaways – often to humorous effect. An example of this is the exhibition of summer 1992 at Chinese Arts Centre: ‘Beyond Chinese Take Away’ which designated itself as, ‘the first exhibition of its kind researching the innovative works of contemporary artists of Chinese origin living in Britain.’ It also worked to ‘challenge the stereotypes – catering and traditional, of the Chinese community... There is very little recognition of their diverse talent and establishment existing inside and outside Chinatown.’ (CAC exhibition leaflet 1992). The show was actually Kwong Lee’s opening into the centre as he travelled across from Leeds – where has had been studying Fine Art - to hand in (in a pre-email era) his almost-late CV for the exhibition.

Lee: ‘There was an open submission in Artists Newsletter – Beyond Chinese Takeaway. I was late to post my application and got on the train to Manchester and got chatting to Wendy Hee. Then I applied for the post and got it.

What were your impressions of it?

It was small and community focused. The Takeaway show was daunting as I come from a take away background so it was a bit unnerving.’ (10 February 2014)

In a sense, this clichéd contextualisation in relation to the food business was part of many Chinese artists’ experience as first or second-generation migrants. Exhibition spaces such as the Chinese Arts Centre and other independent galleries were necessary harnesses for the display of artworks with a Chinese migrant voice. The multiculturalism drive of the 1980s may have had a more focused desire to recompense for the experiences of former colonised slaves, workers and mistreated subjects. However, a drive towards the ‘celebration’ of ‘cultural diversity’ – terms used by Chris Smith, Secretary of State for the Department of Culture, Media and Sport of diversity in British culture, in 1999, under the Blair administration (Dewdney et al 2012: 47-8) - encouraged an awareness of the differences in opportunities for people of non-white ethnic origin, on a more implementative level. Partly as a response to the Race Relations amendments Act of 2000, this, later, included a move to make gallery exhibitions and other cultural spaces representative of the diverse population of Britain. Under Thatcher, also, it had been acknowledged that ‘proportionality’ was needed in terms of the ethnic make-up of Britain’s population and how this corresponds to the arts (and other) sectors (Dewdney et al 2012: 20).

Diversity in Britain was not necessarily dialectically attached to physical, imperialistic oppression. However, it was still associated with a complacent, white-orientated cultural consciousness (and sometimes an actively racist one if extended to the structure of the police force as illustrated in the 1999 Macpherson Report) that saw diversity in the arts as a statistical necessity rather than as something that might occur naturally from the inside of the system rather than from the (white) inside looking out.

I asked the artists to consider the issue of diversity across the arts in terms of policy initiatives and in relation to how they were funded at the time when they served at CAC/CFCCA:

Lai: 'The position of our approach was that it had to be public funding because the Chinese businesses were all private and that enabled them to be closed off so it was important to use public funding.'

Lee: 'I think initiatives but not permanency. To be part of the centre – part of the culture. If the mainstream was a diverse mainstream then that would be OK.'

Ling: We used CAC for our own ends to move our career forward. We knew from the outset that it was only relevant for a certain period of time. The goal was to not exist within a Chinese framework in the long run. Susan Lok talks about the Ethno-tactical position. The centre also plays a tactical role in terms of arts funding. It becomes a vehicle for businesses to have links with Chinese culture. That's the paradox of working in a cultural framework when it's dislocated or displaced. It's tactical. It can never lose itself. There is always the mainstream angle. CAC internalises its difference. To ever be truly authentic it had to not exist. However, working within its paradoxical state is a challenge and a life's work. There is what it takes as a position and what it takes as a direction.'

Tan: 'We were set up to represent diversity in the arts for artists of Chinese descent in Britain 27 years ago but what does that actually mean? Does that make the artists peripheral? I don't think so.'

Wewiora: 'We are regularly funded through arts council England as well as looking for specific funding support from various partners (UK and international) and trusts, foundations and international cultural department support (for example Taiwan ministry of culture, or Hong Kong trading economic office) depending on the project/ programme we are trying to deliver. Like with every other organisation and its funders there are remits and agreements in

terms of target audiences and strategic priorities which of course are taken in consideration for programming and therefore representation but by working with a variety of funding streams and partners we are able to offer and fund a wide variety of programme suitable for all.’

All the participants acknowledged the problems involved in designating a space – ideologically and materially – for the representation of a particular ethnic group. Amy Lai considers this more practically at a time when contemporary (or any) art or culture from China was invisible in Manchester (and Britain). In part, she saw this as connected to the insular activities of Chinese migrants: ‘In the late eighties there was nothing. No Chinese art. One, people didn’t believe there was any Chinese art around. Secondly, they were secretive, closed.’ Funding for the centre at this time was sought from the local council as the centre then worked towards integrating and educating the local Chinese community into a British speaking cultural centre.

Later, Kwong Lee sees Arts Council Initiatives, such as Decibel, or, for example, the ‘No Difference! No Future!’ report commissioned by the North West Arts Board (NWAB) in 1998, as a means to an end. It was a temporary necessity to put Chinese art on the British cultural map. Yuen Fong Ling also highlights this position, asserting in relation to the ontology of the Chinese Arts Centre that ‘to ever truly be authentic it had to not exist. However, working within its paradoxical state is a challenge and a life’s work.’ If contemporary art by British-Chinese artists was absent from British art institutions and exhibitions, then there first had to be a process of *making present*. Ling goes further to unpack this process, suggesting that British-Chinese artists were acting tactically and that this was a conscious decision. Lee and Ling both worked at CAC during the 1990s in what could be described as its *middle period*. During interview, they described the next stage – when Sarah Champion took over, and then, later, Sally Lai – as ‘internationalising’, focusing on building relationships with China and expanding on definitions of Contemporary Art. They also both highlighted the Chinese Arts Centre’s involvement in part hosting The British Art Show 4 in 1996 as a pivotal point in this thawing of British-Chinese art displays at the centre.

‘There was the first period then the Sarah Champion period. Her agenda was to continue some of the British-Chinese connection and also to build connections with China and to showcase Chinese painting. Then with Sally Lai it was about new practices that were beyond fine art – video work, collaboration, site-specific. There was always living-in artists. Research based work.’ (Ling, 3 March, 2014)

The current phase – and the final phase within this biographical trajectory – has involved taking this global focus further whilst still, as Wewiora states (above), considering ‘target audiences and strategic priorities’ around funding and representativeness. Whereas under Champion and Lai, the centre still focused on British-Chinese artists and their interconnectivity to and relationship with China, the CFCCA, under Sarah Fisher, multiplied this dialogue, creating reciprocal centres and CFCCA employees in areas of Greater China, such as Hong Kong and Taiwan. Yet, it would seem that some of the former ‘British-Chinese’ dialogue may have been lost or surpassed. However, at the time of writing this article there is an exhibition of sculptural works by British artists of Chinese ethnic origin on show at the centre, called ‘Tipping Point.’ The difference, perhaps, is that the so-called second or third generation ‘émigré’ status of these artists is not being highlighted or categorised as a characteristic as such. Instead, they are described as ‘UK-based artists’. The artists and artworks are therefore not simply being equated to an ethnic identity, or even a (multicultural) national one. They are portrayed as based in the UK suggesting that, perhaps, the artists may at some point be further re-based to another part of the globe because we now *all* live in a world of cultural contemporary nomadism. Since the 1990s usage of the term globalisation – initially foregrounded by social theorists such as David Harvey (1989) and Roland Robertson (1992) - has come and gone in scholarly and cultural discourses. Arguably, this is because the notion of the global (and of the corresponding digital) is now omnipresent and indubitable. The Chinese Arts Centre has, thus, globalised. The difficulty in terms of deciphering its new global, cosmopolitan identity is in ascertaining the extent to which this is natural or strategic. A strategy around globalising the centre may not only work in terms of widening target audiences, funding opportunities and artistic participation but also as a way of assuaging the difficulties around the centre’s formerly essentialist ethnic identity.

I asked Wewiora via email contact: ‘What are/were your aims / mission statement and how have they changed since the rebranding?’ to which she provided the following summaries.

‘Old statement. [pre 2013]

The Chinese Arts Centre is the leading organisation for the promotion of contemporary Chinese art in the UK. Working with the best creative talent we run a lively programme of exhibitions, residencies, engagement projects, festivals, international projects and events which support innovation and that reflect the dynamism of contemporary Chinese art. Chinese Arts Centre believes in the importance of ongoing dialogue and exchange in shaping our understanding of the changing world, and the need for a diversity of perspectives in

contemporary visual arts. We create meaningful encounters between artists, audiences, cultures and ideas that make contemporary art and culture relevant to diverse audiences.

New statement

The Centre for Chinese Contemporary Art (formerly Chinese Arts Centre) is leading the UK in exploring a changing international dynamic. This is the Chinese Century and Chinese contemporary art and visual culture is a vibrant force, fast gaining momentum. We have a proud 27-year history of ‘first’ UK solo exhibitions, featuring exceptional artists that go on to achieve international acclaim. We work with a wide array of partners to provide people with a lively and innovative programme of exhibitions, residencies, engagement projects, festivals, symposia and events. We are uniquely placed to explore the Chinese Century through art and the trans-cultural debates that will shape our future.’

Notably, the shift in focus is the relocation of China *in* Britain to China *to* Britain: The centre for ‘contemporary Chinese art in the UK’ becomes the centre ‘leading the UK in exploring a changing international dynamic. This is the Chinese Century...’ Two references are made to the Chinese Century, implying a reorientation of centre and periphery. If Britain and ‘the West’ or ‘North’ are no longer the locus for contemporary cultural thinking, then issues of the diversity and representation of Chinese artists – in this context, in Britain - appear outmoded or even reversed. Indeed, this is suggested in the CFCCA’s new mission statement. Taken from this perspective, the problems around the ‘ghettoising’ of Chinese art in Britain (a phrase used by Yeh, Lee and Ling) are potentially solved. But, where is Chinese art in Britain now?

CHINESE DIASPORAS: WHY AND WHERE?

Before Wewiora’s examples of immediate post - and pre - rebrand mission statements, there is an older one, taken from a leaflet from the time of Champion’s directorate, which had been kept on file at the centre. The address given is Edge Street - the first of the centre’s two homes in the Northern Quarter, dating the leaflet to some time in the late 1990s. Unlike the later two mission statements provided above, the earlier one speaks not of ‘contemporary Chinese art in the UK’ or ‘Chinese Contemporary art’ more generally, but of art that connects to people of ‘Chinese descent,’ thus connecting to issues of Identity Politics and art making: ‘The Chinese Arts Centre promotes and enhances Chinese arts and culture to develop the positive identity of people of Chinese descent.’ (no date, Chinese Arts Centre information leaflet). Similarly, one of the centre’s aims during this period was to ‘promote a wide variety

of artists of Chinese descent and their work in arts and cultural events.’ If this is no longer the case then why have a centre of Chinese art in Britain at all? For whom does it survive?

I have already alluded to the fact that the major shift in the orientation of the Chinese Arts Centre, prior to its rebrand into the CFCCA, occurred during the period in which Sarah Champion was director. Arguably, this change happened in response to changes to arts policy between the Thatcher and Blair years as well as to academic thinking around issues of the multicultural and of diversity - to new conceptions of the global. At points located within 1980s postcolonial discourse as well as in governmental statements, the terms ‘multiculturalism’ and ‘diversity’ are used interchangeably, although multiculturalism refers to the coexistence of multiple cultures in a pluralistic society, whereas diversity considers difference more generally, relating to ethnic origin as well as to cultural values. Whilst both terms denote difference, the multicultural implies the notion of inclusivity as a form of agency, due to its focus on *the cultural*, whilst diversity is less loaded as a term and tends to be connected to policy making (Dias 2013). For example, we have seen Chris Smith’s intention to ‘celebrate’ diversity under the New Labour government. Commentators such as Baumann (2004) and Rex (1996) have criticised the concept of multiculturalism due to its intrinsic demarcation of cultural difference that not only equates difference to culture (such as religious membership) but which also tends to avoid issues of political conflict caused by difference (Malik 2010), for example, in relation to civil war and migratory movements. Malik argues that the notion of multiculturalism, hence, undermines diversity issues. In connection to this study, neither terms have been used prevalently by employees of the CAC/CFCCA, although the term multicultural can be applied to Lai’s initial reasons for wanting to found the organisation, whilst its middle period, as a centre that celebrates both diversity (of the Chinese diaspora) in Britain and in relation to international Chinese art, would have been buttressed by the New Labour government’s Art Council and local council of the time. Perhaps not coincidentally, Sarah Champion – director during this period – has since become a Labour MP. Following the nomenclature outlined above, the Chinese Arts Centre can be viewed as a vehicle that represents paradigms of difference prevalent within the cultural, political and academic spheres in Britain in the 1980s and early 1990s. Alternatively, usage of the term globalisation, from the mid 1990s, worked to extend this understanding of diversity or the multi-cultural, situating difference within a new world of ethnic flows, or ethnoscares (Appadurai 1996). However, globalisation was not necessarily a term that Champion utilised. In an introduction to a publication about the centre’s Vital Live Artists festival, Champion attributes the shift more pragmatically to Hong Kong’s decolonisation from Britain:

‘Since our inception, the majority of our work was with British Chinese artists, however, world events made us change our remit to all international Chinese artists. 1997 marked the “Hand-over” of Hong Kong to China and with it great UK media interest in all things Chinese.’ (Champion 2007: 8)

In fact, changes in ethnicity discourse that worked to disorient notions of otherness and, perhaps, crude artistic associations with colonialism, coincided with Britain’s hand over of Hong Kong back to China and the anticipation of what this might bring to Britain’s migratory and cultural landscape. Susan Bright and Anthony Key, both referenced in Yeh (2000: 68), highlight the British art scene’s fascination with ‘all things Chinese’ in 1997. Second generation artists of Chinese descent were – to reference Ling in relation to his induction to the Chinese Arts Centre – ‘arriving.’ This was highlighted in the first exhibition in Britain of contemporary art from Hong Kong, shown at Urbis (now Manchester’s museum of football), curated by Yuen Fong Ling and Sally Lai and called ‘Arrivals and Departures: New Art Perspectives of Hong Kong.’ Manchester was, perhaps, at the pinnacle of the Chinese Art movement as such. With a large ethnically Chinese population, a centre devoted to Chinese art, and contemporary artists such as Kwong Lee, Yuen Ling Fong and others - such as Lesley Sanderson and Panni Poh Yoke Loh - the Chinese, predominantly of the Hong Kong cultural diaspora, belonged to a locale beyond London. In the late 1980s and the 1990s this was significant because it enabled artists who had expressed vocally how they had felt outside of the British cultural sphere to locate themselves inside of it. In part, this involved the internationalisation of Chinese art in Britain because once the British cultural sphere opened to include contemporary art made in China, the issue of diversity became irrelevant. The globe is diverse already. Furthermore, when the colonial relationship of Hong Kong with Britain ended, the Chinese, of Hong Kong or other descent, could no longer be viewed as a subaltern group within a diverse Britain *or* within a diverse globe.

However, from a more adverse perspective, Rey Chow (e.g. 1993) has discussed the difficulty for Hong Kong Chinese people in terms of how they position themselves, often feeling neither Chinese nor Western but in-between cultural identities. Added to this, is the further sense of dislocation for specifically diasporic Hong Kong Chinese people. Placed within the context of this study, I argue that a Chinese art centre in Britain that does not provide a particular space for Hong Kong diasporic artists to explore their identity would be deficient in essential respects, especially if we suppose that Chinese diasporic people want to always think about the Chineseness of (a global) China, or the non-Chineseness of (a global) Britain. As Ien Ang summarises in relation to the ‘quest’ for ‘Chineseness’ as ‘an object of study’:

‘How Chineseness is made to mean in different contexts, and who gets to decide what it means or should mean, are the object of intense contestation, a struggle over meaning with wide-ranging cultural and political implications.’ (Ang 2005: 39)

We might consider what the term ‘diaspora’ brings up for British-Chinese artists – and in the case of this study’s participants - those of Hong Kong descent. Notions of diaspora were diversified in the 1980s and 1990s when commentators, such as William Saffran (1991) and Robin Cohen (1999) began to consider the issue of cultural or ethnic dispersion across nations not only in terms of imposed exiles and the intent to return to homelands, as previously studied, but as something more fluid and pluralistic in terms of identity formation and transnational migration more generally. This also correlates to the notion of globalisation, prominent at this time. The term diaspora has since been applied to second, third generation (and so on) émigrés whose original reasons for relocation may not be due to traumatic circumstances but for reasons such as employment or marriage. Yet, even with a more incorporative usage of the term diaspora, what does it really mean to be associated with a particular nation a few generations down? Susan Pui San Lok and Ien Ang (Lok 2005: 62) highlight the problems of orienting diasporic Chineseness as synonymous with China as a whole, not least because China is in itself a massive, multifarious nation of varied cultures, histories and languages. Lok cites Ang (2001: 282, in Lok 2005: 62): ‘If “being Chinese outside China cannot possibly mean the same thing as inside,” it is also worth remembering that being Chinese inside China no more means the same.’ Like Diana Yeh, Lok suggests that Chinese identities are always ‘on the move.’ (Yeh 2000) Notions of insideness and outsideness are, in relation to Chinaness (rather than to, perhaps, Chineseness), no less problematic than the concepts or constructions of nations as ‘imagined communities.’ (Anderson 1991) However, movement, relocations and translocations between China and the rest of the world are still observable and these translocational positionings (Anthias 2002) are in themselves identity forming.

Hong Kong diasporic artists and writers have at times explored the shifting nature of diasporic identity in terms of how it embodies elements of ethnic descent, connecting to both ‘homeland’ and ‘host’ country. At the same time, some have dismissed all these cultural tropes that relate to what 1990s postcolonial critics, such as Homi Bhaba, described as ‘hybridity’. Kwong Lee considers these junctures as a negotiation of ‘the gap between.’ In a sense, the presence of identity discourses around diaspora and postcolonialism work to dislodge cultural expectations of Chineseness for second and third generation Chinese migrants because they offer alternative yet still confining attitudes around race and movement that can themselves, paradoxically and more positively, then be actively *disorientated* – for

example, through the work of artists. Artists who translocate will always naturally reposition themselves within their new surroundings, responding to the stimulus caused by new places and spaces.³ In this sense, ‘Diaspora Studies’ provides thought-provoking intersections with art practice and theory. Linking to this study, it seems vital to discuss the potential cultural engagement of Britain’s generations of Hong Kong migrants, not necessarily because they are blatantly or actively over or under represented in British art institutions but because some artists will always want to explore their ethnic or historical identity within their art practice. Such artists should be able to choose whether they want to display their artwork in a centre that focuses on a nation connected to their ethnic origin or an art gallery with no such affiliation. Ling argues,

‘The impact and interest in China has sidestepped the arguments and perspectives around British-Chinese-ness. The centre’s role / focus has shifted in response to this. But there continues to be new British born Chinese artists who want representation in the UK. The times have shifted, and so have the artists. For example Gordon Cheung has had enormous critical success and yet he does not seem marginalised by the issues of British Chineseness. Although - he is never one to deny his connections to the issues, either. The critical mass of ideas is also timely and they function to serve the specific needs at any one point. What if The Chinese Art Centre was to take the core principle of serving the community of Hong Kong migrants and children [which Amy Lai originally took] now? The centre would lose its critical currency. However, if these new issues and definitions of China become the priority, what happens to these first generation issues and audiences?’ (in conversation, 3 March 2014)

Ling suggests that artists and audiences of Chinese ethnicity in Britain have become ‘invisible’ at the CFCCA, via its internationalisation drive towards representing and working with China; this has caused the centre to lose its ‘creative and critical spirit,’ as well as the kind of personalised agency that it embodied via its previous directors. According to Ling, each former director had a particular ideological focus that shaped its agenda and function whereas, at present, it has become instrumentalised by the drive for funding. Ling reflects that as an artist group or collective does not direct the CFCCA, it is ‘a centre in theory’, and has become absent from political or personal viewpoints around issues of diversity and representation. Without personal agency driving its vision, arguably, an organisation becomes

³ This is something I have investigated previously in relation to Korean artists and curators living and working in London, see <http://www.thirdtext.org/korean-women-artists-in-britain>, although the two studies are not comparable in the context of diasporic concerns, as Koreans in Britain are a much newer diaspora and their migration is due to more global transnational rather than post-colonial concerns.

a more functional agency - like a travel agent. Through such a space things pass - whether they are services or (art) products - on their way to and from somewhere else, such as China.

WHAT ABOUT THE NAME? CATEGORISING A CENTRE FOR CHINESE ART

‘What about the name? Does the art have to be by artists of Chinese ethnic origin and/or from a Chinese diaspora? (– in conversation with Ying Tan, 17 December 2013)

The current, more globally focused Chinese Arts Centre, called the Centre for Chinese Contemporary Art, may have transcended the discourse around representing diversity in a British multicultural arts landscape but it continues to identify with the space of China. It is also aware of the oxymora implicit within its ontology. When I asked the above question to Tan, she replied,

‘No, have British artists nothing to say about China or the Chinese diaspora? It is problematic to focus on ethnicity but, yes, there has to be an association with China, otherwise we would just be representing contemporary art as a whole and that would be even more problematic in terms of a label. One of the reasons why we rebranded was because the name – Chinese Arts Centre – appeared to focus just on Chinese artists. We can’t be the definitive voice for artists of Chinese descent. How can just one organisation in the UK be *the* organisation to showcase that?’

If we lived in a Britain where ethnic groups were more or less evenly distributed then representations of difference within the artistic infrastructure might have more chance of assimilating ‘cultural diversity,’ creating a true inter-culture or global sphere. Because the dominant ethnic group is white, acknowledgements of diversity become ‘celebrations’ of difference, rendering ‘the other’ as included within ‘the main’. Postcolonial theorists have considered these celebrations for decades (take, Paul Gilroy’s influential critique on hybridity, for instance: 1994: 54-5) as by their very nature paradoxical, patronising and self-defeating. The mainstream will lead and observe the other for as long as there is a mainstream, but within this climate ostensive ethnic minorities need to be represented and they should make a point of ensuring that they are. However, notwithstanding this process of endeavour they continue to work under the restrictions of subaltern representativeness. The answer, though one that is beyond our control, is for the mainstream to be absented through a more evenly distributed cultural or even transnational globalisation – something that the CFCCA appears to endeavour to achieve. Moreover, as has been the aim of postcolonial work, subaltern histories need to be reoriented and rewritten so that the notion of what

minority constitutes is shifted. Yet within this rewriting, minority viewpoints must first foreground themselves. Women are not a minority group, yet they still need to make a point of being represented and ‘celebrated’ because, historically (and, arguably, contemporaneously) they have not been truly acknowledged. For as long as there is the other – whether minority and/or subdominant - cultural representativeness will be partially without.

The Centre for Chinese Contemporary Art is by name an organisation whose ontology concerns the representativeness, not merely the representation of Chinese art. Despite changes being made to the direction of the centre in terms of location, curatorship, branding, artist schemes and definitions of what Chinese art may constitute, it still self-labels, arguably deferring its focus from contemporary art to art about an ethnically subdominant group in Britain or within Modern (not older) histories of the world. One way the centre has tried to counter this under more recent directorates (Sally Lai, Sarah Fisher) is to build on relations with artists and curators from Greater China. There is also a research curator, Rachel Marsden, whose own, corroborative, PhD research is focused on the issue of the cultural translation of Chinese art. As Ying Tan also stated in the interview from which I quote above: ‘We are a collection of voices representing a collection of views. We also don’t just work with artists from China or with Chinese ethnicity.’ This includes bilateral artist residencies and the integration of multi-site, international curators, such as, for example, Peiyu Li, who is based in Taiwan. In doing this, the centre sends the message that contemporary Chinese art is being represented in Britain because Britain is not China, not because Britain is itself not dominantly ethnically Chinese (and thus in need of presenting ‘diversity’). This shifts the focus from ‘British-Chinese’ representativeness to international representation, based on a transnational ambitiousness. If, added to this equation, we consider China’s newly acknowledged position as a burgeoning or forthcoming economic superpower or, as the new CFCCA statement describes ‘The Chinese Century’, then the Chinese nature of the CFCCA becomes even less about minority representativeness and more about global connectivity and intercultural exchange. The centre then resembles a kind of embassy that channels and represents contemporary Chinese culture to British audiences. Viewed this way, it is a mini China in the city of Manchester, not because the Manchester British-Chinese community need their representation but because China does and because Britain wants it. Or, perhaps, the organisation can cater for the Chinese diaspora too, just as an embassy would. If the centre does both then does this alleviate the on-going problem of subaltern categorisation familiar to postcolonial tropes? Perhaps CFCCA’s new international stance does break down such criticisms but this doesn’t mean that the institution should want to erase its origins as a centre established by and partly for the Chinese diasporic community.

Lee and Ling in their interviews both highlight the importance of the centre as an agency for Chinese Art. This can be considered alongside Preece's view in 1998 that '[A]s a focal point for British Chinese art in Britain, the centre has been an important place for emerging artists, and has provided a point of reference to things Chinese for the over 30,000 immigrants in Manchester, predominantly those who arrived in the 1960s from Hong Kong, and an estimated 250,000 in the country.' If the centre is considered to be a focal point for Chinese Art, as a conduit for its discovery or interpretation, then it doesn't necessarily have to be located within a British *or* within a diasporic context. This may have been its purpose originally and Preece and others may have viewed it as an outlet for Chinese Art in Britain for British-Chinese people, but when located within its current path it would seem that the centre has become a channel for this on a global level. Lee argues that this is partly due to the shift from analogue to digital communication played out during the centre's existence (interview, 10 February 2014). In a sense, the centre was always an agency but now it is a more interconnected and expansive one. The agency of the centre has travelled and diversified partly according to who directed it at the time and in relation to their cultural agendas, whether these are community focused, British-Chinese orientated or more internationally strategic. As Yuen Fong Ling articulated during email correspondence about the centre: 'personal 'agency' becomes an extension to the work of an organisational 'agency'' (28 January, 2014). Part of an institution's agency is its authority to change. The Chinese Arts Centre has been a vehicle not just for representing Chinese art but also for carrying and anchoring the various changes in tropes around diversity issues. As Ying Tan suggested when considering the ongoing problem of how to categorise or how not to categorise Chinese art in relation to the CFCCA, '[w]e are a vessel for creating and curating a dialogue.' (interview, 17 December 2013)

CONCLUSION: TRANSLATIONS - DISSEMINATING 'CHINESE ART'

It would seem that things have improved in terms of the way that we – the diverse we – think about international, not inter-national, art. The CFCCA reflects and embodies this change. Chinese art represented at an art gallery in Britain does not need to tackle Chineseness from the outside looking in because if we are all a part of the 'Chinese century' then either Britain is on the outside or we are all on the inside of this cultural sphere. Yet, at present, the USA is still technically, financially – in terms of GDP - the superpower (<http://www.tradingeconomics.com/country-list/gdp>. 2014). There is also the question of difference; not necessarily a difference that is disproportionately segmented, nor 'celebrated,' but one that is scattered with landscapes, customs and languages that not everyone can

translate. In the context of this study, the CFCCA is wise to employ bilingual staff and multi-site curators and artists across Greater China. Compared to its earlier incarnations – particularly in the days of Amy Lai and county council funding - perhaps it is now more financially or technologically able to do so. The dissemination of Chinese art at the Chinese Arts Centre has both defined and been defined by changes to funding, to scholarly polemics around multiculturalism and diaspora and, arguably, to Britain's and China's globalising relationship with international artists and centres for contemporary art. As Ling surmised in interview: the Chinese Art Centre is a *translator for* Chinese art in Britain.

This case study has shown, from gathering data on articles and exhibitions concerning specifically 'British-Chinese' art in Britain and, particularly, through conversation with Kwong Lee who was active as an artist during some of this time, that the discourse around so called British Chinese art has departed. It was an issue in the 1980s and 1990s for artists such as Erika Tan, Susan Pui San Lok and Anthony Key that Chinese 'diasporic' art was somewhat excluded from 'minority' or diversity discourses as well as from mainstream art institutions. The Chinese Arts Centre was significant in that it hosted a range of activities and art exhibitions that included and promoted artists of 'Chinese descent' in Britain. This was exceptional because – although Manchester has one of the largest Chinese populations – London has always had the biggest and there was no such arts centre there. Perhaps this is one of the reasons why the term 'British-Chinese art' is no longer used and why there is little written on the issue since Diana Yeh's 'British-Chinese Art: Ethnicities on the Move' article. Perhaps art by second, third or fourth generation 'Chinese' artists no longer needs to be translated either by the artists themselves in relation to their identity formation or by funding bodies, curators or publics because such art is no longer viewed as on the outside of mainstream activities. However, recent conferences in Reading and London on Chinese art in Britain (see: <http://www.reading.ac.uk/ft/research/ft-ContestingBritishChineseCulture.aspx>; <http://translatingchina.info>) coupled with the enthusiasm I have encountered by second generation Chinese artists regarding the discussion of their identity for this study would suggest otherwise. Identity formulates culture, whether of institutions or of individuals. It would be a shame if a centre that works with art in China ceased to work with artists of Chinese ethnic origin in Britain who might connect with China or to notions of Chinese identity in some way and want to articulate this several generations down. This is a part of history and of historicism. This is the way we translate our individual and cultural evolutions.

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