

JAMIE KENNY

Out of the frying pan

The image of the Chinese in Britain as essentially part of a spreading empire of chip shops is out of date. The Chinese yuppie is a conspicuous figure.



Above, the classic: a Chinese fish and chip shop in Manchester. Right, at a Chinese New Year disco at the Adelphi Club in Liverpool. Top right, Leaving on the first flight for Hong Kong from Manchester airport (November, 1985).

A new image of the Chinese is emerging, and you can see the symbol of it every day in Manchester's Chinatown. It's a BMW, bright red for luck, usually parked under the arch. There's a lantern in the front window. The registration contains a double eight, and transliterated means "one way get rich, richer." Evenings see it parked outside one of the local discos that play Cantonese pop, its owners busy inside sipping Perrier and dancing the night away.

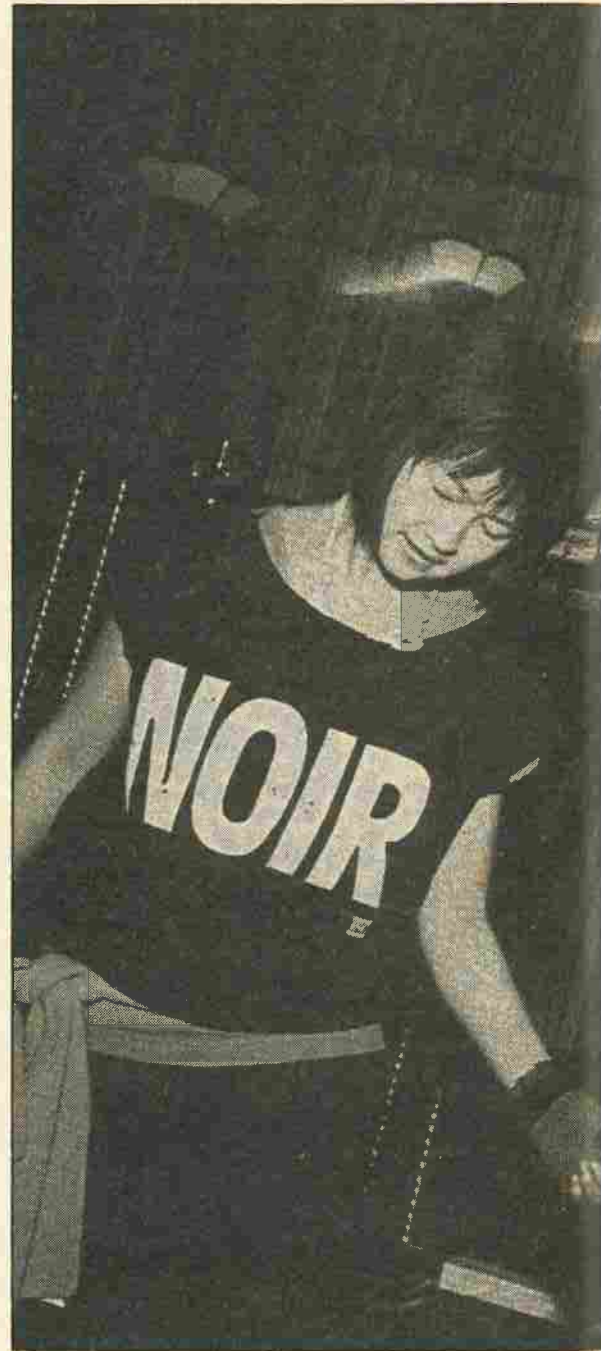
As the Chinese have gradually become established in the UK, the stereotype has changed. First it was laundries, then chip shops. Now it is accountancy, German cars and the birth of the Chinese yuppie. Perhaps because the business acumen for which the Chinese are noted fits in so well with eighties values, it is hard for many westerners to believe that second and third generation Chinese people are concerned with anything other than making money.

"I was featured with other people on *South of Watford*, and *Time Out* said we were not 'real' Chinese, but the sort of people you would find in a Soho brasserie. That's libellous—I've never been in a Soho brasserie." Liam Woon sighed and shook his head. He is a successful photographer working on a regular basis for quality Sunday papers and monthly glossy magazines. He was born and raised in Coventry to a family in the wholesale trade.

"Eldest brother is a doctor, second brother is an engineer and here am I with a degree in photogra-

phy from Wolverhampton Polytechnic. A lot of parents would be happy to have their children do anything as long as they are out of catering, which is a hard and thankless job. I think my parents weren't too keen on me working in a takeaway or a restaurant, though they did want me to take over the family business—but that's business, not catering." Liam, with a touch of pride, freely admits that he is something of a black sheep in the family. He has been making a photographic record of other black sheep, of Chinese footballers, pianists, ballet dancers; it's a stereotype-breaking exercise that *Time Out* might find revealing.

Younger Chinese people in Britain may be second or even third generation, or may have spent much of their childhood in Hong Kong, with consequent cultural and linguistic differences. "I found at college that there was a definite pecking order: Chinese from Hong Kong, who speak Cantonese, look down their noses at Chinese born in Britain who speak Cantonese, who in turn look down their noses at Chinese born in Britain who can't speak Can-





tone—*which is me,*” says Liam. “Also, I’ve had conversations with white people who say to me, ‘You’re all right, you Chinese, you come to our country, you don’t expect anything from us, you don’t group together like those blacks and Asians.’ They’re being racist in front of me, but being racist about others, saying, ‘you Chinese are all right as immigrants go,’ and it makes me angry, because in a way they’re trying to be nice to me by patting me on the head, which is patronising.”

Alienated on the one hand from traditional Chinese culture and patronised on the other by British society, it is hard to know what being British Chinese actually means. Liam does not mind admitting his confusion on the subject.

Andy Wong is not confused. He knows where the future lies. It lies in computers. Andy is an old colleague of mine whom I met again by chance on Gerrard Street. He bought me a coffee and told me of his ambition to go to America, where you could earn really big money. Andy was born in China, but has lived in the UK since he was twelve. His father runs a restaurant in Sheffield. “Being a foreigner in the UK, you encounter racism, and I had a lot of difficulties, and inconvenience, but so what? No place is paradise, you can’t blame it for your own failure. I realise that as a foreigner I have to prove myself more.”

I ventured that he sounded almost, well, typically Chinese in his views. “No, not at all, I don’t think I am like most Chinese people. For instance, I was brought up in a restaurant culture, then I went to university, which had a very different atmosphere. Most Chinese people are Conservatives, but being brought up here I believe in the welfare state and vote Labour. It’s like I’m halfway between all the time.” Having sorted out his cultural identity for me, Andy and I shook hands and he walked rapidly down Charing Cross Road, towards a prosperous future in computer programming.

Susan Leong was born in Liverpool, to a Chinese family who were themselves born in the area. Her uncle, Frank Soo, played professional football for Stoke City in the 1930s. Susan is an actress, an almost equally unusual career for the Chinese. “My family never went to the theatre. My father strongly disapproved, but he hoped I would grow out of it—he just didn’t think of it as a suitable career, that or anything in the arts. Even when I appeared on *Brookside*, my dad was embarrassed, the Chinese just don’t like to draw attention to themselves,” she says.

“There is a kind of Chinese yuppie mentality produced by the fact that Chinese parents encourage their kids to make money, to become professionals. But at the same time, I’m not like that, and the Chinese community is just not that homogenous. I know people who I suppose you could call Chinese yuppies, but there are also people in the arts, for instance. It’s just that we’re the first generation who are trying to sort all that out, to go into careers that the Chinese haven’t gone into before. There is a perspective on the British Chinese experience emerging, but extremely slowly, and it saddens me that there has been no play, or film or any kind of performance piece that has been a platform for the Chinese.

“English people come to view the Chinese yuppie as somehow representative because there has been no true perspective on what it’s like to be Chinese in Britain, what it’s like to be born here, so they just don’t know.” It is a situation that Susan intends to change. With a grant from Greater London Arts she hopes to set up a British Chinese theatre group in the summer, and she is looking for original scripts.



Top, Chinese styling at a hair salon in Liverpool. Above, two generations at the See Yip Association in Liverpool.

Photographs by Martin Parr.

Another cliché in the process of being overturned is the notion of Chinese political quietude. Recent years have seen the establishment of Chinese welfare groups funded by local authorities, with a political edge lacking in the traditional clan associations and professional groups. Again, though, it's slow going. "The Bangladeshi community has been in Tower Hamlets for around 20 years, and they have what seems like hundreds of groups. The Chinese have been in the area for 150 years and we only have one," says Susan.

Boyce Yeung is chair of the Tower Hamlets Chinese Youth Organisation. A UK resident since 1972, he is a veteran of community work, a hard-bitten lobbyist of local authorities, a tireless organiser and campaigner. It is to him, and others like him, that people turn for help in sorting out their welfare problems, and in increasing numbers to report incidences of racial harassment and assaults. But why did he think the Chinese started so late? "From

1850-1950 the Chinese people who came to this country were not well educated—sailors and so on—they just came here and worked in catering. And in the last 30 years, people educated themselves to get out of that kind of lifestyle and become professionals. We have a lot of accountants, people like that, who are just not going to be interested in community development.

"When we started our organisation, we had fairly prosperous people on the management committee, but they just came for the name it would give them, not to do serious lobbying. I doubt if some of them know what community work is. It is very hard to train the older generation to be effective politically, but we are training youth workers to be more aware of their circumstances, and I think that there is more awareness among younger Chinese people generally. Don't forget that the older generation of organisations have people in them who are already rich, who have made their money; they don't really care about the poorer sections of the community. And when they organise Chinese New Year and so on it comes across that the Chinese are only interested in money and business."

But after all, in the enterprise culture of the eighties, money and business are what we are all supposed to be interested in. Joseph Wu is a freelance journalist, born in Hong Kong, raised in England, hoping to start his own magazine for Chinese young people in London. What kind of audience will he write for? "It's not true that young Chinese people are all rich, only interested in making money and spending it in discos and so on, it's just that they are the ones who are more visible. There are so many kids working day in and day out in chip shops, or whose parents make them study at all hours. My main aim is to provide a launch pad for Chinese youth who might want to get involved in this kind of work, because at the moment there just isn't the opportunity and without the opportunity they won't have any kind of support from their families."

A stereotype is always a prison, and never more so than in this case. Parents want their children to go into business, and the government feels the same way. Never has a cultural stereotype been so complementary to the political direction of the country. This in turn makes it harder for Chinese people to establish any other kind of presence, to make their mark in any other field.