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THE GUARDIAN

Where there's still some sanity left.

The Chinese children of Britain

Brian Jackson and Anne Garvey

More Chinese children enter the country than those of any other nation. They work long hours in the take-away shops, and are a hide-away problem.

"I like it when we down street and nobody see. No one turn head, or notice us. I like that." Chinese children in Britain are the invisible offspring of elusive parents. But suddenly there is one of these invisible handfuls in every big school; twos and threes in smaller primary schools. Undemanding—until extremely provoked. Speaking either little or no English. Yet here to stay.

Our first finding, in this first-ever study of their situation, is that there are more Chinese children now entering this country—and may be for the next ten years—than children from any other Asian or Caribbean country. The only possible exception to this is India.

Jamaica, the largest of the West Indian islands, sent 1,378 children to join their families in Britain in 1972. There are, however, a fair number of children born in Britain but sent back to the West Indies when young—then recalled to Britain at ten or more. Since they already hold British passports, there is no check on them. So we can only guess at the West Indian figure and put it at around 2,000 children annually. Bangladesh sends 1,000 to 2,000 children a year to Britain: a very unsettled number, reflecting the tensions, famines and floods of a very unsettled society. Pakistan is around 2,000, and India just over 3,000.

Against these, the number of Chinese children coming in is clearly at the top of the table. A parliamentary select committee hazarded 1,600 a year; but this overlooks the complexities of the calculation. The Hongkong High Commission guessed 2,000 a year, and rising. Another estimate is 3,500.

If we are right about the scale, why are schools not more aware of it? There seems to be two reasons for this. First, the Chinese sub-economy in Britain now depends mainly on the take-away food business. And though there are substantial congregations of Chinese in Liverpool 8 and around Gerard Street in London, most Chinese are to be found in small groups in small towns—Dewsbury, Berwick-on-Tweed, Penzance, Wigan, Burton-on-Trent, Ely, Canterbury and Elland. Restaurants, chip shops, chop-suey bars and take-away corner shops have scattered them thinly over the whole country. Because they are more widespread than any other group of immigrant children, each teacher (with the odd couple of Chinese children in his class) often thinks he is facing a small, temporary and insoluble problem which (if ignored) will go away. The sheer scale, difference and future dimension of the question, is hardly glimpsed.

The second reason is that the classroom concern with immigrants has—for the last 15 years—been overwhelmingly a concern with either West Indians or, more frequently, with the children originally from the Indian sub-continent—Pakistanis, Indians, Bangladeshis, East African Asians. But our society now hosts large and increasing numbers of Chinese, Cypriots, Portuguese, Italian, Spanish and Turkish

children. For none of them—and least of all for the Chinese—does the teaching profession yet possess the insights, knowledge, relationships, and specialist pedagogic techniques, necessary to give them a fair chance in the society which will be—in name and reality—their own and our future world.

But the plight of Chinese children in Britain is not about numbers, or immigration flows or statistics. We wanted to find out what it's like to be a small Chinese child in Leeds or Liverpool or Bognor Regis. If we jumble around stories we have heard, we can make a patchwork of a child's day. Here are some snippets to begin with; notes from our diary over the year in which we have been carrying out research.

Yun Sheng sleeps in the box room over the restaurant. It is not really his room exactly; they use it for storing boxes of dried noodles. His bed is an afterthought; they found him some space because his father is the cook at the Golden Dragon and it is hard to get good cooks. Outside, there is a heavy-duty lorry going past. It is changing gear to make the hill. When he first came to the little room, Yun thought the traffic was going to come right through the walls. His parents do not usually get up with him. They work late and need sleep. Yun drinks cold tea in the kitchen and gets himself off to school. He is seven.

Yun Sheng is one of hundreds of Chinese children we have talked to. His day is not special. It is what school means for Chinese children. Playground is the worst place. Waiting to hear the bell so you can go in out of the unfamiliar cold. Away from the other children who chase and shout to each other in a language you cannot make out.

What do you do? Lean against a wall? There isn't a quiet part in a playground. Or a private part. You are on display. Yun Sheng tried playing but did not understand the rules. They kept on explaining; but the faster they talked the less he understood, and in the end they gave up and now no one notices that he never joins in. "Why don't he straighten his face up?" asked Cheryl. "It's always screwed funny, like this." And she grimaced, pulling her eyelids outwards and baring her teeth. They can certainly spot you if you are Chinese. Different skin. "You're yellor aren't you, yellor-bug?" Features that are strange, impassive.

There are lines and queues and pushings and scufflings; and when they keep changing the tables around, Yun Sheng never knows where to sit. He looks out at them from under his thick glossy pudding-basin fringe. They never stop talking. They laugh and clatter the plates. It is a big school—sometimes more than 500 in the dining room. It rolls before him like a chaotic film-strip, without subtitles. He has asked his mother for extra jumpers to wear at dinnertime. Outside it is damp and chilling, 45 minutes of standing and watching. The footballers take their jumpers off and pile them up in

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the corner of the playground or stick them on the wire netting. "Chinks are funny. Well they can't be in one gang or another, can they? They're not black. And they're not white, now are they?" Yun Sheng is usually glad when it is ten to two. By that time he will have done three slow laps of the grounds. Right round the perimeter. Not cutting any corners. Walking.

Tzu Lai doesn't like playing either. He always gets into trouble. Once he was beaten by a gang of boys and had to stay off school for a week. His mother laid him in a dim room, and put warmed herbs on his bruised eyes. After that, he did not want to go back at all; but the eyes healed, and there wasn't any choice.

But even Chinese patience will snap if it's stretched taut enough. The warning signals are already winking. Passivity is not now the whole picture. Ping Ling-ho is 16. One day in February he took a knife to school. It had a small sharp blade and he kept it in his shirt sleeve. He knew who it was for. By the end of the day, he had stuck it in the English boy's heart. Ping Ling-ho spent five months in prison cells, waiting for his trial, attending the court hearing. He was accused of murder. After a long trial he was acquitted—the killing was self-defence. He had been bullied and intimidated for a whole year. He just could not stand it any more.

Chinese children in urban areas are bullied all the time; systematically, consistently. Their parents will not allow them on the streets at night, nor on the school holiday projects. When the beatings and the fear get very bad, they take them away from school altogether.

At Yun Sheng's school, they have never seen a real live yellow-skinned slant-eyed face before. He

looks like a mongol, and mongols are mental and go to the Silly School. Tonight he lies in bed, with the packing cases around it, and cries. Though he doesn't know exactly what they're saying when they run up to him in the playground, he feels it is not nice. Yun's mother says to get on with his work. She does not know why he has not got homework. Is he shirking? No one has told her it is a primary school where they do not have any work in the evening. There is no contact with school at all. Sometimes notes come home with Yun but his mother cannot even read Chinese, never mind English; and the owner of the restaurant is a very busy man with little time for translating for Mrs Sheng. Tonight she is worried that Yun is crying, and she hopes he will be all right.

Four o'clock is not the end of the day for many Chinese children. It is the beginning. Su-Su goes straight to bed when she comes in. She sleeps until nine o'clock, and then her brother gets her up to serve in the chippy until one o'clock in the morning. Su-Su is not yet ten. So she has no need to worry about homework. Among the Chinese children interviewed the average child worked three and a half hours each evening.

"And do you want to go into the chippy business, Tzu Lai?" He smiles and looks out of the window to where the kids in the yard are kicking a ball about. "Oh, no. I want to be a goalkeeper, when I'm grown." Afterwards we mused on it: not a striker but a goalie.

Child migration from Hongkong will continue, and may increase. Some 43 per cent of the population of that densely packed Crown Colony (33,157 people to the square mile) are children under 16. Chinese families in Britain are here to stay, and

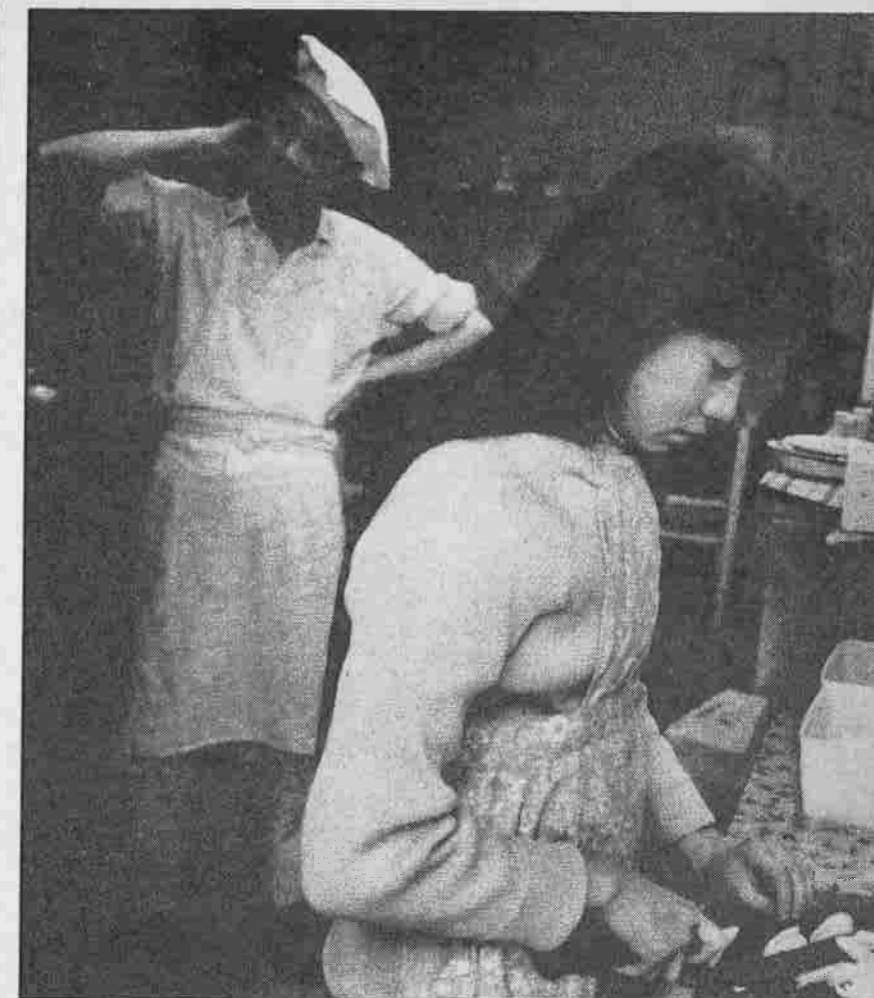


Photos: Bryn Campbell

will have more children. Yet school, at present, seems to offer them little. Of course, there are adventurous teachers here and there or unusual social workers, who are trying to make contact, create dialogue, help and learn. But most schools are unaware that many Chinese children in their district (especially girls) never come, anyway. Nor do they know what language the ones who come actually speak. Nor do they succeed in giving them adequate English. Nor do they know why Yuk Lan so often arrives late (we've seen her punished by being made to stand in the playground—excluded from lessons that seldom helped her). Or why Tang Yulin falls asleep at his desk. As always, it depends on getting out of the classroom, and into the home; on seeing the child's needs in that extended setting; and on teaching in such a way as to celebrate the culture they carry with them.

It is nearly 1 am in the centre of Chesterfield on a Saturday night. There are four small children working furiously. The chippy is hot and steamy, and still packed with the last, loud, slightly boozy customers from the clubs and late-drinking pubs. The two youngest children are about five or six. They run about naked, diving between the stainless steel fryers to ferry fresh stocks of fish and food through from the back kitchen. There is shouting in the shop, and a fight breaks out in the street outside. The children have been there since 8.30 pm. The elder ones serving, the little ones servicing. They do it every night.

A Liverpool Chinese teenager is trying to study for his O levels. He begins his homework at 11.30 pm—after he has cashed up the till, and served the last of the late-night customers in the take-away. He goes to the cinema once a month. Work fills



the rest of the time. Life for these children is the family business. While other kids in their class are playing or sleeping, Chinese children have other responsibilities—behind the counters of those chipmies or in the humid backroom of those take-away shops. For their parents, this is normal. They expect their children to help out. At their age, they themselves were working; they see no reason why their children should not do likewise. Work is an integral part of home life. Isolated from the surrounding British, they have no other criterion than the drudgery of their own past to go by.

Chinese children are heirs to a principle of survival through hard graft. At home in Hongkong, education is neither prolonged nor obligatory; nor, after the age of ten, free. Work is the single and tangible feature of their lives. Most children accept it all. They have never had a holiday, and were shocked when we suggested they might take one. Susan (the English variant she has adopted of her name) is 18 and had struggled through school, working every night and doing homework and extra English lessons. She spoke Chinese at home. In the middle of the sixth form her uncle died, and they needed permanent help in the chippy, so Susan was removed from school.

Between the crises of misunderstandings and difficulties, there is a large area of tedious boredom. Life for these children consists of a routine of school, work and bed. They are tentative and isolated. An English friend is a prize. No doubt language is one of the main contributions to withdrawal. Dai Kwi was showing us his photographs of Hongkong. In one of them he was wearing a scout uniform. "We have scouts here, too." He smiled forlornly: "But I don't speak English."

Two lives in one . . . for many of Britain's Chinese children (like the girl in these three pictures), the walk home from school leads to a stint in the family "take away."

So very often, the wires get crossed. "In British schools, people are always running around. We move the classroom here, and then we go there, and then we change again. In Hongkong, we stay in one desk. Here we move all the time. We never know where we are." An interpreter had translated this little speech for us. The speaker is a twelve year old boy from the New Territories of Hongkong, living in Sheffield. He spoke earnestly and fluently, looking up at us occasionally but addressing his remarks to the Chinese student with us.

"Doesn't he like it, then?" More earnest tones. The student looked apologetic and smiled in the peculiarly Chinese way, a deprecatory sort of beam—a courtesy to mitigate insult. "He hates it," he said. "He doesn't understand anything that's going on. He's ashamed to ask the teachers. It is a disgrace to be so ignorant." "Why doesn't he go and ask other Chinese children?" "Because," our student explained carefully, "he doesn't speak the same language. They are mostly Hakka and he is Mandarin-speaking, unusual here; his parents are refugees from the northern mainland." In Sheffield, there are very few people who speak in his language.

A headmaster in Liverpool gave us the same message. "Well, at first, I'd ask the Chinese to explain to the newcomers—you know, where to go and what to do, who they were supposed to see next. It's a big school this, it's quite a job finding your way around if you're English. They were very willing to do the job, but I did notice that there was a lot of hand-waving and movement in it all. When I looked more closely, I noticed there wasn't any talking going on; they weren't saying anything. The lads were getting over the message in sign language. I told them, I said: 'I can do that'—why aren't you telling them in your language, and that's when they told me they couldn't understand each other."

In two small towns we visited, there were a handful of take-aways and restaurants. All the staff had children—teenagers mostly, between 13 and 15 years old. Yet the local authority in each town had only two children registered as school age. Yes, they were sure; two boys, of seven and five years old. If there are any questions, there is always the switch routine. Children are moved on to another area and another business, until the inquiries peter out.

On top of deliberate evasion, there are all those crossed wires, which exclude quite a number from the legal amount of schooling. Many Chinese calculate the ages of their children in the traditional style. A baby is one when it is born and two, not on the anniversary of that date, but on the next Chinese New Year. Thereafter, years are counted. A child's age therefore, could be up to two years out by our calculations—ie, school-leaving age at 14.

For those who soldier on, school can become more (not less) confusing; harder (not easier) to adjust to. Frustration extends to teachers. "He's bursting with enthusiasm," said a Sheffield primary school teacher, "I just wish I knew how to help him, I really do. We sit looking at one another."

Chinese children are scattered like shrapnel through English schools. As they pop up in twos and threes, in tiny groups, they are not worthy of the title of "problem." In areas where other immigrants are almost unknown, Chinese have moved in, set up businesses, and employed staff. Their children appear on the school doorstep as surprised and mystifying bundles. They come from homes where Chinese is spoken constantly. The new school is a startling challenge, and the effect of a whole new system can be devastating for a newcomer.

Again speaking through an interpreter, a Sheffield Chinese mother talked to us about her eight year old son. "He's become nervous and doesn't sleep well. I can't do anything for him. I speak no English. I understand only a little. Yes he was born here. We have been here for 17 years." They might have arrived only yesterday. Their little boy has only one or two words of English. His teacher was sympathetic but "I would do something, but it's difficult to know what he needs. I must say our methods haven't really worked yet." Chinese children develop their own way around their difficulties. They copy down notes as the teacher speaks, and copy them up in the evenings. It means about twice the work but it can pay off. "And it's all done," said a head we spoke to, "in this fantastic handwriting, all beautifully laid out. Sort of script writing, but not quite. More like italic writing, if you remember that from the old days. It must take hours."

Whether they are in units of two or 200 in a school, the Chinese attitude does not help. They are quiet, undemanding, easily overlooked; brought up in an atmosphere of decorous politeness and awe of authority. They are inevitably a sharp contrast to the boisterous youngsters who sit on either side of them: "You hardly know they're there"; "They are awfully well restrained. It's like another experience having to teach Chinese." But this sort of acquiescence provokes downright hostility in other teachers: "I don't like these impassive faces staring back at me"; "Sometimes I want to shake them and tell them to protest, react and do something dangerous for a change, but they never do." "They look at you as if they're judging you. I've only two in my class: if I had a whole roomful, I'd go mad."

In the East End of London, teachers report Chinese boys with long hair, baggy trousers and short aggressive little jackets. "They're all the thing at the moment," one young teacher told us. "Since that Kung Fu business opened up, it's rather vogue to be Chinese all of a sudden. Kung Fu is the zenith of that masculine ethic of being able to take care of yourself; lots more so than guns. It's a pure virility symbol, bare hands and strength. It's like being good at football, it brings immense popularity. Mind you," he added, "it's making the Chinese very tough. They're still quiet, but very tough."

Britain has a far smaller Chinese population than the United States. The whole situation is, moreover, in a much earlier phase—we have scarcely any second-generation immigrants. Yet, even in America, a new group of Chinese immigrants is causing consternation. They come from Hongkong and not from the traditional fountainhead of Canton and Tei-shan. The recent arrivals are from a cosmopolitan city, not an impoverished country area. After the "freeze immigration" years of Fortress America, the two strains of people are meeting, and problems are arising which never cropped up in the respectful, acquiescent days of early migration, where the Chinese suffered and endured, rather than stood up and protested. Similar conflicts are not guaranteed to by-pass Britain. Our influx of teenagers and children could easily begin to stir the same uneasiness within society if they are ignored.

In a shrinking world it would be foolish and short-sighted to discount tiny representatives of potentially the world's most powerful nation. The refusal to make the effort is serious. Our own society, its culture and values might be one day as interesting and as obsolescent as the jade suit of Princess Wen—so admired this year by thousands of teachers and their lucky charges.

The non- and sometime voters

Anthony King

Not everyone votes all the time, and some people never vote. What exactly do we know about these 'ghosts' who can turn elections?

If one thinks about it, the remarkable thing about turnout at British general elections is not the small number of people who do not vote, but the large number of people who do. Thirty one million persons went to the polls on 28 February. If the turnout next week is lower, it will be partly because the register is older. Many voters whose names appear on the register have died; others have moved house and are either ineligible for a postal vote or not well-organised enough—or interested enough—to obtain one.

There are any number of good reasons for not voting. One may be ill on the day or have to work overtime. One may unexpectedly be away from home. One may be a Jehovah's Witness. In some elections, large numbers of would-be voters are put off by the fact that no candidate of their party is standing; in 1966, approximately one quarter of the Liberal supporters who found themselves without a candidate abstained rather than vote for a candidate of another party.

Not the least of the reasons for not voting is that the chances of any single individual's voting affecting the outcome are infinitesimally small. Even in Carmarthen last February, Gwynoro Jones's majority was three; any one Labour voter could have stayed home without costing Labour the seat. Anthony Downs, Mancur Olson and others maintain that, in many circumstances—given that the act of voting is never a wholly costless act (at the very least, it costs time)—to bother to vote at all is to behave "irrationally."

Why, then, do people vote, and in such large numbers? There appear to be three main reasons. First, many voters go to the polls because, despite everything, they think their vote might influence the result. After all, no one voter can know in advance what all other voters are going to do. In a marginal seat, one vote could be crucial. We know now that the Labour majority in Carmarthen was three and that any one Labour voter could safely have stayed at home. But the voters of Carmarthen did not know it on 28 February. The majority, for all they knew, might be one; there might be a dead heat. Even in a safe seat, if too many majority-party supporters decide not to vote because they calculate that, even if they do not vote, others will, then the seat will be lost.

Many voters are also inspired by a desire to affirm their political faith—to demonstrate their loyalty to a party or cause. Two of the three highest turnouts last February—at Shipley (87.4 per cent) and at Cardiff North West (87.1 per cent)—were in safe Conservative seats. In the past, much larger turnouts than average were consistently recorded in safe Labour mining seats and in the Unionist bastions of Northern Ireland. For electors thus motivated, voting is like going to church or rooting for the home side at a football match; it may not have any effect, but it makes one feel good.

Finally, many voters turn out simply because they think they ought to—out of a sense of civic obligation. Indeed in Britain, a country that does not go in much for flag-saluting and national anthem singing, voting in general elections is almost the civic act. Not to vote is almost to deny one's citizenship.

The number of voters—and therefore of non-voters—varies enormously from election to election, and also from country to country. Turnout at postwar British general elections has varied only within fairly narrow limits as table 1 shows. But

Table 1: Turnout at post-1945 elections (%)

	1950	1951	1955	1959	1964	1966	1970	Feb 1974
turnout at all general elections	84.0	82.5	76.7	78.8	77.1	75.8	72.0	78.8

turnout at all general elections is much higher than at local elections; turnout there seldom exceeds 50 per cent and often falls below 30.

This much is known. Not so well known is that this pattern—of greater participation in national than local elections—is not invariably reproduced in other countries. In Canada, turnout at provincial elections, especially in Alberta, Nova Scotia and Quebec, is frequently higher than at federal elections in the same provinces. In Switzerland, too, the poll is sometimes higher at cantonal than national elections. Even in the United States, where there is a British-like hierarchy of participation—running from presidential elections, through off-year congressional elections, to state and local elections and primaries—the hierarchy can be upended. In the 1950s, for instance, turnout in the one-party Democratic south was consistently higher in the state Democratic primaries than in the general elections that followed.

Compared with many other countries, the proportion voting in Britain even at general elections is not strikingly high. Table 2 shows the turnout re-

Table 2: Turnout in various countries in the early 1970s (%)

W. Ger- many	Italy	France	US	Holland	Canada	Britain
1972	1972	1973	1972	1971	1972	1970
91.1	93.1	80.9	78.8	78.5	77.0	72.0

corded in seven countries in the first national election—whether presidential or parliamentary—held in the 1970s (except for the United States where the figure is given for the 1972 presidential race). The entries in the table have to be treated cautiously, since registration to vote is easier in some countries than others—and since the British poll in 1970 was the lowest since the war. Even so, the table disposes of the idea which is still widely credited, that the British electorate is peculiarly conscientious.

It would be nice to know for certain why more people vote in some countries than in others, and

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