

The World on A Plate

CHINATOWN AND THE STORY OF MIGRATION

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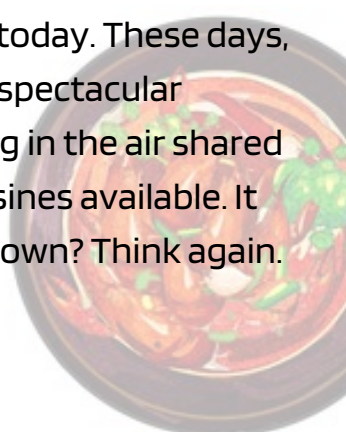
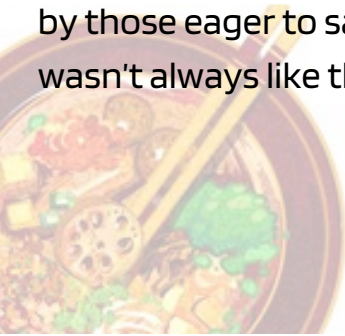
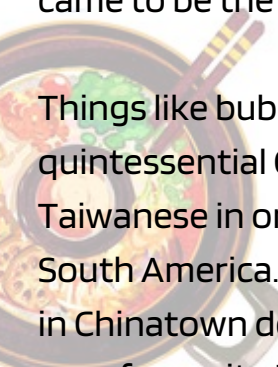
Introduction



Chinatown – a favourite haunt of London's East Asian community. The perfect place to grab a bubble tea, some fried chicken, and a bowl of pho, but none of these things are Chinese. So, what's in the name Chinatown? Our hectic lives mean we often take things for granted and don't question how things came to be the way they are.

Things like bubble tea are so entrenched in our minds as a quintessential Chinese drink that sometimes we forget that it is Taiwanese in origin or that tapioca actually originates from South America. Or how about that over 20 restaurants and cafés in Chinatown don't actually sell Chinese food? Or that maybe your favourite Korean fried chicken, is not so Korean as it is inspired by American food. How did this all happen anyway?

This zine looks at how the movement of people has shaped the cuisines of Chinatown that we know and love today. These days, Chinatown is glittering with bright lanterns, a spectacular gateway, and a multitude of languages buzzing in the air shared by those eager to savour the vast array of cuisines available. It wasn't always like this. Think you know Chinatown? Think again.



The Days of Limehouse

To understand how Chinatown came to be the way it is today, we must first understand what came before. Before Chinatown, there was Limehouse. Founded in the late 1880s, it was the first Chinese community in London. It was small but close-knit with a single street of shops and boarding houses for the early Chinese migrants in London who were principally seamen.

Limehouse was a place to be feared, a place of danger, a place of the exotic, or so coined by popular culture.



A branch of Chee Kong Tong, the Chinese Freemasons, in Limehouse in 1910



In 1913, Sax Rohmer wrote 'The Mystery of Dr Fu-Manchu'. The main character, "the yellow peril incarnate in one man", was an evil doctor scheming for world domination. The "yellow peril" was seen as an enemy to Western civilisation. It symbolised a fear of cheap labour forces taking over the white man's job, the opium and gambling dens and the moral degeneracy of Asian people. Fu Manchu books flew off the shelves, both fascinating and horrifying the white middle-class audience. Fu Manchu may have been fictional, but imaginations of the exotic Chinaman transcended into reality.



artist's depiction of an opium den

"At the bottom of this slough of grimy Despond is the little breathless garret where Johnny the Chinaman swelters night and day curled up on his gruesome couch, carefully toasting in the dim flame of a smoky lamp"

Charles Dickens, Dictionary of London (1879)

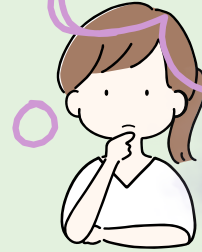
Soon enough, Limehouse became a hotspot for 'slumming', a type of tourism where middle-class tourists went to **gaze** at the "toughest, roughest streets and taverns" of London. Nowadays, Soho's Chinatown is lined with majestic restaurants and cafés with shiny exteriors but back in the day, it was a very different story.

🔍 gaze

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'Gaze' refers to the way we encounter others and perceive them. It's more than just seeing, it refers to the way we look at the world through a filter of ideas and expectations framed by our class, gender, nationality, and many more things. As visitors to a place, we gaze at something because there's a sense of anticipation that there's something about the place which separates it from our everyday experience.

How do you think Chinatown is 'gazed' at today?



The image below is a section from a poverty map of the late 1800s showing Limehouse. Pink and reds meant middle class or fairly comfortable, blue meant poor whilst black meant the lowest class, 'vicious' even 'semi-criminal', and right there in the heart of it lived London's Chinese community. You might ask yourself why people would want to visit Limehouse to see its poverty when visitors to Chinatown today go for the restaurants and culture. For some, slumming was a type of tourism motivated by curiosity, excitement, and thrill.



Maps Descriptive of London Poverty from Life and Labour in London (1886-1903) by Charles Booth



artist's depiction of 'slumming down the East End'

Slumming extended to America's Chinatowns too. In 1909, an article in Munsey's magazine described one of the slumming tours as follows.

"Listen! The guide is talking; but see, few of his followers are listening to him. They are bewildered, uncertain. They feel they are on the threshold of a mystery. The women are clinging timidly to their escorts, or holding one another's hands".

The decline of Limehouse

For a while, this fear of Chinatown and its inhabitants prevailed. As much as Limehouse was a place for people to live, it was a place of performance where tourists were an audience to the eroticised danger acted out by those who relied on this performance for a living. But soon this would all change. By the 1930s, the government was working on slum clearances and widening the Limehouse Causeway which caused Chinese businesses and homes to be demolished. The blitz and decline of shipping in the area left Limehouse towards a path of decline.



Limehouse damaged by the Blitz



Limehouse today



Chinese restaurant in Limehouse in the 1930s

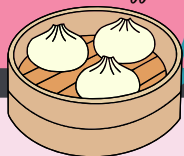


Chinese restaurant in Chinatown today

The Rise of Chinatown

Like a phoenix rising from the ashes, London's Chinese population recuperated from the rubble of the blitz and founded a new Chinese community – the present-day Chinatown. Unlike Limehouse where the Chinese were a small minority in a multicultural community, Soho Chinatown has a distinctively Chinese identity aided by its eye-catching architecture and vibrant culinary scene.

Food is central to our sense of identity. The way any given human group eats helps it assert its diversity, hierarchy and organisation, but also, at the same time, both its oneness and the otherness of whoever eats differently, Claude Fischler



It is this culinary scene that is especially telling of Chinatown's identity today. Food is a marker of ethnicity and otherness, and has played a key role in the migration experience. Food generates a notion of home for migrants but when it is transformed and hybridised with the local cuisine, it reflects a new identity connecting two worlds together.

Food is also a story of acceptance. Attitudes towards Chinese food in the West has shifted from hostility to desire over time. Whilst ambivalent attitudes still exist, Chinese food is now culturally accepted in the UK. This is the story of how Chinatown's cuisine has transformed itself into one of the most desirable in Soho.

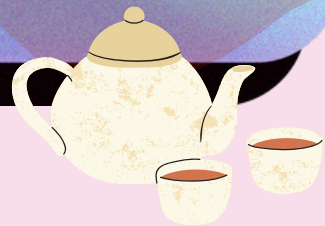
To understand this, one must first look at the Chinese restaurant itself. It is hard to tell when and what was the first Chinese restaurant in the UK because it was most likely to be exclusively catered towards Chinese people and went by unnoticed by the British public. It was also most likely to be situated in Limehouse and seemingly out of bounds for non-locals.

The first Chinese restaurant beyond Limehouse is generally agreed to be Chang Choy's, opened in 1908 and situated in Piccadilly, not far from present-day Chinatown. Its location foretells the site of Chinatown today. Today, Chinatown is easily within reach of the Tube and lies next to the dazzling West End. This was all very much deliberate and a strategy to shed away hostile attitudes towards Chinese people and their cuisine.



In 1884, the International Health Exhibition was held in South Kensington. There were a range of exhibits but by far the most popular was the Chinese restaurant and tea house. There was nothing remotely Chinese about the tea house. Organisers stressed that if the tea house was created in an authentic manner, English sightseers would "neither eat in it nor sit in it", and would treat the tea house with contempt or even disgust.

The International Health Exhibition provides a perfect example of how the general public viewed Chinese food in the late 19th century. But at the turn of the 20th century, Chang Choy's had dared to venture beyond the safety net of the Chinese community and into the heart of the metropolis to appeal to the British public. Chang Choy's was both a meeting point for Chinese merchants and students as well a dining spot for the adventurous upper and middle class white clientele. It was the first sign of breaking down the cultural barrier segregating Chinese and British.





By the mid-1920s, a chain of Chinese restaurants were established in London designed to attract western and bourgeoisie Chinese customers. Where the foreign was tucked away in Limehouse was no longer the case with the foreign now merely around the corner for Londoners. Some were horrified, others were intrigued by the exoticism on their doorstep but for fashionable Londoners of the era, these new Chinese restaurants were a stage for city dwellers to immerse themselves in the multicultural modernity of the 1920s.

By the 1940s, the outlook towards Chinese food had transformed on an unprecedented scale. The Second World War meant that British soldiers who were posted in Asia and now returned home were more accepting of Asian cuisines, and China's position as an ally in the war led to a greater tolerance of Chinese culture. Of course, there were still feelings of hostility that never truly faded but interest in the new Chinese restaurants of the 1940s can be summarised by the English journalist Barbara Whittingham-Jones as follows,



several [restaurants] are barely a year old and their appearance reflects the great vogue for all things Chinese now sweeping in this country

Her comments may be slightly exaggerated but it does reflect a general change in attitude towards Chinese food in Britain. But for it to garner the attention of the general public required more than just servicemen returning from the Far East. Enter the humble dish of chop suey.





The origin of chop suey is widely debated but it is generally agreed that this stir-fry dish with meat, vegetables, and beansprouts hails from America rather than China, brought by the Chinese immigrants who had come to build the transcontinental railway. Ingredients were cheap, familiar to the Western audience but with a dish name that was exotic enough to capture attention. Soon chop suey, became synonymous with Chinese cuisine in the West and Chinese restaurants began to be referred to simply as chop suey restaurants.



a chop suey restaurant forming the backdrop of a painting by Edward Hopper, one of the most well known realist painters of 20th century America

Chop suey can be considered as an “invented tradition”, something we think of as traditional with a rich history dating back centuries but in reality was created far more recently.



🔍 chop suey



The literal meaning of chop suey is 'mixed pieces'. Whilst it is romanised as za sui from Mandarin, it is spelt chop suey in English, romanised from Cantonese reflecting the origins of early Chinese immigrants who mainly came from the Guangdong province.



Into the present

Chop suey forms part of Cantonese cuisine and the prominence of Cantonese restaurants can still be seen in Chinatown today. Walk down Gerrard Street and you'll find authentic Chinese dishes such as roast duck and dim sum mixed with foods catered for western audiences such as chow mein and sesame prawn toast. But as London becomes increasingly globalised and consumers branch out sampling different cuisines to reflect their level of cosmopolitanism, Chinatown has expanded beyond Cantonese cuisine.

Immigration from other provinces in China has brought the likes of Dumplings' Legend, famous for its Shanghainese Xiaolongbao (similar to dumplings), Shu Xiang Ge, a must-visit spot for Sichuanese hotpot lovers, ShaXian Delicacies, specialising in Southeast Chinese cuisine and many more onto the streets of Chinatown.



ShaXian
Delicacies

In recent years, Chinatown has expanded to become a space showcasing culinary cultures beyond China, reflecting the presence of migration from different Asian societies. The rest of this zine explores different cuisines in Chinatown and how these cuisines themselves, much like Chinese cuisine in Britain, has been shaped by migration.



Malaysian Cuisine

Malaysia's tourist slogan, Malaysia, Truly Asia, is an excellent axiom of the country. Malaysia is a cultural melting pot of Malay, Chinese, and Indian inhabitants. If you've ever tried Malaysian food in Chinatown, you might have noticed the rich array of ingredients from across Asia on your plate. Malaysia's colourful cuisine has been shaped by its vibrant multicultural community since its inception as a country.

Thai influences

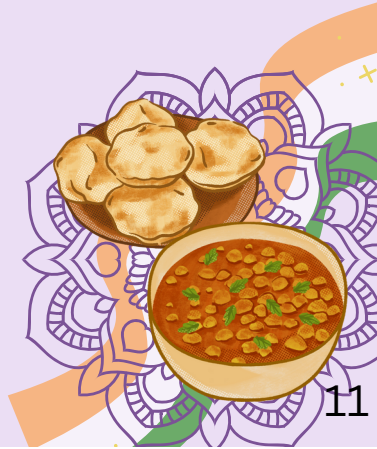
In the northern states of Malaysia close to the border with Thailand, where Thai-Malaysian intermarriage was common, distinct Thai influences have emerged in local cuisine. Sour and spicy flavours prevail, accompanied by Thai ingredients such as kaffir lime leaves and mint.

You can spot influences of Thai cuisine in Chinatown's C&R Café Restaurant, a Malaysian restaurant tucked behind the busy streets of central Chinatown. C&R sells Tom Yum soup and Pad Thai.



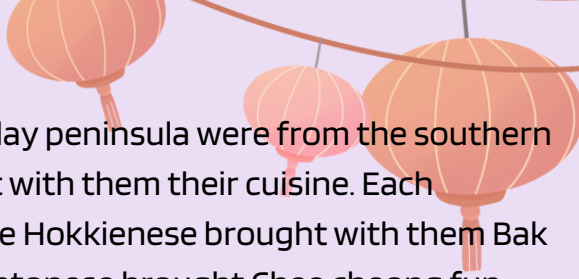
Indian influences

Malaysia's time as a British colony brought widespread immigration from Chinese and Indian indentured labourers to work in tin mines and rubber estates respectively. Indians make up the third largest ethnic group in Malaysia and everything from roti to chapati, have emerged in Malaysian cuisine.



Chinese influences

Historically, migrants to the Malay peninsula were from the southern provinces of China and brought with them their cuisine. Each province had its own cuisine, the Hokkienese brought with them Bak Kut Teh (pork ribs soup), the Cantonese brought Chee cheong fun (steamed rice noodles) and the Hainanese brought Hainanese chicken rice. These can all be found in Chinatown's Malaysian restaurants today.



Bak Kut Teh
(pork ribs soup)



Chee Cheong Fun
(steamed rice noodles)



Hainanese chicken rice



You can grab some Hainanese chicken rice from Rasa Sayang on Macclesfield Street, famous for its Nyonya cuisine

Chinese-Malaysian cooking has become so distinguished in Malaysia that it has its own name, Nyonya cuisine (sometimes known as Peranakan cuisine). Chinese migration to Malaya dates as far back to the Ming dynasty when trade between China and the Straits flourished. Intermarriage created a sub-ethnic Chinese identity of Peranakans. Many lost their ability to speak their mother tongue but retained aspects of their culture such as their cuisine.

Q peranakan

means descendant in Bahasa Melayu, and is used to describe early Chinese migrants and descendants in Malaya who have retained aspects of their Chinese heritage but assimilated into Malay culture



Malaysians in the UK

The Commonwealth Immigrants Act 1962 may have restricted mass entry to the UK from its former colonies but this did little to affect Malaysia, where migration to the UK did not become prominent until the late 20th century.

Malaysia's colonial legacy has created a culture of migration. Between 1946–1948, 10.4% of scholarship recipients offered to all British colonies were from Malaysia. But this early migration was often temporary, driven by the prestige of overseas English education. However, the legacy of colonial rule had left more than esteem for an English education.

"the increased enrolment in private English schools, in spite of the relatively high school fees charged, illustrates the growing demand for English education by all sections of the public" Annual report on the Federation of Malaya. 1951

Colonial rule had created a diverse society of ethnic Malays, Chinese and Indians in the country but affirmative action prioritised Bumiputera (ethnic Malay) education and civil service jobs were often unavailable to non-Bumiputeras. This meant that

non-Bumiputera students in the UK without a job guaranteed back home were more inclined to stay in the UK after their education.

This created a Malaysian community mostly centred in London. In 1983, the British Malaysian Society was formed to facilitate cross-cultural communication and reflected the presence of Malaysians, Bumiputera or not, in the UK. Malaysian presence also emerged in Chinatown, with the opening of several Malaysian restaurants.

'We'd get a lot of students coming in who grew up in Malaysia and told us they were missing the food from home. They'd would often come to Rasa Sayang to eat our homestyle Straits cuisine, with many of them still coming in ten years later!' Ellen, owner of Rasa Sayang restaurant

Korean cuisine

From Korean bbq to kimchi, Korean cuisine has seen a surge in popularity since the birth of Hallyu. In 2008, the South Korean minister of food, Chang Tae-Pyong announced plans to turn Korean cuisine into one of the most popular in the world. This included expanding the number of Korean restaurants abroad.

hallyu

'Korean wave', a term first coined in the 1990s referring to the rapid surge in popularity of Korean popular culture



There are several Korean restaurants in and around Chinatown from Olle Korean Barbecue and Wingstop, (Korean Fried Chicken) to Bunsik (Korean corn dogs and street food)

Whilst the growing presence of Korean food in Chinatown can partly be attributed to growing interest in Korean culture caused by the hallyu wave, its popularity can also be attributed to the presence of a Korean community in London.



How Korean food has been shaped by migration

Korean-Chinese food

Movement between the shared border of China and Korea has led to the development of a unique array of 'Koreanised' Chinese food. The most famous of which is jajangmyeon, a Koreanised version of the Chinese noodle dish zhajiangmian "fried sauce noodles". By adding chunjang, a sweet sauce popular in Korea, zhajiangmian has been transformed into a signature Korean dish.



Chinese zhajiangmian



Korean jajangmyeon

A Chinatown halfway round the world

Incheon Chinatown in South Korea has played a key role in the conceptualisation of jajangmyeon as a key dish in Korean-Chinese cuisine. Whilst Incheon Chinatown today may be small and ordinary, the city of Incheon was originally established in 1883 as a trade port with China and thrived as a Chinese settlement until decline in the 1960s. It is remembered as the birthplace of jajangmyeon.

Korean Fried Chicken

chi-maek

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a portmanteau between the word 'chikin', from the English word 'chicken' and the Korean word for beer 'maekju'

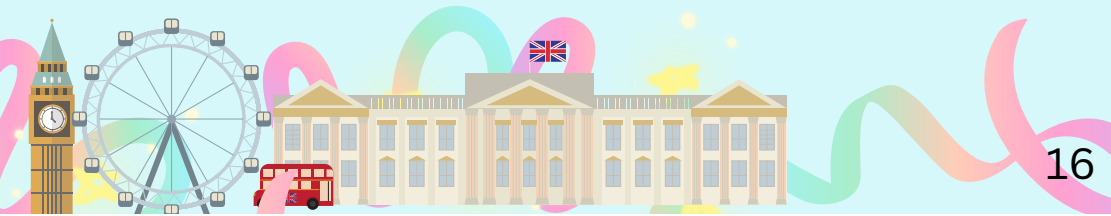


In 1953, South Korea and the United States signed the Mutual Defence Treaty. A legacy of the Korean War, the treaty agreed that the United States of America was allowed to dispatch its troops in South Korea and create military bases there. As of 2021, 28,500 American troops are stationed in South Korea.

American presence in South Korea and an alliance between the two countries generated an interest in American culture, including its cuisine.

American forces introduced fried chicken to South Korea. Meanwhile, the second wave of Korean immigration to America had begun, largely driven by American military, economic and cultural influence in Korea. One such emigrant was Yu Seok-Ho. Yu was inspired by Kentucky's Fried Chicken selling chicken in piece sets. When he returned to Korea, Yu launched the first Korean Fried Chicken shop, Lim's Chicken in 1977, beginning the fried chicken craze in Korea.

Outward migration of Koreans, saw fried chicken shops spring up across the globe, mostly in America where a sizeable Korean population has created a Koreatown in Los Angeles. In Europe, London is one of the most popular cities for Koreans to reside.



A Korean community has developed in New Malden in South West London, and is often referred to as 'Little Korea'. Whilst New Malden may be the hub for the Korean diaspora in the UK, Korean influences can still be seen in Chinatown.



On 47 Charing Cross Road lies Wing Wing, a Korean fried chicken shop inspired by American fried chicken.



On 88 Shaftesbury Avenue is Olle Korean Barbecue. Korean barbecue has a rich history with origins dating back to the Goguryeo dynasty (37 BC–AD 668). During the Japanese colonisation of Korea (1910–1945), Japan adopted Korean barbecue into their cuisine, naming it yakiniku.



Serving over 1 million customers a week, Korea Foods UK is the largest Korean foods retailer in the UK.

Established in 1999, as Korean migration to the UK rose in numbers, there six branches in London alone, including one in Chinatown.



On 64 Charing Cross Road is Nature Republic, a leading Korean skincare brand with its first and only UK branch in Chinatown. It is not only Korean cuisine that has garnered attention in recent years. In 2016, the total export of Korean skincare and makeup products was valued at \$4.2 billion.



Bubble tea

With over 10 bubble tea shops in Chinatown alone, bubble tea has become a core part of Chinatown and synonymous with the identity of young East Asians in the West. Millennials might have grown up listening to Chinese American YouTubers Fung Brothers' parody of Carly Rae Jepsen's "Good Life", Bobalife and thought of themselves as part of the boba generation.

*"The new drink of all the young Asians
Make it tasty, make it tasty
You can call us the boba generation"*



We may think of bubble tea as a quintessential Taiwanese drink but its origins lie beyond Taiwan. Bubble tea, like many foods, has been shaped by the movement of people across space and time.

The story of bubble tea is also one about acceptance. Think back to the days of Limehouse and the discrimination faced by people of East Asian descent. From the late 18th century, European perception of Chinese food was one of hostility, contempt and even disgust. Think to how popular bubble tea is today, not just for people of Asian descent. Bubble tea has become synonymous with acceptance of cultures that are not our own.

What does bubble tea have to do with migration?

Tapioca

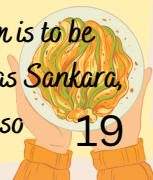
- originates from South America
- early European settlers in Brazil (1500s) relied on tapioca (starch from the cassava plant) to survive
 - they realised the versatility of the plant and brought it with them on slave trading routes to Africa
- Portuguese colonists brought tapioca to Goa (1510s); Dutch colonists brought tapioca to Indonesia (1800s)
- Chinese migrants to Malaya harvested tapioca as indentured labourers
 - they acquired their permits from the British government since Malaysia was a British colony (1800s-1950s)

Milk Tea

- tea first became known in the western world through traders to the East and religious missionaries to China
- milk tea emerged when the British began adding milk and sugar to their tea
 - sugar to mask the bitter taste
 - milk to prevent the cracking of European porcelain cups
- when the British colonised Hong Kong, they introduced adding milk to tea creating Hong Kong milk tea (1840s)
- tea was first introduced to Taiwan when migrants from China's Fujian province migrated to Taiwan (1850s)
- today, bubble tea reflects an expansion and exportation of Taiwanese culture



'so you do not know where imperialism is to be found? Just look at your plate!' ~ Thomas Sankara, former president of Burkina Faso



Cassava – a story of science and survival

In bubble tea, we think of tapioca as a sweet chewy jelly-like substance and perhaps that might be it. But behind tapioca's origins from the cassava plant lies a story about far much more.



drawing of *Cassava radix*

European naturalists often relied on the labour and knowledge of enslaved Africans to collect specimens

"The wind was against us, we sailed with a small stock of provisions to Portugal, and we suffered great famine, some of us eating goatskins, which we had in the ship. To each of us daily was given one small cup of water, and a little Brazilian root meal (cassava); we were one hundred and eight days on the water"

the account of Hans Staden, a German explorer working for the Portuguese who had travelled to Eastern Brazil (1557)

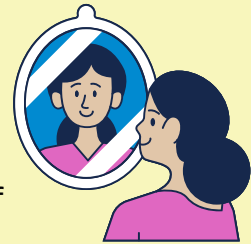
Next time you grab a bubble tea from Cuppacha or Xing Fu Tang, take a moment to think about the little cup of globalisation in your hand. Not only does bubble tea symbolise a movement of people, but the acceptance of cultures, a story about slavery, science, and survival.

Conclusion

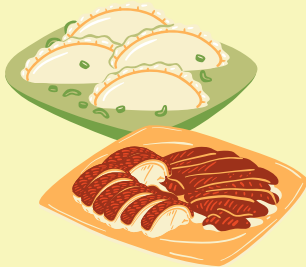


Today, Chinatown is a bustling community and tourist destination for those wanting to experience a slice of East Asian culture. London's Chinatown has come a long way from its Limehouse days and now encompasses far more regional diversity and East Asian multiculturalism than ever before.

Every single Chinatown restaurant and the food it serves has been shaped by migration. Whether it is the creation of a hybridised new dish such as chop suey or a cuisine that has been shaped by centuries of cultural contact, this does not make the dishes any less authentic in reflecting the identity of its creators.



Next time you're in Chinatown and grabbing a bite, take a moment to think of the journeys made by those who invented these dishes we know and love today. Think of those who first brought these dishes to this country, established the first restaurants in Chinatown, and made the present moment possible.



Chinatown's existence in London showcases not only the prominence of a Chinese community and a wider Asian community in London but also a peaceful coexistence between different cultures. Unfortunately, there are times when this peaceful coexistence has been threatened by acts of racism.

Covid racism fuels 80% rise in hate crimes against east and south east Asians in London

East Asian student assaulted in 'racist' coronavirus attack in London

Covid: British-Chinese people 'may be scarred for more than a generation' after virus-related racism



Is xenophobia spreading with the coronavirus?
4 February 2020

British Chinese children have told Newsround that racism during the coronavirus pandemic has got worse, leaving many scared to go outside.

Racism is not new but since the outbreak of covid-19, reports of racial abuse directed towards those of East and Southeast Asian descent have skyrocketed. This zine is meant to be a light-hearted read and paints a very rosy view of racial harmony in the present but it is important to bring to light the racism that threatens to tear apart this community.



Racist acts seek to alienate and exaggerate the otherness of a group but when we look closer, it turns out we are not so different after all. This zine has focused on the theme of food, showing how world cuisines influence each other and ingredients from around the world sit in harmony on the dinner table.

Chinatown has come a long way from its Limehouse days of racism and paranoia. Let's educate ourselves and not go back to those days.

