

Chinese diaspora in Britain

1680s

The first recorded Chinese person in Britain was Michael Alphonsius Shen Fu-Tsung, the son of Chinese Christian parents, who came to the court of King James II (1685-1688). Shen was the first person to catalogue the Chinese manuscripts in the Bodleian Library, Oxford. He died in 1691. His portrait was painted in 1687 by the painter Sir Godfrey Kneller and still hangs in the Queen's collection.

Late 1600s

Britain began maritime trade with China in the 1600s and Chinese sailors first came to London on board East India Company ships. They lived in and around Limehouse (now Poplar High Street) near the docks.

Early 1800s

A Chinese community developed in Liverpool, due to its importance as a maritime city with shipping companies trading with China.

British shipping companies first started employing Chinese sailors during the Napoleonic Wars (1803-1815) to replace the British sailors who had been called up to the navy.

1805

John Anthony, a Chinese sailor who looked after the accommodation needs of Chinese sailors for the East India Shipping Company, became the first Chinese person to be naturalised as a British citizen.

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1850s

By the mid 1850s, many Chinese sailors lived in lodging houses by the riverside in Shadwell, London (near the present day Wapping Underground Station).

1851

The Census recorded 78 Chinese-born residents in England and Wales.

1855

The first Chinese student to graduate from a British university received his MD (doctoral degree for physicians) from Edinburgh University.

1861

The Census recorded 147 Chinese-born residents in England and Wales.

1865

The first direct steamship service from Europe to China was established in Liverpool by Alfred and Philip Holt's Blue Funnel Line. Chinese crew were employed on lower than average wages.

1870s

Some of the Chinese community in London consisted of stranded sailors who worked at the docks unloading tea from China. Later India replaced China as Britain's main source of tea.

1871

The Census recorded 202 Chinese-born residents in England and Wales.

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1877

China sent its first government minister, Guo Songtao, to Britain. He established a Chinese legation in London.

1880s

London's first Chinatown emerged around Limehouse as Chinese sailors settled there to escape the cramped lodgings provided by the East India Shipping Company.

1881

The Census recorded 665 Chinese-born residents in England and Wales.

1882

Wu Tin Fang was the first Chinese law student to become a barrister in London.

1890s

By 1890 there were two small Chinese communities in London. Chinese people from Shanghai settled around Pennyfields, Amoy Place and Ming Street (in Poplar) and those from Canton and south China lived in the Limehouse area.

In Liverpool small numbers of Chinese people began to set up businesses to cater for the needs of the Chinese sailors who worked for the city's shipping lines.

1891

The Census recorded 582 Chinese-born residents in England and Wales.

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1900

By 1900, the Chinese dock community in London numbered over 500, primarily single men, some of whom had married British women.

1901

The first Chinese laundry opened in Poplar, east London and met with hostility from local people.

1900–1910

Chinese Mutual Aid associations were set up in London and Liverpool. These associations looked after the interests of their members, arranged burials and assisted in cases of exploitation.

1907

The first recorded opening of a Chinese restaurant in London.

Leslie Charteris was born Leslie Charles Bowyer-Yin. A screenwriter and author of mystery fiction, he is best known for his books chronicling the adventures of Simon Templar, alias 'The Saint.' He died in 1993.

1911

The Census recorded 1319 Chinese-born residents in England and Wales. The census occupation records showed 480 sailors serving in the British Merchant Navy, 348 laundry workers, 62 employed in retail and 35 in catering.

During the Transport Workers' Strike of July 1911 in Cardiff, every one of the city's thirty-three Chinese laundries was attacked against a background of hostility towards the Chinese community.

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1914

The 1914 'British Nationality and Status of Aliens Act' changed immigration laws making it easier for foreign citizens to settle in Britain. More Chinese families began to settle across Britain.

Frank Soo (1914-1991), born Hong Ying Soo in Buxton, Derbyshire. He was brought up in Liverpool and became a football player and manager (in Britain and abroad). He was the son of a Chinese sailor, Our Quong Soo, and an English mother, Beatrice Soo.

By 1914 there were reported to be five Chinese families living in Bristol. In that year, Hong Pang (c.1890-1958) arrived in Bristol. He was a ship's laundry worker, from Guangzhou. Hong Pang settled in the Horfield district of the city, and established a laundry business that lasted for several generations.

1916

During the First World War, the Sailors' and Firemen's Union organized protest meetings around Limehouse and Poplar against the increasing use of Chinese labour on British ships.

1917

1083 Chinese people left Shandong on a British ship bound for Le Havre. They were the first group of workers (which would eventually total nearly 100,000) recruited to unload munitions and supplies in France for the Allied effort in the First World War.

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1921

The Census recorded 2419 Chinese-born residents in England and Wales, including 547 laundry workers, 455 sailors and 26 restaurant workers.

1930

Burt Kwouk was born in Manchester on 18 July 1930. His film career began with *The Inn of the Sixth Happiness* in 1958 and he went on to star in the Pink Panther Films opposite Peter Sellers. He also starred in many television shows including *Doctor Who* and *Last of the Summer Wine*.

1931

The Census recorded 1934 Chinese-born residents in England and Wales,

1937

Japan attacked China at the start of the second Sino-Japanese War. In response the China Campaign Committee was set up in Britain with the support of Chinese students, Chinese intellectuals and other members of the Chinese communities in London, Liverpool and Manchester.

1938

The publications *China Week* and *China Sunday* with the support of Chinese communities in Britain, the Archbishop of York and other church leaders, raised funds for the International Peace Hospital in Yan'an, Shaanxi province.

1939

With up to 20,000 Chinese sailors in Liverpool, the Chinese Merchant Seamen's Pool was established in the city. Members staffed the oil tankers on the dangerous North Atlantic supply route during the Second World War.

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1942

A strike was held by Chinese mariners in Liverpool for equal pay to that of local seamen. The strike lasted for four months. The strike was ultimately unsuccessful, resulting in the Chinese being forbidden shore jobs and being offered one-way voyages back to China.

1939-1950

During this period, the Chinese community in East London was badly affected by the Blitz followed by a post-war slump in maritime trade.

Late 1940s

The British Government and the shipping companies worked together to forcibly repatriate as many as 1,362 Chinese seamen with the Blue Funnel Line sacking all of its Chinese crews. Records show that about 300 of these men had married British women and had families. They were therefore qualified to stay in Britain and their repatriation was illegal.

1949

First Chinese restaurant opened in Newcastle upon Tyne.

1951

The Census recorded 12,523 Chinese people living in England and Wales.

David Yip was born on 4 June 1951 in Liverpool. After training in London as an actor, he played the lead role of Johnny Ho in the 1981 BBC drama *The Chinese Detective*. He starred in many film and television programmes including Indiana Jones and James Bond films as well as *Doctor Who*, *Brookside* and *Casualty*.

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1958

Release of the Hollywood film *The Inn of the Sixth Happiness* which was shot in Snowdonia (standing in for China) and featured many of the Liverpool Chinese community as extras.

1960s

Land reform in Hong Kong brought agricultural workers to Britain in search of a new livelihood. Many settled in Soho and Bayswater in London, drawn by the booming Chinese restaurant trade. British soldiers who had served in the Far East created a new customer base for Chinese cuisine. The area in Soho, around Gerrard Street, became known as Chinatown.

In Birmingham, an informal cluster of Chinese community organizations, social clubs and businesses (centred around Hurst Street) emerged in the 1960s. At the start of the decade the first Chinese people settled in Northern Ireland and the Chinese community in Tyne and Wear began to grow.

1961

The Census recorded a Chinese population of 38,730 in England and Wales.

1962

Restrictions on immigration from current and former British colonies were introduced.

1966

After 1962, immigration to Bristol from Hong Kong and the Malaysian Chinese community increased and by 1966, there were ten Chinese restaurants in the city.

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1970s

During the 1970s about 300 take-away outlets were established across the Tyneside region. Two community organizations – the North-East Chinese Association and the Wah Sun Chinese Association - were established.

1971

The Census recorded a Chinese population of 96,030 in England and Wales.

1974

Gok Wan was born in Leicester to a British mother and a Chinese father. He received his diploma in performing arts at the Charles Keene College of Further Education, Leicester and began working as a session hair and make-up artist before moving into fashion styling. He is currently well-known as a British fashion consultant, author and television presenter

Late 1970s

Lewisham, Lambeth and Hackney in London became the focal points for Chinese immigrants as Vietnamese Chinese people fled the war in Vietnam.

1980s

Birmingham's Chinese Quarter was officially recognized in the 1980s. The city is home to the headquarters of the Chinese supermarket chain Wing Yip.

1981

The 1981 British Nationality Act deprived Hong Kong British passport holders of the right of abode in the United Kingdom. Later, in 1990, the government made provision to grant citizenship to 50,000 families, whose presence was important to the future of Hong Kong, under the British Nationality Act (Hong Kong) 1990.

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The 1981 Census recorded a Chinese population of 154,363 in England and Wales.

Mid 1980s

A significant migration from mainland China began in the mid-1980s as the People's Republic of China introduced more relaxed restrictions on emigration.

1985

A survey indicated that 90% of the employed Chinese worked in the catering industry. By 2004, this number had halved.

1986

Ping Pong, the first Chinese film from the British Chinese community, opened in London. Directed by the British-born director Po-Chi Leong, who had directed several features in Hong Kong, the film is set in London's Chinatown. Apart from the well-known actor David Yip, it had a largely unknown cast and dealt with traditional Chinese themes of family responsibility and duty.

1987

Completion of Manchester's Chinatown archway, at the time the largest in Europe (superseded by the Chinese archway erected in Liverpool in 2000).

1988

Chinese businesses in Stowell Street – Newcastle's Chinatown – were allowed to display signs in Chinese as well as English. BBC Radio Newcastle introduced a 15 minute Sunday afternoon Chinese language slot aimed at the Chinese community.

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The number of Chinese community language schools (supporting British born Chinese children in learning about the Chinese language and culture) estimated at 100.

1989

12 Chinese restaurants, 300 take-aways, 4 Chinese supermarkets and one Chinese food-processing factory were operating in the Tyneside region. Alongside the settled Chinese community there were 1000 Chinese students attending the region's institutions of higher education.

1980s and 90s

The 1980s and 90s saw a migration of scholars and professionals from London's Chinatown to the suburbs of Croydon and Colindale.

1997

In 1997, the government brought in the Crime and Disorder Act, which included the offence of racially aggravated harassment. One of the first prosecutions under this act concerned a Bristol Chinese fish and chip shop owner who had been subject to a four-month campaign of harassment by a local resident.

1998

The Bristol China partnership was founded.

2000

Chinese communities were present in many major British cities including London, Birmingham, Manchester, Liverpool, Bristol, Newcastle, Sheffield, Belfast and Aberdeen. In some cities these communities included third and fourth generation British-born Chinese.

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2001

On 23 May Bristol and Guangzhou signed a 'sister city agreement'.

12,000 Chinese takeaways and 3,000 Chinese restaurants in Britain.

The first Chinese Peer, Lord Michael Chan of Oxton appointed to the House of Lords.

Chinese Civil Rights Action group established.

2002

Jimmy Choo awarded an OBE by Queen Elizabeth II in recognition of services to the British shoe and fashion industry. Choo, a Malaysian of Chinese descent born in 1961 into a family of shoemakers, made his first shoe at the age of 11. He graduated from Cordwainers' Technical College (now part of the London College of Fashion) in 1983 and opened his first workshop three years later. In 1996, he co-founded Jimmy Choo Ltd and, in 2001, sold his 50% stake in the company for £10 million.

British Chinese formally complained to the British Library regarding an exhibition about the East India Company and demanded recognition of the human cost of the opium trade in China.

2003

Aberdeen city council approved plans for a new Chinatown in the northern part of the city.

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2004

143,500 Chinese people recorded living in Britain including 15,000 in Wales (1700 of these in the city of Swansea).

At least 21 Chinese workers died at Morecambe Bay while working out on the sands collecting cockles. The event highlighted the plight of illegal Chinese immigrants.

2005

Anna Lo became the first member of an ethnic minority community to be elected to political office in Northern Ireland as a member of the Northern Ireland assembly.

British schools and universities educated more students from China (about 60,000) than from any other country.

2006

A memorial plaque in remembrance of the Chinese sailors expelled from Britain in the late 1940s was erected on Liverpool's Pier Head.

The drama film *Ghosts* was released. Directed by Nick Broomfield, the film was based on the 2004 Morecambe Bay cockling disaster.

2007

The Chinese community in Scotland, originating from both mainland China and Hong Kong, numbered just over 10,000, with the most significant population in Glasgow.

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2008

8000 Chinese people living in Northern Ireland. The majority in the Greater Belfast Urban Area with significant numbers in Craigavon, Lisburn, Newtownabbey and North Down.

Further reading

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