



'Chinese Whispers?'

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Reading Race, Collecting Cultures

Collections at the Ahmed Iqbal Ullah Race Relations Resource Centre



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Chinese Whispers?



The Roving Reader Files

Three pounds of rice, four duck eggs, a pair of straw shoes, and a lonely trip over the mountains to 1940s Hong Kong. Long hours of labour in food outlets mushrooming on 1960s London high streets. What do these scenes have in common? The answer's illiterate Chinese migrant Yue Kai Chung.



What an extraordinary life, pursued in the byways established by the extraordinary history of cultural and human exchange between China and the UK! If you've ever speculated about the origins of those enigmatic-looking Chinese takeaways, or mused about the experiences of the people that toil inside, come into the Centre and thumb through ***Such a Long Story! Chinese Voices in Britain*** and ***Chinese Homes: Chinese Traditions in English Homes***. It'll relieve you of relying on the misleading stereotypes perpetuated by the **Chinese whispering** that goes on in the media.

Such a Long Story! (1994) and ***Chinese Homes*** (1992) were pioneering attempts to allow Chinese people and their culture to speak for themselves. Beautifully-illustrated and featuring Chinese text along with English translation, both complement each other in providing a platform to aid understanding of a community which had for so long remained quietly in the shadows.

We previously met Jamaican Londoner **Louise Shore**, whose ambition to write her autobiography was achieved with the help of the Hackney Reading Centre. Well, ***Such a Long Story!*** was only one amongst several publications resulting from a similar enterprise – The Ethnic Communities Oral History Project, a voluntary organisation backed by part-funding from London's Hammersmith and Fulham Council.

Apparently based in Shepherds Bush Library, only a stone's throw away from the famous BBC studios, the Project had already compiled and published oral histories relating to, among others, the Polish, Iranian, Afro-Caribbean, Irish, Traveller, Basque and Somali communities. What an assortment! All lived cheek by jowl in the same borough of London.

Committed to recording and publishing in the mother tongue, this undertaking enabled seemingly marginalised non-English-speaking individuals like Yue Kai Chung to take centre stage in narrating their own unique experiences, their own sacrifices and hardships. In Yue Kai Chung's case, these had led him from a remote Chinese village, via the post-war upheavals in Hong Kong, to the teeming streets of London.

Meanwhile, not far down the road from the publisher of Louise Shore's autobiography in Hackney, [The Geffrye Museum of the Home](#) had collaborated in a remarkable cooperation between academics, cultural institutions and elders from the Hackney Chinese Community Centre. A fascinating exhibition called 'Chinese Homes. Chinese Traditions in English Homes' was produced, involving related community activities. *Chinese Homes* was published to support this work.



Charting the indelible imprint over the centuries of Chinese arts, crafts and textiles on the development of English aesthetic tastes and manufacturing, *Chinese Homes* also presented the lived experience of actual Chinese settlers in London since the nineteenth century. In its exhibition, The Geffrye Museum had even reconstructed [the interiors of whole rooms](#) to show how local Chinese families were maintaining their precious cultural traditions. Pictures of such rooms appeared in *Chinese Homes*.

At the core of these efforts lay the mission to increase the level of understanding between British and Chinese people, not only of each other, but also of their respective cultures.

It would be some years before the Chinese economic miracle took firm hold and China burst onto the world stage as a powerhouse of industrial activity. The determination of those who produced *Chinese Homes* can only be admired, working as they did in the poisoned atmosphere left by the 1989 events in Tiananmen Square, and against the suspicions prevailing in the popular imagination regarding what until then had seemed a closed and reclusive nation.

So what of Yue Kai Chung and his peers?

Armed with the insights provided by *Chinese Homes*, we can perhaps contextualise with deeper understanding the life experiences preserved in *Such a Long Story!* We can follow in our mind's eye twenty-year-old Yue Kai Chung as he passes crying over the mountains to Hong Kong with his rice, duck eggs and straw sandals. Full of tears, yes, but also full of hope for the chance to work towards a better life for himself and his family. Through reliving Yue Kai Chung's words, even if only in our imaginations, we may look a little more sympathetically upon the waves of migrants that have arrived here in the UK since his time.

Let's hope it will be so...



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Such a Long Story! Chinese Voices in Britain was published by The Ethnic Communities Oral History Project in 1994, and *Chinese Homes. Chinese Traditions in English Homes* was published by The Geffrye Museum of the Home in 1992. Written and compiled by David Dewing, Harriet Dover, Jan Graffius and Steve Hemming, the latter was described on its price tag as the 'Chinese Homes Catalogue'. These two publications are unusual in featuring text in two languages (a Chinese original along with translation into English), but there are loads more equally fascinating oral history publications in the Centre which are just in English. Come in and take a look.