

## The Chinese Community in Britain and Ireland and the Response of the Churches

*Maggi Whyte – Sheila Crowe*

### The Situation in Britain

#### 1. Context

The Chinese community in the UK is one of the largest and oldest in Europe. The latest public statistics are from the UK Census of 2001, when the Chinese population was quoted as being just under 250,000 – or 0.4% of the total population. It is the fastest-growing ethnic group in UK and by 2006, the estimated number had risen to 400,000. However, current estimates put the figure at 600,000 – including probably almost 100,000 students, but excluding irregular migrant workers. This figure includes the rapidly-expanding number of British-born Chinese.

#### 2. Background

The first significant settlements were in the early 19th century, when Chinese sailors, – many originally from the ports of Tianjin, Shanghai and Canton (Guangzhou) – who had been employed by British shipping companies, settled in the port areas of London and Liverpool. These two places, along with Manchester, Cardiff and several other British cities, are still home to the most concentrated Chinese communities. The early self-contained communities focussed round the mobile population of sailors, together with the small numbers of permanent residents who provided services for them. They grew slowly but steadily between the 1850s and 1920s, by which time Chinese laundries – and later, Chinese restaurants – were significant features which were appearing within the wider community. Chinese seamen's participation with the British in the two World Wars, and

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Sr. Sheila Crowe is an Irish Columban Sister who has for many years taken a great interest in China and the Church in China. She was involved in the Educational Apostolate for many years in Hong Kong and later moved to China, teaching English as a Foreign Language in two different universities. She now resides in Ireland and is involved in recruiting teachers to teach English in China as she herself did previously.

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their subsequent appalling treatment, is not a widely-known story – but their presence continued to be the backbone of ongoing Chinese settlements.

In the 1950s, these communities were replaced by a rapidly-growing population of Chinese from Hong Kong, and the restaurant trade expanded rapidly. With post-war rebuilding, London's Chinese community moved from the East End into its current central location in Soho. In the 1960s and 70s, they were joined by Chinese economic migrants from the other former British colonies of Malaysia and Singapore – who dominated the scene until rising living standards in the areas of origin and other factors, including changes in nationality laws, reduced the flow. From the 1980s onward, a significant number of students from mainland China began to arrive – initially modest numbers of mainly post-graduate students, followed more recently by larger numbers of undergraduates. In addition, the flow of economic migrants from areas of mainland China without previous migratory links to Britain has boosted the Chinese population.

### 3. Key Issues

The UK Chinese population does not form a cohesive integrated community, but is a complex mix with ethnic, class and professional differences. On the one hand, it is perceived as a successful group in business, academic and hi-tech spheres, including many younger high-achievers, but it also characterised as having a sector traditionally confined to low-paid, low-skilled occupations in the niche catering market. However, there are a range of issues that are commonly felt to be of concern, especially to the lowest-paid and most vulnerable. These include:

- Lack of English-language skills, which prevents good access to public services, especially health and housing.
- The language barrier also restricts employment opportunities and many feel trapped in the long hours and low wages of the traditional restaurant sector.
- Isolation, especially for the elderly and those living in areas without an active Chinese community.

These, and other concerns, have prompted the establishment of a number of Chinese community centres in the main cities, giving support and advice on a range of issues.

A Chinese Mental Health Centre in London recently listed the following as main triggers for mental health problems among its clients:

- Racism and prejudice
- Dispersed settlement and isolation
- Long and unlegislated working hours
- Lack of English language skills
- Unfair stereotypes
- Inter-generational issues

### 4. British-born Chinese

The last point in the list above – inter-generational issues – is a key one for British-born Chinese (or BBCs, as they are often known). Figures from the 2001 census showed that

29% of Chinese people then living in UK were born there, a significant increase on the previous decade. Many Chinese families are into their second or third generation. However, many young BBCs experience difficulty in “trying to please both cultures” – maintaining the traditional values and culture of their parents and grandparents, while integrating with the wider youth culture of their peers. Chinese school students are high achievers; in 2002, they were the ethnic group with best GCSE exam results. Of the successful applications to UK universities in 2009, 4000 were BBCs.

A recent survey showed that while this group respect the strong emphasis their families place on academic achievement, some feel that their parents are inclined to neglect the value of social integration. There is a network of Chinese extra-curricular schools in UK, set up to introduce Chinese language and culture to the new generations; at present, that network includes 13,000 youngsters across the country. The young people surveyed expressed a wish for more youth groups where they could meet with other Chinese young people.

## 5. Migrant Workers

From the 1950s, new waves of migrant workers of Chinese origin began to arrive in UK and these numbers have increased dramatically in subsequent decades. The profile of this group has changed over the years, from the earlier regions of origin in Hong Kong and SE Asia, to newer areas of mainland China, including Fujian and Dongbei; also in terms of educational background, skills and status. That the Chinese are the fastest-growing ethnic group in UK is largely due to net migration. Amongst the Chinese migrant workers currently in UK, it is estimated that there may well be 150,000–200,000 who are undocumented or have irregular status. Of the 1000 workers in London’s Chinatown alone, one-third are thought to be illegal. There was a steep rise in the number of Chinese asylum-seekers in the 1990s, and in 2003 Chinese were the third most frequent nationality applying. There are now a number of Chinese advice centres who specialise in asylum law.

Two tragedies, one in 2000 when 58 Chinese stowaways were found suffocated in a lorry at the port of Dover, and one in 2004, when 21 Chinese cockle-pickers were drowned in Morecambe Bay, brought the attention of the British public to people-trafficking and the shadowy world of illegal migrant workers; laws were subsequently passed to regulate the activities of gangmasters (snakeheads), profiting from smuggling illegal workers into the country and keeping them in intolerable conditions, with poor housing and below-minimum wages.

Migrant workers are found in a range of occupations: health service, business sector, catering, food processing, garment-making, traditional medicine, seasonal agriculture and construction – more recently in child-minding and the selling of DVDs and cigarettes. Many Chinese are supporting families back home, often trying to assist their children through their university years. The recent economic recession has had a negative effect on certain trades in which Chinese migrant workers have engaged; at the same time, there is increased demand in some areas from the growing Chinese community. The recession and changes to immigration law have curbed to some extent the activities of the snakeheads. Many irregular migrant workers have returned to China earlier than they originally

planned. A severe shortage of legitimate workers in the catering industry has led to more of these posts being taken up by students – some of whom work part-time to supplement their living expenses, but some of whom are full-time workers and are not actually attending educational establishments.

Concerns about issues such as bonded labour and labour brokerages, and a wish to improve working conditions, has led the Chinese community recently to be involved in the UK-wide “Strangers into Citizens” campaign; this was launched to try and carve a pathway to citizenship for long-term and undocumented migrant workers of any origin. The campaign was marked by London’s Chinatown in May 2010 with a symbolic closure of restaurants.

## 6. Chinese Students

Edinburgh was the first university in Europe to admit a student from China – 1855 saw the first Chinese Doctor of Medicine graduate in Scotland. Small numbers of Chinese students arrived during the second half of the 19th century and by the time of the first World War, there were more than 350 Chinese scholars recorded. From the 1960s, increasing numbers of students came from Hong Kong, but it is only in the last decade or two that significant numbers have started to come from mainland China and the number of those coming for undergraduate or foundation courses, or to attend private or language schools, has increased dramatically. In 2005, it was estimated that there were 50,000 Chinese students in UK; today that figure is thought to be nearer 100,000. Chinese students are the largest single ethnic group amongst the overseas students attending UK universities, although they are varied in origin, status and prospects. Many go on to become permanent residents, part of a highly-successful and educated group within the mainstream economy.

As doubtless elsewhere, the profile of the incoming students has changed as the numbers increase. Many are now privately-funded by parents, rather than here on scholarships and this has an impact on the type of student coming here, and their lifestyle expectations. While some students are on a very tight budget, others are expecting to maintain the lifestyle they have experienced in Beijing or Shanghai. There is quite a significant divide between rich and poor students, which can lead to envy and a pressure to keep up with the more affluent. Many students, especially if located in smaller institutions, can be lonely and welcome contact with British people. Many feel the pressures of “perfectionism and performance,” according to one Chinese chaplain and may find it difficult to connect their own cultural experiences to the environment they have arrived in. There are a number of Chinese student associations, including the long-established Chinese Students and Scholars Association, which has branches in many universities.

## The Response of the Churches

### A: The Chinese Community

**Catholic:** There are a small number of Catholic priests ministering to the Chinese community in Britain, most of whom are British nationals relating to Cantonese speakers.

One priest from Hong Kong who worked as chaplain to the Chinese community in the Archdiocese of Westminster has recently retired. The Archdiocese is currently hoping to find a new Chinese chaplain, who will address the needs of the Mandarin-speaking group, including both the wider Chinese community, as well as students in the capital. Previously, a Chinese priest student, sponsored for studies in the UK by Cultural Exchange with China (CEC), started a Mandarin-speaking service in London twice a month, which attracted up to 60 people, but this was discontinued once the student returned home. Catholic Chaplains to prisons have also referred imprisoned Chinese, usually illegal migrants, to Mandarin-speaking students sponsored by CEC.

In central London, St Patrick's Catholic church is the base for sacramental services to the Chinese Community in the Westminster archdiocese. Based in Soho, it relates to the nearby Chinatown community, and has offered a Cantonese Mass since the 1980s – the first public Cantonese Mass being said in 1967. Hitherto predominantly serving the Cantonese community, some Mandarin-speakers are now attending and so readings and homily are now translated for them. Currently there is no official Diocesan chaplain, so limited services are provided by Mandarin-speaking PhD students from Philippines and Poland and a Columban Father home from Taiwan, who extends his ministry to Chinese people elsewhere in England and Scotland as needed. Many Chinese Catholics in other locations would seek their local Catholic church and attend as individuals.

**Protestant:** Members of the Chinese community, as well as attending local Protestant churches as individuals, have established many Chinese congregations across Britain, particularly in large cities. Some of these, for example the Chinese congregation at St Martin-in-the-Fields in central London, have been established for several decades. In most cases, the congregations were formed to serve Cantonese speaking worshippers, but many have recently added Mandarin-speaking services. A good proportion of these congregations also provide social service activities – eg, clubs for the elderly, advice and support centres, and in some cases, Chinese supplementary schools, mainly aimed at the BBCs. More recently, congregations have formed out of groups begun by mainland Chinese students and who have stayed for employment. The turnover of such congregations is much more rapid.

With notable exceptions, like St Martin's, which is an Anglican church, plus a Methodist countryside network of about 10 churches with congregations ranging from 12 to more than 200 worshippers, the Chinese congregations tend to be independent, without denominational affiliation and conservative evangelical in nature. There are at least 120 such congregations across Britain, with approximately 30 in London. Many of the congregations meet by arrangement in operational Protestant church buildings, although some have premises of their own. Many of them are linked through the network of COCM (Chinese Overseas Christian Mission), an organisation set up in the 1950s to nurture Chinese churches in Britain and Europe. They provide support in terms of personnel and publications, as well as providing training courses in Christian ministry at their own Bible College, set up in 2003. COCM had to close their college recently, but are now running bible-training courses in a new format.

Within London, the Chinese Church in London (CCiL), also established in 1950 by the same Chinese pastor as COCM – and with 7 congregations offering services in Can-

tonese, Mandarin and English – has a high profile. They offer a broad range of activities, involving young and old; “The Next Generation” ministry is specifically geared to the new generation of BBCs. CCI’s New Leaf Counselling Service offers culturally sensitive counselling and workshops in the areas of relationships, family issues, gambling, stress of studies, drug abuse and identity problems (this last aimed at BBCs). St Martin-in-the-Fields has Cantonese and Mandarin services, and the longstanding Ho Ming Hwa Association, set up in the 1980s, runs an effective Chinese Centre which offers a wide range of social and informative activities for the Chinese community during the week. They were also the impetus behind the Christian Centre for Gambling Rehabilitation, set up in 1996. The central London Chinese Methodist congregations also have considerable outreach work, including offering support and advice to undocumented migrant workers.

## B: Chinese Students

**Catholic:** Cultural Exchange with China (CEC) which was started in 2001, aims to build bridges between the Catholic churches of China and Britain – including relating to Chinese students coming to UK for study, especially engaging those from the Catholic community – as well as linking with local Chinese communities. CEC has taken three exposure groups to China to get a sense of the situation there and hopefully on return to facilitate greater openness by the Catholic Church in the UK to the newly arriving Chinese. In 2008, CEC took several UK chaplains on such a visit and contacts are maintained with the Catholic chaplaincy network, with input into regional chaplaincy meetings and further opportunities for briefings being sought. In a small number of places, eg Guildford, local congregation members are engaged in outreach to Chinese students.

**Protestant:** There are some very positive initiatives being taken across the country, but to date the response has not been even or coordinated. Quite a number of churches in locations where there are universities and colleges make outreach to international students, Chinese included, welcoming them sometimes with courses of introduction to British culture and habits, or to the local area. Often much-appreciated invitations to share time with British families are extended, sometimes through coordination with Christian organisations like Friends International and Host. Occasionally these contact events may be geared specifically to Chinese students: for example at Chinese New Year; one “Churches Together” group regularly hosts a Chinese New Year meal for students to celebrate together with church members.

More coordinated services are offered through some of the established groups – for instance, the Chinese Church in London (CCI) has a developed mentoring scheme for Chinese students and Methodists in NE England are just setting up a one-to-one mentoring scheme. St Martin-in-the-Fields has recently established a project specifically aimed at outreach to Chinese students in London. Some groups are paying particular attention to returning students; one such Mandarin-speaking congregation at a London city church is called “Gospel Home.” Some students who return to China after studying abroad have found it difficult to adjust to living in China again, not least to the expectations of their family and a different working culture. Particular issues may be raised for those who have

converted to Christianity during their time overseas and the new organisation Link International has begun work to help Christian returnees settle back into China. The Overseas Missionary Fellowship (OMF), formerly the China Inland Mission, has an established Diaspora Ministry, offering English language classes and even driving tuition, as points of contact! They offer training days to churches and universities, enabling British people to gain an insight into East Asian cultures, as preparation for engaging with students from those areas. Many of the local Chinese congregations have activities to which Chinese students are invited and much use is made of websites and social-networking sites, as well as personal contact, to advertise available events.

### C: Chaplaincies

Hitherto, there has been no coordinated effort to support chaplains, either Catholic or Protestant, within the universities and colleges in their engagement with the growing numbers of Chinese students. There are a relatively small number of Chinese men and women who are formally involved in chaplaincy teams. Some British chaplains have expressed their concern about their lack of cultural understanding when relating to Chinese students – particularly in situations of pastoral care. We are also aware that it is difficult to introduce the concept of chaplaincy to Chinese students and to let them know that chaplaincy services are available to them.

In order to address these issues, the China Desk of Churches Together in Britain and Ireland (CTBI) – which brings together representatives of British church groups, including CEC, in a China Forum – and Friends of the Church in China (FCC), an ecumenical partnership group of 25 years' standing, have been investigating the situation regarding Chinese students in a number of universities across the country. In April 2010, they hosted a Round Table meeting on The Practical and Pastoral Needs of Chinese Students studying in UK. This brought together chaplains, representatives of British and Chinese congregations, organisations working in the field and Chinese students. From this small beginning, an informal network has been set up to facilitate the exchange of resources and it is hoped that this may mean that successful model approaches may be rolled out in other areas. It is also hoped to set up a series of briefings for chaplains and other interested parties, to enable them to learn more about the Chinese cultural context, and to find ways of interpreting the religious landscape to Chinese students, making chaplaincy and counselling services more accessible. This project is in its initial stages, but it is hoped it will develop to enable people to make the best use of available resources and allow them to give the best support to the Chinese student community.

### The Situation in Ireland

In 2007, a report was commissioned by the Dublin University Far Eastern Mission (DUFEM), founded at Trinity College Dublin in 1885 and now focussing on cultural exchange and dialogue between the people and churches of Ireland and China. Entitled “Mainland Chinese Students and Immigrants in Ireland and their Engagement with Chris-

tianity, Churches and Irish Society,” the report’s conclusions included the following – of those surveyed:

- 79% had experienced some form of racism
- 58% felt marginalised due to language barriers
- 12% felt uncomfortable because of their ignorance of Irish customs, including religion
- 75% were unaware of denominational differences

The report also concluded that there were some 6000 Chinese Christians in Ireland, amounting to roughly 10% of the Chinese immigrant population, and suggested that the Chinese community was receptive to evangelism, particularly when engaged through Mandarin. The report’s findings are being utilised by DUFEM and local churches in their forward plans for outreach and it is hoped to develop a Chinese Centre at a downtown church location in Dublin.

*Maggi Whyte, Friends of the Church in China*

## Report on Chinese in Ireland, Specifically Dublin

Sr. Sheila Crowe gave an oral presentation based on the 16 given pointers.

### Chaplain

Fr. Xiao Xianbin, Anthony, assigned by his Bishop in Xianxian, Hebei Province and supported by Archbishop Diarmuid Martin in Dublin.

Anthony has been given a parochial House in Corpus Christi parish, Home Farm Road, Drumcondra, Dublin 9, where he holds his meetings.

### Pastoral Work

- 1 Contact with as many Chinese in the city as is possible.
- 2 Catechetical classes for catechumens. Presently he has 15 who will have their right of acceptance in November [2010], and election the first Sunday of Lent and Baptism at Easter.
- 3 Retreat for those preparing for Baptism and for their sponsors.
- 4 Post Baptism follow-up.
- 5 7 baptised at Easter 2009.
- 6 Visiting Chinese in hospitals and doing reflexology, trained in reflexology in China.
- 7 Visiting Chinese in prison, illegal immigrants and others.
- 8 Mass in his centre in Chinese on the 2nd and 4th Sunday each month.
- 9 Prayer meetings, Faith sharing, on Monday evenings.
- 10 Meeting with core group as required.
- 11 Pre Marriage courses.
- 12 Marriages.
- 13 Pre Baptism courses for parents of babies to be baptised.

- 14 Baptism and confirmation of babies during the Sunday liturgy.
- 15 Email the homily to those who cannot attend the Sunday Liturgy.
- 16 Reflective prayer sent to at least 200 through the internet.

*Sr Sheila Crowe*

## Some Useful References

China Policy Institute: [www.nottingham.ac.uk/cpi/index.aspx](http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/cpi/index.aspx)

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For an electronic version of the DUFEM Irish survey, please email [dufem@csc.tcd.ie](mailto:dufem@csc.tcd.ie)