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Dressing Up, Dressing Down! Situating Identities and Negotiating Otherness Through the Bodies of British Chinese Women

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Abstract

This paper will examine the ways in which the practices of dressing and adornment are employed to manage the otherness experienced by second generation British Chinese women. In amongst the lack of social representation in the wider British imagination, the objects of dress and adornment chosen by the women enables them to negotiate their visibility. As such, the negotiation of power is not an abstracted struggle within the mind, rather I propose that the struggle of power manifests as a material strategy through dressing. Drawing on creative ethnographic fieldwork, the women narrate their experiences through materiality to create personal artworks, which offers an insight into the affective dimension of their personal embodiment. As a creative ethnographic methodology with a focus on material practices, this research demonstrates the enriched insights of such qualitative and experimental research methods to emphasise the significance of everyday actions and objects in the negotiation of power in the formation of ethnic women's identities.

Keywords: *British Chinese, women, dressing, embodiment, arts-based ethnography, materiality, creative methodologies, visibility, identity.*

The subjective experience of the self is a bodily matter, one that is materially felt. The negotiation of one's identity is rarely an internal monologue; rather, this struggle manifests in dialogue with one's external environment. The potential to integrate into social life, either in compliance or resistance, is a material condition; Chris Shilling reminds us of a basic yet fundamental condition, "We

More information about the object-stories of British Chinese women can be found at the following online exhibition: www.objectstories.co.uk.

have bodies and we act with our bodies” (2003: 24). These notions can be actualised through interaction but first and foremost, they are materially embodied through practices of dressing. In this sense, dressing is not just a vessel of semiotic significance but rather, it is a *felt* condition as it reassures and armours the individual in various social encounters. Keenly understanding the potential of orientating one’s identity through dress, the women in this study use dress in different ways to negotiate their otherness along racial, gendered and sexual identities. To elucidate these concepts, this paper will focus on experiences of second generation, British Chinese women living in London to examine the negotiation of their identities through dressing and adornment.

The sense of otherness raised by the women is indicative of the limited visibility of the British Chinese in the UK. This notion is observed by David Parker, who described the Chinese community as the “least noticed of all communities in Britain” (1998: 4). Compared to other ethnic groups in Britain, the Chinese have been perceived as “quiet” or “reserved” however the lack of social recognition has not insulated the Chinese from stereotypical notions. These stereotypes oscillate from the figure of the opium smoking Fu Manchu (Witchard, 2014), to subservient caterers, to the well-adjusted model minority; each one in turn distorts the complexities experienced by the British Chinese.

Debating the terms of the Chinese diaspora, Adam McKeown (1999) observes that the history of Chinese migration has been dominated by two competing nation-based narratives; the China-centred perspective has emphasised the preservation of a “Chinese soul”, while the Western-centred perspective has emphasised the flexible adaptation of Chinese people. In 2008, Benton and Gomez produced a much needed historical account of the British Chinese through an employment lens, however the gendered considerations were minimal. The research on the British Chinese has broadly concentrated on the identifications and performativity of ethnic boundaries (Pang, 1999; Lin, 2014) while the intersectional considerations between race and gender have been less considered.

The limited research of diasporic Chinese women in the UK sits in great contrast to the scholarship relating to American Chinese women (Ling, 2013; Yang, 1999; and Bao, 2006). While there are instances of research on British Chinese

women as journal articles (Yuen, 2008; Lim, 2015), to date there are no published hardback accounts dedicated to the subjectivities and histories of British Chinese women. Due to the lack of research on British Chinese women, there is a tendency for women to be portrayed as “suffering” due to oppression, existing between Confucian and Western cultures (Yuen, 2008) or as “workers” in reproductive labour with the family takeaway business (Benton & Gomez, 2008). To counter these opposing stereotypes, this analysis will adopt a material culture perspective and Creative Research Methods (CRM) as a methodological approach to illuminate the subjectivities of British Chinese women through materiality and creative expression. To provide a wider view, this analysis takes its findings from a wider study on the materiality and creative expressions of first and second generation British Chinese women. However for this paper, I will focus on the material objects and dress practices relating to the second generation of British Chinese women.

Over the course of a generation, the burgeoning second generation are viewed as having made “rapid socio-economic advancement” (Pang & Lau, 1998). According to the 1988-1990 Labour Force Survey, British Chinese attained the “highest percentage for any ethnic group in Britain” (Parker, 1998: 97) as the survey reports that 44% of all Chinese aged 16 to 24 had at least one A-Level or equivalent qualification. By 2000, a quarter of young Chinese had degrees, as reported by Benton and Gomez (2008: 353). As the second generation, they do not contend with the language barriers that faced their predecessors. Their educational attainment suggests that the young British Chinese have a greater propensity to choose an occupation of their choice. The perception of these achievements of an ethnic minority group has led the Chinese in Britain to be labelled as a “model minority”. Given these projections, an in-depth focus on the subjectivities of second generation British Chinese women is much needed to interrogate the assumptions of social mobility and cultural ease for this cohort. To sufficiently offer an in-depth analysis, this paper will draw on the accounts of two second generation British Chinese women.

Creative Research Methods in the Study of Identity

Under the umbrella of grounded theory, I used creative research methods as a two-tiered approach which comprised of (1) life-story interviews where they selected a personal object of significance to articulate their experience as British Chinese women; (2) art workshops where the women made artwork inspired by their object as the women embarked on experimental writing, collaging and printing. To build a more intricate picture of the experiences of British Chinese women, each stage cannot be understood as mutually exclusive. Rather, they function as part of a holistic, cyclical process in which each part inspires and informs the others.

Grounded theory conceptualises individuals as active agents rather than as passive bystanders of social structures. As an approach, grounded theory observes the agency of people to situate the ways in which they navigate the structural challenges they face. This people-centred approach becomes a strategy to challenge the theoretical grand narratives that might silence the individual on the ground. Norman K. Denzin reflects on the suitability of using grounded theory in people-centred research:

There is no grand or middle or formal theory here, no formal propositions, no testable hypotheses. No wonder it is so popular. It is all grounded. It is two things at the same time, a verb, a method of inquiry, and a noun, a product of inquiry. It is intuitive. You let the obdurate empirical world speak to you [...] No hierarchy, the social theorists are not privileged (Denzin, 2007:454).

The methodological principles of grounded theory align with creative research methods as they are both interested in locating the agency of the individual and how they negotiate their subjectivities in the social world. In the pursuit of situating individual experiences, David Gauntlett (2007) advocates the advantages of CRM as it seeks to situate the voice of the individual by encouraging self-reflection through creativity and experimentation. The construction of identity is a visual condition, one which is influenced by popular culture and advertising media. In noting this symbiotic relationship, Gauntlett suggests CRM

to be an insightful way of generating an understanding of the construction and experience of identity from people because it allows “participants to spend *time* applying their playful or creative attention to the act of *making* something symbolic or metaphorical, and then *reflecting* on it” (2007: 4).

For this study, each woman was asked to choose an object of personal significance; the item could be as everyday or as culturally-specific as they desired. Asking the participant to speak about an object offered the individual the opportunity to present a phenomenologically-driven account of their lived experience. This perspective acknowledges the material dynamic between people and things as the movement of objects mirror the journey of our lives. Using their objects as creative inspiration, the women attended a one-day art workshop. As the artist workshop facilitator, I led a series of experimental writing exercises, creative meditation, and techniques in mono-printing and collage to support the women in exploring the affective narratives of their object and their lives.

The value of the women’s objects cannot be read as innate; rather, its significance exists in a conceptual tangle between the self and the social world in navigating their subjectivities. The significance of the object is further revealed by the artwork produced in the workshop. While the object may appear inconspicuous, the artwork reveals the active intention of the woman. In other words, the object and the artwork exist in symbiosis to reveal the affective and conceptual resonance between object, self and the social world. Subsequently, the artwork and objects of the women will be used to illuminate the ways in which British Chinese women negotiate otherness along the lines of gender, race and sexuality.

Existing accounts of British Chinese women largely derive from a sociological and social policy perspective which largely centres on the sites of the family and employment (Song, 1995; Lee et al., 2002; and Yuen, 2008), with the exception of Yun-Hun Hsiao (2008) who explored the creative literature of British Chinese women. Diana Yeh (2014) asserts “this does so [...] by assigning to particular bodies a machine-like capacity for work but an inherent lack of creativity, which constructs them [the Chinese] as essentially ‘Other’, denies their status as fully human, and questions their very ability to participate in the social and cultural

realm” (2014: 1207). While some British Chinese creative professionals have received some academic attention, this literature has generally been concerned with the artistic expressions of artists (Yeh, 2014; Lok, 2004). In this study, the use of CRM focuses on everyday British Chinese women to offer an opportunity for them to situate their subjectivities through visual strategies. This methodology presented an alternative production of knowledge about the British Chinese to challenge the stereotypes that surround British Chinese women and the British Chinese at large.

Recruitment and Reflexivity

This research intends to situate the subjectivities of British Chinese women, and this understanding cannot be achieved through an “objectivist” approach which would undermine a feminist embodied perspective. Donna Haraway (1991) critiques the way that feminism and the social sciences have sought to map women’s lives through a scientific sensibility. In doing so, Haraway argues that this objective lens generalises the intricacies and contradictions of women’s lived experiences. As such, Haraway advocates a “view from below” and pursues a view of feminist objectivity which she defines as a “partial perspective”:

I am arguing for politics and epistemologies of location, positioning, and situating, where partiality and not universality is the condition of being heard to make rational knowledge claims. These are claims on people’s lives. I am arguing for the view from a body, always a complex, contradictory, structuring, and structured body, versus the view from above, from nowhere, from simplicity (1991: 195).

In the spirit of my positionality as a researcher, it is important to acknowledge how my presence as a female British Chinese researcher shaped the recruitment and engagement of the participants. Given the qualitative nature of the research, my disposition as an educated British Chinese woman invariably influenced the recruitment of second generation women. All of the women in this study have attained a full education. With the exception of one participant, all of the women hold university degrees and even doctorates. As such, the women

participants in this study can be understood as being well-educated and holding professional roles. From a selection perspective, the participants cannot be understood as being representative of all second generation British Chinese women; rather the focus of this study is concerned with situating an in-depth account of how British Chinese women negotiate challenges as individuals. By identifying the dispositions and commonalities within this cohort of second generation women, we can begin to understand how these dispositions frame their challenges as British Chinese women.

In total, I recruited 17 second generation British Chinese women and to provide a sense of the wider picture, 10-15 first generation women participated in the art workshop and interviews. 17 second generation women participated in the object-story interviews while 11 attended the one-day art workshop. Being the researcher, I assumed various roles as the art workshop facilitator, interviewer and research coordinator. As part of the recruitment process for the second generation, I distributed posters in the city of London, gave a radio interview on British Chinese radio, submitted a call for interest via a British Chinese website and advertised through social media. Despite these efforts, it proved difficult to recruit participants through public channels; it appeared that my presence was needed as the reference point of the project. The main channel of recruitment was done through snowballing, personal introductions and meeting other British Chinese women at cultural events in London.

Contrasts Between the Generations

On the whole, the objects selected by the second generation women were eclectic and included childhood clothing, traditional *mien lap* jackets, gold jewellery, headphones and framed slippers, to name a few. The selection of material suggested that materiality played a meaningful role in their lives. While they may not see themselves represented in British society, they were able to situate and unravel questions of belonging through objects. In this study, it appeared that physical objects played a greater role in the lives of second generation women compared to their first generation counterparts.

It is important to observe that the majority of the first generation women who participated in the project came from a vastly different demographic compared to the second generation. The participation of the first generation Chinese women derived from a Women's Group in Haringey Community Centre in London. As a group, they immigrated during the post-war period from Hong Kong and largely identified with the term "overseas brides". In arriving in Britain, migration was a means of economic betterment as they assumed catering and sewing occupations.

Migration is a challenging transition and many of the women recalled the challenge of being working mothers and the difficulty of having a limited acquisition of English. On the whole, it appeared that the women did not want to preserve the memory of migratory hardship through material possessions. Compared to the second generation, this cohort of first generation women did not usually tend to hold onto objects from their past. Rather, their intention was orientated to aspiring towards a prosperous future and settlement stability. In this sense, the process of art making proved more meaningful as it became their opportunity to create a future they desired. Using creative methodologies, the women were able to express their migratory ambitions and aspirations in a way that presenting an object from the past would be unable to achieve.

For the second generation, there was a diversity of objects, however a unifying commonality was their consistent relationship to their body and reference to the family. The object is almost always orientated to the self or towards the site of the family in affirming the self in a wider social ideology or migratory history. In this way, social ease and material bodily comfort cannot be disentangled. To feel comfortable in one's skin is to feel socially at ease in one's environment. This dynamic is most acutely played out in the daily practice of dressing. Seemingly a mundane act, dressing is one of the most significant ways that people manage feelings of otherness and orientate their identities in a social context. This notion of social orientation can be understood as especially significant for ethnic minority women where their otherness is a visible factor.

To varying levels, feelings of otherness and questions of belonging are notions that permeate all the accounts of second generation women in this study. The interrelated dynamics between the body, the social world and dressing informs

the selection of the two case studies. Practices of dressing highlight the ways in which individuals employ material strategies to manage structural inequalities. By presenting an in-depth analysis of two case studies, this paper intends to locate an embodied “view from below” to examine how practices of dressing and adornment are used to negotiate feelings of otherness. In doing so, it situates the textured voice of the women in a British Chinese context, which historically has been overlooked.

Theoretical Framework

Theoretically, this analysis builds on Shilling’s emphasis of the body as an arena of expression and, moreover it takes the position that practices of body dressing and adornment are essential to the articulation of identities. Body dressing refers to social practices associated with the decision making of dressing and adornment which enables the individual to orientate themselves in the social world (Entwistle, 2001). From this perspective, dress theorist Joanne Entwistle (2001) asserts that, “Identity is managed through dress in rather more mundane and routine ways because social pressure encourages us to stay within the bounds of what is defined in a situation as a ‘normal’ body and ‘appropriate dress’” (2001: 49).

According to Entwistle, the site of the body and the act of dressing is bound in relations of power as the dressing of oneself is a constant orientation of the self to the social world. Entwistle states, “Dress lies at the margins of the body and marks the boundary between self and other, individual and society. This boundary is intimate and personal since our dress forms the visible envelope of the self” (2001: 37). Mary Douglas (1979) argues that social forces push upon the physical body which creates “two bodies”: the physical body and the social body. Drawing on this notion, Entwistle describes this interaction between the body and the social as a *situated bodily practice* by which the body is embedded within the power relations of the social world. If the individual debunks the social order through dress, then the body risks retribution. As she explains, “Bodies which do not conform, bodies which flout conventions of their culture and go without the appropriate clothes are subversive of the most basic codes and risk exclusion, scorn or ridicule” (2001: 33).

To further the understanding between the body, dress and the social world, Bourdieu's theory of habitus (1992) is useful in elucidating these relations, particularly his emphasis on embodiment. The habitus is a social phenomenon that attempts to explain the exchange and reproduction of power relations within different fields in society through its individuals. This emphasis upon the individual is pertinent and as a concept, it does not over-emphasise subjective agency but neither does it view the individual as solely determined by social structures. Rather, it presents an opportunity to think through the entanglement between subjectivism and determinism.

Bourdieu describes the habitus as "an open system of dispositions that is constantly subjected to experiences, and therefore constantly affected by them in a way that either reinforces or modifies its structures" (1992: 133). For Bourdieu, the point of "dispositions" refers to the individual's socialised "ways of being" or "propensity" which may alter the structure of the habitus or continue its presence. Therefore one's personal dispositions will structure their practice and inclination within the habitus. As social agents, we may participate in the reproduction of existing power or the untangling of such structures. The notion that the habitus is an "open structure" emphasises the possibility of a mutable habitus, however it may be slow to change and resistant.

Through the habitus, the reproduction of power is not conceptualised as a vertical structure, but rather, power is envisaged as a horizontal form. From this horizontal perspective, power is enacted through the behaviour and actions of all individuals. Sociologist Richard Jenkins describes the habitus as a mental state which exists "inside the heads" of everyday people, and that this internal monologue is expressed through forms of social interaction such as "ways of talking, ways of moving, ways of making things" (1992: 75). In this sense, the habitus is far from an abstraction but the reproduction of the habitus and its power is an intrinsically material expression of the body: "The body is a mnemonic device upon and in which the very basics of culture, the practical taxonomies of the habitus, are imprinted and encoded in a socialising or learning process which commences during early childhood" (1992: 76-7). This focus on embodiment and the materiality of the habitus offers a way to conceptualise the significance of dressing and adornment as integral practices that individuals employ to manage their identities in the world.

Applying the habitus to dress offers an amplified and physical insight into the power relations between individual and society. To speak about dressing is to speak about the body and the micro social order that the self exists amongst. The practice of dressing is far from being a superficial consideration as these daily decisions are entangled in a wider negotiation of making one's body socially acceptable. Furthermore, the dressing of one's body has a spatial element as "spaces impose different ways of being on gendered bodies" (Entwistle, 2001: 50). It is more likely that women have to think carefully about their appearance in various public spaces such as the workplace or quiet areas at night as these spaces expose a gendered vulnerability. As Douglas asserts, dress transforms the physical body into a social body and therefore the body will orientate itself accordingly to the space or *field* it will enter, for example a wedding, a boardroom, or a job interview. To negotiate the social world, women have actively used dressing techniques to manage the otherness of their bodies and the gaze of others.

From a Bourdieuan perspective, the institutional habitus of Britain does not fully acknowledge the British Chinese community as a visible part of the multicultural life in Britain. Subsequently, this is the habitus from which the British Chinese women negotiate their identities through practices of dressing. In this paper, I will present the case studies of two second generation British Chinese women to examine the ways in which they employ practices of dressing insituating their identities. As a British-born Chinese woman born in London, Rachel's object of significance is a collection of inconspicuous t-shirts that enable her survival within a male, white dominated tech industry.¹ Though they appear commonplace, these t-shirts become a self-imposed outfit to manage her otherness in the context of her workplace. In contrast, Robin, who is a mixed-race woman born in Hong Kong and who migrated to Wales at a young age, experienced racism within the habitus of her school which generated much cultural displacement. Despite enduring such raced oppression, in her adult years she wears her cultural and racial identity visibly upon her skin as a tattoo of a phoenix rising from the ashes.

¹ All participants' names are pseudonyms.

Case Study A: Rachel (29)

Armoured Dress in the Workplace

The context of the art workshops created a space to bring together a group of second generation women. The function of the workshop was two-fold; it was an environment to learn new visual skills and it also created an opportunity to bring together a group of women who would otherwise remain dispersed and unknown to each other. In comparison, the second generation was more likely to be isolated from one another, since they have fewer meeting spaces and are less likely to attend community centres. This sense of isolation amongst the second generation was noted by other younger women in the workshop, as they remarked on the limited awareness they had of other British Chinese women like themselves.

The workshop became a supported and safe space for the women to share their experiences, ranging from questions of maintaining language, sexual discrimination, mothering across cultures and a lingering sense of division in living between cultures. As the women were invited to bring an object of significance, the material object became a stimulus to ignite speech and exchange experiences about social challenges and desires that would otherwise go unsaid. It is from this ethos that the British-born Chinese woman Rachel shared her experience of otherness in the tech industry.

As a woman in her mid-twenties and born in London, her parents migrated from Hong Kong to London in the 1960s. Showing academic potential, Rachel decided at the age of 14 that she wanted to become a technical coder at Google. After studying computer science at Cambridge at the age of 21, she secured her dream job at Google. Her academic and professional achievements were a far cry from her parents' initial work as waiters. Evidently naturally gifted, bolstered by self-determination and family support, these characteristics appear to be symptomatic of British social mobility and worthy of the label of "model minority". Having arrived at Google, Rachel quickly observed difficulties arising in her workplace. She explains:

Even though I saw myself as an engineer first, the tech industry being very white and male dominated, they did not see me

as a part of that...I was either left out of the decision-making or people would...er...you know, sometimes people were a lot more open about saying things like, "You don't look like an engineer or are you from sales?" I would say, "No, I'm an engineer" but it was difficult for people to see that.

On a regular basis, Rachel recounted a daily need to prove her worth and in this homogenous environment, the accumulation of "distrust" over her identity as a woman led to intense feelings of dismemberment. At the adult age of 22, Rachel recalled the very moment that she witnessed her own racial otherness. Influenced by workplace exchanges, Rachel started to see herself through the gaze of others and as a raced body.

I remember being about 22 or 23...and staring at myself in the mirror and being *absolutely astonished* that people would see me first as Chinese, and in fact that as I looked at myself in the mirror I saw a Chinese person first! People would not see "Rachel", they would not see me as British first, which is obviously how I saw myself. I grew up in London which is very diverse and I went to an all-girls' school until I was 16. I never really developed this realisation that people would see me in *that* way first. It took until working in this environment, and it's more than just Western-centric because it's very male dominated to realise that this would be the case you know!...As long as I chose to work in the tech industry.

On enduring workplace gendered and racial prejudice, Rachel's artwork (see figure 1) distils all that she cannot say in the workplace but visually laid out before us. Through her artwork, she reverses the power of gender relations. In this instance, it is not her own body that is made to feel vulnerable, rather it is the male body. Her artwork is presented in the shape of a shield, as rows of undressed males are lined side by side. We are not privy to their faces or the rest of their bodies as they exist in complete anonymity. Acting like a strip club peephole, the men are dismembered from the rest of their bodies; all that is available is a framed portrait of their genitalia while their hands dangle in awkwardness. Perhaps the most startling aspect of this artwork is not necessarily the exposed

male body, but the fact that the men are captured in a soft, un-erect state which challenges the ideology of phallic patriarchal power. Rachel's artwork explicitly captures her personal defiance of patriarchal authority and its dominance in the world of work.



Figure 1. Rachel's artwork.

To survive within this hostile environment, Rachel started to move into departments where the gender balance was more evenly weighted. Describing gender discrimination in the tech industry as a “touchy subject”, Rachel recalled

that plenty of men would try to explain away the gender imbalance: “It’s not a problem, it’s just not a problem! If you want to study computer science, you just go and do it, or say things like, maybe women just aren’t as good at programming and maybe their brains aren’t as set up for it!” [Laughs.] This is supposed to be Google! This is supposed to be a really smart and liberal group of people.” The power relations of the workplace habitus were not just expressed through verbal comments; they were materially reinforced as Rachel’s memory with her own otherness was recalled through dress.

I go to tech conferences and it is a *sea* of white, grey and blue. These are great colours to wear if you are white with blue eyes, pale skin and mousy brown hair but it looks god awful on most minorities, which sounds like a small thing. But I noticed that 95% of the time, I can’t take these t-shirts they give out at conferences. I can’t take them because of the colour, they are men’s t-shirts so they are too big on me and even if they are women’s t-shirts, a lot of the time they have blog slogans across the chest and that’s not *comfortable* as a woman—you don’t want people staring at your chest! So I don’t take most of these t-shirts because they exclude me in three different ways.

The design of these conference t-shirts imagines the ideal wearer to be a “5 ft. 10 white guy with pale skin and mousy brown hair”. In turn, these t-shirts reinforce the covert expectations of the ideal employee; to fit into the clothing means to fit into the job. Rachel’s observation unveils the power of the habitus and its ability to penetrate into the most minute of interactions in distinguishing between those who are included and excluded. While the t-shaped garment began as an emancipatory dress for working men in freeing up the top half (Brunell, 2002), the emancipatory ethos of the t-shirt is contradicted upon Rachel’s body. Rather than inciting unity amongst her and her male colleagues, they underlined her exclusion in emphasising her gendered otherness by eluding towards a sexualised interpretation of her body through bold slogans across the chest.

Writing about power dressing, John T. Molloy (1980) notes that the area of the female chest is one of the most problematic for the workplace and the inability to contain the potential eroticism of the female body can undermine their “professionalism” and “productivity” there. Susan Bordo (1990) argues that the workplace requirement to neutralise a woman’s hips and breasts means to strip the female body of its “psychic resonances with maternal power”, as she asserts:

From the standpoint of male anxiety, the lean body of the professional businesswoman today may symbolise such a neutralisation. With her body and her dress, she declares symbolic allegiance to the professional, white, male world, along with her lack of intention to subvert that arena with alternative “female values”. At the same time, insofar as she is clearly “dressing up,” playing “male” (almost with a “softening” fashion touch to establish traditional female decorativeness), she represents no serious competition (symbolically, that is) to the “real men” of the workplace (1990: 104-5).

The covert masculinisation of the tech world habitus is reinforced by its attitudes to uniform. The tech world seemingly advocates a “relaxed” attitude to dress. It welcomes its employees to dress as they like but for Rachel, this was a false freedom and one that she could not afford. To wear the typical tech clothes of a plain t-shirt, jeans and trainers would read completely different on her gendered, Asian body. Rachel was clear to point out that for her stature, this type of relaxed clothing would read as “child” or “girl”, rather than as a woman aiming towards senior management. On her body, this type of dress would be undermine her authority amongst her colleagues, she explains: “I am short, female and I’m Chinese...I don’t have the same gravitas or base level of respect if I come in wearing what guys wear”.

After five years, Rachel resigned. On her final day, she recalled a specific comment from a colleague-friend who said, “Thanks for making the team a nicer place to look at!” Having left Google, Rachel found another job in a new tech start-up as a Developer Advocate which she describes as being more “female-friendly”. This transitional time between jobs signalled a phase of self-reflection

where Rachel turned to the site of the body to reconsider how to regain control over her othering. This period coincided with her discovery of K-Pop, Korean Pop Music, a phenomenon that has propelled itself into a global consciousness.

Though highly manufactured, this explosion of K-Pop presents a construction of Asian womanhood that contravenes stereotypical attributes assigned to traditional Asian femininity. Through the extravagant lens of K-Pop, the Asian female body becomes an experimental space that is subversive and bold. The synthetic sound and styling of the music videos challenges the construction of an innate Asian femininity which usually falls within the stereotypical qualities of gentleness, submission and restraint. Writing about Korean Pop Culture, Michael Fuhr comments that the visual pleasure of K-Pop has “opened a discursive space in which traditional rules of masculinity and femininity can be critically reflected, reoriented, and transformed” (2017: 1152). This sweeping wave of Korean Pop Music did not escape Rachel, which prompted her to reflect on the lack of media representation of Chinese and Asian women in a British and Western context. For Rachel, it was a pivotal moment to see Asian women as “aspirational”, which started the unpicking of the stereotypical Western prejudice she had internalised about Asian women.

When you grow up in a Western environment, you watch Western media and you assimilate their stereotypes. On the BBC for instance, Chinese women were generally portrayed in one way. When I started watching K-Pop, it really helped me push through my own stereotypes of Asian-looking women and I could start to see...to see...these as individuals. It's easier for me to visualise myself in multiple ways rather than thinking Asian American in Hollywood and you've got Lucy Liu and that's it! It sounds ridiculous but it was a really big moment to see these people held up as aspirational who I could relate to visually. Like K-Pop, I want my image to be something I construct with no real regard to my inner personality.

In recognising the potential of creatively reconstructing one's appearance, Rachel felt inspired to address her racial and gendered otherness in the workplace. Specifically, she turned to the site of the body and used dressing as a tool

to regain control. After much contemplation and in preparation for her next job, Rachel decided to invent a new work wardrobe. She declared, "I'm going to do the Steve Jobs thing and buy multiples of one outfit and it's going to be my perfect outfit". This new wardrobe accumulated in the purchasing of a dozen identical t-shirts (see figure 2). Purchased from the high street, these crew-necked t-shirts were strikingly unremarkable; identical in every way, each cotton garment was bottle green. Worn with a pencil skirt, this became a self-imposed work uniform. In discovering her ideal work uniform, her exhilaration is evident in her experimental workshop writing. Rachel writes from the perspective of her t-shirts and their initial encounter with herself:

I remember being purchased by a Chinese woman in her mid-twenties.

She seemed agitated but when she found me, she was delighted.

She took me and a few of my siblings into the changing room where I was tried on over and over again in different permutations and with photos taken.

It was quite exhausting!

After she decided that we would be the t-shirt, I was taken back to the rack and every inch of us inspected.

In particular the seams and hems were checked for straightness and evenness.

Five of us were chosen from dozens as the neatest and most perfect looking, and we were all taken together on hangers to be paid for.



Figure 2. Rachel's t-shirts.

Rachel's writing captures a sense of her relief in finding the ideal t-shirt that would both enable her to visually integrate into the work environment while complimenting her racial colouring and body shape. However, finding the garment was not enough. The way in which the t-shirt was to be worn was just as important: she explained that each t-shirt was worn back to front. This decision was deliberate as the neck line would sit closer to the collarbone to further deter any attention to the neck and chest. The choice for a singular style and colour was not a creative oversight. This was a conscious consideration to minimise her affiliations with the traditional female identity and its associations with colourful and fashionable clothing. She explains, "If you dress up, keep changing your clothes, you are not technical, you are not an engineer, you are not one of us. In the tech industry, there is this feeling that clothing is functional and it's frivolous for you to care and that's distinctly female".

Being a woman in this male-dominated environment was a disadvantaged position; therefore, to further behave as a “woman” through dressing would emphasise her otherness. Instead, she seeks to unmark herself from the gendered associations of her body as she says, “I want to project this *blandness*, this professionalism, I just want my work to be visible and I don’t want you to think of me as the ‘purple-hair girl’, I *absolutely* don’t want to be seen as the *woman* in the office...even though I am”.

In relationship to clothing, Rachel is clear that wearing a traditional Chinese cheongsam would further eroticise her body and undermine her professionalism. She explains, “They (cheongsam) are seen as sort of exotic and unprofessional. I like wearing them but I don’t wear them very much and not around people I don’t know”. Rachel’s intention to avoid colourful traditional Chinese clothing echoes the historical Western scepticism of colour which David Batchelor (2000) calls “chromophobia”. Batchelor describes the cultural objectification of non-Western cultures through colour as he states, “Colour is made out to be the property of some ‘foreign’ body—usually the feminine, the oriental, the primitive, the infantile, the vulgar, the queer or the pathological” (2000: 22). These visual ideologies are keenly picked up by Rachel as her personal observation is indicative of underlying cultural prejudices. Furthermore, Rachel reflects on the unequal judgment between her wearing a Chinese dress compared to a white woman:

A white women can be in the same dress but she would look like she is dressing up or having fun, she can always take it off. But if I wear Chinese clothes, it’s very Chinese and it’s very hard for people to not immediately see me as an immigrant who has broken English, rather than someone who has grown up in this country.

Recognising the racial power relations between her and a Western woman, she is clear that for a Western woman a Chinese dress is expressive of her artful attitude, but upon her body, it fixes her racial identity. This notion is underlined by Sarah Cheang (2015) who states that the phenomenon of British Chinoiserie for white women was not to “turn Chinese but to adopt an aspect of Chinese culture on the path to modern European corporeality” (2015: 138). While she

cannot change her biological gender or racial identity, she can make external decisions through her dress which offer her a level of protection in surviving in the male dominated workplace. As a British Chinese woman, her skin is a racial dress and it is one garment that she cannot take off. Though her t-shirts appear inconspicuous, they function as an armour for the workplace, a concept which is reflected in her artwork.

Taking a magazine clipping of male genitalia, Rachel cut this imagery into the shape of a shield (see figure 3). The shield-like form is suggestive of the function of her t-shirts; Rachel's t-shirts offer a literal protection from the male gaze at work and by adopting the "Steve Jobs" dress, she affords her body a level of camouflage. The numerous rows of penises confront the viewer with a blunt starkness which is markedly different from the sexualised media images of women's bodies. A woman's body has historically been the site of male pleasure and to see the male body objectified switches gender relations; no longer is it the man surveying the objectified woman. Through the collage, the male gaze is turned inside out and reversed. Here, it is the woman who is doing the making, and hence the looking.



Figure 3. Close-up image of Rachel's artwork.

Rachel's portrayal of masculinity contradicts the concept of an ideal authoritarian, white male persona. Rather, the male body is shown with vulnerability in its un-erect state, as it is portrayed in a full frontal state of undress as their hands dangle with a stammer of self-consciousness. A closer inspection highlights the multiplicity of the male body; different sexual orientations and creeds. Male bodies in the workplace are often rendered invisible in contrast to the attention given to women (Entwistle, 2001) but through this artwork, it is no longer her body that is visible and self-conscious, rather it is the male.

Her conscious choice to present the imagery as upside down has a double significance; in one sense, it softens the confrontation with the male body but equally it can be read as a symbolic desire to overturn the existing status quo in gender power relations. Through this artwork, Rachel created a scenario that would be unspeakable in her workplace. On the one hand, pasting male genitalia in this overt way reverses the gaze. In addition, the shape of the shield is symbolic of the function of her t-shirts in protecting her from the same gaze she is simultaneously exposing. This concept of dress as armour is mirrored by Rachel's language as she describes the t-shirts as a form of protective wear:

I just try to optimise everything that I have...I don't want a lot of clothes, partly because of the tech industry. I have to—I have to, protect myself in a way, you know. I have to project—I have to, as much as I can, control what people will think when they see me...because I don't have the luxury of wearing anything I want, despite what the tech industry saying—wear whatever you want, it's not true!

This notion of clothing as armour and imprisonment is echoed by Umberto Eco (1987) when he reflects on wearing a tight pair of new jeans. He refers to the "epidermic awareness" that he experienced when wearing jeans that clung too tightly and stated, "Well, with my new jeans my life was entirely exterior: I thought about the relationship between me and my pants, and the relationship between my pants and me and the society we lived in. I had achieved hetero-consciousness, that is to say, an epidermic self-awareness" (Eco, 1987: 194). In feeling the "edges" and limitations of his body, the sensation of wearing jeans acted as a physical reminder of his objectivity. Despite the egalitarian and unisex

appeal of denim, Eco states that jeans for women serve as another form of imprisonment which, “don’t free the body, but subject it to another label and imprison it in other armours” (1987: 194-5).

For Rachel, it is precisely this “epidermic awareness” that she wants to avoid by wearing the t-shirt uniform. Moreover, Rachel’s interpretation of armour contradicts the traditional notion of armour as a hardened material highlighting the covert nature of power within the contemporary workplace, as dress writer Jess Carter-Morley (2017) says, “It is power dressing obsessed with soft power”. The contemporary definition of “armour” is now assigned to a pile of soft cotton t-shirts drawing a contradiction between its ideological function and literal form.

At first glance, Rachel’s green t-shirts appear to be everyday clothing but when these garments are considered in relation to her artwork, the function of the t-shirts becomes far more lucid. These cotton t-shirts may assume an easy-going persona but they also possess a symbolic and literal function. Firstly, by adopting a “Steve Jobs” style, it gives her an element of camouflaging within the habitus of her workplace. The t-shaped, relaxed cotton garments mirror the style of her male colleagues which draws a visible commonality between herself and others. However, her deposition within the habitus as an ethnic minority woman means that she cannot simply mimic their mode of dressing directly (by wearing jeans and trainers). Instead, Rachel pairs her garments with a pencil skirt and develops her own practice of wearing these t-shirts back to front. In doing so, she attempts to contain any sexually eroticised interpretation of her body to prevent any narratives that might undermine her professionalism. Though these t-shirts appear to be commonplace, this self-imposed uniform is her workplace armour; the t-shirts enable her to camouflage into the workplace habitus while simultaneously managing the male gaze.

Case Study B: Robin (59) **Reclaiming Chineseness Through the Phoenix**

As a mixed-race British Chinese woman, Robin contrasted to the strategy of camouflage as she adopted a distinctively different approach in negotiating the

power relations within her life. Rather than seeking survival through concealment, Robin pursued the opposite direction by using visibility to assert herself into the world. This visual assertion manifests as a multi-coloured tattooed phoenix which spirals across the expanse of her back.

Born in Hong Kong to a Chinese mother and a Welsh father, Robin recalled a happy childhood until the age of 8 when she and her family relocated to Cardiff in 1966. Growing up bilingual in Hong Kong with little sense of her difference, Robin had never experienced any racism until arriving in Cardiff. The change of cultural environment also signalled a shift of habitus as she recalled the vicious racism she experienced at school. This racism was not only from other children, but was facilitated by her teachers:

It was a very hard time for me, I was very unhappy for many years and you know, the racism wasn't just from kids in school, teachers would take the piss and whip the kids into a frenzy [CLICKS HER FINGERS]...Race had been such a...painful issue...I suppose I wanted to fit in, I wanted to be like everyone else. That was very, very difficult.

To integrate and survive into this new habitus, Robin felt it was necessary to distance herself from her Chinese heritage and this impacted on her relationship with her Chinese mother and her ability to speak her native tongue of Cantonese. In experiencing such direct racial abuse, Robin explains, "In my little girl's head, it was all my mother's fault that I was getting all this shit. I wasn't very close to my mum when I was little because actually it was safer with my dad". In response, Robin aligned herself with her white, Welsh father and this alignment had a profound effect on her bilingual ability. At the age of 13, she no longer had any command of Cantonese. Robin recalls a dinner with her Chinese relatives: "People were chatting away and I couldn't understand them...I was 13. I thought, shit, I couldn't...I can't, I can't understand this anymore...because I used to say to my mum, *speaking in English, speaking in English!*"

As protection from the daily racism, the loss of her Cantonese was driven by a burning desire to assimilate into the dominant white British society. Growing up as an adolescent, Robin became estranged from her Chinese identity as she

described her initial surprise at seeing “Chinese people for the first time” in 1975. Having suppressed her cultural identity for many years, her first trip to Hong Kong since leaving as a child was highly evocative.

It was really emotional for me...God...flying...yeah...I was blubbing away in the toilets for ages. It's very difficult to put into words. It was such an emotional experience. It also made me think, what would my life had been had I stayed there. I probably would have been much more of the daughter my Mum would have wanted. I think I would have been more conventional, become a doctor or a lawyer!

The journey to Hong Kong was not just an experience in becoming reacquainted with her suppressed cultural identity but in returning, Robin wondered about the “conventional” life that she might have lived had she stayed. As a young woman in Britain, she identified herself through her sexuality as a lesbian woman and her socialist politics. The most significant event in healing her relationship with her racial identity was joining a Chinese lesbian group in South London in 1984. Accessing a wider network of like-minded women from diverse ethnic minority backgrounds gave her an opportunity to break the sense of isolation and shame that shrouded her early racial identity, as she explains:

I hadn't really been around Chinese people that much or those that were around seemed really different to me in that they were, I suppose, more serious and weren't into partying and drinking [laughs]...It was a small group of 6, all of us were born outside of this country and suddenly that sort of...expanded my...my *comfort* with myself.

The Chinese Lesbian group travelled to the first international Asian and Lesbian conference in San Francisco. This experience firmly situated Robin's racial and sexual identity as a visible and legitimate position in the world. She recalled her exhilaration at the encounter: “There must have been five-hundred people at this conference. Well I've never seen so many like-minded women and women that *looked* the same as me, ever, in the same place!” It was important

to not only meet women who shared similar attitudes but also women who visually resembled herself. After years of internalising shame and embarrassment over her racial and sexual identity, Robin was able to see her identity and others like her as proudly visible in the world. This notion of visibility echoes Rachel's sentiment about K-Pop and the feeling of legitimacy in the world by seeing oneself externally mirrored in it.

Ruth Holliday (2001) asserts that visibility for queer identities is specifically crucial as sexual identity, unlike the gendered or racial identity, is not biologically marked onto the body. The expression of one's sexuality has to be consciously and visually inscribed onto the external body. She highlights that for queer identities, the techniques of dressing and adornment are entangled in the "politics of visibility" which refers to how everyday cues and ways of dress communicate group belonging. To combat the pathologisation and invisibility of queer identities, the site of the body becomes increasingly charged in asserting belonging of the self. As such, Holliday emphasises the importance of visual expression for queer individuals. In this way, dressing oneself can be a matter of survival as queer identities seek to create communities and connect with like-minded people.

Visually asserting her identity as a Chinese lesbian woman has been important for Robin as the site of both her body and home are crucial spaces of self-identification. As her father was a part of the Hong Kong police force, her family was able to import a lot of furniture from Hong Kong to Wales. After moving her mother into a care home, she has inherited many of her household items. These household objects are both ordinary and ornate: a 1960s Formica handmade table and chairs, a rice cooker (see figure 4), a chopsticks holder, paintings and wall hangings, a carved wooden drinks cabinet (see figure 5), her baby bath tub, an enormous jade plant and even a P&Q napkin kept from a ship journey to the UK.



Figure 4. Robin's rice-cooker.



Figure 5. Robin's drinks cabinet.

Stepping into Robin's home is a materially distinctive experience as many of these objects were a part of her Hong Kong childhood. She remarks: "Fundamentally they represent the best time of my life. My childhood in Hong Kong was a very happy one so yeah, it represents a time of safety and security which was taken away when I came here". Though she lives in London, her furniture from her Hong Kong childhood embodies a fleeting time of warmth and security. Robin expresses a desire to return to Hong Kong, but knows that this is impossible; the Hong Kong of her childhood has ebbed away and it has moved on without her. Through the wear and tear of her childhood furniture, she is able to situate herself amongst a history. Moreover, through the domestic space, Robin furnishes her own material intervention which sits in oppositional contrast to the wider social habitus which has excluded her cultural hybridity in the past.



Figure 6. Robin's phoenix tattoo.

Both the domestic space and the site of her body are essential arenas of identity articulation. Her identity as a lesbian woman is physically marked on the body as a tattoo of two women in an embrace and over the years, she has accumulated tattoos including an anarchy symbol and various “peace” characters in Chinese, Thai and Tibetan. For Robin, tattooing is a physical and external reminder of an ever-changing body of personal, eternal truths; as she says, “It’s to remind myself that inner peace is a very important thing and not to let things get in the way of that”. One of the most significant and impressive tattoos on Robin’s body is her multi-coloured phoenix that rises from the base of the spine and explodes into the expansiveness of her back (see figure 6). Having survived a difficult phase of her life, the tattoo celebrates her survival.

Victoria Pitts (2003) describes body modification and tattooing as an act of “reclaiming” the female body. The permanent inscription is a symbolic action of ownership, as she asserts: “Modifying the body promotes symbolic rebellion, resistance, and self-transformation—that making the transformation of the body can symbolically ‘reclaim’ the body from its victimisation and objectification in patriarchal culture” (2003: 49). Tattooing is a form of “body-biography” as the individual chooses to commemorate significant events on their flesh. Alfred Gell (1993) highlights the psychological effects of tattooing. Far from being a singular process of inserting ink into the skin to attain a surface decoration, Gell emphasises that tattooing creates a “double skin, folded over on itself” where the internal self is not only externalised through adornment but the body’s renewed surface internalises its new exterior:

What tattooing reveals [...] is an inside which comes from the outside, which has been applied externally prior to being absorbed into the interior. The basis schema of tattooing is thus definable as the exteriorization of the interior which is simultaneously the interiorization of the exterior (1993: 38-9).

For Robin, the phoenix is a form of body art that physically embodies her survival of a challenging life event and akin to the ideology associated with the phoenix, it announces her rebirth—a renewed strength and empowerment. A crucial point about the phoenix is its cultural affiliation with Asian culture. This visible and undeniable assertion of a racial identity is in complete contrast to

her early attempts to conceal her otherness. The tattoo not only celebrates her survival but also permanently inscribes her identity as a Chinese woman in the most lasting and direct way possible.

In some ways, her sexuality could be viewed as problematic as it contradicts traditional Confucian, familial expectations that associate the filial duty of a daughter with heterosexual marriage and reproduction. However, over time, her once difficult maternal relationship has healed and her mother not only accepts her sexuality but has joined her lesbian community in making good friendships with the parents of her friends. In recent years, her mother has developed dementia and as her condition worsens, Robin is dutifully filial and has become the sole carer. She states that her mother is integral to her changing relationship with herself: “For many years when I first came to this country, my race was such a nightmare, it caused me so much pain. But yes, I reclaimed all of that and in a positive way and my mother represented. It’s been a total reversal”.

Evidently her sense of Chineseness is deeply connected with her mother but equally she acknowledges the fragility of this hard-won position: “Race becomes more or less of an issue at different times, I think now race is an issue, my mother has got Alzheimer and she’s dying. What will it mean for me when she goes? Do I feel less Chinese? I don’t know”. As a lesbian woman, Robin is acutely aware of the impact between reproduction, race and sexuality, specifically the decision of deciding the racial genetics of her child, which was a question she considered in her thirties, as she explains:

In terms of race and my sexuality, I wouldn’t want to have a child with a white man, I don’t want a child that—that might look like a *white* child. That really struck me. If you’re heterosexual with a white man, that wouldn’t have entered my consciousness. This is such a significant part of me...I didn’t want that *diluted*, which is quite interesting because my race has been such a source of *pain* for many years. But I guess, that pain I associated with that period in my life...that must have gone.

Robin's desire to reproduce a "genuine" Chinese baby reinforces her journey of self-acceptance and racial ownership. As a woman, she admits a feeling of responsibility to continue the racial lineage and to preserve it as "authentically" as possible. Without children of her own and the mother in ill-health, her connections to her Chinese identity begin and end with herself. Now in her fifties, Robin has not had children but her sense of cultural and racial preservation is reproduced and visualised through the domestic and upon the body; it is inscribed through tattoos and reinforced through the Chinese furnishings in her house. Her actions and physical possessions become points of material stability as they orient the self in a world of change. This desire for stability is reflected through adornment, as the tattoo becomes an additional way to counter uncertainty as it "works to 'glue' identities in a world where they are uncertain" (Entwistle, 2001: 47).

Following Gell's schema about the externalisation of an interior identity, the phoenix unleashes a formerly repressed racial identity. The active construction of a "double skin" intervenes into the social habitus which has historically marginalised her identity. Her tattooed skin becomes a permanent form of racial dress, a dress that will self-generate, change and crease with the body's rhythm. Striking a distinction with Rachel's desire to minimise the reading of her racial body, Robin's tattooed skin is a garment that she does not want to take off. The intersections between her race and sexuality cannot be overlooked; outwardly claiming her sexuality as a lesbian woman created a positive impact on her racial identity. Like the rising phoenix, she is no longer willing to repress any part of herself.

A View From Below, Dress as Resistance

The use of creative methodologies in this study highlights the need to utilise a greater range of innovative methodologies in the study of the British Chinese. To date, the experiences of British Chinese people have privileged linguistic knowledges and adopted interviewing as a general consensus (Parker, 1998; Pang, 1999; Yuen, 2008; and Lin, 2014). As a group of people dispersed across Britain, the use of innovative methodologies becomes ever more pertinent. It

offers a creative and expressive capacity for British Chinese individuals to present surprising and unexpected insights on their terms to challenge the stereotypes which have framed their identity. The use of creative methodologies combined with a materially-driven perspective presents a “view from below” to understand how a dispersed community, and in this case second generation women, have developed personal strategies to manage the otherness they face in everyday situations.

The function of art workshops allowed second generation British Chinese women to break the sense of a shared isolation through the sharing of their experiences. As remarked by Rachel and Robin, many of the women in this study expressed a sense of growing up in isolation from other British Chinese female counterparts. In this way, the exchange of experiences derived from the women’s object-stories is an opportunity for women to situate their points of commonalities and divergences in a creative and productive context. As such, the object-stories workshops provide a physical space to encourage a collective sharing and articulation; such a context is not readily apparent in the wider British society.

As a population, a British Chinese political voice is in emergence as demonstrated by the London Chinatown protest against discriminatory business raids in 2018. In lieu of an overt discourse surrounding British Chinese identities and discrimination, women’s dressing practices can be read as a tactics of resistance and assertion employed on an individual level while wider discourses are in fruition. Furthermore, future research on the British Chinese requires a stronger gendered consideration to understand how notions of femininity and masculinity are forged by British Chinese individuals. A continual need is required to consider the intersectional dynamic between ethnicity and gender to understand how these categories interact with one another in the negotiation of otherness.

It is evident that the two women of this study have experienced forms of institutional impingement and oppression in different scenarios. Along the lines of race, gender and sexuality, the women’s identities have been in opposition to their habitus, be it the school or the workplace. As highly educated women, possessing fluent English and professional jobs, they are knitted into the fabric

of British life however, their racial visibility marks them as separate to the imagined British society. Their otherness is visually experienced on the body and simultaneously this is the site where relations of power are negotiated and resisted. Practices of bodily presentation highlight how overt and discreet ways of dressing are employed by ethnic minority women to negotiate everyday structural inequalities.

In seeking to manage the workplace gaze, Rachel chooses plain and inconspicuous clothing to neutralise the gendered and racial interpretations of her body. The desire for refuge creates an impression of compliance, however this interpretation is contradicted by her artwork which reveals a combative perspective on gender relations. In this way, her t-shirts cannot be understood within the binary terms of “domination” or “resistance”, but rather, her negotiation of power is one of political hybridity (McNay, 1992). Equally, Rachel’s interpretation of K-Pop as an emancipatory force in her own life needs to read against the capitalist endeavour of K-Pop that spreads “soft power” on a global level (Mantcore-Griffin, 2011). There are certainly questionable ethical practices associated with the industry as K-Pop cannot be seen as an unburdened vehicle of emancipation. However as McNay reminds us, if we view structural forces as being strictly “emancipatory” or “repressive” then this perspective strips away the propensity of the individual to draw agency from a variety of expected and unassuming sources. This point has been keenly observed by Rachel. For her, seeing K-Pop females as “aspirational” ignited a racial re-evaluation of her workplace habitus where she recognised this racial prejudice as an institutional force.²

As a woman, she is equipped with the hallmarks of being self-determined and well-educated and therefore the presence of these t-shirts underline the illusionary label of the Chinese as a “model minority”. It may appear that the second generation are excelling in terms of education and occupations. However a

² Rachel notes her discovery of K-Pop and subsequently she embarked on a Korean Culture course and observes that it was a way of building comfort with herself: “I have been watching with interest at the rise of K-Pop. I find it so fascinating because I never saw Asian women, particularly girl groups being held up as aspirational. Last year, I took a brief course, mostly girls and a few boys from 18-20 years old. It was a Korean culture course about food, language and K-Pop. It was the first time in a long time that I felt, truly comfortable”.

deeper examination reveals that despite these achievements, structural discrimination is still very much present. This highlights the existing challenges facing British Chinese women and other ethnic minority women in the workplace. Despite possessing the ability and social resources to excel, prejudice and discrimination still permeate British institutions and undermine their professional progression.

While Rachel views her clothing as an “armour” for the workplace gaze; Robin reverses the years of internalised racial shame by permanently inscribing her body as distinctively Chinese through the act of tattooing. Absorbed into the skin, the tattooed phoenix forms a racial “double skin”. Her body becomes her artwork as she transforms the raw materials of oppression into a sensual and creative sight upon her body. As a lesbian woman, the intersections of sexuality and race collide and having to negotiate her sexuality has equipped her to assert all aspects of herself, including her race.

The British Chinese are a dispersed population, and second generation women have fewer points of occupational commonality and meeting spaces, which means that experiences of isolation are prevalent. In a Britain where they do not readily see themselves, material objects have the potential to equip and situate a sense of belonging. In this context, materiality assumes a heightened significance for the second generation as objects are used to negotiate their identities and otherness as exemplified by these case studies. The subjectivities of Rachel and Robin explored through materiality are indicative of the ways that objects anchor and negotiate belonging for second generation British Chinese women in the wider study.

Both the women referred to a sense of isolation and an inability to see themselves represented in culture. The existence of their objects are driven by a desire to feel comfortable and at ease in one’s skin. Though the tattoo and t-shirts seem to contrast in their cultural appearance, the women use these practices of dressing to counter otherness. In other words, the tattoo and the t-shirts are the women’s personal responses to the same problem. Invested with tensions and contradictions, their objects are more than their physicality. Rather, the presence of these objects are informed by lines of inquiry based on questions of gender, race and sexuality.

Whether spurred on by the discovery of K-Pop or a Chinese lesbian group, the objects are material precipitates resulting from their journeys with themselves as British Chinese women. Therefore, a vantage point situated upon objects and practices of dressing emphasises the significant role of materiality in social life. These actions cannot be viewed as mundane or peripheral; rather, it is through these embodied everyday practices that relations of power are negotiated. As such, these practices and objects can be viewed as strategies to manage the wider structural inequalities and otherness that ethnic minority women face in their everyday lives.

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