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From Chop Suey to Chop-Socky: The Construction of Chineseness in British Television Adverts

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Abstract

Edward Said's theory of orientalism proposes that Western European culture has overwhelmingly tended to (mis)represent non-European cultures, societies, regions, and ethnic groups via mythic, romantic, simplistic and simplifying sets of binaries. This article asks whether orientalism remains present or active within contemporary media, by analysing the representation of 'Chineseness' in British television adverts between 1955 and 2018. It argues that a predictable, recurring, limited set of aural, visual and narrative clichés and stereotypes have functioned – and continue to function – as the principal resources to evoke 'Chineseness' in British television adverts. The analysis suggests that caricatures, clichés and stereotypes of China, Chinese people, locations, artifacts and phenomena are so common that there can be said to be a glaring seam of unacknowledged, uninterrogated orientalism functioning to maintain a kind of 'invisible' racism in British advertising.

Contributor Note

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Introduction: Stereotyping Adverts

Television adverts are not representations of reality. They involve what Louise Althusser called 'allusion illusion' (Althusser 1971, 162–63). That is, although they create the illusion of making allusions to reality, what they principally make allusions to are illusions – other images, representations, and simulacra. They are audiovisual constructs. As such, like other audiovisual media, adverts might be called hyperreal (Baudrillard 1994; Eco 1994).

Hyperreality is not an opposite of 'reality'. Nor is it unrelated to it. Rather, if the category of 'reality' refers (or alludes) to anything, then it is to all possible components of the complex ensemble of elements that form human cultural and social experience – or, what cultural and social theorists have called 'discourse' (Foucault 1977; Laclau and Mouffe 1985; Akerstrøm Andersen 2003). As such, even though adverts have regularly been disparaged, disdained and dismissed by cultural critics and commentators of all stripes, for being nothing other than 'empty' consumerist messages, there are ample reasons for ethically and politically engaged scholars to take them seriously.

As they are elements of cultural discourse, adverts constitute potentially consequential interventions into everyday life. This article will set out and lay bare the representational treatment of China and Chinese (or, rather, 'China' and 'Chinese') products, images, practices and identities in British television adverts. 'China' and 'Chinese' must be placed within inverted commas because we are not dealing directly with these things, but with their construction or simulation in both products and textual representations.

Following Roland Barthes' pioneering semiotic approach to cultural analysis in *Mythologies* (Barthes 1957), the term 'Chineseness' is used to refer to the effects created by the imagery, themes, motifs, clichés, stereotypes and other representational conventions that cluster around depictions of ostensibly Chinese people, practices and things. Analysis of the construction of Chineseness throughout the history of televisual advertising in Britain leads to the conclusion that whenever British adverts have incorporated Chineseness into their textures, they have principally worked with orientalist or even racist stereotypes. This is a practice whose basis, orientation and cultural consequences can only be regarded as regressive.

This work is certainly not the first to identify and analyse 'Chineseness' in one or another context,¹ but it is unique as a historical survey and analysis of Chineseness in British television adverts. Moreover, although it focuses on adverts, its critical implications are not limited to the sphere of advertising. Rather, the insights to be gleaned from this study have the capacity to contribute to progressive anti-racist projects of many kinds. For, the article offers a critical contribution to understandings of the contemporary British media landscape.

Viewed as optimistically as possible, this is a moment in British history in which ever more kinds of racism are finally beginning to be recognised for what they are in a growing number of contexts (*BBC News* 2018; Burns 2019; Equality and Human Rights Commission 2019). This article aims to show that the standard conventions used in British adverts to evoke Chineseness must be added to the list of contexts in which racism is 'hiding in plain sight'.

¹ There are multiple studies of Chineseness, internationally and across disciplines, which explore a very wide range of issues. There is not time to review these in depth here. (See for example Ang 1994; 2005; Barabantseva 2005; Chan and Rossiter 1998; Chow 1998a; CHU and Cheng 2011; Chua 2004; Chun 1996; Ellis et al.

1985; G. B. Lee 2003; Zhouxiang, Zhang, and Hong 2014; Yin and Liew 2005; Wickberg 2007; Lombard and Salmon 1993; Louie 2004; 2009; Meerwald 2001; Oakes 2000; Perdue 2004; Reid 2009; Siu 2001)

The UK has arguably been slow to recognise forms of racism that are widely acknowledged in other countries. For instance, US discourse often displays a highly nuanced and variegated awareness of and sensitivity to all manner of problems in ethnic representation. However, racist codes and conventions to convey Asianness and Chineseness have remained largely 'below the radar' in the British context. Accordingly, this work seeks to help draw hitherto forms of 'invisible' or unacknowledged structures of racism circulating in audiovisual culture into visibility.

TV Advertising in the UK

The British Broadcasting Corporation (the BBC) launched the world's first regular television channel in 1936. This was first called the BBC Television Service, but it became BBC One upon the launch of BBC Two in 1964. Neither of these television channels have ever broadcast commercial adverts. The only adverts on the BBC are known as 'idents' and these are essentially announcements for forthcoming BBC programmes. It was not until 1955 that the UK's first independent television station began broadcasting one channel – ITV – that British viewers began to see television adverts for commercial products.

From 1955, ITV was the sole television broadcaster of commercial adverts, in a TV ecology of first two and then (in 1964) three channels. Another commercial channel to broadcast adverts, Channel 4, appeared in 1982, followed by Channel 5 in 1997. Cable TV had made only marginal inroads into the British television landscape during the 1980s, and satellite television did not appear until 1989, with Sky. As such, all of these channels can be regarded as highly significant sources of cultural, political, and ideological information.

The cultural centrality of television in Britain in the second half of the twentieth century cannot be overstated. Along with print media,

radio, popular music and cinema, television was one of the major forces of 'massification' in British culture (Anderson 1991). Given the cultural dominance of television, combined with such a scarcity of channels, television advertisers in the UK were assured of significant audiences between the 1950s and 1990s.

Within the first year of ITV broadcasting, some of the adverts shown were already trading on ideas of racial and ethnic difference.



Fig. 1: Esso Extra (1956)

Smiling Inscrutability

In the first year of ITV's broadcasts, an advert for Esso Extra was shown, made up of a sequence of animated cartoon faces singing 'the Esso sign means happy motoring'. This line is repeated three times, and the sequence completes with 'call at the Esso sign'. Different versions of this advert were made, but in one, the first face we see is a white woman (who retrospectively appears like a proto-Wilma Flintstone character, from the 1960-1966 cartoon series *The Flintstones*). After a chorus, in which the screen changes to the Esso sign itself, the next character is a caricatured black face singing the same lines. After the next chorus, the music changes to introduce a recognisable 'oriental' sound, constructed from musical clichés in the pentatonic scale (a scale that Westerners have long associated with East Asian music (Nilsson n.d.)).

The line-drawn face that then appears is made up of many stereotypical features that Westerners have constructed for male Chinese characters, including a pointed conical hat, thin eyes and long moustache (Fig. 1). The advert even goes so far as to modify the lyrical refrain of the song on this occurrence, so that in this iteration, instead of the words 'the Esso sign means happy motoring', the 'Chinese' character adds the word 'very'. Hence, the line runs, 'the Esso sign means very happy motoring'. But this is done entirely so as to shoehorn a linguistic cliché into the line – in which the letter R is pronounced as an L – so that 'very' is pronounced 'vely' (*Esso Extra Commercial* 1956). This is a linguistic stereotype that (as we will see) continues to this day.

Although evidently US-made, this is perhaps the oldest TV advert involving Chineseness broadcast on British television. It is an animation. This means that, in a literal and direct sense, from the very beginning, the 'Chineseness' constructed and depicted in British television adverts is, from the origin, *pure simulation*. As this is a *cartoon animation* it is therefore nothing but 'allusion illusion' – and one that is constructed entirely through (and perpetuating the circulation of) ultimately racist stereotypes.

Such stereotypes that have no real relation to Chinese characteristics, no matter from which perspective they are viewed. The R-to-L cliché in the pronunciation of 'very' as 'vely' exemplifies this. Although there is evidence that *sometimes* native Japanese speakers confuse R and L sounds in English, there is no evidence that native Chinese speakers do. The literal 'smiley face' character of the construct, while working to appear humorous and endearing, does nothing to diminish the misuse and abuse of racial stereotypes.

During the same first twelve months of British TV advert broadcasting (1955-56), Kellogg's released a 'Yum-Yum Corn-flakes' advert. This short 17-second advert begins by showing the words 'Yum-Yum Kellogg's Cornflakes' and then cuts to a teenage girl in medium

close up, holding a bowl in front of her chest and eating the contents with chopsticks. From the first moment, the visual image is accompanied by the strumming of oriental-sounding instruments, such as the yangqin and pipa. As will become the case across many subsequent adverts, it is the sound of the music that effectively announces the presence of Chineseness. Then a voiceover says, 'Like Yum-Yum, enjoy the taste of Kellogg's Cornflakes'. The girl then begins to laugh (Fig. 2) – perhaps to register how funny it is to eat cornflakes (which are conventionally served in milk) with chopsticks, or perhaps just to signal the sense of enjoyment (*Kellogg's Corn Flakes Commercial: Chinese Girl* 1956).



Fig. 2: Kellogg's Cornflakes (1956)

By contrast, the happy smiley-face animated 'Chinese' man of Esso Extra and the laughing cornflake-eating Chinese girl – both seen of 1956 – are absent at the start of a 1976 Vesta Chop Suey advert. Unlike our first two examples (which are for Western products), the product being advertised in this case is ostensibly Chinese – packaged chop suey meals (although, like fortune cookies, the origins of chop suey are actually to be found in the twentieth century USA rather than China).

In other words, if our first two adverts are organised around a 'happy Chinese' stereotype, this Vesta advert plays on a diametrically opposed stereotype – that of the infamous 'inscrutable Chinese' (Chow 2001). As Edward Said notes, orientalist representations are not univocal: they split,

double and contrast 'types', along binary lines. The happy, laughing, childlike innocent figure must have its converse. This has long been the figure of the 'inscrutable Chinese'.

In the Vesta Chop Suey advert, a group of Chinese men and a boy wearing Western clothes walk along a presumably British street. A voiceover asks us: 'Did you ever see a Chinaman smile?' What is today a self-evidently alarming and unavoidably racist formulation is uttered easily in 1967, as the establishment of a conceit, like the opening line of a joke.



Fig. 3: 'Did you ever see a Chinaman smile?'

This scenario will play itself out, and end in such a way as to recast the 'inscrutable Chinese' as eminently capable of laughter. The voiceover continues: 'Look in one night, when the family's eating Vesta chop suey'. The scene switches to a domestic kitchen, where three generations of an extended family are gathered round for a meal – of Vesta chop suey.



Fig. 5: 'Look in one night, while

the family's eating Vesta Chop Suey' Upon eating, one of the men breaks out into raucous and evidently contagious laughter, so that soon everyone else in the family follows suit and begins laughing. Indeed, the laughter is so animated that (to a contemporary viewer, at least) it appears almost demented in its strained and over-acted manner (Fig. 7).

It takes an effort of interpretation to work out the intention animating this advert. Clearly, the 'Chinaman' needs to laugh by the end of the advert in order to resolve the opening question. And perhaps the group laughter is intended to suggest a shared joke – perhaps that white Westerners think chop suey, as an 'authentic Chinese meal', is hard to make, but really it is easy because Chinese families just use Vesta?



Fig. 6: inexplicable laughter

In any case, in its strained excessiveness, the laughter is likely to appear highly eccentric to a contemporary viewer. Indeed, by today's standards, the advert actually seems to backfire. For, it evidently seeks to play the inscrutability myth in order to puncture it and thereby soften up a presumably prejudicial audience to the idea of Chineseness (and more precisely Vesta 'Chinese' food products). Yet, in the final analysis, what the audience is literally shown is a Chinese family dissolving into fits of manic laughter in the face of a British version of a supposedly Chinese dish (*Vesta Chop Suey Commercial* 1967).



Fig. 7: Vesta Chop Suey (1967)



Fig. 8: PG Tips (1974)

Cultural Confusions & Misplaced Mispronunciations

In our first two examples, the Esso and Kellogg's adverts, Chinese faces appeared against a non-specific background. After this atopia came the very British scenario of Vesta's chop suey advert. Higher-budget adverts of the 1970s began to place Chineseness into more diverse locations. A decades-long series of adverts for PG Tips tea (in)famously featured clothed, anthropomorphised and vocally dubbed chimpanzees 'playing' human roles.

In 1973, one of these adverts constructs Chineseness by playing on the James Bond movie theme. The sound of a gong accompanies the opening of the advert and an 'oriental' costumed chimpanzee plays the role of a 'Bond villain'. This is in keeping with the well-worn tradition in which the anti-heroes in James Bond 007 films display ethnic stereotypes (*PG Tips Commercial* 1973). The Chinese chimp antihero begins his dialogue with the vocal cliché of 'ah, so' and speaks with a caricatural/stereotypical Chinese accent. This is starkly contrasted with the ultra-English pronunciation of the 'Bond' character.

Similarly, the cigarette brand, Benson and Hedges, takes another line on the James Bond theme with its 'Escape' advert, shown during the early 1970s, in which a white Western man attempts to escape from a Chinese-esque location.



Fig. 9: Benson and Hedges (1975)

In it, we see ramshackle market streets, military-looking Asian policemen giving chase to our white hero, and the rowing boats, sailboats and junks that are indelibly associated in the Western imaginary with Hong Kong. Market sounds and Chinese music play in the background. The white man makes it down to the docks and attempts to pay a shady-looking character for his safe passage out of there. The Asian man (who is stroking a cat, in line with the James Bond villain cliché) is uninterested in the fugitive's money, documents and watch, etc., but is won over by his Benson and Hedges cigarettes. Finally we see our hero hide inside a lion dance costume along with other performers, and dance his way unseen onto a waiting boat (*Benson and Hedges Commercial: Escape* 1970s).



Fig. 10: Benson and Hedges (1975)

Although Hong Kong here represents ‘China’, Hong Kong itself features in numerous different kinds of adverts through the 1970s and 1980s. It often features in adverts for British Airways, in whose adverts the British Crown Colony is presented as an interesting and exotic stop-over on long-haul flights. This attribution of a ‘stop-over status’ adds weight to the arguments of certain cultural critics in the 1990s about Hong Kong’s longstanding status of being ‘neither here nor there’, but constantly in between (Chow 1992; Abbas 1997; Chow 1998b; Morris, Li, and Chan 2005).

Given the fraught and immensely complex relationship between Hong Kong, China and the West, there is a sense in which using Hong Kong to represent China smacks of cultural confusion. Yet, this is nothing compared to a 1976 advert, again for Kellogg’s Cornflakes, which is for some reason called ‘Twins’.

The Kellogg’s advert may be *called* ‘Twins’ but the two East Asian girls who star in it are clearly are not twins. One is considerably taller than the other, and they appear to be of different ages. Yet they are implicitly being regarded as (if) ‘twins’ here, because of their shared ethnicity. As Stuart Hall frequently noted, one of the degree-zero propositions of

² One girls says, ‘Kore oishii wa! [This is delicious!], to which the other replies, ‘Koko ga suki nareru to omou wa! [I think I can like this place!’

racism is the formulation, ‘they all look the same’.



Fig. 11: Kellogg’s Cornflakes (1976)

In ‘Twins’, Kellogg’s again stage an encounter between East Asian girls and the eating of cornflakes. Once more, it is depicted as a culinary encounter that elicits delight: the girls seem to love the cornflakes and evidently rave about them in their native language. However, although this advert is tagged ‘Chinese’ in the archives of the History of Advertising Trust, the language that the two girls speak to each other is actually Japanese.² This filing error or category mistake is suggestive in what it reveals of the frequent Western conflation of Chinese, Japanese, Korean and other East Asian cultural identities³ (*Kellogg’s Corn Flakes Commercial: Twins* 1976).

The connection between Chineseness and food has always been strong in British advertising. This connection has not always been primary. It actually registers the fact that the predominant economic activity of Chinese immigrants in the UK in the mid to late twentieth century was the takeaway food service industry. Before this, during the first half of the twentieth century, Chineseness in Britain principally involved connotations of and associations with sailors, Chinatowns and laundries (Seed 2006; Seshagiri 2006;

³ I have written about the tendency of Western popular culture to confuse and conflate specific Asian nations and cultures at length elsewhere (Bowman 2010; 2011; 2013), so I will not dwell on this point again here.

Künnemann and Mayer 2012). However, by the 1970s, with increased immigration from Hong Kong and the development of the takeaway food economy, Chineseness in Britain became decisively associated with food.

We see this in a 1978 advert for Jacob's Golden Orient biscuits. This is set in a simulation of an ostensibly grand Emperor's palace. Once again, there is some cultural confusion between Chinese and Japanese imagery, and again this spills over into the vocal performance. Generic oriental string music plays as we see the Emperor and his court. The Emperor is angry about his food – shouting and kicking away the bowls and plates of food presented to him.

The emperor, in this advert, is played by the ethnically Chinese British actor Burt Kwouk. Kwouk had a long and successful international film and TV acting career, and, in terms of adverts, he quickly became the 'go-to' actor for Chinese and oriental-esque characters in British TV and radio productions throughout the 1970s and 1980s, even into the 1990s and occasionally (for nostalgic reasons) the 2000s.

When the Emperor is presented with Jacob's Golden Orient biscuits, he is initially delighted. He loves the taste. However, when he reads the box, he becomes enraged – because they are British. He exclaims, 'an English-u biscuit-a-maker?', before shouting, 'you will pay dearly!' Fortunately, his wife immediately says, 'not at these prices!' The cheapness of the product instantly pleases the Emperor and he is appeased, laughing happily, along with all present, to end the advert on a happy note.

The confusion of Chinese and Japanese imagery is nowhere more apparent than in the combination of ethnically Chinese Kwouk mouthing stereotypes associated with Japanese speech, such as adding an 'u' sound to the end of words and placing an 'a' in between certain words (*Golden Orient Commercial: Emperor 1978*).

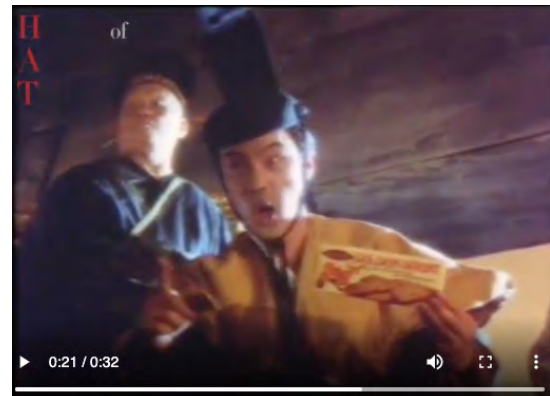


Fig. 12: 'An English-u biscuit-a-maker?'
Golden Orient (1978)

This advert is only the tip of an iceberg in this respect. British TV advertisers have long been fixated not only on Chinese accents in general but also on certain perceived pronunciation problems in particular – specifically, as we have already seen, in the misplacing of the letters L and R, wherein 'very' is believed to be pronounced 'vely' (or 'vewy') and 'lock' is believed to be pronounced either 'rock' or 'wock'. In British contexts, these mispronunciations are frequently, yet incorrectly, associated with Chinese people. Perhaps the most exemplary case appears in 1979, when the otherwise entirely reputable white British actors, June Whitfield and David Suchet, indulged in an embarrassing case of 'yellow-face' – or, as they might say in this advert, 'yarrow-face' or even 'lerrow-face'.



Fig. 13: Bird's Eye (1979)

The product in question was Bird's Eye's China Dragon Range. In the advert, the white June Whitfield is orientalised and is preparing dinner in the kitchen, speaking directly to camera. Her lines and pronunciation hit every

misinformed stereotype about how the Chinese supposedly speak, including broken English, as she expresses hope that her husband will not be able to tell that she didn't actually cook the food herself. As she throws away the box that the food came in, her husband spies her doing so and hence deduces the truth. As he appears, he announces, in equally caricatural diction, that he knows what she has done. June confirms that she knew she'd never get away with it, because he is none other than famous detective, Charlie Chan (*China Dragon Range Commercial: Charlie Chan* 1979).



Fig. 14: Bird's Eye (1979)

Such adverts are hugely problematic in every way and have no redeeming qualities or dimensions. They encapsulate the essence of long-running and rarely challenged or problematised conventions in the British representation of Chineseness.

However, in the same year (1979), Knorr released two adverts for 'Knoodles' (pronounced 'canoodles'). Both used animation, in which Chinese-looking characters move about against a backdrop clearly intended to be interpreted as Willow Pattern (a 'Chinese' style design used on all manner of crockery, which was very popular in the UK in the 1970s). However, the visual semiotics slip and slide between Chinese (Willow Pattern) and Japanese (Samurai) imagery.



Fig. 15: 'Different Shapes in a Willow Pattern, 19th Century', Wmpearl⁴

Interestingly, both of these Knorr adverts also play on the theme of speech and accent. However, they approach the theme of Chinese dialogue from the opposite direction, by giving the 'Chinese' characters broad cockney (working class London) accents. In one of these two adverts, we see a female character trying to get home and complaining bitterly about the day she has had and her journey home, in a broad cockney accent (Fig. 16). By the end, we see her standing on a jetty as three boats appear. In response – echoing a very familiar British complaint about buses – she says, 'typical, you wait for ages and then three turn up at once!' (*Knorr Knoodles Commercial: Bus Queue* 1979).



Fig. 16: Knorr (1979)

Similarly, the other Knorr 'Knoodle' advert is also set against a Willow Pattern backdrop, this time depicting a Chinese character with

4

<https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=51653825>

a male cockney voice. In this advert, the working-class man expresses relief at not having to see his mother-in-law. This is because, we are told, she is a 'dragon'. This conventional sexist cliché of the 1970s about mothers-in-law being 'dragons' serves as a bridge to return us to a stereotypically Chinese theme: upon the man making this statement, we are shown a literal animated Chinese dragon (Fig. 17) (*Knorr Knoodles Commercial: Mother In Law* 1979).



Fig. 17: Knorr (1979)

These two adverts at least show traces of an ironic relation to linguistic stereotypes, in that their humour is derived from the gentle cognitive dissonance of Chineseness (sometimes shading into Japaneseness) combined with working class London accents.

Perhaps the makers were even aware that the supposedly Chinese Willow Pattern that has long been popular in the UK does not in fact derive from China at all. The 'Chinese' Willow Pattern design is a decidedly English form of chinoiserie, having been designed in the 1780s in Shropshire, England.

Enter the Chop Socky

A quickly banned advert for Walker's Crisps in 1983 combines elements of both of these dimensions (the interplay and interaction of cockney and Chinese accents), while adding what would soon become another prominent component of Chineseness of British adverts: cinematic-style martial arts.

The 1983 Walker's advert stages an encounter between a newly arrived Chinese traveller and a working-class street vendor in London. Standing excitedly at the window of a street café housed in a kiosk, the smartly dressed young Chinese man asks for directions: 'Please direct to Lotus Flower Take Away. My brother, he work there'. To this, the vendor replies, 'This is a tea stall, John; not an information centre. Do you want a cup of tea or not?' The Chinese man replies, 'ah, ok', and asks also for a packet of Walker's crisps as well, adding: 'my brother, he say Walker's crisps, so fresh, so tasty, always say Walker's'.

Both speakers communicate stereotypically. The vendor has a strong cockney accent. This will turn out to be vital for the 'success' of the advert, because its conclusion relies on a joke based in 'cockney rhyming slang'. Meanwhile, the Chinese man speaks in the stereotypical way Chinese people are often depicted as speaking English, involving such features as dropping pronouns, speaking in the singular and tending to stay in the present tense.



Fig. 18: Walker's (1983)

On hearing the request for Walker's crisps, the cockney vendor seems troubled and attempts to sell him a different brand (the fictitious 'So-So Crisps'), saying 'Naaah, John, these'll do ya'. But the customer is adamant, replying firmly: 'No: Walker's'. At this point, the salesman immediately replies, 'Take these, me old China'. This phrase means, 'take these, mate' – because 'China' in cockney rhyming slang is short for 'China plate', which rhymes with and means 'mate' (i.e., friend). At this

point the customer explodes with rage and begins smashing the wooden kiosk to pieces with chops, strikes and jumping kicks (Fig. 18).



Fig. 19: Walker's (1983)

After the destruction, he holds a packet of crisps to camera and says, 'My brother, he say, man who seeks perfection always insists on Walker's crisps. So fresh, so tasty' (*Walkers Crisps Commercial: My Brother* 1983).

Whilst perhaps intentionally comic, this advert was in fact banned, on the grounds that it could cause racial offence. Clearly, this may be valid. But, by the same token, in another way, the advert could also be read as staging and engaging the topic of racial bias and inequality in the UK. Certainly, the Chinese man may conform to two stereotypes – firstly, speaking in broken English and, secondly, demonstrating spectacular martial arts skills – a stereotype that was born in the wake of such internationally successful TV series as *Kung Fu* (1972-75) and Bruce Lee's martial arts films (1971-73). But at the same time, the Chinese character is also confused by the apparent hostility he is faced with, and vents that rage as a kind of righteous (if excessive) retribution. The most glaring cinematic antecedent of this scene is undoubtedly a famous moment in *Fist of Fury/Jing Wu Men*, in which Bruce Lee's character, Chen Zhen, destroys the racist 'no dogs and Chinese allowed' sign banning Chinese entrance to a Shanghai park.⁵

⁵ I discuss this advert more fully in 'Game of Text' (Bowman 2019c).



Fig. 20: Bruce Lee's Chen Zhen destroys the 'No Dogs and Chinese Allowed' sign in *Fist of Fury* (1972)

Moreover, when viewed from the position of a broader survey of the construction of Chineseness in British adverts, it seems ironic that this advert was banned. For, multiple adverts, before and since, have committed far worse representational crimes.

For instance, an advert for an 'Oriental Bamboo Steamer' of 1982 contains a Burt Kwouk voiceover, in which virtually every phrase used is made to contain some kind of supposedly Chinese linguistic tick. For instance: 'herrow' for 'hello', 'terrovision' for 'television', 'please to get pen and paper leddy to lite our address' for 'please get [a] pen and paper ready to write our address', 'sirry irriot' for 'silly idiot', etc. (*Oriental Bamboo Steamer Commercial: Bamboo Steamer* 1982).



Fig. 21: Bamboo Steamer (1982-3)

The exact same device characterises a 1987 Batchelor's Cup-A-Soup advert, in which a 'comic' Chinese-style voice suggests that instead of visiting the Great Wall of China, viewers might instead prefer to stay at home

and enjoy this 'vely tasty' product (*Batchelors Cup-A-Soup Commercial: China 1987*).



Fig. 22: Batchelors (1987)

Heroes and Hordes

Through the 1980s, cinematically-influenced orientalism increasingly informs the construction of Chineseness in multiple ways – from the crowds of ‘natives’ staring agog at British Airways planes flying over Hong Kong (*British Airways Commercial: Hong Kong 1981*) to crazed kung fu assassins attacking suave and cool white men while, for instance, taking a bath in Macau (an assassin foiled when the white man places his bar of Wright’s Coal Tar Soap on the floor, causing his attacker to slip and crash out of the window (*Wrights Coal Tar Soap Commercial: Macau 1983*)).

The cool white individual versus multiple Chinese antagonists is a common trope, and it is not restricted to the *male* ‘white saviour’ genre, as exemplified by James Bond or Indiana Jones. White *women* can also be seen running rings around Chinese pursuers, as in an advert for ‘Sure’ deodorant, in which a young woman has the Sure logo (a tick, not unlike the more famous Nike swoosh) sprayed with deodorant onto her back. After a long chase through hot Hong Kong landscapes, she is shown to be sweating all over, apart from the area on her back that had been sprayed with deodorant (*Sure Commercial: China Chase 1980s*).



Fig. 23: Sure, ‘China Chase’, 1980s

Interestingly, this advert effectively repeats the structure of the previous Benson and Hedges advert, except this time it is a woman who is being chased by Chinese police, who have witnessed her escaping from a hotel window. We have already seen her pick up a man’s wallet and begin her escape. So, we assume she is a criminal. The police chase her through city streets and the confusion of a lion dance, but she makes it down to the docks, where she meets a man and delivers his wallet – he has evidently forgotten it. The locations used in this advert are so similar that they are likely to be the very same locations used in the earlier cigarette advert.



Fig. 24: Sure, ‘China Chase’, 1980s

Perhaps because it is considerably more expensive to stage, the white-hero-in-exotic-Asia scenario is not as common as the far cheaper linguistic mispronunciation motif, along with the gongs and other sounds of Chineseness, or the domestic kitchen

scenario.⁶ It is only bigger budget advertisers that can easily simulate an expansive Chinese landscape or cityscape. But even when advertisers are able to afford to simulate a lavish Chinese scene, they still use many of the other stereotypical elements too, such as accents, mispronunciations and – more recently – martial arts.



Fig. 25: Warriors arriving, 'Chinese Warrior', BT (1985)

For instance, the British telecommunications company BT played shamelessly on linguistic stereotypes in its otherwise lavish 1985 'Chinese Warrior' commercial. This advert is one instalment of a long-running series, in which a telephone would ring at an inconvenient time and the person who answered the telephone would call out, 'it's for you-hoo!' In this instalment, the telephone rings as a 'Chinese warrior' is poised on the brink of defending what looks like a Shaolin temple from an invading army.

Along with spectacular gymnastic/cinematic martial arts derived from texts such as *Kung Fu* and other Shaolin Temple inspired films and shows, the advert makes indulgent use of the culturally misattributed L/R-conflation stereotype (*BT Commercial: Chinese Warrior* 1985).

⁶ An Uncle Wong Frozen Food commercial from 1983 is interesting in this regard. It includes all the usual gongs and sounds of Chineseness, and devolves down to a culinary scenario. But we see an interesting reversal as Chinese food is



Fig. 26: White *g*-wearing 'monk' prepares to defend a Shaolin-esque Temple 'Chinese Warrior', BT (1985)



Fig. 27: 'It's for you-hoo!', BT (1985)

This advert explicitly acknowledges its televisual antecedents when the white-clad warrior carries out his (L/R-conflating) telephone conversation with his father ('Father say, it is better to be friend than enemy', etc.). He concludes it with the instantly recognisable question, 'How is Grasshopper?' Grasshopper was, of course, the affectionate nickname given to the young character, Caine, in the classic 1970s TV series, *Kung Fu*. This illustrates the extent to which orientalist martial arts cinema and TV of the 1970s was still playing itself out intertextually in media culture of the 1980s.

In the same year, 1985's Homepride Classic Chinese Sauces advert presented us with yet

reframed as 'home cooking' (*Uncle Wong Frozen Food Commercial: Good Old Home Cooking* 1983).

another animated Chinese character facing a 'horde'. This time, the horde are a troupe of identical animated Homepride men. These characters were already very familiar to viewers, as they had for a long time featured in all Homepride commercials. However, this advert introduces a new 'Chinese' character, who announces his own arrival by sounding a gong (Fig. 28).



Fig. 28: Homepride Classic Chinese Sauces (1985)

The Chinese character's voice is once again provided by Burt Kwouk. As ever, he is made to communicate using every linguistic stereotype available. This phonetic racism, however, is twisted and redirected at the end of the advert – or rather, a core racist idea is reversed and redirected: Kwouk's Chinese character addresses one of the Homepride characters by the wrong name (Fred). When he is corrected ('I'm Burt'), Kwouk says: 'So sorry [sorry]: all Homepride look same to me'.

Such reversals of the usual senders and receivers of racist observations, while taking the inverted form of ostensibly humorous jokes, arguably simply rely on and hence do little or nothing to challenge racist structures. At best, they merely reveal and reconfirm the presence of such structures, and therefore should be read principally as further evidence of their well-known, if unspoken, existence.

All of these examples provide ample evidence that the basic stereotypical structures of the visual and aural signifiers of Chineseness changed very little between the mid-1950s and mid-1980s.



Fig. 29: 'So sorry: All Homepride look same to me' (1985)

Challenging Chopsticks: Culinary Curios and Kitchen Racism

One interesting thematic curio that emerges during the late 1980s involves the appearance of the proposition that chopsticks are novel, weird and/or uncommon. We see this, for instance, in a Bejam Chinese Vegetables commercial from 1987. This advert employs another familiar auditory convention of British adverts – the impeccably English-sounding narrator, whose voice is defined by its rich, 'plummy', quintessentially English texture.

In this advert, the narrator starts out as the straight man of the piece, describing the Bejam Chinese vegetables in luxurious detail. After extolling their virtues, he says, with the rising intonation of a question, 'the only way to make them [Bejam Chinese Vegetables] more authentic?', and pauses. In the pause, we hear the sounds of woodworking, sawing and chiselling. Then, two small, thin, rough-cut pieces of wood fall into shot and the narrator continues: 'chopsticks!' (Fig. 30) This final word is uttered as if the narrator is finding it hard to contain his hilarity at the very idea of chopsticks (*Bejam Chinese Vegetables Commercial: Special Chinese Veg* 1987).



Fig. 30: Bejam Chinese Vegetables (and hilarious chopsticks) (1987)

Chopsticks still remain a source of comedy in 1992. We see this in an advert for 'Chinese Oxo'. This product was a variant of standard Oxo cubes, long used for making gravy in the UK. The advert for Chinese Oxo plays out a scene in which the parents of an adult son go to his and his partner's new house for dinner. They enter the domestic kitchen and dining room where the son's partner is preparing dinner with 'Chinese Oxo'. The Chinese meal that is eventually served up is presented as something quite curious and unusual in and of itself – an exotic and interesting 'event' meal. The novel status of all of this is foregrounded in the conversation, which centres on the topic of the (white English) diners never normally eating Chinese food and being unable to use chopsticks (*Oxo Commercial: Chinese Oxo* 1992).

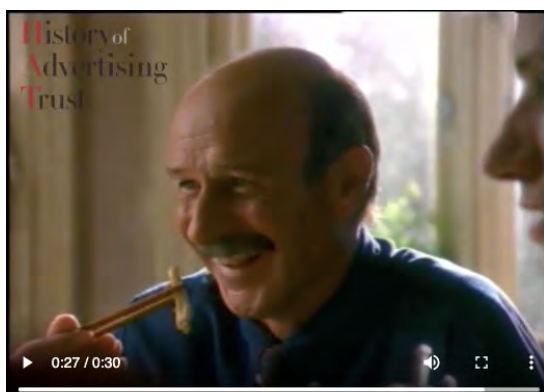


Fig. 40: Oxo advert (1992)

Oxo has long been a decidedly British product, and its adverts have long played on British domesticity. The 'family' who appeared in one of its very long-running series of

adverts were actually known affectionately as 'the Oxo family'.

Domesticity is also played – albeit differently – in a British Lee and Perrin's Worcestershire sauce commercial from 1996. This advert places us as guests in a domestic Chinese kitchen, in the company of a housewife who is talking us through how to make a stir fry, incorporating what she pronounces as 'Woo-ister Sauce'. Most of the time is taken up by her instructional monologue, but the entire premise of the advert seems to have been how funny it will be when the hyperbolically English-sounding narrator pseudo-sinicizes his own pronunciation of 'Worcestershire Sauce' as 'Wooooo-ister sauce' at the end (*Lea & Perrin's Worcestershire Sauce Commercial: Shanghai* 1996).



Fig. 41: Lea & Perrin's 'Wooo-ster Sauce' (1996)

Clearly, 'traditional' forms of unacknowledged racism – taking the form of supposedly acceptable humour – have endured in British advertising. As recently as 1998, a Batchelor's Super Noodles advert showed two young men in a domestic kitchen having a food fight. Acting out faux film dialogue in 'ah-so' accents, sometimes attempting cinematically recognisable techniques (such as the supposedly Okinawan/Japanese 'crane technique' from 1984's *Karate Kid*) and improvised but badly executed martial arts style moves, the two white men converse in 'ah-so' and 'ah, grasshopper' style parodies of Chinese-sounding dialogue (*Super Noodles Commercial: Shaolin* 1998).



Fig. 42: Super Noodles 'Shaolin' (1998)

This is just one variant of an ever-growing catalogue of adverts that register these recurring sets of stereotypical connotations and associations. As we have seen, martial arts themes enter into the assemblage of stereotypes signifying Chineseness during the 1980s and 1990s. This arguably becomes the dominant trope, albeit rising to the ascendant, without fully displacing or replacing earlier clichés, images and tropes.

Martial Ads

The martial arts dimension that has become such a part of the media construction of Chineseness was established in cinema and film during the early 1970s. However, it is only belatedly that spectacular martial arts were added to the assemblage of ingredients that make up the current entity of Chineseness in British television adverts.

Neither 'martial arts' nor 'kung fu' have one stable representational form (Hunt 2003; Judkins 2014). Each contains many variants and styles, far too numerous to describe here. In relation to China and Chineseness, however, there are a few recurring coordinates worthy of attention.

Bruce Lee, Bruce Lee 'clones' and allusions to Bruce Lee are perhaps the most common. But at the same time, in equal first place, we often see imagery derived from the Shaolin Temple as it has appeared in internationally successful films and TV programmes since the 1970s. The most recent modification or

modulation of this imagery relates to the hit millennial film, *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* – a film credited with installing *wuxia* aesthetics and 'wire fu' firmly within the lexicon and aesthetic universe of Western visual culture (Hunt 2003; Park 2010).

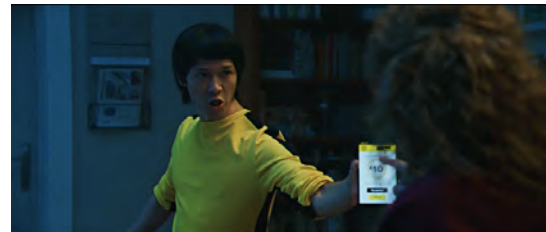


Fig. 43: OVO 'Boost Lee' (2017-19)

Bruce Lee 'clones' have primarily been discussed in relation to martial arts films of the 1970s, but Bruce Lee lookalikes continue to feature in adverts for all kinds of products to this day. At the time of writing, one of the most recent UK adverts to use a Bruce Lee clone was a 2017 OVO (energy provider) advert featuring a character called 'Boost Lee'. This advert featured a supposed Bruce Lee lookalike dressed in Lee's signature yellow jump suit (made famous by his incomplete 'masterpiece' *Game of Death* and in famous scenes during Quentin Tarantino's subsequent homage, *Kill Bill, Volume 1*).

In the OVO advert, 'Boost Lee' is advertising a smartphone app. The advert was called 'finger of fury', as the app and the advert focus on tapping on a smartphone screen with the fingers. There were complaints about this advert, based on the sense that it seemed to be racist. These were not upheld by the regulator, the Advertising Standards Agency (Bradley 2018). Presumably Bruce Lee clones, if only by dint of their ubiquity, and no matter how caricatural, are regarded as acceptable within the British mediascape (and presumably also they fall outside of the purview and field of influence of the lawyers of Bruce Lee Enterprises (*The Hollywood Reporter* 2019)).

There are many adverts that use intertextual references to Bruce Lee. There are even adverts that use Bruce Lee clones to advertise ersatz smoking paraphernalia – such as an

advert in 2010 for Nicorette Inhalers that directly references the idea that its Bruce Lee lookalike star is not the real thing, with its strapline of 'the closest thing to...' (Fig. 44) (*Nicorette Inhalator Commercial: Kung Fu* 2010). Clearly, it can be seen that TV adverts often follow and riff on themes first produced and popularised in film. However, it deserves noting that – sometimes, at least – despite the proliferation of adverts that construct Chineseness via stereotypes, clichés and out-and-out racist material, some adverts can arguably be said to construct Chineseness in ways that have to be evaluated as 'positive' (at least according to the yardsticks of certain anti-orientalist approaches to film, TV, media and cultural studies).



Fig. 44: Nicorette 'the closest thing to...' (2010)

For instance, a 1997 advert for Levi's 501 jeans is set in a gritty and nostalgia-inducing Hong Kong against a soundtrack that recalls early 1970s blaxploitation era funk music. The tight white-vest-wearing lead man (Dustin Nguyen) is *not quite* a Bruce Lee lookalike, but the advert works hard to form the association, through signature Bruce Lee moves and accompanying sound effects as he bests multiple opponents on his race through an urban cityscape, down into a commercial laundry.

Once inside the laundry, he takes an item of clothing out of the arms of an equally smoulderingly attractive female laundry worker and looks at them. They are evidently his 501 jeans, which he deftly flicks out and back into his hands, turning them inside out. He hands them back to her as hordes of

opponents appear outside the door. After some lingering eye contact between the male and female leads, our hero heads back out into the melee. She gazes after him. Then the advert fades into the logo for Levi's 501s and the words 'best washed inside out'.

In this example, the Levi's advert does something that 'Hollywood' (as shorthand for Western films or the Western film industry in general) has long been accused of failing to do: specifically, it eroticises not merely an Asian female but also – significantly – an Asian male lead. This eroticisation of an Asian male was for a long time exceedingly uncommon in Western film and TV media (Erwin 2003; Marchetti 1994; 2006). In this sense, it can be seen that although adverts very often 'follow' other media forms (film, for instance), they are eminently capable of innovating and 'leading'.

(Un)Becoming Chinese(ness)

Mining the reserves of the temple theme, a 2002 advert depicted a white disciple 'becoming Chinese', by entering and going through a long period of training in an Eastern temple. Needless to say, the temple is strongly reminiscent of cinematic depictions of Shaolin or Wudang (*Pepsi Commercial: Kung Fu* 2002). All of the masters, teachers and seniors in the temple bear a characteristic 'brand' on the centre of their foreheads. The young disciple does not. In the final scene we see the disciple, much older now, at a graduation-like ceremony. He is faced with a can of Pepsi. After drinking the entire can, he seems unsure what to do next, and hesitates. Then, as if in a moment of awakening, he realises what must be done: he crushes the can onto his forehead, to the approving applause of all of the other monks, and gains the 'brand' of a graduate of the temple (Fig. 45).

Becoming a martial monk may seem to be an extreme and entirely cinematic example of 'becoming Chinese' – although, inspired by cinematic representations, martial arts

pilgrimages and residencies in institutions such as the Shaolin Temple are increasingly popular with Westerners (Polly 2007; Frank 2006; Griffith, Marion, and Wulff 2018). Similarly, other related forms of the domestication of ‘essentially Chinese’ practices is increasingly common (Frank 2006; Ryan 2008).

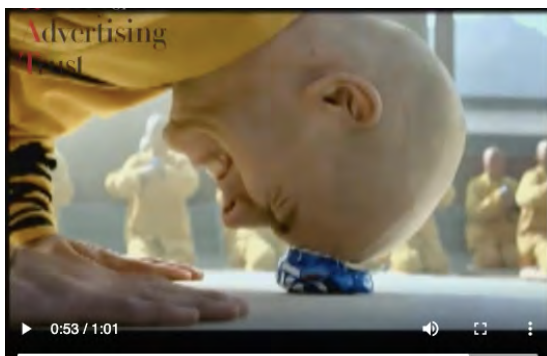


Fig. 45: Pepsi (2002)

This is registered in a BBC ‘ident’ that ran between 2002 and 2007. As mentioned earlier, an ident is a short advert featuring a TV channel’s branding (in this case, the BBC) while a voice-over gives information about forthcoming programmes. During 2002-2007, the BBC broadcast a range of idents featuring bodies in movement. Two of the most prominent were one featuring capoeira (with two capoeiristas playing on an urban rooftop) and another featuring a tai chi class performing a form by a rural water’s edge. The tai chi ident, featuring white westerners culturally cross-dressing in ‘authentic’ tai chi ‘uniforms’ and performing a modified Wudang form by a Lochside in Scotland, presented taijiquan as both exotic and yet also an entirely valid and viable – almost normal – practice for white British people (‘BBC One “Rhythm & Movement” Idents’ 2018).

Some may regard Westerners dressing up in Chinese costumes as problematic. But cultural cross-dressing when it constitutes a ‘proper’ part of a practice is surely not to be disparaged as ‘cultural appropriation’. If it is a recognisable part of the ‘correct’ performance of something that involves the immersion of practitioners in a world of precise cultural codes and conventions, then cultural cross-

dressing is part of a much more subtle and sophisticated process than ‘appropriation’ (even if and when it is *also* that). Indeed, as I have argued many times before, *whoever* is dressing up in costumes – whether Eastern or Western, and whether of any national identity or ethnicity – can be appraised in terms of the question of (in)authentic performance (Bowman 2013; 2017; 2019a).

A recent series of adverts that have arguably self-consciously and dialectically played around with such themes was a high-profile campaign for Snickers chocolate bars. These adverts foregrounded martial arts and incorporated the vacillation between foreignness (or otherness) in relation to domestic-ness (or sameness) in relation to identity.

Starring Rowan Atkinson – who had formerly played the bumbling British comedy character, Mr Bean – the three adverts each see Atkinson playing a Mr Bean-like character in different situations that are visually and thematically reminiscent of the most famous of transnational *wuxia* films, such as *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (A. Lee 2000).

In each of these adverts, a troupe of highly skilled martial artists perform impressive (often impossible) feats in the manner of *wuxia* characters (for instance, flying through the air or only touching lightly on rooftops; or performing amazing martial arts sequences or nunchaku routines). However, when Atkinson appears, performing as Bean in all but name, he executes the required task atrociously. One of his colleagues gives him a Snickers chocolate bar and, upon eating it, Atkinson/Bean transforms into a completely different character – played by a different actor – an ethnically Asian actor – who is needless to say, a martial arts expert.

The advert tagline then runs ‘you’re not yourself when you’re hungry’ (‘Snickers Adverts’ n.d.). In this way, the adverts are able to poke fun at Bean’s quintessentially or stereotypically English incompetence whilst reciprocally evidently elevating the status of

what remains presented as a simultaneously familiar-yet-foreign activity – cinematically spectacular Chinese martial arts.



Fig. 46: Snickers Advert (2014)

Same And/As Other

The logics of incorporation and exclusion that are active in so many of the adverts so far discussed are nowhere more apparent than in a banned 2012 advert made for the European commission. This advert showed a white woman wearing the iconic Bruce Lee/Beatrix Kiddo, *Game of Death/Kill Bill* yellow suit. She enters into a large space, akin to an old warehouse or hanger. Soon, other characters appear on the scene – a sword wielding Turk, a combative capoeirista, a kung fu fighting Chinese man, and so on.

All of these characters surround her, and she is outnumbered and presumably soon to be overpowered. However, moving into a meditative pose, our heroine starts to replicate. Exact duplicates (or clones) of her begin to appear, and as they grow in number they surround and outnumber her ethnic antagonists. In the end, so many female clones form a circle around the enemies that the foreign aggressors realise they cannot win, so they stand down. At this point, the scene melts into a picture in which the women become points on the circle on the European flag and the advert tells us that we are 'stronger together' (Fig. 47).

Despite speaking a certain truth about the rationale for the European Union, this advert was banned because it collapsed nationalities into ethnic stereotypes and

strongly implied that they were to be regarded as aggressive.

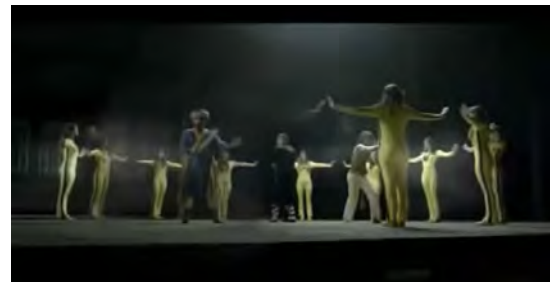


Fig. 47: 'Stronger Together' (2012)

Nonetheless, for our purposes, this advert is interesting. It is structured by the image of Beatrix Kiddo (from *Kill Bill*) – a white western character into whom is condensed and perfected the martial arts wisdom of the East. So, we may see here a kind of incorporation, absorption or assimilation of Chineseness (qua foreignness) transformed into sameness – or what Jacques Derrida might have formulated as a bringing of the outside (foreignness) into the heart of the inside (sameness).

Yet, as Gina Marchetti has pointed out in her analysis of the 'becoming American' of ethnic Chinese characters in Hollywood film, the other can never simply become domestic without trace or remainder. Something foreign must remain, and must be excluded (Marchetti 1994). Hence, our white martial artsy heroine nonetheless faces multiple non-white, non-European threats, including a Chinese martial artist. Chineseness remains other.

As the history of Chineseness in British adverts shows clearly, we may scrutinize the other, visit the other, eat the other, study the other, include the other, master the other, domesticate the other, or in certain ways become the other; but it seems that the other must always bifurcate and divide, and something of the other must always remain other.

The other can be doubled and divided, incorporated and excluded, played and erased. It cannot simply be 'same'. As such, it

can be seen that the construction of Chineseness in British adverts continues to rely on, reiterate, and reactivate recognisable forms, structures and patterns of orientalism, and that in this national media context at least, these centre on only very few themes, meaning that the construction of Chineseness in British adverts continues to devolve down to a few weary stereotypes, ranging from chop-suey to chop-socky.

Conclusion 1: Adverts and the Maintenance of a Discursive Entity

Adverts may appear to be fleeting events in the cacophonous environment of the eternally returning and ever-changing 'ad break'. However, individually and collectively, adverts construct, manipulate and reiterate representational conventions.

Representational conventions have diverse cultural effects (Hall and et al 1997; Dyer 1997). Of necessity, TV adverts must be fast. Adverts seek to communicate quickly: capturing, constructing, condensing and conveying a sense and a message, appeal or injunction as quickly, concisely, compellingly, intensely and efficiently as possible. In order to create effects quickly, adverts often incorporate widely recognised stereotypes. These may be 'off the peg' reiterations of common clichés, or they may be bespoke modifications, manipulations and novel innovations, playing on a theme. Televisual adverts either use established conventions or construct their own semiotic codes to capture attention and communicate. *What*

they communicate may always boil down to one or another variant of the same statement – which might be rendered 'you (should) desire this' – but the *ways* in which they try to generate or stimulate desire may take potentially infinitely variable forms.

However, *potential* infinite variability does not necessarily translate in practice into *actual* infinite variation. Rather, certain themes, motifs, tropes, conventions and devices tend to recur (White 1997). The reasons for the occurrence of semiotic repetition or reiteration relate to the exigencies of motivated communication. Form and content need to be readily intelligible to an interpretive community of viewers. Advertisers want their adverts to be understood in the ways they want them to be – otherwise, as Stuart Hall put it in his classic essay, 'Encoding/Decoding', the message fails (Hall 1980). In other words, adverts combine overdetermined material in ways that their makers calculate will be predictably intelligible, memorable, pleasurable, and hopefully 'effective' in relation to their intended demographic.⁷

Both within one media context and beyond it – out into the wider world of other media, and other cultural and social contexts – clusters of connotations can coalesce into 'discursive entities' (Foucault 1978; Bowman 2019b; 2019c). From wherever it may have been 'born' – an irreducibly complex process of multiple histories of European expansion, travellers' tales, colonial imperatives, wars, treaties, cultural anxieties, and more – the discursive entity of Chineseness has taken root in different media environments (art,

⁷ Of course, adverts – like any act of communication – can always 'fail' (Derrida 1987; 1998). Indeed, it could be argued that in some sense they always fail. For, if they did not, then viewers would be compelled to answer every advert's injunction. This is not the place to reflect on the reasons why a letter (or message) might 'always possibly not' arrive at its intended destination, to use Jacques Derrida's phrase for inevitable failures of communication (Derrida 1987; 1998). Nor are our current concerns related to trying to improve

advertising/communication techniques or strategies. Rather, the interest in this work is in establishing and interrogating the main ways that the recurrent semiotic construct or discursive entity that I am calling 'Chineseness' has been constructed in one the context of British television adverts (Barthes 1957; Bowman 2017; 2019c). The reasons for this focus are ethical and political. Representations have effects outside of the field of representation. They feed into attitudes, expectations, beliefs and actions.

literature, theatre, dance, news stories, film, TV, adverts, and so on) (Hall and Gieben 1991; Krug 2001; Bowman 2017).

What is most surprising is that, as it exists within British adverts, the discursive entity of Chineseness turns out to be made up of such a limited number of signifiers of and for China, Chinese culture and ethnically Chinese 'types'.⁸ In interrogating the key aural and visual signifiers and cultural/semiotic values that convey Chineseness in British adverts, we can glean insights into what can be termed the 'discursive status' of images of China, or of Chineseness as a field of connotations, associations and values, in the current moment.

My use of such terms as discursive entity (along with discursive status and discursive constellation) derives from Michel Foucault's theorisation of the notion of discourse (Foucault 1991).⁹ A key Foucauldian proposition is that any given cultural or historical 'formation' is characterised by – or could be said to boil down to – the range of statements that it is possible to make on a given subject – statements that will be understood as meaningful and appraised as meaningful ideas. To speak of a 'discursive formation' or 'constellation' is to evoke the range of beliefs, opinions, feelings, ideas, and emotional responses that circulate within a given community or period in the face of a certain subject (what I am here calling a discursive entity).¹⁰

⁸ China is a vast geographical area with multiple ethnicities. However, the British – indeed, Western – media and cultural context only rarely registers awareness of what might be termed either the 'internal differentiation' within the supposed single ethnicity, or indeed the multitude of ethnicities conflated within the term 'Chinese' (Chen 2010).

⁹ The related theme of regarding times and places as 'discursive conjunctures' – and, from this, the argument that cultural studies should always take the form of 'conjunctural analysis' – derives from the influential work of Stuart Hall.

Accordingly, despite apparently being brief, fleeting, ephemeral and isolated events in a constant maelstrom of heterogeneous broadcasts, television adverts should be a focus of any cultural study that seeks to contribute to what Stuart Hall called 'conjunctural analysis' (Gilbert 2019). This is not because adverts somehow 'reflect reality' (they do not) but because they conjure up and conjure with existing repositories of cultural meanings, connotations and values (Derrida 1994). As such, analysing them – both in isolation and in conjunction with other media, texts and events – can provide insights into the discursive status and cultural value of the entities they incorporate.

Conclusion 2: Seeing Chineseness

When it comes to Asia, the representational tendencies of Western media have always tended towards what Edward Said calls orientalism (Said 1978; Hall and Gieben 1991; Krug 2001). In Said's influential conceptualisation of the issue, orientalism involves mythic, reductive forms of representation, often hyperbolic stereotypes, and processes of splitting and doubling. These create an image of an 'Other' that takes one or another simplistic form – for instance, being painted as either innocent and guileless or sinister and deceptive, either virginal and pure or salacious and sexually scheming, and so on, often by turns. A key element of Said's formulation of orientalism is his argument that orientalist representations tend to say more about the

¹⁰ In the field of cultural studies, the range of concept-metaphors associated with 'discourse' have long been used to organise what Stuart Hall famously called 'conjunctural analyses' (Stuart Hall, Morley, and Chen 1996; Stuart Hall et al. 2000). The conjunctural analysis of cultural studies involves trying to determine and make sense of the various forces and dynamics by which different macro and micro social, cultural and political contexts are organised (For recent contributions to this tradition, see Gilbert 2019).

representor than the represented – specifically that it is possible to discern the desires, fantasies and anxieties of those who have painted this or that orientalist picture of the Other.

There are different versions of orientalism, although they share features in common. Different cultures will be represented according to specific clusters of stereotypes and will acquire different statuses and roles in the imaginations of the countries that represent them via such reiterated motifs. So, although it is possible to evoke ‘the East’ or ‘Asia’ as if it were a mythic unity, nonetheless, in the Western European imagination, there are numerous possible subdivisions and differentiations; meaning that ‘India’, for example, will have different resonances and connotations to ‘Japan’, even if they share certain equivalent orientalist connotations, such as being spiritual, timeless, mysterious or mystical.

British media has long been overwhelmingly white (not unlike North American and other ‘Western’ media). Black and ethnic minorities have long been both marginalised and stereotyped in most contexts (Marchetti 1994; 2006). Nonetheless, there has always been a range of possible reasons for including Asian faces in Western adverts. Most obviously, as we will see, they hinge on advertising ‘Asian’ or ‘Chinese-style’ products – and primarily food products.

However, there are other reasons to include Asian faces in British adverts. In the current context, the most common reason is inclusivity. Increasingly, British adverts include a mix of (easily recognisable) ethnicities, in all manner of scenarios: multiethnic groups of student-types share houses to advertise mobile phones, broadband providers, or to order food online. Adverts showing audiences and crowds apparently at public events are nowadays often as ethnically diverse as is possibly imaginable for a British context. Couples shown in adverts are increasingly likely to be interracial. (Indeed, if an East Asian face

appears in a crowd or as part of a couple, it is highly likely that the rest of the crowd or the other half of the couple will not be Asian, but will be from obviously different ethnic groups.) Adverts for cosmetics, toiletries, hair and beauty products flash glamorous models of one ethnicity after another onto the screen. And aspirational young characters exercising, competing, working, living life to the full, seizing the day, and so on, in the name of any number of possible products, are increasingly as likely to be visibly East Asian as any other ethnicity.

The presence of such diversity reflects to some extent demographic changes. For instance, in the UK, by far the largest immigrant group is Chinese students (Office for National Statistics 2017). Even though prohibitive visa regulations mean that this group is ultimately principally transient, nonetheless, wherever possible, advertisers will want to include and ‘recruit’ as many potential consumers as they can. Furthermore, the ethnicities selected for inclusion within adverts are likely to be based on market-research, not only into the target audience for the advertised product but also into test audience responses to pilot adverts as well as data on previous advertising campaigns.

However, at the same time, making sure that adverts appear more multiethnic also reflects long-term (multi)cultural ideals. To echo Roland Barthes’ famous cultural analysis of the black soldier cadet on the cover of *Paris Match*: the inclusion of multiethnic imagery (often without explicit comment) tacitly pushes the progressive myth that we live in a benevolent, content, and inclusive culture, free from ethnic or postcolonial antagonisms (Barthes 1957). Slightly more cynically put, the ‘principled’ inclusion of multiethnic faces in advertisements also works as a kind of insurance policy, implicitly acknowledging former historical white bias in the form of a pre-emptive warding-off of any potential future accusations of racism.

Whether based on empirical calculations, ideological ideals or avoidance of potential complaints, one result of increasing ethnic inclusivity in UK adverts has been the loosening and broadening of various representational norms – challenging the hegemonic assumption that whiteness is the norm (Dyer 1997; Pitcher 2014). Against this, multiethnic adverts arguably work to establish a new sense of the normality of a multiethnic group of friends ordering food, multiethnic families, or a multiethnic series of models all ostensibly signifying the same high calibre of beauty ideals.

This is not to say that there are no problems with such representations as these – all representations are inevitably biased, and in being totally orientated towards consumption adverts are principally apolitical and depoliticising. Yet, despite the problems with such representations, even the tokenistic inclusion of multiethnic faces, to the extent that this occurs in more and more contexts on more and more occasions, might work to loosen stereotype-driven structures of representation, thus shifting the terrain of visibility and invisibility.

This article did not focus on such adverts as these. The analysis of adverts in which ethnicity is 'unremarked' (as if multiethnic harmony is the norm) opens a different set of problems and amounts to a substantially different project. In the present study, the adverts selected for attention were not those that merely included Chinese faces as part of unremarked ethnic diversity. This is because what is 'shown' or 'seen' in such adverts is not *Chineseness 'as such'* (i.e., as a discursive construct), but rather *ethnic diversity 'as such'*. There are a slew of such adverts, in which ethnic diversity is represented but unremarked. In them, ethnic difference is included as if it is a normal, unproblematic

and unremarkable – i.e., *invisible* – part of the everyday life of society.¹¹

To be clear, this is not to suggest that a multicultural group of different ethnic faces in a pizza advert *is* 'unremarkable'. As mentioned, increasing the quantity and frequency of multiethnic and multicultural representations in mainstream contexts is one way of helping to make ethnic difference 'accepted' (in every sense of the word) in a formerly white dominated society and media culture. However, although such texts make ethnicity visible in one sense, they simultaneously render ethnicity invisible in other senses – precisely in being motivated to present ethnic difference as unremarkable.

It is for this reason that my analysis looked only at explicitly foregrounded cases of Chineseness in adverts. To use the terms just mentioned: this study only looked at examples in which Chineseness is 'played' rather than 'erased', i.e., foregrounded as a textual feature, rather than ignored as supposedly normal and hence 'insignificant'. It did so to delineate on the forms and characteristics of 'Chineseness', as a semiotic and discursive entity that is produced and circulated in media texts, in this case television adverts.

As we have seen, a predictable, recurring, limited set of aural, visual and narrative clichés and stereotypes have functioned – and continue to function – as the principal resources to evoke 'Chineseness' in British television adverts. The analysis suggests that caricatures, clichés and stereotypes of China, Chinese people, locations, artifacts and phenomena are so common that there can be said to be a glaring seam of unacknowledged, uninterrogated orientalism functioning to maintain a kind of 'invisible' racism in British advertising.

¹¹ It is eminently possible to take such adverts as further verification of Roland Barthes'

conclusions in his analysis of the black soldier on the cover of *Paris Match* in the 1950s.

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