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Constructions of Race in Advertising Archives: The “Silent” Chinese Minority

Sally Chan

Abstract: *What do historical representational imageries of the Chinese in television commercials tell us about Britain’s perceptions of this “silent” community? The power of advertising to distort reality and misrepresent “the Other” is well documented. This report addresses colonial constructions of race in advertising using historical archival evidence of the Chinese as a hidden ethnic minority community in Britain. The arguments, drawn from my doctoral thesis, emphasise the importance of archival analysis in historical research on race. In particular, cultural commodification of Chinese culture is evidenced by their depiction during 1960s television commercials for Guinness Export. These interrogations provide clues to how Chinese people and culture have been constructed onscreen, and the political and hegemonic influence of racial politics in Britain. The report also considers the methodological implications of archival holdings in contributing to our understanding of how and why race on screen advertising is produced, consumed, and reproduced.*

Introduction

The British advertising industry has come under increasing pressure in the last ten years to be more proactive in addressing diversity and inclusion issues (Parry). Organisations such as the Incorporated Society of British Advertisers (ISBA), the Institute of Practitioners in Advertising (IPA), the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) and Credos have demonstrated their collective commitment to furthering education in equality and diversity in the profession (Haynes et al.). Academics are under pressure to address colonial constructions of race in advertising in an effort to narrate an inclusive heritage past.

The aim of this paper is to report on historical archival evidence of on-screen racialised constructions of the Chinese as an ethnic minority community as an example of the kind of research needed to advance these causes. This evidence has been identified whilst conducting research for my PhD thesis on the Chinese on screen. Elsewhere I have referred to the Chinese as a “silent” migrant community (Chan et al.). The first records of Chinese in Britain date as far back as the 1600s, and historians have identified colonial links with the British Empire (Pan; Benton and Gomez; Price). The concept of a “hidden minority mentality” has been used to describe both the dispersal of the Chinese community and their relative reluctance to speak out about discrimination in contrast to their American “model minority” cousins (Parker; Yeh). The relative invisibility of Chinese migrant communities has also been attributed to their self-sufficiency and insularity (Kwan Chan et al.). Patterns of migration of first generations to Britain and subsequent entrepreneurial pursuits led to catering enclaves in many British towns and cities before the second generations sought mainstream occupations; overall, the result was a highly dispersed pattern of settlement in Britain particularly during the 1960s and 70s (Watson; Baker), with significant consequences for media constructions of the community (F. Chan; Bowman).

Scrutinising the archives allows us to investigate the larger question of the value of archival analysis in historical research on race. I follow Kantar & Affectiva and Stuart Hall (“Emergence”) in seeing race as “a historically and culturally constructed system of classification [...] loaded with political and ideological meanings” (Kantar & Affectiva 17). But the decade has seen a shift in focus from the representation of race to the cultural production of race. Sarita Malik’s early study of racialised representations on television, focussing on the marginalisation of the Black community from structural factors prevalent in British broadcasting, was an important step toward this new paradigm, as was the landmark work of David Hesmondhalgh and Anamik Saha on race, ethnicity and cultural production. Since then, scholars have examined the ways in which common tropes and standardised visual representations of minorities in advertising are broken down, reworked and shaped to reinforce mainstream hegemonic forces (Nwonka; Nwonka and Malik; Saha, “Rationalizing” and *Race*; Saha and van Lente). This paradigm emphasises the importance of historical research about how advertising constructs race, rather than Stuart Hall’s populist ideology of how race in advertising is represented or read by audiences (Saha, *Race*).

Archival research is an important tool in historical research on cultural production. In this report, I demonstrate the value of using the content of screen advertising archives to understand the adoption, by the advertising industry, of tropes and stereotypes of the Chinese silent minority from British film and television, and identify some of the challenges raised by using archives to investigate these intermedial connections and to make connections with broader social and political issues related to Empire and British–Chinese relations. The study of advertising is crucial to understanding the postwar commodification of tropes of Chinese culture. I focus particularly on the commodified aspects of Chinese culture as constructed by advertisers during the onset of commercial television in the 1960s.

The Collections: Advertising Screen Archives

The History of Advertising Trust (HAT) and the British Film Institute (BFI) National Archives hold the largest collections of cinema and television commercials from the 1960s. Their archives offer a starting point for analysing depictions of popularised racialised constructions of the Chinese community. Established in 1976 to preserve advertising materials, HAT now houses one of the largest collections of work from creative agencies in the UK (Schwarzkopf). During research undertaken for my PhD thesis, I identified sixty-nine martial arts-themed television commercials broadcast during 1966–2018. This report centres on one of the more significant of the commercials held in the BFI collection, the series made for Guinness Export in 1968.

Guinness Export *The Man* (1968)

Guinness Export’s internationalisation strategy in 1968 contains an important example of stereotyping of the Chinese community from the late 1960s. The BFI collection contains a series of three identikit 60-second commercials for Guinness Export “The Man” in 1968. The setting and script were the same for each commercial but featured a different racial construction of the cast in each version: Caucasian, Black and Chinese. The six-frame storyboard for the commercial is shown in Figure 1.



Figure 1: Guinness Export “The Man” 1968 Storyboard. BFI archives. Screenshots.

The commercials parodied the early-1960s *James Bond* films (Albert R. Broccoli and Harry Saltzman, 1962–1975), *The Avengers* series (Sydney Newman, 1961–1969) and *The Saint* series (Robert S. Baker, 1962–1969) with their depictions of a suave, sophisticated British spy. The storyline, setting and fight sequences are particularly similar to *The Avengers* and *The Saint*. Exceptional fighting skills and the obligatory female companion were accompanied by a jazz-influenced soundtrack. The commercials reflected the popularity of iconic British films and television shows of the 1960s and 70s.

In this period, Guinness commercials, with the backing of S. H. Benson (who later merged with Ogilvy & Mather) in the 1930s, to J. Walter Thompson from 1969, were crafted with greater audience insight and production quality (backed by a substantial budget) than comparable brands (Lee). Because Guinness was focused on export markets, the brand tailored its consistent message—with the same setting and storyline—to local markets by adjusting its racial construction. By introducing a Chinese language version of the commercial, Guinness was able to tap into the burgeoning market in the Far East in the 1970s. This Chinese version used a Cantonese dialect. Contextually, the bulk of Chinese migration to Britain during the late 1960s was from the former colony of Hong Kong where Cantonese is commonly spoken (in contrast to the Mandarin dialect used in mainland China). The choice of a Cantonese dialect is evidence perhaps that Guinness sought to appeal not only to Hong Kong audiences but to Cantonese-speaking audiences who had migrated to the UK. When compared to the Cantonese dialect used in the Chinese version, the English voiceover for the Black and Caucasian versions of the commercials is noticeable.

Although these three commercials are *prima facie* identical, there were minor variations between the Chinese version when compared to the version with Caucasian and Black actors. Later research has suggested that racial identifiers in actor casting contribute to brand perceptions (Cohen). Audience perceptions of similarities with the cast may positively affect their perceptions of the advertisements and, ultimately, the brands being featured (Appiah). This may explain why Guinness used different or mixed-race models to ensure broader acceptance, and why studios often use models or actors from different ethnic groups in early advertising. With kissing being perceived as taboo in 1960s China, the couple in the Chinese commercial appear to hug rather than embrace (Fig. 2).



Figure 2: Guinness Export “The Man” 1968. Different styles of couples embracing for Caucasian (left), Chinese (centre), and Black (right) casts. BFI archives. Screenshots.

These 1968 Guinness commercials invite us to consider the extent to which knowledge gained from historical racial discourse, coupled with an understanding of the political landscape and cultural awareness surrounding marginalised communities, shaped the tropes of racial representation adopted in television. It indicates the value of the recent paradigm shift away from analysing representation in advertising towards investigating the conditions and circumstances of cultural production in order to understand how advertising makes race (Saha, “Funky Days”).

The Context: Chinese Stereotypes in British Film and Television

Investigating the conditions and circumstances of cultural production involves examining the broader discourse of race and tropes of racial characterisation in screen media available to the producers at the time. Simone Knox investigated the televisual representations of British Chinese identities in TV drama, where stereotypical tropes meant that many British Chinese actors were cast as criminals, or in fantasy, action and crime genres. These stereotypical tropes had their origins in early media portrayals that overemphasised opium fuelled dens in London’s Limehouse of the nineteenth century, and the “sly, inscrutable and unscrupulous” Chinese as imagined by Sax Rohmer in the popular Fu Manchu novels of 1913–1959, which were adapted for the screen (Frayling; Price 196). Stereotypes and colonial discourse surrounding the Chinese in Britain can be traced back to Sax Rohmer’s Chinese orientalism in the early period from the 1890s to 1930s (Hunt). Ming the Merciless villain in the *Flash Gordon* TV Series (Edward Gruskin and Wenzel Luedecke, 1954–1955) symbolised “the West’s fear of being overrun by the ‘wily Oriental’” (Yeh 89).

Sinophilia came in the form of *Charlie Chan* films in the 1930s and 40s in which the main character cast by white actors made to look Chinese (Richards). The films used the practice of “yellowface”, in which Caucasian actors applied yellow makeup to play Chinese characters. “Yellowface”, also referred to as “whitewashing”, is a form of racialised appropriation designed to displace the Other (Chan, “Cosmopolitan” 42). Often linked to villainous roles, “yellowface” misrepresented and limited the visibility of the Chinese on screen (Lee). Illustrations of “yellow peril” or Fu Manchu representations were also a common feature in action dramas, such as the already cited *The Avengers* and *The Saint* (Chan, “Cosmopolitan Pleasures”).

For the Guinness commercial, the lack of actors of Chinese origin during the 1960s led to a Caucasian actor being cast as a Chinese woman (pictured in the centre of the bar scene in Fig. 3). The Guinness Export ads were designed with a global audience in mind therefore a parred down version of “yellowface” complete with cheongsam or Chinese style dress is evident in this commercial. In Hollywood, Caucasian actor David Carradine was cast as a Chinese Shaolin monk in *Kung Fu* (Ed Spielman and Herman Miller, 1972–1975). When he made the cover of *Esquire* magazine’s August 1973 edition, the caption: “Ah, so! A new American hero at last!” normalised the derogatory use of racist imitation of Chinese/Japanese speech (Desser). Many argued that the character of Cato—Inspector Clouseau’s Chinese manservant in *The Pink Panther* films (Blake Edwards, 1964–1992)—reinforced racial stereotypes of the Chinese in film and television. Despite his role in popularising Chinese depictions for mainstream audiences, it was not until the 1980s that BBC1 dramatised *The Chinese Detective* (Terence Williams, 1981–1982). The latter featured British Chinese actor David Yip as the lead for the first time on mainstream television. This positive representation was a direct response to mainstream fears of mass Chinese migration to Britain when the British

handover of Hong Kong to the mainland led to the subsequent establishment of the British Nationality Act 1981 (Chan and Willis). Although *The Chinese Detective* aimed to reduce racial stereotyping, the series had been inspired by the Charlie Chan detective series of the 1930s. The practice of “yellowface” was also evident in a BBC *Doctor Who* series, “The Talons of Weng-Chiang” (David Maloney, 1977), and in Ming the Merciless villain in *Flash Gordon* (Dino De Laurentiis, 1980). “Yellowface” as a form of commodification of race meant aspects of Chinese culture, which it purports to emulate, are appropriated for mainstream audiences.



Figure 3: Guinness Export “The Man” (1968). Bar full of Caucasian actors (left); Chinese actors with “yellowface” casting (middle) and Black actors (right). BFI archives. Screenshots.

“Race” in the Guinness Export Series

British notions of “Chineseness” for the silent community are a manifestation of the imbalance of power that existed between the advertising cultural producer and the minority community audience. Not only were the Chinese exposed to a limited repertoire of their reflections in media portrayals, but the stereotypical approaches to their depictions served to shape their cultural identities and amplify their otherness (Pollay; Hall, “Cultural Identity” and “Work”). The influence of film on television commercials saw elements of Chinese culture appropriated and constructed into more palatable tropes for Western filmgoers. Cultural producers in early advertising may have employed mixed-race models in the hope that mainstream audiences would accept them more readily compared to ethnic minority models. Saha and van Lente argue that these kinds of media representations functioned as a form of racial management through which people of colour have been commodified and devalued at the same time. This cultural logic of capitalist production may have been a key driver of these cultural constructions of the Chinese. My research suggests that the commodification which occurred contributed to the gradual dilution of cultural markers and a distortion of cultural identities for this silent and highly dispersed community (Pollay; Hall, “Cultural Identity”; Rogers; Chan and Willis).

Conclusion and Methodological Challenges

In this report I have examined the commodified aspects of Chinese culture in the Guinness export series of 1968 in relation to film and television tropes of the 1960s and 70s. Using advertising archives to research the historical construction of race can provide insights and a contextual understanding that contemporary analysis alone cannot. It is important to study the impacts of power and politics in advertising constructions not only in relation to the socio-political history of the Chinese as a silent and highly dispersed Chinese minority but also in relation to broader media constructions. The Guinness export advertisements mirrored societal norms that existed at the time and perpetuated their recurrence over decades.

Significant advances have been made by the collections team at HAT and the BFI to make their collections more easily accessible to the general public, higher education and schools for study within an educational context. Those advances have been matched by theoretical work from scholars such as Malik and Saha showing the fundamental necessity of historical research in constructions of race. The advertising screen archives relating to the Chinese community in Britain are an important testing ground for the methodological and theoretical challenges that lie ahead.

Analysing advertising constructions of minority groups raises major methodological challenges. My own PhD research has uncovered a number of them – from perennial questions of whether advertising depictions represents truths or reality, or merely distort them (Pollay) to the pitfalls of visual distortions in image based research that relies on the researcher's ability to read textual data (Schroeder and Borgerson) or ability to ascribe meaning (Hall). There is also a shift away from content-based "scientific" and semiotics analysis to more interdisciplinary approaches with textual and critical discourse analysis that go beyond mere audience recall, to conversations that will acknowledge media response to racialised advertising (Van Leeuwen; McKee). There is, therefore, value in a more focussed study before substantial progress can be made in using the screen archives for representational research. In the first instance, recurrent racialised tropes are linked to appropriation by a dominant Western culture. This means that the Western gaze not only informs racialised constructions on screen, but the cataloguing methods employed by the curator and collections team are also based on their own constructions of race. I identified three different catalogue entries for the Guinness commercials at the BFI, each of which prompted me toward a different reading of the racial tropes. Current procedures and budgets rarely afford time for archivists to investigate readily available constructions of race and national identity, nor do they facilitate a hermeneutic method addressing cultural "preunderstanding" (Arnold and Fisher 57) and "ascribed closeness" (Banks 475) to the underrepresented that may provide legitimacy and endorsement of social-cultural perspectives underpinning interpretation.

The Guinness Export commercial examined in this report was part of a number of advertisements selected by the BFI collections team and digitised for public engagement through the BFI's free-to-access online Player. But archival information may not always be accessible in a readily digestible format, and may be ad-hoc at best, with some items yet to be catalogued or released online (Strickland). Digitalised collections only represent a fraction of the total holdings of repositories. Additional information about the commercial was identified from a number of separate sources which might not be readily available to the general public or to academics or secondary or further education teachers seeking to use television commercials for the examination of race in a cultural studies or media studies context. The difficulties in accessing some of the contextual detail behind the advertising from the archives are not new.

Archival research is a vital tool in order to understand how and why race in screen advertising is produced, consumed, and reproduced (Saha, "Funky Days"). But alone it cannot illuminate the role of the commodification of racial tropes by dominant groups (Nwonka and Malik). As Saha has argued, the integration of racial politics is needed in future studies about historical racialised tropes in advertising. This means that the archival process itself needs political debate.

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