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Contesting the ‘model minority’: racialization, youth culture and ‘British Chinese’/‘Oriental’ nights

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Abstract

While racialized youth are often central in debates on citizenship, multiculturalism and belonging, those ascribed as ‘British Chinese’ are constructed as model minorities, lacking a hybridized culture but insulated from racism, and thus invisible in these discussions. This article argues, however, that the model minority discourse is itself a specific form of contemporary racialization that revives ‘yellow peril’ discourses on the capacities of particular ‘Oriental’ bodies. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork, it examines how young people challenge these constructions, by drawing on popular culture to organize and participate in what they call ‘British-Chinese’ and, more provocatively, ‘Oriental’ nightlife spaces. It analyses how through these spaces participants forge a sense of identity that allows them to re-imagine themselves as racialized subjects. It demonstrates how these spaces constitute transient sites of experimental belonging, facilitating new cultural politics and social identifications that at once contest reified conceptions of British-Chineseness yet also create new exclusions.

Keywords: British Chinese, Oriental, model minority, nightlife and popular music, belonging, racialization

Introduction

In recent decades, with the rise of so-called ‘black British’ and ‘British Asian’ youth cultures, celebrations of hybridized cultures have coexisted alongside racialized constructions of youth as a threat. After 9/11, the unrest in northern England in 2001 and the 2005 London bombings, new fears of ‘home-grown terrorists’ and ‘Asian gangs’ have emerged alongside the continuing criminalization of ‘black youth’. The deaths of 58 undocumented would-be migrants from China discovered at Dover in

2000 and of a further 23 at Morecambe Bay in 2004 catapulted 'illegal' Chinese migration into the limelight. Together with the moral panics around Vietnamese cannabis factories, such events have revived Orientalist discourses of snakeheads and Triad gangs. However, still commonly perceived to 'belong' only in the mundane world of takeaways (Parker and Song 2009), those ascribed as British-born Chinese tend to be invisible within youth cultures and rarely receive media attention, except as a model minority.

Amid repeated claims of the failure of multiculturalism, attributed to supposedly self-segregating 'minority ethnic communities', this paper examines the emergence of what are known by their organizers as 'British-Chinese' and, perhaps more provocatively, 'Oriental' nightlife spaces. It examines how young people ascribed as model minorities seek to redefine themselves against this discourse and associations with takeaway life by drawing on local and global popular culture, especially music. Framed by concerns over debates on a post-race era and specific assumptions that the Chinese do not experience racism (Song 2003), this paper argues that these social formations emerge in response to specific forms of racialization, rooted in colonial discourse, and which continue to flourish today. Conceptualizing the model minority discourse as a contemporary form of racialization, it highlights how it constrains young people, and men in particular, by limiting ways of imagining the self as an embodied subject.

Focusing on nightlife spaces, this paper further relocates those ascribed as a model minority within the politics of contemporary urban multiculturalism. Conceptualized as alternative public spheres (Gilroy 1993), these spaces can be seen as politicized arenas where gendered racial and ethnic identities and solidarities are renegotiated and contested. Examining the social and cultural practices forged within these spaces, this paper highlights how they foster a sense of belonging and alternative ways of imagining the self, while contesting bounded notions of homogeneous identities, cultures and communities. It also shows however that, by drawing on corporate multiculturalism and emerging in cities restructured by neo-liberal capitalism, these spaces create new exclusions.

While the political categories of 'black' and 'Asian' in Britain and of 'Asian-American' in the US are widely acknowledged, there is little discussion of pan-ethnic organization among those ascribed as British Chinese (Benton and Gomez 2008). This

paper examines the emergence of 'Oriental' identities that challenge the hegemony of discourses of 'Chineseness' and 'British Chineseness'. The reappropriation of this racial category unfolds within a specific historical context of racialization and its contestation.

From 'Yellow Peril' to model minority?

While discourses of a post-race era work to further delegitimize the significance of racism, specific assumptions that 'the Chinese' do not experience racism emerge from their reputation in Britain as a peaceful, law-abiding and insular community. While migrants in the nineteenth century were associated with a 'Yellow Peril', current generations are constructed as 'model minorities'. This apparent linear progression in status, however, belies the way in which the model minority discourse is itself one of the specific ways in which those ascribed as 'Chinese' are racialized. The category of 'Chinese' is itself contentious (Yeh 2000), erasing the linguistic and generational differences, 'mixed' heritages, socio-economic divisions and diverse migration trajectories of those not only from Hong Kong or China, but also Malaysia, Vietnam, Singapore, Taiwan, Mauritius, India, the Caribbean, South Africa and elsewhere (Benton and Gomez 2008). Equally problematic is its function as a racial category, incorporating all 'East and Southeast Asians' (Parker 1998).

Following earlier incorporations into the categories of 'asiatic', 'oriental' and 'coloured', or since the 1980s, 'black', in the 2011 Census the category of 'Chinese' (only 0.7 per cent of the population in England and Wales), became subsumed within 'Asian'/'Asian British'. This precarious position reflects that as an 'Oriental' civilisation, the Chinese have occupied an intermediate place in the racial hierarchy and, as Britain only operated an 'informal empire' in China (Bickers 1999), an ambivalent position within colonial politics. Through racial science, the colour 'yellow' was equated with the categories of Mongolian, Asiatic and Oriental. Coinciding with China's resistance against imperialism and the global dispersal of the Chinese through indentured and labour migrations, 'Yellow Peril' discourses emerged. Desires for 'docile and biddable' yellow bodies, endowed with 'an extraordinary capacity of steady labour' and 'inured to a low standard of material comfort' (Benton and Gomez 2008: 309, 297) – notions consistent with contemporary

takeaway lives – coexisted with fears of advancing masses of inassimiliable alien Others. Gendered constructions of ‘Orientals’ continue to pervade contemporary popular culture – men as Triad members and kung-fu masters or emasculated servants, and women as exotic whores or submissive wives, mothers and daughters (Back 1996; Parker 1995, Yeh 2001, 2014).

While, in the US, Asian American political activism has curbed the institutional usage of ‘Oriental’, its prevalence continues informally (Kibria 1998). In Britain, the term circulates in popular and official discourse, notably in healthcare and policing (Aspinall 2005, Schramm and Rottenburg 2012). Nonetheless, it is more widely acknowledged as a racial discourse than its counterpart, the model minority. The latter’s apparently positive ascription reflects that young ‘British Chinese’ tend to excel in education and join high-salaried professions (Francis and Archer 2004, 2005a; Benton and Gomez 2008). Yet it disregards significant differences in class and achievement, and a lack of social, cultural and political representation (Parker and Song 2007, 2009). The model minority is thus ‘an ideological discourse that operates to create and sustain racial marginality’ (Kibria 1998: 954). It casts doubt on experiences of racial disadvantage, such that the Chinese in Britain are perceived to be insulated from racism (Song 2003) and essentializes Chineseness against norms of whiteness. Racialized explanations of success revive notions of ‘docile and biddable bodies’, inherently disposed to a ‘steady but uncreative drive towards material prosperity’ (Parker 2000: 76). Rather than opposing one other, discourses of the ‘Yellow Peril’ and model minority operate within same racial schema.

Rupa Huq (1996) has argued that the positioning of British Asians as a model minority constructed them as disconnected from wider youth cultures. Until recently, research highlighted an absence of hybridized identities and cultures among young British Chinese (Watson 1977; Parker 1995). Such assertions, however, depend on reified, albeit now hybrid, notions of what those identities or cultures might be and arguably sustain the model minority discourse by reproducing notions of insularity and a lack in creativity. This has a gendered dimension, with young men particularly stereotyped as ‘nerds’, ‘boffins’ and ‘geeks’ (Francis and Archer 2005b), and who, due to lower rates of interracial marriage compared with women, also appear less ‘integrated’ into British society. Recently however, Benton and Gomez (2008) propose that a sense of community based on national belonging as ‘*British-Chinese*’ is

emerging. Indeed, 'British-Chinese' identities, however 'complicated and contested' (Parker and Song 2007: 1050), are becoming increasingly visible. Elsewhere, I discuss the so-called 'British-Chinese' arts scene (Yeh 2000). Parker and Song (2006a, 2006b, 2007, 2009) recently highlight 'an emergent British Chinese sensibility and identity' forged around websites. They contend that, for a scattered population (with the most dispersed geographical distribution of any group including 'white'), the sites have been vital in facilitating collective identity formation and are 'helping to define an embryonic second-generation civil society' (Parker and Song 2007: 1056). By examining what are known as 'British-Chinese'/'Oriental' nightlife spaces, this paper testifies to a broader experimentation with possible identity positions unfolding in other spheres.

A transient field

That 'cultures do not hold still for their portraits' (Clifford 1986: 10) is abundantly clear in researching 'British-Chinese'/'Oriental' nightlife spaces. Though constructed here as a field, its contours are constantly shifting, as promoters, musicians, DJs and club nights emerge and disappear, as trends in popular culture ebb and flow, as venues change and crowds find and lose interest in the scene. This paper, based on analysis of research I undertook between 2010 and 2012 among a small number of participants, thus provides a partial interpretation of a transient field, but nonetheless highlights the ways in which racial and ethnic identities are contested and renegotiated through flux.

My fieldwork combined participant observation and in-depth interviews with nine men and one woman identified through snowball method. As promoters depend on websites and social networking sites to advertise their events, I also conducted virtual ethnography (Hine 2000), which involved immersion in these sites. Video footage, photographs and material publicizing and documenting events provided virtual access to a greater range of events than I could attend, and different perspectives on those I did attend. Used as promotional tools, these highlighted the fantasies and aspirations at work in the construction of 'British-Chinese'/'Oriental' spaces. Observations offered alternative understandings of these and of further cultural performances and social interactions on the ground. Through interviews, I

elicited narratives, crafted through a negotiated dialogue, of individual participants' perspectives on and experiences of the nightlife spaces. Participants were invited to comment on the paper, and at their request, real names, with the exception of one, used, though some extracts are anonymized. The multifaceted methodology enabled insight into how participants renegotiated their identities in different contexts and how identities are formed and performed through discourse, the consumption and production of culture and social networks in often antagonistic ways.

Rather specifying categories such as age, gender or ethnicity, my criteria for interviewees was involvement in 'British Chinese' or 'Oriental' nights, terms used by participants. All were attending or had attended university, though two had left without a degree. Six worked as promoters: GK Tang and Wayne Chang were in their twenties; Jon Bock, Johnny Wan and James Baxter were in thirties, while George Lee declined to specify his age. The other participants were Jay Differ (19), a hip-hop artist, Kevin P'ng (23), formerly a club promoter and now a DJ and Jon Man, an attendee of parties and Steven Ip, a website editor and DJ, who were both in their thirties. All were London-based, except for Steven in Bristol, GK in Newcastle and James in Nottingham. Participants reflect that this nightlife scene is concentrated in London and dominated by heterosexual men, who might be described as ethnically Chinese. Yet, over the course of our interactions, participants spoke of their ethnicities and backgrounds in various ways. Jay introduced himself as 'half Chinese half Vietnamese', Kevin said his family were 'Malaysian Chinese' and Jon Bock described himself as 'born here, Malaysian Chinese'. Steven was Hakka and born in Glasgow, Johnny's father was 'Chinese from Malaysia' and his mother from Hong Kong and Jon Man and Wayne both said their parents were from Hong Kong. George laughingly described himself as 'tropical', born Trinidad and Tobago, with a father from Hong Kong and a mother who is 'three-quarters Chinese'. GK's parents 'were from Hong Kong, then they went to Holland' where she was born. James Baxter, who runs a club with 'a British-born Chinese' (hereafter, 'BBC') and a 'migrant from Malaysia' said he was white English, but, having lived in Asia, found it 'difficult to integrate properly with English people'. His inclusion highlights the multiraciality of these nightlife spaces.

Despite participants' diverse backgrounds, they do not represent the array of different trajectories and positionings of those who participate in these nightlife

spaces, and further research is required to examine the perspectives of others. However, their narratives do provide a sense of the myriad ways in which ‘British-Chinese’ and ‘Oriental’ become significant. Throughout our conversations, differences emerged between participants’ uses and how each participant used the terms at different times. All identified as ‘Oriental’ except James and Jon Man, who described the term as ‘colonialist’, but its meanings were as contested as those of ‘British-Chinese’. Sometimes, both were used interchangeably with ‘Chinese’ or ‘British-born Chinese’, reflecting the hegemony of ‘Chinese’ over other East and Southeast Asian identities in Britain. ‘Oriental’ was also used to identify those with perceived ‘racial’ (phenotypical) and ethnic similarities, and employed interchangeably with ‘Asian’, thus transcending UK usage ascribing those from the Indian subcontinent. Some re-appropriated it as an inclusive category to encompass mixed ethnicity or cultural influences: for Jay, it reflected his Vietnamese-Chinese identity, but for Kevin, it captured the Chinese-Malaysian ‘mix’ of his upbringing. Its use in opposition to *gwailo* (a pejorative Cantonese term for ‘white people’) also relocated it within Chinese racial discourses, salient in imaginings of alternative Chinese modernities (Ong 1999). My use of ‘British-Chinese’/‘Oriental’ reflects the unresolved, irreducible ways in which both terms were used. Their significance, however, becomes clearer in the context of the nightlife spaces. I begin by discussing how these spaces allow participants to re-define themselves against the model minority discourse and associations with takeaway life. I then discuss the ways in which participants draw on local and global popular cultures, showing how their practices transcend bounded notions of ‘British-Chineseness’. In the final section, I discuss the emergent yet uncertain forms of co-ethnic and pan-ethnic sociality facilitated by these spaces, which foster belonging yet also produce new exclusions.

From model minority to party people, rappers and DJs

While previous research identified catering as the cornerstone of British Chinese identity (Parker 1995; Song 1999), ‘British Chinese’/‘Oriental’ parties are emergent spaces where new identities of leisure can be forged. While not new (Parker 1998), their frequency, popularity and visibility have surged in London and spread to Newcastle, Edinburgh, Bristol, Sheffield, Manchester and Nottingham and other cities

across Britain. Attracting crowds who travel by train, coach and car to attend, they show how those ascribed as model minorities are redefining themselves, by making visible, in the words of JnG Promotions, 'what we all know' which is that 'Chinese people love to party!'

These spaces, however, challenge any sense of a unified 'British-Chinese' or 'Oriental' identity. Fragmented to some extent by ethnicity, and by age-range, locality, music and style, these parties reflect differences even within a predominantly university-educated cohort. Each promoter provides distinctive events, from large-scale raves in disused warehouses and 3,000-strong student nights in commercial clubs to small, exclusive events in elite bars. As discussed below, these parties are stratified along economic lines. Yet, for those with sufficient capital, new identities can be forged around celebrity-style glamour, which contrasts starkly with the image associated with takeaway lives. Chau and Yu (2001: 119) argue that the social exclusion of the Chinese in Britain emerges from their position as caterers in the private market where their status is 'more as a commodity than as a citizen'. Though not all participants in this research had catering backgrounds, for many, participation in nightlife spaces offers new agency as consumers. GK, who still works at her parents' takeaway on weekends, exhorted, 'Believe me, I *hate* Chinese takeaway', but her work as a club promoter enables her to be 'seen as a popular girl' and 'get treated like a VIP'. Several club nights similarly reflect aspirations of a higher social status. Johnny and George hold events, comprising 'sit-down dinners, tuxedos, five-star hotels, balloons, lighting and raffle prizes which include trips to Hong Kong'. Other upmarket events are held at 'A-list' venues in elite areas such as Mayfair in London, where table bookings require a minimum £1,000 spend, and a night out involves champagne 'bottle culture with sparklers and flashing your money'. For those supposedly 'inured to a low standard of material comfort', conspicuous consumption, as Gilroy (2010: 9) argues, becomes a strategy 'to win and compel recognition as human beings'.

'British-Chinese/Oriental' spaces also make visible – and possible – the transformation of those stereotyped as 'nerds' and 'geeks' into hip-hop and RnB artists, street dancers, DJs and MCs. Few receive media or industry support, due, participants suggested, to racialized assumptions that 'Oriental people can't make music'. Many began working in non-Oriental environments, but felt it would be, in

Wayne's words, 'easier to enter the Oriental market rather than the black or white market'. As a DJ, Kevin, began working 'for [South] Asian events because I had a lot of Asian friends', but 'I did find that Asian promoters prefer Asian DJs'. 'British-Chinese'/'Oriental' spaces provide funds and equipment, as well as opportunities to gain visibility, experience, affirmation and work unavailable elsewhere in a racially structured economy. Challenging discourses of 'self-segregating communities', intraracial networking emerges not from insularity but in response to racialized forms of marginalization. As well as allowing participants to redefine themselves as party people, 'British-Chinese'/'Oriental' spaces foster contestations over reified notions of 'British-Chinese' identity, culture and community.

Contesting identity through multiculturalism

Corporate and state multiculturalism – and celebratory discourses of hybrid cultures – confine artists to 'their' ethnicity, in terms of genre, venues and audience (Gilroy 1993; Sharma et al 1996). Especially amid today's increasingly available and already messy traffic in global culture, the expectation that young people will create an easily identifiable, distinctly 'British-Chinese' culture rests upon reified conceptions of culture, underpinning earlier 'between two cultures' discourses. While Cantopop has been privileged in the re-making of 'British-Chinese' identities (Parker 1995), these nightlife spaces highlight rather multidirectional routes of identification, and how those constructed as model minorities are embedded within, rather than disconnected from, wider British and global multiculturalism. They highlight the importance of Asian popular musics, yet also engagement with wider forms of local and global culture as participants redefine themselves and contest exclusionary and reified visions of British multiculturalism.

Redefining selves through Asian popular culture

Every participant I spoke to confirmed the widespread frustration at the invisibility and misrepresentation of 'Chinese/Oriental' in Britain (Parker and Song 2007). Jon Man grappled to articulate it as the most enduring barrier to belonging: 'It's something about wanting to be expressed and *seen*-, there's something affirming

about being seen by the wider British’, and until that occurs, ‘I don’t think I could feel I belong in the UK’. Drawing on ethnic-specific and wider forms of Asian popular musics, these nightlife spaces provide a rare sense of affirmation for those who otherwise feel excluded in Britain. Steven described how ‘the crowd went crazy’ when he mixed what he called Chinese and English tracks at a disco. Wayne also described clubbers’ responses to Cantopop mixes at his events: ‘they’re always like “wow I can’t believe this is happening”, because it’s rare, you never hear it in clubs, you’d never hear Chinese music in a club’. Yet the significance of Asian popular music was not limited to Cantopop as earlier studies suggested but reflected wider affiliations and the rise of the popular music industries in Asia. While Steven’s C-Pop Movement was inspired by house and trance DJs in Beijing and Shanghai, James Dang calls his nights ‘Disco Vietnam’ and Wolfi Events plays Vietnamese trance. Other spaces, however, were unrelated to ‘ethnic’ or ‘homeland’ identifications. Jon Bock’s KPop promotes Korean pop and the spread of ‘British-Chinese/Oriental’ KPop parties across Britain displaces ethnicity and ‘the homeland’ as a privileged site for identification. Others spaces also demonstrate the popularity of Asian-American artists.

Participants’ narratives, however, highlighted the significance of Asian artists as ‘Orientals’. Kevin spoke of setting up a ‘rap-rock group’ with friends in the early 2000s, when the ‘slight surge of Oriental musicians’ in the US allowed them to imagine, ‘Yeah! We’re going to be big!’ As he continued, ‘If you see Orientals doing something, you think, “why can’t I do that too?”’ Similarly, while hip-hop artist Jay initially followed Eminem and Kanye West,

what finally made me decide to, want to, thought it was *possible* to make music, was – I saw Jin. Jin used to battle on Freestyle Fridays on BET and ... watching him was a big influence, to be able to say like ‘Wow, like, if he’s doing it, what says I can’t?’

By watching US-based Black Entertainment Television – rather than ‘homeland’ media as is often assumed – Jay discovered, through Jin, the possibilities of transgressing racialized discourses of ‘Orientals’:

He got like a lot of grief for being his race, because of the stereotype that's around us, that, yeah, Orientals can't make music and they can't rap especially, so I think that had a big influence on me, me being able to say 'you know what? It *is* possible'.

In describing the popularity of Kpop artists, Wayne similarly said:

They were Oriental, and that's why we thought 'Oh wow, it's something different' and it was just hyped 'cos everyone looked Oriental.

As he continued, these were 'Orientals' who contravened racialized stereotypes of ability – 'they could sing, they could dance and they were good looking'. Importantly, they were considered sexually desirable – 'Everyone looked really hot in those music videos and obviously all the girls enjoyed it 'cos all the guys were really sexy'. In legitimizing alternative conceptions of ability, beauty and sexuality for those underrepresented in British and wider global youth culture, 'Oriental' stars, enable those racialized as 'nerds' and 'geeks' to imagine themselves anew.

'Shooting for the stars': Transforming identity through multicultural

Despite the significance of Asian popular culture, those who work in these nightlife spaces simultaneously engage with wider forms of local and global culture. The multidirectional routes of their affiliation and identification transform meanings of 'British-Chinese/'Oriental' culture by contesting its boundaries, not only in nightlife parties but spaces beyond. Chinese New Year 2011 in London provides an example. JnG Promotions organized a show 'in keeping with the Hong Kong vibe – a 24–7 globally-connected vibrant city with unlimited potential'. 'International artists' who had 'just flown in from Shanghai' moved between English, Cantonese and Mandarin, performing a cultural cosmopolitanism that excluded many in the mixed crowd and projecting an aura of an alternative Chinese modernity. JnG thus sought to represent 'the Chinese' less as minorities in Britain than as equal players in global multicultural. Including a multiracial line-up of hip-hop, R&B, kungfu and Cantopop artists from Britain, Asia and Australia, in which Chineseness was also sung and

performed by white and black bodies, the event simultaneously disrupted notions of racial and ethnic authenticity.

Participants' practices and narratives further showed engagement in local anti-racist youth cultural politics. Jon Man described receiving 'real warmth and encouragement from [his] black and South Asian brothers and sisters', while Steven and Kevin spoke of the inspiration of '[South] Asians', who 'have their own BBC Asian network and huge Asian events.' As Kevin said, 'they took Asian music and put urban beats on it ... So I thought, why can't you do that with Chinese music?' His work as a DJ, however, is not limited to hybridizing what are perceived to be 'Chinese' musical forms, but shows the complicated ways in which he negotiates Britain's fragmented nightlife scene. For the 'Oriental scene', he might 'mash up' hip-hop with samples from kungfu movies or iconic Chinese pop songs from the 1970s. But he is equally likely to mix commercial pop for international students with house for 'BBCs'. For other nights, he mixes his favourite music – '80s and '90s soul, Motown and Aretha Franklin – with house. Yet at any one time, he samples Punjabi, Spanish and Korean music, depending on the crowd.

Jay's music, meanwhile, is rooted in hip-hop, reflecting his identity as part of a local youth culture in south London and 'the big dark cloud over it', generated by the media's criminalization of it and 'hip-hop especially'. In one song, *No Such Thing*, Jay used a sample of US African-American hip-hop duo Mobb Deep's *Halfway Crooks* to commemorate a friend who died after being stabbed:

Losing someone like that who was *that* close, not just to me but the whole community and at such a young age made me think I need to write something and sort of elevate everyone away from it. Even though he still stays in our thoughts, we try to move everyone on from it.

By 'elevating' his community, Jay seeks to challenge the idea that hip-hop artists 'can't make positive music' and transform perceptions of his locality – 'I'm trying to get to the point where we push that dark cloud over and say, "This is where we're from and we're *proud* of where we're from".'

Far from dislocated from wider society, participants draw precisely on ordinary multiculturalism to redefine meanings of ‘British-Chinese’/‘Oriental’. As Jay said:

I’m Oriental and I was born in Britain, but I’m still who I am, I’m not following the stereotype that’s with that ... I don’t want it to be a limitation on where we can go and what we can do and what we’re capable of. If you can see different cultures and different aspects of how they’re living, you can ... come out of the whole box that [you’re] trapped in and elevate to bigger and better things, I mean, shoot for the stars.

Despite such aspirations, everyday realities of racialization limit participants’ agency. While declaring he ‘accepts’ that ‘at open-mic nights, the Chinese guy is always expected to be the rubbishest’, Jay nonetheless characterizes responses to his performances – “‘Hold on, oh! you’re actually quite good!’” – as ‘just shocking’. ‘British-Chinese’/‘Oriental’ nights continue to provide an important source of acceptance unavailable elsewhere.

Emergent and uncertain solidarities

Due to scattered geographies necessitated by the catering trade, many British Chinese grow up isolated from co-ethnic peers, dealing with experiences of racism alone (Parker 1995; Song 1999). Almost all participants spoke of being the only ‘Chinese’ or ‘Oriental’ at school or the wider locality and developing friendships reflecting local demographics and a tendency to ‘stick together’ with other racialized or immigrant youth. ‘British-Chinese/Oriental’ nightlife provides vital new spaces for intraracial sociality. Though events attract predominantly ‘Oriental’ crowds, each night is shaped by local demographics. Thus, in Bristol, according to Steven, ‘these parties aren’t just for Chinese people, it attracts non-Chinese people, black guys, white guys, so it creates this multicultural environment with a multitude of different non-Chinese’. In Nottingham, Kevin built an ‘Oriental’ scene of around 2,000 students including ‘Burmese, Filipino, Taiwanese people, everyone’ from across the

Midlands. GK spoke of her parties starting as ‘Chinese’, but then ‘it developed to like Malaysians, Thais, and probably next year it will develop into Philippines, Vietnam’.

Despite the mixed crowds, for those who grew up isolated from other co-ethnics/racials, ‘British-Chinese/Oriental’ parties provide spaces where, as GK remarked, ‘you can *actually* meet Chinese people’. For Wayne, this was important as,

we share the same traditions ... we all have the same upbringing, cos all our parents are from Hong Kong, they came over, they try and give us a better life, ... it’s kinda like this same identity, yeah, and we speak the same language, so it feels more like home.

The boundaries between ethnic and racial identification, however, were blurred. Though GK specified the importance of meeting other ‘Chinese’, she also added ‘sometimes you can’t even tell if they are Chinese’ or from different parts of Asia. Research suggests that pan-ethnic identification emerges from shared experiences as a racial ‘Other’ (Kibria 1998). However, participants’ narratives were shaped by a post-race climate, and specifically discourses constructing hierarchies of oppression that exclude the Chinese as targets of racism. Jon Man claimed, ‘I didn’t get any racism, being Chinese’. He and his family may have been ‘spat at’ or ‘yelled at’ in the takeaway or on the streets, ‘but it was nothing like black or south Asian brothers and sisters would get’. Nonetheless, ‘British-Chinese’/‘Oriental’ nights provided relief from the ‘tense and potentially vulnerable engagement’ (Parker 2000: 83) of interracial interaction. The ‘discovery’ of similarly embodied beings was characterized as a refuge. As Jon continued: ‘I was like “*Oh my God!*” It was like all these strange beasts I hadn’t come across before. And we just clung together for two or three years.’ Despite an earlier emphasis on ethnic identification, Wayne also said, ‘we go to Oriental nights ‘cos we feel like we’re not an outsider’. Participants described these parties as ‘safe’, ‘comforting’, ‘affirming’ spaces where they could feel ‘more confident’ and ‘at home’. This highlights the intersectional dynamics of race, gender and sexuality shaping their experiences as embodied beings amid discourses effeminizing men against white ‘norms’ and black ‘hypermasculinity’ (Kong 2011) and dichotomizing women as either asexual or hypersexual (Parker 1995; Yeh 2000). The use of ‘Oriental’ models, DJs and musicians to advertise and

perform at events validates different conceptions of gender, beauty and sexuality, and the ‘racial sameness’ of the majority of attendees allows young men and women, as embodied beings, to become ‘the norm’.

Participants (predominantly men), however, bemoaned gendered differences in Chinese sexual capital – while ‘Chinese lads just can’t get girls’, Chinese girls ‘don’t have that problem’. The 2001 UK Census suggests that British Chinese women (30 per cent) are twice as likely as men to marry interracially. While assumptions that interracial relationships indicate ‘integration’ remain problematic (Song 2009), participants linked sexual capital to a sense of belonging in society. One said, ‘I still feel I belong in Hong Kong’, since, due to his lack of Cantonese, ‘girls actually find me more mysterious’ there. The importance of intra-racial dating is underscored by the emergence of new ‘British-Chinese’/‘Oriental’ speed-dating promoters such as Red Orchid and Oriental Cupid in Manchester, London and Birmingham.

As well as redrawing forms of intimacy, ‘British-Chinese’/‘Oriental’ spaces facilitate new political solidarities transcending historical intra-Asian antipathies. Jon Man, for example, described his hanging out with Japanese friends as ‘odd’, given ‘this antagonism between Chinese and Japanese, you know, Mum wouldn’t even have Japanese video-recorders’. Events are sometimes themed around charity fundraising efforts, both for local Chinese community centres and wider humanitarian aid efforts in Asia, following, for example, the Japanese tsunami of 2011. These nightlife spaces thus facilitate new ethnic and pan-ethnic solidarities, romances and political consciousness.

However, shaped by the restructuring of cities by corporate ownership (Chatterton and Hollands 2003), they simultaneously create new exclusions. Promoters depend on club owners for venues and need to meet their financial and other requirements. A hierarchy emerges based on inequalities of wealth and conversance with the habitus of the elite. In high-end clubs, ‘premium rich’ students from Kuala Lumpur, Singapore, Bangkok, Hong Kong, Seoul and Tokyo are perceived to provide the necessary capital to sustain profit, while others supposedly lack not only financial but also social and cultural capital. According to James, ‘The BBC crowd, they do dress street, you know white trainers and baggy trousers ... They’ll come in, look at an array of exclusive cocktail lists and rare liqueurs and they’ll like be asking for a bottle of Stella [beer].’ In a gendered and classed

discourse, those who hung out in ‘male-heavy’ groups were described as ‘just like northern lads’ – they were ‘too local’ – and perceived as a risk due to violent behaviour: ‘if you let in 3 guys with that street style, the chances of them causing trouble will increase by 95%, that’s how likely they are to kick off’. By contrast, the behaviour of international Asian students, was deemed ‘very good’. In accounting for the potential of his co-ethnics to ‘make trouble’, another promoter explained:

they intend to go out to have fun, but really, if you’re always going out with 10, 15 boys, they’re-, they’re not looking for trouble, but if something does happen, they won’t let go.

Yet different accounts were given, reflecting local demographics and participants’ attempts to locate ‘trouble-makers’ outside their cohort. Drawing on media stereotypes, one identified *Fukin yun* (people from Fujian), who have been at the centre of fears over ‘illegal’ Chinese migrations, as those most likely to cause trouble. The Vietnamese were also mentioned as being involved in ‘gang wars, like the younger generation, they’re just really rowdy and I know there’s a lot of fights’, again reflecting media discourses of Vietnamese gang and drug warfare. However, participants’ narratives also reproduced the racialized fears of club owners. One DJ, for example, who described ‘urban’ events as ‘very Asian and black’, spoke of the perception that ‘if you play too deeply into urban it can start up fights so clubs don’t want that’. These narratives also reflect wider neo-liberal capitalist discourse, which rationalizes exclusions by criminalizing those who lack the resources to participate as consumers in the market. Even among the ‘model minority’, there are ‘defective and disqualified consumers’ (Bauman 2012). In top-end clubs, this nightlife scene thus has contradictory effects, producing new exclusions where certain groups of ‘British-Chinese/Orientals’ are constructed as lacking, economically, socially and even morally.

Tensions also arise over political values. Like other ‘British-Chinese’ spaces, they can be racially exclusive and heteronormative (Parker and Song 2006b). As one participant said:

They were using the term ‘gay’ as derogatory, and they always referred to black people as *huk gwai* [‘black ghost’], and I just thought, ‘oh, casual homophobia and casual racism.’ I don’t think they mean anything by it, but you know.

In some cases, gendered differences in sexual capital support the commodification of female bodies already entrenched in nightlife cultures. Highly sexualized images of women, and, as GK, the only female participant, said, a “‘girls-get-in-free policy” is used to entice guys’. The sexual and racial politics of these predominantly male-organized spaces may reflect compensatory strategies of the disempowered, yet they still alienate those who find such politics wanting.

As transient sites of experimental belonging, ‘British-Chinese’/‘Oriental’ nightlife spaces foster new solidarities and exclusions, yet they are nonetheless important sites where racial and ethnic identities are continually contested and renegotiated.

Conclusion

Despite recent claims of a post-race era, and specific assumptions that ‘the Chinese’ are insulated from racism, by examining ‘British-Chinese’/‘Oriental’ nightlife spaces, this paper has shed light on the specific ways in which participants of those spaces experience particular forms of racialization in postcolonial Britain. Understanding the model minority discourse as a part of contemporary racial discourse, the paper demands a more complex understanding of belonging than reflected in policy debates that, on the one hand, celebrate socio-economic achievement as an indicator of ‘integration’ and, on the other, blame ‘self-segregating communities’ for the supposed failure of multiculturalism. In dialogue with participants, this paper highlights how it is precisely racialized notions of a model minority circulating in contemporary society that work to deny a full sense of agency and belonging to those who are hailed as well-integrated yet who have lacked opportunities for intraracial sociality. It does so by disregarding experiences of social and cultural marginalization and by assigning to particular bodies a machine-like capacity for work but an inherent lack of creativity, which constructs them as

essentially Other, denies their status as fully human and questions their very ability to participate in the social and cultural realm.

As this paper has argued, it is in response to this specific form of racialization that young people seek out similarly embodied beings to find refuge, combat social and cultural marginalization and engage in a cultural politics that draws on local and global multiculturalism to re-imagine and perform their identities anew. It thus also challenges discourses of an absence of hybridized 'British-Chinese' identities and cultures, arguing that such contentions sustain the model minority discourse, by reproducing an essentialized difference that dislocates particular bodies from the ordinary multiculturalism of urban Britain. By contrast, this paper has argued that 'British-Chinese'/'Oriental' spaces draw precisely on local and global youth cultures to redraw boundaries of affiliations, cultural practices and social networks.

The unsettled uses of 'British-Chinese' and 'Oriental' testify to the situational dynamics and uncertainty of identity claims. Alongside the continuing if contested salience of a 'British-Chinese' identity, new reappropriations of the 'Oriental' category, are significant. They highlight the centrality of racial subjectification, and despite its racial and colonial legacy, the term's political capacity to engage with mixed ethnicities and migration histories erased by discourses of 'British-Chineseness' and to organize pan-ethnic collectivities, which combat structural marginalization and foster a sense of belonging. A broader condemnation of the category, however, raises doubt over its wider potential. The solidarities fostered in these nightlife spaces are also fragile, dissolving under market pressure and contestations over gender, sexual and racial politics to produce new divisions and exclusions. Further research is needed to examine in greater depth the participation of women and young people of other sexualities and ethnicities in these spaces, which will provide alternative understandings of their dynamics. As transient sites of experimental belonging, 'British-Chinese'/'Oriental' nightlife spaces are marked by flux and uncertain forms of identification, yet they nonetheless testify to the engagement in a cultural politics of race by those who supposedly do not experience racism in a purportedly post-race era.

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