

# Telling our Stories, Finding our Roots: Exeter's Multi-Coloured History

## Chinese Minority and its Contribution to Diversity in Exeter

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February 2013

### I. Chinese in Modern Exeter

The United Kingdom has long earned its reputation for being a multicultural and diverse society. People from around the world have come here for the sake of safety, jobs and a better life [1]. Being part of the big family, Chinese or British Chinese [2] residents have made up 1.7% [3] of the total population in Exeter. With the increasing number of Chinese overseas students in recent years [4], 7.5% [5] of the total students in the University of Exeter now originate from mainland China [6]. This figure (around 1,300 students) nearly catches up with the number of Chinese residents in Exeter and is equivalent to ~1.1% [7] of the total population.

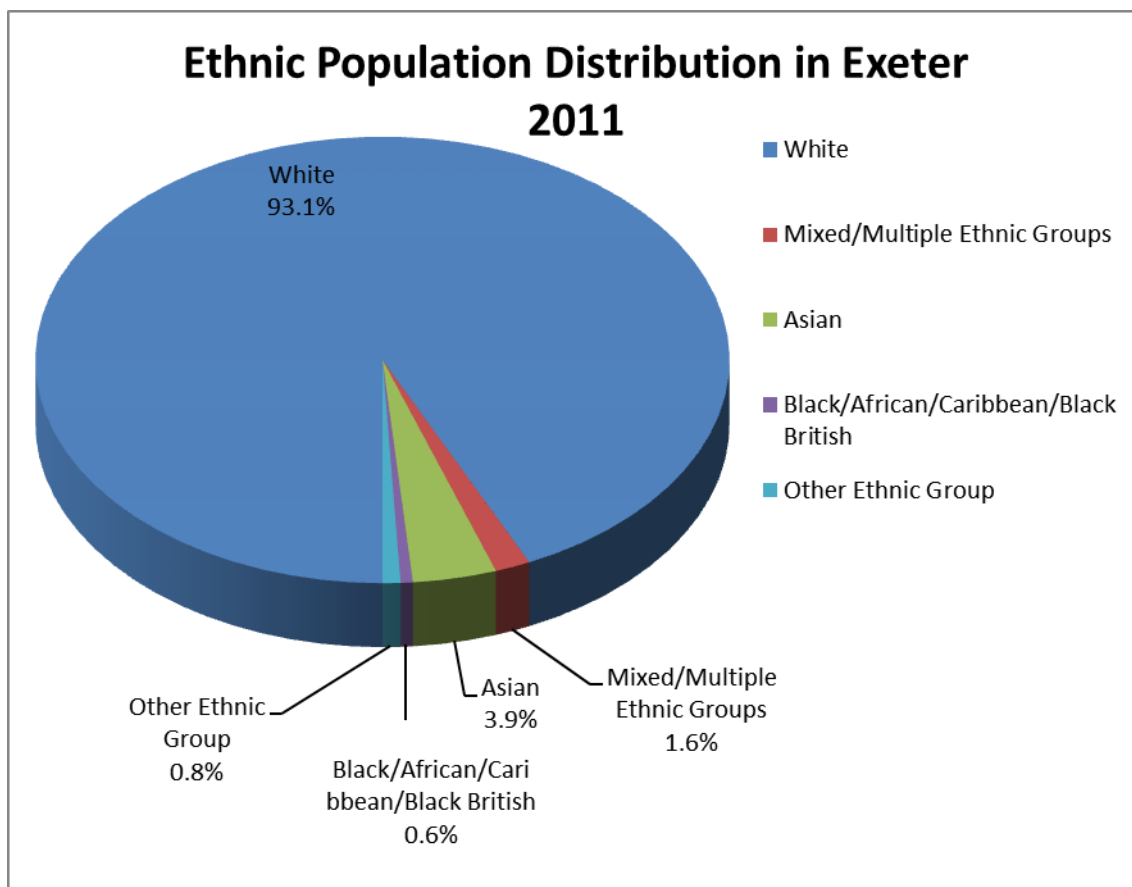


Figure 1. Population in Exeter (2011) according to ethnic groups. (Built based on data from [3])

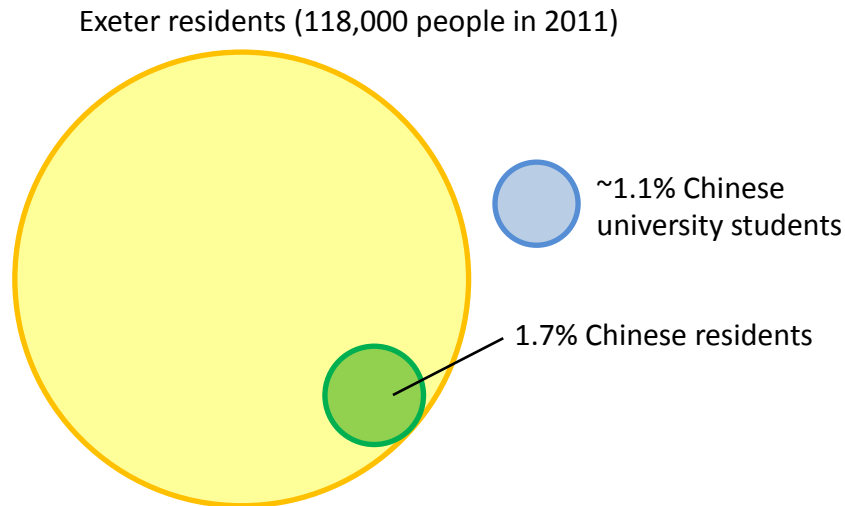


Figure 2. Chinese population in Exeter. (Not in scale) [3][7]

Exeter is in the top 10 local authority districts in England for businesses that show high potential for growth [8]. Thus, it is not surprising that this city can attract a workforce and intelligent minds, including ethnic minorities from around the world. Even though ethnic minorities might possess different lifestyles, languages, cultures or origins from the majority [9], their existence and contribution could be beneficial to our everyday life. There are now a number of Chinese restaurants and takeaway stores in Exeter serving a variety of food [10], and more importantly, customers deserve all these choices. With the recent growing economy of modern China [11], Chinese tourists, investors and students have also evolved into a new super buying power [12].

Through the exploration of the stories of two remarkable individuals, Mr. Zorro CHEUNG and Mr. Tung Won PANG, their life journeys and interaction with the local community, we are going to reveal in this essay the ways of life of Chinese residents in Exeter.

## II. Exeter and the Chinese in the Last Centuries

During the research period of the project, with the help of Devon Record Office [13] and their extensive heritage records and services, we were able to discover some forgotten history which will be surprising to most of us. Let's see if you can guess the right answers to the following questions.

- A. We all know Aladdin, the story with a magic carpet and the lamp with a genie inside. Where exactly does Aladdin come from? (i.e. a place, country, etc.)

Answer: In 1816, the play "Aladdin" was produced in the Exeter Theatre. An advertisement was placed in the local newspaper, saying "the splendid Chinese Spectacle of Aladdin" [14]. Yes, although Aladdin is a Middle Eastern tale, the story is set in China and Aladdin is explicitly Chinese in the original [15].

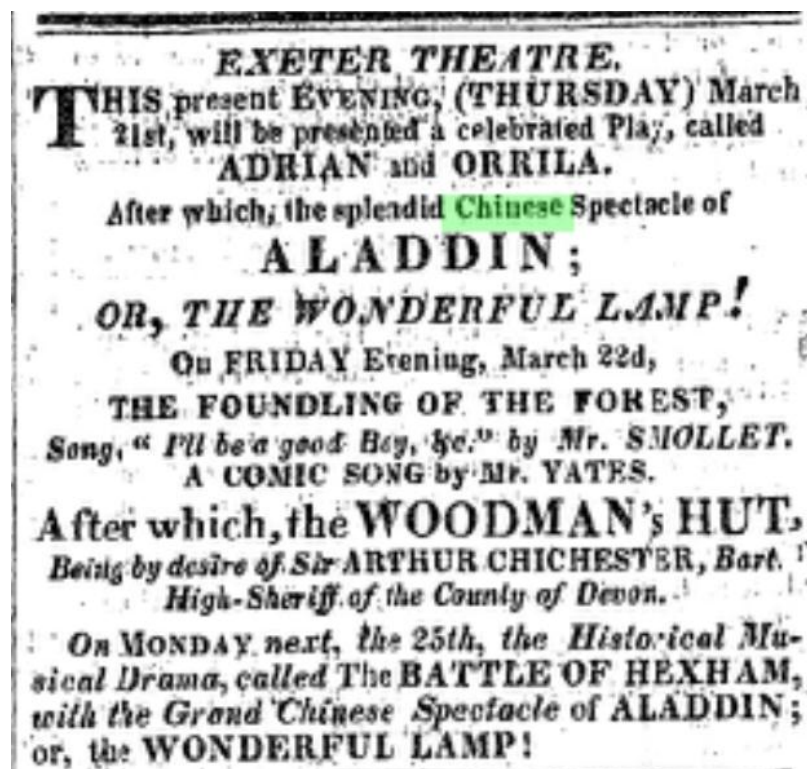


Figure 3. Advertisement of the play "Aladdin" on local newspaper in 1816. [14]

B. Nowadays, there are more than one thousand Chinese overseas students studying in Exeter [7]. When did the first Chinese student arrive in Exeter?

Possible answer: In 1911, while George V was just beginning his reign over the United Kingdom [16], the last imperial dynasty of China, the Qing Dynasty faced its end in an armed revolution [17]. In this year, a 14-year-old Chinese boy (Khai Way Chan) from China was recorded to be studying in Exeter with more than 20 other boarding students [18]. It is unclear whether Chan is the first international student of Exeter from China or not. However, he has certainly acted as a pioneer for many followers who try to seek the wisdom of democracy, justice and freedom.

NAME AND SURNAME	RELATIONSHIP TO HEAD OF FAMILY	AGE	PARTICULARS AS TO MARRIAGE	PROFESSION OR OCCUPATION	BIRTHPLACE	NATIVITY	OPINIONS
18 Khai Way Chan	Boarder	14		School	China	Chinese	
19 [Name]	Boarder	15		School	China	Chinese	
20 [Name]	Boarder	16		School	China	Chinese	
21 [Name]	Boarder	17		School	China	Chinese	
22 [Name]	Boarder	18		School	China	Chinese	
23 [Name]	Boarder	19		School	China	Chinese	
24 [Name]	Boarder	20		School	China	Chinese	
25 [Name]	Boarder	21		School	China	Chinese	
26 [Name]	Boarder	22		School	China	Chinese	
27 [Name]	Boarder	23		School	China	Chinese	
28 [Name]	Boarder	24		School	China	Chinese	
29 [Name]	Boarder	25		School	China	Chinese	
30 [Name]	Boarder	26		School	China	Chinese	

Handwritten notes at the bottom of the form include: "School" in a green box, "China" and "818 Chinese" in a green box, and "18 Khai Way Chan Boarder 14" in a green box. There are also some numbers and signatures in the bottom left and right sections.

Figure 4. A 14-year-old Chinese boarding student at “Park House, 56 St Leonards Road, Exeter” in 1911. [18]

C. The first recorded Chinese restaurant in London was opened in 1907 and the rise in the number of Chinese restaurants in the UK began only after the Second World War [19]. When were the first Chinese restaurant and Chinese takeaway store opened in Exeter respectively?

Answer: Hikmat Devon [20] in St Sidwell's Centre, Exeter [21] is a Community Interest Company aims to support families and individuals from minority ethnic backgrounds. With the help of their Chinese Community group, we were able to identify the earliest Chinese restaurant and takeaway store in Exeter.

According to the daughter of the owner, Mrs. Sheila Wan Ping YAU, "Rice Bowl" at "13 North Street" (currently known as the Red Rose Indian Restaurant & Takeaway) was the first Chinese restaurant opened in Exeter. In her description, Rice Bowl was founded by her father in 1958, and served both Chinese and local cuisines. It was the golden age of restaurant business and there were only two Chinese restaurants available for competition. (The other restaurant was "Chopsticks" in Queen Street opened in 1960.) By the time Yau arrived in 1966, the business was running well enough to support nearly 20 staff, including 6 to 7 waiters, and 11 to 12 chefs or kitchen workers. It was estimated that about 200 sets of three course meal could be sold during a single lunchtime. With a price of less than £1 per meal (£1 is approximately £14.5 in today's value [22]), the restaurant was thronged enough to keep her family busy from 11:30 in the morning to midnight every day. The choices of cuisines in the 1960s

show little difference from what we can get today. Fried rice, noodle, curry, sweet and sour, chop suey and even local roast dinner were on the menu. As a footnote, please be reminded that chop suey is not a traditional or common dish in China, and is widely believed to be invented by Chinese immigrants in America [23].



Figure 5. An old photo featuring the owner of "Rice Bowl", Mr. Sam Fat LAW at the cash desk. There are stacks of menus next to him. [24]



Figure 6. An old photo featuring Law’s family and the front of their restaurant. The Chinese characters of “Rice Bowl” are clearly shown. [24]

RICE A. W. FRMR, WEST FRIEIGN IM. . . . . Lapford 337  
 Rice Bowl, Chinese Rstnt, 13 North st. . . . . Exeter 76650  
 Rice, Dishes, Drinks, The Green, Marsh, Bate 247

Figure 7. “Rice Bowl” Chinese restaurant on British Phone Book in 1960. [25]

The first Chinese takeaway store in Exeter could possibly be “The Orient” founded by one of our interviewees, Mr. Tung W. Pang, in 1968 [26]. According to Pang’s autobiography, The Orient was located at Fore Street in Heavitree, and served both Chinese food, and British fish and chips. Whether it was a coincidence or not, the Pang family had also opened the first Chinese restaurants in Weston and Taunton respectively before.



Figure 8. An old photo showing Pang in the backyard of “The Orient”. [26]

D. Now, let us travel back to the year of 1879, when the UK was experiencing its glorious Victorian era [27] but China was being ruthlessly ruined by Empress Dowager Cixi [28]. In this year, a mysterious and rather controversial poem called “A Chinese Song” was published in the local newspaper [29], saying:

*“Over green fields and meadows a tiny rill ran  
(The little precious coquette);  
She was pretty, she knew, and thus early began  
Gaily flirting with all that she met.  
Her favours on both sides she'd gracefully shower,  
Regardless of whom they might be;  
One moment she'd kiss the sweet lips of a flower,  
The next - lave the root of a tree.  
She would leap from one rock to another in play,  
Tumble down on her pebbly bed;  
Like a naiad let the dazzling sun-smitten spray  
Fall in prismatic gems round her head.  
Sometimes she would lash herself into a rage,  
And rush roaring and seething along;  
Till a bit of smooth ground would her anger assuage,  
When she'd liquidly murmur a song.”*

Some people believe that there is a sexual metaphor if one reads between the lines, whereas some don't. We are not certain of any obvious connection between China and the poem, and whether local people in the 19<sup>th</sup> century were open enough to discuss sex in public [30]. Meanwhile, we would let you decide what this piece of work means to you.

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## POETRY.

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### A CHINESE SONG.

Over green fields and meadows a tiny rill ran  
(The little precious coquette);  
She was pretty, she knew, and thus early began  
Gaily flirting with all that she met.  
Her favours on both sides she'd gracefully shower,  
Regardless of whom they might be;  
One moment she'd kiss the sweet lips of a flower,  
The next—lave the root of a tree.  
She would leap from one rock to another in play,  
Tumble down on her pebbly bed:  
Like a naiad let the dazzling sun-smitten spray  
Fall in prismatic gems round her head.  
Sometimes she would lash herself into a rage,  
And rush roaring and seething along;  
Till a bit of smooth ground would her anger assauge,  
When she'd liquidly murmur a song.

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Figure 9. “A Chinese Song” published on local newspaper in 1879. [29]

### III. Interview 1 – The Story of a Man whose Name is Zorro

#### A. Background

Being an active member in Exeter’s local communities, Zorro Cheung (also known to his friends as Tony) is well known for his long history of contributing to voluntary services, including Hikmat Devon and the Exeter Oxfam shop. He follows Chinese culture enthusiastically, and his collection of antiques recently came into the public eye as part of it was exhibited in the Royal Albert Memorial Museum [31] in Exeter. Dedicated to the assistance of minorities, he has been playing an important part in Exeter’s Chinese community.

#### B. Introduction

Interviewing Zorro, who is originally from Hong Kong, we found that he is playing a prominent part in the running of the Hikmat Devon CIC project which reaches out to ethnic minorities. Zorro has witnessed a dramatic expansion in Chinese businesses in Exeter since 2004, when he arrived in Exeter, especially restaurants, takeaways, and stores specializing in Chinese food. At the end of the interview, he expressed his feelings of deep satisfaction with living in Exeter: he reckons he is now living in the right place at the right time.

#### C. Hikmat Devon CIC Project

After the tragic death of his long-time partner which greatly upset him, Zorro left his life in Somerton in Somerset and moved to Exeter in 2004 where he received support from the Chinese community in the city. Seeing the world on TV, he realised that, despite the loss of his partner, he was still a lot luckier than poor people in some parts of the world such as Africa. This inspired him to start volunteering for local organisations. Zorro has now been working as a volunteer sorting and pricing clothes in the Exeter Oxfam



Figure 10. Zorro (Tony) Cheung with his antique fans. [32]



shop for nearly 9 years. He also takes part in a project called Hikmat Devon CIC. According to Zorro, this project brings people from various nationalities and cultural backgrounds together – people from Southeast Asia, Africa, and China feature prominently, as do Muslim men and women. Within this project, he is responsible for the Sahara Group and he helps to run activities such as Hikmat Hurricanes (an exercise group that meets weekly) and a Walking Group. He is very conscious of the success of the Walking Group. Says Zorro: “A new member recently joined the Walking Group. Her only walking previously was a daily walk from her home to her office. After joining the Walking Group, she could feel a big difference – she was very tired at first, but soon got into the swing of it and now feels much better.” This feedback was very encouraging and so he is proud of his contribution.

#### D. Exeter – The City of Diversity

Zorro also shared his views on his living in Exeter over the past eight years. From his perspective, the city has noticeably grown with many new shops and entertainment centres. He said, “In the past, some shops in the Princesshay area were quite run down and it wasn’t too safe to walk that way. Now it is vastly improved with new stores and restaurants.” To him, Exeter is now much more welcoming for ethnic minorities. It is a city where people from many countries – China, Japan, Philippines, Hong Kong and Thailand – now live. There are now at least five Chinese restaurants serving Chinese food in the city whereas there was really only one Chinese restaurant here when he first arrived. There are also Thai, Greek, and Italian restaurants as well as many as four Chinese supermarkets selling Chinese food making it much easier to prepare Chinese food at home.

#### E. Exeter – Now the Right Place for Zorro

Zorro told us that he has really made his mark in Exeter since arriving, much more so than he did when he was living in Hong Kong, even though in Hong Kong he was an ice skating champion and coach. The display of his antique fans in the Royal Albert Memorial Museum in 2012, the first in their “Finders Keepers” series [32], caused quite a stir – Zorro was interviewed on local radio and in the local press at the time. Zorro said that the Sahara Project has been very useful in developing his communication skills and he is now quite comfortable when talking to the public as he has done so on a number of occasions. He said, “Exeter is now my home; Hong Kong is my second or holiday home.”

#### F. Conclusion

Exeter is clearly much more of a multi-cultured city where diversity exists and is welcomed.

Ethnic minority groups are increasing and the Hikmat Devon CIC Project funded by Exeter City Council is playing a very important role in bringing people of different backgrounds together. The group has been instrumental in introducing new restaurant businesses and supermarkets (5 Chinese restaurants, 3 Thai restaurants, 4 Asian Grocery Stores) and serving customers. Despite having their different race, nationality, and cultural backgrounds, these ethnic minorities now consider Exeter as their home.

#### IV. Interview 2 – History of Chinese Restaurants in Exeter

##### A. Background

Sitting right in front of my interview partner and me, Mr. Tung Won Pang was a humble, easy-going and humorous man in his 80's. Together with his family, Pang had been running several successful Chinese restaurants, takeaway stores and laundries in different UK locations for decades. After having retired for 15 years, his story can still serve as a reflection of both the British Chinese's way of living, and the evolution of Chinese catering services in UK.

##### B. The Early Days

Pang's father originally arrived in the UK in 1921 as a laundryman. Like many other Chinese immigrants, he managed to buy his own laundry a couple of years later through hard work and saving. If there was one thing about his father Pang was proud of, it would probably be the act that his father had volunteered to be a fire warden and helped to put out fires in town during the Second World War. (Weston-super-Mare, the town where Pang's father lived was heavily bombed in early 40s. [33])

Being a British-born Chinese (BBCs) [2], Pang was always busy in laundry or restaurants owned by his family when he was young. As he recalled, "In 1950s, Chinese often worked in the laundries. There were very few Chinese restaurants and virtually no Chinese takeaway store at all." At that time, Pang was able to make £5 a week working as a laundry worker (£5 a week was a reasonably good pay in the 1950s and was approximately equal to £240 per week in today's value [22]). It was not until his uncle opened the first Chinese restaurant in Weston-super-Mare that Pang began to plan his own business. "My uncle opened 'The Asian' in 1958 with his own dry cleaning business at the back. The dishes we served were very different from the local ones as we had rice, noodle, curries and foreign herbs," Pang wrote in his autobiography. The business ran very well.



Figure 11. Pang (left) with his father (front) and brothers in Weston-super-Mare. [26]

### C. Family Business

In 1960, Pang decided to start his own business and opened the first Chinese restaurant, “The Little East” in Taunton. In 1968, he moved his business to Exeter and opened the first Chinese takeaway and fish & chips store, “The Orient” on Fore Street, in the town. “In those days, employees in a Chinese restaurant could own a partnership of a business by contributing about £200 (approximately £5,000 in today's value [22]). Most people started their businesses in this way,” he explained. The low barrier of starting a business also implied the difficulty in hiring an experienced but loyal chef. As a result, a takeaway store beat an ordinary restaurant in term of the ease of management and cooking complexity. “We offered fried rice, noodle, curries and chicken in a simplified European taste. Besides fish and chips, fried rice and chicken were the best sellers,” he recalled.

Unlike what is happening today, competition among different restaurants was less intensive in the past. According to Pang, “Rice Bowl”, “Chopsticks” and his “The Orient” were the only three options available in Exeter. Later competitors also tended to spread in different districts and serve different sets of customers. “In those days, there were less than 50 Chinese in total in the city. Vehicles were less common, and so were the traffic lights. Customers used to visit him on foot and that was why no delivery service was necessary,” he clarified.

With the price of 80 pennies per set of fish and chips (~£4.50 today's value [22]), and 25 pennies per egg fried rice (~£1.40 today's value [22]), Pang’s business was booming. Nevertheless, wealth often comes at a cost. In this case, it was the long working hours and difficult working environment. “We usually started our preparation and cooking at 9am, and finished a day in midnight. Peeling 10 bags of potatoes per day, 2.5kg per bag, was not easy. Picking all the bones from a cod freezing cold by hand was another matter. As a comparison, Chinese takeaway stores nowadays open from 3pm to 11pm in general,” he expressed.

According to Pang, it was not until 12 to 13 years ago (around year 2000) before the first Chinese supermarket appeared in Exeter. There are now 5 to 6 these supermarkets available in the city, whereas in 1960s, the nearest options were located in Cardiff and Birmingham. It is hard to imagine how he received his supply of fresh fish from Grimsby instead of using frozen ones like what we do today. “Supply distributors would normally send their representatives to visit us once a while and that was why finding Chinese ingredients was never a problem,” he said. On the other hand, both my partner and I (the interviewers) were amazed when we were told that the Chinese ingredient distributors ran a video rental

service together with the food business. “Video watching was one of our favourite entertainments. The Chinese ingredient distributors offered VHS rental service of Hong Kong dramas and movies for £2 each a week. The videotapes would be delivered together with the food,” he explained. So, Chinese businessmen were quite considerate in the sense that they provided means for ones’ living, helped them relax, and shared their profits at the same time. (VHS was common in the 1970s and Pang was referring to entertainment in this period [34]).

#### D. Family and Leisure Life

Unlike most of the restaurant owners who focussed every minute on income, Pang chose to spare some time to spend with his family. “Sunday was the day when my children had a day off. That was why we decided not to open our store on that day. It was hard to find a friend to visit as the others were being busy with their businesses. We used to go the seaside like Budleigh Salterton and spend a day with the kids,” Pang recalled the childhood of his family. The Pang couple had five children in total, who all grew up to marry European partners. Being the third generation of BBCs, Pang’s offspring considered themselves as British and spoke no Chinese or Cantonese [35].

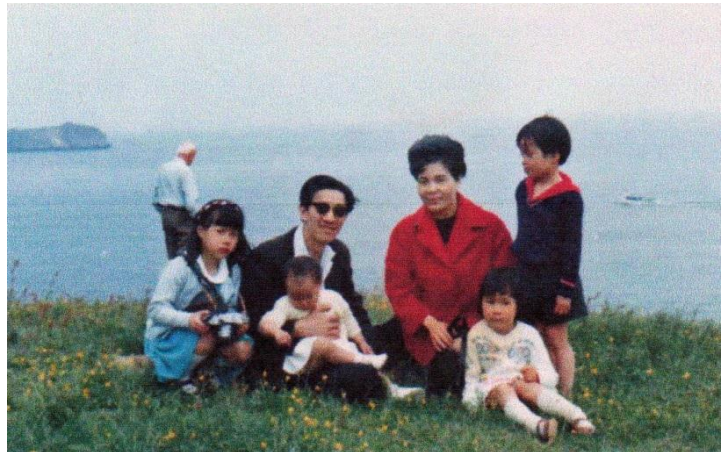


Figure 12. Pang’s family on a day trip to seaside. [26]

#### E. Identity and Traditional Values

We had observed a distinctive difference between how Chinese-originated western citizens represented themselves in America and Britain. The former called themselves Chinese American [36], whereas the latter named themselves British Chinese instead of Chinese British [2]. Did Pang consider himself as Chinese or British? In short, Pang saw himself as Chinese even though he had spent most of his life living in the United Kingdom. Few Chinese customs were performed by Pang’s family but gatherings at traditional festivals were expected. For instance, during Chinese New Year, Pang’s family would gather with their cousins and celebrate together. Eight dishes of chicken, duck, prawn and vegetable would be made. (According to Chinese tradition, 8 is the luckiest number, and 4 is an unfortunate

number [37]). Besides food, mahjong [38] also played an important role in keeping a family together as it involved four players, and often a little bit of cash to bet.

Among all the traditional Chinese festivals, it was the Qingming Festival [39] which drove him back to China. “I have no family but very distant relatives living in China now. In Qingming Festival, I went back to my mother’s grave and showed my respect. Roast pig, chicken, joss papers [40] and incenses [41] were offered to the ancestor,” he recalled. Being Chinese myself, I believed that perhaps it was our meme [42] which drives us back to our origins like the salmon.

Traditional Chinese Festival	Remarks
Dongzhi Festival	Have Tangyuan and Jiuniang and perform ancestor worship, Feast day, family gatherings, also named "Chinese Thanksgiving".
Chinese New Year	More fireworks after midnight, visit family members.
Qingming Festival	Visit, clean, and make offerings at ancestral gravesites, spring outing.
Mid-Autumn Festival	Eat mooncake, family union meal, related to the legend of Chang'e.

Table 1. Traditional Chinese festivals related to strengthening of family bonds. [39]

#### F. Conclusion

Pang bought another fish and chip store in Exeter in the 1980s and retired in 1998, exactly 30 years after he had started his first business. Having opened the first Chinese restaurants in Weston and Taunton, and the first Chinese takeaway store in Exeter, Pang and his family set another record of owning four “The Orient” restaurants in different locations of Britain. Pang was also amazed by the rapid development of China, “In 2003, bicycles appeared everywhere, whereas in 2011, cars became the major means of transportation except villages.” Having lived in UK for nearly 70 years, Pang made the following comment, “Well, I didn’t do too badly actually.”



Figure 13. Mr. and Mrs. Pang. [26]

#### G. Further Readings

1. The Evolution and History of British Chinese Workforce. [\[Link\]](#)
2. British Chinese Food Timeline. [\[Link\]](#)

3. History of Chinese, Thai & Other Oriental Restaurants in Britain. [[Link](#)]
4. The History of the 'Ethnic' Restaurant in Britain. [[Link](#)]
5. Statistics & Data, The Federation of Specialist Restaurants. [[Link](#)]

## V. Interviewers' Reflections

### A. Sasiporn

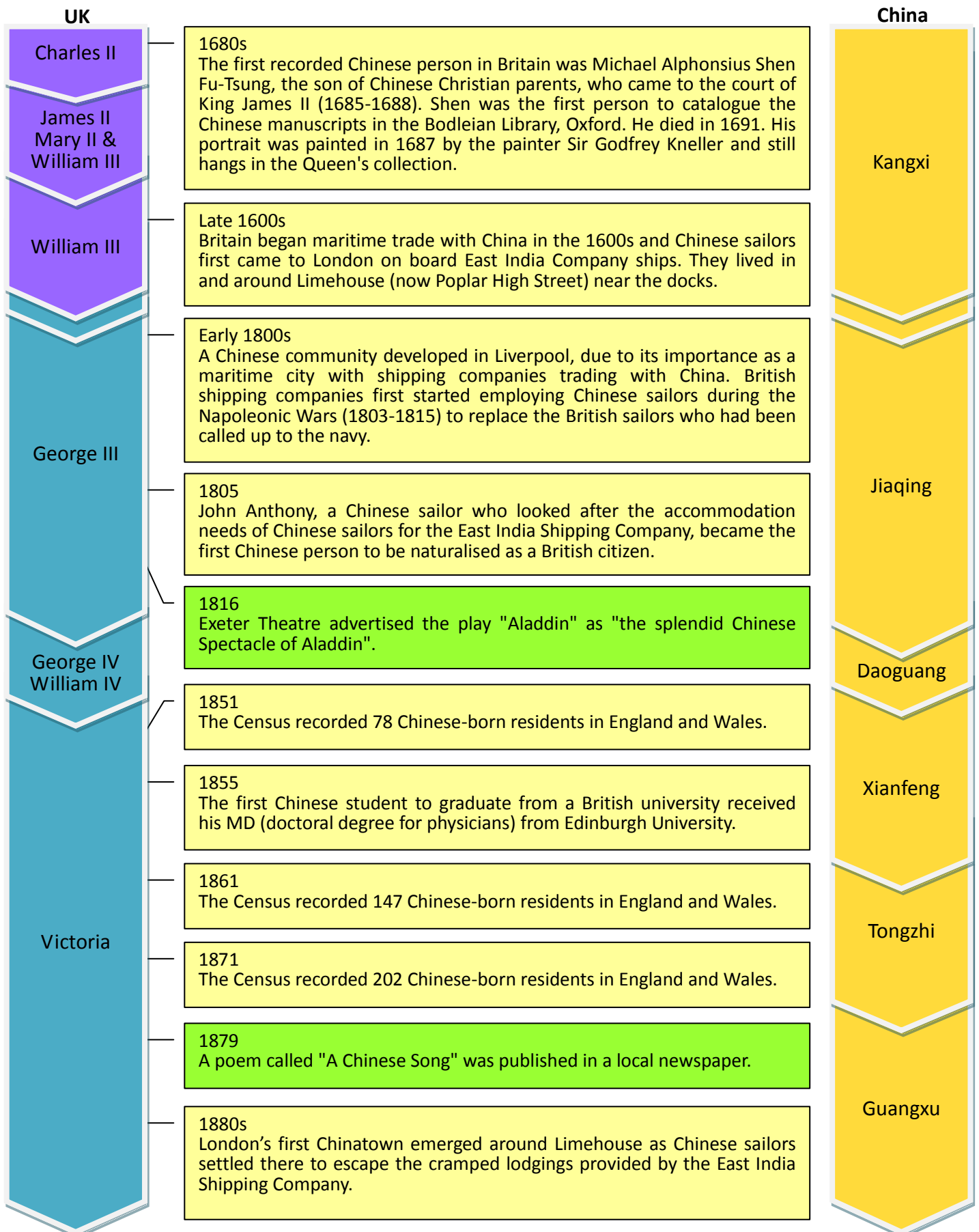
I am very pleased to be in part of this valuable project initiated by Global Centre and appreciate training from RAMM Royal Albert Museum and Devon Record Office which guided me on the disclosure of the hidden stories. In-house training i.e. interview and storytelling skills are the essential factor on making my research successful. This community research project has revealed the hidden stories or histories in relation to multi-coloured people living in Exeter, and broadens my views on arrival, living and contributions of Chinese to the city which is my research focus. Despite being Thai as my official nationality, I was brought up in a Cantonese Chinese family and the interviews reminded me of Chinese Cantonese language, customs and traditions that the interviewees, my research partner and I have in common.

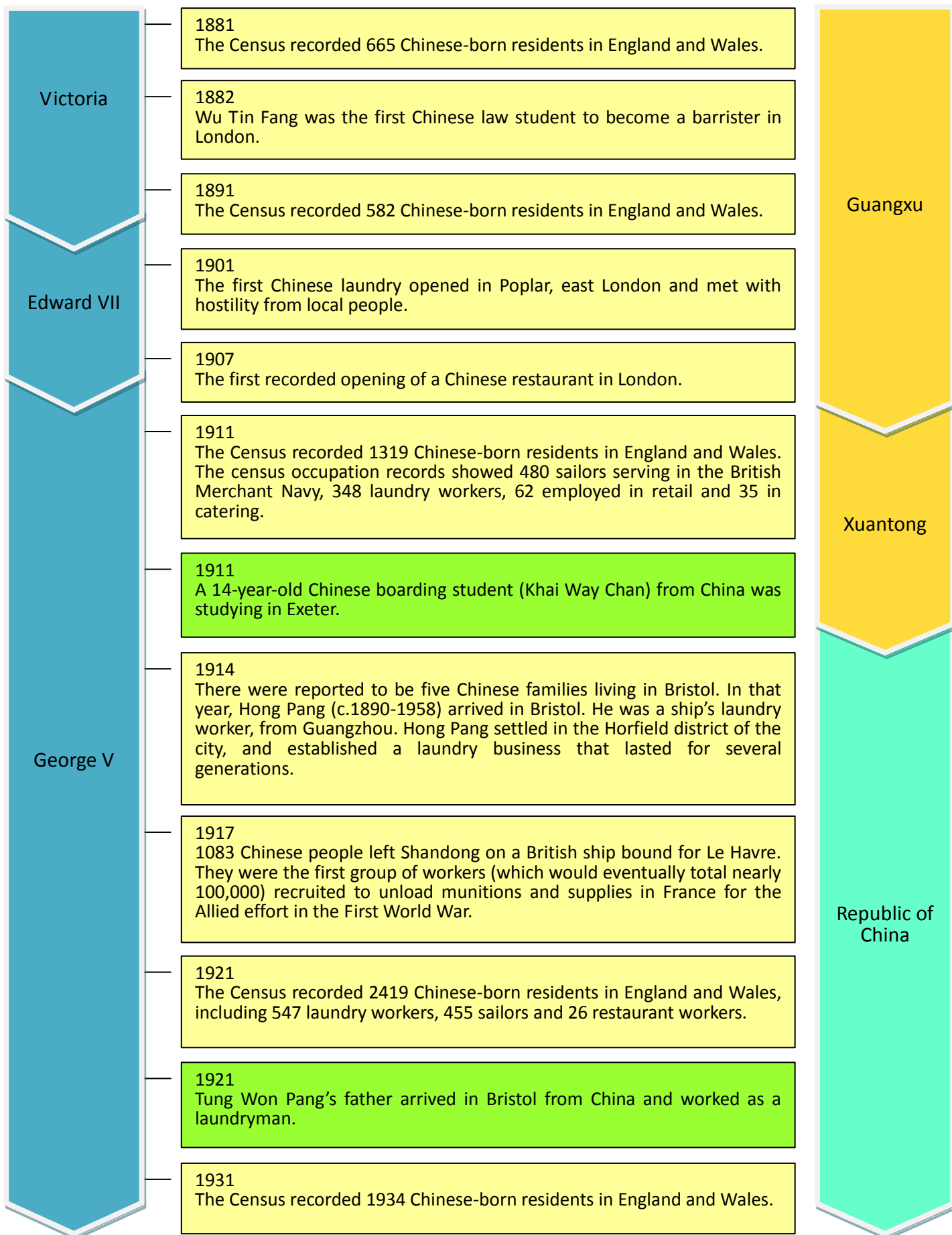
### B. Gordon

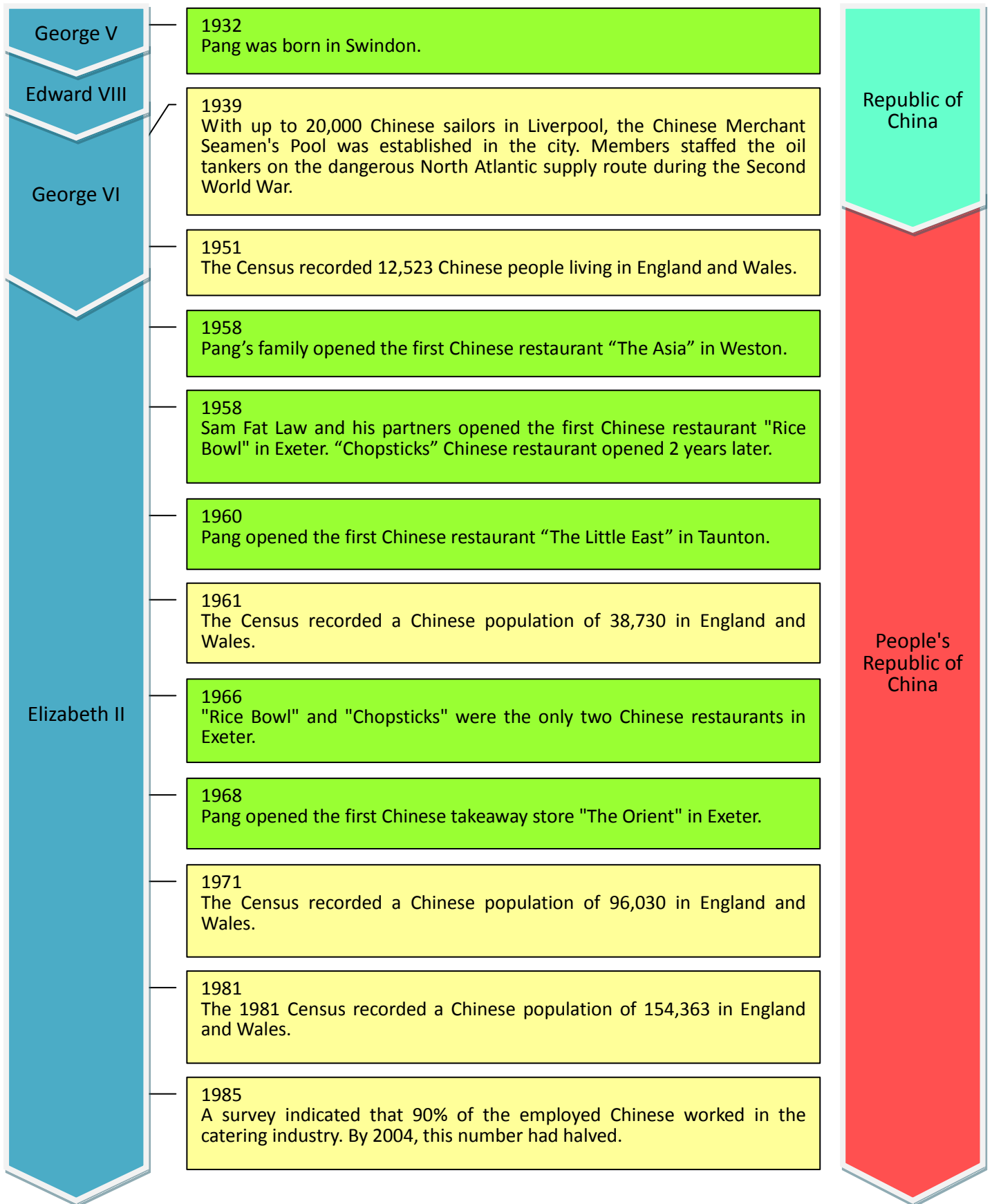
It is my honour to be chosen as part of the project, and to talk to such an intelligent person, Mr. Pang. Our giant volunteer team have been working hard to discover interesting and valuable stories and heritage in Exeter. Through the tutorials from RAMM Royal Albert Memorial Museum and Devon Record Office, I have turned myself from a new immigrant to a citizen who understands more about the availability, richness and significance of local resources. The Global Centre has also succeeded in suggesting to me to believe that I am actually part of the country. Being a Chinese originated British citizen, I care about when Chinese people will begin to treat themselves as citizens instead of civilians. I pin my hope on that 1.1% of young fellows living on the campus of the University of Exeter.

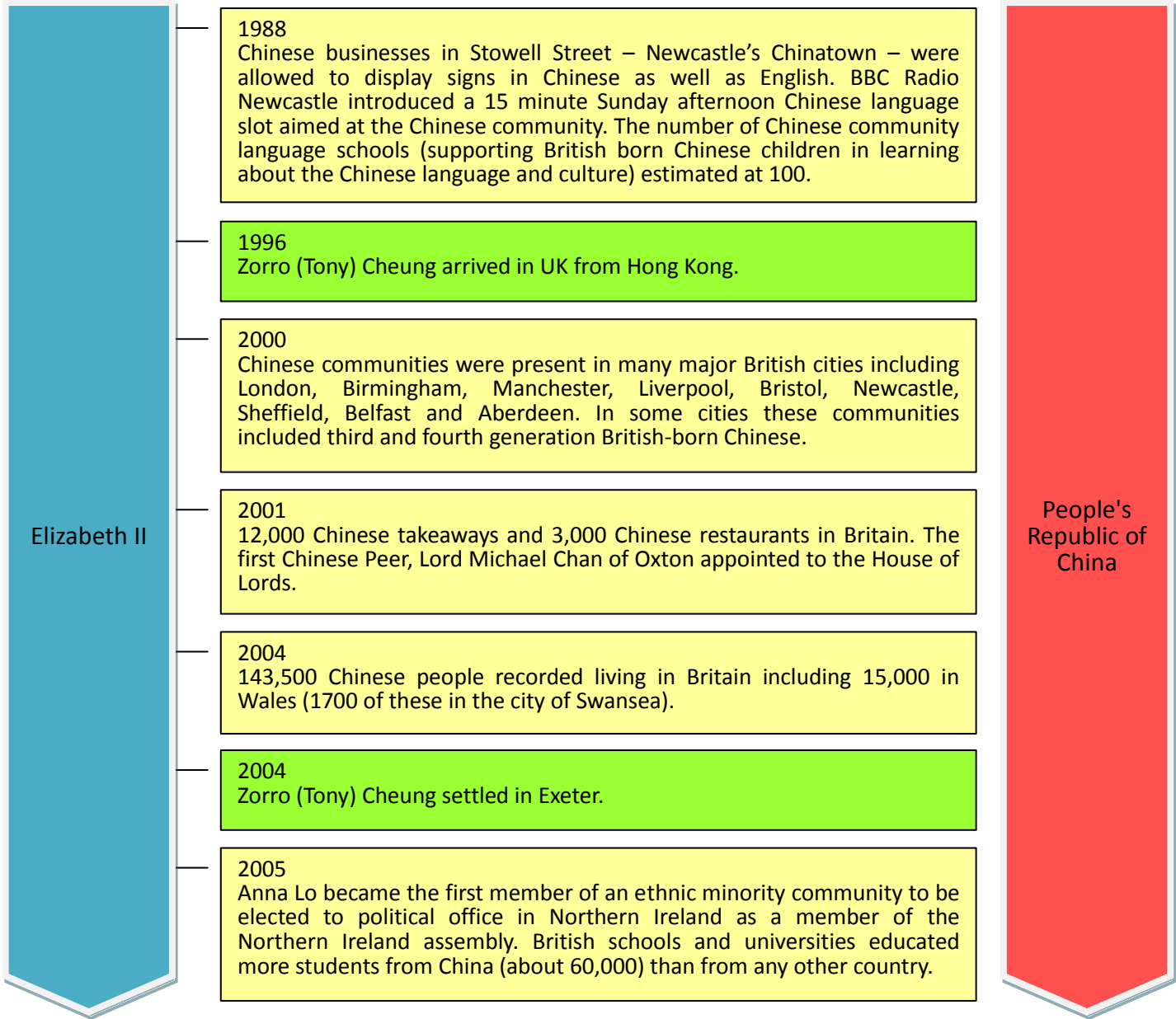


## VI. Timeline









Reference from "Chinese diaspora in Britain", the British Museum. [43]

## VII. Acknowledgement

We would like to express our gratitude to RAMM Royal Albert Memorial Museum, Devon Record Office, Mr. Tung Won Pang, Mrs. King Pang, Mr. Zorro (Tony) Cheung, Mr. Sam Fat Law, Mrs. Sheila Wan Ping Yau, Mrs. Jackie North, Mr. Ghee Bowman, Ms. Miranda Harvey and all the other staffs and volunteers for their contribution to the success of this project.

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