Chinese communities in the North East

The ties between North East and China can be traced back to the nineteenth century when the Navy of the Ching dynasty placed an order between 1881-1887 to build four military ships from the then thriving ship building industry in Newcastle . Five sailors of the Imperial navy died of a nasty illness during that period and were buried in Benwell Cemetery.

It is believed that Chinese people began to settle in the North East shortly after the end of World War II in late 1940’s. They were mostly sailors from Southern China.

In the 1950’s and 1960’s when Hong Kong was a British colony, farmers and fishermen found it extremely difficult to make a living in the New Territories. Taking advantage of Hong Kong’s special ties with UK, many of them chose to relocate to the North East, in the hope of searching for a better life.

The vast majority of the early Chinese settlers, due to their low level of education/skills, were engaged in the catering/hospitality services.

Beginning from late 1970’s some Chinese pioneers ventured to set up supermarkets, restaurants, and other businesses in Stowell Street, converting it from an area of run-down and dilapidated factories into a Chinatown (one of the five existing Chinatowns in UK), making enormous contribution to the local economy. A Chinese arch (one of the only four in UK) symbolizing Chinatown was erected in 2004.

Apart from introducing various Chinese cuisines to the North East through eateries, the local Chinese have put a lot of efforts into promoting the cultural and economic developments of the region. They are playing an important role in the cultural and economic exchanges between China and the North East. Starting from 2000, Chinese community leaders, in partnership with Newcastle City Council, have been organizing large scale annual Chinese New Year celebrations, bringing joy and happiness to the local communities across all walks of life, making North East a genuinely multicultural, truly diversified and harmonious region.

There are several well established Chinese community organizations in Newcastle and surrounding areas, playing different roles to bridge the gap between the government and the local Chinese communities. Quite often, in collaboration with organizations like NHS, NSPCC, various Carers’ Centers and Black minorities groups, they provide essential services for members of the Chinese communities. In particular they organize physical and educational activities to promote healthy living lifestyles, as well as carry out food safety courses to enable catering sector workers to comply with national food safety requirements. All along these organizations have been encouraging their members to be civic-minded, integrating themselves into the mainstream society. For example they have been actively involved in various fund-raising campaigns for local hospitals and BBC Children in Need. The most recent of which was to raise funds for purchasing personal protective equipment for local hospital frontline medical staff in 2020 at the height of the current pandemic. Indeed they have made great contribution making a real mark on the social, cultural and economic vibrancy of the North East.

Last but not the least it is worth noting that since 1984 the city of Newcastle has linked up as sister cities with Taiyuan of Shan Xi province of the PRC. Undoubtedly the local Chinese people in the North East have been playing a vital role in the cultural exchanges and continual development of business between the two cities.