



IF WALLS COULD TALK





INTRODUCTION

If Walls Could Talk is a participatory art and heritage project led by artist Louise Atkinson. The project reimagines the Chinese export wallpaper in the East Bedroom at Harewood House and considers what it means to contemporary audiences.

The wallpaper was created in the 1700s in Guangzhou, China for export to Britain. It shows detailed scenes of rice, silk, tea, and porcelain production, industries central to Chinese trade and British consumption. While highly valued in Britain, these wallpapers were not used in Chinese decorative schemes.

Through a programme of art workshops and discussions, participants from Chinese-speaking community groups in Leeds collaborated with the artist to respond to the ideas and motifs reflected in the wallpaper. These exchanges opened up conversations that challenged fixed notions of identity, while celebrating the cultures and traditions from which they derive.

The resulting artworks include an augmented reality intervention at Harewood House and a series of postcards depicting ingredients from seasonal recipes. These works connect the historical rhythms depicted in wallpaper with ongoing narratives of migration, identity, and belonging.

Harewood House is a historic country house near Leeds, UK. It was designed and built in the mid-18th century by architects John Carr and Robert Adam. The house and its contents were commissioned by Edwin Lascelles, whose wealth was largely sourced from the transatlantic slave trade.

In 1769, the Chinese export wallpaper was installed in the Chintz Bedroom by Thomas Chippendale's craftsmen. During the 1800s, the wallpaper was taken down and stored in an outbuilding, where it remained for over a century before being rediscovered in 1988.

“It reminds me of the famous painting, Along the River During the Qingming Festival.”

Following restoration by Allyson McDermott, the wallpaper was reinstalled downstairs in the East Bedroom to coincide with the *China in Yorkshire* celebrations during the Beijing Olympics in 2008.

The original installation covered a larger surface area than the new room, leaving some sheets unused. In 2011 these remaining panels were sold and acquired by the Guangdong Museum for their permanent collection, returning the wallpaper to the original site of its production.

“Everyone in the wallpaper is working hard. Nobody seems to be enjoying life.”





子如重
粟水際
分飛任
所之莫
今蘭絲
失利盡
耳年留
作授衣
資



別悠：種嗣期綿：送蛾臨
遠水蚤歸祝明年

我史布



城初脱纒縛如螺樹然得



ARTISTIC INSPIRATION

The wallpaper imagery directly references a series of prints called *Pictures of Tilling and Weaving*, or *Gengzhitu*. They were first created in the 12th century and later reinterpreted by Qing emperors who used them to promote agriculture, good governance, and Confucian values.

By the 1600s, the images began to incorporate Western influences. Jesuit missionaries at the Imperial court introduced techniques such as linear perspective and shading, creating visual hybridity. Many of the same motifs circulated in export watercolours, helping to shape European ideas of everyday life in China.





“The images show a rural part of China. The clothes and hairstyles are from the Qing Dynasty (1644–1911).”

“There are a lot of different cultures in China, not just the ones we can see here.”

WORKSHOPS

Through a series of workshops, Chinese-speaking participants explored photography, collage, repeat pattern design, animation, and augmented reality to learn more about the different artistic processes involved in creating the artwork and to contribute to its development. Each session built on the previous one, forming a rich narrative thread throughout the project.

We visited Harewood House to see the wallpaper in situ and considered how it connected to other objects in the room. We also discussed the wallpaper imagery and how it related to cultural and historical knowledge.

The group highlighted aspects of farming, fishing, ceramics, weaving, and working in tea houses. They identified the time period as the Qing Dynasty through details such as hairstyles, clothing, and architecture, and noted that the wallpaper depicted a very specific region of China, offering only a partial view of everyday life at the time.

They were also keen to imagine how the wallpaper might be updated, suggesting motifs such as hanging couplets and lanterns, alongside contemporary festivals and activities including Dragon Boat racing, New Year flower markets, Chinese opera, and family meals. A number of participants also referred to the symbolic use of red and gold.





PHOTOGRAPHY

Participants brought along personal objects to photograph, including teaching certificates, retirement gifts, ceramics, and objects related to travel, celebration, and prayer.

These photographs were used as the basis for collage activities, and combined with images from the wallpaper in a workshop focused on Chinoiserie. During the session, the group reflected on their personal relationships to British and Chinese culture.





***“As a
Hongkonger, I
am influenced
by Western and
Chinese cultures.
I value both
for my diverse
personality.”***





CHINOISERIE

Chinoiserie refers to European adaptations of Chinese artistic traditions, which became popular in the 18th century through trade, travel, and the circulation of pattern books.

Thomas Chippendale incorporated Chinoiserie elements into his work through lacquered surfaces and intricate fretwork. His specially commissioned furniture was created to complement the Chinese export wallpaper in the East Bedroom, resulting in a space that reflected both a fascination with and a reinterpretation of China.





Jean Pillement was a key figure in popularising Chinoiserie in eighteenth-century Europe. His book *The Ladies Amusement* (1768) contained over 100 designs for use on embroidery, ceramics, and furniture.

His designs combined imaginary Chinese figures and landscapes with French flourishes, and were marketed to amateurs to decorate their own homes.





One of the earliest Chinoiserie manuals was *A Treatise of Japanning and Varnishing*, published by John Stalker and George Parker in 1688.

It offered instructions on how to replicate the look of Chinese lacquer work using European materials, and included prints of chinoiserie motifs, along with guidance on how to apply them to objects.



Artist William Alexander joined Lord Macartney's 1792 embassy to China, where he produced over 2000 sketches of people, architecture, and customs.

In 1805, he published *The Costume of China*, which featured 48 prints and influenced decorative schemes across Europe, including the Royal Pavilion in Brighton.





TEMPLAR LANE 2

MIGRATION

Unlike some of Britain's cities, Leeds does not have a designated Chinatown, but traces of one can be seen on Templar Street in the city centre. Shop signage and architectural details remind us of a once lively area filled with supermarkets, restaurants, and hairdressers.

Chinese community life officially began in Leeds in 1966 with the Wah Kwong Association, offering advice, translation, and support for local families, and in 1988 Leeds became twinned with Hangzhou, as one of the first UK-Chinese city partnerships.

In 1995, the Leeds Chinese Community Association was formed. It brought together the Wah Kwong Association, the Leeds Chinese Community School, and the Cantonese Operatic Arts Centre.

The Leeds Chinese Community School has since grown to more than 200 pupils. It teaches both Mandarin and Cantonese, as well as calligraphy, music, dance, and painting. Many of the teachers are parent volunteers, making the school a cornerstone of Chinese cultural life.



***“I look Chinese but
I feel British. I go to
the pub and play
dominos.”***

Chinese culture has also been incorporated into the Leeds civic calendar, and events including the Lunar New Year Festival are now celebrated throughout the city with lion dances, calligraphy, and other activities.



In recent years, new arrivals from Hong Kong have settled in Leeds, joining earlier waves of migration, and the University of Leeds continues to attract large numbers of students from China and Taiwan.

Beyond these groups, the city is also home to people with family connections to Singapore and Malaysia, reflecting the wider Chinese-speaking diaspora in the UK, which is shaped by different languages, dialects, traditions, and migration histories.

REPEAT PATTERN

The repeat pattern design workshops coincided with Spring Festival, so our designs focused on red and yellow silhouettes of motifs including dragons, ceramic vases, and Buddha statues.

Images from the sessions were also used to create simple stop motion animations and augmented reality experiences.





"Making art helps us to express ourselves."

SUPER/MARKET

Food was a prominent aspect of the workshops, from shared meals to stories about the origins of particular dishes, such as why Zongzi is eaten at the Dragon Boat Festival. The augmented reality intervention, *Super/Market*, developed from these starting points.

While the Chinese export wallpaper details the cycles and processes of food production and export, *Super/Market* reimagines these motifs through contemporary images of food and festivals to mark different times of the year, linking everyday life and cultural heritage.

The title references global histories of trade, as well as shifts from agriculture to large-scale manufacture. Framed by a Chinese arch modelled on the entrance to a local wholesalers and restaurant, the work also highlights how such gateways reflect identity and belonging in Chinatowns across the UK.

Accompanying the intervention are four postcards depicting ingredients from seasonal recipes that link to their own augmented reality experiences. Together, the intervention and postcards celebrate food as a marker of time, community, and exchange.





超級市場



出入平安

出入平安

出入平安

出入平安

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