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If Walls Could Talk: The Interweaving of British Manor History and Immigration Narratives in the If Walls Could Talk Project

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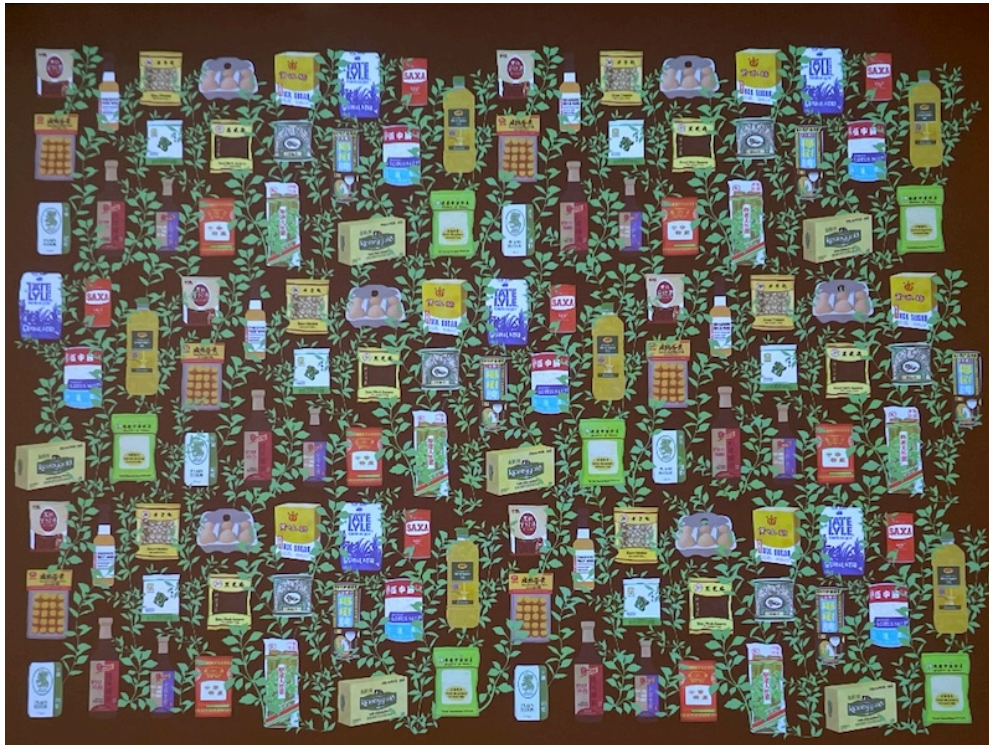
colonial

Collective memory

Community Engagement

Decolonization

migrant



Digital wallpapers created by rearranging everyday ingredients. (Photography by Luo Shuyu)

Author: Luo Shuyu (Master of Museum Studies, University of Leeds, UK)

Familiar supermarket items like olive oil, sugar, and salt shakers, along with packaging for dried shiitake mushrooms,

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rock sugar, and salted egg yolks commonly found in Asian supermarkets, are now projected onto a wall at the University of Leeds, clinging to green vines. These everyday ingredients have been redrawn and arranged repeatedly against a dark brown background, transforming into a rich digital wallpaper.

This is a work by artist Louise Atkinson for the If Walls could Talk project. Inspired by 18th-century Chinese wallpaper in the east bedroom of Harewood House, she echoes the historical context of Guangzhou export wallpaper at that time and engages in dialogue with Chinese immigrants living in Britain centuries later, exploring contemporary issues of immigrant identity and belonging.



The east bedroom was originally a ground-floor guest room at Harewood House. The wallpaper, which was removed and preserved in the 19th century, was restored in 2008, recreating the historical space's appearance. (Provided by Harewood House)

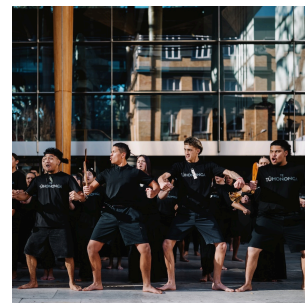
Unveiling the Colonial Shadow of Country Villas

This exhibition is related to the recent trend in Britain to explore colonial history within cultural assets and incorporate public participation. Country houses, often owned by the aristocracy, frequently concealed behind their enviable wealth and luxurious lifestyles, and were inextricably linked to the slave trade or the exploitation and oppression under the colonial system. The National Trust, a leading British historical and cultural preservation organization, has recently been conducting research on colonial history within the



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cultural assets it manages, emphasizing the need to uncover the hidden histories of those in power, confront the damage caused by colonialism, and acknowledge the complex relationship between the post-colonial era and the colonized nation.

The core site of this project, Harwood Estate, was built in the 18th century by Edwin Lascelles, a sugar merchant whose family profited by exploiting thousands of African slave laborers in the Caribbean. Although Harwood Estate is not an asset managed by the National Trust, it has recently been used to engage in dialogue through curated exhibitions and events, acknowledging its connection to colonial history.



Harewood House covers approximately 4,000 acres and boasts extensive woodlands, gardens, and courtyards. (Photo courtesy of Harewood House)

A Dialogue Across Time and Space: The Intertwining of Wallpaper and Immigration

The If Walls Could Talk project is a collaboration between the University of Leeds and Harwood Estate, led by Louise Atkinson, a visiting scholar and artist at the University of Leeds. The two-year project includes workshops with the immigrant community and will culminate in exhibitions at the University of Leeds School of Art and the Harwood Estate East Bedroom in September and October 2025. The former will present the project's timeline, the wallpaper's historical context, and Louise's artistic response, while the latter will showcase the AR artwork "Super/Market".

The project began with a Chinese export wallpaper from 1769 that covered the east bedroom of Harwood Manor. This "Farming and Weaving Picture Wallpaper" was based on the Song Dynasty's "Imperial Farming and Weaving Pictures," depicting the production processes of silk, tea, rice, and porcelain, thereby portraying the emperor as the protector of the land and the people. Farming and weaving pictures were widely used in China on everyday items such as inkstones and porcelain. In the 18th century, they were printed as export wallpaper and eventually became the decoration of English country houses.



A partial view of the "Farming and Weaving" wallpaper depicts the production process of food and various daily necessities. (Provided by If Walls Could Talk official website)

Just like these wallpapers that have traveled across the ocean, Chinese immigrants also experienced transnational migration, crossing oceans to arrive in the UK. The If Walls Could Talk project focuses on the intersection of these two experiences, examining how contemporary Chinese immigrants respond to the connection between wallpaper and their own experiences. Artist Louise Atkinson collaborated with the immigrant community in Beeston, a town south of Leeds (including the Hong Kongers and Lychee Red), to conduct a series of workshops. The activities included site visits to the manor wallpaper, photography, collage, and pattern design, and guided participants to share cultural memories, life experiences, and immigrant identity. These creations and feedback became an important foundation for the development of subsequent AR works.

A Foreign Table: Reaffirming Identity Through Food

During interactions with the community, participants frequently mentioned their concern for food sources and shared recipes for different festivals and seasons. Ultimately, the community chose "food" and "Chinese supermarkets" as the themes for their creations, using them to present the contemporary life experiences of the Chinese immigrant community in Leeds. These food memories reflect the rhythm of ingredients and seasonal foods changing with the seasons, and when transformed into AR postcards and interactive installations, they resonate with the natural cycles emphasized in the wallpaper.



AR artwork "Supermarket". (Provided by If Walls Could Talk official website)

In terms of visual vocabulary, the Chinese supermarket landscape depicted in the AR artwork symbolizes the modernity and visibility of immigrant life, forming a stark contrast with the natural imagery and trade activities presented in the wallpaper. The image of the Chinese archway at the entrance to the Leeds local shopping district highlights the supermarket's symbolic significance as a gathering place for the Chinese community, reinforcing the artwork's discussion of immigrant identity and cultural continuity.

Artist Louise is skilled in using digital technology. Four images made up of various ingredients hang on the wall. By

scanning the QR code below with a mobile phone, festive foods made from the ingredients will pop up on the screen: rice cake, zongzi (sticky rice dumpling), mooncake, and tangyuan (sweet rice ball). This shows how immigrants far from home use British ingredients to recreate the taste of their hometown.



The exhibition showcases the ingredients needed for representative foods of different festivals. After scanning a QR code, visitors can see the food made from those ingredients on their mobile phone screen, such as the mooncake in the left picture. (Photo by Luo Shuyu)

The exhibition features a video introducing the history of export wallpaper, while a Parody curtain on the wall explains the project's conception, process, and creative results. The final stop on the tour is a large digital wallpaper, composed of rearranged ingredients that appeared earlier, echoing the intertwined and ambiguous relationship between export wallpaper and immigration.



A video introducing the history of wallpaper exports was shown at the exhibition. (Photo by Luo Shuyu)

Here, food preparation is not merely about satisfying physiological needs, but also a way for migrants to reaffirm their cultural identity in a foreign land. This sense of familiarity, constructed through physical labor and gustatory memory, responds to the project's core question: "How to recreate home within the experience of migration." The exhibition deliberately avoids excessive labeling and explanations, and refrains from critically examining the identity shifts of immigrants. Instead, it focuses on the food culture Louise witnessed during her interactions with the immigrant community, encouraging visitors to explore freely.

Interestingly, recreating the taste of home in a foreign land is a collective memory for many contemporary international

students. With the increasing popularity of Asian supermarkets in the UK, many Chinese students go to great lengths to recreate the taste of home, even buying bamboo leaves and cotton thread to wrap rice dumplings themselves. These experiences resonate deeply with them regarding the exhibition, expanding the narrative from "colonial history" to "contemporary transnational migration," and allowing the history of Harwood Manor to be viewed and reinterpreted today.

Whose history? Who tells the story?

It is worth pondering whether Louise Atkinson, as a white artist, is using hegemonic culture to speak for immigrants. Does her work, inspired by Chinese export wallpaper in the bedroom of a British aristocratic manor, make immigrants visible, or does it allow immigrants to be exploited again? This is the ethical question that the If Walls Could Talk project cannot avoid and must address directly.

Louise was keenly aware that "the representation of Chinese culture by white artists" could fall into a recolonial framework. Therefore, she used workshops to generate exhibition materials from the community to avoid objectifying "Chineseness" and to provide space for the local community to weave their own stories. In the exhibition space, the labels on the works deliberately downplayed her name, leaving visibility to the community narrative and the voices of the participants, thus reconfiguring the discourse.



The red curtain on the left explains how the project was inspired and implemented, while the right side features a digital wallpaper made of food ingredients. (Photo by Luo Shuyu)

Here, the immigrant experience is not merely a "supplement" to colonial history, but an effective entry point for reinterpreting the colonial legacy, attempting to loosen the narrative framework originally dominated by manors and colonial power. Through the life experiences, memories, and cultural practices of contemporary immigrants, the exhibition allows visitors to understand the historical context of Harwood Manor from another perspective—those seemingly static buildings and decorations are actually deeply connected to trade, the introduction of plants, the circulation of goods, and the transnational migration and power inequality that continue to this day.

Let the silent wall speak

The "wall" is both export wallpaper that came across the ocean in the 18th century and a symbol of the long-standing situation of immigrants living in Britain who were observed, framed, and lacked a voice. However, in this project, the wall is no longer just a decorative object, but a vehicle for the community to voice its opinions.

The If Walls Could Talk project is not only a response to the legacy of colonialism, but also allows communities to reimagine the space of "home" during migration. Seemingly scattered elements in the exhibition—the life experiences of

immigrants, the taste of food, the labor of transnational migration, and the iconographic traditions of wallpaper—are ultimately stitched together, allowing the originally silent walls to truly speak.

(Executive Editor: Huang Lu)

Information source

Harwood Manor Official Website
National Trust
If Walls Could Talk Project

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