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FINDING THEIR POLITICAL VOICE

AN INCREASINGLY SELF-CONFIDENT
CHINESE COMMUNITY IS BEING
ENCOURAGED TO JOIN POLITICS

By DAVID BARTRAM

Europe's Chinese diaspora is being urged to take a more active role in politics as immigrant communities across the continent begin to find their political voice. As more Chinese immigrants, particularly second- and third-generation, begin to engage with mainstream national politics, governments are looking for ways to better integrate the community.

The UK's Electoral Commission is one such body to take steps to encourage British-Chinese to engage with the political process. It recently launched a new campaign, based around Chinese New Year, encouraging the community to vote in upcoming local and regional elections.

Of the estimated 650,000 people that make up the UK's British-Chinese community, some 30 percent are not on the electoral register.

"The dragon is said to symbolize decisiveness and passion," says Samantha Mill, head of campaigns at the Electoral Commission. "Mak-

ing the decision to register to vote is one way that members of Chinese communities across the UK can make their voices heard on the issues they are passionate about."

That the issue is beginning to attract the attention of bodies such as the Electoral Commission is evidence of the work being done to correct the widespread under-representation of Chinese communities across Europe's political institutions.

"There is this idea that Chinese immigrants are not interested in politics," says Joseph Wu, who works with the BC Project, an organization that

promotes the integration of British-Chinese into politics. "It is said that they have an emotional coldness toward politics, but I think this is a very stereotypical idea.

"From my experience I've found that if people feel that their voice is valued, they will communicate very passionately. Some people like to label the Chinese community as the 'silent community' but phrases like that are very dangerous.

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WINNER OF 2011 UK LAUNCH PAPER OF THE YEAR

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Cover story

Models: Encouraging more 'active involvement'

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"It implies the silence is something innate, when in reality it is the result of a very particular set of circumstances."

The BC Project is taking steps to alter these circumstances. Since being founded in 2006, it has attracted sponsorship from members of parliament and built a network of contacts designed not only to encourage British-Chinese to vote, but also support those who wish to play an active role in UK politics themselves.

However, the biggest challenge remains in convincing the Chinese community that politics is relevant to their lives.

"The traditional reaction of the Chinese community has been to say: 'We are here as guests, so we must adapt if anything changes.' But unfortunately every so often an issue arises that requires the community to express a view," says Wu.

One such example was a piece of immigration legislation proposed by the previous Labour government, which would have placed a strict English-language requirement on immigrant workers. The Chinese catering industry would have been particularly affected.

"If the Chinese catering industry collapsed then the impact is felt far beyond the Chinese community," says Wu. "That piece of legislation was being proposed without thinking about the consequences for the Chinese community."

"We started encouraging local restaurant and take-away owners to write letters to their MP raising their concerns. Eventually we got a meeting with the relevant minister and by the time the legislation was passed the language requirement was somewhat relaxed."

Such positive results from greater engagement are encouraging, but the big issue remains representation. Despite Chinese populations of more than 100,000 in France, the UK, the Netherlands, Italy, Germany and Spain, it is only in the Netherlands where there is anything approaching significant representation of ethnic Chinese immigrants in national government.

Explaining this under-representation is somewhat of a puzzle, particularly when considered next to the relative success of South Asian and Afro-Caribbean immigrant communities in European politics. Some point to Chinese communities' unwillingness to actively participate. Others argue that the political parties are not doing enough.

Merlene Emerson, who moved to London from Singapore in 1979, co-founded the Chinese Liberal Democrats in 2006 to help raise awareness of the party within the Chinese community.

"We try to communicate the party's ideas to the British-Chinese community while at the same time communicating the needs and aspirations of British-Chinese to our own colleagues and party leaders," says Emerson.

"I would say that with the change in China's role, British-Chinese have a greater level of self-confidence now. The news is no longer about illegal immigrants being smuggled in; it is



PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

The UK's Electoral Commission recently launched a campaign to encourage British-Chinese to vote in upcoming local and regional elections.



Mark Wu runs the website Visible Chinese, to compile a Who's Who for the Chinese community in Britain.

now about China's economic growth.

"In the past there was almost an aversion to politics among the British-Chinese community, now they are slightly more open. People like (Assembly Member) Anna Lo in Northern Ireland have really helped to pave the way for the rest of us."

There is certainly a hope that the growing number of Chinese political role models will encourage the next generation to take a more active involvement. Mark Wu is helping this process via his website Visible Chinese.

"The idea with Visible Chinese was to compile a Who's Who for the Chinese

community. I realized there wasn't anything that showcased people across the whole spectrum of society. There really wasn't a focus on the unsung heroes."

Visible Chinese provides biographies of members of the Chinese community across all sectors from politics to social work to acting. As well as celebrating achievements, the site shows young British-Chinese that they are not limited to the more traditional career paths.

"There is a perception that the path for a good second- or third-generation British-Chinese person is to go to school, study hard and get a job in accountancy, IT or something that is



Merlene Emerson co-founded the Chinese Liberal Democrats in 2006.

considered a professional role.

"When my generation was growing up, we saw a lot of people follow these quite 'geeky' career paths. If you wanted to go into the arts or politics or something that didn't seem very stable you were discouraged from it."

The impact of websites such as Visible Chinese on the further integration of the British-Chinese community into UK politics was examined by Miri Song, a professor of sociology at the University of Kent.

"The striking thing about sites such as Visible Chinese is that they are all about demonstrating links to the mainstream," says Song. "Some see the emergence of minority sites as an overtly inward move, but I say that to engage with the mainstream you need a sense of group consciousness and public presence first."

"Generally speaking, the second- and third-generation are highly professional and there is a lot of evidence that British-Chinese do want to get involved

in politics. They don't regard it a contradiction to be committed to a minority group but also active in mainstream politics."

This balance between representing a minority group and representing a constituency as a whole is still a sensitive one. In the 2008 Paris municipal elections, Felix Wu was criticized for openly campaigning along cultural grounds. The idea that Wu was campaigning to represent the city's Asian population did not sit well with those who believed that in doing so he would be failing his other constituents.

But it will likely be the disintegration of race-based politics that ultimately signals the true integration of the Chinese diaspora into European politics.

"I do think increasingly British-Chinese people aren't content to only engage in ethnically specific politics," says Song. "Now people are saying they want to run for a seat and it just so happens that he or she is British-Chinese. But such candidates are not going to run only on the basis of being Chinese, or cater only to Chinese interests and needs."

Archie Preston, author of research on Chinese involvement in British politics at the University of Cambridge, says that in the 2005 general election, there was only one Chinese candidate, yet five years later in the 2010 election there were eight.

And in 2010, Thomas Chan became the first Chinese mayor in Britain, while last year, Helen Chuah was inaugurated as mayor of Colchester, Preston adds. At the same time there are younger Chinese politicians coming through the ranks, among them Steven Cheung who ran for the European Parliament in 2009 at the age of 19.