My project focuses on collecting and categorising the visual identities of Chinese restaurants in the UK, aiming to reveal how their naming, interior styles and graphics, dishes, and menu layouts have evolved alongside successive waves of Chinese migration. This process exposes how culture is represented and reshaped within a diasporic context.

I plan to present the research in four small booklets, each addressing one visual dimension — **naming**, **interior and graphic style**, **dishes**, and **menu design**. The first booklet, *Naming*, is currently in progress.

This booklet is an A5 comb-bound photo collection. Each page is divided horizontally into three sections:

- **Top section:**
  This part collects **cropped photographs of restaurant sign names** featuring words such as "China" or "Oriental," traditional Chinese motifs like dragons, phoenixes, or lotuses, and English names derived from Cantonese romanisation. These represent the stylistic tendencies established during the early Chinese migration and the 1950s–60s Hong Kong migration wave. The visual language of this period is highly homogeneous, reflecting an effort to cater to Western tastes and the Western "Oriental imagination."

- **Middle section:**
  This part presents **cropped images of restaurant names** that reference Chinese regions or dishes (e.g., *Hotpot*, noodles), or use Mandarin pinyin in their English names. These reflect the arrival of mainland Chinese immigrants after the 1980s and the pursuit of *authenticity* — an attempt to challenge the previously reductive image of "Chinese restaurants" through regional and stylistic diversity.

- **Bottom section:**
  This part includes **images of restaurant names** that do not explicitly signify "Chineseness" or "authenticity." They represent more individualised, brand-oriented naming practices that emerged after the 2010s, following the rise of a new generation of Chinese students as a major demographic within the UK Chinese community. Because this group is smaller in number, I have preserved the thinner volume of this section to reflect its proportion in reality.

The subsequent booklets will follow the same format to explore how other visual dimensions — interior design, food presentation, and menu layout — have transformed alongside changes in migration patterns.

Reference: Typography as Racialisation – Chris Lee
1882–1982–2019 is a set of three "Chop Suey" typefaces, each with a different weight, designed by American graphic designer Chris Lee. Each weight represents a key historical moment in the racialisation of Chinese identity in the United States. The project is presented as a type specimen book.

The 1882 weight was developed from visual materials such as political cartoons and commercial advertisements that depicted anti-Chinese sentiment in California, referencing the year when the Chinese Exclusion Act was passed.

The 1982 weight attempts to rationalise these irregular brush-like forms, corresponding to the period when Asian Americans began organising politically and asserting visibility.

The 2019 weight was generated by AI, using the prompt "futuristic Chinatown scene", reflecting the resurgence of anti-Chinese attitudes during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Antithesis and Parallels
Both Lee's work and my project investigate the historical representations of Chinese diasporic identity in Western contexts.

While Lee's focus lies in the American visual system that racialises Chinese labour, my research examines how the imagery of Chinese restaurants in Britain reflects shifting cultural strategies across migration waves — from early assimilation under "othering," to later assertions of regional authenticity, and finally toward plural and self-defined identities today.

Methodologically, Lee's project is based on re-making — reconstructing historical images through the medium of typography.

My approach, by contrast, is based on collecting and classifying — photographing and arranging existing visual materials derived from lived experience and field observation.

Lee's outcome, the type specimen, narrates history through a single visual medium.

My outcome, a typological visual catalogue, uses juxtaposition and repetition of images to make visible the temporal shifts and ideological traces embedded within everyday visual design.

Reflection
At first, my project was quite broad, mainly focused on cataloguing the visual representations of Chineseness in the UK. However, after analysing 1882–1982–2019, I realised that studying "cultural representation" does not need to be comprehensive. Focusing on one specific medium can sometimes lead to sharper criticism. Lee's use of typography as a single, precise entry point made me question whether my catalogue was showing more than it was arguing. I began to see the catalogue not as an end, but as a research tool that helps me identify more focused and critical directions.

Lee's work also made me understand that design research does not always mean creating something entirely new. Acts of reconstruction, reinterpretation, or transformation can themselves challenge dominant aesthetics and power structures. He did not create new aesthetics but used an existing style to uncover the ideological framework of design history.

New Questions
Alongside the making of my catalogue, I began a series of small-scale experiments.

The first was remaking the bilingual street signs in London's Chinatown. I replaced the English names that were originally transliterated from Cantonese pronunciation with new versions based on Mandarin pinyin. This act raised a new question: Whose "China" does Chinatown represent? Does my work seek to explore a multiplicity of coexisting "Chineses," or does it inevitably speak from the perspective of a particular diasporic identity?

The second experiment involved reimagining contemporary, brand-oriented Chinese shops by restoring their current naming and visual styles into earlier, stereotyped aesthetics. This helped me reflect on a further question: When the traditional and stereotypical visual languages of "Chineseness" are deliberately abandoned, can "Chineseness" still be communicated—and if so, through what new visual mechanisms or cultural codes?

Together, these experiments began to shift my project from cataloguing representation toward interrogating how representation itself is produced, translated, and reimagined—a direction I intend to continue exploring in the next stage of my research.
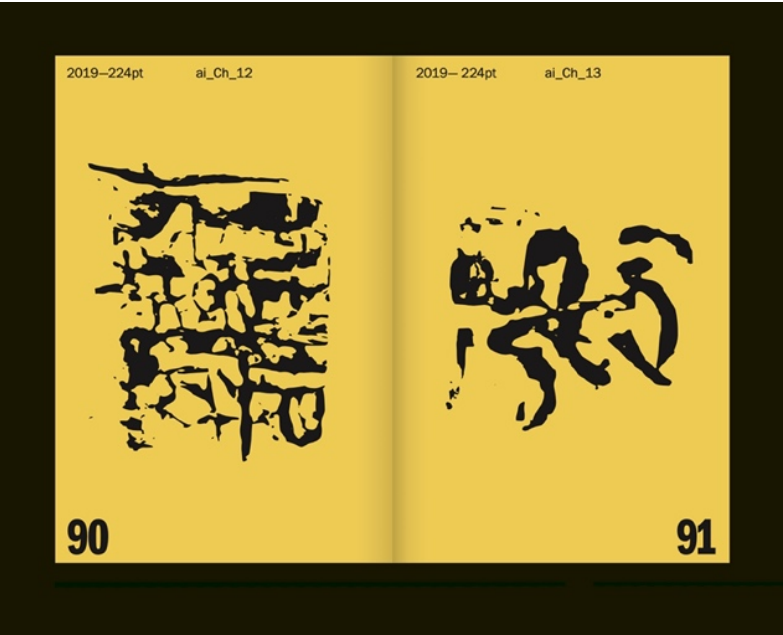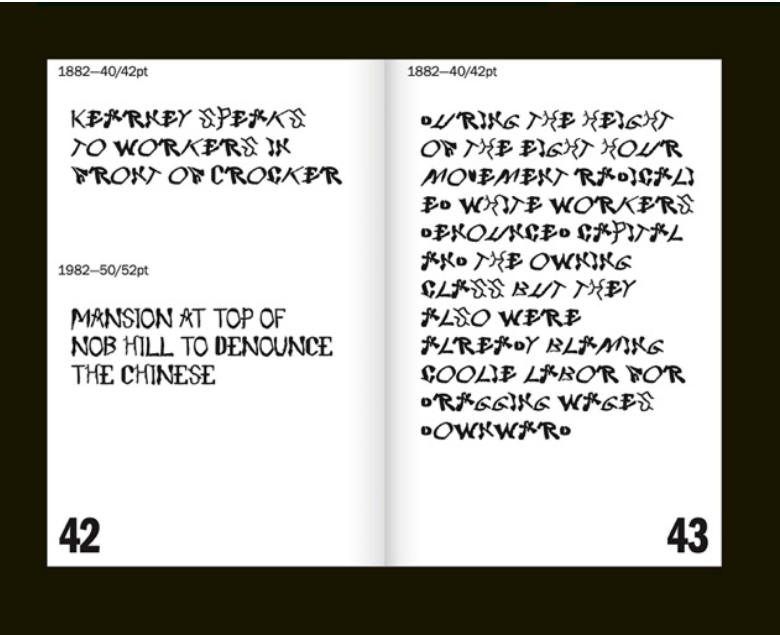

Studio work

Typographics (2024) Chris Lee. [online] Available at: https://2024.typographics.com/conference/chris-lee (Accessed: 2 October 2025).

"Chop Suey" is a Latin-script typeface whose letterforms morphologically imitate East Asian brushstrokes. It originated amid the anti-Chinese animus of the mid-to-late 19th century in the United States, particularly on the West Coast in California.

Other reference:

Roberts, J.A.G. (2002) *China to Chinatown: Chinese Food in the West*. London: Reaktion Books.

Kuhn, P.A. (2016) *Chinese Among Others: Emigration in Modern Times*. Chinese simplified translation. Nanjing: Jiangsu People's Publishing House.