

**Report on the Consultation about
proposals for a Chinese
Community Centre on Donegall
Pass, Belfast**

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Executive Summary

In late 2003 the Chinese Welfare Association identified premises on Donegall Pass as a possible site for a Chinese community and resource centre. However, opposition to the proposal was voiced by some residents in Donegall Pass.

Belfast City Council agreed to co-ordinate a consultation process to allow CWA to explain their plans for a resource centre on Donegall Pass and to listen to questions and comments from residents of Donegall Pass. The consultation process took place between 1st and 8th June 2004.

The consultation indicated widespread opposition to the proposals for a Chinese community centre on Donegall Pass among the local white residential community. The views of residents can be summarised in the following four themes:

1. **Development:** Donegall Pass has been subjected to extensive free-market development over recent years, with few planning controls and little consideration for the needs of residents. This has led to major problems with parking, traffic, house prices and diminishing resources for the local community. The proposed centre is simply another example of unwanted development in the area.
2. **Resources:** The residents fought for thirty years for a community centre in the area, this provides resources for all local people. The Community Forum also provides services for the local community. Another similar project will only be in competition for resources with the existing projects.
3. **Relationships:** Relations between the local white community and Chinese residents are generally good. The local Chinese community share the existing community centre and attend classes and courses run locally. A Chinese Community Centre would lead to greater levels of segregation rather than promote higher levels of integration.
4. **Identity:** Donegall Pass is a Protestant community, which is proud of its history and culture. The local white community do not want the area to become Belfast's Chinatown.

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The small number of local political representatives who participated in the consultation largely reiterated the view expressed by residents, while local religious leaders did not make any contribution to the debate.

The local business community was represented by one individual. He expressed concerns about parking, but otherwise wished the CWA well with their proposals.

The local Chinese community expressed a strong desire for a Chinese community centre and felt that the site on Donegall Pass would make an ideal location.

The findings do not perhaps reveal anything new. They do however reveal the poor relationships between the local white residential community of Donegall Pass and the Chinese community and illustrate the lack of any effective forum or appropriate mechanism for a building understanding and discussing issues of concerns between the two sections of the local community.

CWA can either acknowledge the concerns and to try to address them while pursuing the plans for a community centre or abandon plans for a centre on Donegall Pass.

Regardless of which option is chosen there is a need to build better relationships between the white residential community and the Chinese community. Both communities should acknowledge the need to work together on this process.

There is also a responsibility on local political, community and religious leaders to take a positive role in supporting and facilitating a constructive dialogue, and on Belfast City Council to support the process.

There is also a clear need for dialogue to begin as soon as possible in order that it might contribute to an effective and agreed solution to the acknowledged need for a Chinese community centre to service the Chinese community in Northern Ireland.

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Background

1. The Chinese community have been established in Northern Ireland for over thirty years. They are represented by two main organisations, the Chinese Welfare Association and the Chinese Chamber of Commerce. Both organisations are based in South Belfast and many members of the community also live in South Belfast. The Chinese community has also had a significant presence in the Donegall Pass area for many years.
2. The Chinese Welfare Association have been searching for an appropriate and affordable location for a community and resource centre to service the Chinese community in Northern Ireland for several years. In late 2003 they identified premises on Donegall Pass as a possible site for their centre and secured some of the funding they needed. The CWA hope to purchase the property and renovate it to provide a hall, a range of meeting rooms, a library and offices for CWA staff.
3. Through ongoing contacts between representatives of the CWA and the Donegall Pass Community Forum it became clear that there were some concerns among some residents of the Donegall Pass area about the proposal. These concerns were aired at a public meeting at the Donegall Pass Community Centre on 1 March 2004. Those attending the meeting voiced general hostility to the proposals for a centre. But they also raised issues about general relationships between the local white community and the Chinese community.
4. The CWA responded in writing to the issues that had been raised and, following this discussions were held between representatives of the Community Forum and the CWA. It was agreed that there should be a broad and open consultation of the views of residents and the business community in Donegall Pass with regard to the proposals for a Chinese Community Centre.
5. Belfast City Council agreed to co-ordinate the consultation. A steering group was convened comprising representatives of Belfast City Council, Donegall Pass

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Community Forum and the Chinese Welfare Association. It was agreed to organise three open sessions for residents and three separate sessions for the business community, local politicians and church leaders and for Chinese residents and business community.

6. The aims of the consultation process were agreed to be as follows:
 - To allow CWA to explain their plans for a resource centre on Donegall Pass;
 - To listen to questions and comments from residents of Donegall Pass;
 - To allow CWA to respond to questions and comments.

7. It was agreed that each session would begin with an introductory presentation from the CWA and this would be followed with an opportunity for questions from the audience. Three main questions were agreed by the steering group and these were to be highlighted at the beginning of each session. The three questions were:
 - What benefits do think the resource centre could bring to Donegall Pass?
 - What concerns do residents have about the plans for a resource centre on Donegall Pass?
 - How can any concerns be addressed and who can help to address any concerns?

8. The steering group asked Gerry Doherty of South Belfast Partnership Board to chair the open sessions and employed Neil Jarman from the Institute for Conflict Research to facilitate the process and prepare a brief report reviewing the main issues raised during the various sessions. Funding for the consultation process was provided by Belfast City Council and the Community Relations Council.

9. Belfast City Council agreed to send a letter to all residents advising them of the consultation process and the dates of the three open meetings. They sent separate invitations to the local business community, to all local councillors and religious leaders.

Consultation Process

10. The consultation process took place between 1st and 8th June 2004. It included open sessions for residents of Donegall Pass on 1st June in the morning, and on 2nd and 7th June in the evening, a session for local politicians and church leaders on the morning of 2nd June, one for the local business community on the morning of 3rd June and a session for Chinese residents and members of the Chinese business community on 8th June in the morning. The two evening open sessions were held in the School of Music, while the other four sessions were held in Donegall Pass Community Centre.
11. The three open sessions were each chaired by a representative of South Belfast Partnership Board. The first two were chaired by Gerry Doherty, the third by Lee Reynolds, the other three sessions were introduced by Anna Lo, other representatives of the CWA also attended each session. Notes were taken at all sessions by Neil Jarman.
12. The consultation sessions were not particularly well attended. All sessions were attended by representatives of Belfast City Council, the Donegal Pass Community Forum and the Chinese Welfare Association. Apart from these, the first open session was attended by 4 local residents, the second attracted 19 residents and the third attracted 13 residents. The session for politicians and church leaders attracted one individual (the same individual plus a second politician and a church leader attended the final open session) as did the session for the business community. The session for Chinese residents attracted 7 individuals.

Views of Donegall Pass Residents

13. The views expressed by residents of Donegall Pass can be grouped into four main themes: development, resources, relationships and identity. Briefly the issues raised under each of these heading can be summarised as follows:

- **Development:** Donegall Pass has been subjected to extensive free-market development over recent years, with few planning controls and little consideration for the needs of residents. This has led to major problems with parking, traffic, house prices and diminishing resources for the local community. The proposed centre is simply another example of unwanted development in the area.
- **Resources:** The residents fought for thirty years for a community centre in the area, this provides resources for all local people. The Community Forum also provides services for the local community. Another similar project will only be in competition for resources with the existing projects.
- **Relationships:** Relations between the local white community and Chinese residents are generally good. The local Chinese community share the existing community centre and attend classes and courses run locally. A Chinese Community Centre would lead to greater levels of segregation rather than promote higher levels of integration.
- **Identity:** Donegall Pass is a Protestant community, which is proud of its history and culture. The local white community do not want the area to become Belfast's Chinatown.

14. In general local residents were hostile to the proposals for a Chinese community centre and were reluctant to see any benefits that such a development might bring to the area. These main themes are explored in the sections below.

15. Most of the discussions took place in a frank and open manner, however at times some of the comments became more clearly hostile to the proposals, and to the

operations of some Chinese businesses in Donegall Pass. Some of these comments were perceived as racist by representatives of the Chinese Welfare Association.

Development Issues

16. The consultation meetings raised a number of concerns that the proposed community centre might have on parking and traffic flow in the Donegall Pass area. This issue occupied considerable time at the first open session and was revisited on occasions thereafter. Numerous people noted that there had been extensive redevelopment in the area over recent years and this has had a negative impact on the quality of live for people living in the Pass.
17. Parking was cited as particular problem, which had become worse in recent years due to the redevelopment of the Gasworks site. It was claimed that many people who work in the Gasworks park their cars in the Pass because of lack of parking facilities near to their work. This problem was particularly bad in the area where the CWA proposed to develop its centre.
18. Parking problems in the vicinity of the Session Music premises were compounded by customers visiting the Water Margin restaurant next door, and the bookmakers opposite. It was noted that the owners of the Water Margin had initially leased off-street parking, but they had stopped doing so because customers did not use the available spaces.
19. A number of residents complained that parking was a general problem throughout the area and that people parked on double yellow lines, on corners and on the pavement and with little consideration for pedestrians. This often caused great inconvenience and danger to people with young children.
20. A CWA representative noted the concerns and said that the CWA had similar parking problems in their current premises and few of their staff drove to work.

The CWA were currently exploring options for providing off-street parking for staff and visitors to the centre.

21. It was argued that whatever might be done there would never be enough parking spaces available because there was no attempt to restrict commercial development in what was supposed to be a residential area. It was also noted that residents had raised this issue during consultation over the Gasworks development and with planners more generally, but despite proposals for a residents parking scheme nothing had yet materialised.
22. As well as the parking problems people expressed concerns about the increased level of traffic that would occur as a result of people 'picking up and dropping off' at the proposed centre. A number of people made the point that there was already a high level of traffic on Donegall Pass as a result of the growing number of businesses that had located in the area.
23. These specific concerns about parking and traffic flow were part of a wider concern that residents had about the changes that had been occurring in the area in recent years. It was felt that these changes were in large part due to physical location of Donegall Pass close to the city centre and they were detrimental to the local people and communities. People felt that there was no control exercised over redevelopment by planners and that developers were being encouraged to buy and build with little concern for the needs of the residential community.
24. Residents noted that over recent years the housing stock had declined, house prices had risen and that there were too few 3 and 4 bedroom houses for young families. The local school had been closed, there were few play areas and people felt they were being forced to move elsewhere if they wanted accessible resources for their children. A number of these issues had been raised previously in a survey of housing needs carried out by Queens University and Donegall Pass Community Forum in late 2003.

25. It was stated that the area had been ever more compressed and boxed in - by the zoning of potential housing land adjacent to Ormeau Avenue for an inner ring road, by the redevelopment of public housing in the Salisbury Street area as private housing, while elsewhere space had also been taken by the Fire Station. Residents were also suspicious of the Housing Executive's intentions for the Posnett Street site, which they felt was likely to end up as expensive flats similar to the Whitehall Square development, rather than family housing.
26. People also cited the changing nature of shops and businesses on Donegall Pass, many of which did not service the immediate community but rather brought people in from outside, as further evidence of unrestrained development. These developments were turning a residential area into a commercial area.
27. References were made to the increasing number of restaurants and fast food outlets on the Pass and which attracted people into the area after the bars on Botanic Avenue and Bradbury Place closed and often late into the night. This trade only caused more disruption and disturbance to residents.
28. Although it was acknowledged that the redevelopment of the area was nothing to do with the proposals set out by the CWA, it was stated that the plans for a Chinese community centre were simply another example of the changes that were occurring to the area. Residents felt powerless in response to these changes as their voices and they felt that their concerns were not heard or taken into consideration.
29. The overall assessment was that there was an unofficial wish on behalf of 'planners' to encourage the gentrification of the area. It was felt that allowing the market to determine the form and level of development would force residents, especially those with young families, to move elsewhere and that this was the undeclared aim of the City Council. Residents also said that they were not the only community in South Belfast in this position, but believed that the communities in

Sandy Row, the Village, lower Lisburn Road and Annadale were in a similar position to themselves.

Resources

30. Many people questioned whether there was a need for a Chinese community centre in Donegall Pass at all as there was already a community centre serving the local resident son the area. People noted that the existing centre was well used by the Chinese community, who held a luncheon club on the premises and the centre also held English language classes, which were attended by Chinese people. Others noted that members of the Chinese community attended courses and classes run through the Donegall Pass Community Forum.
31. A number of people said that they valued the current sharing of resources and they questioned whether any new centre would only lead to greater levels of segregation rather than more integration. Some said that there was a need for greater levels of contact between the Chinese and white community rather than less.
32. It was also noted that resources for community projects were always finite and currently funding for the Community Forum was under threat. Some people questioned whether the development of a Chinese community centre would lead to greater competition for certain sources of funding if two groups were aiming to provide the same resources in the same area. Concern was also raised that in a competition for resources a regional centre, such as proposed by CWA, would be more likely to be able to attract funding than would a local community centre.
33. A CWA representative said that while the Chinese community welcomed being able to use the existing resources, they had demands that currently could not be met. However, it was noted that the community centre was very busy and that at present resources for the Chinese community were located in numerous centres

across South Belfast. In particular, there was a need to provide resources for both the young and the elderly within the Chinese community.

34. The plans for a Chinese Community Centre would allow a broad range of activities to take place under one roof, would allow for some activities to take place more regularly and would give people a sense of ownership over the space they used. The CWA hoped to be able to offer classes, course and activities, which would be attractive and interesting to other local residents and which would encourage the building of relationships.
35. The CWA also noted that many other minority ethnic communities had their own community centres in Belfast and that the residents of Donegall Pass had also fought for their own centre rather than share the centre in Sandy Row. In this the Chinese community were no different from these other communities and their needs could be best served by having a centre of their own, while the presence of a Chinese community centre would provide a base for building stronger relationships with the communities in South Belfast.

Relationships

36. A number of people made the point that relationships between Chinese people resident in Donegall Pass and the local white residents were generally very good. They also said that they were pleased that the Chinese community used the community centre and took part in other activities in the wider community.
37. However, there were also comments that the Chinese community did not mix as much as would be liked. Some people noted that language was a significant barrier, and that many of the Chinese community either did not speak English or chose not to speak English. Others noted that many members of the Chinese community kept to themselves and socialised with other Chinese people.

38. Several people commented that the presence of a Chinese community centre on Donegall Pass would not lead to more integration but rather it would lead to greater levels of segregation, as activities for the Chinese residents would take place in the Chinese community centre where they now take place in venues that are used by all sections of the community.
39. The CWA explained that many Chinese people living in Northern Ireland had low levels of formal education, which could make it difficult for them to begin to learn another language, especially in adult life. It was also noted that many people worked in the catering trade, which involved long hours and working with other Chinese people, which further reduced opportunities to learn English.
40. The CWA also noted that the Chinese community centre would increase the capacity to teach and encourage people to learn English and this would be particularly important for children who often struggle in a second language when they begin primary school. The after-school club is another important means of ensuring that young Chinese both learn English and keep up with their education.
41. The CWA also insisted that they did not want to encourage more segregation, but rather aimed to develop a range of activities, such as cooking, language and martial arts classes, that they hoped would be appealing to the wider local community. The CWA wanted to encourage people to attend the various Chinese festival events that they held locally.
42. A number of people used the consultation process to raise wider issues about the problems they were currently experiencing with some of the Chinese businesses in the area. Problems of parking and access were cited, in particular in relation to the Water Margin and Lee's Foods supermarket and wholesalers, both of which are at the Ormeau Road end of the Pass. Others complained about the late opening hours of the one particular restaurant (Dragon Rendezvous) and the disruption that this caused to people living in adjacent properties.

43. The CWA replied that they could not be held responsible for the activities of Chinese businesses in the area, but they acknowledged the concerns that were being raised. The CWA said they would be willing to raise the issues with the relevant people or to help organise a meeting between the Community Forum and local Chinese businesses.

Identity

44. A number of people made points related to the impact that a wide range of changes were having on the social identity of the Donegall Pass area. One person said that 'the Pass used to be known as God's little acre, we now feel its becoming the Belfast Chinatown'. As an extension to this, some people stated that they believe the City Council and other statutory bodies wanted to encourage the development of a 'Chinatown' area in the city, but local residents did not want this to happen.

45. While there was general acknowledgement that the Chinese community were not responsible for all the changes that had occurred, the visible presence of Chinese businesses was highlighted as one clear indication of the changes that were taking place in the area. People variously cited the wider range of Chinese owned businesses and businesses that served the Chinese community as evidence of the changing identity of the Pass.

46. It was argued that situating a centre to service the needs of the entire Chinese community of Northern Ireland in a small already pressured community would only lead to increased tensions between the two communities.

47. It was claimed that the identity of Donegall Pass as a Protestant, unionist, loyalist community had already become diluted, as an example it was stated that they were no longer able to erect an Orange Arch in the area. Furthermore, while the Chinese community organised festivals in the area, it was claimed that they did not participate in local events, such as the Twelfth celebrations. It was also

claimed that the City Council would rather see a Chinese Arch in the area than an Orange Arch.

48. A small number of comments were extremely hostile to the potential presence of the Chinese community centre. It was claimed that this would only lead to greater problems due to an increased number of Chinese people in the Donegall Pass area. The final open consultation session in particular generated a number of hostile and aggressive comments objecting to the CWA proposals.
49. During the final session it was stated on a number of occasions that 'Donegall Pass has enough problems already' and the presence of a Chinese community centre would only exacerbate these. It was claimed that the Chinese community had been buying up all available properties in the area, and a growing Chinese presence would lead to an increase in crime, because of the presence of 'Triads', and that people in the area were 'fed up' being asked to think about the needs of the Chinese community.
50. It was also stated that residents had already expressed their opposition to the proposed centre and that was why few people had participated in the consultation process. It was also claimed that if the CWA proposal did go ahead it was likely that local people would come out on to the streets to protest against it.

Views of Local Politicians

51. The two politicians who attended the consultation process largely re-iterated the concerns expressed by Donegall Pass residents about traffic, parking, widespread re-development, lack of family housing, and the blighting of land for an inner ring road. It was stated that these factors all impacted upon the local community and led to a feeling of being under siege.
52. Questions were posed about the benefits that a Chinese community centre would bring to the residents and community in Donegall Pass as none of the recent developments had addressed the needs of the local community. It was felt that there was a need for investment that would benefit the wider local community but that this was not being done at present and would only happen if there was a clear directive from the Council or from government.
53. It was also claimed that Donegall Pass was an interface community, and there were existing recurrent problems and underlying tensions between the area and the neighbouring lower Ormeau Road and McClure Street. The final open session was in fact disrupted when two petrol bombs were thrown at a house in the Vernon Street area by someone in the nearby McClure Street area.
54. There was acknowledgement of the needs of the Chinese community to have a centre, but it was questioned whether Donegall Pass was the best place to site such a project. The CWA were asked whether there were not other sites in the area, or in other parts of Belfast that would not be a better option for the centre.
55. CWA reiterated that they had worked closely with many local groups over the years, that the Chinese community were a long established and integral part of the wider community in South Belfast and that the CWA felt that the community centre would readily contribute to the wider needs of the local communities.

56. It was also noted that the CWA had been looking for a suitable site for a centre for many years, that they had already lost out on attempts to secure three other sites and the other available properties in South Belfast were either too large or too expensive.

Views of the Business Community

57. The consultation session with the business community was attended by one individual, whose office was close to the Session Music premises. In general the individual welcomed the idea of having the CWA take over the building and hoped that there might be commercial benefits for his business if they did. He noted that a bookmaker had recently opened opposite his offices and was doing a good trade, some of which was from the local Chinese community.
58. His only concern was in relation to parking. He noted that parking was already difficult in the area. Even though there had been ten designated parking spots, he could rarely park outside his own office and many people already parked illegally in that area. The high levels of parking often made it difficult for larger vehicles to access his premises, but he felt that this was something he had to live with. He noted that access to his offices in Dublin was far worse. He felt that parking was an issue that was going to get worse and needed to be addressed as a general concern. But he had no suggestion as to how this might be done.

Views of the Chinese Community

59. Most of the members of the Chinese community who attended the consultation were elderly. Three lived in the Donegall Pass area and two others had lived in or near the area in the past. All attended the luncheon club at the Community Centre. Two members of the Chinese Chamber of Commerce also attended.
60. There are an estimated 23 Chinese households in the Donegall Pass area and a further ten elderly people living in sheltered accommodation. They stated that relations with the white community were generally very good and said that they had never had any problems from people in the area.
61. There was a general consensus that there was a real need for a community centre serving the Chinese community and that having it situated on Donegall Pass would be ideal for those living in the area. There was a need to provide a variety of forms of support to the community and there was a value in being able to access this on a regular basis. The luncheon club was only available one day a week and it was difficult for elderly people to walk to the CWA premises in University Street.
62. Whilst it was acknowledged that having their own centre would reduce the level of contact with the wider community through use of the Community Centre, it was stated that there was a great need for resources specifically orientated to the Chinese residents. A number of people spoke of the isolation they felt, the amount of time they had on their hands and the difficulty they had in meeting with friends and other members of the Chinese community. One man spoke of a simple desire to have a space where he could spend time with friends.
63. The representatives of the Chinese Chamber of Commerce said that there was a clear need for a Chinese community centre and Donegall Pass was very convenient for members of the Chinese community as many of them lived in or

near South Belfast. One person noted that the CWA and CCC had been looking for a site for 5-6 years and that this was the fourth building or site they had bid for. In each case people had accepted the desire of the Chinese community for a community centre but had opposed locating the centre in 'their' area. He asked 'where should we go?'

64. Two of the elderly members of the community noted that they had lived in Scotland in the past and there the Chinese community was well resourced and serviced in comparison with Belfast. They felt that although the Chinese community contributed to the local economy in Northern Ireland, they got very little in return.

Review

65. The consultation process indicated that there is widespread opposition to the proposals for a Chinese community centre on Donegall Pass among the local white residential community. The proposals were seen as simply another example of a development that would increase pressures on the local area without providing any clear benefits. It was also felt that the proposal would potentially threaten existing community resources in the area, would create pressure on existing relationships between the Chinese and white communities, and would undermine the identity of Donegall Pass as a Protestant community.
66. Local politicians tended to reiterate the view expressed by residents.
67. The local religious leaders did not make any contribution to the debate.
68. The local business community was represented by one individual. He expressed concerns about parking, but otherwise wished the CWA well with their proposals.
69. The local Chinese community expressed a strong desire for a Chinese community centre and felt that the site on Donegall Pass would make an ideal location.

Next Steps

70. The consultation aimed to inform all parties involved in the process, Donegall Pass Community Forum, Chinese Welfare Association and Belfast City Council, of the feelings of the different sections of the broad Donegall Pass community. The structuring of the process implicitly acknowledged that Donegall Pass is a broad and diverse community and one that includes both residential and business interests and two distinct residential groups, the larger white Protestant community and the smaller Chinese community.
71. The consultation revealed contrasting views among those consulted. There was strong support for the proposals for a Chinese community centre among the local Chinese residential and business community; warm support from a representative of the local business community and strong opposition from the local white residential community.
72. The findings do not perhaps reveal anything new. The comments made by those local residents who oppose the centre were broadly similar to those made in earlier meetings to discuss this issue. They do however indicate something of the nature of the relationships between the local white residential community of Donegall Pass and the Chinese community. In many ways the consultation was used as an opportunity to voice concerns about the relationship between local white residents and the wider Chinese community as much as it addressed the specific proposal of a Chinese centre. However, it should be noted that most hostility was voiced towards sections of the Chinese business community rather than to the Chinese residential community.
73. Nevertheless, the issues raised in the consultation process illustrated the current lack of any effective forum or appropriate mechanism for building understanding and discussing issues of concerns between the various sections of the local community.

74. There are two basic options for the Chinese Welfare Association with regard to their proposal. One is to acknowledge the concerns that were raised and to try to address them while pursuing the plans for a community centre. The second is to acknowledge the opposition that exists and abandon their plans for a centre on Donegall Pass.
75. Regardless of which of these two options the CWA choose, there is a clear need to begin to build better relationships and greater understanding between the white residential community and the Chinese community. This should not be viewed as primarily or principally the responsibility of one community over the other, rather both should acknowledge the need to work together on what will necessarily be a sustained, and at times difficult, process.
76. There is a responsibility on each of the two main representative organisations, Donegall Pass Community Forum and the Chinese Welfare Association to initiate and sustain such a process. But there is also a responsibility on local political, community and religious leaders to take a positive role in supporting and facilitating a constructive dialogue, and on Belfast City Council to continue to support the process that they have initiated with the consultation.
77. There is also a clear need for such a dialogue to begin as soon as possible in order that it might contribute to an effective and agreed solution to the clear and accepted need for a Chinese community centre to service the wider Chinese community in Northern Ireland.