

# Te Papa Tongarewa exhibition to tell story of Chinese Migrants

Contributed by Lachlan  
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Te Papa Tongarewa exhibition to tell story of Chinese migrants in New Zealand

Te Papa Tongarewa, the Museum of New Zealand being built on the Wellington waterfront will be opened in February 1998. One of the major exhibit themes being developed at present is The Peopling of New Zealand to tell the story of human occupation of these islands. Pride of place will go to the story of Maori migration and European colonisation; however there is to be an area devoted to telling the story of Chinese migration. This will be in the form of a "temporary" exhibition which will be on display for one year. At the end of that period, it is proposed that the display will tour the country, and perhaps be set up in each of the other main centres. It will be replaced by a display telling the story of another ethnic group. The Chinese exhibit will be the first of these "temporary" displays and will open on the same day as the main Museum. This is a significant honour and recognises the importance of the Chinese as a migrant group.

The planning for the Museum project is a major undertaking, and many, many people from the Government, the Museum of New Zealand as well as the Museum's consultant team are involved. However from this large group about six professional historians and Museum staff have had a direct input into the Chinese exhibition. The people involved are Jock Phillips, Lyndon Fraser, Michael Fitzgerald, Fiona Hall, Jane Martin and Sharon Jansen.

Other people, Chinese and non-Chinese, from around NZ, including Manying Ip, James Ng and Nigel Murphy have contributed their knowledge, research data, information sources and contacts to the Chinese exhibition. In addition, a group of Chinese in Wellington have met regularly with the professional Museum staff to help plan the exhibition and to provide community and cultural input. This groups includes: Kirsten Wong, David Fung, Lynette Shum, Chris Cheng, Esther Fung and Steven Young.

Museum staff have travelled widely throughout NZ to interview individuals and family groups, to gather stories, documents, photographs, mementos, artefacts and other exhibit items. They have visited historic sites, streets and buildings and developed an overall sense of the history of the Chinese in NZ.

In the end a chronological approach has been inevitable; accordingly the exhibit will tell the story of the five phases in the story of Chinese migration to NZ. They are:

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First migration - the gold mining days: The Chinese men who came expected to stay only for a limited time and worked under physically harsh conditions. Their families and their hearts and minds stayed in China.

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Urban settlement and racial discrimination: The Chinese were blatantly discriminated against officially and socially; this was the era of the poll tax and the reading test; families were separated for half a lifetime. Many Chinese worked at low-grade physical labour and as some sort of defence lived in ghettos.

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The war years and the beginning of family life: The Chinese were recognised as brave allies against the

Japanese; limited family reunifications was allowed. Women and children humanised the existence of the Chinese in NZ. The Chinese started to regard NZ as a permanent home.

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The post war years - assimilation and loss of culture: Further family re-unification was allowed after the Communist takeover of mainland China. Immigration was still largely restricted to family reunification grounds; children gained a western style education, lost most of their culture and became assimilated. Chinese were more accepted into NZ society and moved into the professions.

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New migration - diversity: Chinese migration was allowed (and even encouraged) by Government policy from China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore and Malaysia - many with good education and significant capital. The sudden influx creates alarm and resentment.

Within these broad parameters, it has been the task of the group to plan an exhibition which captures the essence of the sociological and political themes and human stories without turning the exhibition into a collection of mementos in glass boxes. The main constraints have been space (about 150 sq metres), accessibility (must be understood by groups of children of aged 12 passing through at walking pace) and robust enough to allow some touching and handling.

The sheer number and diversity of the stories, documents and mementos available has meant that, as a practical necessity, much of what is interesting and even important will have to be omitted - there is simply no room to show everything. It is the intention however to illustrate the threads of the most important historical themes and to capture the essence of the feelings of the times.

As part of the exhibition, there will be a book-quality catalogue published at the same time as the opening of the exhibition. This will contain colour photographs, commentaries, historical essays and stories of interesting Chinese people in NZ.

I have suggested to the Museum staff that this catalogue be further upgraded to a monograph to record even more fully the history of the Chinese in NZ.

The Chinese in NZ can support this project, firstly by encouraging particularly older members of the community to share their experiences, secondly by coming forward with leads which might allow significant documents or artefacts to be located to illustrate the general themes already identified, and thirdly by supporting the publication of a book.

Steven Young

The professional Museum staff involved include:

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Jock Phillips, PhD (Harvard) who is currently the Chief Historian at Historical Branch, Department of Internal

Affairs.

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Lyndon Fraser PhD (Canterbury), the concept developer, is a specialist in ethnic studies.

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Michael Fitzgerald MA (Massey) History Curator, has substantial Museum experience and expertise in NZ colonial history.

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Fiona Hall MA (Canterbury) History Curator, completed a postgraduate qualification in Museology and has strong research interests in aspects of NZ social history.

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Jane Martin, Interpreter, was formerly the Museum's Senior School's Education Officer. a primary school principal and Wellington Zoo Education Officer.

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Sharon Jansen, who brings a wide variety of skills to her role as exhibition designer.

Other researchers and historians who have contributed include:

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James Ng, physician and historian who researched and wrote three volumes on the history of Chinese in New Zealand.

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Manying Ip, senior lecturer in Chinese, Auckland University, a researcher and teacher of Chinese, commentator on Chinese affairs, and author of a book on Chinese women in New Zealand, who has coordinated

Museum staff access to sources in Auckland.

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Nigel Murphy, senior librarian at the Alexander Turnbull Library who has researched the history of the Chinese for more than 10 years, and an authority on published and archival documents relating to the Chinese in NZ.

The group of Wellington Chinese who have acted in an advisory role include:

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Kirsten Wong, former editor of the Wellington Chinese Association Newsletter, currently editor of Chinese Voice, a regular insert in Wellington's City Voice newspaper.

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David Fung, sometime secretary of the Wellington Chinese Association and founding editor of the Association's Newsletter.

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Lynette Shum, genealogist and family researcher, and leader of the Haining Street Oral History Project.

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Chris Cheng Yuk Lam, a newer immigrant formerly involved with Chinese Radio.

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Esther Fung, secretary of the NZ Chinese Association.

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Steven Young, past-President of the Wellington Chinese Association and a former member of the NZ Chinese Association committee.

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