

Esther Fung

Contributed by Lachlan
Sunday, 22 July 2007

ESTER FUNG PRESIDENT OF WELLINGTON CHINESE ASSOCIATION RESPONDS TO THE APOLOGY

Kia Ora tatou. Tena kotu, tena kotu katoa

Prime Minister, Rt Honourable Helen Clark, Minister of Ethnic Affairs - Hon. George Hawkins, Distinguished guests. I am speaking tonight as a descendant of several persons who had to pay the poll tax. As a Chinese New Zealander, I have much to be grateful to my ancestors for, - for their courage in coming to a strange faraway land, for their carrying of the huge financial debt burden as a result of paying the poll tax and for their steadfastness in working very hard to succeed in an hostile environment.

I would like to share with you a couple of family stories. The Poll tax was imposed not just on Chinese persons coming from China, but on any person of Chinese ethnicity. My grandmother, Lily Googan as young girl of 17 years, came to New Zealand to be married. Lily did not come from China but from Sydney, Australia, where she was born. Having been born in a British country did not exempt her from the Poll Tax - she too paid 100 pounds and was fingerprinted, in the manner of a criminal.

Laundries, fruit shops and market gardens were the usual occupations for the Chinese in earlier times. Those of you who have visited the Chinese exhibit in Te papa will have seen some of the cartoons which illustrated the social attitudes of those times. My Grandfather had a fruit shop, and in the provincial towns many shopkeepers would go hawking to the country towns and villages. Apart from having to put up with taunts and insults, he on occasions when hawking his fruit and vegetables had to put a bucket over his head as protection against stone throwing.

We have come some way since those days, the Chinese community has prospered and contributed to the development of our country. We have worked hard and kept our heads down – we have been a model minority, compliant and silent. Silence came too with the loss of the mother tongue – Cantonese, the language of our forebears; although Mandarin is now included in the school curriculum. But as our children’s early teacher of Mandarin said "they (our sons) can learn Mandarin as a foreign language".

The silence is further echoed in the history of New Zealand. Little has been written of the Chinese in the general histories of this country. In the school curriculum the history of the Chinese in New Zealand is all but ignored. We do need to know more about how our country developed, about the Tangata whenua, about the Treaty of Waitangi and about Chinese New Zealanders who have been here since the 1840’s.

Prime Minister, I thank you for acknowledging the injustice of the poll tax and the other anti-Chinese laws and for your recognition of the contributions which the Chinese community have made to New Zealand. I hope that this evening marks the beginning of further dialogue between the community and government – and thank you for giving me this opportunity to speak as a direct descendant of 5 persons who paid the poll tax.

As this is the Chinese New Year, I wish everyone a Happy New Year of the Horse – Sun Nian Fie Lok, Gung Hei Fat Choi.