

David Fung explains the background

Contributed by Lachlan
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The Tragi-comedy of the NZ Chinese Poll-Tax Issue

Background to the NZ Government's Apology

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In the early 1990's many Chinese notably from Taiwan and Hong Kong immigrated to New Zealand and most settled in Auckland. This gave rise to a great deal of anti-Chinese feeling based on latent xenophobic sentiments. Such accusations as the Chinese were flaunting their wealth, driving their BMW's hazardously, talking in their own language too loudly and sticking with their own, abusing the social welfare system, plundering our coastal marine resources, taking jobs from New Zealanders, introducing vices and triads and not making contribution to the welfare and economy of this country, were made. These sentiments were also expressed by some local born Chinese as they felt that they had earned the acceptance and respect of the "white society" by hard work, keeping quiet and causing no trouble. Their self-perception of being model citizens was tarnished by the perceived bad behaviour of the new comers. Maori activists too joined in the chorus. For people who were familiar with the anti-Chinese prejudices in the 19th century which engendered much anti-Chinese legislation by New Zealand governments of the day, of which the most glaring institutionalized racism was the Poll-Tax levied on all Chinese entering New Zealand, the feeling of déjà vu of history was about to repeat itself over 100 years later was overwhelming.

It was against this background that the Wellington Chinese Association raised this issue at the 1991 AGM of the New Zealand Chinese Association. At the time opinion was divided whether we should stir up old trouble and so suffer a back-lash from the white people. No resolution was reached at the time but the Conference did approve further research into the subject. As a result of this the NZCA commissioned Nigel Murphy who at the time was involved in helping with research into a Chinese family's history to do this research. Through working in the Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington he had ready access to historical documents. In his research paper, Murphy (1994) compiled a list of all Chinese Poll-Tax payers extant in the National archive (excluding those documents destroyed in a fire in 1952) and calculated that a sum of over £300,000 sterling of Poll-Tax was paid by Chinese from 1882 to 1930.

In the meantime the Asian-Invasion article was written by the journalist Pat Booth in an Auckland newspaper, the rise of the Winston Peters phenomenon, the advent of MMP, that resulted in a coalition Government with Peters becoming Deputy Prime Minister. It was considered that the climate was not favourable to press the matter further. However, informal discussions with various MP's on the Poll-Tax paper which together with another commissioned paper by Murphy on anti-Chinese legislations (1996) were distributed to the politicians and various institutions, in order to enlighten them on the injustices done to the Chinese by New Zealand governments in the past. This was against a background of Waitangi settlements with Maori. Both Don McKinnon Minister in charge of Treaty Negotiations and the then Prime Minister, Jim Bolger did publicly declaring that the Government will acknowledge past injustices and to address the process of recompense and reconciliation.

At subsequent NZCA Annual General Meetings the Wellington Chinese Association kept the pressure up to take the matter further. Mai Chen, a constitutional lawyer, was asked informally to advise the NZCA. She was instrumental in discussing this subject with various Cabinet Ministers, government officials and the Executive Officers of NZCA over a period of several years. At the NZCA AGM in 1997 Chen addressed the delegates and set out various scenarios as to how the poll-tax matter could be further progressed.

The clamour against Chinese had gradually subsided as many of these earlier accusations were proven to be without substance, and that Chinese, old or new have contributed significantly to the well being of New Zealand. China and Taiwan were seen to be important trading partners. However it became clear that the majority of New Zealanders, including many politicians, crown law officers as well as our own Chinese people were ignorant of the past anti-Chinese history. Not surprisingly, in the major publications and the school curriculum on New Zealand history, the story of the Chinese was either completely ignored or dismissed in a few sentences. The exhibition on the Chinese in New Zealand in Te Papa (Feb 1998 to July 2000) was an eye opener to all who have seen it, even though it was severely restricted in space and in time.

The Wellington Chinese Association had continued to press for further action at the NZCA AGM's. Study groups were held and eventually a subcommittee was formed to look at developing strategies to take the matter further. In the meantime the Labour party won the 1999 election and became the major party in the Coalition Government with Alliance. The NZCA then made some informal and formal contact with George Hawkins, Minister of Ethnic Affairs in 2001. As a result of this, George Hawkins intimated late in the year that the Prime Minister, Helen Clark would make an announcement on 12 February 2002, being the Chinese New Year Day. The NZCA was asked to make a submission before Christmas 2001. The nature and substance of the Prime Minister's announcement was not revealed. Confidential and secretive communications flew between George Hawkins, the NZCA executives and the various local branches of NZCA more in boy-scout fashion than real cloak and dagger. However, the exhortation was that the Branch Associations should come up with an opinion on a submission drafted by the President of NZCA. Direction was also given for the Branches to hold meetings including the poll-tax payers' descendents, a task which was impractical as well as impossible given the time constraint.

It was inevitable that this secrecy was not waterproof. Other, non-NZCA organizations were not happy that the NZCA should make representation for all the poll-tax descendants, the majority of them were neither members of NZCA nor indeed of any other organizations. A letter from the dissenting organizations was sent to the Prime Minister to acquaint her with the fact that they considered the NZCA submission inappropriate. It was believed that the Prime Minister considered whether to continue to proceed with the announcement. It was then that a very capable person was asked to mediate between the different factions. It was to this intermediary's credit that a compromise was brokered, so that the Prime Minister would announce the Government's apology for the poll-tax and other injustices dealt to the Chinese in the past, and that the Government would continue to hold dialogue with the Poll-Tax payers' descendants, for the process of reconciliation. This was done on February 12, Chinese New Year's Day, thus saving many faces and providing a way to go forward!

The Government had taken the initiative from the New Zealand Chinese Association and ran with it. Whether this was a political opportunity seized or due to genuine remorse you may speculate on. The result, particularly the apology so easily given was applauded by all but a few red necks. Helen Clark did say (on advice from the Crown Law Office) that the Poll-Tax was "lawful" hence there would not be monetary recompense to the poll-tax payers' descendants. However, the injustice and inhumanity of the anti-Chinese legislations can not be dismissed by a mere apology.

The Government is now engaging a group of people to develop ways to forward the reconciliation process. One hopes that opportunity exists for every poll-tax payer's descendent to have a say in this matter. The process should be transparent and not be captured by any one or other organizations who do not represent all PTP descendants and should not have any mandate to speak on their behalf.

This takes us back to the original intention that if we do not learn from the past we are sure to repeat it, that the history of Chinese in New Zealand should be written, warts and all, to be included in school curriculum so that New Zealanders of Chinese, European descents, Maori and others should not forget that shameful chapter in the history of New Zealand.

Now that the dust has settled somewhat, it has to be acknowledged that credit should be given to the NZCA for considering the poll tax issue and to persist with it despite the mishandling and the inept way it had dealt with the Chinese community. Had the matter be left with the poll-tax payers' descendants or any other organization, it would have never seen the light of the day.

The 5th April being the 23rd day of the second month of the Chinese calendar is "Ch'ing-Ming". The Poll-Tax payers' descendants are now able to tell their ancestors that the New Zealand Government has apologised for the bad behaviour meted out to them, and that we can now raise our heads high to take our rightful place in New Zealand, and not to have put our head down waiting for patronizing approval from our white neighbours. If you feel that you have been deprived of your language and culture due to the belittling treatment your ancestors suffered, you may have a chance to have a say to government on how to address it. This may be the only chance you get. If you squander this opportunity, how will you face your ancestors, and more importantly, your children and those who are to come?

This whole saga has the dimensions of a tragi-comedy. There are many aspects that would make one cringe. The outcome, despite many unwholesome twists and turns is a happy one. The Chinese saying is "jeung cho jauh cho", and so all's well that ends well. Happy Ch'ing Ming .

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This article was written primarily to inform members of the Chinese community as to the background of the Poll-tax issue leading up to the Government's apology on the Chinese New Year Day. Permission is hereby given for the entire article to be copied, distributed, emailed to other members of the Chinese Community, to be printed or published in Chinese community newsletters. No parts or the whole article could be used or published by commercial press, newspapers or other media without written permission by the author, David Fung, P.O. Box 28064, Wellington.

David Fung is a neurologist in Wellington. In the mid-1980s David was instrumental in revitalising a moribund Wellington Chinese Association by recruiting younger and more active members into its Committee, and by publishing a regular, thought-provoking Newsletter (which later spun off Chinese Voice). As such he is the unwitting grandfather of this web site.