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THE CHINESE IN NEW ZEALAND SCHOOL ESSAY COMPETITION

In what ways was the experience of Chinese people in New Zealand different from the experience of other New Zealanders?

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During the period 1865-1965 the Chinese community in New Zealand experienced a great deal of hardship because of discrimination through both laws and attitudes, isolation from family and the rest of New Zealand society and inability to breach the language barrier. Throughout this period and in spite of these hurdles, the Chinese tried to both assimilate their own culture into New Zealand society and to adopt New Zealand culture as their own. Their experiences were in large part defined by the difficulties and prejudices they faced, which were considerably different to the experiences of other New Zealanders.

The Chinese originally came to New Zealand as part of the worldwide gold rush, where hopefuls flocked to the goldfields of California, Australia and New Zealand. They were mainly men who lived in and around Otago and who intended to return to their families in China with enough money to live comfortably. However many stayed and eventually brought their families, preferring even the prejudice and scorn of Pakeha society to overcrowded, poverty stricken China which was torn by civil war and flooding. Because of this influx, many New Zealanders feared that their country would be overrun by the Chinese and regarded them as 'the yellow peril'. Discrimination was rife and Chinese culture was looked down upon as inferior to British culture. In 1865, most New Zealanders would have identified themselves as British citizens. In 1920, Sidney Holland (who would later become a New Zealand Prime Minister) commented that "The highest civilisation that has so far appeared on the globe is the civilisation represented by the British race. For that reason everything should be done to fill the waste places of New Zealand and Australia with the descendants of the race that represents this aspect of civilisation." 1

In 1881, in response to fears that this 'superior race' of British citizens was under threat from Chinese immigration, a poll tax of £10 was introduced, which had been raised to £100 by 1896. The Immigrant Registration Act of 1899 introduced a literacy test also aimed at preventing the "Mongol hordes" from becoming New Zealand citizens. The declared intention of the Act was to keep out criminals, the insane, people with infectious diseases - and the Chinese. From 1908 all Chinese entering the country had to have their fingerprints taken and could no longer become naturalized citizens - they were 'aliens' and could not vote or receive old-age pensions.

These laws were merely the written actualisation of openly held prejudices within society. Economic pressures such as the Great Depression fuelled public resentment towards the Chinese, whom they thought would steal jobs away from Pakeha and who tended to spend their money on Chinese goods in Chinese shops. Prejudices were entrenched early, with the derogatory song "Ching Chong Chinaman" being a common playground taunt. For many Chinese, the attitudes of Pakeha New Zealanders and their obvious physical, lingual and cultural differences increased their feeling of isolation. A Wellington Chinese woman recalls, "All my life I felt like a minority. Even though I was born here, I had very few European friends. We kept very much to ourselves." 2

Family provided a support network for the Chinese. Unlike New Zealand nuclear families, Chinese families tended to be large and include extended family, many of whom helped run Chinese businesses such as fruit and grocery shops, laundromats and restaurants. The efforts of Chinese market gardeners in producing food for the war effort during WWII helped other New Zealanders to identify with the Chinese as New Zealand citizens. Over time harsh laws were relaxed - in 1944 the poll tax was repealed and in 1952 Chinese residents could become full New Zealand citizens - and after 1947 Chinese men were encouraged to bring over their families. New Zealanders became more accepting of the Chinese and both sides were able to gain valuable insight into each other's culture. By 1965, other New Zealanders were increasingly exploring aspects of Chinese culture such as food, festivals, medicine (such as acupuncture), language and religion. At the same time, many Chinese New Zealanders were trying to rediscover their identity. Janice Chin considers her "upbringing as a New Zealand-born Chinese as different from that of my peers; I hope that I am able to share in the best of what both cultures have to offer." 3

With the awakening of interest in Maori culture and acceptance of the need to atone for past grievances, such as the unjust taking of land, Pakeha have also begun to think about the grievances inflicted on the Chinese community and the valuable contribution they have made to our history and the development of our country's identity. This is evidenced by the formal apology given to the Chinese people by the New Zealand government in 2002 for past discriminatory statutes.

Many Chinese living in New Zealand now, are descendants from the first Chinese settlers and have lived their entire lives in New Zealand. Although racist attitudes and beliefs towards the Chinese still exist, the increased awareness of New Zealand as a multi-cultural society and of our important role in the South-east Asian region,

have contributed to our broader attitudes and exploration of our identity. Despite the vastly different experiences of the Chinese and other New Zealanders, these two strands of culture are becoming ever more closely interwoven - celebrating the differences while attempting to understand the other's point of view.