

Christopher Burns

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Differences between the experiences of Chinese in New Zealand 1865 – 1965 from other New Zealanders.

Since Chinese started arriving in New Zealand in 1865 their life and experiences have been very different to that of the other New Zealanders. They have been a small isolated group often picked on by larger, more powerful groups of European New Zealanders. Despite the fact that the Chinese always made up such an incredibly small percentage of the total population they were often treated as some kind of major threat. Over the 100 year period from 1865 – 1965 the Chinese were often made to feel they were in a country they should not be in and it was not till the end of this period that they were made to feel more welcome.

The first major group of Chinese to arrive in New Zealand were the gold miners who started arriving after the Dunedin council invited them in 1866. These people were mostly poor males from the Canton area their families would stay in China and they would be sojourners not settlers. The Anti-Chinese prejudices mostly started to come late in the 1870s. This was due to another influx, hard times and the Chinese people spreading further than Otago and taking on other jobs. The Chinese diggers way of life was very different to the rest of the diggers. Whenever there was a major new area discovered the Chinese would lag behind the main rush. The Chinese would sieve and resieve hoping to find gold the other diggers had missed. They were concerned with making a living not a fortune. The living conditions of the Chinese were very different to the others as well. Instead of using tents the Chinese would make caves and crags habitable and live in them. Eventually the racism held by the public went on to the government. Restrictions were put on the number of Chinese allowed on ships to New Zealand and a £100 poll tax was introduced to be paid upon entry. In 1920 the Immigration Restriction Amendment Act gave the government right to not let people in they did not want. This virtually stopped Chinese Immigration into New Zealand. But there were still a large number still in the country. In the 1920s after World War One racism towards Chinese was at its peak. Many returned servicemen were not happy to come back and find Asians in their country. ’We fought not for Chinese but for White New Zealand’ became the popular slogan of the RSA. Chinese where also accused of taking jobs away from the servicemen while they were out defending the country overseas. Over the 1920s theories of white supremacy were gaining popularity especially in former British colonies such as Australia, Canada and South Africa. In New Zealand Newspapers were full with articles on the ‘yellow peril’, however Chinese were so small and powerless they were hardly worth worrying about.

Some Maori were also concerned with their interaction with Chinese. A women named Dr Staler was worried Maori women would be exploited by working in Chinese market gardens economically and sexually she stated ‘Chinese associations are dangerous, morally, spiritually and physically.’ She also declare that ‘the Europeans are bound in every way to assist Maoris in overcoming the Asiatic evil.’ This lead to an investigation as to whether Chinese are any danger to the morality of Maori women. The whole episode would have been very embarrassing for the Chinese and remind them they were unprotected vulnerable in a White New Zealand.

The Chinese lived through many legislative discriminations other New Zealanders would not have to worry about. From 1908 to 1952 no Chinese could be naturalised, or become a permanent resident. Every Chinese lived on temporary permits they had to renew in periods of 6 months to 2 years. The Chinese would be living in a sense of insecurity knowing they could be expelled at any time. Also from 1901 to 1965 according to the Opium Prohibition Act police could enter any Chinese house without a search warrant.

Chinese children growing up would have experienced a very different home life then mainstream New Zealanders.

Many Chinese children would be raised in their parents workplace be it the fruit shop, market garden, the hand laundry or the Chinese store. These shops would not just be the family’s source of income but also the area which the family’s activities revolved around. Most Chinese families would get their children to work in the shops. Chinese jobs would be labour intensive with very long working hours. The advantage of these occupations is it meant the Chinese did not have to compete with the mainstream New Zealanders for employment. In the Children’s holidays they would have to stay and help look after the shop and study. Then when they returned to school explain to others why they could not go away on holiday like them.

Chinese in New Zealand were also affected by what was going on back at home. In 1937 war broke out between Japan and China. Chinese New Zealanders answered the call for help from the motherland. New Zealand Chinese donated £174, 149 to China. With New Zealand away in Europe helping Britain fight Germany New Zealanders became more sympathetic to Chinese and started accepting refugees. When the war finished in 1945 the refugee women and children had become well accepted into New Zealand society and treatment to Chinese started to improve. In 1947 Peter Fraser’s Labour Government gave permanent residence to; wives and children who came as war refugees, children born of those women in New Zealand and students and temporary residents who had been in the country more than 5 years. However government would encourage travel agents not to book travellers who would be unwelcome in New Zealand. This largely was aimed at Asians.

Chinese inside New Zealand started to be looked at with more weariness since the victory of the Chinese Communist Party.

From 1950s onwards New Zealand started to accept the Chinese for assimilation. The Chinese could apply for naturalisation, however they had to renounce Chinese nationality, which many Chinese were reluctant to do. From this time onward New Zealand claimed there was no racial problem. Chinese had started to be accepted a little more into society, but still often looked at as outsiders. Immigrants were still under the 1920s policy whereby applicants could be accepted or denied without reason. Chinese small and politically silent they were unobtrusive, law-abiding and undemanding. Many Chinese considered themselves a 'model minority'.

Over this time period the life of any Chinese would have been quite different to that of any other New Zealanders.

Often nudged out of society and left feeling insecure and unsure. The image of the Chinese gold miners is an interesting way to look at it. While the mainstream New Zealanders would rush to find gold, the Chinese would patiently wait till they had finished and see if anything had been left behind for them.