

Out of the Shadows

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Out of the Shadows: Emerging Political and Civil Participation of the Chinese in New Zealand
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Civic Participation of Global Chinese Communities

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It has been briefly updated to take account of the election results

Key points

New Zealand's snap election puts Chinese/Asian community in spotlight

NZ attitudes towards Chinese

Importance of Chinese community to New Zealand

Chinese in national and local politics in NZ

Out of the shadows

New Zealand's snap election puts Chinese/Asian community in spotlight

When the New Zealand Government called a snap election for 27 July the ruling Labour Party had a commanding lead in the polls. In the 1996 election immigration race had been a major issue. Winston Peters, the leader of New Zealand First, captured many votes with an avowedly anti-immigration stance. He argued (with some justification) that immigration was producing a situation "which sees rows of ostentatious houses in this very suburb (Howick, in Auckland), occupied in some cases by children whose parents have no ties in this country other than the price they paid for the house and who prefer to remain outside its shores." At one stage polls in 1996 put New Zealand First at 30%, and in that election they won 17 seats, and a place in the government. This time immigration was still at the top of his list "we will fix up the immigration mess" but early polls gave the party a mere 3.8%. In the actual election however New Zealand First belied the pundits and gained close on 11% of the votes, winning 13 seats, making it the third largest party in Parliament (see Table 5).

It is difficult to say what role immigration issues played in New Zealand First's partial resurgence, and its success may have owed much to the disintegration of the National Party "down from 39 seats to 27.

Significantly the unknown United Future Party jumped from 1 seat to nine with no particular policies apart from the claim to be the party of "common sense".

Not merely has public concern about immigration subsided since the mid-nineties, but most parties are now actively canvassing for the "Asian vote". With Chinese being by far the largest Asian ethnicity in New Zealand, and with most people unable to distinguish between Chinese and peoples from other parts of East and Southeast Asia, the terms are often used interchangeably and frequently confusingly. For instance, (Brian Nicolle) "is the brains behind the ACT (party's) billboards in Auckland carrying messages in Chinese as well as English, aimed at Asian immigrants who he says share ACT's belief in the virtues of hard work, thrift and enterprise." Indian immigrants might agree that they are hard-working but would be bemused at the assumption that they read Chinese.

The right-wing party even has a Chinese page on its website, by activist and Hong Kong immigrant, Alex Wong.

The Green Party, for one, has been criticised for not having any Asian candidates. The National Party is proudly fronting its flagship Asian Member of Parliament "Pansy Wong

New Zealand attitudes towards Chinese

New Zealanders are more positive towards Asia than five years ago, according to a recent survey commissioned by the Asia 2000 Foundation.

New Zealanders are more aware that external links matter. Asia is regarded as the most important region to New Zealand's future (79%), followed by Europe (67%), North America (60%), South Pacific (50%) and South America (32%).

New Zealanders have growing and positive views of Asian trade (80%), tourism (83%) and students (62%). Views on Asian investment are more positive (49%) and less negative (20%) than previously. Negative views on Asian migration have declined significantly over five years (28%), while positive views have remained stable (32%).

Awareness of the importance of Asia for population reasons has increased significantly (36%). Overall awareness of its importance on economic grounds has been sustained (trade 31%, exports 30%, growth 17%, wealth 14%, tourism 13%).

More New Zealanders are interested in Asian art and culture (33%) and in travelling to Asia (47%) than five years ago. Interest in economic links remains high (47%) but has declined somewhat. Interest in living and working in Asia is stable (18%).

However, recent events in Europe, particularly the shock success of Le Pen in the first round of the French presidential elections, and manifestations of anti-immigrant feeling in Italy, Holland, Britain and Germany, caution against complacency. Attitudes can change. And New Zealand has a sorry history of anti-Chinese discrimination. Prime Minister Helen Clark tried to put this behind us earlier this year when she made a formal apology to the Chinese community for the poll tax that had been levied on the Chinese "and only on the Chinese" for many years. At the ceremony at Parliament on Chinese New Year, 12 February 2002, she recounted the injustices suffered by the Chinese-

"In the late nineteenth century, the New Zealand Parliament passed discriminatory laws against Chinese seeking to enter New Zealand. The Chinese Immigrants Act of 1881 imposed a poll tax of ten pounds per Chinese person and restricted the numbers able to enter the country to one person per ten tonnes of ship cargo. In 1896 the tax was lifted to one hundred pounds per person and there were further restrictions on the numbers of Chinese able to enter New Zealand. No other ethnic group was subjected to such restrictions or to a poll tax. Other legislative initiatives also singled out the Chinese."

Amongst other things, Chinese were barred from citizenship from 1908 to 1951. The poll tax itself was not lifted until 1944, when China and New Zealand were allies in the war against Japan.

The Prime Minister announced "that the government has decided to make a formal apology to those Chinese people who paid the poll tax and suffered other discrimination imposed by statute and to their descendents". She said that the Government's apology was the "formal beginning to a process of reconciliation", and that it wanted to discuss suggestions such as that by the New Zealand Chinese Association that "the government to make a contribution in the form of funds and resources for the purpose of restoring and maintaining the Chinese heritage, culture and language in New Zealand".

The apology, whilst welcomed by many, was not without its critics. National Party MP Pansy Wong claimed that her party had done much more for the Chinese than Helen Clark's Labour Party. Auckland University academic Dr Manying Ip rebuked her for introducing party politics. This dissension within the Chinese community was a reflection of a healthy sense of confidence. Gone were the days when the Chinese would remain silent, and seek safety in invisibility.

More worrying was an underlying tone of resentment expressed in editorials and letters to the editor that an apology was uncalled for, and that the past was the past. This attitude was strengthened when the Prime Minister made subsequent apologies, especially to Samoa for actions committed during the period of NZ colonialism. To some extent Helen Clark was at fault in that her apology to the Chinese was too focussed on the past, and inward-looking. What she did not stress enough perhaps was enlightened self interest. As NZ diplomat and China scholar Chris Elder once put it, "with each passing day, Asia becomes more important to New Zealand, and New Zealand becomes less important to Asia." The redress for the injustice inflicted upon the Chinese in the past should have been coupled with the recognition of just how important the Chinese world and the Chinese people will be to the New Zealand of the future. This was the opportunity, if ever there was one, of announcing a commitment of reshaping our education system so that the study of Chinese language, culture, communities and economies was commensurate with that importance.

Importance of Chinese community to New Zealand Governments want migrants for two things -what they bring and what they leave behind. They bring with them

money, skills, motivation, an ethic of hard work, a commitment to education and cultural diversity. The least of these is money, although governments often do not understand that. Indeed, money and motivation are often at loggerheads.

What migrants leave behind in many ways is more valuable than what they bring with them. Their ties with their mother country is a resource that should be fostered and can be utilised for business, cultural and political purposes. In the past migrants were expected to "assimilate" and forget their past, and many did this. Now there is a growing realisation of the importance of integrating the past with the future and their old culture and loyalties with the new, creating transnational communities. Advances in technology, especially transport and communications, are having a profound impact on this process. People, for instance, are able to email relatives and friends, and read the web versions of their home newspapers, so that they are able to remain "virtual citizens" of their old country while become actual citizens of the new. If this process is handled well, the migrant's knowledge of mother country and culture is constantly refreshed and can be imparted to the rest of the community, hence increasing New Zealand's capacity to interact with Asia. Part of the challenge facing New Zealand politicians, both Chinese and non-Chinese is to create and nurture an environment and a popular awareness and acceptance that allows these opportunities to be realised

The importance of the Chinese to New Zealand can be conceptualised on two main axes, external and internal. The first is most clearly illustrated by trade. The Chinese economies (the Mainland, Hong Kong, Macau, Taiwan and the "overseas Chinese") are already NZ's 4th largest trading partner. This trend will continue before too long "China" (in this broad definition) will dominate our economic horizons.

Fig 1 NZ's major trading partners, 2000

The other axis, the internal one, is Chinese migration to New Zealand. Chinese have long settled in New Zealand "there was a substantial influx to the goldfields in the 1860s but until recently, partly as a result of discriminatory policies, the numbers have been small. However, in the mid 1980s there was a fundamental shift in NZ immigration policies away from a virtually exclusive focus on traditional "source countries" of which Britain was by far the major one, to a "racially-neutral" policy whereby immigrants were accepted, in theory, on the value to New Zealand irrespective of ethnicity. One result of this is that the Asian share of the NZ population has doubled since 1991 to 6.6%. (Table 1)

Table 1 Changing ethnicity in New Zealand, 1991-2001 (as percentage of total population)

1991

1996

2001

European

83.2

83.1

80.0

Maori

13.0

15.1

14.7

Pacific

Islanders

5.0

5.8

6.5

Asian

3.0

5.0

6.6

Other

0.2

0.5

0.7

Total

104.4

109.5

108.4

Source: New Zealand census via Statistics New Zealand

In the 1991 census, just 3% of the population described themselves as "Asian" but by the time of the 2001 census this had risen to 6.6%, overtaking Pacific Islanders. It should be noted that in New Zealand, unlike say apartheid-era South Africa, ethnicity is a matter of self declaration rather than by any supposedly "objective criterion" and so the growth of minority ethnicities is partly a reflection of people asserting an ethnicity which previously they may have wanted to hide. This has been especially true with Maori, but Asians may also have been part of this trend. The other thing to note is that the census takes account of mixed ethnicity and respondents were allowed up to three ethnicities, thus bringing the total to more than 100%. The Asian proportion of the New Zealand population is projected to rise to 9% by 2016.

Within the Asian community the Chinese have remained by far the largest group.(Table 2), although there was a slight decrease in share 1996 to 2001, perhaps reflecting an influx of Indians from Fiji, and of Sri Lankans

Table 2: Chinese share of New Zealand population, 1991-2001
(as percentage)

1991

1996

2001

Total population

3,345,813

3,466,587

3,586,731

Chinese (not further defined)

44,136

78,663

100,203

Taiwanese Chinese

471

2721

3,768

Total Chinese

44,607

81,384

103,971

Asian

99,756

173,505

237,459

Chinese as % of total population

1.3

2.3

2.9

Chinese as % of Asian population

44.7

46.9

43.8

Nevertheless, the numbers increased substantially, from forty five thousand in 1991 to over one hundred thousand ten years later. The proportion of people in New Zealand (which is not the same of course as citizenship) claiming Chinese ethnicity rose from 1.3% to 2.9% and nearly one half of all Asians were Chinese.

Chinese in national and local politics in NZ
 Pansy Wong, New Zealand's first member of Parliament of Asian ethnic origin, was elected in 1996 as a member of the National Party. Her Parliamentary webpage gives three main goals she hopes to achieve for the Asian community in New Zealand

- to provide constituency services,
- to encourage more political participation by Asian New Zealanders and
- to enhance the understanding of Asian issues in the political arena.

Pansy is not merely the first MP but has also the highest national profile, by far, of any "Asian" politician. Born in Shanghai and raised in Hong Kong before her family emigrated to New Zealand, she tends to describe herself as Asian rather than Chinese, and to talk of Asian issues rather than purely Chinese ones. In a major speech in Auckland on 30 May 2002 she outlined changes in the social and political participation of Asians in New Zealand and called for more assertion.

"Until the late 1990s you could characterise Asians in New Zealand politics as virtually unseen and unheard. Although the situation has improved, New Zealand still has some way to go before people can identify with Asian candidates and elect us direct to Parliament. Likewise most Asian New Zealanders have not grown comfortable with the idea as well", she argued.

She stressed that Asians should be more assertive and confrontational, even within the Asian community "Asian New Zealanders have to take risks, instead of compromising at all costs. We have to risk a bit of disharmony among ourselves, and with the community at large, within prudent measure of course" (her emphasis) There are many elements of disharmony within the Chinese community, as the poll tax issue exemplified. It is not surprising that this is so, especially given that the "Chinese" are in reality a collection of very different groups. The "old Chinese", mainly from Guangdong, and then more recent arrivals, via Malaysia, and from Hong Kong, Taiwan and the Mainland. One of the challenges facing Chinese in New Zealand is the need to seek unity on certain issues of common interest while respecting differences. At the same time they need to educate the wider community on those differences. Perhaps a good starting point would be less use of that troublesome word "Asia" which gives a misleading impression of homogeneity to a very diverse region and the use precise a term as the occasion allows.

Pansy Wong may be the most famous of Chinese in New Zealand political life, but she is not alone. The situation is a bit confused at the time of writing because the political parties are just launching their campaigns, and announcing candidates. Because of the NZ political system of proportional representation, the place of a candidate on the party's list can be critical. The position at the moment appears to be as shown in Table 3

Party

Name

List number

National

Pansy Wong

10

National

Eric Liu

34

Labour

Stephen Ching

56

ACT

Kenneth Wang

10

Progressive Coalition Party

Meng Ly

8

Progressive Coalition Party

Nong Li

15

None of the other parties – the Greens, the Alliance, and the various smaller groups among the 21 contesting the election – appear to have Chinese candidates.

Although the national election currently captures attention, Chinese have been active in local politics. The current mayor of Gisborne is Meng Foon and in the 1980s Molly Ngan Kee was Deputy-Mayor of Lower Hutt and the previous decade George Gee was elected for several terms as Mayor of Petone. A growing number of Chinese have been standing for positions in community councils, school boards and other voluntary organisations.

They are a large number of Chinese ethnic organisations, such as the Taiwanese ones listed in Table 4 Table 4 Main Taiwanese societies in New Zealand In addition there are those whose professional life brings them into the political arena in various ways. Notable here are Dr Manying Ip, Steven Young, Mai Chen, Dr James Ng, Janice Wong Liu Sheng, Allen Chang, David and Esther Fung. Nancy Kwok Goddard has been active for many years in fostering China-New Zealand relations and was recently given an award in recognition.

Out of the shadows

It seems fair to say that the Chinese in New Zealand are coming out of the shadows and asserting their culture and their birthright in ways not seen before. This is not to denigrate those who went before but to recognise the changes, both in New Zealand and the region, that are facilitating this process of assertion. For process it certainly is, and one which continue to evolve and change. The 2002 elections have brought Chinese, and Asians in general, increasingly into the limelight. The number of Chinese MPs still stands at one, but Pansy Wong has now been joined by another Asian MP, the Labour Party's Ashraf Choudhary. At the moment, whether we count Chinese or Asians, the numbers of MPs are not commensurate with their proportion of the population. But beyond Parliament Chinese will increasingly engage in political activity, and political dispute. One measure of achievement will be when people don't notice any more, not because Chinese are still invisible, but on the contrary because it will be seen as a natural part of New Zealand life, in a New Zealand no longer a "Britain in the South Pacific" but one that sees itself as a small, multicultural country engaged with the Chinese world in the Asia Pacific region that we share.

Table 5: 2002 Election results

Party

Party Votes

% Votes

Electorate Seats

List Seats

Total Seats

Labour Party

754,600

41.36

45

7

52

National Party

384,533

21.08

21

6

27

New Zealand First Party

193,292

10.6

1

12

13

ACT New Zealand

129,192

7.08

0

9

9

United Future

124,412

6.82

1

8

9

Green Party

118,422

6.49

0

8

8

Jim Anderton's Progressive Coalition

31,862

1.75

1

1

2

Christian Heritage Party

24,752

1.36

0

0

0

Outdoor Recreation NZ

23,388

1.28

0

0

0

Alliance

22,554

1.24

0

0

0

Aotearoa Legalise Cannabis Party

10,598

0.58

0

0

0

Mana Maori Movement

4,707

0.26

0

0

0

One NZ Party

1,704

0.09

0

0

0

NMP

264

0.01

0

0

0

Totals

69

51

120

Source: NZ Ministry of Justice, Chief Electoral Office,
<<http://www.electionresults.govt.nz/partystatus.html>>

Note: This table was last updated 28 July 2002. Not all special votes had been counted and there might be changes.

Acknowledgements

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Selected websites

Asia-Pacific Public Affairs Forum

<<http://www.appaf.org.tw>>

NZ Ministry of Justice, Chief Electoral Office, Election results

<<http://www.electionresults.govt.nz>>

Asia 2000 Foundation of New Zealand

< <http://www.asia2000.org.nz/>>

Chinese Voice

<<http://www.stevenyoung.co.nz/chinesevoice/>>

Major NZ political parties

NZ Labour Party

<<http://www.labour.org.nz>>

New Zealand First

<<http://www.nzfirst.org.nz>>

National Party

<<http://www.nationalparty.org.nz>>

United Future Party

<<http://www.unitedfuture.org.nz>>

ACT New Zealand

<<http://www.act.org.nz>>

Green Party

<<http://www.greens.org.nz/>>

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