

Chinese Participation in Civil Society

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CHINESE PARTICIPATION IN CIVIL SOCIETY IN NEW ZEALAND

Steven Young

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EXAMPLES

Pansy Wong is currently the only Chinese MP in a 120-member House of Representatives. She is a List MP appointed by the National Party and has been made responsible for looking after Asian voters. Last election Mrs Wong was ranked 21st on the list; this year she is ranked 10th and is thus assured of a seat in the House in the next Parliament. Interestingly, Mrs Wong has abandoned her base in Christchurch and is contesting the Auckland Central electorate partly because it has a large Chinese population. It is likely that Mrs Wong will win cabinet rank in a future National Government.

The presence of Pansy Wong in Parliament has motivated a number of supporters to be more active in politics particularly within the National Party. Thus at National Party Conferences there is a table set aside for Chinese delegates from Auckland, Wellington and Christchurch who together are classed as a special interest group within the Party with a similar (but not the same) status as Electorate delegates. These delegates take part in the general debate and their presence is a reminder of the changing face of the NZ electorate. These delegates are gaining experience in helping formulate the future policy of a New Zealand government. Steven Young is the Chairman of the Wellington Asian Committee.

The National Party has another Chinese ranked about 30th on its List. This may not be high enough to ensure a seat in the next Parliament. Perennial hopeful Auckland lawyer Ken Yee languishes somewhere near the bottom of National's List.

The Labour Party has not got any Chinese high on their List for the 2002 election - which probably means they do not consider this a priority. During the year a Steven Wong was paraded around the Chinese community by the Minister of Ethnic Affairs as a possible List candidate. A relatively recent migrant with an inadequate grasp of the New Zealand ethos and of the English language, he appears to have been squeezed out.

A number of Chinese candidates stood for the 2001 Local Body elections. Many of these were new immigrants from Taiwan (rather than members of the old Chinese community.) Apart from Meng Foon, who is the new Mayor of the provincial city of Gisborne, we have no information on their success or otherwise.

In an earlier generation (1980s) Molly Ngan Kee was elected deputy-mayor of Lower Hutt. Earlier still (1970s) George Gee was elected for several terms as Mayor of Petone (near Wellington).

Nancy Kwok married George Goddard an avowed communist in the early 1960s and became a leading figure in the NZ China Friendship Society advocating friendship with communist China during the Cold War. She was reviled by the local Chinese and spied on by the SIS for her troubles. She came out of the cold when NZ recognised mainland China and since then has been feted as a visionary and awarded high honours but lives a simple, modest life in retirement, still a friend of the local Maori people.

Associate Professor Manying Ip at Auckland University is well-known and accessible commentator on NZ Chinese current affairs. Her research and publications about the history of the local Chinese in New Zealand have allowed her to put a longer term perspective on local events affecting the Chinese community.

Mai Chen originally from Taiwan is a brilliant academic and practising constitutional lawyer who founded the public law practice of Chen & Palmer with former New Zealand deputy-Prime Minister Sir Geoffrey Palmer. A former senior lecturer in law, author of several standard texts on constitutional law, much published in law journals as well women's magazines, much interviewed on radio and television and highly sought after professionally, Mai Chen still does pro bono work for the Chinese community, for example advising on the Poll Tax issue.

Dr James Ng's pioneering and painstaking research and his multi-volume monograph have been cornerstones in the rediscovery of the history of the Chinese in New Zealand.

His Windows on a Chinese Past Vol 1, 2, 3 and 4 remain the definitive texts in this field.

(Janice) Wong Liu Shueng is a remarkable woman who while trying to rediscover her own Chinese identity, lost somewhere in 1950s Masterton, felt compelled to expand her search to help her generation of NZ born Chinese rediscover its own. She has worked as a teacher, broadcaster, human rights advocate and is currently research her doctoral thesis at the Auckland University of Technology.

Allen Chang, scion of four generations of Chinese in New Zealand, teacher, secondary principal and education bureaucrat has used his understanding of governmental processes to reshape a defective Poll Tax apology and reconciliation by welding together a coalition of Chinese community groups and on their behalf advocating changes to the objectives, processes and perspectives of the Office of Ethnic Affairs, its Minister, the Office of Prime Minister and Cabinet and the Prime Minister herself.

Steven Young, a consulting engineer and property developer, has moved on from writing for community newsletter and newspapers to publishing on the internet. His website at <http://www.stevenyoung.co.nz> with

contributions from most of the above people and others, is strongly political in flavour, and is, according to Google, by far the most extensive on the Chinese in New Zealand,

NATURE OF PARTICIPATION

From the above it can be seen that apart from Pansy Wong MP, most of the above (which include the most vocal) are still working at the community level and only just venturing into the public arena with their comments. Noticeable by their absence are trade union leaders, leaders of professional and merchant groups and leaders of NGOs, environmental groups, the military, police and senior civil servants.

CRITERIA FOR PARTICIPATION

In New Zealand, until very recently, the total number of Chinese people was relatively small and below the critical mass necessary for an individual to have a meaningful existence entirely within the Chinese community.(cf Malaysia) Thus interaction with the mainstream community was necessary.

However this interaction was usually at the lowest possible level eg as a pupil at school, a student at University, a shopkeeper or a professional adviser (doctor, accountant). The interaction was at a one-to-one level - repeated many times. The interaction was generally not at a one-to-many level except perhaps as a teacher in a class-room.

In order for a (Chinese) person to regularly interact with mainstream society and influence it in some way, it is necessary to:

- Have highly developed spoken and written English language skills.
- Be knowledgeable with relevant information and have something useful or interesting to say.
- Have a forum to disseminate those ideas.
- Be credible (and/or persistent.)
- Have sufficient understanding of the local Chinese community and the host community to be able to act as an intermediary between the cultures of the two.
- Have a theory concerning the interaction between the Chinese community and the host community, eg Confucian values are relevant to the host society.
- The Chinese community as a group, and family connections in it are valuable intermediaries for the host country seeking to trade with Asia.
- The Chinese community needs to fully participate in the host society in order to secure its future there as a permanent home.
- China is full of potential and the local Chinese community is an obvious but ignored contact point within the host society.
- The Chinese are full citizens with equal rights in the host society.
- The internalizing of guilt and discrimination is the result of assimilation, and is a distortion of the ideals of a multi-cultural society.
- Western ideas about democracy, personal freedom, the rule of law, and Christian values help clarify some relationships in traditional Chinese society and makes it more relevant to the modern world.