

"Political Participation of the Chinese in New Zealand: with special reference to the Taiwanese Immi

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Chinese Political Participation in New Zealand --the role of Taiwanese Immigrants

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Abstract:

Chinese New Zealanders used to be extremely apolitical towards national politics. Long denied the right of naturalisation and with no right to vote (from 1908 to 1952), they were historically much more interested in political developments of China, rather than party politics of New Zealand. This paper will explore the dramatic and radical changes in the political awareness and the eagerness to participate in politics amongst the Chinese in New Zealand in the recent decade. Two elements were crucial in this heightening of political alertness:

The influx of a sizeable group of well-informed and politically aware Taiwanese since the late 1980s.
The introduction of the MMP (mixed-members Proportional) voting system in New Zealand.

The Taiwanese community embarked on a crash course of New Zealand politics in the 1990s. Emboldened by the unprecedented number of new Chinese arrivals and intrigued by the general debate on the new MMP voting system, the Taiwanese have been the prime driving force behind the major pre-election rallies, in 1996 and 1999 respectively. Although the lone Chinese MP elected is not Taiwanese, the influence of the Taiwanese community has never been in doubt.

The activities of the Taiwanese were also highly noticeable in the local council elections of 1999, when more than a dozen of ethnic Chinese representatives got themselves onto the campaign tickets of various parties. Three of those elected were Taiwanese immigrants.

This paper will explore the spearheading role played by the Taiwanese immigrants, and examine the reasons behind their political astuteness as well as predict some future trends of their political involvement in New Zealand. The challenges facing the full participation of the Taiwanese immigrants as well as the larger Chinese community will also be examined.

How the Taiwanese are using New Zealand's recent adoption of the MMP system for the furtherance of their political aspirations is a significant example of minority activism of the new overseas Chinese.

Chinese Political Participation in New Zealand --the role of Taiwanese Immigrants

Disenfranchised and apolitical: Chinese New Zealanders

Although the Chinese arrived in New Zealand shortly after the earliest days of British colonial settlement, the history of Chinese participation in New Zealand politics was almost totally blank until the past decade. Severe institutional and social racial discrimination against the Chinese from the 1870s onwards had kept them marginalised and disempowered. The Chinese, first as goldminers and then as market gardeners and laundrymen, were deliberately kept as itinerant manual labourers who were expected to leave New Zealand as soon as they were no longer useful to the young British colony. Rampart racism and the successive exclusion legislation introduced since the 1880s succeeded in reducing the Chinese population from a high of over 5,000 in 1882 to just about 2,000 in 1916.

New Zealand politicians looked upon the Chinese as 'undesirable aliens'. From the early 1880s onwards, parliamentarians often debated about the rationale of denying naturalisation rights to the Chinese, the argument was often centred around the fear that naturalised Chinese could be bought as block voters by unscrupulous politicians, thus undermining the democratic principle. Another reason often cited for the denial of political rights to the Chinese was that the Chinese lacked knowledge and interest in New Zealand politics, and that they were sojourners who would return to China.

In this circular argument that the Chinese lacked commitment to their country of adoption and therefore should not be allowed the rights of citizenship, the Chinese were denied the right of naturalisation for forty-four years, from 1908 to 1952. They were thus totally disenfranchised, being unable to vote in either local or national elections, and had their other rights (like employment and land ownership) severely curtailed. For over forty years, they were kept effectively as outsiders without any political power. Even after 1952 when naturalisation rights were restored, the Chinese community was too busy with finding a niche and foothold as a newly tolerated minority to pay much attention to New Zealand party politics. They became a law-abiding, low profile, and hard-working group, so marginalised and weakened that the political dream belonged only to the distant future.

It was not until the 1960s that New Zealand saw its first aspirant in the national political scene. Ron Ng Waishing (1930-1994) of South Auckland, an active labour union member, contested the seat of Franklin (a rural district south of Auckland) for Labour in 1963, 1966, and 1975. He lost every time as expected. For the seat of the prosperous farming community was 'true-blue' National. Waishing was a lone trailblazer, not emulated by any of his compatriots who apparently had been taught to 'know their place' by the harsh realities of a white Euro-centric society. In spite of the fact that many of the local-born Chinese were successful professionals by then, they seemed to be contented to stick to their unobtrusive and undemanding image. Many mainstream New Zealanders both envied and feared the 'tall poppies', and the local Chinese seemed most eager to remain a non-threatening 'model minority'. A discreet social distance was maintained between the two groups. (Trlin, 1972) Politically silent and largely invisible, the Chinese were not ready to rock any boat.

Clearly, a change of the political fortunes of the Chinese could only come with a dramatic change of the demographic picture. Hard facts of statistical reality need to lift the Chinese across the critical threshold that marked them as a significant factor in New Zealand politics.

Demographic Change

When the Fourth Labour Government introduced a new immigration policy in 1987, welcoming applicants with skills and entrepreneurial capital to come into New Zealand, no one envisaged that it would lead to a sizeable influx of ethnic Chinese people. The Minister of Immigration in fact stated specifically that he did not see that Asian people would be too interested to come.

Subsequent events proved him totally wrong. The 1987 Immigration Act would see prospective immigrants selected solely on the basis of personal merits, qualifications, entrepreneurial skills and capital, as well as potential contribution to the country, irrespective of their country of origin. In effect the new policy dropped the racial preference for 'migrants from traditional source countries' (i.e. British migrants). Many Chinese immigrants, initially led by re-migrants from regions like Taiwan and Hong Kong, qualified to enter New Zealand because they fitted the criteria. By the mid 1990s, immigrants from China outnumbered those from other regions.

The Chinese population stood below 19,000 in 1986, a mere 0.6 percent of the national population. By the time of the 1991 census, it rose to around 40,000, and it doubled again in 1996, to just above 80,000, or 2 percent of the total population. Preliminary reports from the most recent 2001 census show that the number of ethnic Chinese rose to 105,000 nationwide.

Even more significant is the clustering settlement pattern of the Chinese: according to the 1996 census, over 50,000 of them were in Auckland. Over 90 percent of the ethnic Chinese, local born and new immigrants included, live in urban areas, especially the major cities of Auckland, Wellington, and Christchurch. In certain electoral districts of these big cities, the Chinese made up close to 20 percent of the population. By the mid 1990s, New Zealand politicians of all parties suddenly started to consider a totally new phenomenon: the 'Chinese factor'. It was all the more intriguing because the recent immigrant community was largely new and unknown. The Chinese were new to the political system, and their voting preferences were subjects of intense speculation.

The appearance of the 'Chinese factor' in the New Zealand political scene was made all the more significant because it coincided with the introduction of the Mixed-Members-Proportional voting system (discussed below) in 1996. The advent of the Chinese voters therefore became a new factor in a new voting system. Since the new voting system has been widely held to be advantageous to marginalised groups and offering opportunities to minorities, commentators speculated that the Chinese might play a far more significant part than their raw population numbers.

To the majority of the New Zealand public who were cut-off from any non-European migration for over a century, all the Chinese are alike, irrespective of their origins. New Zealand politicians started to try to capture the supposed 'Chinese ethnic vote'.

However, the ethnic Chinese, who numbered 81,308 in the census of 1996, are far from being a homogeneous

group. According to that census, about 27 percent of them (22,497) are New Zealand born. About 11 percent (below 10,000) are long-time settlers who were overseas-born but arrived before 1986. The majority, over 60 percent were recent immigrants who arrived within the decade just prior to the 1996 census. Among these recent arrivals who came because of the policy change, the Taiwanese were the most numerous (31 percent), followed by arrivals from Hong Kong (24 percent) and then those from China (19 percent). All of them are New Zealand's targeted 'quality migrants' who qualified for entry because of their personal merits.

The differences in the backgrounds amongst these groups of ethnic Chinese are reflected in their divergent outlook and interest. 'There is not very much that the new immigrants and the local Chinese can share except their ethnicity'. While the post 1987 immigrants tend to be more assertive and vocal, their very lack of experience in living and working in the country count against them as a political force.

The Politicised Taiwanese

Among the recent Chinese immigrants to New Zealand, the Taiwanese are undoubtedly the most politically astute as a group. Their counterparts from the People's Republic and from Hong Kong might have equally high educational qualifications and business acumen, but neither group has any real experience of choosing their own political leaders by direct votes back in their country of origin. Neither China, nor Hong Kong as a British colony, offered their citizens the democratic option of genuine political participation. It is small wonder that recent immigrants from these two places show little aptitude of political organisation, and have so far shown only rudimentary interest in any genuine involvement in New Zealand national politics.

Former citizens of Singapore or Malaysia have the advantage of being fluent English speakers, and they are supposedly knowledgeable about the Westminster style election system. But these two countries have been under the predominant influence of strong 'paramount leaders' and 'elder statesmen'; whose style of leadership can be said to be contrary to genuine democracy.

It is this writer's opinion that among the new Chinese immigrants to New Zealand, the Taiwanese came with the most complete set of background knowledge and real experience of political activism. Back in their country of origin, they had recently (in the late 1980s) emerged from the authoritarian control of a rigid and conservative military government of the Guomindang (Nationalist Party). In 1987, President Chiang Ching-kuo ended military rule and ushered in constitutional government. He ended the myth that Taiwan was still in a state of war with the People's Republic of China. In the late 1980s, slowly and painfully Taiwan underwent all the turmoils of constitutional reform, the cutting of dead wood from their national legislative body (Members of the Legislative Yuan used to be filled with elderly representatives elected in 1948, the year prior to the Nationalist Government's retreat to Taiwan). The outside world which saw only the notorious fist-fights among Taiwanese legislators tended to ridicule them. The fact that democracy is so new and hard-won in Taiwan is frequently not recognised. The impressive economic take-off of Taiwan also overshadowed the fact that Taiwan is still a very young democracy.

Precisely because the Taiwanese migrated from a homeland where the democratic process is still emerging and rapidly growing, their migrants tend to be imbued with great optimism that the electoral system is worth working for.

In New Zealand, besides the fact that the Taiwanese came with their keen interest and knowledge in political participation already sharpened and honed, they also seemed to be more alert to the potential importance of getting themselves involved in wider community activities of a quasi-political nature. An analysis of the Taiwanese recent immigrants show that they are better educated and also slightly younger than their Hong Kong counterparts. Incidentally, this is the reverse of the situation in Australia (where the Hong Kong immigrants are younger and better educated than their Taiwanese counterpart).

Basically, this is because the Taiwanese attracted to New Zealand tended to be professionals while those attracted to Australia tended to be business people. The majority of Taiwanese immigrants in New Zealand came under the General Skills Category while a large percentage of Hong Kong immigrants came under the Business Immigration scheme. Between 1992 and 2000, 90 percent of the Taiwanese (a total of 28,000 residence visas) were granted entry under the General Skills Category, while only 48 percent of the Hong Kong immigrants and 50 percent of those from the People's Republic were similarly qualified.

Since those immigrants who came under the General Skills Category must be highly educated and professionally qualified, it means that the Taiwanese immigrants to New Zealand are usually highly aware of political and social issues. They are also well informed instead of being merely rich and possessing investment capital. General Skills migrants also tend to be younger than business migrants because youth is a determining factor in the qualification.

An ironical twist of events also pushed the Taiwanese to be politically active. Owing to a serious oversight of the New Zealand policy makers, the majority of Taiwanese immigrants who entered under the Points System as quality migrants from 1991 to 1998 could not even work in their professions after entry (;). The professional boards of New Zealand usually recognised only British Commonwealth degrees and qualifications. Taiwanese qualifications: as doctors, dentists, veterinary surgeons, teachers, engineers etc. which were good enough to gain them high marks in the Points System were nevertheless not good enough for them to be registered by the various professional boards. The result was that these Taiwanese professionals could not be registered in New Zealand and therefore could not practice.

An incidental result of this policy bungle was that the country had a large number of well-educated professionals who had no jobs. They are also too young to retire, which is an option often taken by their compatriots who entered under the Business Category. It is small wonder that they organise themselves into various societies and associations and started to try to play a part in politics. By the mid 1990s, the Taiwanese started to become rather impatient and wanted to become involved in New Zealand politics: initially by approaching their local MPs, lobbying local councillors, and organising big meetings amongst Chinese groups to arouse Chinese interest in certain social issues. Their interest tended to be focused on immigration, settlement, education, welfare and crime. Members of Parliament from districts where there are sizeable numbers of Chinese residents usually are very obliging to show up at all kinds of Taiwanese social functions and cultural events, including Chinese New Year celebrations and the Double Tenth Taiwan National Day receptions.

However, it should be noted that the Taiwanese are comparatively recent immigrants in New Zealand, the majority of them with a history of only about 10 years of settlement behind them. This means that they have to be essentially on a steep learning curve when it comes to political participation: the community have to learn the finer details of the working of New Zealand politics before it can play a fuller and more significant part than being supporters and lobbyists. Their initial political participation therefore tended to be peripheral and auxiliary: mainly in the organisation of fund-raising events and big rallies

New Zealand Political Tradition

Throughout the 20th century New Zealand politics have been dominated by two major parties: National and Labour. The Chinese community used to give them the convenient labels of 'Rightist' and 'Leftist'. While the labels are convenient, they can be misleading. The National Party is probably the conservative party, and has enjoyed strongest support from the country's well-to-do farmers and business people in New Zealand's small towns and bigger cities. The Labour Party is supported by the country's trade unions as well as many egalitarian-minded intellectuals. The former tends to stress the value of free enterprise, the latter tends to favour government intervention and collectivism. However, the above is only a broad outline of their ideological leanings. In practical politics, the two parties' policies tend to blur and both parties go for the middle ground.

In New Zealand, the tradition of public participation in politics is long and robust. Partly because the country is geographically small, the average New Zealander tends to know the local MP well and has a habit of going along to party rallies and public meetings. (Millar, 1996) While voting is not compulsory, approximately 85 percent of eligible voters cast their votes at the 1993 general election and over 75 percent followed the campaign on television. It is evident that people feel that their involvement in political activities is worthwhile. The country is small enough for individuals to 'make a difference', and politicians need to be responsive. New Zealanders are not apathetic and indifferent when it comes to politics. New immigrants therefore find it generally rather inspiring and find it worthwhile to be involved.

Towards the immigrant Chinese community, the Labour Party was traditionally the benefactor. First of all, it was the first Labour Government in 1935 that made a commitment to eliminate institutionalised racial discrimination in New Zealand, thus starting the long and slow process for the Chinese to be granted equal rights. During the Second World War, it was a Labour Government that allowed the Chinese war refugees to stay in New Zealand, which led to the community sinking its roots. In recent decades, it was also another Labour Government (between 1984 and 1990) which de-regulated the New Zealand economy and introduced the new immigration policy of 1987, opening the country to immigrants of skill and enterprise, irrespective of national and ethnic origins. Many of the new Chinese immigrants had the opportunity to settle in New Zealand largely because of the Fourth Labour Government.

However, it would be misleading to suggest that the Chinese are pro-Labour. In reality, the Chinese tended to be pro-establishment and sided with whichever party that was in power. Economic considerations rather than any worries about ethnic concerns also largely dictated their political sympathy. Political affiliations are divided along class, rather than ethnic lines. The majority of the Taiwanese seems to favour the National Party, partly because it is more conservative and pro-business, and partly because it was the party of government when most of the Taiwanese arrived.

The New Zealand Electoral System ‐ MMP

This political inclusiveness shown towards new arrivals is highly significant for the new Chinese immigrants, as they can become qualified voters as soon as they enter the country to settle down, provided that they take the trouble of registering themselves on the electoral roll beforehand. Again, this inclusiveness shown towards new arrivals has no doubt heightened the desire for political participation of new Chinese immigrants.

There are 120 members in the single chamber Parliament. The political parties win seats according to their nationwide share of the vote. There are two different kinds of members of parliament: some are 'electoral MPs', and some are 'list MPs'. Sixty-five seats are to go to the highest polling candidates of the country's 65 electorates (with about 52,000 people each). At the election, every voter can cast two votes: one for the preferred electoral candidate, and one for the preferred party. Political parties that win a greater share of the total vote than the actual number of their electorate MPs will 'top up' by adding candidates from the parties; ranked lists. There are fifty-five seats reserved for such 'party list candidates'.

The MMP system has been practiced twice so far: in the general elections of 1996 and 1999. The system was introduced partly to guarantee that the place and role of minorities are adequately represented. Under the old system practiced in 1993 and before, it was highly unlikely that candidates from ethnic minorities, like the Chinese, could be chosen by any major parties to be electorate candidates. Parties need to choose candidates who have wide appeal and can draw a majority of votes from amongst the local population ---who are mostly of European origin. Under the new MMP system, a Chinese candidate could be picked as party-list candidate as a focus to appeal for the support of the Chinese community nationwide, and used as a vote-drawing magnet of the thinly-spread Chinese population throughout New Zealand.

That was exactly what happened in 1996, when the National Party placed Pansy Wong, a Shanghai-born and Hong Kong educated long-time immigrant on their party list. She got elected by virtue of the number of party votes that the National Party scored and became the country's first and only Chinese MP.

There can be little doubt that New Zealand's adoption of the MMP electoral system gave the Chinese as a community a much higher profile because they had the chance to influence the election outcome in a way they would not have had under the old electoral system. This article will proceed to show that the Taiwanese managed to show their influence and orchestrated the pre-election events to raise their political profile in a way that no other Chinese groups succeeded to.

The Pre-election Seminars organised by the Chinese

The Chinese communities held pre-election Seminars for the general elections of 1993, 1996, and 1999. These seminars were held in the major cities which have significant Chinese populations: Auckland, Wellington and Christchurch. There was a certain degree of inter-city co-ordination amongst the organisers, and the sessions were broadcast on the Chinese radios nationwide.

The major political parties were invited to send representatives to speak to the Chinese audience, and the moderators requested that each speaker address issues that were of particular concern to the Chinese. These were largely in the areas of :education, investment opportunities, employment, and immigration. The politicians were also expected to answer questions raised directly by the audience.

The 1993 Auckland seminar attracted an audience of over 1,600 people. New Zealand politicians who were used to much smaller meetings were very surprised and highly impressed by the huge attendance. When a follow-up seminar was held in Wellington, both National and Labour sent their top politicians. The efficiency of the organisers and the high quality of the seminars, supported by simultaneous interpretation in both Cantonese and Mandarin, clearly made a very strong impression on the New Zealand public. Newspaper reports hailed the seminars as a sign that the Chinese community was going to be a force to be reckoned with in the political scene, a potential bloc to be won over by aspiring political parties.

It was in 1996 that the Taiwanese community emerged as a big player in the Chinese pre-election seminars. Two significant factors stimulated the new intensity of political activities in that year. As pointed out in an earlier paragraph, firstly it was the introduction of the MMP electoral system which seemed to offer great opportunities to ethnic minority groups. The Chinese now had a platform to show their flag. Secondly, the activities were spurred on by the sudden soaring popularity of the New Zealand First party, widely regarded as opportunistic, anti-immigrant and anti-Asian. Although its leader Winston Peters never achieved the level of notoriety as Pauline Hansen in Australia, his thinly veiled anti-immigrant rhetoric stirred up much social tension in the long months preceding the 1996 election.

While New Zealand First supporters openly advertised in newspapers blaming immigrants for problems like traffic-congestion, water and air-pollution, and over-crowded schools, numerous petty anti-Chinese incidents erupted around the cities which have large Asian populations. Public opinion polls showed that the support for New Zealand First shot up from below 3 percent in February 1996 to 28 percent in July of the same year. It seemed that this populist party had scored highly by playing the race card.

The Hwa Hsia Society of Taiwan, as the biggest Chinese association in Auckland (with a membership of over 1,000 families) vowed to organise the biggest Chinese political rally the country had ever seen. They succeeded to hold a gathering of over 3,000 people, and representatives of seven parties sat through a marathon meeting of four hours, expounding their policies towards immigrants in general, and towards the Chinese in particular. However, the fact that there was a huge turnout of a Chinese audience did not translate into a sprouting of Chinese political power. It would be impossible to assess the impact of the rally, besides stating the fact that it showed the high level of organisational power of the Taiwanese community. The huge turnout of so many Chinese probably impressed upon the New Zealand politicians that there were new voters to be won over. It certainly did not deter the meteoric rise of New Zealand First. That populist party won enough votes in October 1996 to become the junior partner in the subsequent National-New Zealand First coalition government and Winston Peters became Deputy Prime Minister.

In 1999, prior to the most recent general election, the Chinese commercial radio station whose owner-director was Taiwanese held the political seminar. This time the entire session was broadcast live throughout the North Island, and the emphasis was more on the content of the speeches and the question and answer session rather than the huge number in the audience.

The Taiwanese could assume such an important role in these Chinese political events mainly because of their superior organisational skills, their willingness to make financial commitments, and their conviction that spending time and energy on such causes were worthwhile.

Constraints to greater political representation

In spite of the impressive big rallies that the Taiwanese, with the co-operation and support of other Chinese groups,

were able to whip up during the election years, they are still a long way away from the actual road to claim participation in wielding political power. When examined more closely, even the significance of the huge audiences was more apparent than real.

First of all, there is still no short cut to political participation. To have a realistic chance of becoming an MP, a person has to be nominated by the party as electoral candidate or place quite high on the party list. To be nominated a person usually has to join the party and work through its organisation for years, proving himself or herself as a party faithful reasonably acquainted with the party's ideological platform and has leadership qualities. When Pansy Wong was chosen as a list MP by the National Party, she was used as a drawcard of the 'Chinese vote' by a party which was fairly confident that middle class Chinese are largely pro-National. At the time when this article is written (early 2002), there is no other prominent ethnic Chinese candidate in any of the country's political parties. If the Chinese political seminars heightened political awareness and general knowledge about the various political parties, with a result that the Chinese became more knowledgeable, astute and sophisticated, then they were truly meaningful. What might have followed from these was that some aspiring Chinese might join a political party of their choice, thereby getting to know New Zealand politics better, and subsequently playing a real role within these parties.

Unfortunately, there has been scant proof that the above has happened. The political seminars were not followed with any significant sustained interest. The Chinese seemed contented to have a 'show of force' in bringing together a numerically large audience to impress the politicians, but they were not really interested in what the politicians were trying to say. Whatever policy the parties expounded at the seminars did not seem to have any impact on the voting patterns of the Chinese, there were not even much follow-up discussions in the Chinese media on the issues raised at the seminars.

Based on the above observations, it seemed that the Chinese have not yet reached the threshold of political maturity. The Chinese seem to be not yet truly ready to participate actively in New Zealand politics, not even as a powerful lobby group. The transient nature of the new immigrant community, with many of the new arrivals busy flying back and forth to their countries of origin and also planning relocation to a third country, has also been detrimental to the development of a real sense of long-term political commitment.

Participation in Local Councils

In the 1999 local government elections, the number of ethnic Chinese local council members and ward members elected was seven nationwide. Even more impressive was the large number of ethnic Chinese candidates who came forward for election, nearly every ticket in the Auckland Eastern Districts and North Shore districts (where the Chinese population is significant) featured an Asian name.

Participation in local politics is of course very different from participation at a national level. Very often candidates are motivated by a desire to serve their local communities. Their chances of success are high when they find a degree of acceptance in their respective neighbourhoods. In the closing year of the twentieth century, New Zealand was also moving along the multi-ethnic and multi-cultural way. It was good form and also politically astute for political parties to incorporate a Chinese name or two onto their candidate list.

The only group (in Auckland's North Shore City) which put forward an all-Asian list was defeated, in spite of the fact that the region has a rather high concentration of Asian immigrants: mainly ethnic Chinese and Korean. If there is a lesson to be learnt, it is quite clear that politicians cannot hope to rely on the 'ethnic vote' alone. Candidates need to present themselves as representing the interest of the community in general, which is still dominated by Pakeha (white European) New Zealanders.

At present it is too premature to speculate whether the taste and the experience in local politics might give the ethnic Chinese aspirations to go into national politics.

But if the pattern of Chinese participation in local politics is any indication, it endorses this author's earlier assertion that the Taiwanese are the most politicised amongst the new immigrant groups. Among the seven Chinese councillors and ward members, three are Taiwanese and four local-born.

Future Trends: opportunities and limitations

The history of Chinese political participation in New Zealand is very short indeed. But a few trends has emerged: First of all, the younger generation of local-born Chinese New Zealanders, the descendents of the humble goldminers and market-gardeners, would need to emerge from the shadow of the previous century's rampant discrimination and racism to re-claim their rightful place in the sun. They would need to find their own identity, and thus nurture their own political ambitions. They would need to gain confidence as true New Zealanders before they would fully participate in politics. The lone trail blazer Ron Waishing (discussed in the historical section earlier in this article) emerged from the well-established politics of the labour union representing vegetable growers. However, as long as the local-born Chinese still feel 'second class', they would continue to be passive 'model minority' citizens. In spite of the fact that most of them are very highly educated and professionally successful, if they feel that the avenues to political power are not really opened to them, they would not be ready to become involved in New Zealand politics. The age-old traumatisation suffered by the local-born Chinese as a group might explain their reluctance to enter national politics, which is quite different from their ready involvement in local politics—an area where they have comparative confidence in.

For political leaders of national stature to emerge from amongst the new immigrant community, New Zealand might have to wait another decade or so. In other immigrant nations where ethnic minorities can participate freely in the political system, like the United States, Canada and Australia, ethnic Chinese politicians did not emerge until

the immigrants have become a stable presence for at least 15 to 20 years. This is not to say that ethnic Chinese politicians can rely on the 'ethnic vote' alone. Instead, they usually represent wider issues, and need to have the credentials to prove that they can adequately represent a majority of the mainstream population.

One detrimental factor to the political participation of the ethnic Chinese which was often unnoticed is the language problem amongst the Chinese groups. In New Zealand, most local-born young people cannot speak Chinese except for a few functional phrases in their village dialect (often ridiculed as 'kitchen Chinese'). A potential political leader from amongst this group would have much difficulty communicating with his or her fellow compatriots who are mostly Mandarin or Cantonese-speaking new arrivals. Their sympathies and concerns are very different, and there is no common point of identification. While the local-born Chinese tended to be concerned about past discrimination, new immigrants tended to worry about business opportunities and employment issues.

As discussed before, the huge preponderance of new immigrants over the local born means that in New Zealand the former group is very much overshadowed, in spite of their greater experience in New Zealand society and politics. So far, the inability of the different Chinese groups to speak with a more cohesive voice has also hampered the emergence of nationally significant political leaders.

Conclusion

The first MMP election saw the emergence of tiny minority ethnic parties: one attempted to appeal for the votes of Chinese and 'other Asians' (called Ethnic Minority Party), and one attempted to appeal for the votes of 'Asians and Pacific Islanders' (called Asia Pacific United Party). Both performed extremely poorly and faded away soon after the election—a clear sign that narrowly-based ethnic appeals just would not work, especially when the tiny parties are devoid of specific policies.

The election of the first Chinese MP to New Zealand parliament is historically significant. However, a lone voice as a backbencher in amongst over a hundred members is essentially very weak. The Chinese representation in Parliament is still below the proportion of their population. A lone Chinese voice, like that of any ethnic minorities in a single legislative chamber overwhelmingly dominated by the Pakeha majority, is more symbolic than real. A brighter future for the ethnic Chinese participation in New Zealand politics will only come with a bigger Chinese immigration inflow. As in the situations in other immigrant Pacific rim countries, there needs to be the emergence of certain focus for the community as a whole to become more politicised. For example, in the United States, the ethnic Chinese learnt much from the Civil Rights Movement even though the movement was primarily to do with the blacks struggling for greater political power. The W3 incident in Canada and the Pauline Hansen crisis in Australia served to heighten the political awareness of the Chinese communities in each country respectively.

Meanwhile, New Zealand political parties have shown their readiness to engage with the Chinese and have useful dialogues. The rather enlightened attitude should be applauded. Today, no institutional hurdles exist to deter the Chinese from full participation in New Zealand politics. As pointed out before, the lenient and inclusive electoral policy towards new arrivals even before they gain citizenship is a big encouragement for immigrants to actively participate in voting. The only element lacking at present is a critical mass.

The Taiwanese have so far played a high profile and prominent role, displaying very clearly their willingness of political involvement. As discussed above, New Zealand has the most generous and inclusive electoral policies towards new immigrants of all nationalities. If they continue to show persistent commitment and sustained interest, there is every chance for the Taiwanese, as well as other Chinese groups, to play a much more significant role in New Zealand politics.

Postscript: New census, new election

At the time of this article's revision, New Zealand's newest census results (conducted 2001) are being released by stages. Although the detail statistical profile of the sub-ethnic groups (like the Taiwanese) are not yet available, the early March census release that the Chinese is now the country's third largest ethnic group, having edged past the number of Pacific Island arrivals, again made sensational headlines in the nation's media. (NZ Herald, 2.March,2002) Now the total population of the ethnic Chinese stands at 105,000 nationwide.

The country is also facing a new election towards the end of 2002. The nation's only Asian MP Pansy Wong has already started her campaign with vigour and determination, announcing that she would stand for the Central Auckland seat, which is not a safe National bet. One strong reason for her to take this risky step is no doubt the frustration of trying to 'represent' a constituency—and i.e. 'the Asians' who are so diverse and widespread that it must have felt like representing a myth. The National Party which made her a list MP in 1996 will no doubt watch her performance closely in their attempt to gauge the supposed influence of the ethnic factor.

Meanwhile, the Labour Party has yet to promote a creditable Chinese, or other Asian, as a serious candidate. As for the various minor parties which mushroomed in the heady days of the initial introduction of the MMP system, they have all but totally disappeared by 2002, leaving only the United Party which made periodic and half-hearted attempts to approach individual Asian community leaders for their support.

The situation of 2002 is one of steady population growth of the ethnic Chinese community, but their political aspirations and interest in involvement seem to have somehow died down considerably.

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