

Pepe Choong - New Zealand Chinese Women: A Hyphenated Identity of East and West. Time Frame of late

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NZ CHINESE WOMEN - PEPE CHOONG

Title: New Zealand Chinese Women: A

Hyphenated Identity of East and West.

Time Frame of late 30s to 50s.

BY: Pepe Choong

Historically, the history of Chinese Women in New Zealand began in 1867 when Census New Zealand recorded 1,213 males and 6 females. Statistically, the number of Chinese women remained low for decades and it was not until the late 1930s under the climate of humanitarian pre World War 2 that the number of Chinese women in New Zealand reached some semblance of gender balance. This generation of children that grew up in the 40s and 50s is undisputedly known as the pioneering settlers-the generation that sank roots into New Zealand marking them as Chinese New Zealanders rather than sojourners. While there have been statistical records of Chinese women in New Zealand since 1867, there has almost been a void, a silence in the generation of pioneering settlers with reference to how they rationalize themselves as New Zealand born Chinese. The focus of this essay will be to investigate this silence, how this generation of New Zealand born Chinese women rationalize their ethnic, gender and nation identity, the conflicts and tensions as well as the blessings of transiting between dual cultures.

A large part of the information presented in this essay will be based on both oral and written interviews carried out between mid to late April 2002. For purposes of privacy and confidentiality, these women will be referred to by their fictitious names selected by them at the time of the interview. I interviewed six women in total, five of whom live in Auckland and one in Dunedin. Two of the women are sisters and chose to be interviewed simultaneously. All my subjects are New Zealand born Chinese who grew up in various parts of New Zealand within the time frame of the late 30s, 40s to 50s. The oral interviews lasted around an hour each although the length of time spent in the subject's home was much longer. Apart from two women, all the other four women were unknown to me before the interview and I traced them through the New Zealand Chinese Women's Group who meet once a month. These women were selected based merely on the criteria that they grew up in New Zealand within the time frame of late 1930s, 40s and 50s and no other set criteria such as educational or family economic background. I feel tremendously humbled and honoured that these women have so graciously shared their personal stories with me and I hope this essay will shed some light as to how and what it was like growing up in the 40s and 50s in New Zealand. I am conscious that I have been privileged as an outsider to be allowed to glimpse into their childhood. It is also my hope that this essay in a small way will render these women a voice to speak for themselves about their generation. Personally, I think it is time to take note of their generation, their triumphs and courage in the face of cultural adversity. I do not profess that these six women are totally representative of the whole generation, but they are at the very least voices of their generation and their voices should and ought to be recorded. Hence, it is with great pleasure that I introduce my six respondents:

1 Gemma: Born in Eketahuna near Masterton in 1951

2 Dor Li: Born in Auckland in 1934

3 Li Shan: Born in Carterton in 1944

4 Christine: Born in Wellington in 1944.

5 Leigh: Born in Wellington in 1951

6 Frances: Born in Takapuna, Auckland in 1941.

There is an unassuming quality and humbleness about these women that is very touching for they do not view themselves as courageous or their lives as part of history. The first time I spoke to Frances on the phone to ask if I could interview her, her reaction took me by surprise: "I am not sure I am the right person for you to interview, my parents are from the peasantry class, poor folks. I haven't thought about myself as important. Are you sure you want to interview me?" To which I replied: "You are precisely who I want to interview, not the rich and famous but the ordinary New Zealand Chinese women." This essay is a dedication to women of this generation.

Ethnic Identity

Whoever said that the best years of your life was when you are young was not Chinese, female and growing up in

New Zealand in the 1940s and 1950s, when the Chinese were regarded as second class citizens.

(Eva Ng, Amongst Ghosts 28)

Indeed, Eva Wong Ng's candid sentiments echo that of many of her generation. Fundamentally, mainstream New Zealanders in this period were unapologetically racist and racism was rife then by today's standards. Legally, the Chinese lost the right to naturalization from 1908 and it was only in 1951 that the legislation was repealed. Even then it was under the most stringent conditions including "that they subscribe a declaration of renunciation of Chinese nationality" and "that they are closer to the New Zealand way of life than to the Chinese"(Murphy 272).

These racist stipulations categorically force the Chinese of this generation to "live a double life of assimilated selves in the public arena and Chinese behind closed doors." (Wong, The Moulding of the Silent Immigrants 7)

Before we can discuss the notions of identity, it is necessary that we first understand the sociological environment of this era for invariably our sociological environment plays a part in shaping our identity, our psyche. The psyche of New Zealand born Chinese women was invariably shaped by their era, as we shall see from their testimonies. As Wong Liu Sheung, a woman of this generation testifies, "(t)he environment of our birth, the political and social pressures mould each of us into the people we are today." (The Silent Immigrants 7) In 1945 the New Zealand Census listed the total number of Chinese as 4,940 of whom only 1,526 were women. Ergo, Chinese women were a double minority, for they were not only a minority to mainstream New Zealanders but a minority among their own ethnicity. All my respondents resoundingly concur that their minority status was further accentuated by the fact that their Chinese physical features marked them apart from the other children in school. Hence their first awareness of being Chinese is through comparing themselves to the dominant group of blue eyes and blond hair. There is much truth in Gilbert Wong's candid reflection, a third generation Chinese New Zealander: "Our identity is shaped by how others see us—how we feel others see us. You always know you look different!" (Ip, Dragons On The Long White Cloud 29) A parallel can be drawn in Dr C.C.Wu's findings in his thesis: Chinatowns, a study of symbiosis and assimilation. Wu posits that even second and third generation Chinese Americans will inevitably feel a sense of perpetual alienation and displacement because of their physical features:

The yellow skin, a distinction more apparent than real, is an obstacle which keeps the Chinese and other Orientals from feeling perfectly at ease in America. Because of his colour, the young Chinese is treated much the same as his immigrant father. This makes him conscious of the fact that he must be different.

(Wu 287)

This is precisely the case when the miniscule number of second and third generation New Zealand Chinese children attending New Zealand schools cruelly marked them as the visible and different other and many had to endure the racist taunting of "Ching Chong Chinamen" daily at school. Li Shan, who grew up in Carterton, a small town with the typical small town mentality shares her experience of growing up as the only Chinese family in a small town.

It was a small town about 2000 people so everybody knew us. Being in a place where

you were visibly different in a tiny town meant that you were totally different and

everybody knew you and I don't mean just mean a few people. It was a town where

everybody talked about everybody else. Everybody knew everybody else. We had a huge amount of racism. I go to school and I don't know much English. I looked visibly different, I have black hair cut like kids hair in those days. There were a group of boys in school that decided I was going to be their grand little target. They would put stones in their pockets and pelt me whenever they saw me. Getting to school was a real cat and mouse game. I haven't done anything to them. I don't know them, they were not in my class and the reason why they did this to me was because I was Chinese. That's when I learnt a thing called racism, even though I didn't have a word for it then.

Unfortunately, racism was not confined to only small towns in New Zealand. The Chinese of that era grew up in the atmosphere where they were "undesirable immigrants" tolerated under sufferance. Eva Ng and her sisters who grew up in Newmarket, Auckland were often warned before leaving the shop and the warnings seem inconceivable to our now present multicultural generation.

"Be careful when you walk in the streets," cautioned the men at the shop whenever we went out. "Some of those larrikins might push you off the pavement in front of the bus and say it's just an accident. You can't tell the truth when you're dead. Some of them hate us Chinese. They're jealous, say we have no right to be in their country, and why don't we go back to where we belong. So make sure you walk on the inside, close to the shops."

(Eva Ng, Amongst Ghosts 28)

However, it would be misleading to stereotype all European New Zealanders of that era as racist. Eva stresses the kindness of her European neighbours and she was able to "slip in and out of their home as an extension of her own home." Frances, Christine and Leigh all vehemently testify to having kind neighbours, who minded them while their parents worked in their fruitshops. Frances has vivid memories of their neighbour, Auntie Dawn two doors from her parents' fruitshop, who helped her mother peel ginger even though she had her own shop to mind. The Gerbeck family who owned a fish shop also offered them free fish heads and fish bones and to this day their daughter and Frances have remained friends.

While all these women claimed to be aware of their ethnic identity at an early age simply because they could not help but notice their visible physical difference, there were other factors that caused these women to view their Chinese heritage as a disadvantage. Although I must emphasize that all these women while reminiscing about their childhood at no time verbalized any bitterness at the racism they experienced in the past. On the contrary, these women displayed an incredible sense of humour at their naïve childhood experiences that is devoid of self pity and victim mentality. It is obviously evident they harbour no residue of bitterness. Many of them preferred to dwell on the good memories and I felt embarrassed at having to ask them to specifically give me examples of their unpleasant memories.

Bickleen Fong acutely sums up the precarious position of this generation in terms of having to subsist between two worlds or dual cultures, where home is infinitely Chinese and the world outside is European.

The same individual has lived in two very different environments; he still observes the Customs and moral codes of two cultural groups, he thinks and speaks in two different languages, and has dual social connections, obligations and attitudes. Two streams of cultures meet in the one person. When the standard of conduct, habits and thoughts of the two communities conflict, as is often the case, the individual who is identified with both communities also experiences the conflict.

(Fong 43)

Having to transit between two opposing cultures must have been difficult and these women would have experienced painful internal conflicts psychologically. As Eva Ng confesses: "During my teenage years, life became most troubled and painful. There were conflicts within myself and also with my parentsâ€(i)t was a shock to discover people judged me because of my Chinese parents"(Eva, Amongst Ghosts 28-29). Hence bearing in mind the discriminative sociological attitudes prevalent at that time, it was not surprising but understandable that these young impressionable women found it easier to affirm with the European world of freedom, education and personal independence. For these women being Chinese meant definite disadvantages and repercussions. Being Chinese for these women when they were growing up has the association of having to work after school, weekends and during the school holidays. Christine, Gemma, Leigh and Dor Li also spoke of having to attend Chinese school, after their primary school and Christine and Leigh could not rationalize the logic for the necessity for it then since their parents hardly spoke to them apart from giving basic commands about work. Leigh says the "rudimentary and formal Chinese" they learned in the classroom was "completely useless" in their daily routine.

The underlying truth of the situation was many of this generation came from poor families who were committed to labour intensive businesses such as fruitering, laundering and market gardening; literally by working from "dawn to dusk" trying to eke out a living. All six women came from families who owned fruit shops and all spoke of having to work in the fruit shops at a very early age. Hence, in fact what these children learned was that to be a Chinese child meant "learning and being expected to work at home helping in the family business." While most children's earliest memory was getting a doll or swinging on the swing, Li Shan's earliest memory was bagging potatoes: "I remember and learned that when the needle reached a certain point, I was supposed to stop bagging."

Gemma's following sentiments and experiences are also typical of most Chinese children of her era as she consciously speaks in the plural pronoun "we":

As most Chinese parents were committed to a business of some kind, we children did

not get to take up after school activities such as swimming, ballet, Brownies, Girl Guides

etc. I was envious of a Kiwi classmate who went to ballet lessons but my parents did not

allow me to go. As soon as we were old enough, perhaps ten years old, my sister and I were

expected to help in the fruit shop after school and during school holidays. Therefore I feel

we missed out on a lot of social contact with children our own age, which Kiwi children

would have had. There was also the problem of transport, as most Chinese families did not have cars at that time, we never went away for holidays.

For Christine, it was not just the awareness that her family was different but that other Chinese families and Chinese children's experiences were parallel to hers.

There was a definite distinction between the lives of Chinese families and European families. Christine speaks of her painful experience:

My friends were all Chinese. The Europeans were so different. On the whole, looked down

their noses at you. There were some exceptions. Your life and their lives were so different.

We live in a fruit shop, we go to Chinese school after school. I really would have loved to

play the recorder but I couldn't because I had to go to Chinese school. I used to think I

want to be like everybody else. I tried very hard, the more you try the worst it becomes

because they don't want you. It doesn't work.

For Frances, "the awareness of being Chinese was more in the food (they) we ate. How we cooked it and our preference for different foods." Bickleen Fong concurs in her observation of the Chinese community in New Zealand: "The preference for their own food is a trait that the Chinese seem to retain the longest, in spite of the many long years that they have spent in a new country" (Fong 113).

Another cultural difference Frances notices was the way "we made our beds differently, and had camphor boxes to store our blankets." Although at that time she admits, she "did not think of it as a cultural difference, more that we were not very well off and that we could not afford to buy furniture or extras for the home."

The whole concept of what is "playtime" at the playground takes on a whole new perspective for Li Shan as a Chinese child. With humour she recalls her understanding of playtime or lack of it when she laughingly says: I had never learnt to play because I had only learnt to work. So I felt playing in the sandpit

really senseless and the jungle gym even more senseless. I had no idea why you would even

want to do that. I had no pre school education so this is my first socialization and I spent

a lot of my time apart from the other children, sitting and watching other children which is a

habit of mine.

For all these women the essence of being a Chinese child growing up in their era meant you were definitely a disadvantaged cultural other. The essence of Chinese culture per se with the richness of its traditional philosophies of art and literature was virtually non-existent in these homes bearing in mind their parents came from humble peasantry backgrounds in China. As Christine succinctly remarks:

Well I wasn't formally, officially taught about Chinese culture. Nothing. What I observed

was all negative. So I got only negative things about Chinese culture, like Chinese

Spits, Chinese talking loudly, play mahjong, slurping their soups. To me, that's all I

learned, I didn't learn anything positive about being Chinese.

Christine's honest sentiments were sad but generally true of her generation. Bickleen Fong has postulated that cultural assimilation should be "a two way process" and "if a more educated class of Chinese immigrants were permitted to come into New Zealand, they would offer to this country some of the best aspects of Chinese culture and ways of life" (Fong 128-129). Unfortunately, Fong observes this is (was) not the case in New Zealand. "(F)or the New Zealand Chinese it has been mainly a one way process-that of the Chinese assimilating

New Zealand culture-because the Chinese in New Zealand (were) not capable of offering something of their own culture in return"(Fong 129). One has to note that Fong's observations were made in 1959. Fortunately, New Zealand 2002 is moving towards a healthier mix of cultural diversity.

Have the attitudes changed? How do these women rationalize their ethnic identity at this moment in time? From my interviews, I would attest that their awareness and pride of their Chinese cultural heritage has had a positive renaissance. All six women commented on their positive experiences of not only visiting China but also making their way back to their ancestral villages as an indication of coming to terms with their heritage-an acknowledgement, pride and acceptance of their Chinese culture; as an integral part of their identity. Although it should also be noted that visiting their ancestral villages has also paradoxically affirmed their identity as New Zealand Chinese as well.

Many of these women are more proficient in English than in their own mother tongue; they have collectively echoed that learning one's own language is important and should be encouraged although it should not be a criteria for defining Chineseness. Henry Chan has concurred that while "language is the maintenance of culture" it should not be a criteria for defining Chineseness. (Chan 3-6) As to the question of the importance of speaking Chinese, Christine eloquently puts it in the contextual perspective of then and now:

Yes, yes, speaking Chinese is important to me now that I've grown up. Not when I was

young, it was just a hindrance. It was something that belonged to the past; it was old

fashioned, a real "No, No". When we go out with our old relatives, they speak loudly in

Cantonese and you cringed inside because you knew everybody was looking. Chinese was

looked down. Chinese was Cantonese, Mandarin was non existent. Everything Chinese was

not good. As for us, we were not encouraged to say Chinese culture was good. We were not

taught Chinese culture.

Christine's visit to China brought home to her that as a New Zealand Chinese, her Cantonese language was archaic, locked in the time language of the Cantonese villages of the 1920s to 40s:

We were isolated like an island. The rest of the world moved on and learned new idioms and technical terms whereas we were stuck in the time language of the Cantonese villages of the 1920s to 1940s. No new blood telling us what these words were. Even if we can speak Cantonese, it would be the old village Cantonese. This was really brought home to me when I visited China in the 1980s. My sisters understood me but she had to translate for her children, the younger generation because they didn't understand me.

Leigh further adds that Chinese New Year was a non-event when they were growing up. "We had no idea what are Chinese festivals, we had no Chinese calendars and it was only in the past few years that I realize what is Chinese New Year. Our idea of Chinese festivals are weddings and funerals."

Chineseness for Frances is not just a superfluous idea but very practical and down to earth: "Being Chinese does not have to be that you can speak the language. I think it is more important that you have the feelings and thoughts of being Chinese. Respect of the family. Understanding the ways of the Chinese." Although the definition of what are the "ways of the Chinese" remains highly debatable and controversial among the NZBC and some of the recent Chinese immigrants.

Trinh Min Ha has postulated in *When the Moon Waxes Red* that identity is fluid and can never be fixed. Hence, Trinh advocates the crossing of boundaries and coins the term, "hyphen identity" be it female, ethnic or nation identity. The essence of identity for Trinh is the paradoxical notion that the only constant for identity is that it is forever transient: "one is born over and over again as hyphen rather than a fixed entity" (157). Likewise,

Henry Chan posits in his discourse: *Rethinking the Chinese Diasporic Identity: Citizenship, Cultural identity, and the Chinese in Australia*, that the notion of Chineseness has to be "renegotiated from time to time" and "it has different significance for different individuals" in "different sociological structures." There is no doubt the ethnic identities of these women are evolving, as identity cannot remain static.

How then do these women define their ethnic identity today?

Li Shan has obviously struggled and pondered on the question of her ethnicity as a visible minority for a long time and the summation of her reflection is thought provoking and profound and perhaps best describes the psyche of many of her generation:

I have tried everything, 58 years of it. Consciously being Chinese and then I have consciously

tried that Chineseness is nothing and chuck out everything that is Chinese. One day I stood

in front of the mirror and decided that I am never going to change how I look so I better

get on with it. So at the ripe old age of about 30, the penny dropped! Then I kind of grew
 in my identity as a Chinese. Going to China in 1986 really helped that process and doing MA
 in Anthropology in ethnicity! It has taken me a long time to realize that in the big map of
 things it includes the sociology of living in New Zealand. I am not like the Chinese person in
 China. I am not like the Chinese person in Hong Kong. I am not like the Chinese person in
 Taiwan. I am not like the Chinese person in Malaysia. I am a Chinese person in
 New Zealand. I think Chineseness is not a noun but a verb. I do think ethnicity is a
 changing thing inside you because as you mature and your critical environment changes!
 It is not static. To be Chinese today is not the same as a Chinese when I was 20 or when I
 was 5 and they are all valid forms of Chineseness. The outward celebration of what it is to
 be Chinese really is in the end about individual choice.

Dor Li has maintained that her identity as a Chinese-New Zealander is a
 unique identity. Neither China-Chinese nor foreign-Westerner. Somewhere between- as fence sitter to some extent,
 observing and extracting what I consider the best from both cultures. Your term 'hyphenated identity' is
 probably as good a description as any, implying an equal input of sources. I sometimes feel like a Chameleon.
 Which is the real

me? I feel comfortable with both Chinese and Westerners whoever I happen to be with.

All six women have overwhelmingly echoed sentiments of pride, having no regrets for being Chinese at this present
 moment in time. In retrospect, Frances is able to reconcile her parents' generation of the traditional Chinese
 world of hard work:

I am proud that I am Chinese. I am also proud of my parents. They were hard working
 and honest, friendly and caring people. They may not have shown their affections like other
 races but we knew they loved us and were proud of us. I am proud to be a Chinese New
 Zealander. I have the best of both worlds. I think Chinese New Zealanders think differently

than other Chinese. Could I be wrong?
 Christine, like Li Shan has been reflecting about her Chinese identity in the past few years and has even started
 writing about her family history. Her reflection like Dor Li similarly affirms to a hyphenated identity:
 I have acknowledged for myself, I am not one or the other. I realize I am not going

to fit into the European culture. I am someone who is neither here nor there. Not someone
 who is stuck in the middle but just in the middle. I can go from one to the other and

can move in both groups.
 Christine's thoughts of being referred to, as a "banana" is poignant for it reflects how her generation has been
 harshly misunderstood and unfairly judged. In her words:
 To be called a banana by another Chinese person is doubly hurtful especially when

they don't know a thing about your past. They are just talking on top of their heads based
 on their own experiences.

Christine also stresses that though many of her generation are more proficient in English than in Chinese, what
 matters is "what you feel inside" as she says: "Many of my generation are very Chinese inside. The

Europeans totally have different values." Therefore as such she feels they are not "bananas."
 Dor Li who has also been labeled a banana even though she "can speak Cantonese after a fashion" has this to say:
 Being called a banana is meant as a denigrating term and can be hurtful if one allows it to

be. I prefer to think of it as a term of envy-what the perpetrator of the term doesn't have is

the breadth of cultural experience of their victim. I also think it is a very racist remark,

implying that one culture is superior to the other.

There is indeed some validity for Christine and Dor Li's sentiments. For Chinese raised in a homogeneous Chinese culture or society such as Taiwan, Hong Kong or China tend to view ethnicity from an ethnocentric perspective as they have the luxury of viewing it from the perspective of the dominant group. Culturally, they have never been in the disadvantaged position of the cultural other to the dominant group. For other diasporic Chinese, who have had to grow up as marginalized groups, have had to struggle with ethnicity and identity issues, tend to view themselves as cultural hybrids and adopt some cultural value of the dominant group. Evidently, this was the case for the marginalized New Zealand Chinese of the 40s and 50s, with their inevitable hyphenated identity of East and West.

Gender Identity

Although my mother was quite liberal, she still favoured boys-my brothers because

that was how she was brought up.

Christine's candid reflection is very much an indication of her times. If the Chinese were second class citizens in the 40s and 50s then the Chinese females were third class citizens. Hence to be a Chinese female in the 40s and 50s was not an enviable position. The traditional patriarchal culture transported from China prevailed amongst the Chinese community in New Zealand.

This generation of Chinese women to a large extent carried a double yoke for being doubly marginalized. They faced discrimination not just from mainstream New Zealanders but within their own ethnicity and family. Frances' family was not a typical case and as she admits she was "the apple of her father's eye" but for all my other respondents, it was generally not an enviable position.

Admittedly, from the outset I understood intellectually that this generation who grew up in New Zealand were the pioneering settlers but it was not until I met these women that I understood the full significance of what it meant to be the pioneering settlers that my respect for these women grew. I think it would be fair to say it is much easier to be a Chinese woman today than it was in the 40s and 50s.

Generally, these women came from homes where their mothers were not highly educated even in Chinese. Many mothers hardly spoke English if any in some cases. The mothers were often over worked themselves working in the fruit shop, bearing children, cooking three meals not just for the family but the workers as well. Christine's mother was 14 when she married her father as his third concubine. The age difference between them was over forty years. Christine remembers her mother as "forever pregnant" and the age gap between her and her youngest brother was 21 years. The biography of Van Chu Ling, a contemporary of Christine's mother's generation, lists her as a mother of 18 children when she died at the age of 49 from probable sheer exhaustion of having to run a home, shop and constant child bearing. Her life would have closely mirrored the lives of the mothers of these women. Van Chu Ling's daughters never remember her sitting down, except to sew or darn, and she often fell asleep over her handiwork through sheer exhaustion" (lp, The New Zealand Book of Women 704). All my six women's recollections of their mothers were that they all worked tremendously hard, both at home and at the shop.

As a result, Christine says she had to learn to fend and make decisions for herself. During the interview, Christine stressed that when I referred to the plural term "parents" for her it meant "mother" since she didn't consider her father as a parent other than as a biological parent. He was far too old to be bothered with her and her brothers and sisters. Her empathy is with her mother even though Christine admits her mother was by no means a role model for her:

Mum wasn't highly educated. She thought the teacher taught you everything so she didn't

have to teach you anything. The teacher and the school were the know all. We had to work

to bring in money. Her view of education is to read and write, that's as far as it went. The

two older brothers had to work to send money back to China. Mum had a hard time trying

to bring all of us up.

There is a dominant feeling among the women that they had to make educational, career and marriage decisions on their own because as Gemma says, her parents' generation lacked the skills, experience and knowledge to advise:

I chose my own career, marriage partner and was free to make plans for my future without any guidance or advice from my parents. This was mainly because my parents were not able to advise me as they did not know about any careers. They acknowledged the fact that New Zealand is a western country where young people chose their

own marriage partners.

More significantly, although these women were the first generation that were educated in New Zealand and many would have entered university based on academic results, there was a general pressure for these women to stop their education when they reached 15. For it was deemed a waste of time for girls or women to have tertiary education seeing they were going to end up as wives and mothers anyway. University for daughters was seen as a definite waste of time and money. As Gemma explains very simply the expectation of women in her era: "In the 40s and 50s most girls went straight into a job after secondary school. My father said it was a wasn't worth it for girls to go to University, as they will soon get married and have children." Pauline Wong is another case in point, her experience is typical of women of her generation as she recalls: "My parents loved me but had no special aspirations for me. They had often said, 'you are a girl remember.' 'I'd loved to go to university, but there was no way! My parents were quite enlightened! but the fact of life was that I had to work for the family'" (Ip, *Dragons On the Long White Cloud* 81)

Bickleen Fong who grew up in this era, shares her experiences from the same kind of pressure from her relatives: I remember relatives talking to my parents in front of me, 'Make her work in the shop, then marry her off. Girls need not study so much.' I can't remember what father replied, Mother didn't say anything. Probably everyone was watching what a mess I would make of my life, as an example of how education ruins a woman!

(Ip, *Home Away from Home* 116)

There was in fact a more insidious reasoning for parents though perfectly logical, not to have their daughters too highly educated for they might end up as old maids, which would be against the grain of traditional Confucian thought of the trajectory of a women's life: first a daughter, then wife and finally mother. Li Shan was most frustrated when she could not enter university even though her results were good enough. When she asked for her father's permission to go to university, she was blatantly told: "No" because if you are too clever, you don't get married." In retrospect, Li Shan admits, "When I think of that statement I am somewhat horrified but I am more horrified by the fact that I actually believed him." In contrast, her brother would have been allowed to enter University had he not died from brain tumour at 15. Such double standards were common and typical among the Chinese community. In fact, Li Shan went against her father's wishes when she finally went to Teacher's College in Wellington.

However, Dor Li managed to enter university but her tertiary education is rare for a woman of her era. Li Shan returned to University later in life and today has an MA in Anthropology. In spite of the double marginalization there were many impressive accomplishments among this generation of women: Bickleen Fong became the first Chinese woman to gain an M.A. degree. Eva Ng became the first Chinese to be registered as a Pharmacist in 1959 and today still practices by the same registration number. Wailin Elliott is recognized among her peers as the first Chinese professional potter in New Zealand. Mabel Sang is the first Chinese to be naturalized on the 28 August 1952.

One cannot help but applaud these accomplishments bearing in mind these women achieved out of sheer determination without any role models and did not receive any encouragement from their family. In fact, Dr. James Ng a contemporary of this generation points out, there were conflicts between this generation and their parents' generation for their parents who had suffered institutional discrimination, generally "believed New Zealand held an uncertain future at best for Chinese. In their eyes future European education was wasted time, a dead end because Europeans would not use us or promote us" (Ng, *Windows on a Chinese Past* 222). With foresight, this generation reasoned and believed that the only way out of their parents traditional businesses of fruitering, laundering and market gardening was through education. Though marginalized this generation bred and educated in New Zealand considered New Zealand home.

Traditionally, the expected role of women was functional, which was primarily to bear children to carry the family lineage. Although all six women expressed the freedom allocated by their parents to choose their own marriage partners there was a strict unwritten and unspoken code that they were only free to choose from their own ethnicity or "to marry within race." Christine laughs and then sighs that during her time there were only about 100 men of marriageable age to choose from and that is taking into account the whole country not just in the city she grew up. Even then she adds, the government policy was "unfair" towards Chinese women in that Chinese women if they chose to marry in Hong Kong, were not permitted to take their husbands back to New Zealand. However, if Chinese men chose to marry women in Hong Kong they could apply to take their wives back to New Zealand. Hence, as Nigel Murphy remarks, "Chinese New Zealand women suffered not only racism at the hands of The New Zealand government, but had to put up with institutionalized sexism as well" (Murphy 85).

For those that did not toe the line of marrying within their own ethnicity, there were severe and dire consequences. There were a few cases where women were disowned by their families. Li Shan spoke of her painful experience when her parents disowned her when she chose to "marry out of race." Lynda Chanwai Earle's *Ka Shue*, which is highly biographical of three generations of her family, speaks of her mother's humiliation of being disowned when she chose to marry a European-"guilo". Chanwai's mother came to New Zealand as a war refugee baby when she was two and belongs to the same pioneering settlers' generation. One of my

respondents somberly mentions a case where both parents committed suicide when they discovered that their child was intending to marry a "guilo." Marriage within race is viewed very seriously by the traditional Chinese parents of this generation.

Presumably, from the point of view of these traditional parents, cultural differences simply cannot transcend love and interracial marriages would be fraught with tensions and conflicts, ought to be avoided at all cost. After all judging from their own experiences, the mainstream New Zealand society has never welcomed them as part of New Zealand's citizens. Therefore, in their perspective their objections are motivated by their children's best interests at heart.

On the topic of marriage, I was surprised that apart from one of my respondents, all five of them confessed that they would much prefer their own children to marry within their own ethnicity. Although all have said that ultimately, it would be their children's choice, yet there is a very strong undercurrent that they would strongly prefer it to be within race. One of my respondents has even offered to "kai siew" -broker a marriage for the children but they persistently declined; though all in the end chose to marry within their own ethnicity. Although this generation of women clearly transit between two cultures, the Chinese pride of race seems remarkably strong in spite of their western acculturation. Bickleen Fong also describes the signs of superficial assimilation which borders on clothes and language but as she points out it is the attitudes that takes the longest to assimilate. (Fong, Chinese New Zealanders: A study of Assimilation) On the point of marriage, it would seem my respondents have yet to embrace interracial marriages or biological assimilation.

The Chinese women in New Zealand were not accorded any more respect in New Zealand than they would have in China, which means there was in effect-no respect. Even though the number of Chinese women in New Zealand was incredibly low and they often helped in the shop as well as having to run the home, they were not viewed as an equal in the marriage or business partnership. Though many of my respondents admitted that they and their mothers were probably more appreciated here in New Zealand than they would have been in China. All five of the women thought of their mothers' relationship with their fathers as unequal in terms of respect. One senses an indignant underlying tone of resentment from these women that their mothers, who had to work so hard, yet received neither respect nor acknowledgment for their contribution.

Gemma had this to say about respect for women for her generation and her mother's generation: It would be hard for them to gain respect as it was expected of them to spend their lives as caregivers and homemakers, not much better than servants. I don't think Chinese women were thought of as precious then. Some New Zealand Chinese men may appreciate their wives and daughters more now, as women have more educational opportunities now, so are more equal in job qualifications than in the 1940s and 50s.

Leigh relates the will of a Chinese market gardener, who passed away a couple of years ago and apparently left all his property to his sons leaving none for his wife and daughters and yet his wife and daughters would have undoubtedly toiled in the family market gardening business for years. Leigh elaborates that this is evidence of the lack of respect for Chinese women in many Chinese patriarchal families even today, so one can imagine what it must be like in the past.

Nation Identity

All six women are staunchly proud of their nation identity: they are proud New Zealanders and not even the racist sociological environment of their era can rob or deny them of that pride.

Gemma is crystal clear about her nation identity and her adamant claims are concurrent with the other women: I am a New Zealand born Chinese woman, 2nd generation born here, as my father was first generation born here. I feel like a New Zealander as this is my home country. My way of thinking is that of a New Zealander.

Dor Li's visit to her parents' ancestral villages was paradoxical in nature that while her consciousness of her Chinese heritage increased it also "defined (her) my identity as a New Zealander of Chinese heritage." This generation has been endowed with the label: "Model Minority" by some observers. Although this label superficially appears complimentary it is as all labels, not without its downside upon closer scrutiny. It would be naïve and too simplistic to think that it is our traditional Chinese values of hard work, perseverance, filial piety, respect for law and order that have earned us the label "Model Minority." To a large extent, these traditional values have played a major role in our successes and this generation has earned their well-deserved admiration and respect through their educational achievements from mainstream New Zealanders. However, on another level, there is an intrinsic quality of the NZBC that has also highlighted them as the "model minority"-their low crime rate, self reliance, and their close-knit kinship that is known to look after themselves and close ranks. Admittedly, these are traits that any minority group should and would be proud of but on a closer inspection these traits come with limitations that stunt a minority group from developing-reaching newer and higher heights.

The label of "Model minority" comes at a price-the price of "knowing of one's place."

The Model and Silent Minority

There is undoubtedly a paradoxical value of silence of this generation of women if one is attuned and cares enough to listen. The paradoxical silence of the 40s and 50s speak volumes and there are many factors that attribute to this multi layered silence.

First let us explore and establish the Eastern and Western essence of silence. There is a definite contrast between the Eastern and Western definition and value of silence. In Western culture, silence is generally not only merely the absence of speech but also denotes a negative value. As Saville-Troike elucidates, in the Western culture, "(w)ithin linguistics, silence has traditionally been ignored except for its boundary-making function-denoting the beginning and end of utterances. The tradition has been to define it negatively-as merely the absence of speech"(3). In contrast, Cheung King Kok postulates, in Eastern culture for instance in Chinese, "the most common ideogram for silence is synonymous with "serenity." Whereas in United States silence is generally looked upon as passive, (but) in China and Japan, it traditionally signals pensiveness, vigilance or grace." (127) In fact, Cheung enlightens that in the East "silence is a form of strength"(145). Saville- Troike reminds us that "just as one can utter words without saying anythingâ€one can say something without uttering words"(6). Personally, I feel it is this essence of multi-layered silence of the pioneering settlers that paradoxically says something about them as a generation.

On the simplest level, Christine justifies the silence of her era through the pragmatic fact "that many women of her generation were not educated enough to write of their experiences" which is factually consistent about women of her generation. Besides, as Christine nonchalantly added: "What would we write about?" Christine's question dawned on me that the underlying question and issue was not just "What to write?" but also "Who would read it?" Would there be a target audience at all? A receptive target audience? In all fairness, I would hardly think so, taking into account the political and social climate of that era. Hence, to this generation of women it would seem their silence is an indication that they instinctively knew their place.

On another deeper level, part of the silence can be explained by what Wong Liu Sheung terms "her grandfather's story" that speaks of the poor nineteenth century Chinese immigrant's contentment to be allowed to live in someone's land-borrowed space by trying to be as invisible and quiet as possible for fear of drawing attention that might lead to further discrimination. Her "grandfather's story" is the Chinese heritage that is typically passed down to many of her NZBC generation as well as many diasporic Chinese around the world:

Granddaughter and Grandsons, when you go out into the world, be very careful. Do not do anything that might bring attention to you. Do not create waves, or stand out like tall poppies. Do not speak out, but gain respect through diligent work habits and accomplishment. And most of all be cautious.

(Wong 6)

The NZBC has fulfilled their grandparents' wishes; they have earned respect through educational achievements through diligence and perseverance. They became the model minority. In parallel, other diasporic Chinese immigrants from China, who have settled around the world have also produced a generation of "model minority" communities for instance, in America, South East Asia and Canada. For invariably, whether we care to admit it or not, we are all sons and daughters of these poor Chinese peasants from China, who emigrated precisely because they were poor and had to learn to be silent while living in borrowed space.

Saville-Troike exemplifies that the "(q)uality of speech versus silence may also be interpreted differently across cultural boundariesâ€Differing norms of appropriateness as to when to talk and when to remain silent can give rise to cross cultural misunderstanding" (11). Traditionally and culturally, the Chinese sense of propriety is not to be "loud"; shouting and protesting by waving placards, or making public their misfortunes is not typically a Chinese trait. The goldminers never shared with their families the humiliations they endured in foreign land. There is the Chinese cultural understanding of "keeping silent" about taboo subjects or unpleasantness. Contrary to Western culture, of "keeping silent" as a mark of cowardice, in Eastern culture, "keeping silent" is an act of sacrifice, self control, propriety and strength. Hence, in a way, the silence of this generation reflects the inner strength of their survival of cultural adversity without the residual bitterness or victim mentality. Today, the urban Chinese and youth do not typically share nor view "keeping silent" as a virtue. The younger generation is verbal and this often causes friction and tension that generates intergenerational conflicts between traditional parents and youths, who grow up enmeshed in Eastern and Western culture.

Wong Liu Shueng in her recent public lecture: "The Moulding of the Silent Immigrants: New Zealand Born Chinese (NZBC)" admits that her generation worked hard to assimilate in order to be accepted by mainstream New Zealanders.

Both Beven Yee and Wong Liu Sheung concur that the NZBC has learned to assimilate "by absorbing racism" (Yee 64) as well as "tactics which aimed at invisibility" such as not "speaking one's native tongue in public," or "not reacting to racism"(Wong 6) and other assimilated behaviour or technique that aims at invisibility: Sometimes even joining in racist behaviour to separate the self from the collective others, or behaving like a model minority, where self alienation becomes expressed as being better than the best, acting in known ways acceptable to the host nation or having to constantly manipulate one's own identity to ensure acceptance.

(Wong 6)

However, Wong eloquently admonishes her generation to move out of the silent model minority mould by addressing and confronting their silence, attitude, perspective and apathy. It goes some way to explain how the external environment moulded us into model minority status. It is a first step, for we in the Chinese community must continue to seek understanding of ourselves and educate not only ourselves but also the wider possible group. We need to explain why we have become 'the model minority' so we can all move on. I suggest that the present environment is time for us to update our thinking and break out of that mode.

(Wong 1)

On a deeper psychological level, the silence of this generation can perhaps be paralleled to other victim groups who have suffered from some psychological stress and would prefer to remain silent as one way of coping with a painful experience.

Victims of political and cultural racism, who have had to endure various forms of personal as well as legislative humiliation such as thumb printing, alien registration cards may understandably prefer to let the past die in silence. From my interviews with these women, I have also come to view their silence with a deeper understanding and I respect their prerogative of dealing with their past. Although the weight of William Faulkner's words: "The past is never dead. It's not even past" is one of the reasons I am working on this research topic. Oral history is one way marginalized groups can reclaim their past and recapture their legitimate history.

In recent years, there have been more inquiry, awareness and debate about ethnic, gender and nation identity among this generation and other New Zealand born Chinese. There is no doubt, the greater number of recent Chinese Immigrants of the early 90s has to a certain extent sparked of this inquiry. As Dr. Manying Ip posits in an interview with Michele Hewitson, "not all Chinese New Zealanders are consciously thinking of their forging a stronger identity. But most have been forced by circumstances to learn more about their own history, heritage, language and culture."(Hewitson) Roger Chang, a fourth generation Chinese New Zealander speaks of having to confront his ethnic identity at the height of the xenophobia: "I did not actually identify with being a Chinese until I was about nine, when I had the fact pushed in front of me. There's nothing like being confronted by racial ignorants to affirm your cultural identity"(Allen and Roger Chang).

However, it remains debatable whether the greater number of recent Chinese immigrants have had a positive or negative effect or a combination of both on this generation of New Zealand Chinese. All my respondents seem to have mixed feelings. On the one hand, they do not like to be "tarred by the same tar brush" but on the other hand, the open celebration of Chineseness is a welcome change and they like the availability of Chinese grocery items where their mother would have had to make from scratch in time past. Christine recalls how her backyard used to stink for weeks when her grandmother and father tried to concoct their own version of Chinese sauces by trial and error.

Personally, I think it is a combination of factors that have caused the inquiry of identity, partly initiated by the greater number of Chinese Immigrants but also partly due to the fact that this generation has now reached a maturity and are at a better position to reflect. The political environment has changed and the sociological environment has improved although the recent appalling racist attitudes in the early 90s remind us that racial harmony in New Zealand is fragile and is at its infant stage.

Another fundamental issue is the attitude of the host nation towards its hyper-visible Chinese citizens. Although the repressive legislations have been lifted, a majority of the mainstream society still views the second and third generation Chinese settlers as foreigners just because of their visible ethnicity; they are still perceived as the social and political "other". The underlying salient issue is the minority's perception of identity is override by the dominant society's perception of the minority's place and value in the society. In a study of new Chinese migrants conducted in the 1990s, the study claims "the successful integration of immigrants into the host society depends, in part on the willingness of the dominant society to allow it." (Ho, Chen and Bedford) Gilbert Wong eloquently speaks about the constant harassment many visible New Zealanders experience with regards to their nation identity:

This year when I was driving through Whangarei, a petrol attendant asked where I was from. I replied: "Auckland but I was born in Whangarei." He refused to accept that and became surly when I told him I was in a hurry. He felt no need to explain himself. He would not. His skin and hair colour and the shape of his eyes automatically grant him legitimacy. He could say he was a New Zealander and nobody would require him to prove it or explain

how that came to be. Nobody question who he is.

(qtd in Hewitson)

Li Shan speaks of the same patronizing behaviour and attitude she has to encounter every now and then: People say the craziest things to me, "gosh you speak good English, don't you?" and I say, "yes, I was born here and I often have to say it 4 times in the course of the conversation as I am trying to get them to think who I am. Unless the mindset of mainstream New Zealanders evolves to include hyper-visible Chinese New Zealanders as to who they really are, patronizing attitudes will persist. The disparaging painful truth about being a hyper-visible New Zealander is as Gilbert Wong reveals: "you risk being defined by your differences, rather than by your affinities with mainstream New Zealand, the big question is what these are." The significant point Wong raises is that many local born Chinese have never had positive Chinese role models either on screen or in literary writing and as a result the Chinese community have tended to "define itself by what it is not rather than what it aspires to be." (qtd in Hewitson). Citing Kirsten Wong in *Dragons on the Long White Cloud*, Gilbert Wong stresses: "We even define ourselves negatively. We're not criminals, we're not lazy, we're no longer market gardeners, we don't work in laundries now." Likewise, Bickleen Fong resonates: It is particularly galling to these Chinese New Zealanders to meet with racial discrimination and to be treated like any other first generation 'Chinaman', when by birthright, they are New Zealanders. They speak English with no foreign accent, their thoughts, ideals and attitudes are those of New Zealand.

(Fong 47)

On an optimistic note, Gilbert Wong believes that in time New Zealand's mono-culturalism or bi-culturalism can be rectified to include cultural diversity but "artists and writers need to articulate cultural identity" and hopefully there will be "Chinese New Zealanders who, through their art and writing will do this. They need time and support" (qtd in Hewitson).

There has also been a learning curve for the Chinese community: both old and new settlers in the past decade. For both the pioneering settlers and their third generation children and new Chinese settlers have come to realize that in spite of their many differences they also share many similarities as Dr. James Ng observes:

Both Kiwi-Chinese and East Asian Chinese newcomers share a basic Chineseness-the same pride of race, shared values like a high regard for the elderly and education and similar problems of assimilation in a dominant European culture.

(Ng, *Social differences between Kiwi Chinese and Chinese Newcomers*)

David Wong, the deputy Chairperson of the New Zealand Chinese Association of the Auckland branch in the latest June 2002 newsletter succinctly reminded both groups that though "we are different, we are all one family, we are all Chinese." Besides, he adds "while the New Zealand Chinese are learning more about their Chinese heritage, the new settlers are also absorbing many New Zealand values" bridging a better understanding of each other. (Wong, *New Zealand Chinese and the New Settler Chinese are part of the mosaic of life*)

Steven Young, a contemporary of this generation has expressed that the lack of interest and awareness among the local born Chinese is due to cultural isolation and as a result many local born Chinese are politically and socially passive. On the other hand, the new immigrants, who have grown up in an environment in which their culture is dominant are more politically conscious, therefore more willing to participate in the political process, which is one way of gaining recognition and achieving some political and social leverage in terms of multiculturalism. He has also rejected the ignorant notion posed by some that the Chinese are considered *Tau iwi* in New Zealand since some Chinese New Zealanders are fourth generation New Zealanders and some have even died in defense of the country. (Young, *The Chinese in a Bicultural New Zealand: The way forward*)

There is also a need to bridge better understanding between the two cultures of East and West. While they are differences between the two cultures, they are also intrinsically common values such as honesty, value of education, and aspirations shared by all civilizations. Bickleen Fong confirms in the study of the two cultures:

It has been found by some that many of the so called antagonistic traits of the cultures of China and New Zealand are more apparent than real. Means are different, the ends may be differently expressed, but intrinsically they are similar. Below the surface of contradictions there is a core of common values, which are shared by all civilizations.

(Fong 45)

Conclusively, all my respondents have acknowledged that coming to terms with their ethnic identity has been a gradual process. All six women have resoundingly testified that their awareness and appreciation of their Chineseness have increased

with maturity. There is a dominant feeling that their sociological environment has played a major role in shaping their ethnic, gender and nation identity that is reflective of their era. The struggles and tensions have been

more painful for some than others but all have nevertheless reached a renaissance of their Chinese heritage. More poignant is the affirmation of their identity as New Zealand Chinese: a hyphenated identity of East and West that enables them to have a dual consciousness and perspective—a blessing in disguise.

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