

Ching Chong Chinamen: When Friends Become Strangers - Sept 1995

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by

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The Taoist philosopher, Lao Tzu, once said:

"That which has a six-foot frame, two hands and two feet, hair on top and teeth in the mouth and moves upright - ordinary men call human.

But it is not impossible for a man to have a beast's heart. That which is winged or horned, has spaced teeth and spread claws, and flies or prowls - ordinary men call a beast.

But it is not impossible for a beast to have a human heart. Yet if it does, men will still shun it because of its looks."

When the latest wave of prejudice against Asians began to wash over this country in the early 90s - the result of a change in immigration policy which saw a doubling of the Asian population within five years - Lao Tzu's words seemed particularly apt. New Zealanders of Chinese descent suddenly found themselves being shunned in situations where before they had been accepted, and all because of their looks, their physical similarity to a group of people which various elements in the majority society had decided they didn't want. Furthermore, they found themselves being labelled "Asian," a catch-all term that was convenient but failed to reflect the diversity of origins and cultures of the peoples it lumped together. The contemptuous tone which often accompanied the label wasn't lost on them either.

For me, the effect of this was to force a re-think. Not about my identity, which if anything became more secure, but about the true level of acceptance of us in this country. Had a century of keeping our heads down and being law-abiding, hard-working, quiet achievers really counted for nothing? When I look at the 1993 headline "The Inv-Asian," beside the 1894 headline "The Chinkey Invasion," it's not hard to draw any other conclusion. Although I must say it's a puzzle how 1.25% of the total population constitutes an invasion …

A consequence of all this is that a subtle wedge is being driven into the relationship between European and Chinese. At this point I should say that I can only speak from my own experience and perspective as a Chinese, rather than for all Asians. However, I know that some of it will have resonance for other Asian minorities, and indeed all those who have had the experience of being a migrant.

So what is this wedge in our relationship? On our part, a mix of wariness and self-consciousness when approaching strangers - will I be abused and told to 'Go Home'? If I'm driving and forget to indicate that I'm changing lanes, am I going to get the fingers and be yelled at for being an Asian driver? As trivial as such incidents might seem, let me assure you that the shock and deep sense of injustice that they engender is not. In spite of ourselves we begin to question the genuineness of our relationship. Prejudice and racism towards us have clearly not gone away, and we look at Europeans with new eyes, and wonder. Friends, in the broadest sense, have become strangers.

On the Europeans' part, what appears to be an explosion of Asian faces on the street is for some extremely threatening. But even those well-disposed toward the Chinese already here have begun to comment on Asian children taking over the classroom and Kiwi children missing out on attention; to make disparaging remarks about big houses and big cars and displays of wealth; to show irritation at the poor English of some of the adult migrants; and to express fears of the Triads and an increase in crime. For them, too, it is a new and uncomfortable situation. They find themselves generalising about and objectifying Asians, and whether intentional or not, their Chinese friends are swept up in their comments and so they, too, become as strangers.

Yet let's be realistic. This isn't new. Wherever the Chinese have gone in the world, they have almost always been treated with fear and contempt. Tolerated, yes, for the contribution they bring in the form of labour or money, but rarely welcomed in an openhearted way as an equal. Any respect eventually accorded has had to be earned, and earned in European, not Chinese terms.

And sometimes it has to be earned more than once. In the late 30s and 40s, my parents owned the general store in Utiku, a small town just south of Taihape. Recently I learned from my mother how well-loved they were; their generosity to the community acknowledged in such ways as their being feted as the guests of honour at the ball to celebrate VJ Day. Yet 20 years later, having left Utiku for Lower Hutt, I can still hear the hurt in her voice as she told me of overhearing a shop customer referring to us contemptuously as "the Chows."

Now, 30 years later, it still goes on. After a newspaper interview I gave earlier this year in which I said 'we Chinese needed to stand up now and speak out against prejudice,' I received this letter:

"What a load of shit. We have been fighting you yellow cunts for the last fifty plus years with great results. It doesn't matter where you're born or what clothes you're in - you are still the enemy. Please make noises as it will make us hate you even more. The only good gook is a dead gook."

It would be easy to dismiss this as ignorance, just the natural human fear of the different that helped us survive in earlier times. But that was then, and this is now. Why, in today's shrinking world, should yet another generation of young Chinese be forced to become invisible in order to be accepted?

What's more, if we were talking about a second migration of Dutch, or Croatians, would we be seeing a similar vociferous reaction? I doubt it. Asian faces are just too different, too alien.

So what do we do about it? I see it as a battle to be fought over time, on several fronts.

First, at the level of politics and the bureaucracy. Many years ago, when I did Sociology I, one of the things I learnt was that public policy decisions always had a social impact, and that a job a sociology graduate might end up doing, if they were lucky, was a social impact report for the government prior to a decision being made. I often wonder now, if such an exercise was ever done around the decision to encourage Asian migration, and if it was, what planning resulted from it. I suspect there may have been a paragraph in the policy paper drafted by officials which said something like: "The Chinese in the past have assimilated well and have become useful

contributors to society. They are conservative, predominantly middle-class and self-reliant. Few are social welfare beneficiaries. Provided the policy targets the well-educated with independent means, there is no reason to expect any unusual problems of resettlement to arise."

So to an outside observer there appears to have been no thought given to:

(1) who these people were as people, as opposed to money-making machines, which might have led officials to ask questions about the culture and environment they had come from, and how that might affect their behaviour and expectations of life here;

(2) the fact that these money-making machines also had spouses and young families who would have a host of other needs to be met, like houses and transport and schools and doctors and language learning;

(3) how New Zealand society would receive them. The assumption that the Chinese already living here appear to be well-assimilated completely ignores the fact that it has taken almost a century to reach that state - and in any case, I am now questioning whether we in fact have - so why should it be any different this time around?

Anyone with any knowledge of migrant behaviour would know that when migrants arrive in large numbers the natural tendency is to stick together to support each other through the transition, which would have implications for housing and schools and services and most especially for the people next door; and anyone with any knowledge of the history of Chinese settlement and reactions to it in NZ - not that it's customarily taught in schools, but there are people out there who have studied it - would have been able to caution and advise on the rate and manner in which the policy should be implemented.

And what about consulting with local Chinese themselves? How much, if any, effort was put into that?

If this is the way it happened, then it was a very arrogant and poorly thought-through process. Any economic policy - and immigration policy is economic policy first and foremost - has extensive social implications. It is designed to change people's economic decisions, but it has downstream ramifications through other parts of their lives, which also need to be anticipated and planned for with appropriate resources.

Take the issue of language, for example. All that the policy required was that one adult member of the migrant family should be able to speak "good, conversational English." That means that the other adults as well as the children were going to need some help, right? Where from? And how much help and for how long? Were those resources already available in the community? If not, could they be developed? Then how could they be delivered, and what would it cost? Hard questions, but needing to be answered. Not copped-out on with some laissez-faire "let the community sort it out" attitude.

I've been a public servant. I know the difficulties of this kind of policy exercise. There are no simple formulas and the 'too-hard' basket is very persuasive. But a genuine attempt has to be made, because the bottom line for me is that the migrants are here because they were deliberately invited. They are coming into a new and very Western culture which doesn't like people being different, and they need a hand. Not a lot, and not for long - just enough to make a start and find their way around. But don't just dump them. Surely that's common sense and common courtesy? It comes down to accepting that migrants are living, breathing people like you and me. Not statistics.

What all this means in terms of improving relationships is that by involving the wider community in the decision-making and planning, you are also preparing them for the change and, therefore, heading off the negative reactions that sudden change always brings.

And while we're on politics and policy, I'm not impressed by politicians like Roger Maxwell, who liken the prejudice against Asians to the Australian's "Kick a Pom a day" slogan, saying "It happens all the time but it isn't a long-lasting attitude." He doesn't think a century is long-lasting? You cannot avoid the fact that even though we

thought it had disappeared, it has clearly only been lying dormant. The similarity of tone and sentiment tells us that.

The second arena that needs to be worked on is education. I can hear teachers sighing already at the thought of yet more work being heaped on them. But the fact is that racism is learned, and the experiences and attitudes that young children encounter in those early school years are crucial. The classroom can not only teach cultural sensitivity and a genuine interest in cultural difference, it can also help to counter negative attitudes being received in the home and community. We really have no choice. Young New Zealanders will be growing up in a global "soup" of cultures and they'll have to learn to swim in it.

In schools where there are many Asian faces, I know that the majority of the children stick together like glue, rarely mixing with groups from other parts of Asia, let alone with Europeans. Obviously, this inhibits their being able to move into the wider society with ease, and obviously it engenders irritation and suspicion on the Europeans' part. But it's a natural reaction and just has to be gradually countered by buddy systems and the like. And sigh-making as it might be, it has to be initiated and monitored by staff, with consultation and co-operation from parents.

There's another area where schools can help: the encouragement of independent thinking and questioning. Confucian habits die hard, and most of us of Asian descent have been socialised as wimps. We bow to authority and we go with the crowd. We passively accept. Isn't that the general stereotype? Well, it's true that that's what we learn through admonishment and observation. But it doesn't mean we are all like that by nature. So as hard as it might seem, Asian children need to be encouraged to speak up. To question, to carve their own path. Some will respond, a lot won't - but isn't it worth bringing through the ones who do? Only then will they begin to feel comfortable about challenging prejudice and injustice.

The third area is the media. Now it's the journalists' turn to sigh. Well, it's a fact that politics, education, and the media are key influences today in shaping people's attitudes. So there is a responsibility right there.

And the media have been in it right from the beginning. In 1865 a Dunedin Punch character said, "I would rather see the goldfields deserted, the country impoverished, the revenue diminished and the province depopulated than admit one of these vicious, idle, thieving barbarian vagabonds to contaminate the soil of this pure, virtuous, prosperous and happy province." It was all on from there - 1888: The Tuapeka Times refers to the "filth-begrimed, opium-besotted horde of Mongolian monstrosities," and there are numerous variations on this - the Mongol Menace, Truculent Tartars, the Yellow Agony, the Yellow Yahoo, the Chow Curse…

And then there were the cartoons: over-the-top caricatures of pig-tailed, slant-eyed coolies with oversize teeth jumping over walls or wrapping octopus arms around Maori maidens symbolising New Zealand. The one jumping over the wall is an interesting one. It has Richard John Seddon saying, "The wall's got to go up a bit higher. If a 100 pound poll tax won't keep the yellow agony out then we'll have to slap on another hundred." For "wall", substitute "points system". For "poll tax", substitute "investment".

And of course Seddon himself, that great political icon, was great copy. It was he who preached European superiority over the Chinese. It was he who said, "there was about the same distinction between a European and a Chinaman as that between a Chinaman and a monkey."

Today, the rhetoric is slightly less purple, but where it comes from, the impulses of contempt and fear are no less strong. Very occasionally, you see a dissenting voice - a satirical cartoon here, an ironic statement there - but mostly, when anything appears about Asians in the media at all, it has tended to be negative or offensive or sensational or anecdotal or unbalanced and stereotyped.

One stereotype that has been much used is the business migrant. This is particularly inflammatory because while Europeans were able to feel comfortably contemptuous in the past of the inferior low profile Chinese of peasant background, they now have to cope with an aggressive character who they see as socially superior by virtue of his wealth. This is not the way it's supposed to work. BMWs and Rolexes and porticoed mansions are red rags to many a Kiwi bull. And the media have kept such rags waving by associating these things constantly with Chinese migrants. Firstly, Europeans own these things too. And secondly, not all Chinese migrants are wealthy. Why don't we see stories about the students, or the young couples here because of their professional

skills? Or the artists, or the man behind the takeaway counter who back home was a surgeon but can't work here because his qualifications aren't acceptable?

My point is that Chinese are as diverse as any other race. And bringing that variety to the attention of the wider society helps to smooth out the differences and create empathy. We are alike in as many things as we are unlike. I suspect we are more alike - but we have to communicate in order to find that out. And that's where the media has a function: communicating, in the full sense of the word, the world around us, to us.

But when a senior television journalist of my acquaintance talks of "showing the Pakeha view, then showing the contrary view," in other words, when the Pakeha view is still seen as the norm, with others in contradiction to it rather than being perceived of equal value, I think we have a way to go yet.

Apart from journalism, what about other branches of the media? What are the images of Chinese in movies and television? Well, when there were any, when I was growing up, they were stereotypes too: the men were either cooks or evil Fu Manchu types, then later the cooks turned into restaurant owners (we all know migrant Chinese are upwardly mobile), and, of course, there were the martial artists. The women were variously prostitutes, sexy sirens, exotic schemers or submissive wives. It was all a bit depressing really. And they had nothing to do with my experience of life.

Have there been any improvements? We are seeing more Asian films from overseas on our screens, with a diversity of characters who aren't one-dimensional. In our own film and television industry there is the odd rare sighting - the film *Illustrious Energy* had an independent young circus performer who liked to dress as a man; the television dramas *Shortland Street*, *Shark in the Park*, and *Plainclothes* introduced doctors and policemen who just happened to be Chinese. But other NZ films? *Dangerous Orphans* had a drug courier, *Should I Be Good?* had the sexy siren, and *Desperate Remedies* had an opium den hostess. Sorry guys, we're not there yet, either in content or quality.

In the non-drama area we have *Asia Dynamic*, a magazine programme with an appalling time slot but a unique and colourful feel because it's stuff we've not heard or seen before, and real people we've not heard or seen before. It's a beginning and I recommend it to you if you want to find out who we Asians really are. It's being made by Asians for Asians, but it is also popular with both Polynesians and some Europeans.

In documentary, we are just beginning. One that I directed and screened early this year, *Footprints of the Dragon*, showed that there was an audience out there for our stories. We have to build on that.

What this means is not only bringing through images that are positive, diverse and authentic, but also encouraging young Asians to take up careers in the media themselves, so they can tell our stories with their own unique perspective. I'm talking about writers, film-makers, artists, performers; perhaps even talkback radio hosts. We've got enough Chinese doctors and accountants - let's get some story-tellers going. I know they're out there, especially amongst the fourth and fifth generations, but they need encouragement from their own people, their parents, their teachers, as well as those in the media.

And let's not forget the recent migrants who already have media skills to contribute. They need opportunities to use and adapt their knowledge, not end up doing something completely different and unsatisfying because they can't get work. In other words, until we have direct creative input from the people themselves, the stereotypes and the misconceptions will continue and the prejudice will remain.

So that's the political, educational and media arenas. But while they can help influence the general environment, in the end it comes down to personal relationships.

Again, there is more than one aspect to these. The first one I want to raise is the relationship between the "old" migrants and the "new" migrants. In particular, in the Chinese community. It's always been a concern to me that there should be a tension here. Of course I know why - for the old hands, the revived prejudice raises fears that all those years of carefully-built acceptance are about to be lost and they and their children will be second-class citizens again, and they are angry at the new migrants for "causing" that. They also don't

approve of the displays of wealth. For the new arrivals, the local Chinese are felt to be stand-offish and not really Chinese any more, just "bananas" - yellow on the outside and white on the inside. They can't speak Chinese properly and when they do, it's some village dialect.

Personally, I find the new migration has definite benefits. I can now go down to any number of shops and buy moon cakes and roast duck and sushi and hot and sour soup whenever I feel like it, and I can learn tai chi from a master and meditation from a monk. I am more in touch with my culture than I have ever been. And it makes me feel whole. It also makes me feel a part of the world, not just NZ and that is a first step toward tolerance. I believe us "oldies" should not only embrace the cultural opportunities that have fallen into our laps, but also extend a hand to the newcomers. It all comes down to who's going to be the first to break the ice. Now I know that's hard for Chinese, who aren't always that assertive, so asking a Chinese to break the ice with another Chinese is doubly hard - but it can be done. And the evidence is there. New migrants who by dint of personality have made the effort to communicate are able to move with ease around their new environment much faster than those who haven't.

The second issue is Chinese relationships with Maori. There's an ambivalence here. On the one hand each agrees there is an affinity in family and community values and maybe even a common ancestor. On the other, there is a fear that migrants will rape the coastlines of shellfish and buy up all the land. While exaggerated, these are important issues, but the way to deal with them is through discussion, not racist invective in the media. There is a willingness on the part of the migrants to hear and understand what Maori want, and why, and that willingness is too precious to be abused. It should be remembered that we Chinese are dab hands at avoiding conflict, and will choose either a pragmatic compromise or a quiet withdrawal. There is no need, therefore, to grandstand in order to get us to come to the table.

The third area we need to work on is ourselves. As Chinese, we too can be ambivalent about what we want in the relationship. It's a confusion that starts early in life. On the one hand, we buy into the banana option, doing our best to assimilate and become invisible, and I recall how pleased I was when people used to say to me "Oh, I don't think of you as Chinese"; on the other hand, there comes a time when we look twice at that comment and wonder. Does it mean that if they did think of us as Chinese they wouldn't give us the time of day? That as long as we don't project our difference, they feel comfortable with us? So we get caught between wanting to be the same, but different. And wanting that difference to be acknowledged and respected. It's an identity crisis that each of us has to work through, and it can affect our relationships with Europeans if we send out mixed messages about what we want. When a European refers laughingly to "Chowick", the assimilated bit of us laughs along with them, but the Chinese bit of us freezes up at the sound of the old insult. The wedge (remember the wedge?) buries itself a bit deeper.

We also need to overcome our lack of confidence in challenging such things as the "Chowick" remark. We need to speak up - not leave it to just one or two people - and communicate how we feel. That's a very hard one for us - all our upbringing dictates against it. We grumble but do nothing, preferring, like bamboo, to bend with the wind, or fold our tents and move on. It won't happen overnight - indeed, it may take generations - but it will happen if we want it to.

In fact, confidence in all dealings needs boosting. Until we take off the mask of impassiveness, we will not make genuine contact. And until non-Chinese realise the mask is there as rather flimsy protection against the insults that our faces seem to excite, and help us take it off by simply accepting us as people, we will not make genuine contact.

Genuine contact is made when we all take off our masks and find ourselves looking at ourselves.

And so to the last and most important angle on relationships - what the European needs to do. Most of it should be pretty obvious by now: overcome your fear of the different, break the ice, communicate, encourage, listen, relinquish the monocultural stance and allow for other ways of seeing the same thing, and become the richer for it.

There is something else you can do. Visit Asia. Or any country where white is not the dominant colour. Stand in a place where you're the only white face and you can't understand the language. Feel the fear.

Unless you've been in a minority situation you cannot imagine what it's like. So feel the fear, and realise it's the same fear the migrants here feel.

And for those of you who have felt the fear already, remember what it was like to come across another New Zealander? Or an Australian? Or anyone who spoke English? Remember how you became bosom buddies immediately? Remember how you went flatting with them in Earls Court or Bondi? And in those countries all the natives spoke English. Now do you understand why we have Chowick and Japuranga?

Once you really experience empathy, you begin to understand.

Over the years I have encountered a range of attitudes amongst Europeans towards Chinese, from hatred, fear and contempt, to paternalistic and positively fawning. In all of these the balance of power is out of whack. The only one that works is when we meet on equal terms, acknowledging each other's strengths and weaknesses and being willing to listen and learn from each other. It's a prescription that could apply to all relationships, and as New Zealand becomes more and more drawn into the world, first as part of Asia-Pacific, and second a voice capable of challenging nations such as France and the United States on issues of peace, we have a chance to show real leadership. To do that we have to have vision. To have vision we have to lift our eyes and look beyond the things that separate us towards the things that connect us.

Lao Tzu said: "Those alike in mind may differ in form. Those alike in form may differ in mind. The sage prefers what is like-minded and ignores what is alike in form. Ordinary men stick close to what is alike in form and keep their distance from what is like-minded. 'We cherish and cling to what resembles us,' they say."

As New Zealanders, let us not be "ordinary men"; let us be sages.