

FILM 403 Research Presentation

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SCHOOL OF ENGLISH, FILM, THEATRE AND MEDIA STUDIES

FILM 403 NATIONAL CINEMA: AOTEAROA NEW ZEALAND

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ALWAYS THE VICTIM?

Representation of Chinese in New Zealand Cinema

A SHORT HISTORY OF THE CHINESE IN NEW ZEALAND

(Refer Appendix 1 Timeline)

The first Chinese person arrived in New Zealand in 1846, only six years after the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi. The Chinese started arriving in numbers in the 1860s when the Otago Chamber of Commerce invited a group of them to work their gold fields after European miners had gone off to new and more lucrative gold fields. They soon faced racial prejudice and discrimination at both the personal and official level. The Chinese gold miners were initially restricted to re-working claims which had been abandoned by the Europeans and were confined to living together in certain areas sometimes in conditions of extreme hardship and privation. The Chinese put up with these conditions because they intended to stay only long enough to make their fortune then return to their families in China.

As the gold ran out in the 1890s the Chinese moved into urban areas but because typically they had little education and capital they could only engage in occupations such as market gardening, laundry work and the selling of fruit and vegetables. Their presence in cities intensified racial discrimination and various laws and regulations were instituted to restrict their lives and the arrival of more of their kind - the most infamous being the Poll Tax, requiring new Chinese migrants (only) to pay a tax of initially 10 pounds, later increased to 100 pounds, a sum equivalent to several years earnings in those days. This made migration of Chinese men more expensive but did not prevent it. However few women came as they could not earn sufficient to pay back the tax within a reasonable time.

Later a system of entry-only-by-permit severely restricted further migration and for a period Chinese women were totally barred from migration – the intention being to prevent the development of a viable family-based Chinese community in New Zealand. In this period, young Chinese men would go back to China to marry and father children then return to New Zealand to earn money, re-visiting when finances and circumstances permitted. Husbands and wives were sometimes separated for more than 15 years. In this period, Chinese could not become New Zealand citizens and were therefore barred from certain occupations, limited in their civic participation and with implications for their right of re-entry if they returned to China. This situation prevailed until the beginning of the Second World War when a small number of Chinese wives and children were permitted to enter New Zealand temporarily as a humanitarian measure; they were

later granted permission to stay permanently.

After the war Chinese could become citizens but the system of entry-by-permit remained. In practice this meant that, with a few exceptions, Chinese could only come to New Zealand for the purpose of family re-unification. As a consequence a Chinese community developed starting in the 1950s but grew very slowly. The official policy was that all ethnic groups in New Zealand would be assimilated into the European mainstream. The teaching and use of languages other than English was discouraged. The loss of language and restricted migration resulted in cultural isolation and cultural decline. The Chinese community adopted the posture of a model minority as a survival strategy. They would gain an education in order to raise themselves from the working class into the professional class but avoid attracting attention to minimise more overt racial discrimination.

It was not until 1985 that immigration policy was changed to a points-based system. The Chinese population, at that time under 30,000 people, grew rapidly and quadrupled within a period of 15 years with migrants from China, Taiwan, Hong Kong and to a lesser extent from south east Asia (Malaysia and Indonesia). Today 108,000 Chinese citizens and permanent residents make up 2.8% of the population, with a new phenomenon â€” a substantial number of transient Chinese international students added to the mix.

How have these Chinese been represented in New Zealandâ€™s moving images? â€œMoving imagesâ€• includes both film and television but in the following I have largely restricted myself to consideration of film because it is the medium whose length and inherent production processes allow more in-depth exploration of the emotional dimension of its subjects. To date Chinese have appeared on television as items of news, academics or â€œcommunity leadersâ€• giving opinions on social phenomena, clips of worthy community activities or token Asians in dramas written from a western perspective â€” in the genres of hospital soap operas and futuristic fantasies for adolescents.

VICTIMHOOD

In the following I have used the term â€œvictimâ€• to describe a person (or group) who suffer(s) from the action of others through no particular shortcoming or fault of his/her own but because of circumstances beyond their direct control. I proposed to explore the thesis that Chinese in New Zealand until have always been victims, one way or another, in New Zealand film.

CHINESE AS VICTIMS IN NEW ZEALAND FILMS

There have only been four feature-length films in which the Chinese in New Zealand have been represented. They are:

Illustrious Energy (Leon Narbey, 1988) which tells the story about Chinese gold miners in Otago, set in the 1890s,

Broken English (Gregor Nicholas, 1996) in which a recent Chinese migrant, Wu, agrees to pay for a sham marriage in order to gain permanent residence – as a subsidiary plot to its main story of a Croatian girl falling in love with a young Maori man to the consternation of her family.

Banana in Nutshell (Roseanne Liang, 2005) Abbreviated by its producer as BIAN, it is a self-made documentary in which a second-generation Chinese New Zealand girl films her white boyfriend's efforts to learn to speak Mandarin Chinese in order to gain her father's blessing for their marriage, and

Waves (Li Tao, 2006) a documentary made by a mainland-Chinese film graduate from Victoria University recording the lives of four Chinese international high school students over a school year.

As this list is almost exhaustive, it is immediately obvious that there has been little representation of the Chinese in New Zealand in film – compared with other minorities such as Maori and Samoans. An examination of these four films shows that almost invariably the Chinese are depicted as victims of history, caricature, filial piety and globalisation which

perhaps reflects their collective experience in New Zealand as an ethnic group. However, not only are they shown in few films, but they are under-represented in the creation and production processes and therefore likely under-represented in accessing New Zealand's unique film funding environment " at a time when moving images (film and television) are increasingly important in defining group identity.

Of the four, only two, *Illustrious Energy* and *Broken English*, are feature films in the conventional sense with actors in re-created situations, working to a fully-developed script based on a pre-determined story line. *Illustrious Energy* was started in 1986 at the height of an economic boom, and *Broken English* in 1996 when Asian migration was at its height. *BIAN* and *Waves* were initiated as self-funded project but appear to have been finished with modest outside funding for post-production. *BIAN* was completed in 2005 and has been shown to festival audiences and on television, while *Waves* has only been completed this year and does not yet exist in a commercial format. Thus 160 years after first arriving in New Zealand and 94 years since films were first made in New Zealand (in 1912) the sum total of feature length films depicting local Chinese is - one historical drama finished in 1988, one caricature appearance in a film made in 1996 and two documentaries by recent film graduates both made in the last 18 months, which have been press-ganged into the list.

In the same period, the 164 feature films have been made in New Zealand up until 1996 [1] before the current Peter Jackson era, including a number of films made by Maori and telling Maori stories. While recent films such as *Once Were Warriors* (Lee Tamahori, 1994) have been able to explore contemporary issues such as urban Maori youth disaffection and family violence, earlier films such as *Mauri* (Merata Mita 1988) have helped set the scene by introducing the New Zealand landscape as a component of our identity and the complexities the Maori's relationship within their whanau, hapu and iwi and their land as well as the always troubling relationship with the European settlers. New films such as *Sione's Wedding* (Chris Graham, 2006) and the animated cartoon TV series *Bro'town* have gone beyond exploration of the tentative relationships with a host society to a celebration of acceptance of Samoans as an integral part of New Zealand society. If films reflect these inter-group relationships, then the very small number of films depicting Chinese in New Zealand would indicate that as a group they are not well integrated yet.

Illustrious Energy (Clip 1, 2, 3 and 4) is set in the Otago goldfields about 1895 when the gold had largely run out. Chan works a claim with his father-in-law, Kim an older man who clings to his Chinese ways. Otago is being surveyed for sale. The pair eventually find gold and Chan goes into town to pay his debts and buy supplies. He discusses Christian and Confucian philosophies with a Presbyterian Minister and later enters a Chinese miners' club where he is tempted by opium and a prostitute but manages to break free. He meets up with the owner of his claim, Wong, who has adapted to local conditions, has married a Scottish wife and has prospered, forgetting his other family in China. Chan goes to see the circus which has come to town, is attacked, and later spends the night with the Eurasian girl performer. When invited to join the circus he declines and goes back to the claim when the two miners enjoy some wine. Kim is suspicious of the surveyors and superstitious regarding their equipment and had hidden the gold from their prying eyes - but in the morning dies without disclosing the location of the gold. Chan realises that it is lost forever, buries Kim and leaves the claim

In *Broken English*, the grasping agent and the Chinese couple desperate for permanent residence are subsidiary characters only and are depicted in almost caricature form. Refer Clips 4, 5 and 6.

Banana in a Nutshell (Clips 7, 8, 9, 10, 11 and 12) tells of the frustrations of Roseanne Liang, a first generation Chinese New Zealander who has a long-term relationship with a European boy - a development which does not meet with the approval of her father who has social status in the Auckland Chinese professional community as an asthma doctor. To date she has kept the peace at home and avoided disownment by always returning home before breakfast after spending the night with her boyfriend. The father for his part will only give his blessing to the marriage if the boy learns to speak passable Mandarin Chinese. Roseanne Liang is the youngest of three well-brought up sisters who has been allowed to study filmmaking instead of medicine. In these circumstances she turns her skills to recording the young couple's struggles in trying to please her father. Although the film is totally respectful of her parents, the making and particularly the public showing of it is problematic to say the least. In the 21st century Dr Alan Liang's assertion of Confucian values seems extreme especially since it turns out that his unbending stance towards an older daughter has already brought heart-ache. (This older daughter decamped to Australia to live in a de facto relationship also with a European boy out of sight of the father. Unfortunately the de facto husband unexpectedly died after a short time and the daughter returned home. The father refused to acknowledge her widowhood.) On the other hand, Roseanne Liang's long-term acquiescence to her father's demands (in effect for a public virginity while waiting for the right Chinese boy to come along), while commendably filial in the Confucian tradition is also outdated and rather indulgent especially in view of her older sister's experience of which she was aware. Dr Alan Liang the father is able to assert the Confucian values of his youth learned some 60 years ago, and for him preserved in good condition, in part because cultural values in the part of the Chinese community in which he lives (essentially the Auckland Chinese Medical Association) have lagged behind the evolution of these values at their source (in his case Hong Kong of the 1960s.) Roseanne, the daughter is the victim of a strong-willed father unbending in his demands, and also of her adherence to Confucian traditions which he no doubt imparted to her. Equally though, the father is the victim of modern education and technology which allowed his private family decisions and their consequences to be shown to the public at large and especially to his peers in a format which allows no rebuttal. There is a special irony in having an earnest effort of filial piety (in this case obeying ones father) turning into the most un-filial of acts (holding ones father up to public ridicule.) In the manner of modern media, the DVD disc also includes an Epilogue showing the wedding. A seemingly happy Dr Liang, makes a speech on camera fully aware that this is his only chance for public redemption. He makes light of his original demands that Stephen, now the happy groom, should learn Mandarin. Indeed as father of the bride he sounds a very reasonable man. In doing so he weakens his daughter's case, implicit in the making of the original film, that he is almost irredeemably insensitive.

Waves (Clips 13 and 14) Li Tao is from China and a graduate of Victoria University's film school who has decided to stay on in New Zealand. In the course of her duties as a secondary teacher assigned to counsel international students she gains the confidence of her charges and follows them around for a year with a camera. The result is Waves which records the lives of four international students who came in China to study at senior high school level. All are boarding with kiwi families in a home-stay situation

Li Tao arrived in New Zealand as a young adult at a time when China was well established along the path of economic success. Whatever her family's story in China, she left that behind and arrived at university without the baggage typically loaded onto a local Chinese student - a family history of earlier financial struggle, generational sacrifice and social marginalisation as members of a migrant community. Equally, her subjects would be free of these burdens. For them, however, these would be replaced by homesickness, cultural shock and re-entry concerns. They would be the beneficiaries or victims of the globalisation of education.

Ken wants to buy a Father's Day present for his home-stay father but being young and improvident, in the manner of some Chinese international students, has run out of allowance and must borrow. He recovers well however and gets a job as a waiter. Father's Day in New Zealand, close to his own father's birthday evokes feelings of homesickness and he telephones home. Later his emotions betray him and in a cathartic moment he cries on camera.

Rose is a shy girl who is overwhelmed by the choices available in her school and decides to tackle a number of subjects which would be regarded as less than academic in her native China such as music and sewing. After a year she learns that her brave decisions were right, that all subjects approached in the right way can stretch the mind and instil mental discipline. She also makes friends with a number other international students from other countries.

Lin wants to go to the ball but has problems with her parents who regard the event as a frivolous waste of time in her final year. Her mother agrees she can go and sends her a dress but Li finds that it is "not suitable". She must get another dress in keeping with what she hears other girls will wear but a new dress is too expensive so in the end she hires one. She is happy until her chosen partner has a change of mind and she faces the prospect of a ball with no date. In the end she attends in a group.

Jane is shy and retiring and participates to the least extent possible in school activities. She is just filling in time and going through the motions in school. Li Tao finds that Jane keeps her watch on Beijing time and keeps up with all her contacts in China by using the internet. Rose is Jane's best friend, but although she helps prepare for Rose's birthday, does not attend the party. Following her home to Sichuan Province Li Tao finds that Jane is a completely different person and the social "leader of the pack". She is exercising the "to-death" solidarity that Sichuan people are said to be famous for. Jane says she will not change throughout her university studies.

This documentary was always going to be uplifting. Li Tao's life was presumably enhanced by her experience in New Zealand -she chose to stay- so it was natural that she should select subjects that at least had the potential for personal growth and development.

Although the filmmaker and subject are indeed Chinese, they come from a time and place which is remote from the local Chinese population, both the community of original migrants and the communities of new settlers. Although regarded as outsiders and although individually most will stay only four years, as a group they will remain a self-renewing pool who will bring with them the latest trends "so long as New Zealand has competitive offerings in education. To date they bring with them the wealth, confidence and adaptability which is seems pervasive in China and are lacking in the victim mentality which is apparent in at least some diasporic Chinese. Thus while the film show the students all suffering to a certain extent from homesickness, culture shock and re-entry concerns, yet the tone of the film overall is positive, that any difficulty is temporary and to be overcome, that the after-effects will not last long, that soon they arrive at a bright future. (There is a darker side of Chinese international student life: profligacy, truancy, falsified grades and attendance records, gambling, prostitution, car accidents, kidnapping, extortion and crimes of passion not yet explored in film.)

VICTIMS OF THEIR HISTORY IN NEW ZEALAND See also commentary Appendix 3

A review of the filmographies shows that there has been relatively little participation of Chinese in film-making.

Apart from the Chinese characters, only Helene Wong had a role as cultural consultant in the production of *Illustrious Energy*. Chinese apparently played no other part in production, direction or directly in the script.

Likewise in *Broken English*, there was a Chinese cultural consultant who appears to have done a very poor job of ensuring a true-to-life representation of the Chinese characters. As noted in the attached commentary, the characters are little more than caricatures of Chinese people. Indeed, they could hardly have done worse without such a consultant.

Both *BIAN* and *Waves* started as no-budget or low-budget personal projects. In the case of *BIAN*, Liang, has got funding from the New Zealand Film Commission and Asia New Zealand Foundation for post-production – from the latter possibly because of its ethnic content. The rest of the production teams seem to have been friends of the Producer/Director/Scriptwriter. In the case of *Waves*, perfectly reflecting the positive go-go attitude in China, Li Tao plans a Chinese language version of the films, sales to CCTV and a book.[2] No doubt she has other ideas kept close to the chest for the meantime. Not for her begging for governmental support.

CONCLUSIONS

To date, from a very limited sample, representations of Chinese in film have been as victims of history, victims of personal racial bullying and official and institutional racism or victims of caricature, or of anachronistic Confucianism within the family or of loneliness and cultural shock- the last particularly relevant to international students.

It is likely that the state of victimhood has had a traumatising effect on the New Zealand population as a whole, particularly the pre-1985 population of original migrants (but also to a lesser extent, later migrants). They have adapted their lives and attitudes to avoid conflict with the dominant majority, for example avoiding the stigma of poverty, by being successful, but not too successful to avoid attracting attention. Also the group has taken to practical professions and avoided the arts and cultural pursuits so that they would not be a burden to their families and the state, and by not seeking state support where other groups freely do so. This applies especially to funding for the arts and in particular for film-making- as evidenced by the number of projects made by Chinese people (ie almost none)

The recent freer flow of a group of Chinese who have not had the experience of being a oppressed minority, who have never suffered from material disadvantage (indeed been affluent their whole lives as the beneficiaries of China's recent one child family and economic development) brings with it attitudes which are far removed from the original story of gold-mining and its aftermath in the Chinatowns of New Zealand - lives lived in laundries, fruit shops and market gardeners, later followed by tertiary education acquired while helping in the family business, with strict instructions not to upset the system by getting arrested during demonstrations for example.

A time is approaching when representations of Chinese will not longer be as victims, when new filmmakers with a more positive self-image and a different life experience will make films on the same terms as other New Zealanders.

STEVEN YOUNG

APPENDIX ONE

TIME LINE

APPENDIX TWO

FILMOGRAPHY

APPENDIX THREE

FILM CLIP COMMENATRIES

CLIP 1

Illustrious Energy

Three men recover a skeleton.

Three Chinese men dig up a skeleton from the bleak Otago landscape at the dramatic beginning of the film. They wash, clean and dry the bones one by one. They are recovering the bones of another miner for final interment in China.

This is symbolic of the fate of a Chinese miner – to work, to struggle and to die, far away in a strange land, to rot in the ground and to have his bones sent to China in a box – a victim of history, Confucian cultural constraints and personal circumstances.

CLIP 2

Illustrious Energy

Europeans try to force a Chinese shopkeeper to buy chickens.

Three European men come into a general store in a Chinese mining camp and try to force the storekeeper to buy chickens. The storekeeper resists and a European handles his crockery items threatening to break them if he refuses to buy the chickens. The Presbyterian minister intervenes.

The storekeeper is being victimised because of his race. The Europeans know that the Chinese storekeeper cannot appeal to any formal European civil authority for protection and just want to change their (perhaps stolen) chickens for cash - whether the storekeeper wants to buy or not. If the storekeeper refuses to buy then he will still lose the value of the crockery which might break by "accident".

CLIP 3

Illustrious Energy

Chan goes into a club, smokes opium and is tempted by a prostitute.

Chan, after paying his bills in gold, goes into a Chinese club for a drink and is approached for a drink by a European prostitute working there. Chan is offered an introductory puff of opium by the club owner who is Chinese. (Even then Chinese drug pushers often targeted other Chinese.) As the opium takes effect, he imagines that his wife and son are calling him home. He knows that he should not be in the club at all. He breaks out of the smoking room rather ill. He is propositioned by the prostitute and is encouraged to take up the offer by the club owner and manager. Now both physically ill and guilt ridden, he stumbles out of the club into the cold night and retches. A storm is brewing.

Chan is the desperate victim of loneliness and the harsh life of a Chinese miner in Otago. He has been away from his wife for 12 years, and is the father of a son he has not seen. There is no family life - the only women on the goldfield are prostitutes. Opium offers a way of forgetting his wretchedness but he knows that it is a drug and that it will soon corrupt his sense of right and wrong. His breaking away is symbolic of his rejection of that false palliative.

CLIP 4

Illustrious Energy

Kim dies before revealing where his has hidden the gold.

Kim has hidden the gold because of his fear of the surveyors. When Chan returns with supplies they enjoy a bottle of wine, but the in the morning, as he removes the trees he has superstitiously cut down, he dies " without revealing the exact location of the gold. Chan realises that it is gone forever. He buries Kim in the Otago landscape " very similar to that at the beginning of the film.

Kim is the victim of his own superstition and fears and has brought misfortune to himself and family by acting on them by hiding the gold in another secret place when there was no need to do so. Perhaps some years later miners will come to recover Kim's bones - as he did in the beginning of the film. Life comes full circle.

CLIP 5

Broken English

Nina approaches Jasmin, to make an arrangement marry for money.

Nina approaches Jasmin and negotiates a deal to marry for money. Jasmin is depicted as the stereotypical Auckland Asian: She dresses in gaudy clothes, wears gold and jewels, drives a Porsche, keeps large quantities of cash in an envelope, speaks stilted English and has a very money-oriented, heartless attitude.

In this case Asians and in particular Auckland Asians are the victims of racial stereotyping. The image of Jasmin is a composite of what people see in Queen Street or Fort Street, years of sensationalist media report and the projected fears and prejudices of Europeans New Zealanders.

CLIP 6

Broken English

Wu and Clara want to move in.

Wu and Clara are depicted as highly excitable, arguing with each other in Chinese, making slightly ridiculous requests revealing their lack of understanding of New Zealand culture and money oriented.

This is a further example of stereotyping. Wu and Clara are depicted as mainland Chinese desperate to get permanent residency by whatever means necessary including spending large sums of money, subverting the law and compromising their personal integrity - and also somewhat stupid.

CLIP 7

Broken English

Wu gets drunk at the barbeque.

Wu gets drunk on beer and blabs to Nina's father that he, Wu, is to be the new groom. Nina's father, a marijuana dealer and male chauvinist, as demonstrated earlier in the film, pushes the drunken Wu into a steel framework. Asians are likely to drink lemonade at barbeques and are hardly ever drunk in public. It is unlikely that Mainland Chinese on the eve of an arranged marriage costing at least \$12,000 would jeopardise their investment and more importantly their future by losing control of themselves. In fact they would probably refuse to attend the barbeque at all. This part of the story is contrived to leak the story to Nina's father. Asians are often shown as physically weak.

CLIP 8

Banana in a Nutshell

Roseanne Liang relates her understanding of what the "Chinese way" means in her family.

Roseanne is the victim of an overly Confucian Chinese father and of herself, an overly obedient Confucian Chinese daughter who must defer to her father.

CLIP 9/CLIP 10

Banana in a Nutshell

Roseanne's elder sister relates the experience of her dating a European boy, her "elopement" and later her "widowhood".

A pioneer victim in the family, the sister tells the story of her parents' initial disapproval and later their insensitivity during her unexpected widowhood when, after living together in Australia, the boy suddenly dies: "Maybe next time you'll find a Chinese boy." This clip brings out very strongly the extent that some parents and their children are still victims of an anachronistic adherence to Confucian ideals in 21st century New Zealand.

CLIP 11

Banana in a Nutshell

"I will let you try to gain my approval"

A short clip illustrating the gulf between some Chinese parents and their adult off-spring who are deemed to be forever children.

CLIP 12

Banana in a Nutshell (DVD Epilogue)

Dr Alan Liang gives his father-of "bride speech at the wedding

Dr Liang realised that the showing of the original film throughout the country by his daughter has made him appear an insensitive ass in the eyes of the public, and more importantly in the eyes of his professional Chinese friends (who, he probably fears, have flocked to the film festival screenings) and, realising that he is again being filmed at the wedding, makes the best of his last chance to put his side of the story by making light of the situation for which he has been lovingly crucified by his daughter using film technology.

In doing so he reduces the impact of Roseanne's original film "it was all a joke really he says "slightly devaluing his daughter's struggles with filial piety over eight years as misguided and somewhat stupid.

CLIP 13

Waves

Ken cries on Father's day.

Ken is a victim of homesickness and the loneliness of the international student. Why did he allow himself to be filmed in this documentary? Probably because he knew that the film would eventually be shown to his family and he wanted to communicate his feelings to them even if that would only be possible in more than a year's time. Ken adapts well to Kiwi life and does not remain a victim for long.

CLIP 14

Waves

Rose recalls her first day at school.

Rose is a victim of the cultural shock suffered by international students. But she is soon happy and positive about studying in New Zealand and has a bright future.

END

[1] Helen Martin, Sam Edwards, New Zealand Film 1912-1996, Auckland University Press, Auckland 1997.

[2] Li Tao, Personal information, August 2006.