

From Assimilation to Multiculturalism: Literature review

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FROM
ASSIMILATION TO MULTI-CULTURALISM

The
evolving model for survival of the Chinese community in New Zealand from 1950 to the
present.

LITERATURE
REVIEW

INTRODUCTION

From shortly after their first arrival in the gold fields of Otago, the Chinese in New Zealand have been considered a problem for the government of New Zealand. They were generally not welcome and measures were enacted to limit their migration and to discourage them from staying. It is also true that initially the Chinese themselves saw themselves as sojourners who would return to China when they had made their fortune. In fact very few did. The gold ran out and many moved to the North Island to become fruit and vegetable shopkeepers, laundrymen, and market gardeners. The Poll Tax and restrictions on the migration of women meant that for the most part they lived a bachelor existence, although some returned to China to marry and father children, then returning to New Zealand alone, perhaps sending for their sons to come when they became of a manageable age. This situation was common until in 1939, at the beginning of World War 2, when the Government relented and allowed a group of wives and children to come to New Zealand. After the end of the War the Government further relented and allowed the re-unification of more families, but little in the way of new migration. The fall of the Nationalist Government in China in 1949 meant that the Chinese in New Zealand were stranded. Naturalization, denied the Chinese for 44 years was re-instituted in 1951. More Chinese children were being born in New Zealand. . A previously isolated and self-contained group, living temporarily in New Zealand, was destined to become a permanent part of New Zealand society. The Chinese who were here were mainly from peasant stock and lacked much depth of education and culture. Their isolation and circumstances mean that the young people in particular adopted the English and the local culture and lost their connection to the Chinese language and culture. It also appeared to be official policy to encourage the assimilation of the Chinese into the host culture in the hope that within a generation of two the Chinese would be fully merged through free inter-marriage and the "problem" of their separate existence as a separate racial group would largely disappear.

LITERATURE

There has only been a handful of studies of

the Chinese in New Zealand
as an ethnic group. The standard
references are as follows:

1. The Chinese in New
Zealand: A study in Assimilation, Ng Bickleen Fong,
Hong Kong University Press, 1959.

This is considered a standard reference for
the study of the Chinese in New
Zealand. Bickleen Fong was born in China and became the first Chinese woman in New Zealand to gain an MA degree
(from the University of Otago in 1954). The book is based on her
research for her thesis. It is the first
formal study of the Chinese community in New Zealand.

The book needs to be read in the context of
the history of the Chinese community in New Zealand up until that time - as
discussed above. This was the background
to the Chinese community which Bickleen Fong researched.

In the early 1950, the question was how
this Chinese community would become part of the wider New Zealand community. Because the Chinese community was
relatively
small compared with the host community, it was believed that it would need to
"assimilate".

In her book, Fong reports (not surprisingly) that there is little contemporary literature on the subject and resorts to observations and interviews. It is interesting to note that "the people concerned were often unaware that they were being interviewed"[1]. Possibly this would now be considered "unethical".

In her introduction, she refers to the concept of the "marginal man" (first developed by Park and later Stonequist) the result of modern migration trends and the mixing of cultures and contrasts this with the sojourner. She also refers to the situations in Hawaii (where assimilation is very advanced, and the US where there is a much larger scale "stranding" of the Chinese because of the communist takeover in China - compared with New Zealand.)

Fong, usefully, discusses concepts of acculturation, assimilation and the sojourner and the marginal man in the context of world-wide migration occurring after World War 2.

Fong's review of the history of the Chinese in New Zealand (to 1950), relevant legislation and naturalisation are fairly brief but still useful and, being closer to the time, capture some of the urgency in the community when reacting to changes in the latter part of the period being considered.

Fong identifies the characteristics of what she calls the first, second and third generation of the Chinese in New Zealand and the subdivision within these groups. At the time of writing (in the early

1950s), the Chinese arriving in New Zealand were relatively homogeneous and originated from the traditional three counties of the majority of the sojourners and were often of the same or not much higher social class. (This situation later became increasingly complicated with time as the sources of migrants became more diversified.)

Fong reviews the institutional life of the Chinese in New Zealand including political, religious, familial and social institutions, but does so in the context of describing community life but not assimilation. She goes on to describe the traditional family, juvenile delinquency and marriage. The book goes on to describe education, occupations and recreation in the Chinese community before giving a small number of case studies of Chinese in the first, second and third generations. The responses reflect a community cut off from its cultural roots, slowly adjusting to improving social conditions, and increasingly accepted by the wider community.

In Chapter 9 Fong reports the outcome of a survey and statistical analysis which purports to measure, in numerical terms, the social acceptance of Chinese children in New Zealand. Several classes of children were asked to rank their preferences in classmates to join them in activities such as playing games or working on joint projects. The survey apparently showed that the Chinese children were as well accepted as non-Chinese children by their classmates.

Towards the end of the book, Fong reviews the conditions favouring assimilation including the repeal of immigration legislation, the availability of naturalisation, the absence of segregation and free social intercourse. She also points out that there was now (in 1950s New Zealand) an acceptance or interest in Chinese cooking, philosophy, literature and art. She also notes that there is no legal bar to entry to various occupations and professions. Finally she notes that inter-marriage is becoming increasing common, but not yet well accepted.

In her final chapter Fong canvasses the prospect of assimilation as a precursor to amalgamation and hopes that more educated Chinese will be allowed to enter New Zealand. She notes that assimilation is (ideally) " ... a two-way process,, yet for the New Zealand Chinese it has been mainly a one-way process - that of Chinese assimilating New Zealand culture - because the Chinese in New Zealand are not capable of offering something of their own culture in return." [2]

Rather conservatively, she advocates that "...a small number of educated Chinese, selected on the basis of skills and qualifications, trained and personal character, and perhaps on an annual quota system, would help enrich the cultural life of a country which tends to be insular." [3]

Finally she states: "The whole world is undergoing a vigorous though painful process of re-integration.... The West too should develop an attitude of interest and tolerance towards peoples and cultures that are non-Western."

It would appear that while describing the process of assimilation of the Chinese, Fong has sensed the underlying unfairness and one-sidedness of the process and has already identified a possible future where there is a fuller exchange of cultures. Although not quite "integration" as it is now understood, she is hoping for a future where the constituent cultures of New Zealand exist in closer balance.

2. The Overseas Chinese
in New Zealand, Stuart William Greif, Asia Pacific Press, Singapore,
1974.

Greif is an American who gained his PhD and wrote this book based on it, while teaching at Otago University. The book was published 15 years after Fong's book and can be expected to reflect the changes in the Chinese community that occurred in that time.

In Part I of the book, Greif reviews in some detail the historical and social background giving rise to the migration of the Chinese; however these matters are not particularly relevant to understanding the drive to assimilation which occurred since the 1950s.

In Part II of his book Greif explicitly reviews the institutional background for the Chinese in New Zealand available to support the retention of Chinese culture in New Zealand.

He concludes that the home environment, the limited language capability of the parents and the New Zealand education system militate against the retention of Chinese language and culture and even the Chinese language schools, run by various organisations including the churches have limited impact. He notes the absence of Chinatowns or ghettos (which tend to preserve Chinese "culture") and the development of non-traditional Chinese social, dance and sports clubs which allow the Chinese to meet socially, but do

nothing to advance Chinese culture. Greif describes practical function of the New Zealand Chinese Association being limited to organising a sports tournament and predicts its decline and eventual demise. He predicts complete assimilation is inevitable unless there is an influx of new Chinese migrants who bring their cultural skills with them or there is a return of anti-Chinese feeling which will halt and reverse the already established trend towards assimilation.

Interesting, Greif reports the comments (presumably in the early 1970s) of a young Dunedin doctor who on a public occasion, in front of his Chinese elders, advocated the limiting of immigration to allow for complete assimilation of the Chinese. After years of study and research, Dr James Ng may well have moderated his views somewhat.

Greif was not to know that in the late 1980's government policy would indeed allow mass Chinese immigration into New Zealand and that world-wide trends only nascent in the early 1970s would eventually lead on the one hand to the Maori Renaissance, and on the other a move to multi-culturalism in many parts of the world.

Greif conducted a survey of Chinese to determine their attitudes, their opinion on range of matters and their degree of assimilation. Greif concluded that assimilation was proceeding at speed and was viewed as inevitable at least by the younger group. However even Greif allows that "Social integration is a two-way process..." but says nothing of the accommodations that the host society might make towards this process.

Greif, drawing on his American background, notes that even in the melting pot of the United States, groups such as Irish Americans, Polish Americans etc persist because they feel that they do not yet

have equal rights. Greif therefore poses the same question to his survey group of Chinese New Zealanders. He finds that some 83% responded in the affirmative: that they enjoyed the same rights as other New Zealanders, the dissenters being mainly the older generation and the younger generation trapped in traditional occupations and not on an upwardly mobile trajectory like others of their age-group.

While the results of the survey are clear enough, from a present day perspective one would ask just how informed those answers were. Of the young respondents, most would have studied history or social studies to no more than junior secondary school level and either stopped or gone onto study "useful" subjects like accountancy, science or medicine whose faculties were hardly hotbed of political activism.

Greif goes on to review the participation of Chinese in politics and singles out two people George Gee and Ron Waishing as being suited to higher office. Having met both of these gentlemen and seen them in action, one would be unsure of the former and certainly demur in relation to the latter as Parliamentarians. This is a problem of researchers outside the community who must accept the public face and reputation of such "leaders" and will find no one in the community who is willing to criticise them to an outsider.

Greif designed a number of questions to determine the Chinese community's views on the responsiveness of governments and political parties and finds that most are satisfied. While the results are valid at one level, they still do not address the problem that the questions were addressed to a sample which was largely uneducated and certainly unsophisticated in political theory. With typically three years of secondary schooling and growing up in homes with lower working class parents, was it fair to conclude that they all felt happy and contented with their lot, not having been introduced to other possibilities.

Following a fairly detailed analysis of responses to questions, Greif posits that that "... we can be fairly certain that within a short while, only race, child-rearing (to a certain degree) and cooking will differentiate the Chinese New Zealanders - or rather the New Zealanders of Chinese ancestry - from other New Zealanders." [4]

Greif includes 10 cases studies. None are particularly interesting (to me as a member of the community under study) except that of Stephen Chan, a student political activist, self-described as an anarchist. His interview certainly confirms that he is very unusual among Chinese students in that he is not really "Chinese" at all in his views or aspirations. He is especially notable among the interviewees because, possibly not satisfied that the interview gave him the opportunity to show himself as he would like to be seen, he wrote a separate autobiography emphasising the highlights of his life and views.

Today, according to his website [5], Stephen Chan is: Professor of International Relations in the University of London, and foundation Dean of Law and Social Sciences at the School of Oriental and African Studies. He previously held senior positions at the Universities of Kent and Nottingham Trent, and was on the faculty of the University of Zambia.

According to other information on his own website, he is prominent not only in academia, but also in the international literary scene, in martial arts and in a foundation to bring martial arts to Africans.

In his conclusion Greif is firmly of the opinion that the Chinese in New

Zealand are well on the way to assimilation. In an Epilogue, Greif records his thoughts about the effect on the Chinese in New Zealand of the recognition of Communist Government of China and his distaste for its manner of execution. He was not to know then that in time the outcome would be more positive than he could have imagined.

3. The Politics of

Survival: A Social History of the Chinese in New Zealand, Charles P Sedgwick. PhD Thesis, University of Canterbury, 1982.

Sedgwick's rather large (719 page) thesis is very comprehensive history of the Chinese in New Zealand. Completed in 1982 after 10 years of research, it is very detailed and appears very authoritative. It starts by looking at the locality and the political situation in the areas in China which served as the source of the Chinese migrants, and ranges through the major periods starting with "Invited Guests and Uninvited Residents: 1868-1871" and ending with "Historic Conflicts and Contemporary Organisations: 1960-1976."

It is the last chapter which is of greatest interest since it reflects developments in the Chinese community 10 years after Grief's book was written. It is also a period in which I had personal experience and involvement (in the fundraising, design and construction of the Wellington Chinese Sports and Cultural Centre - one of the major Chinese community building projects undertaken in the 1970s reported in the thesis.) Although relatively junior in the community at that time (aged 25) as a recently graduated Master of Engineering I was roped into the community's building effort and was at least vaguely aware of the political machinations surrounding the project. Sedgwick has captured the details of this and competing projects rather well which gives me some confidence in the results of his research and his conclusions on other matters beyond my personal knowledge.

It is Sedgwick's view that the three building projects undertaken at that time, two in Wellington and one in Auckland (massively ambitious in relation to the Chinese population at that time) were undertaken to address urgent social needs within the community. Although unstated at that time, these needs probably included a resistance to total assimilation.

The context to this as follows:

Following the pre- and post- war immigration for family re-unification there had been an increase in the number of Chinese youth in New Zealand. There was a need for social interaction which was acceptably expressed through sporting activities. Old rivalries, suspicions and animosities prevented the existing organisations from providing facilities and new, apolitical organisations were formed. However, these organisations were also backed by people with links to the Kuomintang (Nationalist Party of China), the existing "county" (or place of origin) associations and the churches. In this mix the Republic of China, through its Ambassador, was actively trying establish a base of goodwill before it was de-recognised in favour of the communist PR China. Government funding was eventually gained for all the projects. On (earliest) successful completion, each project would create an aura of legitimacy and confer community leadership (in some sense) on the group promoting it.

Sedgwick reports on the re-organisation of existing community groups around 1965 which, on the one hand, saw the community re-asserted control over autocratic executives, while on the other, recognised the need to provide the means of maintaining a Chinese identity. This was achieved in part by the creation of new organisations as a means for new leaders with new ideas to assert authority in parallel with existing organisations and leaders. Sedgwick states that: "The New Zealand Chinese as an ethnic group are the product of a set of relationships which have prompted the Chinese to use whatever means they have available (the segmentary system) to articulate their ethnicity in a political way to ensure survival." [6]

Sedgwick discusses the characteristics of this segmentary system.

Sedgwick notes that "New Zealand government policy as regards ethnic minorities has changed markedly from one that initially gave total support to assimilation, later integration and now multi-culturalism."

Of course, since the time of writing, the concept of biculturalism has become established as a constitutional imperative, with multi-culturalism downgraded to a social objective.

4. OTHER MATERIAL

It would appear that Sedgwick's is the last major formal study of the Chinese community in New Zealand as a whole. Since its publication in 1982 much has happened in the Chinese community in New Zealand. Most obvious is the change in immigration policy which saw an influx of new migrants arriving in the late 1980s.

However I believe it is not among these migrants that the agents of change (from assimilation, to integration and multi-culturalism) can be found, rather it is among a group of young Chinese New Zealanders, mostly New Zealand born, or those who arrived as children, who underwent a western-style education, absorbed the changes in social mores of the 1960s and 70s, and articulated that change of perspective in their personal lives.

These include (Janice) Wong Liu Shueng, Helene Wong, the previously mentioned Stephen Chan and others. For the most part, these have published their ideas in the less formal media as articles, speeches or interviews in magazines rather than formally in books and theses. These have yet to be consolidated and examined as a series to determine how and when they threw off the assimilationist assumptions and accepted the integration/multi-cultural paradigm - which is the subject of the substantive essay.

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[1] The Chinese in New Zealand: a study in assimilation, Bickleen Fong, Hong Kong University Press, 1959, page 3.

[2] Ibid, p123

[3] Ibid, p123

[4] The Overseas Chinese in New Zealand, Stuart William Greif, Asia Pacific Press, Singapore, 1974, p119.

[5] <http://www.stephen-chan.com/Academic/index.htm>

[6] The Politics of Survival: A Social History of the Chinese in New Zealand, Charles P Sedgwick. PhD Thesis, University of Canterbury, 1982, p628.