

# Engaging Asian Communities

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ENGAGING  
ASIAN COMMUNITIES IN POLICY DECISION-MAKING IN NEW ZEALAND - BACKGROUND AND ISSUES

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ENGAGING ASIAN  
COMMUNITIES IN POLICY DECISION MAKING PROCESSES

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what  
can we learn from UK  
experiences.

Shun Au

Chinese Mental  
Health Association, United  
Kingdom

Hunter Lecture  
Theatre

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Centre for  
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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The history and background the various Asian communities, as well as the political situation of New Zealand nationally and internationally need to be taken in account when considering their involvement in policy decision-making processes.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

To date, 150 years after their first members started arriving in New Zealand, Asian and other ethnic communities have not been greatly involved in policy decision-making processes either at central or local government level.

This is starting to change, but the processes and the problems on each side are not well understood by central and local government, nor by these communities.

## 2. DEFINITIONS

Asian communities in the New Zealand context means the various Chinese communities, the Indian communities and the Korean and south-east Asian communities some of which were originally established as refugee communities.

The Chinese communities consist of

the "old" Chinese community which originated in Guangdong Province, first established in the 1860s and built up in number since the end of WWII, (about 20% of the Chinese population) the "new" Chinese community which arrived in large numbers after 1986, from Hong Kong, mainland China, Taiwan and elsewhere who make up another 70%. Between these two there were also smaller groups of Chinese from Malaysia who initially arrived as students in the 1960s who, with ethnic Chinese from other origins make up the rest.

The Indian community includes the descendants Gujarati and Punjabi migrants who arrived directly from India in 1890s and a sizeable number who arrived since 1987 via Fiji following the coup there. (I cannot speak for the Indian community but, as the recent seminar held at the Stout Research Centre has illustrated, the story of discrimination and hardship suffered by the early Indian community is very similar to the story of the early Chinese in New Zealand although there were some differences arising from the Indians' British background.)

#### Consultation

is a process by which policies are exposed for comment by those it might affect. Their response may or may not be used to modify the policy. (In many cases this "consultation" is sometimes an exercise to "sell" a policy to those who might derive no benefit from it, or indeed may be negatively affected by it. Community leaders, flattered and captured by the consultation process in impressive surroundings may have an ambiguous role in this process.

#### Engagement

of a community in policy decision-making processes should include mechanisms for representatives to initiate, examine, debate, and reformulate policies, and for these representatives to be answerable to their communities. (Such engagement in the past has been either non-existent or at least very rare. The only example of any note has been the Poll Tax reconciliation process which Kirsten Wong will speak about.)

## 2. CHARACTERISTICS OF ASIAN COMMUNITIES IN NEW ZEALAND

Plans to engage communities need to take account the history and characteristics of those communities.

### OLD CHINESE COMMUNITY

Because of the Poll Tax and other discriminatory measures the original Chinese immigrants formed what were essentially bachelor communities. Members survived by working very hard, living frugally and making themselves self-sufficient (ie socially isolated), since they were often reviled by the European community. A number of Chinese women and children were allowed into New Zealand just before WWII as refugees and following the war the community was built up by the arrival of more families. While the community was transformed from sojourners to permanent settlers, life was still very hard. In the 1950s and 60s families invested much of their efforts to project the next generation into a wide range of businesses and the professions. While no longer officially discriminated against after the mid 1950s, and enjoying the vote at both national and local government levels, the Chinese community was essentially outside the decision-making process with a few notable exceptions.

- From the 1950s through to the early 1980s the Chinese community did not have the necessary resources, skills and inclination to engage in the policy decisions-making process.

- It did not have leaders with the necessary language skills, education and experience to participate in public policy debate (which was, in any case, less accessible than now.)

- The community was divided into different (but overlapping) groups, many centred on "places of origin", religious denominations, political affiliations in China, with limited agendas related to their homeland and little ambition to influence policy in New Zealand.

- This lack of ambition might have been partly based on Confucian principles which held that the duty of ordinary people was to obey the law - not seek to change it which might be construed as a form of rebellion against the state or at least ingratitude.

- The generation who first entered the professions (in the 1960s and 70s - now nearing retirement -) were heavily influenced by life-long and typical parental admonishments to keep ones nose clean and stay out of trouble. They and their parents may have suffered a mild form of the Stockholm effect (identifying with and defending their "captors" - the power elite of the mainstream community - partly as a survival technique.)

## NEW MIGRANT CHINESE COMMUNITY

The new immigrant community was characterised by a high average level of education, a long-established middle-class background, strong connections to Chinese culture but less confidence in the English language and (as might be expected) much less experience in the NZ political scene.

For example relatively few understand the importance of the Treaty of Waitangi and its place in the Constitution of New Zealand.

The new migrants come from a variety of political backgrounds which might be (over-) generalised as follows:

- Migrants from Hong Kong have been conditioned not only by the business environment but also by their lack of political rights in the former British colony (no elections, government essentially by decree.)

- Migrants from mainland China are influenced by their experiences living in a one-party state, and the general inadvisability of rebelling against the established order.



- Migrants from Taiwan, while proud of their new-found democracy are not accustomed to being part of a minority and the political limitations of that status.

### 3. THE NEW DEMOGRAPHICS

#### NEW ZEALAND AS AN ASIAN/PACIFIC STATE

While all the characteristics discuss above remain largely unchanged today, the evolving national and international situation requires us to view ethnic communities in a new light.

The increasing economic and political importance of Asia (particularly China) on the world stage means that New Zealand's engagement with Asia can only increase also. This will mean more trade, more travel and more people-to-people contacts. Such contact means that the demographics of New Zealand will continue to change regardless of the level of debate within New Zealand society."

In 20 years time Asians are projected to make up to 12% of New Zealand's population, rivalling if not exceeding the projected Maori population. If democracy and one person one vote is to continue (as is likely!) then Asians will have increased electoral weight. It is in everyone's interest that they become actively, positively engaged in policy at both the local and national government level.

Engagement strategies need to take account of the characteristics of Asians in New Zealand - arising from their history and cultural background - which can only be changed slowly.

#### 4. WHY ASIANS NEED TO ENGAGE

From the perspective of Asians in New Zealand, it is beneficial for them to engage in policy decision making processes. One simple reason is that they need to provide input into the design of services for their communities. By doing so they indirectly shape the communities in which they live, making them more responsive to their needs and aspirations.

## 5. LEADING FROM THE FRONT

MMP has, in recent years, allowed the Asian communities to have two MP in Parliament, Pansy Wong (National) from Auckland and Ashraf Choudhury (Labour) from Palmerston North. Kenneth Wang is waiting the wings as the next list MP for the Act Party.

At present, New Zealand has two ethnic Chinese mayors, Peter Chin in Dunedin, Meng Foon in Gisborne and several councillors throughout the country.

With the maturing of the Chinese community, and a greater spread of academic majors, Asians now have a significant presence developing policy in various Departments, Ministries and NGOs.

- Office of Ethnic Affairs
- NZ Police
- Human Rights Commission
- Mental Health Commission
- Ministry of Social Development

Not every Asian officer in these bodies identifies with an ethnic community and of those who do only some are in a position to contribute an ethnic viewpoint. This is possibly a good reason for increasing the "ethnic" presence through the civil service.

(I hope that some time in the future, MPs, mayors, councillors and departmental officers will have the opportunity to explain in detail how they involve ethnic communities in decision-making.)

## 6. FEEDING IN FROM THE BOTTOM

Apart from the "professionals" noted above, most members of the ethnic communities will only have an occasional opportunity to provide input into policy - usually in an area in which they have an interest either personally or as a community leader.

What are the processes which are currently available to provide input?

## PARTY POLICIES

Much social policy is developed by political parties through a process of remits, committees, working parties and the work done in "smoke-filled rooms" ie political horse-trading. It is necessary for an ethnic community to not only be represented by an MP in that party, but also have several members within the party structure, as high up as possible, in order to initiate and push remits through until the ideas are (eventually) embodied in legislation. The process is an exceedingly slow one. It is a numbers game with heavy representation being rewarded by earlier attention to a problem - all subject to attaining the Treasury Benches of course.

## CENTRAL GOVERNMENT POLICY DEVELOPMENT

Members of the Chinese community took up the opportunity to input into Government policy for the very first time during the Poll Tax reconciliation process. The intricacies of consulting throughout the country,

recording comments, summarising submissions, resolving differences, developing policy and the input of Ministers and the Cabinet process, and much more were revealed to an ethnic community for the first time. That process has had a huge impact on the Chinese community, stimulating historical research, community discussion and community development work. The \$5,000,000 fund, established as part of the reconciliation package will ensure that such worthwhile community projects continue.

More recently, an engagement process also has been taking place in Auckland formulating the Auckland Regional Settlement Strategy where the Maori, Pacific Island, Refugees, ESOL providers, employers and migrants (including Chinese) have been given the opportunity to voice the issues, discuss the barriers and suggest ways of working in the future.

There are, of course, opportunities for individuals and groups to present petitions and make submissions in the Parliamentary process. However, Governments seem to use these only as means of testing public opinion, and it takes an overwhelming expression of opposition (and the threat of electoral consequences) to change Government policy. Thus these are largely ineffective tools for ethnic communities to influence policy decision-making.

Participation in policy initiation and formulation is considerably more rewarding than protesting policy implementation.

## LOCAL GOVERNMENT POLICY DEVELOPMENT

The Local Government Act 2002 requires Local Government to consult with their communities. To date this has not been very effective because:

- The Council processes have not been structured to take account of community input at an earlier enough stage.
  
- The communities are not yet geared to provide input which is based on wide consultations within the various communities. People are busy, and many just cannot be bothered responding to what sometimes appear to be inane questions, the answers which can be interpreted in any way the politicians like.
  
- The consultation process is often perceived as the Council "selling" a pre-determined outcome to an unwilling but powerless community.

Local authorities are considerably smaller than Central Government and should be more responsive to their rate-paying electors. (As the recent Local Government elections have shown, the difference between winning and losing is commonly only a few hundred votes - relatively easy for ethnic communities to muster.) Therefore providing input into policy decision-making is a realistic near-term objective.

## 7. OPPORTUNITIES TO PARTICIPATE IN POLICY DECISION-MAKING

At the present time the various organs of Government are set up to provide fair governance not necessarily to empower communities, and most of the current consultation processes reflect this.

Recently the Office of Ethnic Affairs has developed the paper Ethnic Perspectives in Policy, ([http://www.ethnicaffairs.govt.nz/oeawebsite.nsf/wpg\\_URL/What-We-Do-Policy-development-Ethnic-Perspectives-in-Policy?OpenDocument](http://www.ethnicaffairs.govt.nz/oeawebsite.nsf/wpg_URL/What-We-Do-Policy-development-Ethnic-Perspectives-in-Policy?OpenDocument)) which has been approved by Cabinet and required to be taken into account by Government Departments when developing policy. Whether they do so will depend on how often they are reminded by the Asian communities.

However ethnic communities not only need to be a part of the consultation process, they also need to have advocates in the institutions to make sure their interests are represented in the actual setting up of the process. Hence the desirability of having officers with ethnic backgrounds seeded throughout the civil service and related NGOs.

Asian communities and particularly Chinese communities throughout the world have been notorious for keeping their heads down and working hard, with minimal participation in the political affairs of the country they live in. While this has been a survival technique of sorts in the past, it is hardly an attitude that should continue. Failure to participate in policy decision-making will result in decisions being made by others.



Asian communities need to recognise the opportunities in the "Asian Century" and the new demographics, to share their perspectives in the communities in which they live.

Asian communities in New Zealand at present are differentiated from one another by their history and background. However, for effective participation in policy decision-making, Asian communities need to find more points of commonality within the context New Zealand society.

As always, the future is in our own hands.

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Steven Young is the editor/publisher of the website CHINESE IN NEW ZEALAND, (<http://www.stevenyoung.co.nz/chinesevoice/index.htm>), and a writer and commentator on NZ Chinese community affairs. He is currently the President of the Wellington Chinese Association; however the views herein are his own.

