

# Chinese Culture for MCH

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## CHINESE CULTURE IN NEW ZEALAND

A  
background briefing for the staff at the Ministry of Culture and Heritage

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"The Ministry is responsible for supporting and funding the Cultural and Heritage activities of this country, yet we are a very mono-cultural outfit, and we thought it would be really helpful to expose our people here to some of the diverse cultures in New Zealand" Jock Phillips - Chief Historian.

The Chinese make up about 3.7% of the population of New Zealand or about 150,000 people within New Zealand's population of 4,100,000 people.

Of this number approximately 20% are the "established" migrants whose families have been in New Zealand since the 1860s, while the other 80% are "new" migrants who have arrived since about 1986.

Thus the established migrant families are already a minority within the total Chinese population. This is especially marked in Auckland where 80% of New Zealand Chinese live; but is less so in Wellington where the split of established and new migrants is approximately equal.

The established families sometimes console themselves by multiplying their small population by the large number of years their families have been in New Zealand and comparing this with the large population of new migrants multiplied by the small number of years the new migrants have been in New Zealand. It is true that for the meantime the influence of these two groups are about equal.

## 2. ORIGINS & ASSOCIATIONS

The original migrants to New Zealand came from Guangdong Province, predominantly from three administrative areas (counties) originally known as Poon Yu, Seyip (or Toishan) and Jung Shing. They arrived in a process called "chain migration" with sons and nephews following their fathers or uncles or clansmen from their villages.

People still identify with their family's county of origin and still support the old settler associations, established 80 plus years ago which remain active to this day. These associations are the Poon Fah Association, the Tung Jung Association and the Seyip Association.

Apart from these Associations, there is a very active New Zealand Chinese Association which was originally established to raise funds to help fight the Japanese in China and later acted as a national organisation to look after the interest of the Chinese in New Zealand.

New migrants have come from Taiwan, Hong Kong, Malaysia, Indonesia and of course from

mainland China. The new migrants come from all areas and provinces and not from small localised areas.

These new migrants have also established associations based on their origins but these are much more broadly based eg the Hwa Kwang Association is the association representing the Taiwanese in Wellington, the New Chinese Friendship Association represent mainlanders in Wellington and so on.

### 3. SOCIAL STRATIFICATION OF MIGRANTS

The original Chinese migrants to New Zealand were gold miners. Most of these came from villages rather than from the cities and were essentially peasants with little or no education. This was against a backdrop civil war, social unrest, banditry and limited opportunities in China. When the gold ran out, the Chinese took up the classic occupations of laundry work, market gardening and fruit and vegetable retailing all requiring little capital and long hours of backbreaking work. Their descendants have taken advantage of free education offered in New Zealand and generally moved into the professions and business. Many of the children of the original migrants (like their kiwi friends) have taken up opportunities to do their OE or relocated permanently overseas to follow careers.

The new wave of migrants have been - because of the entry requirements- from the professional and business classes. However many have been under-employed because of difficulties in finding work relevant to their education and training.

#### 4. HISTORY OF THE CHINESE IN NEW ZEALAND

The history of the Chinese in New Zealand may be summarised as follows:

WELCOME  
1865-1870

There was a very short period when the Chinese were welcomed to work the Otago gold field after other miners had moved off to new prospects.

## PREJUDICE AND DISCRIMINATION 1870-1935

This was a period when at personal level, the Chinese were bullied, abused and mistreated by Europeans and at an official level the Government of New Zealand took various measures to discriminate against the Chinese. These measures included the imposition of the Poll Tax, fingerprinting on entry and the restriction on the entry of Chinese women. Men would return to China to marry and father children and come back to New Zealand to a bachelor existence.

## HUMANITARIAN CONSIDERATION 1935-1950

Some Chinese women and children were allowed into New Zealand temporarily just before the outbreak of war with Japan. The Chinese were recognised as Allies during the Second World War and the local Chinese were man-powered to provide vegetables for American troops fighting in the Pacific. After the war the temporary permits were extended.

## ASSIMILATION 1950-1985

Official policy encouraged the westernisation of Chinese youth, the learning of English and discouraged the learning of Chinese language and culture - for example by discouraging the entry of Chinese language teachers. Further migration was limited to family re-unification and to the new wives or husbands of Chinese New Zealanders, or highly qualified professionals such as doctors.

## OPEN ENTRY 1985 - PRESENT

The rules were changed to allow entry to those qualified by wealth and educational attainment with little regard to race. This has resulted in a large influx which resulted in a four-fold increase in the number of Chinese (from about 30,000 pre 1985 to about 140,000 now.) In recent years there has been a significant number of Chinese students in New Zealand.

## 5. A SHORT HISTORY OF CHINA

China has had a continuous history of at least 4000 years ie from 2000 BCE to 2000 CE. China as a country and the Chinese as a people have been around for a very long time. It is therefore not surprising that all Chinese tend to take a very long-term view of recent history.

Chinese writing, in a form recognisable to the modern Chinese, was in existence more than 1000 BCE and in primitive forms perhaps 3200 BCE. The earliest precursor scripts found on tortoise shells are as old as 7000BCE.

Confucius was born 550 BCE and his theories of social organisation have influenced Chinese society for much of that period. Confucius defined the correct relationships of hierarchies and their duties to one another: between princes and ministers, ministers and administrators and between administrators and people and likewise between the head of a family and its members.

Confucius's theories were later embodied in the civil administration of China. Entry to the civil service of China was open to anyone able to pass public examinations based on the teachings of Confucius - regardless of the candidate's original social position. Many villages have stories of cow-herd boys who somehow studied the writings Confucius and his disciples and later rose to great eminence as ministers after succeeding in the Imperial Examination.



These stories are the basis for the examination success of Chinese students world-wide: the absolute certainty that study and success in examinations will bring honour and opportunities - regardless of how humble ones beginnings.

Today Confucius's theories are once again honoured by the authorities in China and are enjoying a revival world wide.

The Great Wall of China was built in stages between 500BCE and 1600 CE and is the longest and largest man-made structure in the history of the human race. Apart from its size it is a perhaps as much a testament to the persistence of the Chinese people and their willingness to sacrifice treasures and human lives to achieve long-term goals such as the unity and integrity of the nation.

## 6. CHINA AND THE BARBARIANS

For hundreds of years, China has regarded itself at the Middle Kingdom, and all those outside it as barbarians - including the Europeans who took advantage of corrupt and weak regimes, civil unrest and the warlordism of the past three hundred years to weaken it further and detach various parts to add to their empires.

The Chinese cannot forget that Hong Kong, no matter how successful and important as a commercial centre, was created by the British on land acquired in one of the un-equal treaties a hundred-odd years ago and that Shanghai is the true commercial capital of China.

It will be a long time before China can forgive Japan, encouraged by the European Axis powers, for attacking and occupying China and committing atrocities - the most infamous against the city of Nanking where it is said some 300,000 died after weeks of rape and savagery.

## 7. CHINESE LANGUAGES

The Chinese language is a complex combination of pictographs, ideographs and other elements too complex to

describe here.

It does not consist solely of stylised pictures of hills, water, sun, moon, tree etc and is considerably more complex in the way that it conveys abstract ideas.

In modern Chinese "radicals" give an indication of the class of words, and "phonemes" give some idea of the sound of the word.

For our purposes today, we can say (in a vast simplification) that the Chinese in New Zealand speak either Cantonese or Mandarin. Cantonese was and is spoken by the original migrants who brought their language from Guangdong Province in the south of China including Hong Kong. Mandarin is the standard modern Chinese spoken by the rest of China and by the new migrants.

Cantonese is related to the original (ancient) forms of the Chinese language which was partially preserved when the southern provinces became politically and economically isolated from the rest of China for several hundred years.

Chinese (all forms) is a tonal language, so a single sound may have as many as 20 different meanings depending on the tone

in which it is spoken. In Cantonese there are 7 tones, in Mandarin there are 4 tones.

Many Chinese "words" consist of two characters some of which mean the same thing while in some cases one character qualifies the other! Thus the English word "book" is represented in Chinese by two characters both of which mean "book". On the other hand "aeroplane" is represented by two characters which mean "flying" and "machine".

Given the tonality of the language and its method of creating new "words" from pairs of characters, it is therefore not surprising that the language is full of puns (for native speakers) and traps for foreign speakers. If Chinese friends laugh uproariously at your attempts at Chinese it is possible that instead of describing an enjoyable day pony-riding you have described something very inappropriate involving your mother.

Unfortunately it is not possible to pronounce a Chinese character correctly by looking at the character. The characters give only the slightest clue (and sometimes not even that) to the sound and meaning of the word.

Fortunately there are various systems of romanisation of Chinese which, with tonal marks, can indicate the correct pronunciation. Pinyin is one such system.

## 8. USING PINYIN AND NOT REALISING IT

Pinyin uses some roman characters in ways which are rather unusual. If, without being aware of the differences, you pronounce the pinyin characters as in English, you will sound rather ignorant to the Chinese. Most mainland Chinese have had pinyin drilled into them from an early age and know the system very well. To avoid the most glaring errors note the following:

"Q" is pronounced as a "ch" in English and not as a "q": Thus the island Qingdao is pronounced Chingdao.

"He" is pronounced as a "her" in English and not "hee": Thus Henan Province is pronounced Hernan not Heenan; Hebei Province is pronounced Herbay not Heebay.

"Zhang" is pronounced almost like "Jiang" and not "Zang."

## 9. CHINESE NAMES

Chinese traditionally put their surnames first. (At secondary school we use to do the same!)

There are only about 150 Chinese surnames and of these only 100 are common - the other 50 being rather obscure. The most prolific are the Lees, (Lis) the Chans and the Wongs (Huangs, Wangs etc) who number in the millions world-wide.

There are a few Chinese double-barrel names the most common being the See-toos and the Ou-Youngs.

Chinese traditionally have two given names, although on the mainland people may have only a single given name. These "names" are just words which express the hopes of their parents or desired qualities in the child. (In this way they are similar to the names of Native American.)

Thus Mr & Mrs Ma (Horse) might, in a fit of revolutionary fervour, have named their son, born in 1949, Ma Xin Guo (Ma New Nation) or Ma Jian Guo (Ma Build Nation).

More traditionally my Chinese name is Yang Rui Sheng (in Cantonese Young Sui Sang). The surname means Willow (tree) while the given names mean "fortunate life".

It should be noted that Chinese bear their names without any feeling of embarrassment that their parents expressed such hopes in their children in such a public way. The proper reaction is "Your name has such a depth of meaning! (Your parents are indeed learned people.)"

When reporting the activities of Chinese officials make very sure that you have correctly identified his surname. Nothing will confirm your barbarian status in the eyes of the Chinese more surely than if, after meeting Hu Jintao, you refer to him as President Jintao instead of President Hu. (An almost foolproof tip - see above: the surname is likely to be a single syllable and is the first characters in his name.) Very few Chinese officials will ever reverse their surname/given name order on their name card to "help" foreigners get it right.

## 10. FOOD AND DRINK - FOR VISITORS

Like most of the world, Chinese realise that they are overfed and would welcome having a simple meal rather than an OTT banquet; however sometimes this is unavoidable in order to convey the correct level of respect.

Chinese generally do not like western foods and think the tiny portions of marrow, fern frond or water crest offered at Government House, the Beehive or in the Great Hall at Parliament somewhat ridiculous.

If a banquet is unavoidable, Chinese guests will appreciate getting a nice Chinese meal with plenty of variety and local delicacies such as fresh blue cod, venison, oysters, mussels, lamb and kiwifruit. Do not attempt to order a Chinese meal without qualified advice.



A formal meal should include all of the following: Soup, cold platter, chicken, duck, pork, beef, fish, other seafood, vegetables, rice and dessert. Eight dishes not counting soup, rice and dessert are a minimum, nine is standard. Chinese desserts are usually very simple and are often treated as an afterthought.

Guests from southern provinces like multiple meat dishes with garlic, ginger and soy-sauce based recipes and need plain steamed rice. Guests from the north provinces appreciate hot and sour recipes, with noodles and miantao (fresh steamed rolls). Lamb is a favourite meat for northerners.

Generally cheeses and antipasto-type offerings and cold dishes are foreign to their palates.

Many Chinese guests prefer red wine over white, regardless of the food offered. Many Chinese have not developed their palates to appreciate complex white wines so Cloudy Bay might seem just as good as Oyster Bay.

Tea is the universal Chinese beverage. If you offer tea make sure it is good tea because they can certainly tell the difference between fresh, high quality tea and the cheap muck found at the of the office cupboard left over from three years ago.

If you are host, you do not need to offer  
Maotai or similar especially if you are uncomfortable drinking it. It is an acquired taste.

Even very senior guests may like to sing  
after dinner especially in a private setting as a sign of conviviality. What will you do in response?

## 11. FESTIVALS

To the Chinese, festivals such as Spring  
Festival (Chinese New Year), Mid-Autumn Festival, Ching Ming (Grave Sweeping)  
are rituals which link all members of the Chinese community world-wide in  
expressing their common heritage.

Participation in these festivals is  
non-compulsory but (especially in New Zealand) is a way of asserting  
ones Chineseness in a foreign environment, in an acceptable way.

## 12. CULTURE AND CULTURAL PERFORMANCES

As one would expect in a country with a continuous history spanning several millennia, expressions of culture was highly stylised.

### CALLIGRAPHY

Chinese is one of the few cultures where writing is a recognised art form.

Traditionally calligraphy is done with ink and brush. Because ink will always flow whether the brush is moving or not, any haste or hesitation will result in the characters taking a different form. Great calligraphy is said to reveal not only the knowledge and education of the writer but also his character, temperament and moral rectitude.

## BRUSH PAINTING

Because the tools are the same, ink painting requires total control to abstract the essentials of a scene with a few strokes of the brush. Classical subjects include bamboo, goldfish, cranes on a pine tree, galloping horses, all rendered with a few strokes.

## OPERA

Opera retells traditional stories of hardships, betrayals, courage and sacrifices among kings, princesses, concubines, generals and scholars often evoking Confucian ideals. Certain conventions allow epic tales to be told on stage: a whip in one hand indicates the hero is on horse, stepping over an imaginary threshold indicates that one is entering a grand hall, donning a costume with multiple pennants indicates leading an army of thousands, a red face indicates a hero, a black face a tyrant and so on.

## FOLK DANCE

Folk dances in China, as everywhere, are often stylised celebrations of seasonal changes and abundance, rites of passage and similar events in the life of villagers.

In China

the dances of indigenous minorities and their distinctive costumes are given prominence in recognition of their protected status.

## LION DANCE

The most popular dance is the Lion Dance (which should be distinguished from the much less common Dragon Dance.) The Lion Dance is intended to scare away evil, bring good fortune and is a standard item at the beginning of most festivities - much like a haka. Many communities train year around to be able to perform the Lion Dance at any appropriate occasion.

## DRAGON BOAT RACING

Like many festivals, Dragon Boat racing is based on a story - in this case the story of a scholar who committed suicide by drowning to protest the injustice and corruption of the current regime. The people took to boats with cymbals and drums and traditional foods to ensure that the fish did not consume his body.

Dragon boat racing was originally a strictly male activity and women were forbidden on the bridges over the rivers where the racing took place. Nowadays, equal opportunity laws means that women can join in corporate padding of fiberglass boats.

## 13. IDENTITY

The arrival of the new migrants, confident and comfortable with their Chinese culture, has stimulated the interest of the descendants of the original migrants in their own identity. Many young Chinese have joined especially organised trips to China to seek their ancestral roots. Many undergo life-changing transformations during their trip when they confront at first hand the enormity of their cultural inheritance of which they have been barely aware.

Several conferences have been organised which allow members of both new and old migrant groups to assess their current situations in a country which is small, isolated, mono-cultural with bi-cultural aspirations and with little more than lip service towards any support for multiculturalism.

These developments are taking place in an environment when the economic and political influence of China increases by the day, and the local Chinese are somehow one-removed from the action by accident of history and decisions made by others under very different conditions.

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