

James Liu 1

Contributed by Steven Young
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Don't Slip
on a Banana Skin:

A Reply to
Brian O'Flaherty's "Kiwi View" of the Bananas Conference

The Bananas
"Going Global" conference was the 3rd of a trilogy. The first two engaged with Chinese communities and promoted the idea of being a Chinese New Zealander. The most recent one connected this platform to wider communities in NZ and to Chinese communities around the world. Brian O'Flaherty presented his reactions to the 3rd conference in My Kiwi View in ways that demand reply from the Chinese community.

The term
"banana" began as a catchy, tongue-in-cheek reference to attract media attention. Surely no one could have missed the humour in giving people bananas in their conference packs and presenting them as gifts to guest speakers?
The term reflects a long history of assimilation adopted by NZ Chinese to survive politically and to achieve economic success; among its unintended consequences has been a loss of heritage language and culture among Kiwi Chinese. The term may have out-lived its usefulness as I heard some young people at the last conference calling themselves "bananas" in all seriousness. It's a joke, guys, like Black people in the United States calling one another n*gg*r! And no, I don't want white people calling me a b*n*n*, but Kai Luey might be able to get away with it J

The process
of revisiting the history of racist policies directed against Chinese migrants to NZ in past resulted in not only the creation of the Poll Tax Heritage Trust, with its small endowment of \$5 million, but more importantly the will to use this money to create a public profile, an "identity position" for Chinese New Zealanders that has been shunned by the community in the past. This was the impetus behind the conferences, and raises the first issue where I will respond to Mr. O'Flaherty through his own statements:

"Who
suppressed it, and why?"

Colleen

Ward and Anne-Marie Masgoret in a 2007 issue of the International Journal of Intercultural Relations demonstrated that New Zealand employment agencies (they used a sample of 85 technology sector recruiting firms) are significantly more likely to discard a CV with a Chinese-sounding name and request a follow-up interview for a CV with an Anglo-sounding name even though the two were designed to have equivalent qualifications.

So in 2007,

a person with a Chinese name and superb qualification in IT (hardly a language-intensive area), was one-third as likely to get a call-back from an employment agency compared to a person with an Anglo-sounding name, and nine times more likely to be told there were no jobs on offer. This is in our "politically correct", socially sensitive today. It was much, much worse in the past. No wonder New Zealand Chinese put their heads down and tried not to draw attention to themselves in the past. Invisibility was the safest strategy for survival, and perhaps acceptance. But in the post-1987 era of points rather than race-based qualifications for immigration, this does not work anymore because so many Chinese in NZ are now first generation immigrants from Asia that trigger all the stereotypes NZ Europeans like to carry.

As a

post-1987 migrant, I admire the courage and dedication of those who have planted a stake in the ground to represent the lives of those Chinese who have become rooted to this land through the lives of their forefathers, and have as much a claim to its resources, both symbolic and realistic, as anyone else. Thank you for reaching out and giving us a place to stand.

"Over-sensitivity

and implied recrimination over the question of where you are from"

A quote

from a chapter by Elena Stevens on Russian (white) migrants to NZ illustrates why some people find the question "where are you from"; alienating:

Interviewer: How do you introduce yourself to New Zealanders?

M8: Well, they usually ask... start with... a stupid question, "Where are you from?"; To this question I always reply, "From Brooklyn [Wellington

suburb]”. Here, they start thinking, feel lost for a moment and then the most intelligent say, “That’s great but I am asking you where your accent comes from.” I say, “Well, my accent is from Moscow”.

For Chinese

New Zealanders, the problem is more acute because we are a visible minority. Work in press in the European Journal of Social Psychology by Chris Sibley and James Liu shows that kiwis can pair white and brown (NZ European and Maori) faces to symbols of NZ more quickly than they can do this for yellow (NZ Chinese) faces. While kiwis say that “everyone is equal” they do not act in this way, neither at the explicit level of handling CVs, nor at the implicit level of their gut-level associations of people to national symbols like the flag. This is alienating for multi-generational NZ Chinese because they are treated as foreigners though some of their families have been in NZ since the 1860s. For newcomers, it is not necessarily the most inclusive ice-breaker, though it can work if there is genuine interest in the reply. It all depends on the timing and the intent.

“How comfy
are you in your own skin?”

Mr.

O’Flaherty calls Professor Margaret Mutu “an outspoken… angry lady”. She makes him uncomfortable, because he is a man “with little recognisable past and no concern for the gap”. As he says, this is not the place to discuss Maori-Pakeha politics, but as I have written in my book New Zealand Identities, Chinese and other Asians in NZ might do well to orient towards a bicultural system of nationhood where the principle of non-assimilable difference accorded to Maori as Treaty partners also extends to other groups struggling to maintain heritage language and culture. The past is only a burden for those who want to deny its present day legacies.

“Contrition”
makes “the hairs on my neck start to prickle”

Mr.

O’Flaherty “can’t get away from the feeling that the sins of the fathers are being visited on the sons” with respect to the issue of Treaty Settlements and the Poll Tax Settlement and Apology. Brian, one of the best predictors of the economic success of the son is the economic standing of the father. Unfortunately, one of the major bases of economic success for previous generations of NZ Europeans was land alienated from Maori, often illegally. As Kenda Gee writes, “Government is a living, breathing organism. Just as we hold citizens responsible for their obligations, despite changes in administrations (including back taxes owed

by their estates when they have long expired), so, too, should we expect government to be held accountable for egregious (racist) policies and actions.

Why should

we do this? Because "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it" (George Santayana). In some ways, NZ is a marvellously harmonious society, that has transformed itself from an agricultural society to a multi-sectoral, innovation-based society (with agricultural as a base) in just 25 years.

But in other ways it bears dark stains of its colonial legacy: the second highest incarceration rate per capita in the developed world, the highest youth suicide rate, the unwillingness of employers to hire people with a different skin from themselves. If

"mainstream NZ" is incapable of harnessing the energies of its New Settler communities, and healing the divides of its colonial past, these problems will eat away at its civil society. The "unmarked centre" created in the 19th century to unite the various White immigrant groups from Britain and Ireland does

not provide an adequate identity position for Maori and Asians in NZ in the 21st century. The invisibility of the unmarked centre for NZ Europeans makes NZ Maori and NZ Chinese visibly disadvantaged, Maori economically, Chinese socially. As we form a larger and larger part of NZ's demographics, developing institutions tailored to a multicultural society with bicultural foundations will become invaluable in managing social cohesion.

"It's time we got real about each other"

There is no

question that English language skills are essential to success in this country. In fact, English language

skills are useful in many parts of the world, not the least of which is Beijing. Mr. O'Flaherty's willingness to help a

student improve his English is laudable.

But while English language proficiency is an unavoidable skill set

required for successful adaptation among new migrants to this country,

proficiency in Chinese will become equally unavoidable as a skill set for NZ

Chinese in the global economy of the 21st century. Indeed, Eton, one of Britain's

poshest schools, now requires Chinese for its students!

Man-ying Ip

theorizes both about the interaction between the "NZ factor" and "China factor"

in shaping NZ Chinese communities through their 140 year history. In the 21st century, China is

becoming an economically strong but not yet a totally civil society, while NZ

is relatively benign, but not especially integrative of non-white newcomers,

and economically lagging. For Chinese

people in NZ, there are many paths forward, perhaps more paths forward than are

available to NZ Europeans. For those

with bilingual language skills, the Asia-Pacific holds massive opportunities,

as there are Chinese speaking populations with huge economic and political influences in every nation from Indonesia to the Philippines and Thailand, let alone Taipei and Beijing. To force the assimilation of new Chinese immigrants as in the 19th and 20th centuries would be sheer folly for NZ. To build bridges between various communities of Chinese, both new and old, is the way forward. Each of us brings a different skill set, a different set of connections, a different way of looking at ourselves and others, but a shared cultural heritage that opens doors. It is not for the Brian O'Flaherty's of the world to decide what Chinese identities will be brought into play for the 21st century. Each of us has been gifted, through our cultural heritage and our collective memories of joy and suffering with a set of resources that are of immense value in the global economy. I wonder how long it will take "mainstream NZ" to wake up to the fact that the comfort of its own skin will become a straitjacket of limitations if it misses opportunity after opportunity to engage on an equal basis with people who carry a set of skins that can take NZ to parts of the world where it has not gone before.

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