

FILM 403 RESEARCH ESSAY

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RESEARCH ESSAY

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ILLUSTRIOUS ENERGY

(Leon
Narbey 1988)

After
18 years of radical changes and developments in the community, is the only
feature film about the Chinese in New Zealand still "correct?"

BACKGROUND

Illustrious

Energy was made in 1988.

At one level it is a story based on the lives of miners who left China and their families with the intention of making their fortune, but failed and instead suffered privation, discrimination, and heart-break in the gold fields of Otago.

At another level it is a romanticised story about an exotic group in New Zealand - at a time when New Zealand was starting to accept that there might another history different from the 1950s European version.

The original Chinese migrants starting arriving in significant numbers in New Zealand in the 1860s. For 120 years until 1985, the numbers of Chinese in New Zealand were kept down by various policies deliberately restricting their entry. The infamous Poll Tax of the 1880s was followed by a system of entry-by-permit which from the 1920s onwards allowed entry of Chinese only for the purpose of family reunification, with some minor exceptions. This led to the development of a small and very close-knit ethnic group, with much inter-marriage with a distinct culture emphasising hard work, obeying the law and keeping out of trouble - a model minority.

In 1985 policy was changed to allow immigration based on a merit points system. This led to a large influx of Chinese which today number four times more than the descendants of the original migrant group. The new-comers brought with them skills and knowledge about language and culture which had been largely lost to the descendants of the original settlers.

Relationship between the old and new migrants were not always smooth. Among many other effects, this led to the original settler group (who had become highly westernised) looking into their own history which had largely been ignored and remained unexplored.

James Ng, a Dunedin physician, undertook research over many years and in 1993 published the first two volumes of his four-volume *Windows on a Chinese Past*. His work was in part based on the diaries of Rev. Alexander Don who kept extensive records about his dealings with the Chinese gold miners. Ng's research, together with the work of Nigel Murphy, a librarian at the Alexander Turnbull Library, have together energised the early settler community over the past 15 years or so into rediscovering their past. Other researchers, notably Dr Manying Ip at the University of Auckland have investigated the lives of this migrant group from the 1930s onwards to complete the picture.

This has generated a new dynamic between the original settler community (now a 20% minority of the total Chinese in New Zealand) and the "instant kiwis" who arrived since 1985. Realising that the contributions of their forebears to New Zealand's history might be overlooked, members of the original settler community have collaborated in various community efforts to "recover" their history.

Yet Illustrious

Energy was made in 1988, before most of Ng's work had been done and certainly before it was published and widely circulated.

While *Illustrious*

Energy is of course an outsider's view of the New Zealand Chinese gold miners' story, it had input from the local Chinese community with several Chinese actors.

The film was well-received at the time by the general public, the industry and by critics as a generally sympathetic portrayal of Chinese New Zealand history; however, there was occasional criticism that the story was too romanticised and the characters were perhaps clichéd.

So looking back, with the benefit of 18 years of community development, one is moved to ask: Would *Illustrious Energy* be as accepted today with the same equanimity as in 1988?

With the "benefit" of a greater knowledge of its history, would the local Chinese community, through various means, have influenced the story and its telling?

Would there have been a more "correct" version produced with more insider input today?

Are current New Zealand Chinese historical orthodoxies reflected by the film made 18 ago?

ILLUSTRIOUS ENERGY AS HISTORY

For the Chinese in New Zealand, *Illustrious Energy* is the only film which seriously explores the life of its community founders, the gold-miners who arrived in 1865 at the invitation of the Otago Chamber of Commerce.

In the following, I have tried to re-examine the film from the point of view of an insider to the story, not in a destructive sense, but to check some background information, some of which has only been "discovered" since the film was made.

The film premiered in 1988, but was two years in gestation and may well have been conceived as early as 1985. In the intervening 20 years, there has been much community-based research which has not only revealed hidden aspects of the story of the Chinese in New Zealand but also community activism which has popularised that story so that it has become part of that community's lore.

In the film, a minister of religion or missionary is shown conducting a service among a small "congregation" of miners who, from the expressions on their faces and their lack of participation in the

hymn singing, are shown to be only partly in communion with the Christian faith. Later the minister intervenes when three Europeans try to force a Chinese store-keeper to buy some (perhaps stolen) chickens. This intervention leads to the minister and Chan discussing Christianity and Confucianism.

The minister in the film is undoubtedly based on Rev. Alexander Don, an Australian who arrived in New Zealand in 1879, was then sent to China later that year to learn Cantonese, ordained in 1886 and was then given the Missionary to the Chinese at Lawrence.[1] Don was a prolific diarist who recorded details of the life of the Chinese miners over a period of 40 years. Although some of the diaries have been lost, they provide the base for research on the early Chinese in New Zealand, most notably Dr James Ng's four volume work *Windows on a Chinese Past*[2] which is now the standard reference. Volumes 1 and 4 (Don's Roll of Chinese in facsimile) were published in 1993, Volume 2 in 1995, Volume 3 in 1999.

This opus has stimulated much follow-on research into the early Chinese in New Zealand which continues to the present day. It would therefore not be inappropriate to re-examine the story of the film, if not the text, developed over a much shorter period, in the light of this research.

The film opens dramatically with men digging up a skeleton. The men are revealed as Chinese miners and they are recovering the bones of one their own, to be sent back to his home village in China for final interment. Most of the Chinese in those days regarded themselves as sojourners and they would have thought it highly desirable, if they were to die in this foreign land, for their bones to eventually lie with those of their ancestors on home soil. Wong, the character who has married a local woman and had children with her, would not have wanted this for himself yet he is one of the three men -suggesting that disinterment of bones was not controversial among the Chinese. For the purpose of the story, Kim the father-in-law says that he wants to accompany the bones home back home to China. However, personally accompanying bones may not have been a common practice for supposedly public health and other reasons. They were sent home in two consignments in coffin ships, the first in 1881 aboard the SS Riniu and the second in 1902 aboard the SS Ventnor with 474 sets of bones aboard. Unfortunately, in the second case, the ship foundered off the coast of New Zealand.

The four Chinese aboard survived but all the bones were lost with the ship.[3]

(As an aside, it is interesting to note that in the film, home for the miners Chan and his father-in-law Kim is a hovel, in part a cave set in the hillside. The site has been long-recognised as historic but has now been registered with the Historic Places Trust as the Illustrious Energy Historic Area in honour of the film[4], an example perhaps of art influencing life.)

Accordingly to the New Zealand Film Archive website[5]

the film is set in 1895 and the gold rush is long past. In a scene set in Wong's orchard, Chan discusses the future. Wong recommends to the younger man that he should bring his wife and son out from China to join him in New Zealand. Wong, rather glibly, offers to finance the Poll Tax payments.

The fact that the Poll Tax was mentioned at all in a screenplay written in 1986 is itself somewhat surprising. Although many families had Poll Tax certificates in their possession, it was not until about 1989 that the issue was raised publicly by Dr David Fung with the Wellington Chinese Association, a branch of the New Zealand Chinese Association, and it was not 1993 that the national Association commissioned Nigel Murphy, a librarian at the Alexander Turnbull Library, to undertake research into the subject. The result was *The Poll-Tax in New Zealand* - a research paper published by the Association in 1996 in a very modest format. While the report stirred some interest within the local Chinese community it was not until an approach was made by the Association in 2003 to the Government for a formal apology that it became the subject of quite intense interest. Rather unexpectedly the Government, for whatever reason, decided to make a formal apology to the Chinese community almost immediately and set in motion a consultation process to decide what should be done as a form of reconciliation. The process, and the contributions of various parties to the process, is detailed in a section of my website.[6]

One outcome of the reconciliation package was that the Office of Ethnic Affairs re-published Murphy's updated, augmented report in a modern format[7] and put made the Poll Tax records searchable on-line, by name, by date and by ship. (These records are not complete because some were destroyed by fire.) An inspection of these records on-line[8]

indicates that up until 1892 only 96 Chinese had paid the Poll Tax but in the

four years 1894-1896, a total 355 Chinese paid the Poll Tax. So the film is correct in suggesting that payment of the Poll Tax was an option; however, so far as can be determined from the names of the payers, very few women came. The New Zealand census showed that in 1886 there was a grand total 9 Chinese women and 4995 men in New Zealand. In 1891, there were 18 Chinese women and 4426 men while in 1986 there were 86 Chinese women and 3773 men[9] - a drop in the number of men indicating that some had left at the end as the gold ran out. The Poll Tax was initially set at £10 in 1881 by the Chinese Immigrants Act 1881, but increased to £100 in 1896. In the film Chan repays his line of credit at the general store with 5¼ ounces of gold worth £8. Traditionally Chinese like to pay all debts by the New Year, so the £8 represented perhaps one year's worth of supplies, but not more than two year's worth of supplies - if Chan and Kim had been unlucky. Chinese women could not come for any number of reasons (danger, hardship, lack of facilities, family duties to her in-laws) but mainly because they could not earn enough to repay the Poll Tax. Wong offers to lend Chan the Poll Tax for his wife and son. This would perhaps have been realistic at £20 for the family but probably totally unrealistic at £200 a year later. Not surprisingly the 1891 Census shows the number of Chinese women in New Zealand dropped to 78. In any case, bringing over a wife and family would have been an option for those who were considerably more financial than Chan - who had only managed to survive after 12 years in New Zealand. The screenplay is therefore surprisingly accurate - whether by chance or by careful research - since the information on the Poll Tax has only been widely available since 2002 when the records were put on-line.

With the vast imbalance between the number of Chinese men and women in that period, noted above, it was not unrealistic to depict instances of prostitution in the Chinese camps. James Ng reports in vol. 3 of *Windows on a Chinese Past* that in 1881 there were 61 mixed marriages, in 1886 there were 93 and in 1896 there were 78, including de facto relationships, further that the peak for these marriages were over by the late 1880s. Ng further reports that in 1974 C A Price guessed that possibly half the early Chinese-European marriages in Australia and New Zealand involved "decent" women, the rest being with former prostitutes and the like for whom a marriage certificate was a handy for avoiding charges of vagrancy.[10] (This is an old twist antedating a more modern phenomenon of Chinese entering marriages of convenience or even sham marriages for the purpose of gaining entry to New Zealand and permanent residency, as depicted in the film *Broken English* (Gregor Nicholas 1995)). Ng further quotes Alexander Don as stating in 1893 that three-fourths of such marriages brought ruin to one or both of the parties. A marriage like Wong's to a good Scottish woman and resulting in a happy family with mixed-blood children, was therefore, in reality, a rarity by 1895 - but possible.

In the film, Chan meets and then becomes

intimately acquainted with the magician's assistant/ "danceperson" Li, who is said to come from Australia, of mixed race with an English dancer mother and a Chinese father driven off by the mob during race riots in Australia - possibly the 1873 riots in Clunes near Ballarat[11] when Li would have been a child. While it is entirely understandable that the story introduced a female character as the "love-interest" for the male lead to play opposite, it is not clear why Li's character is of mixed race. Perhaps it is to explain why a Chinese-looking girl is in an Australian circus; perhaps a bedroom encounter between Chan and a fully-European girl in a circus would be too exotic for the film's audience at that time (although the Geeling Ng, the actor playing Li was already notorious in the Chinese community after playing the sexualised role of China Girl in the eponymous 1983 David Bowie music video.)

Perhaps the Chan/Li encounter was one of the scenes Tony Chuah (graphic and web designer and a younger member of the Chinese community) objected to when he criticised the film for "framing of Chan as a romantic hero" and "nostalgia for a Chinese ethnicity of the distant past" and "use of conceptions of Chineseness that verge on cliché." [12] Regardless of which scenes he objected to (and he is not specific) Chuah's views have not had wide support and most reviewers and critics have not identified the same faults.

On the contrary Helene Wong (recently retired from the New Zealand Film Commission) in her 26 September 1995 Clinton Roper Peace Lecture explained the role of Li in presenting an alternative view of Chineseness:

We are seeing more Asian films from overseas on our screens, with a diversity of characters who aren't one-dimensional. In our own film and television industry there is the odd rare sighting - the film *Illustrious* Energy had an independent young circus performer who liked to dress as a man;

Perhaps as cultural advisor for the film, she had something to do with that.

In effect Chuah, claiming to be an insider, was rather predictably criticising a film ostensibly made by an outsider, while Helene Wong, as project consultant, and also an insider, was trying to consciously introducing a modern aspect to a story located at the very being of the history of the Chinese in New Zealand. She is aware of the insider/outsider dichotomy and is clear what is required:

"What this means is not only bringing through images that are positive, diverse and authentic, but also encouraging young Asians to take up careers in the media themselves, so they can tell our stories with their own unique perspective. I'm talking about writers, film-makers, artists, performers... perhaps even talkback radio hosts. We've got enough Chinese doctors and accountants - let's get some story-tellers going. I know they're out there, especially amongst the fourth and fifth generations, but they need encouragement from their own people, their parents, their teachers, as well as those in the media."[13]

While European "outsiders" were in control of the film (as producer, director, scriptwriter and indeed funder), Chinese "insider" did have important roles as the principal actors and Helene Wong as project advisor. It is also extremely likely that James Ng who had been researching Alexander Don's diaries and related historical records for many years would have influenced the tone and direction of the script, so uncannily does the film anticipate Ng's *Windows on a Chinese Past*.

Surprisingly, payment of the Poll Tax has

become a major issue for the current generation in respect of identity and in determining insider/outsider status even within the Chinese community. When the Government in 2003 was approached by the original settler community represented by the New Zealand Chinese Association to make an apology for the injustice of the Poll Tax, to everyone's surprise it readily agreed. Following an extensive round of consultations around the country and after further consultations with a smaller Advisory Group comprising descendants of the Poll Tax payers, the Government resolved, among other measures, to endow \$5,000,000 in Trust to be used for cultural projects among the descendent community. While the whole Chinese community could access the fund and could otherwise benefit, control of the fund was vested exclusively in descendant community. Within a very short time, having an ancestor who paid the Poll Tax (or could have paid the Poll Tax) became the touchstone to determine insider status. By this definition, all members of the cast, and Helene Wong, appear to have been "insiders" and therefore worthy of being entrusted with the story of our gold-mining ancestors. All others representing Chinese in New Zealand cinema (discussed in my recent presentation[14].) are "outsiders". These include the actors playing the immigration agent, also Wu and Clara in Broken English (Gregor Nicholas 1995), all the members of the Liang family in Banana in a Nutshell (Roseanne Liang 2005), and all participants in the making of Waves (Li Tao, 2006). The reason for this classification is obvious in the case of Broken English and Waves; they involved recent migrants; however for the purpose of making a historic drama members of the Liang family are outsiders because they did not have a member of the family in New Zealand before the second world war. The senior Liangs arrived in New Zealand probably in the 1970s not the result of chain migration (assisted by relatives who arrived earlier) but because of personal qualifications. Roseanne Liang would be regarded as an insider for the purpose of making a film about Auckland Chinese urban youth or similar projects. The classification of people with semi-public roles within the Chinese community in New Zealand is a local peculiarity: that is regarded as being of some importance can be seen, for example in the Wikipedia article on Chinese New Zealanders[15] the section on Prominent Chinese New Zealanders identifies their generational status in most cases. Clearly this is seen by the local Chinese community as relevant information to help determine the credibility of the people listed for certain purposes. (The use of Wikipedia as a reference source is controversial in academic circles; however in this case we are discussing a phenomenon occurring within a Wikipedia article as evidence of a community's view.)

Apart from any internal division of the insider/outsider status of Chinese any filmmaker or actor within the wider Chinese community, Chinese as a group have always been outsiders in New Zealand. As such they have been unwelcome in New Zealand society to a greater or lesser extent. This has manifested itself in racial prejudice and bullying at the personal level and institutionalised racism at the official level. It would be fair to say that in some cases the Chinese themselves have contributed to the problem by continuing certain practices which might be regarded as provocative. In Illustrious Energy Chan prepares to go to town after finding a modest amount of gold. He washes and dresses in tidy clothes but he also shaves his forehead in the

Chinese manner of the time. Walking to town he is taunted by children with the classic chant of "Ching Chong Chinaman" and is stoned. Once in town he encounters a number of other Chinese people such as the storekeeper and the josh house (club) owner who all wear their hair as pigtails or queues. This style had been imposed by the Manchus as a sign of subservience and to cut ones hair was a sign of rebellion. Even Wong wore a queue. (They were banned in China after the Manchus were overthrown in 1911.) Did the queue persist as long as is implied in the film?

The Chinese are shown to be living in a segregated area at the edge of town and subject to a mild bullying (in the store). The reality was probably a bit worst. It is difficult to find documentary evidence of bullying, but there is much evidence of popular attitudes reflect in cartoons on the day. Manying Ip and Nigel Murphy in their recent book *Aliens at my table - Asians as New Zealanders see them*[16] have collected cartoons from as early as 1865 to the present day to illustrate the attitudes of New Zealanders to Chinese (and later "Asians") migrants. Cartoons generally include caricatures of "celestials" with exaggerated oriental facial features, leering expressions, wearing inappropriate formal Chinese court dress, or tunic jackets, hair in a queue, which is entangled or inappropriately used in some way in an unfortunate encounter with Europeans who are shown as normal, stoical, disadvantaged, noble, reasonable and so one. It is the nature of cartoons to make a point by exaggeration and one cannot take special offence because of this. However, what is interesting is the political point being made is based on racism. For example a 1907 cartoon depicts an oriental-faced octopus with tentacles labelled "greed", "licentiousness", "evil habits", "opium traffic" and "brutality" entwined around a Maori maiden representing New Zealand.[17]

Much of the dialogue is English and only background babble voiced in Chinese. The characters affect a "Chinese" English accent, except Wong, played by Peter Chin, who has a very broad, late 20th century New Zealand English accent - probably his own. In the light of recent developments in "World Chinese cinema" - Chinese films made for a world audience (notably *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* which is entirely in Mandarin with English subtitles) a re-make of *Illustrious Energy* might have the characters speaking in Cantonese when all the characters present in a scene are Chinese, and speaking English in the presence of European characters. This would be historically correct, certainly at the time of the action depicted, and is still true in many homes where a senior member of the family lacks facility in English.

In the josh house opium smoking scene, Chan's wife and son appear in a dream, dressed in fine Chinese clothes and call out "Where are you? Where are you?" imploring him - in English - to pull back from a life of dissipation. This is probably one of least authentic scenes in the film - which might have been improved at least by changing the dialogue to Chinese.

CONCLUSION

Historically the film is surprisingly accurate and can withstand scrutiny after 18 years of on-going research supported by a high level of Chinese community interest.

Given that this was a European interpretation of local Chinese history, the film has used a relatively high level of local Chinese talent, including a qualified Chinese script consultant. That Chinese were not more involved in the production is only a matter of minor regret in the circumstances.

The character of Li, the circus performer, introduces an element of unpredictability to the story and hints at future possibilities.

The use of English in all the substantive dialogue is perhaps a little too safe, viewed 18 years after production.

Overall, therefore, *Illustrious Energy* stands up well to scrutiny even after 18 years of intense community development in which period the history of the Chinese in New Zealand has received considerable attention from both dedicated community based researchers (if we may still classify Dr James Ng as such after wide recognition including a D.Litt) and recognised and published academics such as Dr Manying Ip. Artistically the cinematography is without reproach. It remains for a new generation of more ethnically-aware film-makers to re-interpret the essence of the story of the Chinese in New Zealand.

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[1] <http://www.teara.govt.nz/1966/D/DonAlexander/DonAlexander/en>

[2] James Ng, Windows on a Chinese Past, vol. 1 Otago Heritage Press, Dunedin, 1993.

[3] <http://www.wildflowerwalks.co.nz/wildflowerwalks/chinese.html>

[4] <http://www.historic.org.nz/Register/ListingDetail.asp?RID=7548>

[5] <http://events.filmarchive.org.nz/event.php?eventInstanceID=1376&eventID=279>

[6] <http://www.stevenyoung.co.nz/chinesevoice/misc/polltax2.htm>

[7] Nigel Murphy, The Poll-tax in New Zealand - a research paper, commissioned by the New Zealand Chinese Association Inc, second editions, reprinted by the Office of Ethnic Affairs, Department of Internal Affairs, Wellington, New Zealand, 2002.

[8] http://www.ethnicaffairs.govt.nz/OEA/chptrecords.nsf/web_IssueDate?OpenView

[9] Nigel Murphy, A Guide to Laws and Policies Relating to the Chinese in New Zealand 1871-1996, commissioned by the New Zealand Chinese Association, MS only, 1997.

[10] James Ng, p. 240, Windows on a Chinese Past, vol. 3, Otago Heritage Press, Dunedin, 1993.

[11] <http://www.anu.edu.au/polsci/marx/interventions/raceriots.htm>

[12] Helen Martin, Sam Edwards, p.135, New Zealand Films 1912-1996, Oxford University Press, Auckland, 1997, quoting Tony Chuan. 'Chan is Missing'. Illusions 11, July 1989, p. 41.

[13] <http://www.stevenyoung.co.nz/chinesevoice/identity/helenewongdec03.htm>

[14] Steven Young, Always the Victim? Representation of Chinese in New Zealand Cinema, Film 403 Seminar presentation, MS, Victoria University of Wellington, 2006.

[15]http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chinese_New_Zealander

[16] Manying Ip, Nigel Murphy, Aliens at my table - Asians as New Zealanders see them, Penguin, Auckland 2005.

[17] Ibid. page 95 Richard Goodall, New Zealand Truth, 16 February 1907, N-P982-5, Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand.