
Recent Research in Cantonese History in New Zealand

Contributed by Steven Young
Monday, 30 January 2012
Last Updated Monday, 30 January 2012

Melbourne Talk 13

Recent Research in Cantonese History in New Zealand

Paul, Friends, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Thank you for your kindness in considering a talk by me. The title is Recent Research in Cantonese History in New Zealand. I use the word 'recent' to mean more or less 10 years and I will focus on writings and film on 'the Cantonese from China, rather than recent Chinese immigrants from a variety of homelands.

The Cantonese are the longstanding Chinese minority in New Zealand, with a history dating back to 1865. However, in 1987, a new law allowed Chinese immigration to become much greater and diverse. By 2006 the longstanding Cantonese residents formed only about 20% of a total New Zealand Chinese population of 150,000. That is to say, we comprised about 30,000-35,000 people (including mixed race branches) of a total New Zealand Chinese population of some 150,000. But before 1987, any mention of the Chinese in New Zealand meant the Cantonese, because they formed the majority of — and for long, almost all — the Chinese.

Until last November I was founding chair of the Chinese Poll Tax Heritage Fund. This Fund was established by Government in 2005 following the Chinese Poll Tax Apology in 2002, to encourage and preserve the language, literature, history and heritage of the Cantonese minority in New Zealand.

The Fund has been helpful in increasing the volume of literature and film on the Cantonese Chinese.

Expediting historical research on the Cantonese Chinese is the fact that New Zealand

is a small country with good knowledge of, and accessibility to, their families. We also have fine libraries and archives, and expanding online resources.

In addition to the Poll Tax Heritage Fund, the Government subsidizes a weekly national TV programme called 'Asia Down Under', dedicated to Chinese and other Asian topics. This will be replaced next year by another Government sponsored programme called 'Forum' with the Asian content raised from ½ hour to a full hour. Following the Poll Tax Apology, the Government had also influenced school children with prizes for essays on Cantonese history and encouraged relevant articles in school journals.

More, Professor Manying Ip in Auckland has a focus on New Zealand Chinese history, including Cantonese history. Her work incorporates academic and international dimensions, whereas this input is lacking in much of the contemporary public writings on the New Zealand Cantonese. However, so far this lack does not seem too much of a disadvantage in our narratives.

We Cantonese also have biennial national conferences on issues and projects, to which we invite observers and speakers. The last conference was attended by many ISSCO members.

The first stage of writings on Cantonese history in New Zealand began in the late 1920s with articles by G. Scholefield and T.D.H. Hall and in 1934 with Jean McNeur's university thesis. Other university theses followed. The research was predominantly on Chinese immigration, legislation and discrimination. The basic book of this stage, which people like me consult in the first instance, is Ng Bickleen Fong's work, based on her MA thesis and published in 1959.

The second stage, beginning in about 1970, still researched immigration, legislation and

discrimination but the social story of the Chinese (Cantonese) in New Zealand was also presented. Film joined in this. In the immigration and legislation category, Charles Sedgwick wrote a major PhD thesis with Chinese input (1982). Neville Ritchie summarized in 1986 what was then known of the Chinese goldminers in a tome on their archeology in Otago. Nigel Murphy published 'The Poll-tax in New Zealand' (1994), followed by 'A Guide to Laws and Policies relating to the Chinese in New Zealand' (1997). Socially, there were two sets of basic books in this stage which people were fairly certain to consult. One set is Professor Manying Ip's 'Home away from Home' (1990) and 'Dragons on the Long White Cloud' (1996), both presenting short biographies of prominent and interesting people. And in 1993-98, I published my 4 vol. 'Windows on a Chinese Past' which was a general history and story of the New Zealand Cantonese and an assessment of them in the Otago goldfields. There was strong interest in the Cantonese story and the research, talks, articles and books, plus the appearance of my generation assimilating into the wider society and including university students with some 90 graduates from 1940-60, led to the Poll Tax Apology in 2002.

The third stage has started now and will fill in gaps of knowledge in immigration, legislation and social aspects. There will also be ongoing research on our minority's progress in New Zealand almost certainly in comparison with Cantonese populations in other Gim Shan countries. A feature in this stage will be the perusal of Chinese documents and newspapers by bilingual researchers. A new basic book has already appeared in William Tai Yuen's work 'The Origins of China's Awareness of New Zealand, 1674-1911', published in 2005. He meticulously studied Chinese diplomatic and Hong Kong records.

My talk will reveal the volume, breadth and depth of recent writings and film on New Zealand Cantonese history. This is now amply sufficient in revealing the past and progressive value of our minority and in establishing our rightful place in New Zealand. The accounts are beginning to also move past the 'victim' view as the whole explanation of the political travails in our story.

I have grouped the writings by categories. The first category is general history.

General history.

In this category, a significant history has been recently completed and another, almost so. They are:

'Golden Prospects: Chinese on the West Coast', by Julia Bradshaw in 2009, which is valuable in filling in many gaps of knowledge on the Chinese goldminers on the West Coast of the South Island. Here the early Chinese reached a population of 1,700, compared with 4,000 in Otago and Southland, and this is an example of the smaller New Zealand scale of things compared with Australia.

A history is almost completed on Chinese Market Gardening in New Zealand.

It is in 2 vols. by Lily Ho Lee, Ruth Lam and Nigel Murphy. The Cantonese dominated in this occupation in New Zealand from the 1880s-1980s and it was for long our principal occupation.

In addition, Helen Wong has written a short history of the Chinese in Taranaki province. This province is good for dairy farming and a Chinese here named Chew Chong pioneered the use of refrigeration in butter manufacture, thereby opening up New Zealand's butter export trade.

Cantonese goldminers.

It is now widely accepted that the Cantonese miners were an important part of New Zealand's goldmining history. You will know that when one person acts against another, they use the three 'D's, namely disparagement, dehumanization and demonisation. So the Cantonese were portrayed as lowly miners, although they actually reached sophisticated levels of technology. What they lacked was finance, rather than brains. Notably, Choie Sew Hoy was the founder of the sluicing and elevating public company in New Zealand which was the top such venture for several years. More importantly he was the New Zealand driving force in pioneering the first modern gold dredge in the world. The regional Kai Tahu Maori tribe has publicly acknowledged the Chinese as one of Otago's early peoples. The ongoing 150th commemorations in various mining districts of Otago have included or will include acknowledgement of the Chinese contribution.

Following the publication in the 1990s of the book 'Windows on a Chinese Past', no subsequent new book written on the goldfields – for tourism or whatever – can afford to leave out the Chinese. Moreover, the authors have to be meticulous with what they write. An example is D. Offwood's novel 'Heather's Gold', which is set in the Otago goldfields and draws an accurate picture of the Chinese.

In addition to books, Leon Narby, an acclaimed film maker, has made a well-researched, full length film named 'Illustrious Energy' on two fictional Chinese miners. This work is predicted to become one of New Zealand's classic films. It was sold to America and after years of neglect it was returned this year to New Zealand and is now digitally restored.

Cantonese counties and villages of origin.

The New Zealand Cantonese comprise three main county groupings, Panyu, Zengcheng and Siji.

In 2007, the late Henry Chan of Australia edited a substantial history 'Zengcheng New Zealanders', which described Zengcheng migrant families and their villages. The Zengcheng folk came from rich Pearl Delta land in the south of their county. They had tended to bring wives to early New Zealand and in the past had just a little more forward thinking than Panyu and Siji people.

The above book inspired another titled 'Gwa Leng Wongs' edited by Edmon Wong, describing the families from the Zengcheng village of Gwa Leng.

No doubt other similar books will follow. One hopes, however, that they will include an index. Meanwhile, young New Zealanders returning to their ancestral villages have made short films of their travel and experience. One notable film relates to Lily Ho Lee's return to her village with her family. This film and other films of returns by young people (including Kim Webby and Jason Moon), have been shown on 'Asia Down Under'.

Anniversary
publications of Chinese Societies and Chinese Churches.

These publications particularly comprise the old county associations such as the Panyu Association in 2001, NZ Chinese Association branches like the Manawatu branch in 2008 and the Wellington Chinese Cultural Centre. Chinese Churches have also written their histories, such as the recent one of the 60th Anniversary of the Wellington Chinese Baptist Church. None are heavyweight works but they have valuable outlines and photographs which incorporate memories of their older folk.

Politics.

In this category is a history of the New Zealand Chinese Association by David Fung, one of our first bilingual researchers. This book is nearing completion.

In 2005, Manying Ip and Nigel Murphy published 'Aliens at my Table: Asians as New Zealanders see them'. This book reproduces cartoons depicting caricatures of New Zealand Cantonese over the years.

Biographies.

I regard comprehensive biographies as crucial to the understanding of the New Zealand Cantonese as a people. So far, the majority of their biographies are short ones as typified by a recent Hephaestus book of prominent New Zealand Cantonese and newcomers, as gleaned from Wikipedia and other online sources.

Besides writings, short biographical films have appeared in 'Asia Down Under'. Many of these are about new immigrants prominent in recreation, music and business. However, notable films on Cantonese include a series of three on the Auckland Hing sisters. Another film depicts a market gardener, Mr Joe Gock, known as the 'Kumara King of Auckland', and another shows Lily Ho Lee's Cantonese mother, a biography filmed and presented movingly by Lily's part-Maori son.

In print, Lily Ho Lee and Ruth Lam wrote 'Chan Dah Chee', a 40 page biography written in 2009 on an Auckland Chinese pioneer gardener and businessman, and published in the ENNZ Journal in January 2011. Wong Ah Poo Hoc Ting (Appo Hocton) is the first known Chinese settler in New Zealand, in 1842. His European-Cantonese descendants have published his life story in 2010 in an 80 page book. A feature of this biography is an original letter from Appo Hocton's mother in Zhongshan, in 1874. The research on Appo Hocton's book has led Steve Austin to research six early Chinese settlers for another book.

A family history has been published by Ng Thoon Gain (Ken Ng) on his family from Taishan county, but the distribution is limited to extended family. It has followed a substantial autobiography written for family by Ding Chew Cheung which I think, is as valuable as Yue H. Jackson's much earlier autobiography of his childhood and youth. There is a meticulous family history by Allen Cheng, an ex-secondary school principal. Allen has died but he presented his family history in Sydney a few years back. A substantial family history was published in 2006 by the descendants of Choie Sew Hoy of both the Chinese and European

branches of this family. The family history incorporated the knowledge known of Mr Choie as the world class gold dredging pioneer, but it is otherwise written along conventional family history lines.

It took me some 10 years to convince people of Mr Choie's reputation as a dredging pioneer. The article which goes a long way towards establishing Choie Sew Hoy's national and international reputation is in 'Buckets of Gold', the published proceedings of a conference on gold dredging in 2006. A biography which regrettably was assembled but never published was Henry Chan's research on Yue H. Jackson, the New Zealand-born European-Cantonese man who was a very important Chinese Consul in my father's generation. Presently Wayne Wilson-Wong has assembled a collection of photographs and film around the story of his family, especially his Cantonese grandmother. It is a PhD project titled 'Yellow'. Wayne is a mixed-race descendant whose abiding memory is his grandmother turning her back on him.

Jenny

Lee, daughter of Lily Ho Lee, wrote a PhD thesis on her Maori-Cantonese background. She published it as a book called 'Jade Taniwha' in 2007. Her book includes a touching outline of her life and her biography has appeared on TV in 'Asia Down Under' and the Maori TV channel. Jade Taniwha was followed by Professor Manying Ip's 'Being Maori-Chinese, mixed identities' in 2008 and 'The Dragon and the Taniwha, Maori and Chinese in New Zealand' in 2009, both very valuable books too. The former book describes families and the latter discusses issues between the two races. I should mention a short biography of Buck Nin published for his retrospective exhibition in 1998; he had a Maori mother and a Cantonese father and is recognised as a major Maori artist. A feature of our Maori-Cantonese branch is an emerging prominence in writing and art.

Two

substantial biographies are nearing completion. One is an autobiography by Paul Wah, another ex-secondary school principal. The other is my work, which is a 2 vol. history of the New Zealand Cantonese after the goldfields. To give the chapters continuity, I have used

the story of my grandfather, father and myself when young as a thread to connect the chapters of history, as the New Zealand Chinese progressed from sojournism and racism, to settlement and acceptance. I have the funding to carry on to publish, perhaps in 2013. What I have learned is that sojournism was a key factor for three generations in our New Zealand story, causing vulnerability and a lack of bonding with the dominant society.

With the Cantonese story becoming better known, Europeans are taking up topics in our minority.

D.A. Drabble wrote the biographical 'Notes on Chew Chong';. Joan Rosier-Jones researched and published 'The Murder of Chow Yat' in 2009.

Fiction.

With a sizeable collection of works on the New Zealand Cantonese having become available, fiction books are being written with characters based on the new knowledge of them.

I know of three written by Europeans (K. Catran's 'Lin and the Red Stranger', K. Kelley's 'Cross the River to Home', and M. Alterio's 'Ribbons of Grace'), and a novel written by Cantonese author and poet Alison Wong. Maxine's novel is a bestseller; she told me she read 'every word' in my book 'Windows on a Chinese Past' to aid her background knowledge. Alison's novel 'As the Earth turns Silver' has won a prestigious award. She follows her great-grandfather in New Zealand as a poet.

Eva Wong Ng had earlier written the novels 'Shadowman' and 'Chinatown Girl', the latter set in Greys Av, Auckland.

Before that, she had contributed booklets and articles on Chinese for the Education Department's school journal. Eva is presently writing a substantial biography of Dr Kathleen Chang the first Chinese medical graduate in New Zealand in 1929. She became a missionary and is one of New Zealand's finest Christians. Incidentally, Eva has also collected some 100 interview tapes on Cantonese men and women.

One notes Ann-Marie Houg Lee, an author of European-Cantonese parentage, though so far she was written little on the Chinese, and Lynda Chanwai-Earle, a rising playwright also of European-Cantonese parentage. Kerry Ann Lee is a young artist who focuses on her Siji heritage. We have other young Cantonese visual artists and two senior Cantonese artists of distinction in New Zealand. They are Guy Ngan who uses

Chinese influences, and Brent Wong who is of European-Cantonese parentage. Other Cantonese have taken up more branches of the creative arts.

Paul Miller and others have scanned New Zealand fiction or film for references to New Zealand Chinese and stories about them. Such research is undertaken overseas too, as it is a valuable marker of prejudice. One of Paul's articles is in the academic book 'East by South',

University Theses and Articles.

I haven't much information so far on university theses because I have largely left this prolific sector till later in the writing of my book. In part, this is to avoid the accusation of plagiarism of ideas and phrases, a rather sensitive issue at the moment in New Zealand.

Meanwhile, there continues to be academic books with some articles describing the immigration and presence of the Chinese in New Zealand. They include 'Localizing Asia in Aotearoa', 'East by South', and 'Asia in the Making of New Zealand'. Professor Paul Spoonley has told me of another such book about to be published. Chinese authorship is not in the majority in these books except in Professor Manying Ip's book 'Unfolding History, Evolving Identity' in 2003. Professor Ip edited 12 authors, 10 of whom were Chinese. This publication has become another basic book.

Miscellaneous.

The China

expert, Professor Bill Willmott, gave the Quaker Centennial Lecture 2009, titled 'Kiwi Dragon, History, Culture, Hope.' This is published as a 47 page booklet.

The Asia New Zealand Foundation has published monographs on the Asian populations in the four main cities in 2008-2009. There is a cook book by Jennifer Yee, perhaps a precursor of New Zealand Chinese cook books like that of your Australians Elizabeth Chong and Kylie Kwong. A

graphic novel has been published by Ant Sang, who works as a graphic artist for a popular TV series called 'Bro; Town;.

Ant is from a Fijian branch of the overseas Cantonese, but his family is long domiciled in New Zealand.

His brother was the chief engineer in building Dubai's tallest skyscraper. An architect cousin, Ron Sang, is a publisher of quality art books, including one on Guy Ngan.

Magazine and newspaper articles.

These tend to be on recent Chinese immigrants prominent in politics, business, recreation and music.

However, there are two senior Cantonese journalists whom I know, Helene Wong and Gilbert Wong, who either write on the longstanding New Zealand Cantonese from time to time or influence the appearance of such. A good newspaper feature has appeared on Tom Ah Chee, New Zealand's supermarket pioneer. Articles on New Zealand Cantonese music making have appeared in the magazines 'Crescendo' (2001) and 'Ritmico' (2011), the former written by S.N. Ng based on his MA thesis. Ian Church has written on the sinking of SS Ventnor in 1902 with 500 exhumed bodies on board bound for China.

The Chinese Garden in Dunedin.

This top quality classical Chinese Garden was jointly completed in 2008 by the

Dunedin Chinese, the Shanghai Museum and the Shanghai Construction Co. to commemorate the Chinese contribution in that city and Otago province. The Chinese committee for Otago's 150th provincial commemorations put forward the project in 1998. There was no other Dunedin memorial to the Chinese past, not even a street name. When the Chinese authorities saw forty 120ft containers weighing a total of 970 tons of Lake Taihu stone being sent to the Dunedin Garden, they banned any further quarrying from the lake for export.

The point is that the Garden has led to an introductory book and now a scholastic book, presently in the proof stage, on the Dunedin Garden and the Chinese garden ethos by J. Beattie, D. Campbell, and Sue Wootton. The Garden has further aroused interest in Chinese plants introduced into New Zealand and information is being collected for another book on this aspect.

The Lawrence Chinese Camp.

This mining camp is planned to be reconstructed as a heritage and tourist site. The Lawrence Camp was the biggest of all the Chinese mining camps in Otago, being situated at the chief gateway to the inland goldfields. An intriguing feature is that the Camp is known to have flown Chinese Dragon flags from the 1880s. Members of the Shanghai Museum and a Beijing museum have been consulted in order to get an accurate pre-1890 dragon flag. Research on the Camp is almost completed and the land and remaining buildings have been bought for ultimate reconstruction. Otago university archaeologists have done three digs and a geomagnetic survey of both the Camp and the Chinese sector of Lawrence Cemetery. The point is the archaeologists have just got the funds to write a book on their findings in the Camp.

The Otago Chinese Mining Heritage Trail.

Presently some 80% of the Chinese tourists go only to Auckland and Rotorua and we in the south hope to diminish that percentage with Otago-Southland's amenities. There is interest in developing an extra amenity, a Chinese mining heritage trail in Otago. A positive feasibility study result has been obtained. The Trail will be based on the Arrowtown and Lawrence Chinese Mining Camps, the international airports of Queenstown and Dunedin and the Chinese heritage sites inbetween. Doubtless the project will open up further research on the Chinese history in Otago, including the fact that Queenstown and Lawrence Chinese established one of New Zealand's first commercial tobacco farms and a cigar and cigarette factory. In the nineteenth century, inland Otago was thought to be suitable for tobacco plant growing.

Chinese Newcomers.

Perhaps I should digress here and say something of the Chinese newcomers and their literature and film, especially since some are embracing New Zealand Cantonese topics, or such topics are part of their work. Forgive the term 'newcomers' – as yet there is no agreed term for them, nor for the length of time when they leave such a term behind.

I believe that Chinese arrivals intent on settlement in New Zealand need about 20 years to acquire peak facility in the wider society. Therefore, we should expect an increasing output of writings and film from the newcomers from about now. Their first literature were written in Chinese such as Song Lam's book, 'The Maori in New Zealand' and a tourist book, 'New Zealand, a piece of jade in the Pacific'. In English, S. Zhong et al have written a self-help guide on New Zealand and Shu Lin has written

a similar book. Ms Tao Li Zhu (Li Tao) has filmed a documentary called 'Waves' on Chinese students who come to New Zealand. She has also written a book on Chinese international students, plus another book 'New Zealand: the Untouched World' (in 2008). However, Ms Tao has returned to China to teach at Fudan University.

From the start there have been writings of Chinese song and poetry. The most prominent of these is from the pen of Yang Lian, a poet of international note. He was a refugee but now has New Zealand citizenship. He lived for a time in Auckland, where he published 'Unreal City' in English in 2006.

A recurrent subject in university research appears to be on the coming and going of the Chinese newcomers, and this is another line of research in Professor Ip's department at Auckland University. Elsie Ho of Waikato University was another valuable researcher in this topic, having come from Hong Kong herself. Alas, she changed about three years ago away from that research. Phoebe Li in Auckland has taken up this subject. As to books, Shanjiang Yu has written on an early sign of assimilation (in language) in recent Chinese immigrants. Hong Wong wrote on their skills and Tim Beal and S. Farib wrote on Taiwanese immigrants.

The subject matter and scope of Chinese newcomer writings and film are widening, and include New Zealand Cantonese history. In this early expanding wave is Shifen Gong's critique of our New Zealand author Katherine Mansfield, while Yi Shi et al discusses New Zealand's role in globalised economics. As already noted, William Tai Yuen (William Tai) of Auckland University has published a book in 2005 named 'The Origins of China's Awareness of New Zealand, 1674-1911.' It is one of the most refreshing and important books published in recent years on New Zealand Cantonese history – in part because the author sought out Chinese sources of information and could read old Chinese script. It is equivalent to the Australian book 'The New Gold Mountain' by C.F. Yong. In religion, Sylvia Yuen is writing a valuable PhD thesis on New Zealand missionaries to China. Sylvia is also fluently bilingual and able to research documents written in Chinese. Like William Tai, she went to the East to do this. She will document the first major New Zealand project in China, the Presbyterian Canton Villages Mission, which was set among villages of Otago Chinese miners.

In film, Roseanne Liang has told the story of her European fiancé and herself

coming together despite the opposition of her doctor father, a newcomer from Hong Kong. It is an acclaimed work called 'Banana in a Nutshell' (in 2005). She followed it up with another interesting film on a Chinese-European marriage. Her sister Renee Liang is a poet and playwright while supporting herself by her doctor's work in paediatrics. She has performed two plays to date, one of which is called 'Bonefeeder'. It had funding from the Poll Tax Heritage Fund because the subject was the S.S. Ventnor sinking.

In 2007, the Gibson Group filmed the TV documentary 'Here to Stay' on different New Zealand peoples, including Chinese. It features Ms Bernadine Lim, a Chinese-Malaysian in origin. This documentary is similar to the 'Legacy' series, which was filmed in the 1980s.

Meanwhile, Margaret South has published 'poems in the Chinese style', possibly an early example of a new trend in New Zealand literature. One should mention Mai Chen, a prominent lawyer from one of the first Chinese newcomer families. She is finishing a book on New Zealand law, in emulation of her sister at Oxford, who has written an acclaimed tome on British law.

Postscript.

There is an increasing store of literature on the New Zealand Cantonese, each notable work supporting our place in New Zealand and providing a springboard for further research. However, while the progression of our immigration has been revealed to a significant degree, and the value of our minority has been established, how they lived in China and early New Zealand and the development of their thinking from sojournism to settlement are still largely unknown. This is a situation where comprehensive biographies are needed, but sadly, the last persons who knew something of the old way of life before extensive assimilation occurred, are now in their seventies and eighties and set to disappear. Meanwhile, it is gratifying that bilingual research is being established and is tapping (or will tap) into the hitherto barely touched records in Chinese script of the New Zealand Cantonese societies, associations and the Dominion Federation of New Zealand Chinese Commercial Growers, the Australian Chinese newspapers which reported New Zealand happenings, the political organisations like the Guomindang in New Zealand (cached in Sydney and Taiwan) and possibly as yet to be discovered caches of letters…

Thank you for listening so well.

