

"UNSMELTERED GOLD, UNCUT JADE"

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•UNSMELTERED GOLD, UNCUT JADE•:

SOURCES AND RESOURCES FOR THE STUDY OF HISTORY OF CHINESE NEW ZEALANDERS

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Before I start I can't help but note the irony of having a series of lectures on Chinese New Zealanders being hosted by the Stout Research Centre considering that the man the Centre is named after, Sir Robert Stout, was so anti-Chinese. He was President of the Anti-Chinese League in 1896 and during the debates on the 1896 Asiatic Restriction Act he said "I am in favour" and have always been in favour" of passing stringent laws against Chinese. . . the reason I object to them is first, on racial grounds, and secondly, they have a lower civilization, which, if introduced into this colony, is bound to affect our civilization. On the other hand Anna Stout, Sir Robert's wife, took the opposite position, saying that Chinese were "desirable immigrants on account of their honesty, sobriety, industry, thrift and kindness. . ." She made these comments to the Lyttelton Times¹ at the same time as her husband was making his anti-Chinese comments in Parliament. . . the conversations at the Stout home on the subject of Chinese must have been interesting. . .

Anyway, on to the topic of my talk - sources and resources for the study of the history of Chinese New Zealanders. Now I have to say at the outset that this will not be so much a "how-to" session on researching Chinese New Zealand history, but more a general exploration of the principles involved, a sort of discussion and introduction to the subject based on my almost twenty years experience researching Chinese New Zealand history.

Definition: Chinese New Zealander But first, who is a Chinese New Zealander? One must define who one is studying before one can study them, surely. My definition of "Chinese New Zealander" is based on the one used by the Prime Minister in her apology to the Chinese community last year, which was "those people who paid the poll tax and their descendants." This definition therefore means the old Chinese New Zealand community, the community whose parents and grandparents paid the poll tax and those who had arrived in New Zealand the 15 years before the tax, the community that has its roots way back in the gold-rush days of the 1860s, the community that has been in New Zealand for over 140 years. The sources I am referring to therefore relate to the study of these people. These sources can be divided into two areas: those that are held in public collections, and those that are held in private collections. The public collections are, of course, those that are held in libraries and archives of various sorts. However, as the title of this talk "unsmeltered gold, uncut jade" (hun jin pu yu) suggests, much of the sources for researching Chinese New Zealanders are primary source material; raw, buried, undiscovered, diamonds in the rough, and not readily available or easily accessible. Like gold they have to be dug for, and this, I venture to say, is unlike many other forms of New Zealand history research, much of which can be done purely from secondary sources. Which is not the case with Chinese New Zealand history. Of course it all depends what sort of history one wants to write. If one wants to write about public policy about Chinese, immigration policy, the Chinese "question", European New Zealanders' attitude and reaction to Chinese, then Chinese primary source material is not so essential. Newspapers, politicians' biographies, parliamentary debates and other official publications, existing post graduate theses on the subject "of which there are many" all these will be sufficient to research these aspects of Chinese New Zealand history. But is this really Chinese New Zealand history? Well, yes, it is. But now we're talking about two sorts of Chinese New Zealand history, Chinese New Zealand history from the outside or from the top down, and Chinese New Zealand history from the inside, or from the bottom up. It is my contention that there is a divide between these two sorts of history. The two different sorts of history require different research approaches and different skills. The policy-style, top-down view of Chinese New Zealand history, mostly done in universities, requires knowledge of standard official, library and archive resources. The view of Chinese New Zealand history from inside the community requires access to first-hand and Chinese primary source material not readily available to the university historian or the general public. This difficulty in obtaining first-hand accounts or privately-held primary source material probably accounts for why most academic studies of Chinese New Zealanders have been confined to immigration policy and similar topics, where the need to consult Chinese sources is minimal. And it is my opinion this is how research on Chinese New Zealand history must be done, at the coalface, talking to people, searching out the raw material of history. It is long-term, and relationships must be built up. As Charles Sedgwick noted in 1982, if the researcher was not able to talk knowledgeably about the finer points of curing bananas and be prepared to spend many hours drinking tea with people, then the necessary oral, manuscripts and published material needed would not be forthcoming.² Much of the history of Chinese New Zealanders resides with the people who have lived it, and nowhere else. One must therefore respect the people, build and earn their trust and learn their history before they will share it with you. And afterwards you must continue to respect them and what they have shared with you, otherwise the next time you go to ask for something the door will be shut. Many of the sources and answers to the Chinese side of the history are not in books, or in archives, but in people. To get the Chinese side of the history ideally requires language skills and a long-term commitment to the community one is studying, skills and commitment few have or are prepared to acquire.

And before anyone asks, the answer is, no, I have not acquired the language skills that I suggest are necessary for studying Chinese New Zealand history properly, but I maintain and believe it is useful to have these skills. As a comparison it would be difficult or impossible to study Hegel or Diderot for example at Phd level without German or French language skills, yet the need to learn Chinese for Chinese New Zealand studies is not recognized. In Chinese language departments in New Zealand universities post-graduate work is largely based on classical or China sources, which I guess is logical, yet the resources of such language skills do seem go to waste somewhat, when one sees what could be done with such skills in the New Zealand context. Historians such as James Ng, Manying Ip and Bickleen Fong have, or have had these skills; the language skills and connections with the community needed to produce top quality work, and not surprisingly their work is among the best, if not the best produced on Chinese New Zealand history. Another worth mentioning is Charles Sedgwick. Although having no Chinese language skills Chas Sedgwick's 1982 thesis on the social history of Chinese New Zealanders was the result of a long-term commitment to and active engagement with his subject, taking eight years to complete. It was based very largely on sources from within the community. Chinese New Zealand history is founded on the work of such people. The extensive personal and published records of Alexander Don and George McNeur, the Presbyterian missionaries to the Chinese goldminers, have long provided most of the material for goldfields study. In fact the history of the goldmining period and beyond would be almost non-existent without them. Both men were fluent in written and spoken Chinese. McNeur's daughter Margaret also wrote a major MA thesis on Chinese New Zealanders using the extensive connections she had with the Chinese community based on her father's work. And this is one of the major problems facing Chinese New Zealand history studies. Much of it is based on the work of a small group of people who have the skills and resources to do it, and is rather over-reliant on the work of this small group. I am not implying a criticism here, I am just pointing out the issues as I see them, and thinking of ways to overcome them. Because if something is not done to overcome these issues there will continue to be a division between those who have access to the essential skills and resources, and those who don't; between community and academic work, and between access to insider and outsider material. One way to overcome this would be to get the Chinese sources into the public realm and to make the community and academic worlds meet. There should be a combination of the two worlds, of the two sets of skills, a partnership between academia and the community. But let's look at the sources available. Publicly available sources of information I've already mentioned that standard sources for history research will provide much information. These sources include published material such as books, newspapers and periodicals. These are particularly useful if there are indexes available. Many libraries have indexes to local newspapers as well as subject indexes that include mention of Chinese. In fact newspapers are one of the main sources of information on Chinese New Zealand history and there are untold treasures buried in those old volumes. Unfortunately very little indexing of Chinese New Zealand subjects has been done, so getting to these treasures requires an awful lot of digging. Manuscript and archival material is also available in public institutions. The strongest collections of this material on the Chinese in New Zealand are held by Archives New Zealand, the Alexander Turnbull Library in Wellington, and the Hocken and Hewitson Libraries in Dunedin. The Alexander Turnbull Library has good holdings of manuscript, photographic and published material, much of it collected over the past 15 years. The Hocken and Hewitson libraries are particularly strong in the goldmining period, the Hewitson holding a wonderful collection from the Presbyterian Church's Chinese mission, including 2,500 photos of Chinese in New Zealand and Guangdong, 400 of which are images of Chinese New Zealanders before 1920. Archives New Zealand's four regional centers hold material relating to Chinese people's interaction with government, and are especially strong in policy issues, and immigration matters. Other institutions around the country hold material relating to their regions, and can be very useful. There is a brief description of the major holdings of various archives and research libraries around the country in the newly-published Auckland University Press book *Unfolding history, evolving identity*. Of course, even where indexes and finding aids do exist, original research using publicly available resources such as newspapers or manuscript collections often requires prolonged and time-consuming work. In addition much of the material is in Chinese, material such as the New Zealand Chinese Growers Monthly journal, the Man Sing Times, the Auckland Chinese Journal and the Chinese manuscripts held in the Turnbull and Hocken libraries. Primary source material In my opinion primary source material, or more specifically Chinese primary source material, is an essential source for the study of Chinese New Zealand history, and although some is held in public collections, much is still in private hands. But how much? Some people believe that perhaps there is an El Dorado of Chinese New Zealand material out there somewhere, just waiting to be found. Maybe there is, it certainly keeps researchers like myself going, and as evidence of this some great collections have been discovered over the last ten years, material such as the 26 boxes of records of the Otago-Southland branch of the New Zealand Chinese Association donated to the Hocken Library, the donation to the Alexander Turnbull Library by the late Young Tong Sing and Lionel Chan of material relating to the New Zealand Chinese Association and the Chinese Growers' Federation; wonderful material containing manuscripts, Chinese language publications and photographs. An entire run of the New Zealand Chinese Growers Monthly Journal 1949-1972 was donated to the Turnbull in 1989 by its first editor, Dan Chan. Attempts have recently been made by the Turnbull to preserve photographic collections. Oral history is also a major source of research material, and more work in this area is urgently needed. The Haining Street Oral History project has spent the last ten years collecting and preserving the memories of the old Chinatown area of Wellington. I'm happy to report that a new Oral History association for Chinese New Zealand history has just been formed in Auckland. Most of this activity has occurred in the last decade, and has been initiated from within the Chinese community itself; which gives great hope for the future

of Chinese New Zealand history studies. ^Â Collecting and preserving primary source material on Chinese New Zealanders. So, if Chinese primary source material is one of the main sources for studying Chinese New Zealand history how does one gain access to it? How can one improve access to this essential source? We can't expect all researchers to spend eight years drinking tea like Charles Sedgwick, surely? The answer could be for existing research libraries and archives to actively seek out and collect the records and archives of Chinese New Zealand individuals and organisations. This could be done on both a long-term basis and by one-off projects with defined aims and timeframes. A good example of a one-off project is the Chinese Heritage of Australian Federation Project (CHAF), set up as part of the commemorations for the hundredth anniversary of Australian federation in 2001. The aims of the project are to "recover and recall neglected aspects of Australian Chinese communities and China's view of Australia." Outcomes of the project are to include, "the recovery and preservation of historical materials and indexes concerning Chinese Australians, translation of Chinese-language historical documents, a world-wide web site; traveling exhibitions and publications." Indeed, one positive outcome for New Zealand from this project is the online index to the Sydney Chinese-language newspaper the Tung Wah Times 1898-1936, which includes much mention of Chinese New Zealand issues and events. The Alexander Turnbull Library holds this newspaper on microfilm for the period 1898-1914, and will be acquiring the rest shortly. But how successful are these one-off search and preserve type of projects? How appropriate are they to preserving the history of the Chinese in New Zealand? In my opinion they can be very effective, if done properly and with sensitivity, and the CHAF project is really a very good model for how New Zealand could proceed. However they need to be combined with a long-term strategy of working with the community, a commitment to build trust and to consult with the community on all aspects of its history. ^Â

Problems and issues This leads to the next point, which concerns issues relating to building collections on Chinese New Zealanders. These issues are different to issues relating to building collections on other groups in New Zealand. The main issue is ambivalence to the past. On the one hand Chinese New Zealanders are very proud of their history and of being Chinese New Zealanders. On the other hand there is an element of not wanting to focus on or be reminded about the "bad old days" of racism and marginalisation, and make no mistake, Chinese did suffer racism and marginalisation in New Zealand. In many ways old Chinese things are a reminder of that past. The legacy of racism and assimilation has led to a desire to not stand out or be different from white New Zealanders, as well as to avoid rocking the boat. Focusing on the history of the community might do both. A traditional distrust of officialdom by the Chinese community combined with the history of racism has in some cases resulted in uneasiness about white official institutions. Another issue is that Chinese New Zealand history is often personal and private. It is very much clan, family and county-of-origin based. There is not quite so much a sense of public history for all to share as in the mainstream New Zealand community. On one hand this may result in suspicion of outsider's motivations: "Why do you want to know about my auntie?" On the other hand within the Chinese community there may be a reluctance to be seen as being more special or important than others. Of course all these issues may be of greater or lesser importance in each individual case and some of these no doubt reside more in the past. Since last year's apology there may also have been some change in these attitudes. However they do create an ambivalence among Chinese New Zealanders about their own history and about why and how to preserve it. Ethics of targeting collections within the Chinese community There are also a number of ethical considerations in targeting the community for material, both for the institutions involved and for the community itself. The question that must be raised is; whose history is it, and who should control it? Does big White brother know what's best? Some in the Chinese community feel little connection or identification with large white institutions such as archives and museums, and feel it may be a loss of power to hand over their history to such institutions. Should public institutions force the donation of material from community groups in the interests of preservation of that heritage? These are difficult questions. While one acknowledges the understandable desire of Chinese to control their own historical records, the problem remains that material staying in private hands may be lost, thrown out or so poorly preserved that it is destroyed. One could argue that by remaining in someone's garage or basement, or in the storeroom of an Association, it is effectively as lost as if it never existed. It is not really doing any good unless it's out there being used. Conclusion To sum up, the sources for researching Chinese New Zealand history may be divided into two distinct fields; those that are inside the community and those that are outside it. The sources inside the community give the voice of the community, the lived experience. The sources outside it provide the context in which those experiences took place. Although there is some meeting and overlap between the two, those researching from outside the community and those researching from within it are condemned to continue working in isolation unless something is done to bring the two together. There is at present little incentive for academics to go out into the community, and that is understandable. But unless this happens there is a danger of a constant rehashing of the same themes, with little new being said. As far as the two sources go, neither can give the full picture; both have gaps that can and should be filled by a combination of the two. It seems one approach could be to encourage community historians to learn academic techniques and learn how to complement their insider knowledge and access with knowledge of how to use standard library and archival sources. Encouraging oral history projects, identifying, indexing, collecting and preserving primary source material held by both the community and public institutions, publishing key documents, materials, records and guides; initiatives like these would give all researchers of Chinese New Zealand history equal access to sources and would go a long way to producing the type of Chinese New Zealand history that New Zealand and the Chinese New Zealand community deserves. ^Â

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