

An overview of New Zealand Chinese writing

Contributed by Lachlan
Sunday, 22 July 2007

An overview of New Zealand Chinese writing Wordstruck Conference.

24/5/03

Dr James Ng The New Zealand Chinese number some 100,000 residents, or about 2.7% of the national population. Since 1865, they are the first and largest non-European, non-Polynesian ethnic minority in New Zealand. They played a decisive role in the Otago goldfields but became the chief victims of the White New Zealand policy. Now, however, they are gaining recognition as one of the founding peoples of New Zealand.

Presently the New Zealand Chinese are broadly divided into two groups; the Cantonese, who number about 20,000, and the Chinese newcomers, who total about 80,000. It is the Cantonese who have a long history in this country, going back in time to the goldfields. From an originally peasant background, today their young adult fifth generation are relatively well-educated, having a rate of tertiary education two to three times that of the general population. The Chinese newcomers began arriving in the 1970s and particularly since 1986. Inflows have come from mainland China, Taiwan, Hong Kong and S.E. Asia. By and large, they are selected quality migrants who are also well-grounded in education. It is fortunate that today's Cantonese and the Chinese newcomers are about equal in Westernisation and both are in the middle class. Therefore one group cannot look down on the other. What this long preamble is leading to is that the writings on, or of, the New Zealand Chinese can also be divided into two groups, the Cantonese and the newcomers. I will overview their historical writing as well as creative writing. The former defines our place in New Zealand and the latter reveals our culture and heritage. The first three generations of Cantonese here were unassimilated sojourners, first by choice and then by the isolation of anti-Chinese prejudice. But gradually they wished to settle here. They still had a poor command of English, however, so their writing remained in Chinese. Even in this, they possibly had a low output of memoirs and other writing. Nonetheless, we know there were poets among what writers there were. Indeed, 'Illustrious Energy' was one of them, and another was Alison Wong's grandfather. Who and what else? William Alloo, an Eurasian, wrote an authoritative book on bowling in 1907, and Yue Jackson, another Eurasian, recorded his early life in New Zealand and China. There is a small store of Chinese newspapers, Chinese Association archives and Chinese histories on themselves in New Zealand, but nearly all these are as yet unresearched. The main sources of knowledge about the earlier Cantonese still are the writings of Rev. A. Don, Presbyterian missionary to them in Otago, and Presbyterian missionaries of the Canton Villages Mission who described their home villages. Scholarly European writing on the Cantonese began with accounts of their migrational history. Guy Scholefield was one of the first in this field, and T.D.H. Hall joined him in an article in 1927. It was impeccable in scholarship but the public prejudice was such that it aroused an outcry. Rewi and G. Alley followed with a 1938 essay. University theses began in 1930 and then clustered in the late 1940s. The general migrational history culminated in Charles Sedgwick's massive PhD thesis in 1982. Even before his thesis, the general survey was passing to the specific topic, which recently included articles on the poll tax. Scholarly Cantonese input began in 1955 and 1959, by Ng Bickleen Fong. Since then, the Cantonese voice has grown stronger, especially from the 1990s. Thus the new book on the Chinese in New Zealand, 'Unfolding History, Evolving Identity', has 12 contributors, of whom six are Cantonese. There can be no doubt that the judicious Cantonese viewpoint significantly influences how New Zealanders gauge certain sectors of the nation's history. For instance, a Cantonese has emphasised the fact that the Cantonese were invited twice in 1865 to the Otago goldfields. This fact was known but never emphasised before; yet it is pivotal to establishing our place in Otago, and it immediately and positively influences the tone of how we are regarded in this province. We hope that history will henceforth show the Cantonese as human beings instead of the old caricatures, as a people who have long intermingled in our unique way with New Zealand's other peoples and are well able to contribute to New Zealand's shared heritage. (Notes)

Another branch or stage of writing on Cantonese history is yet to happen. It will involve persons who are literate in Chinese, this enabling them to delve into the New Zealand Chinese newspapers mentioned, the papers of the New Zealand Chinese Association, and records available in ancestral village halls, Guangzhou and Hong Kong universities and Taiwan foreign ministry archives. Yet another branch of migrational history will follow C.A. Price in examining linkages between the Cantonese goldseekers in New Zealand and other Pacific rim goldfields communities. So far I have mentioned the Cantonese, but the much shorter migrational history of the Chinese newcomers to New Zealand has been eventful too. Hence their immigration has already brought forth much academic writing. The encouraging thing is that both European and newcomer Chinese scholars - like Manying Ip and Elsie Ho - are involved, thereby providing a Chinese perspective right from the start. By comparison, the old Cantonese were largely silent in the face of opposition. What has happened in New Zealand literature and other arts? Especially since the mid-1990s, a small but vital and growing number of mostly youngish Chinese individuals - both Cantonese and Chinese newcomers - are establishing themselves in the arts. This trend is early but I believe it promises to be as significant for the arts as New Zealand Chinese historians are proving to be for history. The Cantonese show, I think, an aptitude for drawing and photography. So I am not surprised to learn of a rising number of Cantonese artists, photographers and others in related arts like jewellery and fashion design. (Notes)

Painters Printmakers.

Simon Kaan

Kim Lowe

Kiri Lowe

Brent Wong

Harry Wong (Wong Sing Dai)

Eric Ngan

(Luise Fong - gone to Australia) Weaver.

Jean Ngan (nee Wong, Helen's sister)

Installation/Multi-media.

Yuk King Tan Sculpture/Installation.

Guy Ngan, OBE

Quintin Young

Denise Kum

Julianne Gee

Jason Ng

Dion Hitchens Fashion design/Sculpture.

Sharon Ng Found Art/Jewellery.

Lee-Ana Lowe Graphic Design.

Yue He Shum Film maker.

Harry Wong

Donald Ng Potter.

Wailin Elliott Photographers.

Glenys Ng

Adam Custins

Vanessa Ling Jack Literature is a rather more difficult matter, because it involves a cross-over in language from Cantonese to a high level of English. Yet a number have mastered English, as Gilbert Wong and Kirsten Wong show in editing and writing, Raybon Kan in humour and writing, Helene Wong as a critic and writer, my wife Eva Ng in Learning Media and general writing, Dave Chan and (earlier) Stephen Chan in poetry, Christine Chan-Hymans in script and children's writing, Sonia Yee, who has begun play writing, Alison Wong in poetry and general writing (and was the Burns Fellow in 2002) and Lynda Chanwai Earle in poetry and plays. One is impressed with their empathy for their Chinese background, particularly if a person has mixed-race origins. For a long time past, their mixed-race predecessors used to hide the Chinese part of themselves, because of the White New Zealand belief that they were products of racial pollution - whatever that was. Remarkably, Chinese newcomers have already entered a range of New Zealand arts including literature. The first was Jye Kang, who published the first Chinese novel in New Zealand, in 1985. Today in Christchurch, Taiwanese have formed the Christchurch Chinese Writers Association; they write in Chinese and translate New Zealand works into that language. Outside Christchurch, Shifen Gong has published a book on Katherine Mansfield, Song Lam wrote a Chinese book on the Maori in New Zealand, and others like T. Fang and Candice Ng have published on aspects of New Zealand life. Poets and other writers who already have an established reputation have come to settle - at least for a time. They include the unfortunate poet Gu Cheng who killed his wife and himself in 1993, Yang Lian, another leading poet from China, Sandor Lau in Auckland, Ming Cher who has published with Penguin books, and Xu Xi, who may yet come to live full time rather than for part of the year in Seacliff, Otago. Other newcomers (I think), are Ann-Marie Houg Lee, who has published two novels, and a writer named Mei is publishing her memoirs with Penguin. In addition, Alison Wong informs me of the Auckland newcomers Roseanne Leang, Pepe Choong, Kandy Ho, and Ming Soo Teow, all of whom are at an early but dedicated stage in their literacy careers. All in all, it looks like a promising Chinese entry into New Zealand literature. For a Chinese, the desire to be a creative writer in English means a personal affirmation or decision to assimilate into New Zealand society, that he/she esteems the citizen values of New Zealand and to which the writer will add the riches of two cultures. A strong body of Chinese authors have already made their mark in Australia and it seems that New Zealand will soon follow suit. How welcome this will be! Paul Millar in his Stout Centre Lecture has reviewed the status of New Zealand Chinese in this nation's literature. After quoting extracts, he concluded; 'the role [the mention] of Chinese New Zealanders in New Zealand literature, while small, has not been inconsequential, nor entirely negative' While they initially feature in the New Zealand settler imagination as alien and threatening, one hopes that the more positive [later] representations are evidence of a more inclusive, tolerant and mature society. But for all the improvements, the representations of Chinese New Zealanders in New Zealand literature will be peripheral, until Chinese New Zealanders tell their own stories I know that there is a lot of work being done collecting evidence and preserving New Zealand Chinese history. But I'd also argue that literature can do something that history can't do. Literature can create characters, and good characterisations are powerful and seductive There are stories that we all need to hear, told in a way that [imparts the essence and] takes us beyond the evidence. Not the sensational tales of gold dredging, riots, murder and mayhem. But the way that ordinary people tried to live lives and carve out a future for themselves and their families in this country. In my opinion, literature is the best way to do this we should all look for and encourage such [writers].

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