

A laundry background

Contributed by Lachlan
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A laundry background Otago Girls High School
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James Ng Retired persons like me say a lot of 'I remember this,' and 'I remember that.' Today, I hope you won't mind me remembering my childhood, because that was the period when my family began to put down our roots in New Zealand - to assimilate into the wider New Zealand society. Other Chinese families in New Zealand were doing the same, and there were three factors involved: first, New Zealand's attitudes to Chinese had improved from the Sino-Japanese war and WW2; second, we had shifted our home from China to New Zealand, if only, we thought, for the duration of war; and third, our families had young offspring who, as is usual, led the way in absorbing and adapting to a new culture. But New Zealand had the White New Zealand policy for a long time. This policy was established at the turn of the twentieth century and it was against the immigration of coloured races, especially Chinese. It was not that the Chinese were so horrible. The ones who had already come to New Zealand were Cantonese and had actually proven themselves in the Otago goldfields to have high citizenship qualities. They were law-abiding, moral, industrious and enterprising. The only thing that can be held against the Chinese was that they were sojourners rather than settlers; like sojourners everywhere, like modern New Zealand sojourners, say, to the Middle East, they want to make their money and then return to their families, in the Chinese case to China. Moreover, in the goldfields, the Chinese could not support a family by their small-claim mining. They were the second wave and had been invited to Otago in 1865 to rework the goldfields; however, once they established small businesses outside the goldfields, some could support families, and slowly the wish to settle followed the economic capability. But what New Zealand wanted was a British population, not Chinese, not even the 5,000 of them in the nineteenth century, not even as they declined to about half that number before building up again to 5,000 around 1950. The factors underlying the anti-Chinese feeling were the scare-mongering Yellow Peril concept, which believed that millions of Chinese could flood into and overcome New Zealand (despite the British navy); another factor (possibly the real core factor) was the known Chinese competitive potential, which was anathema to the rising trade union movement and the Liberal government which supported the unions. There were also the bogeys arising from the prevalent beliefs of racial superiority and white supremacy, social Darwinism, (i.e. survival of the fittest) and eugenics. From these theories arose a special fear of racial pollution - whatever that was - of the superior British people by contact and mixing with the allegedly leprous, inferior Chinese. And lastly, as mentioned, there was the old Cantonese tendency to sojournism rather than settlement, which laid them open to the charge of being 'locusts' in the New Zealand - they would come and devour everything in their path. All this was scare-mongering, but I tell you the public everywhere is susceptible to scare-mongery in any age. So New Zealand set to to stop Chinese immigration, particularly women so Chinese could not procreate here; to disenfranchise the Chinese men already in this country, this to silence their voice; and to circumscribe their work and jobs. Thus the Chinese population would ultimately leave or die out. The chief discriminatory points were: in immigration, a £100 entry tax called the poll tax (worth about \$12,000 in today's money) which was levied only on Chinese immigrants and paid on disembarking at the pier. To this was added a reading test in English, following the discovery that 14 Chinese women had come. The reading test was later replaced by a 100% effective permit system in 1921 but the poll tax was retained just in case. A few more Chinese were allowed entry on permanent residency permits till 1926 after which only temporary residency permits were issued. Naturalisation was first hindered, then stopped in 1908. This deprived them of a vote for members of parliament, and a later act deprived them of the vote for local bodies as well. The Chinese were specifically barred from receiving family and old age allowances and they became hedged in to mainly three occupations - in laundries, fruitshops and market gardens. In these three occupations, the trade unions first harassed but finally left them alone, possibly because they provided cheap, skilful services to the general public. As it turned out, my grandfather was naturalised in 1906, two years before it was stopped for Chinese. This meant that my grandmother was a New Zealand citizen by marriage but Grandfather could not bring her to New Zealand without first depositing £100 for her entry and then get it refunded by going through another Western, marriage ceremony. More seriously, Grandfather's China-born children could not be New Zealand citizens unless they had resided here during infancy. Hence my father had to pay £100 for his entry. Over time, the rules for naturalised persons changed, so my father was deemed naturalised because Grandfather was. My mother, when she came, was considered a citizen by marriage, but by another regulation change at some period, my older brothers and I, being China-born, were aliens. There was a new Nationality Act in 1928 whereby my father could have got us New Zealand citizenship through Imperial British citizenship but he either did not know about it - or he was convinced by then that New Zealand could never be our home and so it did not matter. My grandfather and father worked in a laundry in Gore. Both remained as sojourners, as were nearly all the Chinese men in New Zealand. The difference between my grandfather and my father's generations was that in Dad's time, the New Zealand laws had so evolved that Chinese aliens in New Zealand after 1920 had no chance of settling here if they had wanted to. Everything was in place for the Chinese to ultimately leave or die out, except for about 120 families who had managed to come or reunite here before 1920. Yet nothing stands still, and in the 1930s, New Zealand gradually regarded Japan as a likely enemy and China as this country's 'gallant ally.' In 1938, the Japanese invaded our home region in Guangdong province and in keeping with the

changed times, and as a humanitarian gesture, New Zealand allowed 249 Chinese wives of men here and 244 of their children under 16 years to flee to this country as war refugees. This took place in 1939-41, and they were the first big lot of Chinese women and children to come to New Zealand, before the Japanese captured Hong Kong, the exit port. But they came on temporary permits only, they had to put down a £200 deposit per family to ensure the return fare to China after the war and another £500 bond was required to ensure that any children born in New Zealand were taken to China as well. Despite these rules, more Chinese wives and children may have wished to flee here but New Zealand had stopped accepting more applicants when European fruiters protested. My mother, an older brother and I came with the refugees and went to our Gore laundry. I was five years old, and my brother was eleven. A sister was born here in 1942. We children newcomers were given free education, as apparently the government forgot to charge us and then let it pass. This was a crucial oversight because it exposed us probably for a longer time to European children; and you know that children are the most flexible and adaptable persons as regards race. If education was not free, many Chinese families would have been unable to support us past the minimal school leaving age. Another crucial factor for the refugees was that after the war, we were allowed to stay. The Chinese community and Chinese embassy had pleaded for this, and the Presbyterian Church of New Zealand took up the issue. The New Zealand government agreed. Not only this, since the government was impressed with the Chinese community's war efforts, it decided to allow the reunification of more Chinese families here, in order to encourage them to settle and assimilate. It was also evident that New Zealand society had largely tolerated the Chinese coming amongst them, and indeed some had welcomed the new arrivals, and recalled all the good Chinese qualities - 'never in the courts, hard working, never demanding, always polite'. Overall, however, surveys revealed that New Zealand generally had not shaken off the White New Zealand policy; the Chinese were merely the best of the least preferred settler group. Nonetheless, naturalisation was restored to Chinese on cautious criteria in 1951 but the other pillar of the white New Zealand policy, the preferential entry of certain immigrants and races, was not withdrawn till 1986.

Returning to the refugee children, a lot of us kept on with education, even to university. At first, we saw university graduate skills as the best way we can return to and help China. Then when we were allowed to stay, and after the communist Chinese victory in China in 1949, we saw a university education as our route for upwards social mobility in New Zealand, as the only way to break out of the humble occupations of our fathers. About a third of the refugee children (about 80 of us) graduated from university, notably from Medical School, then the toughest university course. So much for our alleged racial inferiority. And on the whole, we refugee children and our successors have led worthy citizen lives in New Zealand. By the 1980s, before the new influxes of Chinese newcomers from Hong Kong, Taiwan, mainland China and South East Asia, the Cantonese community in New Zealand was said to have become a 'model minority'. When I was growing up, we lived in two worlds - the Cantonese world at home and the New Zealand world outside. The Cantonese world was that of the countryside where we had originated. Our parents spoke only Chinese at home, and my mother could not speak English at all. Our parents' lives chiefly revolved around nuclear and extended family and work, and their principal outside interest was China and its affairs and happenings. Indeed, our parents were strangers in a foreign land. However, each Chinese person or family was not alone; around us in every city and town were scattered Chinese fruitshops, laundries and market gardens. The latter supplied, it was said, some 80% of this country's vegetables. But we had little social standing in the dominant society, and worse, we seemed to be deprived even of a history. There was little that could be easily found about our history in New Zealand. Who were we? Why were we in this shabby state? Why were we so careful and kept to ourselves? Pending answers, we young ones concentrated on securing our future. Most Chinese laundries of the time had one or two workers. They were situated especially in the secondary streets, whereas Chinese fruitshops had to have good locations in the main streets. Usually the Chinese laundries were dingy premises, rentable only to Chinese. For example, the worst looking (decrepit) Chinese laundry in Dunedin was in Stuart St opposite the Cathedral, and it was owned by the Methodist Mission. Clothes were worn much dirtier because homes had poorer washing facilities. So the laundries had the full variety of clothing to wash and iron. However, the most profitable items (the drycleaning work) were skimmed off by European drycleaners, leaving skilled starching work (stiff detached collars and dress shirts) and piecework (handkerchiefs to underwear to outer wear) to the Chinese. The prices were cheap, twopence for a collar, 2s for a dress shirt. As one laundryman said to me, it took a lot of collars - in washing, starching, initially shining them, finally shining and curling them and wrapping them - to make a profit at twopence per collar. My parents worked together. They worked so hard, getting up at dawn on wash days to light up the copper in the washing room and the stoves in the drying room. They ironed till about 10pm at night. Their half day off was on Sundays. As I saw it, laundry work was drudgery, the same kind of thing day after day. I still remember my wonderment that whenever a big rush order came in, like a pile of tablecloths from a tearoom to be washed, starched and ironed in a hurry, my parents rejoiced rather than grumbled, because of the increased income. Fleas were an occupational nuisance. Do you know the sure way of catching fleas was to let them feed on you for a day or two? Then they got bigger and fatter so you can spy them more easily and they can't jump so quickly. How my father put up with the laundry work for so long I don't know. He always said he earned his money by the sweat of his brow; he was proud of his starching work. How my mother adapted to the work I also don't know. She used to say to me, 'Ah Ming, always spend your money wisely, look how hard we have to work to earn it.' Chinese parents are authoritative and show little overt affection in comparison to European parents. There is no emphasis on love and outward signs like kissing, hugging and touching. But Chinese parents show infinite faithfulness and engagement with their children. I always knew they would be there whenever I needed them. And their faithfulness and caring extended into my adulthood and embraced my wife and children,

so the turning point when it came was a natural thing. When they weakened through age, I just became more and more active in caring for them. This changeover is the Chinese ideal. Despite the strong family bonds, the outside school world was different and attractive, because our Chinese world was full of drudgery and had a lower standard of living. Language was no problem because young Chinese children learn English very quickly at school. We made friends who took us as we are, our teachers aided us, we visited homes and saw the greater variety and choice in them, in all manner of things, we felt secure in this outside world and we felt we could definitely make a go of it in New Zealand. As my generation started successful careers in New Zealand, we convinced our parents that we could make our homes in this country, a great relief to them in view of communism rampant in China. Our success had dispelled our parents' fears that no European firm would hire us, if, say, we became a scientist or engineer, or no-one would become our patients, if we became doctors.

Finally, may I elaborate on my experiences at school. Since New Zealand has a dominant British based culture, incoming immigrants must assimilate into this culture and I am certain that the persons who most easily assimilate are the young children who go through all or most of our school system. There is no way of producing instant Kiwis, and if the roles are reversed, you will be quite unable to become, say, an instant Chinese. Assimilation takes time and it is the young children who will best learn, absorb and apply our New Zealand values. When they grow up they may still look different, Chinese, Indian, etc, and they will be multicultural, that is, they will retain some old cultural habits and preferences. But they will share and stand up with us in New Zealand values like tolerance, free speech, non-violence, a sense of comedy, a belief in fairness and representative democracy, a vibrant sporting and outdoor outlook. They will have in themselves a New Zealandness which is represented in our flag and national anthem. New Zealand will probably become more ethnically diverse and multicultural, but we will have a common identity and a sense of belonging and togetherness through our country's values.