

# To be happy for the rest of your life

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• To be happy for the rest of your life •  
 Chinese Market Gardeners in New Zealand

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Auditorium

National Library of New Zealand

An event in support of

A BARBAROUS MEASURE The Poll Tax and Chinese New Zealanders

There is a Chinese proverb, which goes something like this in English:

"If you want to be happy for a day, get drunk. If you want to be happy for a week, get married. If you want to be happy for the rest of your life, plant a garden."

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Market gardening was, and possibly still is one, of the hallmark occupations of the Chinese migrants in New Zealand. Together with the fruit shop, it was the home, nest and breast that nurtured a generation or more of high achievers in their childhood and youth and helped form their characters. The hardships of that upbringing conditioned their responses later in life and allowed them to shrug off later adversity: Having escaped the world of Krypton, they were largely invulnerable to the shafts of late 20th century Earth. The story of Chinese market gardening and the market gardening generation is but one chapter in the history of the Chinese in New Zealand that is still being written. That history has been greatly expanded in the past 15 years with the publication of scholarly works by James Ng, Manying Ip, Nigel Murphy and others. However, to date little has been written about market gardening because, characteristically, the market gardeners left little written material behind which was amenable to scholarly research, and what there was like the Journal of the Federation of Chinese Commercial Growers, was in Chinese and therefore not easily accessible to English-speaking researchers.

Although the Chinese market gardeners, through typical self abnegation, said little about themselves in public, their presence was noted from time to time in the press.

## 2. PRESS REPORTS

Contemporary newspapers reports about the Chinese market gardeners, readily available in archives, tended to give the European view.

On 12 May 1888 of the Auckland Herald (p5) Sir George Grey gave his opinion on the "the Chinese Question" "he was very much against Chinese immigration. - and complained that the Chinese had somehow, through superior cunning, got hold of some land in the Auckland Domain near the Hospital, intended for patients and started growing vegetables on it on a commercial basis. This was considered another reason to keep them out of New Zealand.

On 26 June 1896, it is officially recorded (NZPD Vol. 92) that the Hon. Mr Jennings, a member of the Legislative Council, supporting an increase in the Poll Tax to 100 pounds, complained that Europeans, working 12 to 14 hours a days could not compete with the Chinese gardeners who would work 16 hours a day and live on the smell of an oily rag.

In the same debate, the Government were angered that the Opposition suggested that the proposal to increase the Poll Tax was for electioneering purposes, and in turn suggested that the members of the Opposition were rack-renting their land to Chinamen.

On 18 July 1896, the NZ Observer and Freeland (p2) noted Mr W W Collins, a member of the House of Representatives complained that all the vegetables used in Bellamy's™ were grown by Chinamen and wanted only vegetables grown by non-Chinese to be served and eaten there. The newspaper notes however that it would be very difficult if not impossible to get European grown vegetables because the work is too hard for Europeans. The writer goes on to relate the story of a household, which decided to buy their vegetables from a proper (European) green grocer at 300% the price from the Chinamen, only to find that the Chinamen supplied the greengrocer.

In more recent times the development of the Chinese community was noted. In the 28 May 1958 issue of The Press (p7) it was noted that although the older people remained in occupations such as market gardening, fruit shops and laundries, there were at least 10 Chinese study medicine in Dunedin and others starting out in engineering, architecture, law and the public service with Chinese restaurants becoming extremely popular.

On 25 July 1975, however, in The Press (p8) a headline announces that "Chinese gardeners on the wane". Mr Jack Wong that there is only a slight prospect that any of his seven children will carry on his work.

On 15 June 1989 in the Sing Tao (p3) Alec Wong laments that the future generation of market gardeners are encouraged to enter the professions becoming doctors, lawyers, dentists and accountants etc.

### 3. STATISTICS

Figures from the NZ Census from 1897 through to 1951 show that the number of Chinese in New Zealand was 2641 in 1891, rose and fell to a minimum of 2147 in 1916 rising to no more than 5600 in 1951. In that time Chinese market gardening as an occupation for Chinese varied from 2% in 1871 to 41% in 1916, held at about 30% until after WWII when it fell to 13% in 1951 with the influx of new families. Alexander Don recorded the occupations of the Chinese in 1909-1913 and is quoted by Charles Sedgwick in his PhD thesis in 1982.

Don is quoted as follows:

Nelson	13 men were involved in market gardening	Poon Yu & Fa Yuen
Otaki	17 men	Poon Yu
Fielding	unknown number	Jung Sing
Wanganui	33 men	Poon Yu
Palmerston N	15 men	Poon Yu
Foxton	6 men	Jung Sing & Poon Yu

So much for the statistics, which are rather dry and uninteresting. But the life of market gardening, like the stained glass windows of the Sainte Chapelle of Paris, is best seen from the inside. This is my view.

### 4. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

By the early 20th century, the Otago gold fields were largely depleted, the Poll Tax was in place, and the Chinese in New Zealand were making the best of a harsh social environment: In that era anti-Chinese racism was rife, both at the official and personal level. It was a bachelor society of Chinese men and perhaps their teenaged sons or nephews, because Chinese women were either specifically excluded or constructively excluded because of the monetary value of the Poll Tax.

For the most part the Chinese in that era had only an elementary education in China and few got beyond 4th or 5th form in New Zealand.

The options for making a living in New Zealand were thus exceedingly limited. They therefore gravitated towards those occupations requiring little education, little capital and hard work "principal among them running fruit and vegetable shops, laundries and market gardens. Most of the Chinese in New Zealand had a peasant background; that is in China their families lived in villages, grew rice and vegetables and kept a few cows, pigs, chickens and ducks. They therefore already understood the basics of horticulture: the relationship of the seasons to various crops, seeds, planting, fertilising, weeding, harvesting and later quickly learned about plant diseases, pests and predators. They quickly discovered some areas around the metropolitan areas were highly suited to cultivation and relatively large communities were established in Lower Hutt, Otaki-Horowhenua-Manawatu, Pukekohe and Timaru/Oamaru.

New Zealand society at large learned to accept the place of the Chinese in the food chain as the towns and city grew and it became less practical for the townies to grow their own. This arrangement also kept the Chinese in a kind of well-defined space out of the way of mainstream European society, doing work they did not wish to do themselves. Indeed it appears they became a well-accepted part of the established order, admired for their ability to make something out of nothing "not like the "lazy Maoris" who leased their land out to them.

## 5. WORLD WAR II

The Japanese were getting aggressive towards China in the 1930s and invaded in 1936. The Chinese in New Zealand were organised to help raise funds for the war effort.

With the outbreak of World War II, New Zealand and the Commonwealth found themselves fighting the same enemy. The despised Chinese in their midst were suddenly recognised as Allies in their war.

The Japanese attacked the American Fleet in Pearl Harbour and suddenly it was all on. The Americans marshalled their remaining forces and counter-attacked across the Pacific. New Zealand was a staging post.

Although a few Chinese enlisted in the armed forces, most did not qualify (because of size, language etc). However they were given an honourable part to play in the war effort: they were directed by the Government to supply vegetables for the troops.

Thereafter the Chinese were treated much better by the people of New Zealand. Many women and children were admitted or allowed to stay as war refugees. The Poll Tax was lifted and after the war more family re-unification cases were approved. The Chinese were allowed to be naturalised and become citizens with full rights.

My grandfather arrived in New Zealand in 1899 and my father in 1924.

I arrived in New Zealand in 1951 at the age of three with my younger brother, older sister and mother to re-join my father who had initially arrived in 1924 (and who had obviously been back to China on a couple of occasions!)

My first memories of New Zealand was staying at the Cambridge Hotel and seeing a rather large woman in bronze outside my window! In keeping with this Victorian theme, I also remember taking tea at James Smiths department store, sipping from the new-fangled silver spoons while watching foreign ladies floating down from the first floor (on the escalator).

After a few months staying with "village cousins" in Brougham Street (with many adventures) it was decided that the family would move to Levin to make a new life as market gardeners.

## 6. A BRAVE NEW WORLD

Our worldly possessions, such as they were, were stacked on a small truck. My brother and I were entombed under a dining table among the furniture and we set off via Tawa (before the days of the motorway). We arrived in Kawiu Road, Levin. Our neighbour 50 metres to the right was the sister and brother-in-law of our village cousin landlord in Brougham Street.

There we were, two brothers three and four years old with access to perhaps 100 acres of land- we might as well have been astronauts in space.

Our PLM (principal living module) was an unlined weatherboard shed 5m x 4 metres. Linked off one end was an American designed and built PBM (parent's bedroom module) also known as a surplus American army hut; off the side was a similar CBM (children's bedroom module). Cooking was initially done with re-cycled solid fuel rods on a ceramic heat shield (also known as dead macrocarpa branches on bricks), with forced internal waste gas re-cycling (because there was no chimney). Waste disposal was by way of a separate LD (long drop) module connected to the PLM by a slippery path.

In the 1950's modular furniture was all the rage among the Chinese, the basic modules being the wooden banana case and the slightly smaller apple box.

Five banana cases on the floor made a single bed; seven boxes made a double bed. Two banana cases crossed with two more on top made a table with built-in storage. With four vertical apple boxes as chairs, this made an ideal dining suite. Blue corrugated cardboard from the apple boxes could be stapled on as upholstery. The Evening Post was commonly pressed into service as disposable table cloths.

## 7. THE 1950s

In the early 1950s, farm mechanisation had not arrived. Both our neighbour and our family each had a horse. They pulled sledges, not carts, to bring the vegetables in from the fields. Ploughing then was commonly done by contractors who did own tractors. Planting and weeding was commonly done by hand "an ideal job for children who had nothing else to do anyway. The crops were cut in the fields, trimmed and packed into the ubiquitous banana cases, brought to the road side to be picked up by transport companies (in Levin, Cappers or McFarlanes) who would take them to the vegetable auction companies (in Wellington: Laery & Co, Thompson Brothers, Townsend & Paul, Market Gardeners, D Bowie, A Pope "now mostly restaurant sites)

The main crops were cauliflower, cabbage, carrots, parsnip and lettuce. Specialised crops, requiring additional equipment or capital included celery, tomatoes, and potatoes. Smaller lines included marrow (not yet zucchinis) pumpkins, silver beet, beetroot, peas and beans.

After ploughing and disking by the contractor, the work consisted of planting, fertilising and endless weeding. When the plants were small this was done on ones knees. As the plants got bigger we would use a hand hoe. The family would be weeding perhaps an acres of land every day or so.

In the mid-late 1950s, tractors became available. The most common model was the Ferguson TEA (used

by Ed Hilary to go to South Pole). This machine was a rather light in the nose and would rear up dangerously when a load was applied to the rear. My father, ever the innovative thinker, instead bought an Allis Chalmers G with a rear mounted engine and cultivation equipment in the front. This relieved hand weeding to a certain extent, but not entirely.

#### 8. THE 1960s

In the late 1950 and 1960s farm mechanisation became ever more common-place. Everyone had a tractor. Soon one tractor was no longer enough and the gardeners acquired two, three or even four tractors, some permanently attached to the heavier equipment, and ready for instant use. Ploughing (to turn over the soil) and disking (to break down the plough fields) were done by the gardeners themselves rather than contracted out. Rotary hoes (to finely till whole fields) became available and there was specialised equipment to plant, fertilise, weed, spray and harvest various crops. Production increased dramatically to meet the needs of increasingly urbanised population. It became economic to own a truck and then two large trucks to transport the vegetables to market. The produce arrived in better condition and was presented better by their owners. The transport companies were not longer needed.

#### 9. A WEEK IN THE LIFE OF A MARKET GARDENER IN THE 1960s

Saturday	6.00am start	Harvest	â€œhardâ€• lines such as carrots and parsnips
Sunday	6.00am start	Harvest	â€œgreensâ€•
Monday	2.00am	Drive to Wellington	
	5.00am	Unload vegetables	
	6.30am	Breakfast	â€œ sausage and eggs, fried rice
	7.00am	Watch auction	
	9.00am	Collect banana cases	as packaging
	10.00am	Drive home	
	pm	Cultivation, weeding, spraying	
Tuesday		Same as Saturday	
Wednesday		Same as Sunday	
Thursday		Same as Monday	
Friday	am	Ploughing, spraying, etc	
	pm	In town, half day off shopping	

#### 10. A CHILDâ€™S LIFE

In the early 1950â€™s the children from the age of 7 or 8 to the age of 15 essentially shared this life if not attending school between the hours of 8.00am to 3.30pm. Often, even on school days, it was necessary to get up at 5.00am or earlier in the summer to help harvest lettuce before the sun got hot, so the produce would not wilt. After-school sport was discouraged as a waste of time, and Saturday sports practice was essentially not possible because of economic necessity. During school holidays the children worked full-time as adults.

In my case my brother and I were also given some elementary Chinese lessons at home by my mother, and admonished to keep our Chineseness.

#### 11. BABY BOOMERS BREAK OUT

Although the Chinese in the market gardens worked hard and forced their children to do the same, most knew the value of education and understood that in their newly adopted country, education would be the only way out of their â€œholeâ€•.

Thus while in the 1950s children left school as soon as legally permitted, or earlier, this had changed by the 1960s when by common consent market gardening children were allowed to finish their secondary schooling and even contemplate university studies.

#### 12. GOING TO SCHOOL

School for me was a generally positive experience. I attended the new Levin North School possibly as a first day pupil. Miss Hooper the infant mistress was a kindly lady of indeterminate old age (probably 40) who took an interest in me and my brother throughout our primary schooling, and many years beyond, being amazed I think that the two little Chinese boys from up the road in the garden would go so far so fast. In truth there was little overt racism among the kids and after a couple of years we were well accepted in the rural environment. We had the Maori landlords as neighbours and their kids would always be around. Sadly even then, they did not do well at school, got into scrapes and were dealt to by the teachers. Fortunately, my brother and I were bright enough to stay ahead of the pack, and were among the better

students. In this we were strongly encouraged by our parents who never let us forget that study was the road to a better life. Our mother taught us multiplication tables from 2x to 9x at the age of 5. We could do simple equations at the age of 9.

Our father was a closet scholar and had a 25 volume set of Nelsons Encyclopaedia (so old as to predict the ascendancy of airships over heavier-than-air aircraft.) When we were 7 or 8 he bought a set of Arthur Mee's Children's Encyclopaedia. This opened up the whole world of western civilisation and natural history. (We also lost our 5/-allowance for two years to pay for it.) With this as a cornerstone of our knowledge we vastly over-did school research projects, writing 120 pages in italics on the Roman Empire or Greek philosophers when other pupils produced barely 15 pages.

### 13. SCHOOL FAIR

In the 1950s all schools held an annual fair. At such times my father would drive down to the school on a tractor towing a trailer and deliver maybe 15 cases of assorted vegetables for sale. This was a way of showing his support for the school and partly to compensate for not being able to otherwise participate as a parent. This size of donation would arouse much interest and sounds of appreciations.

### 14. POPULATION

In Levin the 50s and 60s, in a population of 8000 there might have been 30 to 40 families with a total Chinese population of 250 or less. There might have been a dozen Chinese children in each of four primary schools. At Horowhenua College there might have been 20 Chinese children, in the upper sixth form maybe one or two in a class of 16.

### 15. COMMUNITY LIFE

Unlike nowadays, there was little organised community life in the 1950s and 60s in rural areas. One reason was the small numbers of people and the lack of leadership experience among them. Another was the difficulty of communication. Those new-fangled telephone things were not commonly available to us anyway until maybe 1960.

Locally there was little organised, but in Wellington the main event was the "Double Tenth" celebration of the founding of the Republic of China 10 October 1911, following the overthrow of the Qing dynasty. This involved the families travelling to Wellington to participate in a family day at a park, running races and lolly scramble for the children, team sports competitions for young people, and ceremonies, speeches and feasting for everyone.

For the Chinese community, there was a few days respite from work at Easter and Christmas/New Year. Relatives from the city might visit rural areas during these holidays and this usually meant extremely bad luck for the local poultry population. There would be much squawking and quacking, blood, hot water and feathers as chickens, ducks and geese were killed, bled, plucked and drawn before being roasted. Very occasionally several families would arrange to roast a pig. This would be done ad initio with the pig arriving very much alive in wire cage on the back of truck. It was an all day affair to kill the pig, bleed it (saving the blood), de-hairing the beast, opening it up (and saving the heart, lung, liver, stomach) and preparing the carcass for roasting. Usually the pig was marinated whole overnight before being roasted in a special brick oven dug into the ground. Early the next morning, the oven would be fired up using broken banana cases and fire wood. After a couple of hours the fires would be allowed to die down and the pig would be suspended head down in the middle of the oven, which was covered with a lid then sacks. The roasting was timed to allow a late lunch of roast pork followed by a dinner of roast pork, followed the next day by breakfast of congee and roast pork and roast pork fried rice and even roast pork steamed buns. But such festivities did not last for long because we had to re-start work harvesting vegetables two days before the end of these holidays so there would be fresh supplies on the next shopping day.

### 16. SECONDARY SCHOOL

At secondary school I discovered TIME magazine and Gibbons Rise and Fall of the Roman Empire both being thrown out by the librarian. Of the former I consumed five years worth or 250 issues in one year and learned all about (American) current affairs. The magazine shaped much of my view of the world, counterbalanced by the wry world of PUNCH.

### 17. THE SOY SAUCE, 20 ACRE, STEAMED BUN PARADISE THE CLASSIC NEW ZEALAND EXPERIENCE WITH CHINESE CHARACTERISTICS.

Once we were committed to a life of professional training, the whole family had to adapt. We had to be excused work before examinations - particularly public examinations. The work load had to be taken up by my parents and older sister. (Some ten years older, her needs were sacrificed on the altar of male gender-biased advancement and she spent some very uninteresting years as a teenager and young woman working in the garden.) Passing at or near the top of the class was absolutely expected. Any mark less than 85% was considered a major screw-up. What! Only three "A"s! We became like working-class rural white folk made good, with Chinese characteristics however unlikely

that seemed.

We had left the old house long before. We now lived a vast brick bungalow with a Decramastic roof and extensive gardens, a curving driveway, carp pond and a bamboo glade with a 4-bay implement shed in the back. Inside we had a sliding glass door and a split stone fireplace in the dining room and a Tarkaka marble fireplace in the living room (never used), a Formica table, a pair of kidney chairs in orange and green in the dining room, solid Mahogany furniture in the lounge " again never used.

Increasingly we spoke in English at home to articulate abstract concepts. What does the integral of a trig function really mean? What is anti-disestablishmentarianism in Chinese? What is Epicureanism? Indeed what is filial piety? Who was Mencius, who was Confucius, and who was Mao Tse Tung?

Figuring that out took all of three years. Then we were gone in 1966-67 with the admonishment of my father in my ear: Don't get caught in a demonstration, you hear?

Although I came back in the holidays for another 5 years until I graduated " I was well and truly gone. I did come back in a sense " as you will see in the following video.

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