

# Politics and culture

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**POLITICS AND CULTURE** The background and recent developments in the political culture of Chinese New Zealanders. By STEVEN YOUNG

**Abstract** This paper reviews the cultural history of the Chinese in New Zealand, the limits of their cultural activities and how they turned to sport as a means of social interaction. It then reviews the political history of the community starting from an initial invitation to come, but soon followed by discrimination and racist legislation including a Poll Tax whose severity distorted the development of the community. It reviews the measures undertaken to date to effect a reconciliation and how this effort has politicised the community. The reconciliation process is then set in relation to the development of the many earlier Chinese organisations in NZ with political and community development significance. Finally the paper discusses local body and national politics and explores reasons why few Chinese have been involved in politics and posits a grass roots reaction to biculturalism in a globalised world.

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## CHINESE NEW ZEALAND

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

My objective here is not only to review the background and recent developments in the political culture of Chinese New Zealanders but also show that politics shaped the culture of Chinese New Zealanders, and that culture has shaped their politics and will continue to do so in the future.

**2. CULTURAL HISTORY OF THE CHINESE IN NEW ZEALAND** The history and culture of Chinese New Zealanders is divided into two parts, that before about 1987 and after 1987. Before 1987 was the era of the "old Chinese"; after that date the era of the "new immigrants". In the 130 odd years from 1850 to 1987 the Chinese population grew slowly from 1 to 20,000. In the 15 years from 1987 to 2001 the Chinese population quintupled to over 100,000. (Based on NZ Census figures.) In the early era, the principal means of communication was the handwritten letter delivered by sea mail, or for the illiterate &ndash; a personal message delivered verbally by a returning relative. The main means of maintaining cultural contact was probably no more than a few very dated Chinese newspapers, magazines and books. In the 1950s Cantonese-language films made in Hong Kong became available and were shown once a fortnight or on once a month in many towns and cities. In the same period, open reel tape recorder allowed Chinese opera singing to become popular entertainment in homes. This led to enthusiasts organising touring opera troupes from Hong Kong, but such was the expense that the tours were only undertaken every five years or so. For the generation of young people born 1940 to 1960, the cultural landscape was indeed arid. Most only spoke "baby" Chinese and few could read a newspaper let alone a book in Chinese. Most turned to sport, in particular basketball, as a means of social interaction. As the number of younger people increased, this led in the 1970s to the organisation of large-scale Chinese sports clubs and later the construction of several Chinese sports stadiums in Auckland, Wellington, and Christchurch and also in the smaller centres. This stimulus expanded the annual national competition (established in 1948 &ndash; from 1973 known as the Easter Tournament) which rotated around the main centres, which apart being the focus of the year's training was also the highlight of many a young Chinese person's social calendar. From 1950 through to the 1970s immigration was really only possible through marriage and family reunification, so the population grew only slowly from this source. It is not known by outsiders that among the "old" immigrants, the degree of separation is not more than 2: That is, as a member of that community, I will know a person who is directly related to any other member of that community. Since this was the Cold War period and China was Red and Taiwan an armed camp, the candidates for migration had to be in or from Hong Kong which at that time was a British colony. In those circumstances, for the overseas Chinese, Hong Kong defined Chinese culture. (This "Hong Kong" culture was somewhat removed from the scholarly Confucian tradition and reflected the dog-eat-dog, naked commercialism of the Chinese in the British colony at that time and, it would be fair to say, often lacked a proper historical perspective.) The trickle of migrants from Hong Kong brought with them a small supply of cultural sustenance &ndash; language ability, mannerisms, attitudes and some modest background in dance and singing.

Despite this, the battle to maintain the Chinese language (Cantonese) was lost in this period. Without an adequate Chinese cultural milieu in New Zealand the Chinese language became irrelevant to the young, a victim of the relentless march to academic and professional success. The children born to this generation became ever more kiwi, and sweep up by the power of English language western mass media, for the most part lost all but a vestige of their Chineseness. Many became "bananas" - yellow on the outside, white on the inside. Given that Chinese culture in New Zealand in this period was really a desert (with a few mirages) one could be forgiven for thinking that international, national and community politics could barely be sustained. Yet politics is a hardy plant, with a persistent root system and even its spindly branches can cast a shadow over a wide area. As I shall show, its seeds sown a hundred years ago can grow slowly but suddenly burst into flower.

3. POLITICAL HISTORY OF THE CHINESE IN NEW ZEALAND In most of the world, politics is history and history is politics. So it was and is for the Chinese in New Zealand. Apart from the odd adventurer, the first group of Chinese came to New Zealand in 1866 at the invitation of the Dunedin Chamber of Commerce to help work the gold field when the Europeans gold miners had moved onto new gold fields on the West Coast. They were invited there to help maintain the economic growth of the province. (Somewhat like recent business migrants, but instead of bringing gold, had to dig it from the ground on arrival.) When the gold finally ran out, having a bunch of Chinamen hanging around got to be a bit of a nuisance for the "proper" immigrants from England and Scotland, (who were intent on building a brave new world without religious and class strife,) and ways were found to limit their numbers. While Britain was the colonial power and negotiating with China over various matters of great world import, it would not allow overtly racist anti-Chinese laws to be passed in New Zealand. However this did not stop the New Zealand government from imposing the now infamous Poll Tax on Chinese immigrants in 1881. Basically each immigrant was required to pay a 10 pound tax on entry, which in 1896 was increased to 100 pounds. For people earning perhaps 10 shillings to 1 pound a week, (1 pound = 20 shillings) this was an absolutely enormous sum of money. To further limit migration, ships were allowed to bring one Chinese person for every 10 tons of cargo, later increased to one per 100 tons of cargo and finally to one per 200 tons of cargo. This tax and this restriction were on the books from 1881 to 1944 and were only repealed towards the end of the World War II. (Although the Poll Tax was not collected after the late 1930, the tonnage restriction still applied until repeal). This shameful episode in New Zealand political history was buried for many years and largely forgotten by the community until 1989 when David Fung while researching New Zealand Chinese history in his mission to revitalize the Wellington Chinese Association rediscovered it after hearing of the Chinese Canadians' campaign for redress for their own Head Tax. Through the Wellington Chinese Association, he persuaded the New Zealand Chinese Association to commission Nigel Murphy to research the full history of the Poll Tax. Murphy's research paper is the basic document which underpinned an approach to the Government for an apology. The apology has been made and a reconciliation (not compensation) has been offered. As part of that reconciliation process an advisory group has been formed under the auspices of the Office of Ethnic Affairs to advise the Government on an appropriate form of reconciliation. This group was formed after a series of Chinese community meetings held throughout New Zealand, following the official apology. The members of that group are all descendants of the Poll Tax payers. That means they are from the families of second, third and even fourth generation New Zealanders. The group has held two full-day meetings and at present communicates daily through a private managed chat room (Quickplace). Nigel Murphy has been seconded from the Alexander Turnbull (National) Library to the Office of Ethnic Affairs. The Office of Ethnic Affairs has received and analysed in detail a large number of written submissions regarding the Poll Tax and reconciliation process. The submissions received were in the main "from the heart" passionately giving reasons for the suggested course of action. Others were the result of organised efforts at lobbying. Discussions are under way on the best means of managing the reconciliation process which may include various restorative community projects. These will almost inevitably include ongoing interaction with the OEA and the Government. For a community group with a reputation for keeping their heads down, being law-abiding and politically passive, this was a revolutionary change: In the weeks before the apology was issued people wrote persistently and aggressively to the Prime Minister, produced position papers for the Minister of Ethnic Affairs, baled him up in his office and wrote follow-up papers afterward. They also wrote to the newspapers, appeared on television and spoke radio. They had become politicized by the issue.

That is the mainstream the old Chinese had become politicized. Some 10 years earlier in 1993 a smaller group of "activists" had become politicised by the Asian Invasion controversy sparked by Pat Booth in his notorious articles. This group spearheaded a nationwide campaign to refute the substance of Booth's allegation that New Zealand was being swamped by Asians who gained entry through the newly liberalized immigration rules.. Winston Peters gained notoriety by promoting this notion as one of the main planks of his New Zealand First Party which appealed to the redneck elements. The activists stayed in touch with each other as the New Zealand Chinese Public Issues Group or (NZ Chinese PIG) and fought another famous battle against the racially demeaning TV advertisements sponsored by the NZ Olympic and Commonwealth Games Association, eventually forcing them off air.

4. POLITICS SHAPES CULTURE So the imposition of the Poll Tax more than a 100 years ago would eventually lead to the sudden political flowering of the "old" local Chinese community. However to

understand the importance of this, it is necessary to review how politics and culture became intertwined within the Chinese community in New Zealand from the early days. The imposition of the 100 pound Poll Tax (equal to at least two years earnings) meant that Chinese women could not afford to come to New Zealand. When there were 1000 Chinese men there were but six Chinese women, and that ratio was barely improved from 1900 to 1925. Actual figures are: 1901 2825 men 32 women 1916 1993 men 79 women 1926 2770 men 316 women

From 1925 to 1948 no women were allowed to come at all, except for a group of war refugees in 1939-40. Without women there were few Chinese children born in New Zealand. (Some men travelled back to China to marry and have children.) The young Chinese who arrived, aged 12 or 13, were mainly boys who came to live and work with their fathers. They were barely educated in Chinese when they arrived and for the most part were too old to receive all but an elementary education in English. Chinese culture was a distant memory. Theirs was a bachelor society offering little but hard physical work during the daylight hours and loneliness at night. Their lives were not softened by womenfolk and a home life. In this period the community had to deal with overt racism, opium use and gambling. In this dark period a chapter of Chinese Masonic Society (Chee Kung Tong) was formed in Wellington in 1907. This was an updated version of the Triads of earlier times which as well as being formed for mutual protection and support, also had civic, political and patriotic functions and had much popular and grass roots support. The Chung Wah Association was formed in 1909 and a local branch of the Kuomintang (Chinese Nationalist Party) was formed in 1913 being a re-forming of an earlier Tung Min Association in 1905. Both were political but concerned with the politics of China and not the politics of New Zealand. Of course it was in 1911 that Qing dynasty was overthrown and the Republic of China established. The Tung Jung Association was formed in 1926 to provide people from the villages of Jung Seng County with assistance and mutual support. It was similar to the Poon Far Association formed in 1916 (and the Seyip Association formed rather later in 1949.) The New Zealand Chinese Association was formed in 1935 and was different in not being clan-based and with ambitions to cover the whole of New Zealand. The invasion of China by Japan in 1937 drew the local Chinese together. They were organised to contribute money towards the war effort and in fact were heavily levied weekly or monthly. Organisers of this effort (largely the NZCA) became involved with/were also members of the Kuomintang (Chinese Nationalist Party) and this linkage continued throughout World War II, the loss of mainland China to the communists, and the establishment of the Republic of China in Taiwan. The New Zealand Chinese Association with a branch network (but sans its KMT affiliation) survives to this day. It is interesting to note that none of the current executive officers of the national organisation are descendants of Poll Tax payers, although some are linked into the "old" Chinese community generally by marriage. They are therefore barred from direct involvement in the Poll Tax reconciliation process with interesting ramifications. Following the end of World War II and into the 1950s and 60s the Chinese Association became the premier local Chinese organisation and led the community interaction with the Embassy of the Republic of China (based in Taiwan). and organised celebrations for China's National Day (Double Tenth) which included a national sporting event in 1948. These games, also promoted by the CPC (Chinese Progressive Club) were the genesis of the sports Easter Tournaments, mentioned earlier. It is interesting to note that NZ Chinese Growers Federation, through its Journal, actually reached more Chinese people than the NZCA and was highly influential. With the aging of the old supporters of the Kuomintang, but with Taiwan desperate for friends around the world, the then-Ambassador Konsin C Shar needed to appeal to a new generation of Chinese in New Zealand and in the early 1970s vigorously promoted the idea of a Chinese Sports Stadium in Wellington. This idea was taken up by the community and the Wellington Chinese Sports and Cultural Centre was formed, based on the membership of the Eastern Sports Club but with a much wider community support. It built a large sports stadium in Mt Albert Road, helped by a lottery grant, on land provided by the Wellington City Council, opened 1977. When this was going on, many of those with a prior relationship with Chinese Anglican Church organised to build the competing Chinese Anglican Mission Church and Chinese Centre in Tinakori Road which opened 1979. This included not only a church but a sports stadium with a range of community facilities. Some family loyalties were stretched in the process with parents going one way and children another. For many years WCSCC was strong only in sport with little to offer in cultural activities. The Anglican group, with a number of families "recently" arrived from Hong Kong gained the ascendancy in "culture". Today the WCSCC is fast developing a strong cultural and language training base while the sports wing of the Anglican Centre is now semi-autonomous. With the strong thrust of these two organisations into sport and culture, and tying up the talents of the 30 and 40 year olds in the community, the Chinese Association in the 1980s became something of a talking shop for old men. In power but unable to communicate effectively in English and without the educational background and therefore the confidence to address issues with Government, the national Association became captured by strong personalities who manoeuvred to stay in control. At one point the national executive had their own "branch" with voting rights and perpetual membership. To add to their problems, some members of the Chinese Association were strong supporters of the Nationalist regime; a regime the Labour Government had derecognized in favour of the mainland Government in 1972. They were therefore somewhat hamstrung in their dealings with the new Embassy which was a new source of Chinese culture &ndash; initially along the lines of revolutionary or tractor operas. During this period the NZCA became rather stagnant with few new ideas, little new blood and was generally irrelevant especially to the younger generation. In Wellington it was David Fung who joined the Wellington Branch of Association in 1987 and gradually introduced modern principles of communications, accountability and management. By gathering around him a group of younger people the old guard were gradually displaced, and the

constitution updated. This eventually led to the constitution of the national organisation being updated. Today the Wellington Chinese Association enjoys wide support for its social activities but is only just beginning to exercise a community political function in relation to the Government &ndash; perhaps energized by its role in the Poll Tax saga. Through this one can see that politics and political constraints have always shaped the culture of the local Chinese. Having settled into their new way of life as permanent migrants and real New Zealanders, (rather than sojourners) Chinese New Zealanders started to participate in politics with varying degrees of success.

5. LOCAL BODY POLITICS Success in local authority politics would seem to be largely a matter of natural ability, hard work, voter appeal, and a thorough grasp of local issues and an understanding of people. Serious party political involvement is not a major factor except in the larger urban centres. George Gee was elected mayor of Petone in 1970 and served several terms. Molly Ngan Kee was elected a Lower Hutt City Councillor in 1977 and deputy mayor in 1980. Today Meng Foon follows that tradition being elected mayor of Gisborne in 2002..

6. NATIONAL POLITICS Before the advent of proportional representation in New Zealand, the prospect of a Chinese person being an MP was quite remote. Between 1963 and 1975 Ron Waihsing stood three times for Labour in Franklin against Bill Birch. He was allowed to stand because the seat was could never be won, and he was no more than electoral cannon fodder. With the benefit of hindsight, one can see that he was not a credible candidate because he lacked most of the personal skills and personal connections to foot it with mainstream candidates. It is intriguing why other more suitable candidates did not come forward. There are several theories why overseas Chinese are not more actively involved in national politics. One is the theory of cultural inheritance which suggests that the majority of overseas Chinese (in the 1950-70s )come from a class that traditionally has a deep distrust of officialdom. In overseas communities this has translated into an unwillingness to be involved in politics of the host community. The second theory lays the fault on the historical racism of the host community. In the C19th there was a lot of migration to both California and Hawaii. There was much anti-Chinese legislation and virulent and violet racism in California while there was little in Hawaii. To date Hawaii has had significantly more politicians of Chinese extraction compared with California or indeed any other state. It would be untrue to say that Chinese in New Zealand are simply not interested in politics. As voters they obviously believe that their votes count. Nor are they alienated from the political system, for various groups within the community do strongly support one or other of the two main parties according to their socio-economic status rather than ethnic or racial issues. This may indicate either successful integration or a low ethnic-political consciousness. In any case most Chinese would probably agree that greater involvement in politics would be a good thing &ndash; not only for having friends in high places to help sort out problems but to provide input into the general political decision-making process. There may be other practical reasons why few Chinese who are qualified, seek national office. If nothing else Chinese are highly pragmatic and perhaps potential candidates know that the investment of effort at this point would not produce political results in the short term. Previously, election to Parliament pre-supposed selection to a winnable seat. With the old FPP system, there was simply no reason to select an ethnic candidate because their appeal would only ever be to this ethnic group in one electorate. A Chinese candidate would probably lose more racist votes than gain ethnic votes. This has now changed with the advent of MMP. An ethnic candidate can attract the party vote of ethnic people and these party votes would be aggregated to determine the final number of seats allocated to any party. Suddenly it made good political sense to include an ethnic candidate in the party list because the ethnic vote could determine the total number of seats, and perhaps even determine whether a party held the treasury benches. This is how the Chinese gained its first MP Pansy Wong. Interestingly Pansy Wong does not fit into the generally accepted definition of "old" immigrant and is not quite a "new" immigrant either. Pansy Wong who came to New Zealand aged 18 from Shanghai via Hong Kong and attended Canterbury University. After a brilliant career in accounting, business management and in community administration and with a plethora of Government appointments, she was tapped by Philip Burdon a minister in the National Government to put her name forward as a list MP. She was ranked high enough on the party list to enter Parliament in 1996 and created three years of unparallel access for local Chinese to government departments officials and ministers. Unfortunately, National came to the end of its dream run in 1999 and she was on the opposition benches for three years. During the 2002 General Elections she decided to move from her home base of Christchurch to also run as a constituency MP in Auckland Central, Auckland being the centre of a large population of new Chinese immigrants - and lost. Her current concentration on Auckland, even though Parliament sits in Wellington, has deprived both "old" and "new" Chinese further south of greater interaction.

Another Chinese woman who looms large in the New Zealand political landscape is also neither an old immigrant nor a new immigrant. Mai Chen, who came to New Zealand as a child from Taiwan is a brilliant academic constitutional lawyer and founding partner in Chen & Palmer, (Palmer being Sir Geoffrey, a former Minister of Justice and Prime Minister who developed much of NZ's modern administrative law). In her

everyday work practicing public law she has the potential to affect how law is administered in New Zealand. Recently she was tapped by "new migrant" interests to establish the NZ Pan Asian Congress &ndash; an organisation ambitiously intended to be an umbrella for all Asian New Zealanders, including Chinese New Zealanders. The organisation is still in its embryonic stages and has yet to prove itself on substantive issues. The "old" Chinese community at least, is adopting a somewhat wait and see attitude. Both women are "new" Chinese unhampered by the legacies of the racist past. (Although both cite experiences of racism, it was while preparing for honours degrees and professional careers, not drudge jobs in the family garden, shop or laundry where it was indeed advisable to keep ones head down.)

**7. CULTURE SHAPING POLITICS** We have discussed how politics affects culture, but very importantly in New Zealand, culture affects politics, because we are told that New Zealand is a bicultural society, one in which the Treaty of Waitangi between the Maori and the Crown is a constitutional cornerstone. Most of us now understand that biculturalism does not mean that the New Zealand Government supports only European and Maori cultures. Indeed it does support a wide range of cultures in various ways. However it does mean that constitutional interpretation and development is open only to the Maori and the Crown, and for all intents and purposes, is close to all others in particular to other ethnic communities including the Asian/Chinese communities &ndash; no matter how long they have been here. While it may be fit and proper for past Maori grievances to be studied and settled by the Waitangi Tribunal, it is of some concern that an essential element of citizenship appears closed to identifiable immigrant communities.

While our interests are supposedly represented by the "Crown" in Treaty negotiations, yet the Chinese are effectively shut out of the constitutional debate: Imagine the uproar if a Chinese New Zealander seriously and publicly offered an opinion on the Treaty. Yet for those steeped in the Asian (particularly Chinese) tradition and familiar with the economic and social progress which is possible with national unity, thrift, hard work (and smart work) it is painful to see the national angst (and waste) provoked by ever-broader interpretations of the Treaty read as a "living document". For this there will be renewed opportunities as Treaty Principles are specifically incorporated into new laws, and we have a new Supreme Court with special Treaty-qualified judges to tell us what they mean. Whether this proves a problem in the future remains to be seen. One possibility is that future generations will become so kiwi that their ethnic identity is no longer an issue. With the resurgence of China and new immigrants here to replenish our cultural stock, this may or may not happen. The other possibility is that our best and brightest will integrate this constitutional blind-spot with other negative factors that will cause them to look elsewhere to work and settle. Anecdotal evidence would indicate that maybe 30% to 50% of the children of the Chinese community between the age of 23 to 35 (post graduation) are overseas.

**8. SUMMARY** We see that from the earliest days through to the 1970s there was little real Chinese culture transferred to New Zealand - except by people being Chinese in their everyday lives and relationships. Their cultural interactions were largely sublimated into sport and the young people lost a working knowledge of their own language. Why this group were largely apolitical, their presence and existence in New Zealand was governed by politics, particularly the Poll Tax which restricted the development of normal family life and culture. Following the government's apology and offer of a reconciliation process, they have interacted with the New Zealand government machinery as a group for the first time in their history. This is seen as a slow, natural but positive development within the community in which the cultural and community organisations always had a political element in their background. It is only since the late 1960s in local body politics and more recently in national politics that the Chinese have become directly involved in New Zealand politics as candidates.. The reasons for this state of affairs are historical, cultural and political. In national politics the main exponents have not been "old" immigrants at all. In a globalised world where skills are transferable, empirical evidence tends to indicate the a small, beautiful and biculturally constituted New Zealand is not sufficiently attractive to retain the children of the old Chinese immigrants even as large numbers of new Chinese immigrants flood in.

STEVEN YOUNG

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 Friends: Who looked to the right and to the left for me while I drive fast forward. STEVEN YOUNG is currently: Editor of the website Chinese in New Zealand at <http://www.stevenyoung.co.nz/chinesevoice/index.htm> Member of the Office of Ethnic Affairs's Poll Tax Advisory committee. Vice-President of Tung Jung Association of New Zealand. Member of Executive Committee, Wellington Chinese Association. And has also served as: Editor of Chinese Voice, (in City Voice, Wellington) President, Wellington Chinese Association, and editor of its newsletter Member, Executive Committee New Zealand Chinese Association Secretary, Wellington Chinese Sports and Cultural Centre & editor of its newsletter In his professional life is: Principal, Steven

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