

Chinese in New Zealand

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 Sunday, 22 July 2007
 Last Updated Saturday, 04 August 2007

Talk on the Chinese in New Zealand.

Introduction.

Thank you for inviting my wife and I to Oamaru today. My talk is on the Chinese in New Zealand; an overview with some of the lessons to be learned.

The Chinese were the third racial group to emigrate to New Zealand, after the Maori and European. They were the earliest Asian people to come, if one is to exclude the Asian origin of the Maori. The first known business contact between New Zealand and China was in the seal fur trade, the Chinese being the top customers of the pelts. Itinerant Chinese came early on ships to New Zealand, and 16 were mentioned at Wellington in 1843. The earliest known such itinerant was Appo Hocton. In 1842, he jumped ship at Wellington to eventually settle in Nelson, and his mixed blood descendants have traced his story from that time.

China was a world power until about 1800. Around then, it had about one third of the world's Gross Domestic Product. However, China stagnated and was beaten in the First Opium War (1839-42). This was a small war but far reaching in consequences for China. Among its effects was Canton city losing the monopoly it had in foreign trade from 1757. The land and sea trade routes which had converged on Canton were thereby plunged into economic depression. This spawned civil disorder and the terrible Taiping Rebellion (1851-64), arising in the north of Kwangtung province. Said to be the worst civil war in world history this rebellion erupted northwards but the ferocious Red Turban Rebellion (1854-56), widespread Hakka-Poontei conflict (1856-67) between these two branches of the Han people, and the capture of Canton city itself in the Second Opium War (1856-60), occurred within Kwangtung Province itself.

These calamities compelled Cantonese men to seek a way out of the breakdown in economic infrastructure and governance, and from the 1850s, a chief avenue of escape opened in emigration through the ports of Canton, Macao and Hong Kong. The principal destination was 'Nanyang' or South-east Asia and the safest port for leaving and returning was Hong Kong. But somehow, an intrepid stream of Cantonese goldseekers arose who followed the gold rushes in California, Victoria (Australia), British Columbia and Otago. How this emigrant stream first arose is still unknown but in 1865, two invitations from Otago were sent to the Chinese in Victoria to come to the Otago goldfields. The Chinese then numbered some 40,000 in Victoria and 15,000 in New South Wales, nearly all of the Cantonese goldseeker stream mentioned. The goldseekers era.

The Cantonese goldseekers came after the Otago Provincial Council promised them equal justice 'as others receive'. From 1865-1901, the majority of the Chinese in New Zealand were goldminers, mainly in Otago-Southland but with a spillover to the West Coast. By 1869, they were calling for kith and kin to come direct from China, and this became their chief immigrant stream. The highest recorded number of Chinese in 19th century New Zealand was 5,004, in 1881, but to give an indication of the smallness of this country, the 5,000 Chinese comprised 1% of the non-Maori population then. Thereafter their numbers fell, as the easily won gold approached exhaustion. The biggest recorded number of Chinese goldseekers in Otago was 4,159 in 1871, and on the West Coast, 1,609, in 1891. Again, these do not seem big numbers, but in Central Otago in the early 1870s, the Chinese were some 17% of the general goldfields population, 40% of the goldminers and they gathered in hundreds in certain fields. In the mid-1880s, they were still about 8% of the general population in Central Otago and to 1885, still about 40% of the goldminers. So they were very much a part of the southern New Zealand goldmining history. Incidentally, compare these percentages with the 13% of Asians in Auckland today.

What were the characteristics of the Cantonese goldseekers? They were rural Cantonese, from the peasantry, the backbone of China. They were virtually all males who had left their women behind, partly because of their foot-binding custom and the risks inherent in overseas travel. Most were poorly literate or illiterate, with little money. They principally relied on the Chinese family system both at home and overseas, whereby they formed interlinked kinship groupings of clan, smaller circles of extended family and nuclear families. The goldseekers extended this system to create county groupings which were based upon Cantonese counties of origin. Within each grouping, an individual member found comradeship, trust and cooperation, and the groupings got stronger as they got smaller. More, the linkages between the groups meant that the smaller groups could share the skills and resources available in a larger group.

Thus they were able to spread and maximise what advantages they had, and minimise their disadvantages. In this way the Cantonese goldseekers were enabled to come 10,000km to the southernmost goldfields in the world, recruit Chinese doctors to accompany them, establish Chinese stores and inns, keep to Chinese food, form benevolent societies to add to personal effort in providing succour to the sick, disabled and indigent, and even send their dead back to China.

'Gold and China' were their twin aspirations. 'Gold' was the capital they were after and an ounce of gold saved was worth more to them than to an European, because of the foreign exchange rate of one New Zealand pound to three to seven Chinese taels, plus the lower Chinese cost of living.

‘China’ remained their home country by the emotional pull of their families and ancestral soil. Thus they were sojourners, not settlers. Like modern New Zealand sojourners who go, say, to Arabia, they went overseas to get the most money in the shortest time; they seldom studied the local language, customs or religion; nor participated in local community or national affairs or the armed forces; they mixed largely with the local ‘expatriate’ population (as sojourners call themselves today), and because they stayed apart, they seldom intermarried. Since the Cantonese were many and from humble origins they were regarded as worrisome competitors who could drive down wages and adversely affect their social level of Europeans. The Irish Catholics especially regarded them negatively in all the goldfields countries of the Pacific rim.

New Zealand was a European colony which was suitable for European settlers. But, the Chinese were of another race, who despite their peasant background were intelligent and held a high moral and cultural sense. This enabled them to act confidently and adapt quickly to new social conditions. Their farmers, for instance, quickly used their water wheels and water pumps for goldmining, and quickly learned to be market gardeners, shearers, harvesters, rabbiters. Their rural artisans quickly turned out New Zealand furniture (as in Australia), became tailors, bootmakers, stone masons, road and railway navvies, adept water race builders, tunnellers. They made a determined attempt to become tobacco growers and cigarette and cigar manufacturers in Otago (as in California). Their working life seemed ideally to span some 30 years in which they went overseas in early adulthood and saved £100 or so in around five years, whereupon they returned home for one to three years till the money was spent. They then went overseas again for another spell, ideally repeating this cycle four times till the last return home in their fifties, when a man was considered old in the Otago goldfields. However, the Rev. A. Don recorded hundreds who had never returned to China despite many years - even 30 or 40 years - in New Zealand. In the end, though, most appeared to have made it back to China either in life or in death, the indigent achieving this chiefly by donations from their Chinese peers. The Cantonese gold seekers carried out two mass exhumations to send bodies or remains back to ancestral villages; they regarded aiding a body or remains home to China as one of their highest charitable acts. Indeed, the Tung Wah Hospitals were founded in 19th century Hong Kong to facilitate the journey home of the exhumed dead from overseas.

What did they achieve in the goldfields? The West Coast scene is unresearched, but enough is known of the Otago goldfields to bear testimony to the skilfulness of the Cantonese goldseekers. They formed the strongest cooperative mining groups whose main hallmark was the method of mining called ‘paddocking’ in which they methodically dug up the whole claim - say a six acre claim - and convey the wash dirt to a source of water for washing. They dominated river claims, went to the secondary, more difficult goldfields, prospected even very difficult country like the Dart river, tunnelled so that Europeans marvelled, for example, at nearly an acre of unstable ground which they found tunnelled out by Chinese and standing only on props. This notwithstanding, most were small claim miners content to save about £100 and leave. But there were a few exceptional Chinese who reinvested their money in Otago into bigger and bigger projects. The best known of them was Choie Sew Hoy, the key pioneer of the New Zealand Gold Dredge, and Chew Chong who left Otago for Taranaki where he became the pioneer in the use of refrigeration in butter factories. Overall, the Chinese goldseekers left behind them an Otago vein of admiration for their doggedness, industry, skill, self-reliance and peaceableness that has lasted to this day.

The second generation.

The Cantonese goldseekers’ money at home went into family spending priorities like marriage costs and debt repayment; money left over went into land purchase (above all) and small businesses in the market towns. Next was the building of better homes and towers to respectively enjoy and protect their new wealth. To achieve this sequence of betterment, the goldseeker often sought to augment his savings by getting his son or sons overseas too - and he thought of helping kinsfolk overseas also, in order to give them a working chance. The goldfields were an ‘one crop’ industry but New Zealand could provide other work. By inclination and because Europeans will not readily hire Chinese, some goldseekers sought to establish small businesses at first in and then outside the goldfields, going to urban areas all over New Zealand. Most of the early businesses were market gardens but the first Chinese groceries-cum-fruitshops had appeared by 1878 and the first Chinese laundries by 1891. A move into fishing and fish selling proved unsuccessful and the above three businesses - the market gardens, fruitshops and laundries - became the archetypal Chinese occupations for the next two Chinese generations in New Zealand. They provoked the ire of European competitors; by laws and national laws were passed against them and even boycotts took place, but finally the trade unions left them alone, probably because they served certain social needs well and cheaply.

Also tending to perpetuate the flow of sojournism was the situation at home. Whatever assets the sojourners could build up was traditionally split equally among sons in legacies. Therefore, many sons were left with the same problem as their fathers, how to get more capital in a persistently disturbed civil environment that was China’s lot for so many years. The frequent answer was for them to go or keep on going overseas, as sojourners. And it was somewhat easier for them to do so, because of better travel knowledge, better shipping, established contacts in Hong Kong and overseas, and the early Chinese businesses providing them with a job to go to.

Thus a second generation of Cantonese sojourners arose to come to New Zealand, and their earnings at home gradually added to family land holdings, housing and local standing. They became people of local importance because of their relative wealth. So, sojournism became established as a kind of specialised Cantonese industry, passing from father to son or sons by chain migration. However, New Zealand countered their entry by increasing immigration barriers, beginning with an entry poll tax of

£10 in 1881. This tax was levied only on newcomers, and not on re-entrants. As it turned out, £10 was not much of a barrier to the goldseeker's sons, nor to some independent Cantonese sojourners who came to New Zealand because they had been shut out of other Pacific goldfields countries by harsher legislation. My grandfather was one of the latter, because he found it difficult to get back into Australia. But their total numbers were not large; between 1881-1900, only 1,274 newcomers paid the poll tax. With this small influx the total Chinese population in New Zealand in 1901 was only 2,857, being a mixture of the declining first generation and the small number of the second generation. Nevertheless, they included the hard core of determined Chinese sojourners.

The young second generation consolidated the small businesses amid a rising clamour of New Zealand prejudice against their race. Agitation against Chinese competition had broadened to target not only their competition and sojournism, and also their race. They were alleged to be an inferior, unworthy race. The poll tax was raised to £100 in 1896; the Old Age Pensions Act, 1898 - said to be the greatest Act passed by the Liberal Government - specifically excluded Chinese whether naturalised or not; naturalisation was made more difficult and then stopped for Chinese in 1908; and a reading test was introduced on top of the poll tax in 1907, with the special purpose to keep out Chinese women. A White New Zealand was said to be the national wish by 1908.

And yet, things were not impossible for the Chinese sojourner in New Zealand. The situation was that once a Chinese man paid the poll tax and passed the (later) reading test at the quay, he was admitted as a permanent resident. He was not a citizen and could not vote, but a Chinese sojourner did not care about this privilege anyway. The crux for him was that he was protected by the law - which could not afford to loosen its standards at any cost. So the Chinese sojourner could still earn, save, and take away his money. Gradually the second generation not only consolidated but also spread their businesses, so that market gardens, fruitshops and laundries throughout New Zealand became synonymous with Chinese. My grandfather was said to be able to save up to half of his disposable income. One story is that he rolled his cigarette butts and smoked them. He and his peers in New Zealand still relied on the kith and kin and county groupings as of old, especially in loans and donations to each other. For who else would lend or donate to a Chinese?

The third sojourner generation.

By the mid-1900s, my grandfather's generation was able to pay the £100 poll tax and bring out the first of their sons, the third generation, to New Zealand. My grandfather and his generation not only consolidated the sojourner way of life overseas but also at home where their families and villages kept on growing in local wealth and influence. Since China remained in turmoil, the original rationale for going overseas remained, to get the capital that cannot be got at home, and bring it home.

But nothing stands still and there was some change. Overseas, the more prosperous of the New Zealand Chinese sojourners, especially the fruitshop owners, had become established enough to be able to support a family here and they began to bring their families to New Zealand, they thought at least temporarily to get them out of danger. This budding movement was thwarted by the reading test and World War 1, when lack of shipping stopped all migration. Back in China, the money of my grandfathers' generation had extended the welfare of their families to education. They had built secondary schools and sent their sons to them. So when shipping became available postwar, my grandfather's generation had the poll tax money saved and their sons - the third generation, my fathers' generation - had the education and went through cram courses to pass the reading test. As a result, 1,489 Chinese newcomers were able to enter New Zealand in 1918-20. The surprised New Zealand authorities responded with an unsurmountable permit system plus the £100 poll tax in 1921, but the White New Zealand policy of keeping Chinese out and letting those already in the country leave or die out, had already been breached.

However, the third generation of Chinese sojourners could do little more than carry on the occupations of their fathers. Even the few Chinese families which had earlier managed to come here could not thrive. So their primary focus remained in China, where the successive three generations of sojourners kept progressing in landlordism, fine housing and towers, and local prestige. Thus my grandfather, father and his brother had acquired about 40 shek (27ha) of good land by the 1930s, or 20 times the subsistence area needed per average family in the district. Besides this, they had built a fine house of tang brick, a fine tower and owned a shop in the local Ng market town.

Yet there was slow change in New Zealand's racial attitudes from the late 1920s, and this was initiated by forces from outside New Zealand. A basic reason for the bad treatment of the Chinese was because China and the Chinese race were scorned as weak and inferior. The Chinese in New Zealand could not hope to change this perception by themselves, although as mentioned, from the earliest days they were perceived, albeit grudgingly, as an industrious and law-abiding people. However, in 1927 China was reunified by Kuomintang forces, and from 1931 were fighting a full-blown war against the Japanese. As the Japanese threat spread to New Zealand, the Chinese became 'gallant allies' and the good qualities of the local Chinese were recalled. By this time, the Kuomintang had a strong consulate in New Zealand, and it cooperated with the Chinese in New Zealand who had formed a strong New Zealand Chinese Association for war fund-raising and lobbying. In consideration of all these factors, the New Zealand government allowed 249 Chinese wives and 244 young children to come as war refugees, because the Pearl Delta was invaded in 1938. They came on permits which were renewable two yearly, and had to go back to China after the war, but they were safe for the time being. I came with the children.

The post-war changes.

After the Pacific war, the government allowed the refugees to stay and more families to come. This privilege was

taken up because of the civil war chaos then in China, and so the Chinese in New Zealand again reach a population of 5,000 in 1951. But the Chinese communists gained power in 1949, and in 1951-52 they destroyed the Cantonese sojourners' home base and banned emigration. All land was confiscated, landlordism was eliminated and the landlord class was reduced to the level of the general peasantry. By then, only 44% of the Chinese men in New Zealand had family here, but the families who were here began to root themselves in this country. They became the leading faction among the New Zealand Chinese. The families really had no choice other than to stay because of what was happening in China, but the story is more positive than that, because the children were growing up in New Zealand. They influenced and were influenced favourably in their schools and young lives when one is most optimistic, and they proved to their parents that they could successfully integrate and assimilate here. Whereas their parents saw no other choice to settlement in New Zealand, the young folk would have no other choice. Thus after three generations, sojournism finally died with the fourth generation of the Chinese in New Zealand, who chose settlement instead. And in 1951, Chinese were allowed naturalisation again, so one of the two main pillars of the White New Zealand policy was dropped. From that date other discriminatory laws were gradually abolished. Furthermore, by happy chance, the refugee children were allowed free education and about one third of them went on to graduate from university. We led the Chinese community into the professions and higher social achievement. Communist China did not generally relax the ban on emigration till 1976, by which time most of the 'bachelor husbands' in New Zealand and their wives in China had died. So there has not been another big wave of immigrants from the Cantonese countryside. In 1986, the Cantonese in New Zealand had only reached about 13,000 full blood and 4,000 mixed blood persons in 1986, mainly by natural increase. But by 1986, 9,000 other Chinese had already emigrated to New Zealand, chiefly Indo-Chinese refugees and mixed blood Chinese-Pacific Islanders. And in 1986, New Zealand abolished the other main pillar of the White New Zealand policy, the preference for European immigrants. As well, the need to have a job to come to was also dropped. The time had come for the White New Zealand policy to go, and international trade and investment and the need for skills recruitment reinforced the move to loosen up immigration for Asians. Consequently from 1986-96, a net 55,000 Chinese immigrants came and stayed from non-traditional sources - from Southeast Asia, Hong Kong, mainland China and Taiwan. The total Chinese population rose to 82,000 in 1996 and since then by another net 22,000 to a total of 104,000 in 2001. Other figures are as follows; the Chinese are 44% of the 238,000 Asians now in New Zealand. In relation to the overall New Zealand population, the Chinese comprise 2.7% and all Asians, 6.6%. Compare this with Europeans (80%) Maoris (14.7%) and Pacific Islanders (6.5%). About two thirds of the Chinese and other Asians live in Auckland where they form about 13% or 10% of the city's population. By the year 2016, the best estimate of New Zealand's population will be 9% Asian or 370,000 people.

Lessons.

What are the lessons to be learned about Chinese immigration?

For Chinese, the essential lesson is that sojournism has little bonding with the host society and inevitably leads to questions of their worth. Whatever their good qualities and service, the Chinese sojourners chose to be strangers who remained strangers. What is more, they came over a life-time, unlike the shorter stays of many of our modern New Zealander sojourners, and their work was competitive to members of the host society. This lack of bonding must not - indeed, cannot - happen again if we truly wish to become one of New Zealand's peoples. The crux of the past lack of bonding was that the Chinese did not share in national sacrifice. To be sure, they were largely an aging population in both World Wars. A few Chinese full-blood individuals did go to war, and their community raised funds and helped in other ways, but not enough for a public perception to arise that the Chinese did their full share in war. In these fundamental points, the crackpot theories of racial inferiority and eugenics were merely overlays in the old resentment against Chinese in New Zealand. One hastens to add that many mixed-blood Chinese-Europeans and Chinese-Maoris were of the right age to go to either World War 1 or 2 and made a full contribution.

Fifty years after New Zealand's last major war, the war generation has almost died off or are in very old age, and today's New Zealanders seem to regard all residents as on an equal plane before any new national conflict that may come. The proof of this attitude is the relaxation of laws and regulations against the entry of Chinese since World War 2 and particularly from 1986.

Are there lessons for Europeans to learn about Chinese immigration? One lesson is that the Chinese have to decide for themselves whether they want to be New Zealanders or not. If they decide to be so, then the Cantonese have almost fully shown that the Chinese can settle and contribute like anyone else to the country. Generally, New Zealand has spent relatively little on its Chinese minority, yet it still needs to learn another lesson, that all immigrants need lots of time to adapt to a new country but the Chinese need more time than say, the British immigrant, because of their widely different original culture. It is a misunderstanding to expect the Chinese - or any other immigrant group - to create a new Silicon Valley in this country within a year or two; they need to learn the nuances in New Zealand language and precision in English writing, form a new network of friends and business associates, adapt to new systems, laws and expectations of the workplace. These are things that would take us years to do if in a reversal of roles, we are emigrants say, to China. Would we use our hard-won capital in a cavalier fashion, and has the host country prepared the way with tangible encouragement and site infrastructure? The American Rand Corporation expresses the fact that all immigrants experience a drop in their earnings on arrival. A third lesson is that the Cantonese immigration story, and that of the recent Chinese immigrants, reveal that their best immigrants for New Zealand are their children, especially the children who

can go through all or most of our educational system. They will grow up with New Zealand perspectives, friends and national loyalties. Yet even they confirm the long time that is needed for social integration and assimilation, as they pass through an education and establish themselves in society during young adulthood. This does not mean that Chinese adults cannot integrate or assimilate - numerous adult newcomers settle successfully - only that young children can do it more thoroughly. Adults will mix less than a child who daily goes out of the family to school, but all of them, young and old, will require tolerance, a fair go, and the little kindnesses and thoughtfulness that change a stranger into a good neighbour. Remember that they are vulnerable people when arriving and assimilating.

In modern New Zealand, we generally have a fair and tolerant, increasingly multicultural society. Yes, we do have a portion of people against conspicuous immigration, and a natural antipathy against a lot of immigrants - of any race - arriving all at once. It is also unfortunate that any people influx will include a number of bad types who had welcomed the chance to 'get away' - and provoke both their own and the wider community in the new homeland. That said, we New Zealanders presently have the education, the familiarity in inter-racial relationships through Maori-Pacific Island- Cantonese - pakeha mixing and the physical space to further develop a successful multicultural society. The new Asians have already arrived in numbers and short of a massacre or mass deportations, they will remain and gradually increase. In this new society, the Chinese who through their Cantonese predecessors have long been in but not an integral part of New Zealand society, should surely play an important and productive role.