

Chinese goldseekers in Otago

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Sunday, 22 July 2007

The Chinese Goldseekers in Otago Melbourne
19/6/03

Dr James Ng May I first thank Kier Reeves and the committee for inviting me. I am from Dunedin, the city and port of Otago province in southern New Zealand. Dunedin is the Gaelic name for Edinburgh, and reflects the Free Church Scottish Settlement of Otago, from 1848. Otago is derived from the name of a Maori village in Otago harbour. In 1870, the southern part of Otago incorporated the small Southland province, also largely populated by Scots. The interior of Otago is called Central Otago, where most the goldfields were. Other goldfields were on or near the former Otago-Southland border, and one other, Round Hill, was far south, on the Southland coast. They were the southernmost goldfields in the world but the climate was not like Alaska. Central Otago has a continental climate which has warmed up in the last decade such that vineyards now flourish there; Dunedin and even Round Hill has a temperate coastal climate. My brief is to give a Chinese perspective to the Otago goldfields. The Chinese in nineteenth century Otago began as a branch of the Victorian Chinese mining population. It reached a peak of only 4,200 Chinese - in 1871 - before it spilled over to the West Coast goldfields on the west coast of the South Island. This spillover eventually reached its own peak of about 1,600 persons but as the West Coast Chinese increased, so did the Otago Chinese population decrease. Hence the biggest recorded total of Chinese residents in nineteenth century New Zealand - that is Otago, West Coast and all - was only 5,000, and they were chiefly in the Otago and West Coast goldfields. These are small figures by Victorian standards but they were significant in early New Zealand terms. The 4,200 Chinese in Otago in 1871 represented nearly 6% of the province's population. The move to the West Coast soon dropped the Otago Chinese population to 3,500, but this number was still 17% of the Otago goldfields population in 1874. From 1874 to 1885, the Chinese were some 40% of Otago's goldminers and produced about 30% of the province's gold. The total Chinese population of 5,000 in New Zealand, in 1881, was 1% of the country's non-Maori population. However, the small numbers probably makes some aspects of the Chinese easier to trace. As it is, we have particularly good records of the Chinese in Otago, because the Presbyterian Mission to the Chinese in this province adds considerable information to that obtainable in official documents and goldfields newspapers. The Rev. Alexander Don of this mission not only kept meticulous notes in Chinese and English, but he took photographs as well. Don also founded the Presbyterian Canton Villages Mission which operated among the home villages of the Otago Chinese miners. The missionaries of this overseas mission described village and home scenes. This wealth of primary material has enabled research publications in the last decade to establish the place of the Chinese in early Otago. Accordingly, the Maori people of the Otago branch of the Ngai Tahu tribe has publicly acknowledged the Chinese as one of the founding peoples of this province. Now, that may not seem much to you, but it is very important for a minority to be able to say, 'Yes, this is our place too.' More recently, Otago authorities are aiming to add history and heritage to the attractions of beautiful landscape and vineyards. So the Chinese in early Otago are also topical, because with our increased knowledge, the moment one talks of the region's goldmining history, one thinks of the Chinese. My first thought about the Otago Chinese miners is one of wonder. How on earth did they manage to come so far and survive? They were virtually all Cantonese males from the countryside, from the peasantry, the backbone of China. Specifically, they were from in and about the Pearl Delta, from whence numbers of them followed the gold rushes of the Pacific rim countries. The majority were Pooni Cantonese, or descendants of early Han settlers from the north. In New Zealand, a few hundred were Hakkas, or descendants of later Han settlers. None had a home tradition of mining but the Otago Chinese did include experienced goldminers from California and especially from Victoria, Australia. This was because in 1865, Otago businessmen sent two invitations backed by the Otago Provincial Council to Chinese in Victoria, to come and rework the province's goldfields. The Otago gold rushes had begun only four years before, but the goldfields were small and quickly skimmed over, and the European miners were leaving for the West Coast rushes or to return to Victoria. Perhaps 12-13,000 European miners had left by late 1865, leaving Otago's expanded infrastructure with much less revenue from the gold tax, and the goldfields businesses with much fewer customers. Some 6,000 European miners remained but for how long? The authorities and Dunedin Chamber of Commerce decided that the only quickly available goldminers who could expand the goldfields population were the Chinese in Victoria. At the time, they numbered some 40,000 in Victoria (and incidentally, about 15,000 in New South Wales). There were those among them who had wished to go to Otago but had been discouraged by threats from European miners, say, on board or about to board ship. So someone or some Chinese prudently asked for equal justice to others, and the Otago Provincial Council promised this. Consequently the Chinese came, their first mining party arriving in December 1865. It would be fair to say that most of the remaining European miners in Otago opposed the invitations, but the electoral system of the day had minimised the miners' representation, so they had little political voice in 1865. Those persons in favour of the Chinese coming - including shipping and mercantile elites - pointed out that 13 years of Australian experience of them in the goldfields were, on balance, favourable. It may be of interest to you that the two chief advocates were New Zealand executive members of the Australian firms Sargood, and Dalgety. On the Chinese side, a chief

contact was Lowe Kong Meng of Melbourne. The invitations were known to Otago historians but never emphasised until I did so, which immediately helped to establish our Chinese place in this province. The Chinese influx was relatively slow and episodic and only 1,200 Chinese had arrived in Otago by 1867. Nevertheless, it appears from media comments of the time that the general spending and buying of claims and gold production of the Chinese arrivals combined with that of the remaining European miners to be just enough to stave off financial disaster for many goldfields businesses. They were Victorian Chinese but in 1869, a ship brought men direct from China, and the continuing China stream became dominant over the Victorian stream. Then in 1871, a planned 2,000 Chinese in six chartered ships came from China and that was how the Chinese total in Otago reached 4,200. Added to about 5,000 European miners, this meant that the Otago goldfields had reached full capacity at that time and so the Chinese began spilling over to the West Coast goldfields. It is known that a group of Chinese merchants in Lawrence had planned the 2000 increase - so Chinese merchants could play the influx game too. However, there was no further big Chinese ingress in nineteenth century New Zealand - which was just as well because of the smallness of the country. The extraordinary percentages mentioned of the Chinese in early Otago indicate that they must have been tolerated fairly well, a situation I attribute largely to the Otago Provincial Council's promise to treat the Chinese equally under the law, and the innate decency of the Scottish population. It was a different matter on the West Coast, where goldfields' prejudices against Chinese took root and spread nationally to become a working class anti-Chinese movement which evolved into the White New Zealand policy just after the turn of the twentieth century. Chinese immigration was henceforth largely replacement in nature until WW2 when Chinese war refugees were allowed in and to stay. Today the West Coast today has a sparse population and very little research has been done on the Chinese who ventured there. We know more of the Chinese in early Otago. Their peasant origins had accustomed them to hardship and frugality. Nearly all had poor literacy in Chinese, much less in English. Individually, they had little money to bring. But they had three advantages. First, the Cantonese were among China's strongest exponents of the family system, which formed kinship and clan groupings both at home and in foreign parts wherein a member found help, cooperation and comradeship. Overseas, the Cantonese also extended the family system features of succour and trust to all from the same county and allied counties. They shared resources and skills not only within a group but also between groups, the smaller ones slotting into the greater range of the bigger. Second, the Cantonese had a high moral and cultural sense which gave them adaptability and confidence overseas. An expression of this sense was their regard for the few scholars among them, who in Otago included two poets. Third, they generally were law-abiding - 'docile' the Europeans called them - which minimised confrontation with the European. Their qualities in combination - of persistent, 'plodding' labour and endurance, group cooperation, self-possession and respect for the law, created in every Central Otago community a European vein of admiration towards them which has lasted to this day. They were like bamboo which bends but does not break with the wind. Their photographs show how self-possessed they were in New Zealand - yet humble, undemanding and peaceable. Do you not marvel with me that they kept to their Chinese food (importing much of it from 10,000km away in Hong Kong and Canton), had their own storekeepers (96 in 1871), brought their own doctors even, probably on the voyage as ships' doctors, created their own mail systems (since the official Chinese post was not established till 1896). They further formed the Poon Fah benevolent society based on those from two counties, to add to personal effort in looking after their indigent, sick and disabled, and to send their dead home in two mass exhumations to China. 'Gold and China' were the twin reasons why the Cantonese came to New Zealand. 'Gold' means capital, which they could get at high risk by going overseas, but with affordable expenditure on their part. An ounce of gold saved by a Chinese was worth a lot more to him than to his European counterpart due to the foreign exchange rate of three to seven taels to the nineteenth century New Zealand pound, plus the lower cost of living in China. 'China' was the commitment to ensure the survival and welfare of family in China. That commitment meant that the Cantonese traveller could not forget his family and so he was a sojourner, not a settler. Probably many of the European gold rushers were sojourners too - indeed, it was said that not 1% of the Victorians who rushed to Otago brought their wives, and thousands of them went back to Australia. What are the universal characteristics of sojourners? Think of our modern New Zealand sojourners in Arabia - they are there to earn the most money in the shortest time. They often are men unaccompanied by wife or family. They seldom learn the local language or culture or religion, and they largely mix with their own kind if they are around in numbers. Therefore intermarriages are few. So, the Cantonese goldseekers as sojourners were essentially a male community with little bonding to the host society. The big difference between most modern New Zealander sojourners and the Cantonese goldseekers is that the latter made sojournism a life-long career. The correct thing for them to do was to work hard, send £2 or so every now and then to China as remittances and save about £100 to go home, which they aimed for about every five years. So in a working life of say, 30 years, they ideally went home four times, say, for two years on each occasion till the money ran out and they looked to going overseas again. They returned home for the last or fifth time in their fifties, when a miner was considered old in the Otago goldfields. Nevertheless, Rev. Don's Roll of Chinese reveals that hundreds did not make a trip home till at the end, due to life's vagaries or over indulgence in gambling or opium-smoking. Besides the itinerant nature of sojournism, the great majority of the Cantonese goldseekers were small scale miners reworking the goldfields and hence were unable to support a family here anyway. At the end of the nineteenth century only 61 Chinese were married in New Zealand of whom 18 had Chinese wives and 13 were widowed. That works out to 30-40 mixed-race marriages but the real figure was possibly about 70, since it is known that some such families went to China. Be that as it may, the Chinese were reputed to be a 'safe' group and they did not chase after women - always an explosive issue otherwise. Chinese prostitution and

homosexuality were unknown in New Zealand - and indeed homosexuality was rare in the Cantonese countryside. Their vices of gambling and opium-smoking both sublimated their sexual desires. They themselves pointed out the use of opium for this purpose. Opium-smoking was legal in New Zealand till 1901, when Chinese efforts brought forth the Opium Prohibition Act. Besides goldmining, it would be safe to say that all the goldfields towns were supplied fresh vegetables by Chinese market gardens. Many farming stations had Chinese cooks and farm hands or casual labourers - harvesters, shearers, fencers and rabbiters. Chinese also worked as railway and road navvies. And despite the presence of Chinese stores, plenty of European shopkeepers praised the Chinese as first rate customers. Small farmers benefited from the basic Chinese diet of rice and pork and their liking for poultry; I calculate that the 500 Cantonese miners at Round Hill daily consumed seven or eight pigs each weighing about 70lbs. This is based on Rev. A. Don's figures of the Chinese miner's consumption of 11lb each of rice and pork per day, figures which are comparable with the European miner's 11lb each of bread and mutton per day. The Cantonese goldseekers seemed to eat a lot better than in China. In cost, though, the European's food was cheaper since import tariffs raised the cost of rice, and pork was dearer than mutton. Although the Chinese miners might shop around, yet the Chinese storekeepers and merchants were the key members of their Chinese communities. They were at least somewhat bilingual, and usually they had the most individual resources among the Chinese, this enabling them especially to grubstake the miners - a vital service. Their premises acted as both business and social foci for the Chinese, like the European stores. Customarily, a Chinese store would serve a county group principally. Usually they were respectable premises - opium-smoking and/or gambling were much more catered for by dens and the Chinese lodging houses. The Chinese miners went to every Otago goldfield. Where there were many Chinese, they formed a cluster of dwellings and other premises called a Chinese Camp. The two biggest Camps in the field were at Moa Flat (near Ettrick) and Round Hill. Other Chinese Camps grew on the outskirts of the goldfields towns; the largest was the Lawrence Chinese Camp at the entrance to Central Otago. In this Camp lived about 120 residents, including several mixed marriage couples. Its premises included the Chinese Empire Hotel, two big and several little stores, eating houses and dens, an immigration barracks, a European style boarding house and two Joss Houses side by side serving the Poon-Fah Association of the Poonyu and Fah county men and the Naam Shun Association of the men from Naamhoi and Shuntak counties. In Australia, these counties were combined as the Samyip Association. Most of the mining in Otago was alluvial mining. In this, the Cantonese goldseekers' average income was less than that of the European average miner. Year after year, gold wardens recorded this disparity in their annual reports. The salient reason is because the Chinese came as the second wave, after the best gold and claims and water rights were taken. In 1870, the Chinese generally were earning 30s to £2 weekly and at the turn of the century, when the goldfields were well exhausted, about 10s weekly - but it should be remembered that the gold could run out in a claim and the weather may turn inclement, so a miner could not count on a regular wage. In good times, they lived on 8s-10s per week or more; but at the subsistence level of 3s-4s per week, they could buy just enough food if supplemented with a wild rabbit or two. Their chief waste of money was in gambling and opium-smoking, the latter seriously afflicting about 20% of the Chinese in Otago in 1890. But the correct thing for the Chinese sojourner to do was to work hard and save. Since the sojourners' rule was to get their savings home, it was exceptional for a Cantonese goldseeker to use his money to invest in New Zealand. The two best known Otago Chinese men who did were Choie Sew Hoy, who pioneered the New Zealand Gold Dredge, and Chew Chong who went from Otago to Taranaki where he pioneered the use of refrigeration in butter making. Another pioneer Otago venture may be mentioned, that of Ah Quie and Chau Mong in tobacco growing and cigarette and cigar manufacture, which was ruined by high tariffs imposed by the New Zealand government. Yet another person who may be mentioned was Choie Kum Poy, son of Choie Sew Hoy, who devoted his life to large scale hydraulic elevating and sluicing at Nokomai. However, the common way of the Cantonese goldseeker was to form a mining group. They bought their way in, then pooled their resources and skills and methodically dig up an entire extended claim or paddock, say of six acres, and convey the wash dirt to a source of water for washing by cradle. The Chinese water wheel and water pump were used and water races constructed, where necessary. Their mining groups led to the recurrent observation was that the Chinese miners formed the most cooperative groupings in the Otago goldfields. Gradually they also dominated river claims, where water was already available. And despite what I have said about saving for home, many Chinese mining groups acquired the capital to buy better claims and water rights. Thus by 1874, 46% of the Chinese miners were sluicers, which needed the acquisition of not only a suitable claim but also sufficient water rights and water races. Indeed, research shows that the Chinese participated in all the main mining methods in Otago - including quartz mining - and were capable miners. For example, Round Hill was the last Otago-Southland goldfield to be developed - in the early 1880s, though discovered in 1865-66 - because the gold was like flour, it lay in difficult, remote country with dense forest cover and buried logs, sluicing water was relatively scarce, the fall across the coastal plain to the sea was minimal, and the richest deposits in the river bank or terrace required dangerous tunnelling because of unstable ground and high water table. But the Chinese were Round Hill's first wave developers, up to 500 of them, followed by Europeans in cleaning up operations - a reversal of the usual roles. Mr Chairman, I have nearly finished my Chinese story. About 1896, the Cantonese younger men generally departed from the Otago goldfields, leaving older persons behind who could not or would not leave the fields. In 1898, the Old Age Pensions Act was passed, said to be the greatest Act of the Liberal ('Red' or working man's) Government. It excluded Chinese, however, whether naturalised or not. So the indigent European miner received seven, later ten shillings weekly from the government, whereas the indigent old Chinese miner received, if he was selected, three or four shillings from the local Charitable Board. The Old Age Pensions exclusion was a

sign that Chinese were not welcomed in New Zealand. One cannot wholly blame the European for this prejudice. The Cantonese goldseeker had formed few bonds with the wider community. They, and their sons and kin who followed them to New Zealand, paid the inevitable price for their deliberate choice of being competitors in the dominant society whilst not bonding. It was a recurrent saying nonetheless, presumably by Europeans of conscience, that the Chinese were persecuted for their virtues. As is happened, probably most of the old Chinese left in the Otago goldfields finally made it home, often by donations from the Chinese community. Remarkably few Chinese graves are to be found in the Otago goldfields, indicating that many had departed before death and also the Chinese practice of exhumation, to send body or bones to China. Kith and kin would exhume a deceased person for the return home if at all possible. This was regarded as one of the most praiseworthy charitable acts for a Chinese to do. The first mass exhumation of 230 Chinese graves was completed in 1883, and the second in 1902, but in the latter case, the ship Ventnor, bearing 499 remains, sank off Hokianga in the North Island. The last Chinese goldseeker left in Central Otago was Chow Shim of Lawrence who died in 1945, at over 90 years of age. When a family recently traced its Lawrence history it was found (to the enquirers' huge surprise) that Chow Shim was their ancestor who had stayed behind, I think, because he had two children born to Mary Ann Harris nee McCarthy. From 1946 to 1972 Central Otago had no living Chinese resident until I bought a house in Queenstown. It has, however, 18 Chinese heritage site worth preserving, but that is another story. What did the Cantonese goldminers achieve? In Otago, probably their greatest achievement is that they left a good name. When I set up medical practice in Dunedin in 1970, there were still Europeans alive in this city and Central Otago who knew the last of the Chinese miners and respected them and told me so. The Chinese played no mean or dishonourable role in Otago goldmining. They played a very supportive role in Otago's gold industry up to and even as gold production fell below 100,000ozs annually in the 1880s, and then there followed Choie Sew Hoy's New Zealand Gold Dredge which he built in 1888. The deeper, water-laden layers of the river beds were Otago's last, rich untapped source of gold and a vigorous gold dredging industry ensued which obtained about a third of Otago's total gold production. Within 14 years of the appearance of Sew Hoy's first dredge, Otago had a fleet of 201 gold dredges either built or being built, nearly all modelled on his dredge. Subsequently there were European mining articles which ignored or minimised his achievement, until I proved it. Because the Cantonese mining story is a honourable one, it is being resurrected into Otago heritage, to foster tourism and benefit later generations. Since they looked back to China, one expects to see their prime achievements there. And in fact, the Cantonese goldseekers as a body, including those who came to New Zealand and others who went to California, Victoria and so on, laid the groundwork for a total of three generations of Cantonese sojournism in the Pacific rim goldfields countries. By so doing, they earned and accumulated enough wealth to become a distinctive and prosperous landlord class in Kwangtung (Guangdong) province that contributed significantly to the province's (and Hong Kong's) power and well-being. Not only this but eventually, enough of them had decided to stay overseas so that they formed the basis of Chinese settlement in their host countries, as in New Zealand. At home, the Cantonese goldseekers bought land (above all), built housing and made village and market town improvements like village halls, schools, wells, roads, and even bridging. They made local, county and regional investments and one great entrepreneur even built a railway. The next generation and the next followed them overseas, because the goldseekers had paved the way, the governance at home was still bad and Chinese legacies were equally divided among sons, necessitating a continued quest for capital. However, the communist Chinese 'land reforms' of 1951-52 destroyed their home base, and so those lucky enough to be overseas at the time turned to settlement overseas. We have arrived now at the core achievement of the Cantonese goldseekers who came to New Zealand. They were participants of an unique survival system for their families. So effective in their work were they and their descendants that they were also the chief cause and chief victims of a defensive White New Zealand policy. Yet they were humble, inoffensive, meek and persistent, and in due course, these qualities evoked a kinder consideration of them and a slow relaxation of the White New Zealand policy towards them. When the communist catastrophe struck in their homeland, enough fairness and kindness existed towards them here to grant them shelter and the environment to put down their roots in New Zealand. Thus was the survival and welfare of the goldseekers' families continued and the over-riding aim of the goldseekers fulfilled, albeit in the distant Gold Mountain.