

Family Photographs

There are two photographs of my father and his family when he was young. You can tell these photographs are old: they are black and white – and it's not just the style of their clothing but the way they hold themselves, unsmiling, captured in that one long moment when children are not allowed to be children but forever still and emptied of play.

Aotearoa New Zealand, 1929
My father is four years old. He cannot speak English. He has two older brothers and two sisters. The boys wear woollen jackets with short pants; the girls short short-sleeved dresses with fitted bodices. They all wear long socks that wrinkle at the ankles. The older boys wear a tie and a handkerchief folded in their jacket pocket. My father is too young for lace-ups, so he wears shoes with a strap like his sisters.

They are about to return to China. I say *return* even though my father and his siblings were all born in New Zealand. Their grandfather arrived in 1896. He never *returned*.

Canton, China, 1932
My father is seven years old. He has three brothers and two sisters. The brothers wear light cotton jackets with Mandarin collars. They wear loose cotton trousers. Their sisters wear loose cotton dresses that come down well below the knees. None have buttons – their world is held together with loops, with complex Chinese knots.

They are about to return to New Zealand. This is why the photograph has been taken. Who knows what might happen on such a long sea journey?

The family must pay £100 to the New Zealand government. This is the poll tax. This is because the youngest was not born in New Zealand. Because they are Chinese.

A child of two or three is too young to be left behind. Not a child of six or seven. The family will have to work hard. They will have to save. When there is enough money, they will send for my father, for his two elder brothers.

How long will it take?

Alison Wong



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by Alison Wong

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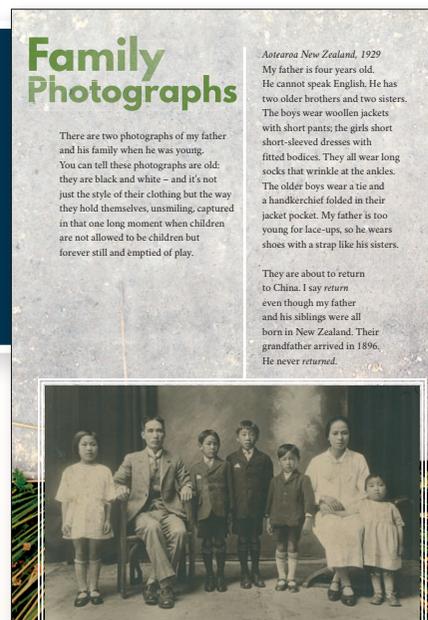
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Published 2015 by the Ministry of Education
PO Box 1666, Wellington 6140, New Zealand.
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Enquiries should be made to the publisher.

ISBN 978 0 478 16456 5 (online)

Publishing services: Lift Education E Tū
Editor: Susan Paris
Designer: Simon Waterfield
Literacy Consultant: Melanie Winthrop
Consulting Editors: Hōne Apanui and Emeli Sione



SCHOOL JOURNAL LEVEL 4, OCTOBER 2015

Curriculum learning area	English
Reading year level	Year 7
Keywords	ancestry, Chinese, estrangement, family, history, immigration, New Zealand history, poetry, poll tax