

Chinese New Zealanders

by Helene Wong

Ever since the first Chinese came to New Zealand, the response to them has been mixed. In the early years, some people even formed groups to campaign for fewer Chinese migrants.



Kong Cong, who came to New Zealand as a young boy to mine with his father

New gold mountain

It's thought that the first group of Chinese to arrive in New Zealand were twelve goldminers who'd come from the gold rush in Victoria, Australia. They arrived in Otago in 1866. The men were welcomed for many reasons: they were hard-working, they didn't want to stay long-term, and they were willing to rework claims other miners had abandoned. Gold had been discovered in 1861, but after five years, most miners were leaving Otago for the gold rush on the West Coast. Dunedin's city leaders were worried. There were fewer people around to spend money. They wanted to keep miners in the area for as long as possible.

Within three years, more than two thousand Chinese miners were working in New Zealand – “new gold mountain” as they called it. Many came from villages in southern China, where there was poverty and war. They hoped to find gold, become wealthy, and return home to provide a better life for their families.



Chinese miners in Otago with Reverend Alexander Don

A troubled homeland

In the late nineteenth century, life in rural southern China (known as Guangdong province) was incredibly difficult. Overpopulation, wars, corrupt local officials, and lawlessness made people feel desperate. Life was especially hard for the poor, who had very little power to change things. Many longed for a better life.

Canton (now called Guangzhou) was the biggest city in southern China, and it had a long history of receiving news from overseas. (Because of this, it was often referred to as the Gateway to the West.) People soon heard about the gold rushes in Australia and New Zealand. Seeing an opportunity, many men left to seek their fortune, leaving their families behind. Although the majority planned to return home, this didn't always work out. Some miners died; others never earned enough money to afford the trip back to China.



Reaction

By the early 1870s, attitudes were changing, and anti-Chinese sentiment began to spread – on the goldfields, in the newspapers, and in parliament. Many people thought the Chinese were inferior and alien. They saw them as a threat – perhaps they'd even take over the country!

A **depression** in the 1880s deepened these feelings. People now worried that the Chinese would take jobs when there weren't enough to go around. It didn't help that there were no Chinese women or children in New Zealand. Lonely men without their families had time to gamble and smoke **opium**, people said. They were a bad influence on society. Concerned citizens even asked the government to stop Chinese from coming altogether.

The West Coast member of parliament Richard John Seddon was very outspoken. He helped make the first laws that discriminated against Chinese people, including a poll tax in 1881. The tax meant that every Chinese person had to pay £10 (about \$1,700 in today's money) to enter the country. No other ethnic group was taxed in this way.

depression: a time when the economy does badly and many people don't have work

opium: a drug that was popular during the nineteenth century



A cartoon published in 1905 in the *New Zealand Free Lance*, a popular weekly newspaper



A Chinese greengrocer and his family in their shop around 1905

A bigger poll tax and more

By the late 1880s, the gold rushes were almost over. Most of the Chinese miners went home, but a few stayed, becoming farm labourers or starting market gardens and orchards around Otago. They were joined by a new wave of Chinese migrants who came to Auckland and Wellington to establish fruit and vegetable shops, grocery shops, restaurants, and laundries as well as market gardens.

Many Pākehā continued to have a negative attitude towards Chinese migrants. They wanted a white New Zealand, and people formed anti-Chinese societies with names like the Anti-Asiatic League and the White Race League, to put pressure on the government. In 1896, the poll tax was increased to £100, and two years later, when the **old-age pension** was introduced, Chinese New Zealanders weren't included.

Over the following decade, the discrimination continued. In 1907, Chinese arriving in New Zealand had to pass an English language test, reading a hundred words picked by a customs officer. In 1908, they were no longer allowed to become **naturalised** as New Zealand citizens, and that same year, all Chinese temporarily leaving the country were required to have a re-entry permit, which was thumbprinted so their identity could be proven when they returned. No other group of people at the time was singled out in ways like this.

old-age pension: money paid by the government to support people over the age of sixty-five

naturalised: to be allowed to become a citizen of a country

The poll tax certificate of Wong Wei Yin, who came to New Zealand in 1916

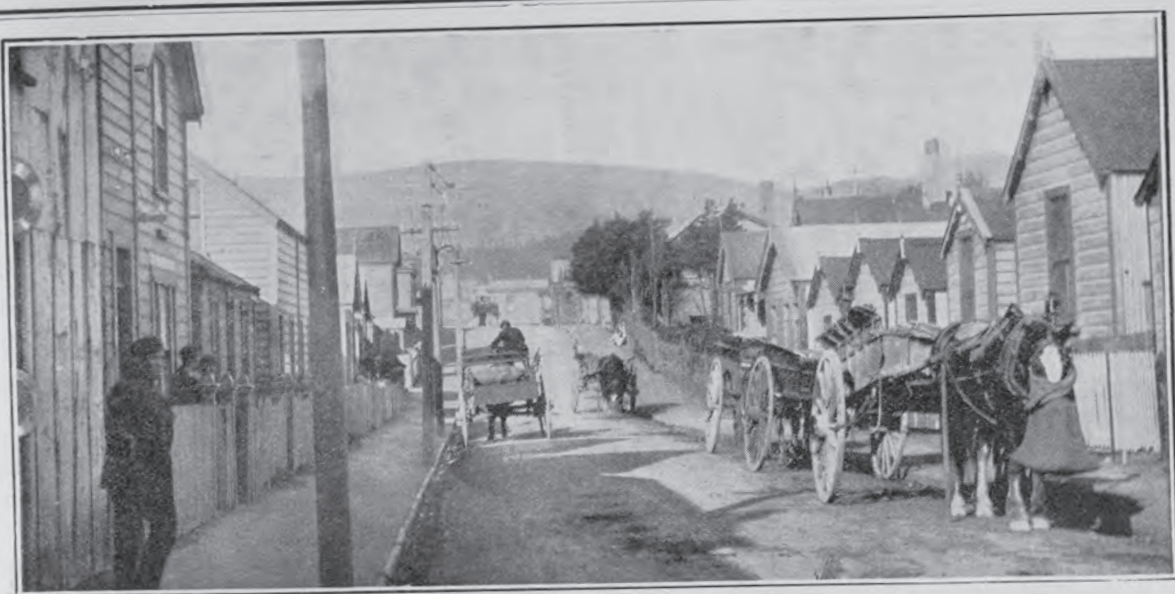


CERTIFICATE
Under Section 33 of the Immigration Restriction Act, 1908.

Customhouse, WELLINGTON, New Zealand, 6th day of February, 1916

This is to certify that WONG WEI YIN, whose apparent age is 14 years, and born at Canton, whose former place of residence was Canton, did arrive in this Dominion by the vessel MANUKA from Sydney, 13/11/16, and that the Master of the said vessel has paid to me the sum of One Hundred Pounds, required by section 31 of the

WONG WEI YIN



HAINING STREET.—THE CHINESE QUARTERS OF THE CITY OF WELLINGTON.

Haining Street

“Kidnapped, boiled in a copper, and made into preserved ginger” – this is what some children were told would happen to them if they visited Haining Street in central Wellington. For almost a century, between 1880 and 1960, Haining and Frederick streets formed a small Chinatown for local Chinese. Because the area had places where men gambled and smoked opium, it received a lot of negative attention in the newspapers. In reality, it was a safe neighbourhood with all the usual things a community needs: places to stay, eat, meet, buy groceries, and celebrate festivals.

In 1905, to protest against non-European migrants in New Zealand, a man shot and killed Joe Kum Yung in Haining Street. He said he wanted the country to be rid of the “yellow peril”.



A shop on Haining Street, which once sold Chinese embroidery, antiques, and groceries

A new image

People’s attitudes began to change in the late 1930s, especially after Japan invaded southern China in 1937. This war in China became tied up with the Second World War, and Japan became New Zealand’s enemy, too. As the Japanese set their sights on the Pacific, people here realised it was the fierce fighting by the Chinese that had been holding the Japanese back. The Chinese were no longer considered yellow peril. They were now our brave allies.

The war helped in other ways. With so many Chinese men here worrying about their families back home, sympathetic community leaders asked our government to help. Between 1939 and 1941, almost five hundred wives and children – along with Chinese from New Zealand who were trapped in China by the fighting – arrived here as war refugees. Being reunited with their families meant a better life for the men. They could now be part of a more complete Chinese community that included women and children. These children went to school. Families started businesses. Most New Zealanders got used to having Chinese, and their New Zealand-born children, living alongside them. In 1944, the poll tax was abolished. Seven years later, Chinese were once again allowed to apply to become New Zealand citizens.



Chinese New Zealanders helping to celebrate the end of the Second World War in Oamaru, 1945

Hidden

By the 1980s, the Chinese had a new **stereotype**: model citizens. Most were choosing to hide their cultural background. Behaving like Pākehā New Zealanders was a way to avoid racial abuse. For the children, this often meant refusing to speak their own language, which led to a loss of culture and identity. Chinese parents also changed. In the past, most wanted their children to take over the family business and become shopkeepers or market gardeners like themselves. Now, they encouraged their children to go to university and become doctors, accountants, and teachers. These kinds of jobs helped the Chinese to become more **integrated**.

The second wave

In 1987, the government changed the **immigration** laws. Traditionally, it only wanted migrants from Britain and Europe, but now people were needed who could invest in the economy. To help this happen, the government made it easier for wealthy people from countries such as Hong Kong, Taiwan, and China to live in New Zealand.

New Zealand's Asian population doubled in five years. Although these people were only 1 percent of the population, some New Zealanders became alarmed. Once again, anti-Chinese attitudes began to appear in our newspapers. Even original Chinese settlers and their New Zealand-born children found themselves being yelled at: "Go home!"

An article from the *Eastern Courier*, 16 April 1993



stereotype: a generalisation about a particular kind of person
integrated: completely mixed with other people
immigration: people coming to live in another country

Diversity

More than three decades later, racism in New Zealand hasn't disappeared, but people are more aware of cultural diversity, and attitudes are changing. In 2013, the number of New Zealanders born overseas hit a million – around a quarter of the population. More people are taking pride in their cultural difference, and this includes the Chinese. As a community, this pride has given them the courage to speak out against racist treatment. In 2002, the government formally apologised for the poll tax and a special group was set up to record Chinese New Zealand history, culture, and knowledge that was lost because of prejudice from past governments.

Today, Chinese migrants learn English, and New Zealanders learn Chinese languages. Chinese New Year is celebrated throughout the country, and the grandchildren and great-grandchildren of the first Chinese migrants are filmmakers, politicians, lawyers, designers, scientists, and Olympic athletes – as well as market gardeners. They are proud of being New Zealanders and proud of their Chinese ancestry.

Chinese New Year in Wellington, 2018



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