

THE STORY OF THE VENTNOR

BY KIRSTEN WONG

The night of 28 October 1902 was calm and clear, but the SS *Ventnor* was in trouble. Ever since it hit a rock the day before, the ship had been drifting and slowly sinking. Now, miles out to sea off the Hokianga coast, it was about to go under. The people on board scrambled to the lifeboats. With only seconds to spare, three of the lifeboats made it away from the ship. The fourth lifeboat wasn't so lucky, and thirteen people died that night. Also lost was the ship's precious cargo: the remains of almost five hundred men. Most had died many years earlier, long before the *Ventnor's* journey had even begun.



Chinese goldminers outside their cob hut in Tuapeka, Otago

GOLD RUSH

The SS *Ventnor* left Wellington on 26 October 1902, bound for southern China. On board were the remains of 499 Chinese men, most of them goldminers who'd been part of Otago's world-famous gold rush. The first group had arrived in 1866 to rework the goldfields that European miners had abandoned. For the Chinese, this was a chance for a better life. Times were tough back home in Guangdong province. There wasn't enough land to grow food for all the people. War was making life there even harder.

Many of the miners hoped to work for five years, save money, and return home. This plan worked out for some, but mining was dangerous work. Some men died on the goldfields. Others couldn't save enough to return home. Chinese graves became a common sight in Central Otago and, later, on the West Coast.



HUNGRY GHOSTS

For the Chinese, both here and in Guangdong, these graves were worrying. They believed it was very important to be buried in a place where your family could take care of your spirit. If this didn't happen, you might become a "hungry ghost", lost forever in the afterlife and never finding peace. So the community took action. In 1878, it formed the Cheong Shing Tong (the Flourishing Virtue Society). One of the society's aims was to return all deceased Chinese to their families. In charge of this work was the well-known Dunedin business leader Choie Sew Hoy.

The society raised money, then began the huge task that lay ahead. Teams of men went to work in cemeteries around Otago, Southland, and the West Coast while government officials and doctors supervised. The miners' bones were treated, packed in coffins and boxes lined with zinc, and carefully sealed.

The first venture was a great success. In 1883, the *SS Hoihow* returned the remains of 230 men to their families back in China. The society had done exactly what it had planned. How could it not be confident about future work?



Choie Sew Hoy

PASSAGE HOME

The voyage of the *Ventnor* took longer to organise. This time, teams from the Cheong Shing Tong went to cemeteries as far away as Auckland. Nine elderly Chinese men were to care for the remains during the voyage. In return, they were given a free passage home. There was also one unexpected passenger: Choie Sew Hoy. He had died in 1901, and his remains were on board with the others.

The *Ventnor* was only a few hours into its journey when it struck a rock off Taranaki. The ship continued north, but by the following evening, it had sunk. Among those drowned were the captain and five of the Chinese men. Two lifeboats made it to shore. The Cheong Shing Tong hired a ship to search the area and rescued men in the third lifeboat, but nothing else was found. The shocked community gave up hope.



The journey of the *Ventnor*

Chinese men in Central Otago around 1900



The *Ventnor's* lifeboats on Ōmāpere Beach



AFTERMATH

For a long time after the sinking of the *SS Ventnor*, people as far north as Te Oneroa-a-Tōhē were surprised to find carefully packaged bones washing up along the coast. On the north side of the Hokianga Harbour, some Te Rarawa ancestors realised that the bones were from the *Ventnor*. They wanted to return the kōiwi (bones) to Auckland, where they had a better chance of reaching China. South of the harbour, Te Roroa ancestors took the kōiwi from the beaches to a burial place near their own urupā. It's said that gum diggers from nearby Waipoua helped by lending a horse and cart.

Stories of the kōiwi were handed down from one Māori generation to the next. The people of the Hokianga wondered if the Chinese would ever come back, and one day, they did. In 2007, some people from New Zealand's Chinese community learnt what had happened. "It was like a fairy tale come true," says Wong Liu Shueng, one of the first people to talk with iwi. In 2009, she took a group of descendants to the Hokianga. They wanted to thank local iwi and pay their respects to the ancestors.



Alex Nathan (left) and Peter Sew Hoy (middle) with Tom Joe, a member of the descendant community

WĀHI TAPU

One of the people in that group was Peter Sew Hoy, the great-great-grandson of Choie Sew Hoy. "Dad talked about the *Ventnor* on and off for years, but we didn't really take it seriously," says Peter. The trip to the Hokianga made the story real.

"We didn't have much experience with anything Māori," says Peter. "But the pōwhiri, meeting all the Māori descendants, seeing how similar Māori were to Chinese with their respect for the ancestors – it blew me away."

Alex Nathan, a Te Roroa kaumātua, took Peter to the beach where some of the bones were gathered. As they walked, Alex remembered the words of his kuia. "She said, 'Don't forget to look after the Chinese wāhi tapu.' She believed the places where their bones had washed up were just as important as if it had been our own ancestors."



The entrance to Hokianga Harbour

RELEASING THE SPIRITS

The Chinese descendants wanted to do something for Te Rarawa and Te Roroa. In 2013, they gave each iwi a special plaque to express their deep gratitude. More than two hundred people came to the unveiling ceremonies. The events brought peace and healing for everyone involved.

Te Roroa kaumātua Fraser Toi was the first to mihi the Chinese manuhiri. Like Alex Nathan, he grew up with the old stories. “My grandfather was part of the generation who found some of the boxes that came ashore in the harbour and landed below our home,” Fraser says. “Those lost Chinese ... they’ve always been on my mind.” Fraser felt the ancestors’ blessing on the day of the unveiling. “A spiritual feeling was there all the way through,” he says. “True aroha and compassion – it was a lovely day.”

A LIVING HISTORY

To the north, Te Tao Maui and Te Hoko Keha of Te Rarawa have their own stories about the kōiwi. Before he passed away, kaumātua Peter Martin told the story that was handed down to him. He said that his people wanted to send the kōiwi back to the Chinese. The bones were sent to Rawene so a ship could take them to Auckland, but the crew refused to take human remains. The kōiwi were then given to the local police and were said to be buried at Rawene cemetery.



At Mitimiti, a bright red Chinese waharoa (gate or entrance way) stands on the Maunga Hione urupā. The gate, which looks out to sea, was built by Nick Grace of Te Rarawa. The iwi wanted to respect the ancestors and honour the history that connects the two cultures. “We see the waharoa as a sign or tohu,” says Nick, “placed there to call people back.” The waharoa is now an icon for the Chinese descendants and a special place where they can go.

MOVING FORWARD

The story of the *Ventnor* – and everything that’s happened since – has inspired songs, poems, documentaries, and even an opera. Now there is a memorial at Opononi, close to where the lifeboats came ashore. The memorial lists the names of all those who were lost. Meng Foon led the work on the memorial for the New Zealand Chinese Association and the descendants. He says that sometimes people ask why he’s doing this work, and he always replies, “It’s for our ancestors.” Meng says it’s all about respect. It doesn’t matter who you are or where you’re from. “You can be Chinese, Māori, Pasifika, European, African – respecting our ancestors is another way of respecting ourselves and those around us. It’s only then that we can move forward.”

- ▲ The waharoa at Mitimiti with Nick Grace (far right) and Meng Foon (second from left)
- ◀ Fraser Toi (right) greets Graham Wong (middle), a member of the descendant community



The Story of the Ventnor

by Kirsten Wong

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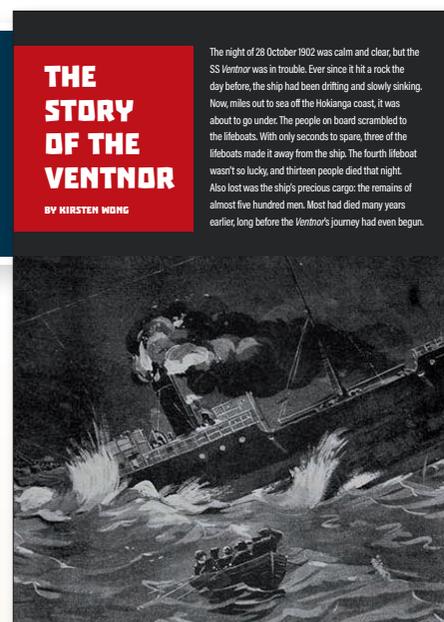
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