
**‘Maoriland’ and ‘Yellow Peril’
images of Maori and Chinese in the creation of New Zealand’s national
identity 1890-1914**

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What I aim to do in this paper is to show how White New Zealanders imagined Chinese and Maori between 1890 and 1914 – the key years when New Zealand’s national identity was being formed – and to see what those images tell us about New Zealand’s identity, and how those images helped create that identity.

It is said that nations are imagined communities - meaning we create nations in our minds by an act of collective imagination - and national identity is the same. National identity is largely the outcome of a process of conscious imaginative creation. And if we create nations and national identities in our minds, the same applies with race. Races, like nations, are largely imaginary and the concept of race is largely a creation of the European mind.

In the West race is about power and the power to set the agenda. It helps define the parameters of the debate about nationhood and nationality. It also places power in the hands of whites. It says’ ‘white is the norm against which everything else is measured’. It is also about ownership. The African American scholar W E B Dubois called whiteness

and the experience of being white ‘ownership of the world.’ But there is really no such thing as a white race. The white race was created as a means to maintain power and to mark limits of inclusion and exclusion. To belong to the white race meant being part of the power elite and being part of a privileged class. So in the West and in countries such as New Zealand, being white was about power, privilege and ownership. It was saying ‘this is our country.’

Therefore how we imagine race is a means of creating and maintaining power. And when, as in the case of New Zealand – race was a key factor in the creation of the nation state and its national identity – then racial images and the ability of these images to help shape a nation’s identity and control and limit who can be part of that nation’s identity is all the more powerful. New Zealand’s national identity was based on race. It was to be a White New Zealand. It was also to be British; a more perfect Britain in the South Seas. In New Zealand a white person was equivalent to a New Zealander and vice versa. Imagining the ideal New Zealander as a White Anglo-Saxon also meant imagining those who were not white as either threatening or inferior.

Images of Maori and Chinese – the two main non-white groups in New Zealand between 1890 and 1914 - played a prominent role in the formation of New Zealand’s national identity. How? In two main ways. One was as a means of discussing ideas about the construction of national and racial identity – in other words as a form of national debate on race and identity. The other was to help in actually creating that identity. There was also a third function, and that was as a means to express fear and relieve anxiety about

racial issues. The images of Chinese and Maori created between 1890 and 1914 therefore reflected what White New Zealanders felt about race and about Chinese and Maori and their place in New Zealand. But by helping White New Zealanders articulate their ideas and feelings about race, the images of Maori and Chinese also helped create New Zealand's national identity.

But why did White New Zealanders need to use images to help create their national identity? They had complete political power and control of the nation by the 1890s. Surely they could do what they liked with it? How could something as simple as images of 'other' races help in creating a national identity? This is a complicated issue. It raises questions about the limits of racial and political power. It also reflects New Zealanders' underlying insecurity about itself and its emerging identity at this time. The period from the 1890s to 1914 was a time of deep insecurity for New Zealanders – morally, militarily and racially – and this was reflected in its over the top responses to race, which often verged on the hysterical.

The creation of racial images that make fun of, belittled or parodied racial types that made New Zealanders anxious was a means of reducing and relieving that anxiety and insecurity.

However there is still an element of 'what came first – the chicken or the egg?' here. By that I mean how much did these images create white New Zealander' ideas about race and, how much did they merely reflect them? The simple answer is both. However the

degree to which the images of Maori and Chinese depicted in cartoons, drawings and newspaper articles helped construct a White New Zealand identity, or merely reflected White New Zealanders' fears and anxieties about race, is incidental to the fact that they *did* play a powerful role in the construction of that identity. It is well-known that images are an incredibly powerful tool in shaping attitudes – just think of the advertising industry and the use of political propaganda - and images of Chinese and Maori were created for that reason. As historian Matt Basso rather nicely put it: 'colonial artists' racial imagination had an immense influence on the construction of a racialised politics, but the specific context of early twentieth century New Zealand meant the material stakes were enormous.'¹ The stakes he refers to were of course the shape and form of New Zealand's emerging national identity. Those who were helping to construct New Zealand's national identity at that time – the newspapers and publications that created and disseminated the cartoons and images of Chinese and Maori – were well aware of those stakes, and used their considerable power to mold the attitudes of New Zealanders toward their view of what that identity should be.

And what were these images? To illustrate my point I will largely restrict myself to cartoons. Images can of course be created by newspaper articles, slogans, paintings, photographs, jokes, speeches, and fiction and non-fiction writing. However cartoons are more immediate, influential and, in my, opinion, powerful.

¹ Trevor Lloyd, native land, and the contest over the European racial imagination in New Zealand in *Turnbull Library Record*, 2004; n.37:p.68-86

I'll first look at how White New Zealanders imagined and depicted Maori. Maori occupied a unique and somewhat awkward position when it came to the newly-emerging New Zealand identity of the 1890s. The question was - where did they fit? If being a New Zealander meant being white, then it was a simple matter to exclude those who were not white. But Māori were not white, they were indigenous – natives - so it was not possible to exclude them physically. And because New Zealand believed itself to be a utopian and model society, with the best race relations in the world, it was not able to exclude them from the definition of 'New Zealander' either. To do that would be treating them in the same way that Americans, Canadians, South Africans and especially the Australians treated their native peoples and New Zealand, of course, was better than that. But making Māori equal to White New Zealanders – which is what New Zealand theoretically wanted to do - did not fit the racial theories of the time. Maori were not white, so how could New Zealand make them equal? The answer was to promote them, to remake them as 'honorary whites.' In fact New Zealand went one better and actually made them white. It did this by creating a myth that Māori were in fact members of the white Aryan race. They had just gone off in another direction and slid down the racial scale. So although they were savages, they were family, and could be treated, at least in theory, as equal.

However this was all theory and White New Zealanders continued to respond to Maori as non-white, and the images of Maori created from the 1890s to 1914 reflect this.

So what were these images? They can be grouped into a number of categories. These included the lazy and dirty Maori, the comical Maori, the child-like and primitive Maori, the relic of an ancient and noble race, and the brave warrior following in the tradition of

his ancestors. All these depict Maori in a patronizing way, but not as racially threatening. The reason for this is that by the 1890s the wars between Pakeha and Maori were over and the freeing up of land – the main purpose of the wars for Pakeha – was well under way.

By the 1890s Maori were no longer seen as dangerous or threatening to the wider settlement of New Zealand. For White New Zealanders the main issue with Maori was not race, but land, and has largely continued that way ever since. With the dangerous element of racial ‘otherness’ removed, Maori could be repositioned as an exotic amusement for White New Zealanders’ entertainment, much like a Maori version of the Irish comic Paddy in England.

At the same time White New Zealanders were quietly hoping that Māori would die out as a race, either physically, or by intermarriage and cultural assimilation. Cultural assimilation is a form of genocide in itself, of course. There was little regret for this sad inevitability – it was merely a New Zealand version of America’s ‘Manifest Destiny’ - the belief that lesser races would inevitably succumb and give way to superior ones. There was so little regret at this that it was even a subject for humorous cartoons. Following this process the racial remains of Maori would be seen as a ‘golden tinge’ in the faces of New Zealanders, and their cultural remains would be displayed in museums.

Representations of Māori played another role in the creation of New Zealand’s national identity, and this was by cultural appropriation. By taking elements of Māori culture to

signify white New Zealand culture, White New Zealanders hoped to gain a feeling of belonging and indigeneity in a foreign and alien land, and this claim to indigeneity would then cement their right to be here. From the 1890s Māori symbols - for example Māori stories, the haka and the adoption of Māori names like Rewi and Ngaio – were used to signify White New Zealand identity. But the form of Maori culture used by Pākehā to achieve this was an idealised version based on a romantic misty-eyed idea of old-time Maori culture – a version either long dead or one that never existed.

This idealised version of the Maori past by white New Zealanders has been referred to as ‘Maoriland’, an imaginary place created in the white New Zealand mind and only existing in the white NZ mind. Stripped of their contemporary reality Māori could then become colourful tourist attractions or a nice backdrop to White New Zealanders’ identity, in the same way as pohutakawa, ferns, kiwis and Rotorua’s mudpools. They could also be sexually alluring.

This appropriation of Māori culture mirrored the appropriation of the land itself. Between 1890 and 1900 about 28% of land still held by Māori was taken by the government. White New Zealand took both Maori’s land and their culture. Appropriating Māori culture as our New Zealand’s own also meant New Zealand could have its cake and eat it too. Māori were erased but remained as a non-threatening white reinvention. The ultimate aim was that Māori would not disturb New Zealand’s national identity, and the recreation of Maori achieved this aim. As the *New Zealand Herald* happily noted in 1901 ‘Owing to his exceptional characteristics, the Māori interferes in no way with our

national homogeneity. His position is unique.²

Images of Chinese differed significantly to those of Maori. Unlike Maori – where once the issue of race was removed the main issue between Maori and White New Zealanders was land. On the other hand White New Zealanders' issue with Chinese was solely about race. Early images of Chinese to New Zealand show them as being exotic and objects of curiosity – a novelty.

This gradually changed in the 1880s to perceiving them as an economic threat. With the growth of race as a key indicator and building block of national identity in the 1890s - and as an ideological framework for constructing that identity - the focus shifted to place Chinese as a major racial threat. The images of Chinese from this period became increasingly vicious and emotional as emotions about New Zealand's racial identity became more shrill.

Chinese changed from being people who we had a few issues with, to being a symbol for everything that threatened the racial make up, purity and identity of New Zealand. They became a 'Yellow Peril'. This change, however, was not with the Chinese, but with White New Zealanders, and with White New Zealanders' identity. Chinese remained essentially the same. In fact they made significant movement toward becoming less 'Chinese' and more 'Western. It was White New Zealanders who changed. Race and racism is a White problem. Other people suffer from it, but the problem is one of Whiteness.

² *New Zealand Herald*, 15 Feb 1901

The images of Maori and Chinese created between 1890 and 1914 reflected White New Zealand's attitudes to race during the time its national identity was being formed, and acted as a means to help create that identity. Because race was a central plank in the formation of that identity the way the two most significant racial others in New Zealand were represented at that time shows how White New Zealand felt about race and identity.

In the case of Maori, race was effectively removed as an issue, leaving them in racial terms as non-threatening to New Zealand's emerging national identity. Maori were neutered and depicted as children who needed guidance by big white brother, as amusing fun-loving simpletons or as a quaint, romantic background for mainstream New Zealanders.

Chinese, however, were increasingly seen as symbolizing the issue of race. As race and the purity of the white race became a key element in the formation of New Zealand's national identity, Chinese symbolized the racial threat to that emerging national identity - and this is reflected in the images of Chinese during this period. The purpose of these images was to demonise and exclude them.

As well as helping to create White New Zealand's national identity, a further outcome of the creation of negative images of Maori and Chinese was these stereotypes were picked up by both Maori and Chinese, and both took on the negative attitudes to each other created by those images. It is a sad fact of racism that those subjected to it will often take

on the attitudes of those who are racially oppressing them. Therefore Maori have often taken on the Pakeha view of Chinese as diseased, culturally unassimilable, racially impure and economically dangerous, and Chinese have often viewed Maori as simple-minded, lazy, violent and prone to crime. These stereotypical attitudes have been taken largely complete and whole from images created during the period when White New Zealand's national identity was being formed. Sadly many of these prejudices and attitudes are still prevalent today, both in the Pakeha community and the Maori and Chinese communities. A sad legacy of history and a sad price to pay for the creation of New Zealand's national identity.

Understanding how and why images of Chinese and Maori helped create New Zealand's national identity between 1890 and 1914 helps us understand how race relations have evolved in New Zealand, and why New Zealand's identity and race relations are the way they are in 2009. It also helps to explain why in many respects we all – pakeha, Chinese and Maori - continue to react to each other in the same way as we did when that identity was being formed.