

23/5/14 for 30/5/14

Bananas Conference, 2014.

Richard, Ladies and Gentlemen,

My brief is to consider whether we can be Chinese New Zealanders, especially in the light of the past European disparagement of Chinese as the 'Yellow Peril'. In the first part of this brief, I will present today's state of European-Chinese relationships in Otago province, my home region. In the second part, I have searched the history of European-Chinese relationships in Otago; particularly for the prime cause of the prejudice leading to the Yellow Peril. The first waves of Chinese immigrants to New Zealand came to Otago, so my focus here is appropriate. [slide]

So, can we become Chinese New Zealanders, based on the Otago experience? Yes, today there are little if any feelings of Yellow Peril in Otago. Why? One reason, I think, is the small Chinese population. Presently, Otago has a provincial population of _____, and the total Dunedin population is _____. The provincial Chinese population is _____ and the Dunedin Chinese population is _____. Generally, Otago's population today is stable, in large part because there is not enough work to attract a lot of new people. Hence, most Otago Chinese originate from longstanding Cantonese families, and as usual they are quiet, pleasant, hardworking families whose children mix well with other children and do well in schools. The modest-sized Chinese population and a quiet demeanour are strong reasons for the continuance or re-emergence of the Yellow Peril, but is there another clinching reason? Yes, because the Otago Cantonese and a scatter of non-Cantonese newcomers have a small, well-educated Chinese elite which participates well in the life of the general community. In recent years, for example, the Dunedin Chinese have included six family doctors, three lawyers, three accountants, three pastors plus two laymen in important wider church committee posts, five owner pharmacists, an associate professor of dentistry who is a colonel in the army, a Cantonese artist who is a lecturer in the Polytechnic, other lecturers in Polytechnic, university and hospital, a well-established biotechnical firm with one owner, the treasurer of the prestigious Dunedin Club, and a Dunedin mayor.

More, five years ago, the local Chinese raised 7.7 million dollars to construct a high quality Southern Chinese Garden in Dunedin. This was done with the aid of Shanghai sister city links, which are valued today and are acknowledged in both Dunedin and Shanghai circles to have had key local Chinese input in establishing that relationship. The Otago Settlers Museum for long had a big New Zealand Chinese section, though a new form of continuous historical presentation has diminished the Chinese content, perhaps temporarily. For the sake of completeness in listing, one mentions a hotel with a sole Chinese owner and another hotel owned by an overseas Chinese firm, and a large forestry operation owned by an overseas Chinese firm based in Dunedin. These provide work for Europeans after the Sew Hoy clothing factory employing 300 Dunedin people had closed.

Thus it can be safely claimed that modern Otago Chinese can aspire to be an integral part of the wider society, and be able to function and be accepted as fellow New Zealanders. In so doing, I am sure they will *feel* they are New Zealanders. One sign of the good present-day attitudes towards Chinese is that they are constantly reported in Dunedin's naturalisation ceremonies. Another sign is that intermarriage in Otago between Europeans and Chinese –perhaps once thought to be the end of the world or something similar - is now obviously accepted in both the European and Chinese communities.

Coming now to the history of European-Chinese relationships in Otago, I recall Rewi Alley telling me that the New Zealand Chinese need more writing about themselves for Europeans to understand us better. And indeed, as more of Otago's past history is revealed, the importance of the historical role of Chinese in this province is becoming clearer and acknowledged. I was emotionally moved two years back when Clyde and Waikaia, two goldmining towns in their 150th mining anniversary commemorations, each erected a bronze plaque which acknowledged the pioneering role of Europeans *and* Chinese together. [slide] A move last year to have Chinese street names in Dunedin – at long last - was passed, and a project to restore the nineteenth century Chinese Camp in Lawrence has won widespread approbation, and a proposed Chinese Mining Heritage Trail for Central Otago has keen supporters for action.

One of the first historical points to be re-discovered and emphasized was the two invitations in 1865 from the Otago Provincial Council to Chinese miners in Victoria, Australia, to come and rework its goldfields after the rush. The Chinese were nearly all Cantonese males with rural origins. They came first from Victoria, then from home counties in Guangdong. Theirs were a relatively small influx of 4000 at their peak, before some went to the West Coast goldfields. But Otago always had the majority of the Chinese miners.

To explain, there had been a goldrush European population of some 19,000 in early 1864 but this fell precipitously to 6000 in 1865 from diminished gold returns. The rushers went back to Australia or rushed to the West Coast goldfields. Hence the invitations to the Chinese in Victoria, in order to support the gold export tax and goldfields businesses. It was estimated that the Otago goldfields could still support a total of 11,000 miners. So the Chinese were welcomed for sustaining business, and for several years, there was room in the goldfields for both Europeans and Chinese to make a reasonable living wage. Plentiful other work were available too in farm and general labour, and in the early 1870s, further labour was required for new public works in Otago such as railway construction. European observers praised the skill, perseverance and cooperation of the Chinese mining parties. Their heyday in Otago in both goldmining and social relationships with Europeans lasted till the late 1870s, that is, over a dozen years, before the shallow gold deposits were largely exhausted.

The year 1879 can be taken as the turning point in feelings towards the Chinese both in the Otago goldfields and nationally. Only one year before, the prominent

Vincent Pyke had remarked on the good relationship between Europeans and Chinese in the Otago goldfields. But in 1879, serious complaints arose against Chinese in two economically poor Otago districts, where they were now regarded as foreign competitors in goldmining who took out, quote, 'every speck' of gold which, it was considered, should have been a reserve for white miners in hard times. By sad coincidence, the anti-Chinese feelings in these two districts were additionally fuelled by the loss of other work consequent to the onset of the so-called Long Depression throughout the nation, which began in 1879 and persisted till around 1896. Thus the Chinese employed as non-mining labour were added to the accusations of foreign competition, in particular because they could be hired at a cheaper rate.

The negativism against Chinese spread throughout Otago as the decline of gold production and the Long Depression bit, and this took place almost simultaneously with feelings expressed against Chinese by West Coast politicians and by the rising working class in urban New Zealand. The latter was bolstered by the legalization of trade unions in 1878 and by granting universal suffrage to men in 1879. Their particular agitation was for regulation of Chinese immigration from the fear of potential – not actual – Chinese competition in their workforce. There were as yet few Chinese outside the goldfields. The vocal and persistent voice of the working class was the trade unions, and while no doubt they were influenced by the situation in the Otago and West Coast goldfields, their major influence was the outcries against Chinese competition in other Pacific rim countries.

One can now see a formidable array of anti-Chinese feelings which arose from the Otago goldfields, the West Coast politicians, the Long Depression, the working class and a fifth factor, the fledgling Liberal Party, whose leader issued in 1879 a memorandum criticizing Chinese. He thereby set a persistent anti-Chinese tone in his party. A momentum of prejudice built up on what was called the Chinese Question, which fed upon itself and progressed to racism and legislative discrimination. The worst years for the Chinese in New Zealand corresponded to the Liberal Government which was in power from 1891-1912, with noticeable improvement when the Chinese Consulate was at last accepted in 1908 and the Consul arrived in the next year, and again when China was nominally unified as a country in 1927 and a Kuomintang Consul arrived in the following year. As an aside, it is notable that despite the prejudice, the Chinese still managed to significantly spread from the goldfields into urban New Zealand, establish viable businesses, maintain chain migration and kept to their sojourner's goal of acquiring capital.

Sojourner? What does 'sojourner's goal' mean? I will explain in a roundabout way and start first by posing the question: was there a common underlying cause for all this prejudice? Yes, and we can clearly find it in Otago. As noted, the Chinese miners had years of good tolerance which was eventually overwhelmed by intolerance. What made the Chinese vulnerable to such a change? It was not due to lawlessness and other bad behavioural characteristics. Rather, the Chinese carried a fundamental weakness, in that they were sojourners, not

settlers. Sojourners are called transnationals these days but I prefer the older term 'sojourner'.

Sojourners the world over are overseas travellers for a temporary purpose, very often to earn money which they take back to their homeland as capital. For example, I had medical colleagues who went to the Middle East for this purpose and this is what I mean by the term sojourner's goal in relation to the New Zealand Chinese. Most often too, sojourners are males only who keep to their own language and customs, and therefore are happy to mix with their own compatriots when overseas. From the standpoint of the host society, sojourners minimally participate in the life of the wider community, and seldom seek integration and assimilation. Expressed differently, they minimally share in the joys and sorrows of the host society and for the most part, their basic loyalties lie elsewhere. Probably the old Cantonese were among the world's most successful sojourners, but to sum up their situation in New Zealand, they were not settlers and so they had minimal bonding in the European society, which held primacy over them politically and culturally.

Therefore it is not surprising that the early Chinese became viewed as foreigners who took wealth away and therefore were of questionable long-term use to a new, developing country. This European opinion was expressed time and again in early New Zealand and was even acknowledged - but glossed over - in 1865, during the discussions on the invitations to Chinese to come to Otago. The liability to reach such a negative opinion formed the inherent vulnerability of sojourners. The negative opinion may be overlooked when they serve a useful purpose during good times, but hostility could emerge in hard times. And to especially make things worse for the Chinese sojourners in New Zealand, the antipathy to them as work competitors progressed to racism because the Chinese were so different as a people, were so hard to dislodge from this country and the times tended to regard coloured races as inferior humans and China as a failed state.

Am I on the right track in singling out sojournism as the fundamental cause for prejudice against them? In comparison we have a similar situation in Australia today where many New Zealanders retain a distinctiveness by keeping too much to their New Zealand roots, thereby causing feelings and even measures against them. It seems to me that it is primarily their persistent looking back to New Zealand that has brought the negativity upon them. This has happened despite New Zealand being so close in nationhood to Australia, though thankfully because of this, the negativity does not embrace racism as well. And if we return to present-day Otago, we have the converse situation where Chinese desire New Zealand citizenship and have settled well and are accepted and thriving.

However, the pathway to settlement is not always straightforward and easy either. Professor Ip will examine some of these aspects for you.