

Book Reviews

Being Chinese: A New Zealander's Story

HELENE WONG

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The search for identity and one's place in an adopted land is a familiar theme in many autobiographies. Helene Wong's book is a poignant and moving documentation of her personal quest for the meaning of 'being Chinese' set against the rich tapestry of the travails of the Chinese in New Zealand, from the early years of discrimination and marginalisation to the more subtle 'othering' beneath a veneer of embracing diversity of recent times. The author uses oral history materials based on copious interviews with her mother and other family members of the Wong and Chin Ting clans, both with longstanding history in New Zealand. She also makes good use of the abundant archival materials on the New Zealand Chinese whose movements were meticulously documented because they were unwelcome aliens.

Throughout the book, the author's skill in script writing is evident. Readers are often introduced to vivid scenarios full of cultural implications where the characters interacted with each other, bringing out deeper meanings illustrating some messages that the author wishes to expound. The recurring single theme of the book is the evolving Chinese New Zealander identity which the author painstakingly worked at. The process was slow, uncertain, and took decades of revelation. Throughout her girlhood in rural small town New Zealand (Utiku and then Taihape) to her teenage years in Lower Hutt and Wellington, Helene craved to be invisible and assimilated, just to be like all her white New Zealander peers.

The dramatic impact of the 1980 visit to her father's home village in China marks the sudden awakening of Helene's feelings of 'being Chinese'. She chose this particular episode of her life to start the story. It is a very powerful prologue, not unlike an intensely spectacular screen shot starting a feature film. The author has just turned 30, and has never set foot in China. Her interest in China was tangential and second-hand. She doesn't even speak the language. Accompanying her newly retired parents on their first return to the ancestral village, the narration is somewhat like a silent film. Consider this succession of scenarios: unknown

relatives shuffling at the village entrance, her father stepping down and embracing an old friend, her father weeping, and then making a lengthy speech in Chinese which Helene had no understanding whatsoever. The author noted that she had never seen her father embracing anyone, or weeping. The serious lengthy speech in Chinese of which Helene could not follow at the time, was him trying to explain his previous efforts in sending back flood-relief money from New Zealand which somehow did not get distributed.

There are more montage techniques: the long queue of relatives going in front of her parents to offer tea and food, then getting lucky money in return; her first encounter with fresh lychees—the fruit that her father told her of so many times before and she had no means of appreciating it; and her interaction with her elderly third aunt, consisting of smiles and missing cues. The finale of the home village visit was a flood of uncontrollable tears in the privacy of her mosquito-net draped bed. It ushered in the thoughts of ‘Who am I? Why am I? And what’s being Chinese got to do with it?’

Introduced by this powerfully poignant prologue, the rest of the book is largely chronological. It traces Helene’s life story interwoven with the story of her parents, grandparents, and the wider New Zealand community that she grew up in. She was born into a small town New Zealand community enjoying post-war prosperity. Like all New Zealand kids of her time, she enjoyed ‘the routine of my comfortable fifties middle class world as a typical Marmite, Weetbix, and school milk and Chesdale cheese suburban kid’ (pp.26-27), except for the occasional racial taunt which reminded her of her Chinese look and Chinese identity. She noted that “we were wary around most Europeans, knowing we could never take acceptance for granted and that at any time we could be ambushed by abuse” (p.37).

Helene depicts the Chinese world with mischievous deftness and loving details. There is little explanation and everything is depicted through her own incomplete perception of what certain aspects of ‘Chineseness’ is all about. Her grandparents’ Te Aro shop had an enclave storing salted fish, salty duck eggs and preserved Chinese sausages, like ‘visiting Aladdin’s Cave, a magical adventure’ (p.39), which she admitted to feeling too embarrassed to share with any of her European friends. Helene describes the big Chinese wedding parties, and elaborate funeral services. Always the greatest attention was paid to the food for all sorts of gatherings.

Helene Wong remains one of the few New Zealand Chinese active in

performance arts. She describes how she started performing at a young age; her debut was classroom singing at her primary school (p.51). She soon learnt that despite her flair and talent in performance, she could never aspire to prima donna roles (like Alice in Wonderland), but must settle for being the Mad-Hatter. She “played the occasional minor role – ones where being Chinese didn’t matter, such as maids or pantomime cats” (p.59).

Reminders of her being Chinese were infrequent but they popped up unexpectedly. As when she needed a special passport, a two-week permit to enter Australia on a student conference in her final year of school (while all her peers had unrestricted rights of entry and residence). She also needed a re-entry permit to be allowed back into New Zealand, although she was born locally and held a NZ passport (p.58). Socially, she was aware that she was “same but different”.

Her academic and social activities were typically mainstream New Zealand: dancing, skiing, partying and drinking, yet she got called names. Her university peers called out “I see the Vietcong’s arrived” (p.61) and she also got unwanted compliments for her English fluency. An active presence in Victoria University, she was much in demand as a performer in capping pantomimes and the occasional TV commercial. She also fell in love, and married Colin Knox, happily adopting his name and grateful that she could now drop ‘Wong’ as a surname.

Her graduation in 1972 was followed by working in the State Services Commission as a civil servant. Then came the invitation to work for Robert Muldoon’s Advisory Group. Helene became an efficient and impartial civil servant, and her work experience threw her closer to non-white minority groups like Maori and Pasifika. She also travelled to the United States with her husband for two years when he studied public administration on a Harkness Fellowship in Boston. The American stint broadened her world view, and sharpened her awareness as an overseas Chinese.

Her continual interest in acting was interwoven with her quest for understanding her Chinese heritage identity. It came together in her close involvement in the film production of *Illustrious Energy*, a film about a Chinese gold miner in the Otago goldfields set in the 1910s. But she was still not ready, unable to see a way out or the light forward.

Then circumstances in New Zealand changed; the Chinese world was radically altered when ‘the immigration floodgates’ opened. The arrival of the new Chinese immigrants from Taiwan and then Hong Kong changed Helene’s world. If she had been hesitantly (and somewhat reluctantly) Chinese, in the early 1990s she became ‘Asian’. Ready or not! She and Colin

moved to Auckland around the same time as the new immigrants came in sizeable numbers. "Their visibility, practical difficulties with settlement, and the reaction of locals, became media fodder." (p.107) Helene soon found herself caught up in the virulent anti-Asian atmosphere. "Never mind that I was New Zealander. A Chink is a Chink". This brought an unexpected bonus to her artistic career. She had offers as an actor in film and television. A more significant breakthrough was being invited to be Director of a full length documentary juxtaposing the experiences of the old Chinese settlers with the new immigrants. *Footprints of the Dragon* became one of the top ten documentaries of 1995.

It happened that this reviewer was closely involved in the development and the research of this documentary, and it is quite a jolt to read Helene's account and analysis of those heady times. Mainstream New Zealanders had little understanding or direct knowledge of the plights and difficulties facing the new Chinese immigrants, who were stereotyped as "wealthy Chinese living in rows of ostentatious homes" (p.121), who could not drive properly, and generally spoke too loud. As a guest lecturer she pointed out to students "examples of the contemporary media's treatment of Chinese ... the underlying tone of contempt, ridicule and fear" (p.116). She still found it difficult to take a bold stand against virulent racism, and she got her first hate mail after the local newspaper featured her. (p. 118).

The last chapters of the book are devoted to the life-stories of Helene's father Willie and mother Dolly. Willie came to New Zealand on a student permit in 1916 as an eight year old, and Dolly was New Zealand born. They were among the earliest group of ethnic Chinese children in the country. Theirs was a life of separateness and marginalisation in spite of their daily engagement with 'normal' New Zealand everyday life. Dolly's side of the Chin Ting family, for example, has pronounced artistic flair. Helene's Uncle George Chin Ting was leader of a dance band which regularly performed at all the Chinese weddings and social gatherings. Dolly herself was an aspiring ballet dancer. The chapters detailing their upbringing, brief courtship and long years of building up a family give rare glimpses of New Zealand daily life through the experiences of a typically hard-working couple.

Helene shares with her readers how she found her identity, and how coming to value her hybrid identity as both a Chinese and a New Zealander has helped her 'achieve harmony in life.' Her account is moving because it is frank, genuine and direct. The book ends on a thoughtful note when she asks whether New Zealand might achieve a multiple national identity

that is genuinely tolerant and inclusive, “a national identity comprised of many identities” (p, 177). Before that happens, she is resigned to the fact that being Chinese would always court ‘casual racism’. But the reality of the future is that New Zealanders will have increasingly multiple identities, and happier times will lie ahead.

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