

Asian tauiwi and tangata whenua: Māori-Asian relationships and their implications for Aotearoa New Zealand’s constitutional future.

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Abstract

This article traces the history of migration by Asian peoples to Aotearoa New Zealand and examines how their relationships with Māori has evolved and been influenced by the social, economic and political climate. Although Asian and Māori communities have often been pitted against each other by mainstream narratives, they share many common values and are natural allies – including in constitutional transformation. Despite perceptions to the contrary, there is strong compatibility between recognising te Tiriti and supporting Aotearoa’s ethnically and culturally diverse population. I argue that honouring te Tiriti is a foundational step towards addressing injustice and supporting all those who live in Aotearoa.

Introduction

Conversations about Aotearoa New Zealand’s past, present and future tend to focus on the relationships and tensions between Māori and Pākehā [British/European settlers]. Māori and Pākehā are the country’s two founding cultures, original partners to Te Tiriti o Waitangi / The Treaty of Waitangi (represented by Māori rangatira [chiefs] and the British Crown), and largest groups by population. Over the past fifty years, however, the arrival and settlement of non-Māori and non-Pākehā communities has grown considerably and today those communities make up almost a quarter of Aotearoa New Zealand’s population.¹ Asian communities are the largest of these, representing 15% of the country’s 5 million residents.

Modern day Aotearoa is described as “demographically multicultural, formally bicultural, and with few exceptions, institutionally monocultural.”² This context has created tensions between longstanding efforts by Māori to ensure their status as tangata whenua [people of the land] and rights accorded in te Tiriti are recognised and calls to support the growing needs of a multicultural settler and migrant population. This article explores the nexus of these two challenges within the context of Māori-Asian relationships and in relation to the country’s constitutional arrangements.

The impetus for this article stems from a desire to explore my own position on these issues as a New Zealander of Chinese ethnicity. Born in Beijing, China, I moved to Auckland in 1995 as a young child with my parents, who came with aspirations for a better life and limited knowledge of English language or culture. Like many migrant children, my childhood straddled two very different worlds – a “home” world of my family, whose values and worldviews were steadfastly Chinese and shaped by experiences of Mao-era China, and an “outside” world at school and work, where I tried my best to fit in to predominantly Pākehā institutions and to tread an unassuming path. My views and inquiry are inextricably shaped by personal experiences and my own ongoing exploration of belonging, identity, and responsibility.

This article is structured in four parts. The first provides an overview of migration by Asian peoples and their diversity in Aotearoa today. This context provides the backdrop for the second part, which explores early and contemporary relationships between Asian and Māori communities, and the social, economic, and political influences at each point in time. In the third section, I consider how Asian communities may engage in constitutional conversations in

relation to te Tiriti. I argue that upholding te Tiriti and creating space for Asian peoples in Aotearoa are mutually reinforcing and interconnected goals. In the final section, I conclude with some suggestions to build stronger Māori-Asian relationships and solidarity.

Asian Migration to New Zealand

History of immigration and arrival of Asian peoples

Signed in 1840, Te Tiriti o Waitangi / The Treaty of Waitangi is the nation's founding document and established a basis for non-Māori to live in Aotearoa under the kāwanatanga [governorship] of the British Crown, while respecting the tino rangatiratanga [chieftainship, sovereignty] of Māori tribal leaders.³ Te Tiriti sets out a series of rights for both parties – rangatira on behalf of their hapū [tribe] and the Crown on behalf of her subjects. However, these rights were quickly disregarded when Pākehā settlers, seeking fortunes in lands belonging to Māori, forced their way into control. Te Tiriti is a contested document, with separate Māori and English versions of the text and disputed interpretations of entitlements and rights. While the Māori version is recognised as legitimate and reinforced by international law via the contra proferentem principle, the English version has been historically dominant and continues to be used to justify the assertion of sovereignty and dominion by the Crown.

Immigration policies between the 1840s and late 1940s were designed by Pākehā settlers to create a society in which people of British descent predominated.⁴ This was driven by an Anglo-British “White New Zealand” identity and fervour that predominated at the time.⁵ During this period, Aotearoa received the most homogeneous immigration flows of any settler society.⁶ The 1921 Census, for example, recorded 99.35% of the population claiming British nationality.⁷ There was a small population of Asian people throughout this time, comprised largely of Chinese men from Guangdong and a small group of Indian migrants from Gujarat and Punjab.⁸

Individual sailors and merchants of Chinese and Indian descent have been present in Aotearoa since the early 1800s, arriving as crew on British East Indian Company and New Zealand Company ships.⁹ The first organised group to arrive were Chinese miners in the 1860s who came at the invitation of the Dunedin Chamber of Commerce to work on Otago goldfields.¹⁰ These early migrants were subject to significant discrimination, restrictions, and exclusions. Beginning with the Chinese Immigrants Act 1881, which imposed a restrictive poll tax and quota on Chinese newcomers, racism and discrimination would become entrenched across dozens of Acts of Parliament.¹¹ The marginalisation and hardship of this period led many to return home with few new arrivals.¹²

Several major changes occurred after World War II and from the 1950s that would transform Aotearoa New Zealand's population. By the 1950s, many of the discriminatory laws had been removed and family reunification programmes enabled existing Asian migrants to bring relatives over.¹³ Refugees were accepted, initially from Europe after World War II and later from regions like South-East Asia, the Middle East and Africa.¹⁴ Economic and business interests strengthened their influence over immigration policy and led to migration from non-traditional sources, starting with the Polynesian Pacific in the 1960s and 1970s.¹⁵ In the 1980s, race-based preferences were removed from immigration policy and a skills-based system implemented through the Immigration Act 1987. This was modified in 1991 by a points system which assessed potential migrants on their personal qualities, skills, and employability.¹⁶ Further migration was enabled through business, work, family, humanitarian and student immigration categories.¹⁷ Internationally, Aotearoa was reducing its dependence on the United Kingdom (precipitated by the United Kingdom joining the European Economic Community in

1973) while seeking to build closer economic, diplomatic and security relationships with influential Asian nations.¹⁸

These shifts facilitated significant immigration from Asia as well as from Africa, the Middle East, North and South America, and Europe.¹⁹ Today, Aotearoa is characterised as a superdiverse society, home to more than 200 ethnicities and significant cultural, linguistic, and religious diversity.²⁰ More than a quarter of its residents are born overseas, reflecting the high rate of recent migration.²¹ Asian people are the third largest ethnic group with a population of 707,600 (15.1%) after European at 3.3 million (60.2%) and Māori at 775,800 (16.5%).²² Projections indicate that the Asian ethnic group will grow to 1.5 million or 26% of the population by 2043, surpassing Māori in the next decade as the largest minority population.²³ Even with reduced migration due to the COVID-19 pandemic and anticipated reforms to immigration policy, this trend is likely to stay its course.

The sharp increase in migrants over the past three decades occurred during a somewhat precarious social and political setting. First, Aotearoa was not well prepared for the number and diversity of people who have come, lacking institutional structures in areas such as education and social services to cope with them successfully.²⁴ Secondly, although there was no longer a “white New Zealand” stance, migrants of European descent remain dominant and European migrants continue to be preferred over non-European migrants.²⁵ Third, many complex national issues remain unresolved, including the Crown’s relationships with Māori and the changing nature of Aotearoa’s national identity and nationhood. Finally, residents have almost the same social, political and civil rights as citizens, meaning that the obligations of the state extend to a broad population with wide ranging and untested ties to the country.²⁶

In 1986, Asian people comprised just 1.5% of the population with 54,000 people.²⁷ Now at more than 15% and a population of 707,600, the significant size and visibility of Asian peoples has created noticeable and heightened tensions within society. Asian communities attract more negative sentiment and discrimination than other migrant groups and are frequently singled out in media and political debates.²⁸ Although race and ethnicity-based discrimination is unlawful, there continues to be blatant racism towards Asian people as well as more subtle forms of discrimination and marginalisation in the workplace and community.²⁹ Asian people are often treated as “other” and seen as incompatible with being “New Zealanders,” as illustrated by television anchor Paul Henry questioning whether the Governor-General Sir Anand Satyanand was a New Zealander and the use of Chinese surnames by the Labour Party to estimate the number of foreign buyers of Auckland property.³⁰ Concerns about Covid-19, foreign investment, and geopolitical tensions with China have also increased community-level antagonism, as people conflate state actors and governments with people and culture.³¹

The pan-Asian ethnic group

“Asian” is one of six major ethnic groups defined by Statistics New Zealand and the term is widely used by government and media. While ethnicity is a self-identified label, it is often linked to race, ancestry, nationality and visible markers such as skin colour.³² The Asian pan-ethnic group covers people with origins in the Asian continent, stretching from Afghanistan in the west to Japan in the east and from China in the north to Indonesia in the south.³³ Chinese and Indian are the largest ethnicities within this group, accounting for 64% of the total Asian population.³⁴ Due to the migration history and contemporary demographics of Aotearoa New Zealand, the term Asian has specific connotations and usage when compared with other countries and is often used interchangeably to refer to Chinese.³⁵

Although the Asian grouping has widespread usage, it does not represent a single Asian community and there is no unifying Asian identity.³⁶ One risk of using pan-ethnic labels like “Asian” is that it can obscure heterogeneity and reduce a diverse group of communities and people into a single category with monolithic characteristic, attitudes, and views.³⁷ Even within a category like Chinese or Indian, people will differ markedly on factors such as age, education, socio-economic status, religion, language, length of time in the country, home country, and reason for moving. These factors, among others, impact people’s expectations, attitudes, and experiences of living in Aotearoa. Individuals with multiple ethnic backgrounds face additional complexities with ethnic classifications.³⁸

Ethnic categories can be problematic in terms of who defines the groups, how they are used and portrayed in the media, and whether communities and individuals find them meaningful. Despite its shortcomings, the Asian grouping is a valuable collective identity to explore and provides opportunity for diverse Asian communities to reflect on shared experiences and unite on common issues. This article will refer to broad ethnic groups (like Asian, Māori and Pākehā peoples) and group-level experiences, recognising that this may overlook nuances and heterogeneity at the individual level. I am also mindful that Pākehā remains a contested term with multiple meanings. In this article, “Pākehā” is used as a descriptive identifier of people with European ancestry and which links to a particular history and status in Aotearoa.³⁹

Relationship with Tangata Whenua

This section examines the history of Māori-Asian relationships and the context that has shaped their interactions. These relationships have been influenced by the Crown, relationships with Pākehā, and media narratives that tend to generalise and sensationalise indigenous and immigrant stories.⁴⁰

Māori-Asian relationships and interactions

Early contact and relationships between Māori and Asian people were generally positive and cordial, as “partners in adversity.”⁴¹ Common themes in these interactions include shared experiences of marginalisation, hardship, and assimilation pressures, and reciprocated solidarity and support.⁴² In the early 1900s, many Māori and Chinese lived in the same communities and worked together on market gardens, where the Chinese were regarded as generous and hospitable by local Māori.⁴³ Some Māori politicians, including Major Te Wheoro in 1880, supported the Chinese in opposing anti-Chinese legislation.⁴⁴ Other recorded stories of solidarity include local Māori from Te Rora and Te Rarawa iwi [tribe] who cared for and buried washed up remains of Chinese gold miners of the shipwrecked *SS Ventnor* and Chinese market gardeners in Waikato feeding the Te Puea-led resistance movements against conscription of Māori for World War I.⁴⁵

Although the number of Asian people was low until the mid-1900s, anxiety about them was high. Pākehā attitudes towards the small population of mainly Chinese men was influenced by hostilities between China and Britain⁴⁶, anti-Chinese prejudice from Australia, and their non-adherence to Christianity.⁴⁷ Chinese were seen as both inferior and a mysterious threat, including to Māori. This is reflected in a 1907 cartoon titled “The Yellow Peril” which depicts an octopus with Asiatic features entangling a distressed Māori woman.⁴⁸ Outcries against sexual relationships between Māori women and Chinese men in the 1920s led to the appointment of a special committee to investigate and condemn intermingling of Māori with Chinese and Indian people.⁴⁹ Apirana Ngata, the Minister of Native Affairs, commented in Parliament that Māori mating with Chinese or Hindus would cause “deterioration not only in the family and national life of the Maori race, but also in the national life of this country.”⁵⁰

Anti-Asian sentiment was less pronounced in the mid-1900s as Asian people learnt to adopt a low profile and not “ruffle Pakeha sensitivity by being as unobtrusive and ‘trouble-free’ as possible.”⁵¹ Assimilation strategies were adopted to gain acceptance by Pākehā, and their success led to Asian people being cast as a model minority. This created some estrangement with Māori as the Asian model minority narrative was used to blame Māori for their circumstances and “to show up the lazy natives.”⁵² By the 1960s, around half of the local Asian population was born in Aotearoa.⁵³

The 1987 Immigration Act was a fundamental recasting of immigration policy that would transform Aotearoa’s population. There was a media backlash to the surge in migration, particularly from Asia, describing it as the “inv-Asian.”⁵⁴ Politician Winston Peters and the anti-immigration rhetoric of the New Zealand First party had a significant influence on public attitudes over the 1990s and early 2000s.⁵⁵ Although Peters’ comments seldom refer to Asians directly, the way immigrants were portrayed was understood to refer to Asian immigrants specifically. His views are often conflated with general Māori attitudes, being Māori himself and having strong Māori support (the New Zealand First Party won all five Māori electorates in 1996). Media coverage also contributed to the racialised framing of immigration and the problematisation of Asian people and the blurriness between immigrants and Asians.⁵⁶ Even within the Asian community, there was some internal distancing by the “Old Generation” towards newer arrivals.⁵⁷

Surveys suggest that some Māori view a growing immigrant presence with considerable suspicion.⁵⁸ While Pākehā and Māori share unease towards the high number of Asian arrivals, Māori tend to exhibit stronger anti-immigrant feelings than Pākehā.⁵⁹ Māori attitudes towards immigration and immigrants generally reflect deeper issues of disempowerment and domination, including their exclusion from immigration policy, concerns about political and constitutional impacts, and perceived competition for social, economic and cultural resources.⁶⁰

Māori have been continuously excluded from immigration policy decisions, with Māori perspectives ignored or vilified when offered.⁶¹ The unilateral determination of immigration policy by the Crown without Māori engagement has been a source of frustration and anti-immigration sentiment. In addition, some consider that immigration from countries outside those referred to in te Tiriti is a breach of the original agreement.⁶² The preamble of te Tiriti refers to “Pakeha” who were “already living on this land and others yet to come” and the English version mentions “Emigration from both Europe and Australia.” Although there are differing interpretations about the meaning of this text and who is being allowed in, one view is that non-European people were not provided for by te Tiriti and therefore Asian migrants do not have specific permission by Māori to settle in Aotearoa.⁶³

Changes in immigration policy and the influx of immigrants was occurring at a time when Māori were gaining political influence and traction over recognition of Indigenous rights, redress for breaches of te Tiriti, and revitalisation of te reo Māori [Māori language] over the 1970s and 1980s.⁶⁴ The arrival of new people into Aotearoa during this sensitive time created significant tensions and has been described as “a bit like finding a whole lot of uninvited people in your house ... just when you were in the middle of a pretty heavy discussion about who’s in charge of what.”⁶⁵ Ranginui Walker regarded immigration reforms as a “direct negation of the Maori assertion of the primacy of biculturalism.”⁶⁶ He writes that:

The reduction of the Maori to a position of one of many minorities negates their status as the people of the land and enables the government to neutralise their claims for

justice more effectively than it does now. Furthermore, new migrants have no commitment to the treaty. For these reasons, the ideology of multiculturalism as a rationale for immigration must be rejected. Although its primary rationale is economic, the government's immigration policy must be seen for what it is, a covert strategy to suppress the counter-hegemonic struggle of the Maori by swamping them with outsiders who are not obliged to them by the treaty.⁶⁷

Walker articulates multiple concerns that Māori have in relation to immigration, which remain salient and are shared by others. Formal recognition of Māori sovereignty and rights accorded through te Tiriti are still contingent on political will, and a growing immigrant population is perceived as a threat to Māori revitalisation by reducing the visibility and strength of Māori in collective action and allowing the government to side-step Māori claims for justice.⁶⁸ As Margaret Mutu explains, Māori opposition to Asian immigration was “fuelled by the ongoing refusal of successive governments to provide constitutional recognition for Māori as the indigenous people of the country, and to make adequate reparation for the discrimination and injustice they had suffered and continue to suffer at the hands of the Pakeha.”⁶⁹

The primacy of te Tiriti in shaping Māori views about immigration has some support in data. Analysis by James Chang finds that Māori view contemporary immigration more negatively compared to non-Māori and that this could be explained by perceptions towards te Tiriti.⁷⁰ For Māori, more support for te Tiriti is correlated with less support for immigration, while for non-Māori more support for te Tiriti is linked with more support for immigration.⁷¹ Although not a causal relationship, this analysis suggests that concern for te Tiriti may be affecting Māori attitudes towards immigration.

Much of the indigenous-immigrant tension is driven by a zero-sum narrative where recognition of Indigenous rights is perceived as conflicting with protecting immigrant rights.⁷² Māori and Asian communities have often been pitted against each other to prevent alliances, create competition, and generate antagonism and polarisation.⁷³ The biculturalism vs multiculturalism debate is one example of this. On one side, discourse around multiculturalism and diversity is seen as a diversion or defence against the biculturalism embedded in te Tiriti, relegating Māori to one of many minorities and denying their Indigenous status.⁷⁴ On the other, biculturalism is viewed as an exclusionary partnership between Māori and Pakeha and detracting from a shared national identity that binds the nation together.⁷⁵ While some of the controversy is due to different understandings of biculturalism and multiculturalism, the debate ultimately pits “Māori against migrants in the cultural politics of our nation.”⁷⁶ Other examples where Māori and Asian communities have been set in opposition to each other include Don Brash arguing for the creation of a Ministry of Asian Affairs to replace the Ministry of Māori Affairs and concerns that a formal apology to the Chinese community for the poll tax would devalue the Crown's apologies to Māori.⁷⁷

Māori have also expressed concern about competition for resources, jobs and housing.⁷⁸ Māori, who were already adversely affected by the de-industrialisation of the 1980s and 1990s⁷⁹ feel that they will have to “fight even harder for their share of the economic cake” with more immigration.⁸⁰ These views are promoted by politicians like Winston Peters, when speaking about immigrants being from “alien cultures” that are pushing Māori “to the bottom of the heap.”⁸¹ However, these views are not universally shared and some Māori see greater immigration and relationships with Asia as providing opportunities for Māori entrepreneurship and tribal capitalism.⁸²

Within this context, it is understandable that some Asian people are wary of Māori attitudes towards them and worried about their place in a political system with greater Māori influence. Given the history of discrimination and racism experienced by Asian people, many are sensitive to anti-immigrant attacks and feel insecure and vulnerable in their acceptance by Māori and Pākehā.⁸³ Some Asian people are aware of and sympathetic to the frustration and resentment that Māori have about immigration policy, and do not believe that it is racially motivated.⁸⁴ Others are uneasy towards Māori power and activism, with a “common Chinese perception that rising Māori power means increasing Chinese powerlessness.”⁸⁵ Manying Ip acknowledges these conflicting feelings for Chinese people, writing that “Chinese are keenly aware of Maori as an important indigenous group, and that is why Chinese have viewed Maori with a complex mixture of affinity, wariness and awe.”⁸⁶

Perceptions by Māori and Asian people of each other can vary at the group and individual level. In relation to recent Chinese immigrants, Ip notes that their “impressions of Maori are a curious mixture of rather positive one-to-one personal experiences and a deep-seated wariness engendered mainly by the fear of Maori as a group.”⁸⁷ Despite tensions at the group level, many Māori and Asian people have strong personal connections and friendly relationships.⁸⁸ Arama Rata and Faisal Al-Asaad describe relationships between Māori and non-Pākehā *tauiwi* [non-indigenous New Zealanders] as “family like, based on shared experiences, and joined in solidarity,”⁸⁹ which is fitting for Asian communities who share many values in common with Māori. These shared values include respecting kaumatua [elders], emphasis on hospitality and relationships, and respecting mana [prestige, status].⁹⁰ Mutu describes there being “natural cultural alliances” between Māori and Asian communities, sharing tendencies to promote the group above the individual, value stability, and to make decisions in communal gatherings and by consensus.⁹¹

Perspectives on te Tiriti

Asian perspectives on te Tiriti are limited and reflect a broader lack of engagement on political matters.⁹² Several reasons contribute to a hesitancy to speak out on these issues. The first is a perception of te Tiriti as a matter between Māori and Pākehā where other voices are “unwelcome” and “excluded from the discourse.”⁹³ Steven Young noted to a select committee in 2007 that “many ethnic groups ... feel unwelcome and indeed gagged in relation to any discussion in which the Treaty is mentioned.”⁹⁴ Secondly, people may be confused or unsure about their views. Analysis of Chinese attitudes finds that many do not have set views or have not made up their mind on issues related to te Tiriti, redress and Māori rights.⁹⁵ Thirdly, some individuals may not feel socially assured enough to share their opinions openly and want to avoid offending people and causing trouble.⁹⁶ Finally, Asian communities tend to focus their political engagement on securing their own acceptance and position in society. Recent consultation by the Ministry for Ethnic Communities found that promoting diversity, addressing racism, attaining equitable access to services and employment and representation were most important to the community.⁹⁷ Anti-Asian sentiment and violence continues to be a live concern, as demonstrated by a protest in March 2021 against Asian hate and abuse.⁹⁸

Public views by Asian people on te Tiriti tend to fall under two broad categories. In one group are those who argue for multiculturalism in opposition to biculturalism and are drawn to narratives about moving on from te Tiriti and Māori claims of sovereignty. Lincoln Tan, writing about Waitangi Day in the *New Zealand Herald*, comments that “our society is diverse, and the issues that we face are far greater than those between Maori and the Crown” and asks that “we put our differences aside and [turn] Waitangi Day into an occasion where ... people of all ethnicities who call themselves New Zealanders have an equal place under the Kiwi

sun.”⁹⁹ Ramesh Thakur, writing in defence of multiculturalism, sees biculturalism and multiculturalism as being “mutually exclusive” and opposes biculturalism on the grounds that “groups which are neither Māori nor European are frozen out of the debate on the identity and future of the country.”¹⁰⁰ Steven Young, in a 1995 interview, supported Māori having equal rights and considered that “an insidious creeping agenda towards Māori sovereignty is going to sap the energies of this country and just waste time.”¹⁰¹

There is a growing group of generally younger voices who support the Māori tino rangatiratanga and recognise the interconnected struggles of Māori and Asian communities. As one speaker pointed out during the march against Asian hate, “racism cannot be protested without acknowledging the colonial struggles of our indigenous people and other disenfranchised groups who have done work to combat the racist struggles we are all a part of.”¹⁰² Tze Ming Mok wrote that “we can’t afford to be among the passers-by, hidden amid the ranks of white society, hurrying past the darker, poorer minorities punched to the pavement. We need to realise that if Maori are expendable we are all expendable.”¹⁰³ K. Emma Ng, in her book *Old Asian, New Asian*, comments that “in seeking acceptance as New Zealanders who have made their lives here by way of colonisation and the Treaty, we tauiwi must also take on the responsibilities that this entails.”¹⁰⁴ Lincoln Dam explores Māori-Asian relationships from a desire to “see my responsibilities to biculturalism, the Treaty, and Māori and Pakeha without whose aroha (love) and manaakitanga (hospitality) my family and I would be homeless and perhaps have ceased to be at all... while [keeping] space open for the other.”¹⁰⁵ Maggie Shui, writing about Māori-Asian solidarity, argues that “one mind shift to both help us find our grounding as Asian migrants in this country and recognise that, really, this is our problem, is through recognising Te Tiriti.”¹⁰⁶

Asian communities do generally empathise with and support greater recognition of Māori rights, culture and language. Surveys show that more Asian respondents (76%) believe Māori culture and cultural practices to be very important for defining New Zealand than European respondents (68.5%) and were more strongly supportive of te reo Māori (48% vs 39.4%).¹⁰⁷ Another study finds that most Chinese recognise and respect Māori as tangata whenua and the original host of the nation, understand the historical injustice and social disadvantage suffered by Māori, and are more supportive or ambivalent about keeping Treaty references in the law, in contrast to Pākehā who are much more unequivocally in favour of removing Treaty references.¹⁰⁸ Asian people who learn about Māori history are often shocked to discover that they have been previously ignorant or misinformed¹⁰⁹ and there is natural empathy for Māori by Asian people that have also experienced colonisation and invasion at the hands of the British.¹¹⁰ Over the past three decades, Asian communities have set up multiple initiatives to build relationships with Māori, and to support their communities to learn about Māori history, culture and te Tiriti.¹¹¹

Political expressions of solidarity and support by Asian people remain comparatively muted albeit growing in strength and visibility through activism, political and cultural commentary, and research. Individuals and groups, particularly among young Asians, have mobilised to support contemporary issues like the foreshore and seabed.¹¹² Asians Supporting Tino Rangatiratanga is a notable and growing pan-Asian group engaged in political activism and Tiriti education. More established organisations have also expressed solidarity through public statements and submissions, such as the New Zealand Chinese Association in their opposition to the Principles of the Treaty of Waitangi Deletion Bill and the New Zealand Federation of Multicultural Councils promoting a “Treaty-based multicultural society” which affirms and

honours Indigenous rights and status of Māori while supporting full and equitable participation of individuals from all cultures and ethnic groups.¹¹³

Natural allies?

Intergroup attitudes between Māori and Asian communities have often been presented in an overly simplistic or generalised way and mediated by Pākehā narratives. This section has sought to surface and examine the nuances that underpin Māori-Asian interactions and to show why, despite outward perceptions of antagonism and opposition, Māori and Asian communities are natural allies.

In summary, interactions between Māori and Asian peoples have occurred in a cultural and political setting that tends to pit the two groups against each other, creating antagonism and resentment that is sometimes internalised by members of these groups. This has often been driven by government failure to properly address political, social and economic issues head-on, and the exaggeration and racialising of topics by politicians and media. For many Māori, their concerns about immigration reflect the Crown's ongoing breaches of te Tiriti in excluding them from immigration policy and failing to recognise their rights as tangata whenua, together with an existing social and economic system that disadvantages Māori and which is worsened by population growth. For Asian peoples, their worries about greater Māori power stems from a distorted view of Māori attitudes towards immigration and a perception of Asian people being excluded within a te Tiriti framework.

There are many opportunities for Māori and Asian communities to develop closer bonds. The two share many common values and worldviews, which contributes to friendly and cordial relationships at the individual level even when there are group-level tensions. The issues faced by Māori and Asian communities stem from the same underlying causes, and the fundamental goals and interests of Māori and Asian people are compatible and mutually reinforcing. This is a view shared by Māori scholars such as Kukutai and Rata, who contend that “there are ample opportunities to create partnerships that are mutually beneficial for Māori and migrants,”¹¹⁴ and Khylee Quince, who believes policies can be framed “in ways that recognise and provide for indigenous rights and recognition, whilst sharing our land in the spirit of manaakitanga.”¹¹⁵ The future of Māori-Asian relationships has potential for greater solidarity and opportunity to effect shared agendas – including through constitutional settings.

Implications for Constitutional Conversations

In this section, I consider how Asian communities might engage in conversations about Aotearoa New Zealand's constitutional future, particularly in relation to te Tiriti. I argue that there is no inherent tension between centring te Tiriti and Indigenous rights at the heart of Aotearoa's constitutional arrangements while supporting Aotearoa's cultural diversity and citizenry. In fact, a constitution founded on te Tiriti could assist in creating institutional and societal spaces that respect the cultures and aspirations of all people in this country.

The biggest constitutional question that Aotearoa faces is in relation to tino rangatiratanga and Māori rights. These discussions focus on Te Tiriti o Waitangi as the founding document, supported by other sources including He Whakaputanga o te Rangatiratanga o Niu Tirenī / The Declaration of Independence of the United Tribes of New Zealand of 1835, tikanga [customs, practices] and human rights instruments, notably the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

Aotearoa's constitutional arrangements have been and continue to be the subject of significant political and legal debate. Although there are differing views about what the arrangements should be, there is general recognition that te Tiriti is a key source in the nation's unwritten constitution, that the nature of te Tiriti within existing constitutional arrangements is unsettled, and that most if not all significant constitutional questions touch on te Tiriti to a material extent with social and political importance.¹¹⁶ In terms of specific arrangements, there is growing literature and proposals for how te Tiriti could be given effect in a modern constitutional setting. Notable work by Māori writers include the 2016 report by Matike Mai Aotearoa, an independent iwi group working on constitutional transformation, and *He Puapua*, a report commissioned by Te Puni Kōkiri in 2019 to explore how Aotearoa could give effect to the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

I start with the premise that te Tiriti should have a central place in our constitutional arrangements. This includes honouring legal, political, economic and social rights for Māori as consistent with te Tiriti and recognition of tino rangatiratanga. Te Tiriti should influence and shape, to a deep extent, the structures of our public institutions and relationships between communities and individuals. Cementing the position, status and rights of Māori as tangata whenua will, to a great extent, alleviate the perceived political and constitutional threat that immigrant communities and population growth pose to Māori.

As described earlier, some Asian people are unsettled by a future founded on te Tiriti. The Constitutional Advisory Panel, set up in 2011 to review and consult on constitutional arrangements, noted concerns that “a largely bicultural institutional dialogue was excluding other ethnic groups who formed a significant part of New Zealand's changing demographics.”¹¹⁷ The Panel responded that “the Treaty of Waitangi offered strong multicultural potential and, along with robust ethnic community engagement and development, would be critical to achieving access and acceptability in New Zealand.” The concerns and issues faced by Asian communities are often underpinned by the same systemic causes that have undermined te Tiriti and side-lined Māori. The existing cultural and political setting disenfranchises Māori and other non-Pākehā people, failing to recognise and support their social, economic and political well-being. Exploring a te Tiriti-centered constitution is an opportunity to reset and transform the institutional structures and settings that have made it difficult for all non-Pākehā communities to thrive. Recognising the interdependence of Māori and non-Māori people and their well-being, Quince writes that “when migrants struggle on our whenua, we feel whakamā – the embarrassment of being poor hosts – which undermines our mana and status as first peoples.”¹¹⁸

In exploring what a te Tiriti-centered future could look like, discussions should explicitly address the place of non-Pākehā tauwi. The perspectives shared in the previous section indicate that there is significant ambiguity around the relationship of te Tiriti to Asian communities (and non-Pākehā tauwi more generally). This could include clarifying their political identity, rights, entitlements, and responsibilities. If left underdefined, the vacuum leaves Asian people vulnerable to ostracism and attack by politicians when it is expedient to do so. Clarity would allow Asian communities to have a stronger and more certain sense of belonging in Aotearoa, as well as open up opportunities to strengthen interethnic relationships more broadly. The Māori-Pākehā relationship continues to be an important and relevant lens to consider the history and legacy of colonisation. At the same time, Asian communities also have a history which is intertwined with Aotearoa's colonial past and present, which should be grappled with and considered.

While te Tiriti can create space for Asian communities, it also creates interdependence and reciprocal responsibilities. Moana Jackson uses the analogy of the marae to illustrate this point: Te Tiriti o Waitangi for me welcomed people from somewhere else onto our marae. You are welcome. You can live your lives as who you are. But this is the basic kawa: that you will respect the rights of others, you will respect the land and you will work together to make this a better place.¹¹⁹

What does this require of each partner? For Māori, Kukutai and Rata talk about manaakitanga [hospitality] that extends to all communities who are here.¹²⁰ Quince also presents three principles of “manaaki, aroha and utu”:

Manaaki refers to the ethic of host responsibility – and the reciprocal action of “aki,” inherent in the lifting up of the mana of others. Utu also captures the aspect of mutuality – similar to the idea of social contract in Western terms – that protection and safety may be offered in return for the resources, efforts, and skills of newcomers. Aroha, of course, refers to love and compassion – which might include taking refugees or those in need of shelter and care, who may take some time to add value to the host community – emphasising the ongoing relationship inherent in migration practices.¹²¹

In return, honouring te Tiriti is a responsibility on all who have or wish to make Aotearoa New Zealand their home. In doing so, Asian communities should consider how to support Māori in succeeding politically, socially and economically, and on their own terms. Depending on the context, this may require individuals and groups to rethink or reframe their aspirations, as well as an awareness of their own positioning, histories and potential role in perpetuating injustices and inequalities within the existing system. The interdependencies between Māori and tauwiwi communities are summarised by Kukutai and Rata as:

Only when tino rangatiratanga is realised will Māori be in a position to fully express manaakitanga to manuhiri (guests)... and tauwiwi have an opportunity to reciprocate manaakitanga by supporting Māori in their efforts to gain recognition and redress for Treaty breaches, and to realise tino rangatiratanga.¹²²

A Path Forward

Transforming constitutional arrangements is a slow process and one that can take many years and decades. In the previous section, I set down an aspirational direction which embraces the mutually supporting goals of Māori and Asian communities. However, achieving this will not be easy or straightforward, and no constitutional arrangement will be a panacea. In this final section, I consider what Asian people could do to advance this direction and propose four calls to action – starting with the self and ending with society.¹²³

The first is for Asian people to position ourselves as individuals and as diverse communities in Aotearoa, which requires knowing our whakapapa alongside exploring our membership in Aotearoa as underpinned by te Tiriti. This includes a willingness and responsibility to learn about te Tiriti and to recognise that it is relevant to all tauwiwi. For some, it may mean confronting the complicit mould of a model minority and embracing a readiness to challenge the status quo. Each person will have a different journey and starting point. For me, the process of writing this article has been part of a journey to understand my connection to te Tiriti.

Secondly, we should consider how we, as a pan-Asian community, can deepen connections and foster a stronger collective identity and platform. Instead of politicians or the media determining when and how Asian people become visible, we should define the Asian identity in Aotearoa. Mok touched this opportunity, writing:

In New Zealand, the ‘Asian’ label has yet to become a strong collective identifier that unites our diverse groups from within, except in times of strife. ... It takes actual physical attacks to mobilise Asian communities into political action. But ‘stop hitting us please’, though difficult to argue with, doesn’t go very deep - we never manage to catch the roots. Opportunities to break down ideologies, to deepen connections between our communities and with other communities, are appearing like never before. To seize these opportunities requires acute self-awareness, and openness to those who are unfamiliar or hostile. It’s a moment of negotiation and vulnerability. No wonder we’re afraid.¹²⁴

The third area is for Māori and Asian peoples to continue building relationships with each other, whether at the individual, community or pan-Asian level. The process of building relationships breaks down insularity, encourages discovery of shared values and whakapapa, and allows cultural connections to be deepened to forge more enduring relationships. Rata and Al-Asaad have written about whakawhanaungatanga [relationship building] as a framework and foundation for future Māori-tauwi relationships.¹²⁵ Building relationships and being in community with one another will help Māori and Asian communities move away from narratives mediated through mainstream society and to find new foundations for aroha, solidarity and reciprocated manaakitanga. While we will not see eye to eye on everything and there will inevitably be points of tension and contention, deeper relationships will enable these issues to be navigated with love, sensitivity, and respect and to hold space for difference.¹²⁶

Finally, Asian communities should be more active voices and visible participants in society. Constitutional conversations involve everyone in Aotearoa, including Pākehā and other tauwi, and change requires political will and support across the population. Asian peoples have an opportunity to bring other people on board, contribute our perspectives and worldviews to the discussion, and to advocate for greater understanding by all tauwi of te Tiriti. We can and should be greater political allies for Māori in constitutional transformation. For a long time, Asian people have learnt to stay quiet and inconspicuous, fearing that greater visibility would draw the fickle and unwanted attention of mainstream society. This strategy no longer serves us well, and it is time to embrace the power of a collective and political voice.

Conclusion

This article has traced the migration history by Asian peoples to Aotearoa New Zealand and examined how their relationships with Māori has evolved and been influenced by the social, economic and political climate. Although they have often been pitted against each other by mainstream narratives, Māori and Asian communities share many common values and are natural allies – including in constitutional transformation. Despite perceptions to the contrary, there is strong compatibility between recognising te Tiriti while supporting Aotearoa’s ethnically and culturally diverse population. Honouring te Tiriti is a foundational step towards addressing injustice and supporting all those who live in Aotearoa.

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