

New Zealand's Chinese Gold-Mining Heritage:

(Re) Telling their Stories

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The Chinese gold rush in New Zealand occurred between 1865 and 1900, nearly all of Chinese miners were males of Cantonese rural area.

The first group of Chinese miners arrived New Zealand in 1865. They were invited from Victoria goldfields in Australia by the authorities and the Dunedin Chamber of Commerce, as a quickly available source of labour to expand the population and rework the Otago goldfield after European miners left for the richer West Coast goldfields. The Chinese were chosen because they were thought to be hardworking, law-abiding and they preferred to return home eventually. By 1869 the Chinese gold seekers were coming directly from China as well. This inflow became the mainstream of Chinese arrivals.

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The Chinese miners first worked in the Otago goldfields. Their number reached a peak of 4,200 in 1871, before it spilled over to the goldfields on the West Coast. The spill over to the West Coast reached its own peak of about 1,600. By the mid 1870s Chinese made up the largest minority group on the West Coast goldfields. The highest recorded number of all Chinese miners was 5,004, in 1881. The Chinese also entered other employment in the goldfields, like farm labouring, market gardening, laundering and railway and road building. Some managed to establish their own small business, especially in market gardening, and laundering. These were also the industries they went into when gold was exhausted.

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Many Chinese gold seekers experienced hardship in New Zealand. Their living conditions were generally poor. Most of the Chinese miners spoke very little English, and had a hard time communicating with Europeans. For this reason they relied on kinship and stuck together. This however reinforced their separateness from the Europeans.

The Chinese were disliked by the Europeans not only because of their distinct physical and cultural appearance, but also their competitive potential. They were excluded from New Zealand's society and were banned to live in the towns or be buried in local grave yards. In response, they formed

small Chinese communities and established their own camps outside the towns. During the 1870s, there were about 25 Chinese communities established in Central Otago and the West Coast. The largest Chinese camp was in Lawrence, had about 120 residents, Chinese doctors, shops, hotels, joss houses and opium and gambling houses. The remains of Chinese headstone and buildings can still be seen today, especially in Otago region. A few Chinese miners were successful and have earned respect from the Europeans. The best known of them was Choie Sew Hoy. He was the key pioneer of the New Zealand Gold Dredge

There was always antagonism against the Chinese since their first arrival. Since the number of Chinese miners increased quite fast in the 1870s, a serious concern over the Chinese influx started. The Chinese were labelled “The Yellow Peril” and were seen as an economic and social threat to the European community. From 1881 antagonism against Chinese started to focus increasingly on race. The Chinese was seen as an inferior race, and the immigration of Chinese to New Zealand was then very much restricted. Two main parliamentary acts were passed to stop Chinese immigration in 1881 and 1896. Both acts imposed a poll tax on the entry of new Chinese immigrants, the latter act raising the poll tax from £10 to £100. This Poll Tax was levied on no people of other nationalities but the Chinese. This Poll Tax was remained until 1944

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The Chinese were the largest non-European and non-Polynesian immigrant group to arrive New Zealand during the Gold Rush era. Their stories were long ignored as the mainstream of New Zealand history emerged out of the confluence of European and Polynesian experience and interests. Until recent decades, the Chinese contribution to New Zealand’s development was largely unknown and unacknowledged.

There were only 4 Chinese sites were registered by New Zealand Historic Places Trust before 2002.

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And there is only one Chinese gold mining site being interpreted to the public, which is Arrowtown Chinese Settlement. It was first excavated in the early 1980s and then restored as the compensation for the loss of the last large remain of Cromwell's Chinatown in the construction of Clyde Dam.

There are a couple of other gold mining attractions have Chinese components. Shantytown is located on the West Coast. It is a replica of old gold mining town. It has a small Chinatown, which includes 4 buildings and a vegetable garden. This is the only site on the West Coast that includes Chinese component.

Through the request of local Chinese community, the Otago Settler’s Museum in Dunedin has a permanent display on the Chinese history. It tells “the story of Otago's Chinese community from their first arrivals in 1865 right up to the present, including life on the Otago Goldfields, the move into towns and cities and the eventual assimilation of later generations into a New Zealand way of life”

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The situation has changed since 2002, former Prime Minister Helen Clark made a formal apology for discriminatory laws imposed on Chinese immigrants in the late 19th to early 20th centuries. As a part of the apology, New Zealand government supported the establishment of the Chinese Poll Tax Heritage Trust and later paid \$5 million to help promoting the preservation and awareness of Chinese New Zealand history.

In 2003, 10 Chinese gold rush sites was proposed to add to the Trust's Register to make up for the shortcoming in the number of publicly recognized Chinese places; since then 8 sites have been added to the register, taking the total to 12.

There were also redevelopment at Arrowtown Chinese Settlement and Shantytown Chinatown. The redevelopment at Shantytown led to a research project on the Chinese history on the West Coast. The final product of that research will be a published book.

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There have been other recent efforts of promoting Chinese culture and heritage, and the connection between China and New Zealand. A Chinese Garden in Dunedin, the historic gateway to the Otago goldfield, was opened in September 2008.

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Reconstruction project of re-building Lawrence Chinese Camp and turning it to a major tourist destination is underway.

The completed site will have a reconstructed Chinese camp, a Chinese garden, a museum, and all tourists catering facilities, such as cafes, restaurants, hotels, and car parks.

Pictures: how it used to be like – today (only Chinese Empire Hotel left) – its future plan

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A most recent proposal for a Chinese Heritage Trail; It is proposed to start from the Dunedin Chinese garden, link of Lawrence and other Chinese gold mining relics in between, and end at the Chinese settlement of Arrowtown.

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It is very interesting to me that why the Chinese heritage started to receiving more interest today after been neglected for so many years. So I conducted a qualitative research to find this out. I talked to 23 people, including the people who are involved in managing and developing Chinese heritage sites and Chinese group tour guides.

Apart from to explore the reasons for current interesting in (re)develop Chinese heritage in New Zealand, my research also aims to...(objectives 2 and 3). Today I will focus only on my objective No. 1, and very briefly discuss: who are the audiences of the stories of Chinese gold miners.

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Apart from the government apology I have mentioned earlier there are several other factors that are leading the increasing interest to Chinese heritage. There is no particular order for these factors, and they interrelate with one another.

People in New Zealand are starting to realize the importance of heritage and history and becoming more interested in heritage in general. New Zealand as a country is starting to become mature in wanting to recognize all aspects of its history, including the Chinese part.

Since culture and heritage tourism was specifically identified as a sector that requiring further development in New Zealand tourism Strategy 2010, there has been an effort to lift its capacity and to better understand its opportunities. NZTS 2015 states that there will be continued emphasis on the developing heritage tourism. The history of the Chinese has therefore received more attention, especially from the tourism aspects.

For the descendants of Chinese miners, the Chinese heritage in New Zealand is their personal heritage. They have been always strong with being recognized as an important part of New Zealand history and preserving their heritage. The Chinese garden and Lawrence Chinese Camp project are/were both leading by descendants of Chinese early settlers

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The Chinese migrants have become the largest ethnic group among Asian migrants in New Zealand. This increase in number has made the Chinese community in New Zealand more noticeable and influential. The free trade agreement between China and New Zealand has made China become an important economic partner. These changes in New Zealand's societal structure and economic circumstances fostered a greater interest and appreciation of New Zealand Chinese culture and heritage.

Increasing number of Chinese visitors to New Zealand is given as justification for current redevelopment of Chinese heritage. China has already become New Zealand's fourth largest source of international visitors. Some people believe there is need for developing a "Chinese-specific tourism product", and Chinese gold mining heritage tourism product will be the right one.

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The Arrowtown Chinese Settlement was redeveloped in 2003 with the fund from government apology package. The old interpretation was brief, dated, and visually dull. It was focused only on the site itself and couple of miners who lived at the settlement. The upgrade interpretation mixed graphics, photos and text. It covered more information on the origins of the Chinese miners and why they came, how they lived on and beyond the gold fields, their fate and the discrimination toward them. The stories told are not necessarily restricted to Chinese in Arrowtown but also in the region and what generally happened to the Chinese back at the gold mining time. The on-site interpretation tends to focus more on the dark side of the experience of Chinese, as there are not successful stories of the Chinese told. The hard life that the Chinese had and how they were pushed to this end of the town is what people mostly communicate with. Apart from the titles are also in Chinese, the interpretation panel are in English only. It can be a problem for the Chinese visitors who do not know English.

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The Chinatown at Shantytown was rebuilt in 2003. The old Chinatown had only a hut, a couple of sheds and very little interpretation. The new interpretation is with more explanation on where the Chinese miners come from, why they leave China and came to the West Coast, what their lives were like (such as opium smoking), how they mined, and what other industries they went into (such as market gardening). There are also information on the Chinese traditions, beliefs, and customs. Different from Arrowtown, Shantytown Chinatown attempts to interpret the Chinese miners as a collection of individuals who coped with the West Coast in different ways rather than consider them as a big homogenous group. They try to dispel the stereotypes that all the Chinese miners were isolated, experienced hard times and were not treated well. They try to tell the stories of how the

Chinese adapted their lives differently in New Zealand; such as some of them who were successful and owned land and houses; some married European women and stayed on. The display panels are in both Chinese and English.

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The people who are involved in managing the sites suggested that both of the sites are equally popular among international and domestic visitors. Interestingly, in the case of Shantytown, domestic visitors are more satisfied with the Chinatown display than international visitors.

Some developers believe Chinese heritage will fulfil the dearth of products and attractions for Chinese visitors to New Zealand. However the Chinese tour guides disagree. They suggest the Chinese visitors do not generally show such an interest in these Chinese heritage sites, simply because it is not what they come to New Zealand to see. Also, considering they only spend three or four days in New Zealand, Chinese heritage sites can only be an add-on, and only if they have spare time.

Therefore, some other participants suggested Chinese who live in New Zealand, such as Chinese students, Chinese-New Zealander or visitors from other Chinese related regions, such as Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore and Malaysia as possible potential markets, because they could travel in New Zealand independently.

Without the support of further research, the Chinese gold mining stories which should be told, may remain unknown.