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**Opening Address:
Chinese Music Making in Early New Zealand**

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Registrar's Note: This article was published in two parts. It has been reproduced in its entirety here.



Dr James Ng is a leading historian and archivist of the Chinese community in New Zealand. He was born in South China and came to New Zealand in 1941, fleeing with his family from the invading Japanese during World War 2. He grew up in Gore where his grandfather owned a laundry, and like many Chinese refugee children, saw education as the way to success. He has had a notable career in medicine and in public life, and has published a four-volume history, "Windows on a Chinese Past".

The emphasis here is on the historical occurrence of Chinese music making, rather than on the music itself. I am endeavouring to show that the early New Zealand Chinese, like all peoples, valued their musical tradition, which they took overseas as one of their forms of relaxation, nostalgia and entertainment.

The early New Zealand Chinese people were Cantonese in origin, from peasant and rural artisan stock, and were part of the Cantonese diaspora in the 19th century. Most Cantonese went to Southeast Asia but an intrepid branch sought gold in the gold rush countries of the Pacific Rim, namely America, Canada, Australia and New Zealand.

Cantonese formed virtually all the Chinese populations in these four Pacific countries till well after World War 2, when their immigration laws for Chinese were relaxed. In New Zealand, we Cantonese are now the core of the present Chinese minority, about 30,000 of us out of a total Chinese population of about 150,000, about one-fifth. As we say, we are now a minority within a New Zealand minority.

But, the early Chinese history in New Zealand is our Cantonese history. The Cantonese are one of the great migrating peoples in the world, in the top rank, and, except for the Maori, the Cantonese were the people most discriminated against in New Zealand. They did not fit the vision set for a British country and this prejudice was worsened because the Cantonese were competitive aliens and sojourners. The early Cantonese were not settlers and were seen as a people who would not stay to permanently enrich the country. They were like New Zealanders today who go to the Middle East to work, save and return.



Choie Sew Hoy, top Chinese merchant

As small farmers, the Cantonese were part of the backbone of China. They had little

education but were imbued with a high cultural sense. Law-abiding and industrious, they minded their own business and did not chase after women. The immigrants were said to be simultaneously the most defenceless objects and the most formidable opponents of discriminatory legislation because they rolled with the punch. In New Zealand, they produced three pioneers in the gold mining period, Choie Sew Hoy in gold dredging, H. Long in commercial tobacco growing and manufacture, and Chew Chong in the introduction of refrigeration in the dairy industry.

Despite bad discrimination, my father's generation achieved domination in the market gardening, fruit selling and laundry trades. After World War 2, legislation against us was relaxed, and in one remarkable bound, 89 of us graduated from university up to and including 1960.

But when a people are discriminated against, they are disparaged, dehumanised and demonised.



Miner with gold cradle

This is probably the most published photo of a New Zealand Chinese gold miner, taken about 1900. It is likely that he was an old, poverty-stricken miner who was unable to find his fare to return to China. But he personifies the contrived image of the Chinese at the height of the anti-Chinese prejudice – ugly, alien, even menacing.

However, I start my account of early Chinese music-making with a positive report from Cromwell during Chinese New Year in 1886, where the Chinese leader was the top local Chinese merchant and, unfortunately for our purposes, was named Won Kee¹. In 1886, he

¹ Ng, J. *Windows on a Chinese Past*, Chapter 9A, Biographies, 19th Century. Won Kee, Vol. 3, Otago Heritage Book s, 1999, pp.356-367

organised a concert in the Atheneum Hall, the proceeds of which were donated to local institutions. Europeans and Chinese turned up to a capacity house. The Cromwell Brass Band participated and a Chinese band played with cymbals, gong, drum, and 'a kind of bagpipe'. European and Chinese vocalists sang and Won Kee contributed a piece on the Chinese banjo. It was a successful evening, a 'novelty' combined with "congenial action".²

In 1887, a Cromwell newspaper reported:

*Our Celestial fellow citizens have been having a gay time of it last week. Monday last brought in their New Year since when crackers, cymbals, drums and other instruments of noise have been the order of the day – or rather night – A marked feature in their character is the apparent goodwill and absolute freedom from division of opinion among themselves in their various holiday amusements – The Chinese Camp – situated at the head of Melmore Tce – presented quite a gay appearance at night time – a grand display of fireworks took place – a Chinese band added their brazen quota to the din. Among the large crowd assembled could be noticed a fair representation of European faces of both sexes.*³

The same kind of Chinese New Year activities continued till 1893 when rising anti-Chinese sentiment all over New Zealand, and Won Key's departure for China, appeared to significantly sever the Cromwell goodwill.

An 1873 description of Chinese music making in the Chinese Camp at Lawrence, the largest Chinese Camp, reads:

A noticeable feat of the New Year festivities at Chinatown was the vocal and instrumental preferences of several celestial musicians. The instruments used resembled the kithera of the ancient Greeks, and the strains produced in some instances bore striking affinity to those emitted by the Highland bagpipes. Some of the simpler tunes played were not unlike Scotch reels; while the more pretentious compositions rendered reminded us of no earthly sound, save the howling of a gale through the cordage of a full rigged ship. The vocalists would drive an opera house full of people of musical taste mad in one minute thirty seconds by the watch. They sing in an unmelodious grating falsetto and then songs were spun out to an

² *Cromwell Argus*, 16 and 23 February 1886

³ *Cromwell Argus*, 1 February and 1 March 1887

*unconscionable length. One magnificent flight of Mongolian genius in the way of a love song warbled by a Chinese minstrel will long lacerate our acoustic organs. The singer sat bolt upright with one almond eye gazing intent into eternity and his other optic fixed reproachfully on the accompanist. He rendered passionate entreaty by a succession of screeches – and the tender passion found expression in sounds compared to which the moaning of a suffering infant will be seraphic music. Pervading the whole was an independent strain as if someone was vigorously sharpening a saw in the vicinity.*⁴

And here is how our Chinese forebears thought of European music:

*As for music, the Chinese draw the line at that – The sounds [the choir] give forth are too much for their auricular nerves. It is said that one man strolled into the Concert Hall – but retired precipitately when the orchestra struck up. I can quite believe this, for doubtless our ‘harmony’ is to Chinese ears as unharmonious as the Chinese ‘melody’ is to our ears unmelodious...*⁵

The Chinese miners interested in music-making appeared to favour the Chinese fiddles especially the yee wu (er hu or yu), possibly because they were light, portable, and could be used in solo music-making.

The first known reference to a Chinese fiddle was in 1873, when “a Chinese, Wong Quin, treated an audience at Ross to a fantasia on the Chinese fiddle and also sang a song”⁶. Also in 1873, James Shum, then working at Upper Pomahaka, went to McKay’s store in Roxburgh to buy supplies and resin, presumably for the strings of a Chinese fiddle.

In 1882, a Chinese house (or store) was described in Welshman’s Gully where “some twenty or thirty Celestials were passing the happy hours away [on Sunday] by smoking opium, playing the fiddle (a hollow wooden mallet with two pieces of catgut attached) and amusing themselves [playing fan-tan]”⁷. In 1891, Rev. Don noted on the declining Chinese rush to the Round Hill goldfield, “... the guitar and violin hang on the wall; and the

lascivious song is hushed.”⁸ The Naseby storekeeper Joe Young used to go out on to



An Erhu, or Chinese fiddle
[Wikimedia Commons](#)

the street on fine Saturday nights and played a one-string Chinese fiddle”⁹.

Sinclair’s Fiddles

The Graham Sinclair collection of Chinese miners’ items, now deposited in Te Papa, has two Chinese fiddles, one apparently homemade and the other repaired. The Sinclair family lived next to the Adams Flat Chinese Camp, and when a Chinese died, his mates would send back anything valuable such as money, a watch, or a piece of jade, and otherwise closed up the hut. The Sinclairs collected whatever they could when the last Chinese man died or left, and before Graham himself died, he asked me to find a home for the collection.

⁴ *Tuapeka Times*, 6 February 1873

⁵ *NZ Presbyterian*, 1 April 1890, p.183

⁶ *Tuapeka Times*, 11 April 1888

⁷ *Mt Ida Chronicle*, 18 November 1882

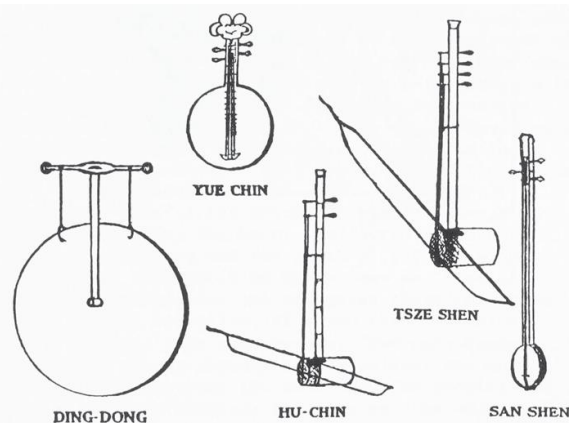
⁸ *NZ Presbyterian*, 1 May 1893, p.203

⁹ Ng, J. *Windows on a Chinese Past*, Otago Heritage Books, Vol. 1, 1993, p.208

Other Chinese musical instruments, I suspect, being less simple and mobile than the yee wu guitar to take around would have been imported chiefly by residents in the Chinese Camps. In 1886, the Lawrence Chinese Camp imported a number of musical instruments, and an article in *Tuapeka Times* of 17 April 1886s reported that “when the members of the new band have attained a proper stage of efficiency, they will be pleased to assist or give an entertainment in aid of any worthy object”¹⁰. However, the situation then at Lawrence was a rising prejudice against Chinese, inflamed by an Australian editor of the *Tuapeka Times* and the offer was not taken up. That editor published gems of prose like “filth-begrimed, opium-besotted horde of Mongolian monstrosities”.

The Presbyterian Chinese Mission Church in Dunedin and its end-of-year social, shows an adoption of Western music-making by the first full-blooded Chinese family in New Zealand, whose mother, I think, pushed her children into social integration.

These were the Lo Keongs, or Lows as the children later called themselves. In 1900 at the church social,¹¹ Norman Lo Keong sang and played the violin while his sister Tilly played the piano. In addition, that night, a Mr Loie played the Chinese flute and a Mr Wong, the Chinese guitar. Tilly Lo Keong became the first Chinese registered piano teacher in Dunedin and probably in New Zealand¹², and Norman, who apparently had a fine singing voice, became an engineer and was the first Chinese university graduate in New Zealand. He was gassed during World War 1 and died postwar from that. In 1909, the performers at the church social included Mr Kong Sze Yau who played the flute and Mr Chan Yau-Tsun the harpsichord.¹³



Chinese Musical Instruments
Wikimedia Commons

I hope I have shown that the early New Zealand Chinese were not devoid of music-making in. I have dipped into the records in Otago, and Julia Bradshaw has some confirming references on the West Coast¹⁴. She mentions, for example, that John Ah Chuck played a Chinese instrument in public in 1874, and that a Chinese band existed in 1880 as well as in 1888. Miss Bradshaw had another reference to a Chinese band in 1892, and eight Chinese musicians played at a church fundraiser in 1900.

I recently came across a Timaru reference in 1879 to a Chinese man playing Chinese string instruments and giving a song¹⁵. The New Zealand Chinese in the 20th century also had their music.

In my childhood I remember seeing Chinese musical instruments in a big market garden, and gramophone records of Chinese opera, and peers who played the harmonica and accordion. So it seems to me, and I hope to you as well, that music-making is a universal human pastime.

¹⁰ *Tuapeka Times*, 17 April 1886

¹¹ *The Outlook*, 21 July 1900, p.6

¹² Tilly's card is in *Wise's New Zealand Post Office Directory*, 1905, p.294. She was probably listed as the music teacher listed in the Chinese section of the 1891 census.

¹³ *The Outlook*, 25 September 1909, p.11

¹⁴ Bradshaw, J. *Golden Prospects. Shantytown, Greymouth* 2009.

¹⁵ *Timaru Herald*, 26 February 1879, p.7