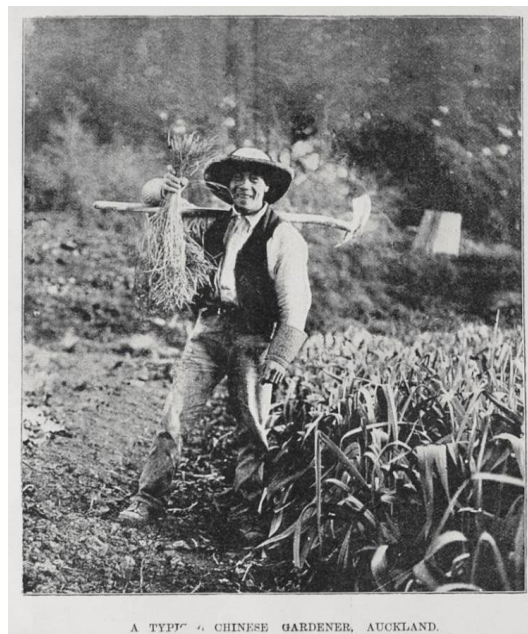


Resilient Roots: Restrictions, Regulation, and Auckland's Chinese Grocers and Growers 1890-1920s

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Tāmaki Makaurau's produce economy revolved around market gardening - an efficient and labour-intensive practice which could sustain the demand of an increasing population. Consumer purchase power was not relegated to supermarket giants as it is today, instead resting with the fresh-market and corner grocer. A cross section of this field-to-fork economy unveils the immense contributions of its Chinese community as important producers, distributors, and sellers of consumables.



Auckland's first-known Chinese market gardeners arrived in 1866.¹ By 1908, at least 200 fruit and vegetable shops and 4,000 acres of planting land were leased and operated by Chinese people nationally.² By 1921, approximately 57% of the working Chinese population were employed as gardeners or sellers of fruit and vegetables.³ However, this success was hard-won. Even in niches which Europeans seldom occupied, like market-gardening, Chinese

¹ "Out of the Past" *The Auckland Star*, 23 October, 1956, 2.

² Report of Chinese Consul. "V. Chinese workers in New Zealand" by Hwang Yung Liang, 30 June 1908, University of Auckland Libraries and Learning Services, MSS & Archives, Manying Ip Further Papers 2022/02 3/8, 1631.

³ Census and Statistics Office, Results of A Census Of The Dominion of New Zealand taken for the Night of the 17th April, 1921. Part VI. Race Aliens. (Wellington: Census and Statistics Office, 1921), 10.

involvement was overwhelmingly unwelcome.⁴ Popular stereotypes depicted Chinese people as freeloading, unsanitary, and immoral; demagogues made several legislative attempts to constrain Chinese immigration and residence. In Auckland, clan and village loyalties remained central. Yet, an emerging ‘Chinese business community’ which connected merchants, retailers, street hawkers, and gardeners became a valuable site of interconnection.⁵ This article will broadly trace the development of this community through tales of some of its most prominent members. It will explore how Auckland-based Chinese gardeners and grocers supported the livelihoods and enterprises of themselves and others through ‘chain migration’ despite heavy restrictions. It argues that market gardens and grocers were both sites of social connection, and outward surveillance.



Chinese Market Gardens in Western Springs, opposite the foot of modern-day Bullock Track

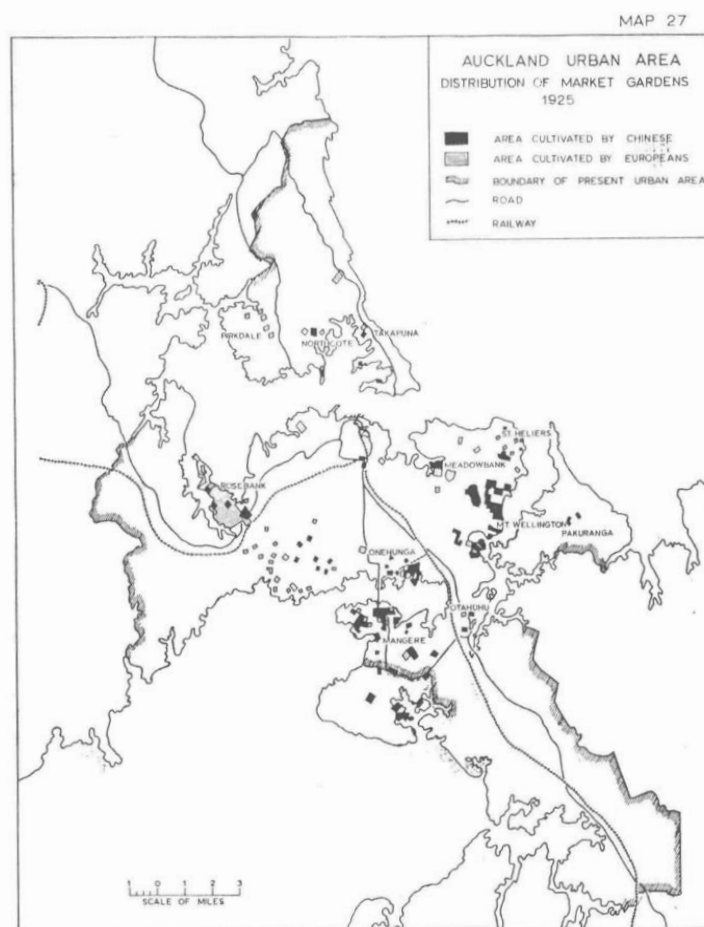
Poll Tax, Naturalisation, and the “Chinese Connection”⁶

⁴ Thomas Wong Doo III, Lorna and David Wong, Ōrākei, 25 August 2011, Chinese New Zealand Oral History Foundation. Auckland Libraries Heritage Collections OH-1403-005.

⁵ Joanna Boileau, "The Social Environment," in *Chinese Market Gardening in Australia and New Zealand : Gardens of Prosperity* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 231.

⁶ Thomas Wong Doo III Oral History.

From 1881, twenty-one separate bills purporting to restrict Chinese immigration went before the New Zealand parliament; though only a few passed.⁷ The debate over the Asiatic and Other Immigration Restriction Bill 1895 was one of the most infamous, specifically referencing Auckland Chinese market gardeners as an example of ‘unfair competition’ and ‘unsanitariness’ and inspiring the policies of the Immigration Restriction Act 1899.⁸ In the background of these debates was a growing pattern of inward Chinese migration due to the decline of the Otago gold rush. Chinese immigrants drifted Northward – particularly to Auckland and Wellington, which were the pre-eminent port cities.⁹



⁷ Charles P. Sedgwick, “Persistence, Change and Innovation: The Social Organization of the New Zealand Chinese 1866-1976.” *Journal of Comparative Family Studies* 16, no. 2 (1985): 208.

⁸ New Zealand, *Parliamentary Debates*, Legislative Council and House of Representatives, 1895, 347 (William Pember Reeves, Member of Parliament) <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/uc1.32106019787982>.

⁹ Census and Statistics Office, *Part VI. Race Aliens*, 4; David Ng, "Ninety years of Chinese settlement in New Zealand, 1866 to 1956" (Masters and Honours Thesis, University of Canterbury, 1962), 57-8.

One such story was Chan Dah-Chee (known as ‘Ah Chee’) who left China in the late 1860s and arrived in Auckland in the 1870s, to begin work as a gardener and hawker of fruit and vegetables.¹⁰ From there, he was able to establish himself as a prominent businessman, opening his first fruit and vegetable shop on Queen Street in 1880.¹¹ About that time, Thomas Wong Doo emigrated to New Zealand on the invitation of his older brother, and at age 15 began work as a market gardener.¹² Before the Cabinet's decision to revoke Chinese naturalisation rights in 1908, these men, alongside others who were naturalised, acted as crucial advocates for newcomers.¹³ The Ah Chee family operated a business in Hong Kong, which connected people to voyages, facilitated layovers in places like Australia, and supplied provisions.¹⁴ Upon arrival, the Ah Chees, the Wong Doos, the Wah Lees, and others would pay the £100 poll tax, and provide guarantees and references for incoming migrants, in exchange for labour or gifts.¹⁵ These families also provided financial services. Wong Doo, for example, became a de-facto banker; his grandson recounts that he “...would open bank accounts...with joint names... old man Doo had a big safe...[and people would] deposit.”¹⁶ Wong Doo, and his sons acted as capital vendors, loaning sums of up to £1000 to people to establish their own market gardens or shops.¹⁷ *Heung Lee* (village cousins) would often work and operate businesses in close proximity of each other.¹⁸

¹⁰ Booklet, “Ah Chee Centenary 1991”, 1, University of Auckland Libraries and Learning Services, MSS & Archives, Manying Ip Further Papers 2022/02 4/2.

¹¹ Ah Chee Centenary 1991, 1.

¹² Thomas Wong Doo III Oral History.

¹³ Charles P. Sedgwick, “The Politics of Survival: A Social History of the Chinese in New Zealand” (PhD Thesis, University of Canterbury, 1982), p.234.

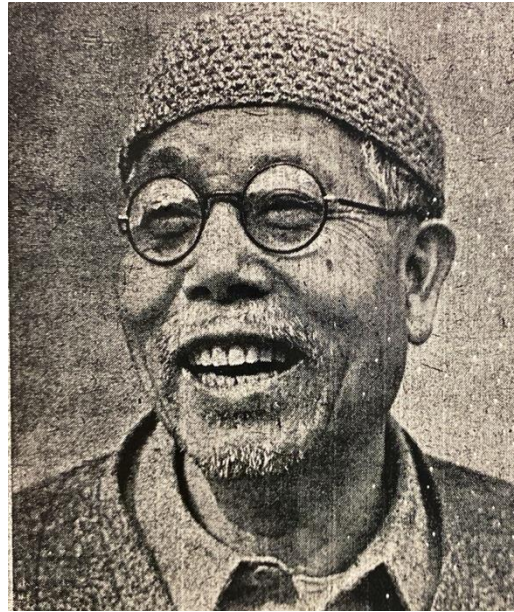
¹⁴ Thomas Wong Doo III Oral History.

¹⁵ Thomas Wong Doo III Oral History; James Letcher, Interview by Manying Ip. Unpublished Transcript. Mount Albert, Auckland, 25 February 1990. University of Auckland Libraries and Learning Services University of Auckland Libraries and Learning Services, MSS & Archives, Manying Ip Further Papers 2022/02 99 8/4; Barry Wah Lee, Sue Gee, Auckland, 4 June 2006, Chinese New Zealand Oral History Foundation. Auckland Libraries Heritage Collections OH-1396-008.

¹⁶ Thomas Wong Doo III Oral History.

¹⁷ James Ng, *Windows on a Chinese Past*, vol. 3 (Dunedin: Otago Heritage Books) 1999, p.235; Thomas Wong Doo III Oral History.

¹⁸ Lily Lee and Ruth Lam. *Sons of the Soil: Chinese Market Gardeners in New Zealand Huángtǔ Zǐsì*. (Pukekohe: Dominion Federation for New Zealand Chinese Commercial Growers) 2012, 15.



Thomas Wong Doo

While modern readers may be astounded by the generosity of these families, European contemporaries were not impressed. In 1907, *New Zealand Truth* described these kinship networks as a “conspiracy” to import “indentured slaves” to the Dominion.¹⁹ Unsurprisingly, these very attitudes only strengthened Chinese inter-community support and reliance on each other for help in migration matters. One key way established members of Auckland’s Chinese community helped incoming migrants was in passing the English language tests.

English Tests

The Chinese Immigrants Amendment Act 1907 mandated that all incoming migrants must read a printed passage in English aloud to the satisfaction of an immigration officer.²⁰ Former Auckland immigration worker, James Letcher, recalls the process:

“If the passenger was White British or American they were allowed to go ashore, if not, he was referred to a senior officer who made the necessary decisions.”²¹

¹⁹ “Capitalistic Chinese Conspirators.” *New Zealand Truth*, November 2, 1907, 4.

²⁰ Chinese Immigrants Amendment Act 1907, sec.3.

²¹ James Letcher, Interview by Manying Ip. Unpublished Transcript. Mount Albert, Auckland, 19 March 1990. University of Auckland Libraries and Learning Services, MSS & Archives, Manying Ip Further Papers 2022/02 8/4.

In Auckland, the English test was usually from the leading article of that morning's *Herald*.²² Members of the Auckland Chinese community caught wind of this and used it to their advantage. Chan Sai Louie and Wong Doo would climb aboard ships, translate, and help newcomers sound out the necessary words to get through.²³ If they failed the test, they had the right to appeal to a magistrate, and Wong Doo's lawyer often represented those whose passage he had assisted.²⁴ At their residence and grocery store on Wakefield Street, Wong Doo's wife, Unui Doo, would also help Chinese people translate official papers and documentation.²⁵



Market Gardens in Newmarket with Maungawhau Mt. Eden in the background

Midnight Raids and the Permit System

Whereas language could be taught, and money could be found, ministerial discretion was inalienable. The Immigration Restriction Amendment Act of 1920 did not allow the entry of non-British people to New Zealand without a pre-departure permit approved by the Minister of Customs and no explanation was required for refusal.²⁶ Public pressure on the government saw Chinese admission entirely refused, except for temporary visitor permits for students and

²² Letcher, Interview, 19 March 1990.

²³ Letcher, Interview, 19 March 1990.

²⁴ Letcher, Interview, 25 February 1990.

²⁵ Manying Ip 'Unui Wong Doo (nee Chan) Article/Biography', (Unpublished Manuscript, n.d.), typescript. University of Auckland Libraries and Learning Services, MSS & Archives, Manying Ip Further Papers 2022/02 8/4.

²⁶ David Ng, 40.

businessmen - though even these arrivals were viewed with suspicion.²⁷ A confidential circular to shipowners warned that it was rare that non-Europeans would "...be desirous of merely visiting the country".²⁸ As early as ten years before the 1920 Amendment Act, Chinese merchants had been denied entry to New Zealand, unless they could provide specific assurances they would not engage in trade.²⁹ Once permits were granted, compliance was strictly monitored. It was common practice for Auckland immigration officers to carry out 'Midnight Raids' on Chinese market gardens and dwellings.³⁷ Letcher estimates that in his six-year term from the late 1920s, there were 60 to 70 of these raids in Auckland, but that the number could be as high as 150.⁴² Following one raid at a garden in Māngere, where five Chinese gardeners were apprehended, Thomas Wong Doo handed in another 'overstayer', negotiating an extension of his permit.⁴⁰ Unlike the sensationalised reports of raids on Chinese opium 'dens', the raids on market gardens were largely kept out of the papers – though they were of keen public interest.



—If the disclosures in connection with a recent raid in a Chinese garden are to be made public?

Cultivating Competition

Fears of economic pressure introduced by immigrant 'competition' are longstanding and enduring. Because they made such immense contributions to Auckland's horticultural landscape, their presence was a point of tension for Europeans. In 1908, Auckland's Pākehā growers had formed their own association to prevent a 'Chinese monopoly' on market gardening.³⁰ Complaints typically fell along the following lines: that Chinese gardeners and grocers were willing and able to work longer hours than Europeans, able to sell their produce

²⁷ David Ng, 40.

²⁸ Customs Department Circular, April 19, 1921, Customs Department Wellington, University of Auckland Libraries and Learning Services, University of Auckland Libraries and Learning Services, MSS & Archives, Manying Ip Further Papers 2022/02 8/4.

²⁹ Correspondence regarding Chinese Consul, 17 Aug 1909, Special Collections, University of Auckland Libraries and Learning Services, George Matthew Fowlds papers 1906-1965, MSS A-18 2/96,

³⁰ "Chinese Market Gardeners" *Evening Post*, June 1, 1908, 2.

for less, were sapping European support for European enterprises, and would someday take over the horticultural sector.³¹ The place of Chinese growers in local and regional economies was frequently debated in direct connection to immigration. For example, MP William Pember Reeves argued in the 1890s:

*“If the white gardeners have been ousted it is because Chinese competition is not fair competition. The whites are handicapped in the competition because they bear burdens which a Chinaman does not... We impose burdens upon [white men] from a great many of which the Chinese gardener, the Chinese trader, the Chinese shopkeeper, and the Chinese digger escape.”*³²

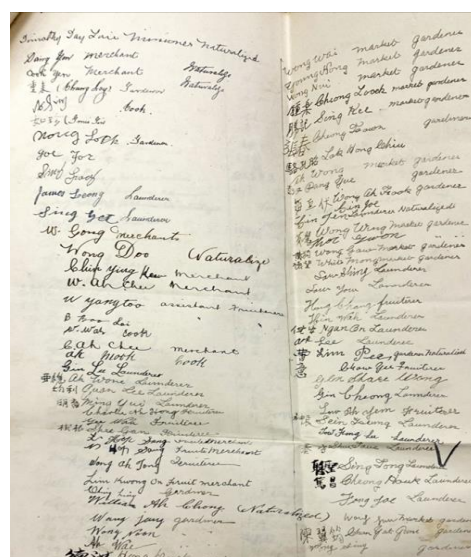


Social Connection and Organisation

³¹ “Foreign Fruiterers” *Evening Star*, March 19, 1920, 10.

³² New Zealand, *Parliamentary Debates*, Legislative Council and House of Representatives, 1895, 347 (William Pember Reeves, Member of Parliament) <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/uc1.32106019787982>.

Groceries were important sites of social and political connection. Thomas Wong Doo III recounts his family's store attracting diverse crowds of gardeners who would come from the markets in Civic Square (now Aotea Square), to play mah-jong and chat.³³ Unui Doo would often mend clothes and preside over visitors from as far north as Whangārei and as far South as Ohakune.³⁴ In 1923, Wong Doo and four others formed the Kwong Cheu Club to help relatives and kin navigate life in Auckland; 11 out of the 15 signatories on its founding document were market gardeners.³⁵ These networks were essential in petitioning and protesting their "...painful position in the dominion".³⁶ From 1883 to 1907, the Chinese New Zealanders submitted nineteen separate petitions to the government. While the only formal success was the establishment of a Chinese Consul in 1908, the constant political pressure demarcated Chinese New Zealanders as a visible and vocal minority, arguably slowing further slights on their rights as a group.³⁷ Important petitions to come from Auckland residents protested restrictions imposed by both the Chinese Immigrants Act of 1881, and the Chinese Immigrants Amendment Act of 1907.³⁸



A 1911 petition from Auckland Chinese Residents to the Minister of Justice protesting violent Sinophobic remarks made by the Mayor of Parnell. 106 signatories are gardeners.

³³ Thomas Wong Doo III Oral History.

³⁴ Manying Ip 'Unui Wong Doo (nee Chan) Article/Biography'.

³⁵ Lee and Lam, *Sons of the Soil: Chinese Market Gardeners in New Zealand Huangtū Zisi*, 328-9.

³⁶ "A Chinese Petition", *Ashburton Guardian*, May 6, 1908, 4.

³⁷ Charles P. Sedgwick, "Persistence, Change and Innovation : The Social Organization of the New Zealand Chinese 1866-1976." *Journal of Comparative Family Studies* 16, no. 2 (1985): 209.

³⁸ "A Petition from the Chinese." *New Zealand Herald*, June 18, 1888, 11; "A Chinese Petition".

Horticulture opened doors for many of Auckland's Chinese community. Today, when most of Auckland's market gardens have been redeveloped as urban and industrial spaces, and many small groceries sold and closed, it is ever important to honour those who've gone before, and those who remain. For the Chinese community, gardens and groceries were significant places for connection in what was, for many, a completely foreign environment, where their entrepreneurship was more likely to be viewed with suspicion than respect. By approaching these histories from the context of regulation, prejudice, and resilience, we can begin to grasp the immense generosity and tight bonds between the members of Auckland's Chinese community. Recent scholarship plays an increasing part in locating histories of Chinese New Zealanders in mainstream narratives of Auckland's – and Aotearoa's - histories. To detach the Chinese market gardener and grocer from their roles in the New Zealand business, social, and political climate of the 1890s-1920s would be, in this author's view, a serious pedagogical failing.

Images

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