

Friendship at Home: the NZCFS and Chinese in New Zealand

The year was 1989, and the New Zealand China Friendship Society (NZCFS) was reeling from the violent events of the Tiananmen Square Massacre. As explained in my second article, the massacre took place when Chinese People's Liberation Army fired on student protestors in Peking. After news of the deaths and injuries reached New Zealand, the Friendship Society was left unsure of what to do with its relationship with PRC, especially regarding its support for the Chinese government. A press release was quickly sent out, stating the NZCFS's disapproval of the violence and bloodshed. Years later, the society's president, Bill Willmott, reflected on the press release and the NZCFS's actions at the time. If the NZCFS had not publicly criticized the actions of the Chinese government, he imagined it would have been 'the end of the Society.'¹

Ultimately, what was clear was that the Auckland branch, alongside the wider NZCFS, needed to reinvent itself post-Tiananmen Square. This final article (in a series of three) will examine how the Auckland branch shifted its core focus and looked to the Auckland Chinese community as a connecting force throughout the 1990s and into the early years of the twenty-first century. During this period, it would move from a political and ideological interest in China to a more strongly cultural interest.

Internally, the situation in 1989 was more complex. Some members disapproved of the Tiananmen Square press release as they thought it did not give enough consideration to the official Chinese view of the events.² Many members also resigned in the aftermath of the massacre. According to Alistair Shaw, a former NZCFS National Secretary, potentially as many as one in five members may not have renewed their memberships in the following year.³ A delegation consisting of the society's leaders traveled to China to investigate the situation, but left feeling skeptical of the image their Chinese hosts were attempting to present.⁴ Ultimately, the leaders' decision was to depoliticize the society.⁵ In Willmott's words, the NZCFS had 'no official "line" on China'.⁶

¹ Alistair Shaw, "Telling the Truth about People's China" (Thesis, Te Herenga Waka—Victoria University of Wellington, 2010), 216, <https://doi.org/10.26686/wgtn.16970761.v1>.

² Alistair Shaw, "Telling the Truth", 214.

³ Alistair Shaw, "Telling the Truth", 216.

⁴ *ibid.*

⁵ *ibid.*

⁶ *ibid.*

Since the bloodshed of Tiananmen Square impacted the whole society, its effects also trickled into the Auckland branch. 1989 was also the year the society's national executive moved from Auckland to Wellington, so fewer official leaders were based in Auckland from that point on.⁷ Still, the Auckland branch kept an office on Customs Street for a while before moving to the nearby Oriental Markets.⁸ Until the markets permanently closed, Jack Ewen ran an information stall there on behalf of the Auckland branch.⁹ The stall was a place for the NZCFS to sell books and functioned as a public face for the society.

The NZCFS's interest in China transitioned from a political investment in the PRC to cultural aspects of China. This shift in the Society's interest was evident in the Auckland branch's bookstore collection. Their bookstore, China Books, was regularly advertised in their newsletters and highlighted topics such as 'literature, traditional medicine, martial arts, language, health and fitness, cookbooks', and 'children's books'.¹⁰ This contrasted the books that they sold in the 1970s, when the NZCFS worked with Progressive Books to sell left-wing and academic titles.

Additionally, its members did not have to be thoroughly educated on events in China, but their opinions and accounts of their travel or cultural experiences were welcomed.¹¹ For example, NZCFS branch meetings sometimes featured a special, reoccurring topic called 'Tales from Travellers', where people who had visited China were invited to share their experiences.¹²

⁷ Tom Newnham, *Fifty Years of Friendship: a short history of the New Zealand China Friendship Society* (Auckland: Graphic Publications Ltd, 2002), 23.

⁸ Tom Newnham, *Fifty Years of Friendship*, 24.

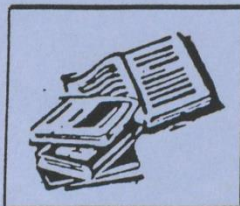
⁹ Cecil Fowler Papers, MSS & Archives Accession 1531, Box R038148114. Special Collections, Te Tumu Herenga | Libraries and Learning Services, University of Auckland.

¹⁰ *ibid.*

¹¹ *ibid.*

¹² *ibid.*

END BITS



CHINA BOOKS

Specify your interests. Literature, traditional medicine, martial arts, language, health and fitness, cookbooks, children's books, and other topics.

Contact: NZCFS, Box 3460, Auckland or visit our branch stall at the Oriental Markets.

READERS WRITE

THIS COLUMN IS FOR READERS.

We welcome your thoughts on China today, comment about news and events, and stories about your experiences in China. In addition, any material or thoughts on what you would like to see in this newsletter would also be welcome.

Please forward all contributions to:
The Editor, C/-NZ China Friendship Society
Auckland Branch, PO Box 3460, Auckland.

China Books advertisement in an undated Auckland branch newsletter, likely around 1992-93. (Cecil Fowler Papers, MSS & Archives Accession 1531, Box R038148114. Special Collections, Te Tumu Herenga | Libraries and Learning Services, University of Auckland.)

National Day continued to be celebrated, but it was no longer made to be a political special as previously seen by the Auckland branch at the Auckland Museum in 1978. In 1996, members gathered for a low-key, celebratory potluck at then-branch president Cecil Fowler's home near Mt. Roskill.¹³ As this was a casual gathering at her home, it was likely that there were fewer people involved compared to the previous celebrations at the museum and much less fanfare to elevate the PRC. Other National Day celebrations saw branch members going out for dinner at a Chinese restaurant.¹⁴

National Day was not the only holiday that the NZCFS observed. In 1997, some of the branch members participated in a Chinese New Year celebration in Aotea Square.¹⁵ This was a new development as Chinese New Year was not promoted as much as National Day in the society's previous newsletters. Members of the Auckland branch donned 'very elaborate Chinese traditional costumes' for a concert performance seen by approximately five thousand people.¹⁶ Such an event showed that the branch placed importance in connecting and celebrating with the Chinese community in Auckland.

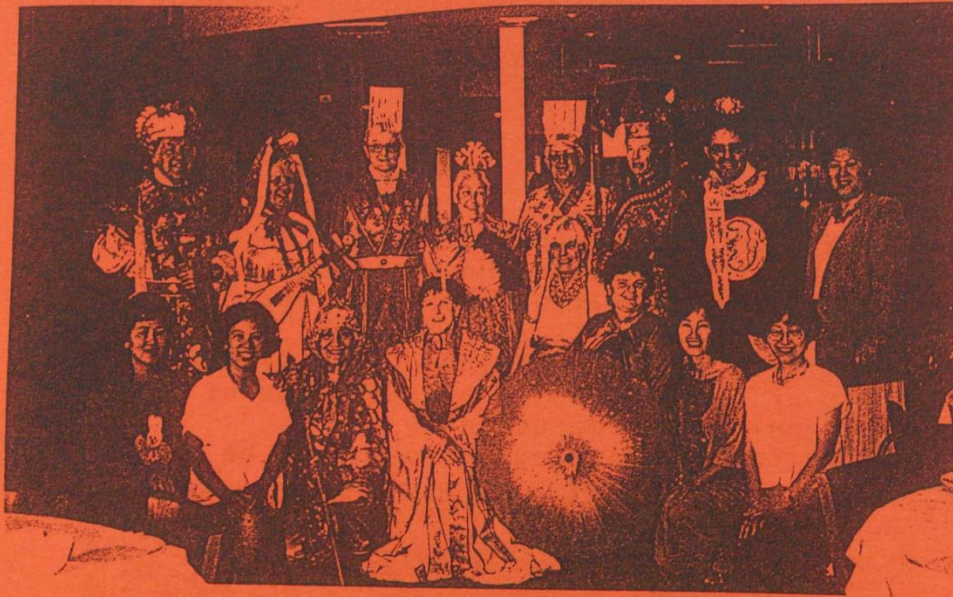
¹³ *ibid.*

¹⁴ *ibid.*

¹⁵ *ibid.*

¹⁶ *ibid.*

CHINESE NEW YEAR IN AOTEA SQUARE



Four society members, Bob and Marie Greetham, Ramai Hayward and Tom Newnham responded to the invitation in your last newsletter and took part in the traditional celebration. Some 5000 persons enjoyed a wonderful concert which included our members performing in very elaborate Chinese traditional costumes.

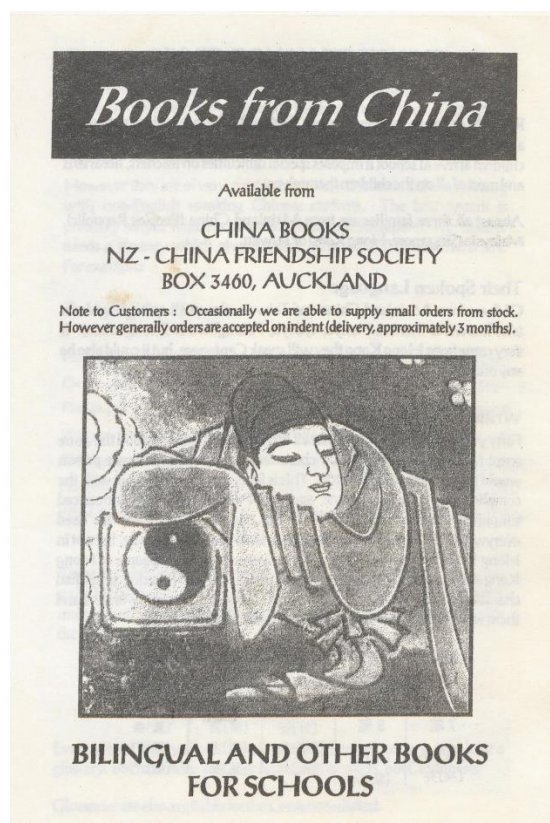
Extract from the March 1997 Auckland branch newsletter featuring some society members in the Aotea Square celebration. Unknown photographer. (Cecil Fowler Papers, MSS & Archives Accession 1531, Box R038148114. Special Collections, Te Tumu Herenga | Libraries and Learning Services, University of Auckland.)

Additionally, the society continued to reach out to Chinese living in Auckland, particularly those who had recently migrated. One newsletter noted the correlation between ‘the increasing numbers of Chinese in Auckland’ and ‘requests... for books in the Chinese language’.¹⁷ While the society explained that they were in the process of attaining books from China International Book Trading Corporation in Mandarin, they were still able to provide a small selection of titles.¹⁸ Since the available books were on Rewi Alley, Kathleen Hall, and Māori myths and legends, it is likely they primarily functioned as a way for Chinese immigrants to learn about Aotearoa New Zealand.¹⁹

¹⁷ *ibid.*

¹⁸ *ibid.*

¹⁹ *ibid.*



NZCFS booklet advertising books from China in English and Mandarin, circa 1993-95. (Cecil Fowler Papers, MSS & Archives Accession 1531, Box R038148114. Special Collections, Te Tumu Herenga | Libraries and Learning Services, University of Auckland.)

To meet the increasing demand for books in Mandarin, the Auckland branch acted further in 1995. Choosing from the large selection of available titles from China Books, they donated \$1,600 worth of children's books to the Auckland Public Library, with a focus on bilingual books with pictures.²⁰ The donation was only made possible through funds from 'an anonymous donor who wished to do something to further friendship and integration between [New Zealanders] and recent Chinese immigrants'.²¹

The NZCFS also sought to learn more about Chinese living in New Zealand. In October 1994, the Auckland branch invited historian Manying Ip to speak about Chinese in New Zealand, with a special focus on new immigrants.²²

Another way the Auckland branch engaged with Chinese living in the city was by establishing an English Corner at Potter's Park.²³ Beginning in 1996, the English Corner was directed toward Chinese immigrants who wanted to improve their conversational English.

²⁰ *ibid.*

²¹ *ibid.*

²² *ibid.*

²³ Tom Newnham, *Fifty Years of Friendship*, 31.

Conceptually, it was based on the Chinese model of students gathering in public parks to practise speaking English.²⁴ The group regularly gathered on Saturdays between the children's playground and the toilet block, and it was a common occurrence to see over a hundred people participating.²⁵ The choice of venue near the playground and toilet block was based on its ability to shelter the group from the weather.²⁶ In a committee meeting, Jack Ewen and Cecil Fowler even reported that 'some Chinese students had walked long distances to attend' the English Corner.²⁷ As the number of regulars increased over time, it was likely that their meetings were an unusual sight to the other parkgoers.

Eventually, more Chinese became actively involved in managing the English Corner. As new leaders from the Chinese community continued to maintain ties with the NZCFS, they often asked members to speak on useful topics for newcomers to New Zealand.²⁸ The English Corner gathered enough attention that a reporter allegedly attended a Community Board meeting in search of a scoop.²⁹ But no matter how the information was released, it was clear that the English Corner had drawn significant public interest. For example, the NZCFS drew attention to the front-page (and somewhat disparaging) headline of the newspaper *Central Leader*: "Chinese Learn English in the Loo", which referenced the English Corner's venue near the toilet block.³⁰ Other headlines, such as "Toilet Training to Continue", followed a similar theme. These articles prompted News Talk 1ZB to reach out to Prime Minister Jenny Shipley, who in turn promised to investigate the matter. The Auckland branch sought to 'set the record straight' in their July 1998 newsletter.

²⁴ *ibid.*

²⁵ Cecil Fowler Papers, MSS & Archives Accession 1531, Box R038148114. Special Collections, Te Tumu Herenga | Libraries and Learning Services, University of Auckland.

²⁶ *ibid.*

²⁷ *ibid.*

²⁸ *ibid.*

²⁹ *ibid.*

³⁰ *ibid.*



The English Corner at Potter's Park, featured in the July 1998 NZCFS Auckland branch newsletter. Unknown photographer. (Cecil Fowler Papers, MSS & Archives Accession 1531, Box R038148114. Special Collections, Te Tumu Herenga | Libraries and Learning Services, University of Auckland.)

The newsletter made it clear that neither the NZCFS nor the Chinese participants were deterred by the *Central Leader's* article. Boldly, it stated: 'Whatever happens the English Corner at Potter's Park will continue.'³¹ They explained that the English Corner was 'a small way to try to meet the [needs]' of recent migrants.³²

As a token of appreciation, the English Corner NZCFS helpers were invited by the Chinese to attend a function at the Mt. Eden War Memorial.³³ This function included 'a splendid song and dance performance followed by a scrumptious lunch'.³⁴ The society members responded with a performance of "Po Kare Kare Ana", led by Ramai Hayward.³⁵

As for the other English-speaking society members, many continued to take an active interest in learning Mandarin. An April 1996 newsletter from the Auckland branch recommended a CD-ROM for Windows.³⁶ As the CD-ROM contained a course on basic Chinese words and phrases, it was a highly recommended starting point for those who wished to learn the

³¹ *ibid.*

³² *ibid.*

³³ *ibid.*

³⁴ *ibid.*

³⁵ *ibid.*

³⁶ *ibid.*

language.³⁷ In the same year, another newsletter advertised Twinbridge, a Microsoft word processor with Chinese characters.³⁸ For those who were less willing to rely on technology, free, in-person Chinese language classes were offered at 14 Rocklands Avenue, Balmoral.³⁹ Tapes were even provided so students could continue to study the language in their own time.⁴⁰

The society continued to prioritize and maintain cordial relations with China throughout the 1990s. The Auckland branch welcomed several delegations coming from China, including Youxie (Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries) in 1995 and a delegation from Xiamen in 1996.⁴¹ Eager for the chance to return the hospitality the NZCFS had received in China, the branch hosted a potluck dinner for the Youxie delegation.⁴² Since the delegation from Xiamen only consisted of five people, executive members Isobel Thompson and Cecil Fowler personally picked up the group from the Auckland airport.⁴³ The delegation was driven around Auckland and was even able to briefly sightsee on the North Shore.⁴⁴

As seen from their film showings and previous seminars on China at the University of Auckland, the society had consistently tried to interact with Aucklanders. But from the 1990s onwards, these interactions were less strictly educational. As the society members could no longer describe themselves as experts on China, their events were more of a way to spread Chinese culture and engage with the Auckland community.

In 2008, the Auckland branch launched a promotional video at the Auckland Lantern Festival. Featuring ‘cross-cultural lyrics and music and four storylines across generations and cultures’, the video was very well-received.⁴⁵ As the video centered young Chinese coming into New Zealand, it was intended to draw more young people into the society. And indeed, over sixty people—many of Chinese descent and under the age of 40—expressed interest in the society after watching the video.⁴⁶ National executive member George Andrews wrote some of his thoughts about the video’s success in an email to Cecil Fowler. ‘Its makers... are

³⁷ *ibid.*

³⁸ *ibid.*

³⁹ *ibid.*

⁴⁰ *ibid.*

⁴¹ *ibid.*

⁴² *ibid.*

⁴³ *ibid.*

⁴⁴ *ibid.*

⁴⁵ Cecil Fowler Papers, MSS & Archives Accession 1531, Box R038148210. Special Collections, Te Tumu Herenga | Libraries and Learning Services, University of Auckland.

⁴⁶ *ibid.*

clearly committed to closer links between Chinese and mainstream New Zealand. That's why so many stopped to watch at the Lantern Festival... They want to find ways to belong and contribute and find friends in New Zealand. Our society could be one of their first places for them to turn; at the moment they don't even know we exist.'⁴⁷

Although the NZCFS had begun with its gaze fixated on the PRC, the passage of time and historical events naturally transformed the society's goals. Members came and went, and as larger numbers of Chinese entered Auckland, the Auckland branch saw several needs they were able to fill. Their story captures the many definitions that 'friendship' can cover. From first pushing for the recognition of China to later teaching English in Potter's Park, the Auckland branch was able to give and receive hospitality from both of the countries they delighted in.

⁴⁷ *ibid.*

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