

*Fan So and Early Chinese Musicians in Aotearoa New Zealand:  
Musical Creativity in an Era of Colonialism, Migration and Discrimination*

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**Abstract**

After warning John McLean of a plot on his life in order to steal his gold, Chinese goldminer, Fan So, became a faithful servant and travelled with him from the Australian goldfields to Aotearoa New Zealand around the middle of the nineteenth century. While McLean became an important and recognised figure in New Zealand, little is known of Fan So. Yet within the scant reports that do mention him, he is portrayed as maintaining musical roots to his Chinese culture through the playing of a 'fiddle'. As part of a deconstruction of the dominant narrative that has so often defined music in a setting of elitism and inequality, this paper recognises Fan So's and other Chinese music making as an assemblage of creativity that demands critical inquiry in an era of colonialism, migration and discrimination. In this context, and adopting a critical historico-biographic perspective through the study of musicking, media sources and secondary literature, this paper is a study of what is known about Fan So, his association with the McLean family, and his music making activities in nineteenth-century New Zealand. The aim of the paper is to re-think what constitutes New Zealand music and to illustrate some of the ways that Chinese music contributed to the soundscape of Aotearoa's colonial past.

Keywords: Chinese; Diaspora, Fan So, Gold-mining, Migration, Music, New Zealand, Performance

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## **Introduction**

This paper contributes to knowledge on nineteenth-century Chinese migration to Aotearoa New Zealand, focusing on the biography of Fan So (d. 1885) and considering his music-making in a setting of colonialism and settlement. Drawing on sources from diverse scholarly fields, including Chinese diaspora studies (Ng, 1993a; 1993b; 1995; 1999) and historical ethnomusicology (McCollum & Hebert, 2014), the study attempts to piece together background information that helps in comprehending Fan So's life in New Zealand and his musicking in a setting of cultural difference. Even though historical information about Fan So is particularly limited, and mention of his music making is only in passing, he has been identified in this paper as part of a broader critique of New Zealand music history (Johnson, 2010; Thomson, 1991).

## **John McLean**

Fan So is the main subject of this paper, but before outlining his biography and significance in historical ethnomusicological and Chinese diaspora research, it is important to note the circumstances that brought him to New Zealand in the first place. First and foremost, he was in the service of wealthy land owner John McLean (1818–1902), and was known as a cook in this setting (“The Lagmhor Estate”, 1913).

McLean was born on the Island of Coll on the west coast of Scotland in 1818 and migrated to Australia with his mother and four siblings in 1840 “to seek their fortune” after his father had died (“Brief History on Redcastle Homestead”, n.d.). After working in the Australian goldfields, the family migrated to New Zealand from 1852. At first, John's brother, Allan (1822–1907), travelled to Canterbury in the South Island, with other members of the family following soon after (Christchurch City Council Town Planning Division, 1983, p. 4). With his family, John McLean purchased extensive blocks of land on the South Island (“Brief History on Redcastle Homestead”, n.d.). He soon became an important figure in New Zealand, at first owning huge sheep farms and later working in local politics, serving on the Legislative Council and Otago Provincial Council (Christchurch City Council Town Planning Division, 1983, p. 4).

McLean moved to Oamaru in north Otago in 1880, where he named his residence Redcastle Estate (“Brief History on Redcastle Homestead”, n.d.). The name Redcastle was a nostalgic choice for McLean, and referred to a location in his homeland, Scotland (“Brief History on Redcastle Homestead”, n.d.). At 84 years old, John McLean died in 1902. He never married. In a local obituary, he was described as “a man of wide reading and deep thinking” (“Obituary: John McLean of Redcastle”, 1902). In a cultural setting that witnessed discrimination aimed at Chinese migrants, and also with a poll tax on Chinese from 1881 (New Zealand History, 2020), McLean and his family showed much cultural understanding toward Fan So, which was reflected in a long-lasting friendship.

## **Fan So**

I now turn to Fan So, who has also been referred to as Tan So (Macdonald, 1952–1964), Tan Sui (“The Lagmhor Estate”, 1913), Tang So (“Tang So”, 1885), Tan Suey (“Life story of a Highland gentleman”, 1938), Fong Get (“The Oamaru Mail”, 1902), and Fond Ket (Waitaki District Council, 2000). Further, and adding to the Scottish influences of the McLeans on his life, “to please his Scottish masters he added ‘Mac’ to his name [Mac Fan So]” (“Brief History on Redcastle Homestead”, n.d.). Fan So's Chinese background is unknown, although he died

in Oamaru in 1885. There are very few archival references about him, but one photograph portrays him among other workers at the Morven Hills Station on the South Island (Snow & Dawson 2015, p. 29).

Fan So was a Chinese migrant to Aotearoa New Zealand, but he was a migrant with a difference. Like the Chinese goldminers who moved to New Zealand from 1865 after an invitation to prospect the areas that earlier European miners had abandoned (Ng, 1993a, p. 123), Fan So too arrived from China via Australia. He travelled in the early 1850s with members of the McLean family. But while Fan So had worked in the Australian goldmines, rather than prospecting for gold in New Zealand (he arrived before the New Zealand goldrush), he migrated with the McLean family. While in the service of the McLeans, Fan So “accompanied Allan McLean to the Waikakahi Homestead [near Waimate] but he longed for the friends and associates of his Morven Hills days” (Duff, 1978, p. 29).

In terms of the Chinese diaspora to New Zealand, Fan So was distinctly an early migrant. The earliest recognised Chinese migrant to New Zealand was Appo Hocton (Wong Ah Poo Hoc Ting) (c1821–1920), who arrived in 1842 and was naturalised in 1853 (Stade, 2010). But the real influx of Chinese migrants was in the years after the 1865 invitation to Chinese miners who came to work the Otago goldfields (Li, 2013, p. 41). In this setting, Fan So arrived over 10 years before the exponential increase of the main Chinese population in New Zealand.

But why did Fan So decide to travel to New Zealand? What were the circumstances that led him away from the Victoria goldrush and to colonial New Zealand with a Scottish family well before any sign of gold had been discovered. One reason was that in Australia, Fan So had warned the McLeans of a plot to steal their gold:

When Mr John McLean was on the diggings in Australia, he was apprised by a Chinese named Tan Suey [Fan So], of a plot to murder him and steal his gold, which was concealed in his tent, awaiting the arrival of the gold escort to remove it to Melbourne and safety; and this man also helped Mr John McLean to escape in safety with his gold. Mr McLean showed his gratitude by bringing Tan Suey to New Zealand with him, and installed him as cook at Lagmhor, where he remained for many years, discharging his duties to the satisfaction of all. (“Life story of a Highland gentleman”, 1938; see also “Personal Items”, 1902)

There are several accounts of the story: “One story says Fan So saved him from drowning in Australia, another story says Fan So saved John when he was being threatened with being shot by a bushranger!” (Dick, 2013).

I now explore Fan So’s musical connections. In some descriptions about him, it is noted that he played a Chinese musical instrument. For example: “He had but one vice, which was that of performing on a Chinese fiddle, which was guaranteed to remove all owners of Western ears within the radius of a mile” (“Life story of a Highland gentleman”, 1938; see also “The Lagmhor Estate”, 1913). While there are no detailed accounts of Fan So’s music making or the specific type of instrument he played on, it is important to question the content of statements such as this one. Notwithstanding the ethnocentric comment regarding the aesthetic interpretation of him playing a Chinese fiddle, we can comprehend two key points from this account. First, Fan So played what is perceived to be a Chinese fiddle; and second, it seems his playing of the instrument was a personal reflection of his Chinese cultural roots.

Regarding the “Chinese fiddle” noted above, the description assumes that it is Chinese, perhaps because of its difference in the New Zealand setting in comparison to other types of fiddles. While the instrument is described as a fiddle, it was probably an upright fiddle. Such bowed instruments are collectively called *húqin* 胡琴. There are many varieties of *húqin*, differing in shape, size and performance practice, with the *èrhú* 二胡 (two-string fiddle) being particularly popular. There are no known photographs of Fan So playing such a fiddle, and the provenance of his instrument is unknown. The *èrhú*, or even a smaller variety of *húqin*, would be relatively easy to carry, but still adding extra baggage if carried from China to Australia, and then from Australia to New Zealand. They are also very delicate because of the thin layer of snakeskin covering the instrument’s sound box. But such was the importance of playing a Chinese fiddle to Fan So, that he reflected on his cultural heritage by playing the instrument in New Zealand.

In Fan So’s life in New Zealand, music making and dancing were known to have been an important part of the creative lives of the McLeans: “There was a piper and a band of Highland dancers on the [Lagmhor] estate who had been trained by Mr Donald McLean” (“The Lagmhor Estate”, 1913). However, considering the comments made about Fan So’s music, one wonders if Fan So’s playing was mainly for his personal musical expression and mostly solitary enjoyment (Killick, 2006).

Fan So had a special place in the McLean household. In later years, and unable to continue to work, “he had a comfortable old age at “Redcastle,” Oamaru, Mr McLean’s home; and when he died, full of years, the chief mourner at his funeral was his grateful and remembering master” (“Life story of a Highland gentleman”, 1938). While this newspaper report notes that Fan So died in old age, his death record, which is written as Tang So, notes that he died aged 46 (“Tang So”, 1885). His grave in Oamaru cemetery is noted in an unpublished work held in the Waitaki District Archive (“Brief History on Redcastle Homestead”, n.d.). The inscription reads:

TO THE MEMORY OF FAN SO  
A NATIVE OF CHINA  
DIED OCTOBER 3, 1885.  
FOR THIRTY-THREE YEARS THE FAITHFUL SERVANT  
OF JOHN MCLEAN OF REDCASTLE, OAMARU

Since his funeral, there has been some confusion as to what happened to his grave. One report notes that Fan So’s body was on the SS Ventnor when it sank off Auckland on 27 October 1902:

The Chinese have obtained leave from the Government to exhume their dead from the cemeteries of the colony, under proper supervision and certain restrictions of course, with a view to their shipment to China for rest. The only remains of Chinamen locally buried which it is proposed to remove at present are those of Fong Get, who, it will be remembered, came with the late Mr John McLean, of Redcastle, from Australia. When he died several years ago, Mr McLean bought a plot of land for Fong Get’s burial and caused a fine memorial stone to be erected over his grave. Early this morning a number of Chinamen, with an inspector, tinsmith, and express, exhumed the remains. The tombstone will, of course, remain to mark the spot where a faithful Chow was, but is not, laid. (“The Oamaru Mail”, 1902)

However, Fong Get was not Fan So. As noted by the Waitaki District Council, there was a Fond Ket buried in the cemetery in 1896 (“Fond Ket”, 2019), who, considering the similarity in name and the small number of Chinese buried there, is presumably the same person as Fong

Get. Interestingly, there is no entry in the *In Memoriam* booklet for Fan So (Waitaki District Council, 2000), but there is for “Fond Ket”, which is a name that relates to Fong Get noted above (“The Oamaru Mail”, 1902). In addition to the confusion over Chinese graves, Fan So’s grave was removed in the 1950s and the land re-used (Waitaki District Archive, personal communication, 2020; 2021). However, in a somewhat poignant reminder of the often silent history of New Zealand’s Chinese diaspora, “there is no evidence today of the headstone that John ... erected in his memory”.

## **Conclusion**

With scant knowledge of Fan So’s musicking, one might wonder the scholarly merit of pursuing a path of study such as the one outlined in this paper. There are, however, several key points that have driven this study, each of which helps in piecing together the fragmented mosaic of New Zealand’s Chinese music history, and recognising the diverse musical cultures that make up music in New Zealand. Above all, Fan So was an early Chinese migrant to New Zealand. He travelled to Aotearoa via Australia along with his Scottish settler patrons. Arriving before the influx of Chinese goldminers, Fan So was an individual within a setting of colonialism and migration.

Mention of Fan So’s music playing is an important testament to his maintaining his Chinese roots in New Zealand through musical expression. While we don’t know the exact type of musical instrument he played on, let alone the type of music, it seems that he did play music that offered difference to those who described it. His musicking was heard by others, and it offers an example related to the notion of holicipation (i.e., music for the self) where, even if played to others, it was still perhaps a cultural expression of “solitary music-making for personal satisfaction” (Killick 2006, p. 273).

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