

Chinese Music, Difference and Inter-Community Relations in a 19th-Century New Zealand Gold-Mining Setting

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Abstract

The socio-cultural milieu of colonial New Zealand changed significantly in the 1860s as a result of the discovery of gold and the subsequent immigration of Chinese miners at the invitation of the Dunedin Chamber of Commerce. At first, Chinese miners arrived from the Australian goldfields, where they had earlier migrated, and later from southern China and especially from Guangdong. The impact of this inward migration was immense and contributed much to New Zealand's cultural diversity at the time, which comprised primarily settler British, who came from various parts of the British Isles, and indigenous Māori. Consequently, a particularly negative outcome of Chinese migration was the introduction of a discriminatory poll tax and immigration policy in 1881, with media reports often including discourse prejudiced against New Zealand's Chinese population. However, in this setting of cultural difference, Chinese music performance was a distinct part of the sonic environment and was acknowledged in a number of newspaper articles, particularly in connection with inter-community relations for celebratory occasions or educational events. This paper offers a glimpse into New Zealand's Chinese past with a focus on Chinese music performance in the nineteenth century as a distinct point of difference that helped bring disparate cultures together. The methodological orientation of the paper is historical in approach, and it assembles several primary sources comprising English-language newspapers articles written by non-Chinese as a way of critically interpreting how and why Chinese and European communities interacted in a musical environment of difference.

Keywords: Chinese, Music, Gold-Mining, Migration, New Zealand, Performance

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Introduction

New Zealand's Chinese music history is an important cultural contribution in the making of the nation. Historical migration was especially prevalent from the mid 1860s as a result of an invitation to Chinese gold miners to prospect in New Zealand, and significant migration emerged again from the 1990s due to a relaxing of the immigration laws. In the colonial setting, Chinese miners usually formed their own settlements beside other miners, and even formed distinct groups with their own shared linguistic and cultural heritage. While activities between Chinese and other miners were characterized by difference in social and cultural space, there are various historical newspaper reports of social action and confluence between diverse communities.

This paper is a historical study of transborder flows and movements of Chinese music performance in nineteenth-century colonial New Zealand with a focus on piecing together and interpreting select newspaper reports that can help in re-telling a story that is so often a neglected or hidden component of New Zealand's music history. Building on literature in the fields of New Zealand Asian studies (e.g., Johnson & Moloughney, 2006), music history (e.g., Johnson, 2010; Thomson, 1991) and ethnomusicology (e.g., Finnegan, 1989; Slobin, 1983), my aim is to comprehend the outcomes of such cultural interactions and the ways Chinese negotiated social and cultural strategies in a colonial setting of migration and difference. Within this framework, an objective is to interpret the musical setting and identify the musical instruments used at this time. Using historical interpretation of media reporting of Chinese performances in a mining setting, the focus of the study is on how Chinese expressed through music and performance their cultural identity in a context of confluence where an objective was to interact with the non-Chinese community. Applying qualitative textual analysis to print media and framed within the fields of historical ethnomusicology and migration studies, the paper provides a critical reading of key sources with the aim of discovering how and why social action and confluence between communities were key aspects of musicking in colonial New Zealand.

Background

The first major Chinese settlement in New Zealand was in 1865 with an invitation to Chinese miners to work the mines in the Central Otago region that European miners were abandoning for other sites elsewhere on the South Island. Originally from Guangdong, Cantonese miners travelled to Dunedin at first from Australian goldmining areas. In summary, the Chinese miners were primarily from Siyi ("Four Districts" – an area to the south-west of Canton), with some from Sanyi ("Three Districts" – an area close to Canton). A decade later, miners from China came especially from Panyu (an area north of Canton) (Beattie, 2015, p. 112). It is important to note the cultural diversity of early Chinese in New Zealand, which was reflected in their linguistic variation, which influenced where the Chinese miners worked and settled. "Siyi Chinese travelled inland on a route north of Dunedin, while Sanyi Cantonese travelled on a route south of Dunedin" (Beattie, 2015, p. 112). Such difference becomes apparent when attempting to identify their musical instruments, as discussed later in the paper.

The sources I have been working with are newspaper reports, which provide mostly surface-level descriptions of music making. I must presume that the reports are representative of just some activities, that is, the ones that managed to make the news for one reason or another. There are likely to have been numerous other performances that simply didn't make the news of the day. The research is like a jigsaw puzzle, one that has pieces that don't fit together, pieces that are missing, and sometimes with no logic at all in trying to fathom out how to interpret a picture with signifiers that seem to lack cultural meaning. But that said, this is what I have to work with, and if the Chinese music history of Aotearoa New Zealand is to be written, research must attempt to piece together this fragmented mosaic of cultural knowledge.

Cultural encounters

The meeting points between Chinese and European settlers and their descendants show distinct cross-border flows. These seem to have had much significance at the time as reflected in their appearance in newspaper reports where they represent intriguing encounters between distant cultures. Integral to such contact zones is music performance, amongst other forms of celebration and entertainment. One example that had music at its core involved a brass band with English roots and a small Chinese ensemble. The Athenaeum Hall in Cromwell in Central Otago was a site of much musicking and cultural contact between European and Chinese communities. Within the fragmented reporting of Chinese performance, those held at the Athenaeum Hall have included more detail than elsewhere. As one report noted in 1886:

An entertainment of a somewhat unique character was given in the Athenaeum Hall on Saturday evening, in the form of a Chinese concert. This being the holiday season in connection with the Chinese New Year, the idea occurred to Mr Won Kee that an evening's pastime might be provided for his countrymen and a local institution likewise benefitted by getting up an entertainment at which Chinese performers should chiefly figure. The notion was conveyed to some European residents who heartily co-operated in carrying it out, and the result was a full house, bringing a substantial addition to the funds of the local Athenaeum. Of the audience fully 150 were Chinese, who appeared to have turned up from all parts of the district. Before the concert opened, a Chinese band gave some music in front of the hall. To European ears the performance was nothing more than a harsh discordant noise, in which a pair of huge clashing cymbals and a big gong took prominence. A drum without resonance and a squeaky instrument of the bagpipe order completed the band. The performers played with commendable vigor, and to the evident gratification of the big crowd of Mongolians who surrounded them. The Cromwell Brass Band rendered some nice pieces which were a pleasant relief to all but Celestial ears. The concert itself was principally conducted by the Chinese themselves, the only European element being some selections by the Brass Band, and some well-rendered songs by Messrs T. M'Nulty and J. Mullins. Of the Chinamen's efforts it can only be said they were beyond the range of criticism, but judging from the self-satisfied aspect of both performers and audience the whole business was to them highly pleasing. One or two peculiar features are, however, worth noting. There was not the slightest demonstration on the part of the Chinese, either of approval or disapproval, although they seemed pleased at the applause from the other section of the audience. The vocalists did not seem to evoke any sympathy in the breasts of their countrymen,

although at times there appeared to be vigorous appeals for the enlistment of that quality. The instrumentalists, too, went about their work in automatic fashion. There were five of these, led by Mr Won Kee on the banjo, which really was the only sort of harmonious thing in the whole Chinese programme. It was amusing to notice the earnestness with which each devoted himself to his particular instrument, the eye never being lifted from beginning to end of the piece - and some of the items were, if not exactly “linked sweetness,” at least long “drawn out.” While the whole was a decided novelty to Europeans, to the sons of the Flowery Land no doubt it was highly enjoyable, and has afforded food for infinite “palaver” even since. The vote of thanks accorded the Chinese, and especially Mr Won Kee, was certainly well deserved, as the concert proved very substantially in a monetary sense that the Chinese population can be liberal enough when opportunity arises for combined and congenial action. (*The Cromwell Argus*, 1886, p. 3)

This particular report is one of the longest that appeared in newspapers of the time, with other reports usually mentioning music with just a few words. In a review of the event, another newspaper described a confluence between the brass band and the Chinese ensemble. The Chinese ensemble, it seems, was playing a piece of music known by the brass band, possibly a European tune. After the Chinese group had been playing, it was noted: “The Cromwell Brass Band came to their assistance, but after playing together for some short time the Chinese withdrew in disgust, leaving the Europeans in undisputed possession” (*Waikato Times*, 1886, p. 2).

Reading beyond the representation of the event and focusing on interpreting the performance from an historical ethnomusicological perspective, there are a few key points that emerge. First and foremost, there was the individual intervention of Mr Won Kee, who was pivotal to the event occurring in the first place. His musicking in a framework of cultural activism and intervention was aimed at presenting Chinese music performance as a way of not only introducing it to New Zealand’s non-Chinese community, but also using it as a tool to bring the disparate cultures together. In terms of musical biography, while little is known about his background, he was a popular and well-known merchant living in Cromwell. He supported the local community by donating funds to help support the local hospital, and collected for the Presbyterian Church. A further activity that he pursued each year was the holding of an annual fireworks display to coincide with the Chinese New Year, of which there are many reported due to non-Chinese being invited each year to the celebrations (Johnson, 2005). His connection as an interlocutor between cultures shows the importance of key individuals in such settings, which helped create musical culture within and between communities.

Even though the first article outlined above commented on the “harsh discordant noise” performed by the Chinese ensemble, within it there are some descriptions of the instruments used. We are told there were cymbals, gong, drum, bagpipe, vocalists and a banjo. These somewhat vague and broad terms to describe the instruments offer little detail with regard to the importance of comprehending the meaning of music material culture, which could help in the re-writing of music history in terms of cultural flows and organological analysis, but the description does show at least the broad types of instruments used. There are few clues as to what type of instruments were used, but based on the English-language description that might have been as follows:

Cymbals: *bó* 鈸 (generic term)
Gong: *luó* 鑼 (generic term)
Drum: *dàgǔ* 大鼓 (generic term)
Bagpipe: *suǒnà* 嗩呐 (double-reed wind instrument)
Banjo: *pípá* 琵琶 (4- or 5-string fretted lute); *sānxián* 三弦 (3-string fretless lute);
yuèqín 月琴 (4-string fretted lute – moon guitar).

Education/General Interest

Another sphere of historical knowledge of Chinese music history in New Zealand is in the area of public talks given by people keen to broaden general knowledge about China. In the Otago region, one particular talk was given in Dunedin at the Temperance Hall by the Rev. Dr Roseby (1844-1918), which had the aim of raising money to help with the Chinese Famine Relief Fund (*Otago Daily Times*, 1878, p. 3). Roseby was from Australia and lived in New Zealand for 12 years.

In the local newspaper report on the talk, there are references to several Chinese musical instruments, which were used in performance by local Chinese players to add context to Roseby's presentation. The report notes:

During the evening several specimens of Chinese music were given, in which [residents] Messrs Han Man, Heong Choo, You Chee, and Lee On took part. The instruments used were the 'Yee been' (resembling a very primitive fiddle), 'Sam been' (or Chinese banjo), and the 'Yeot kum.' The music was of a quaint character, and afforded great enjoyment. (*Otago Daily Times*, 1878, p. 3)

As with other vague historical sources, it is not easy to decipher some of the terms used to describe the musical instruments. However, the term "yeot kum", is extremely close to the Cantonese word *jyut kam* for the 4-string lute, otherwise known as a moon guitar (*yuè qín* 月琴). The word "sam been" is slightly more difficult to discern, but it most probably refers to the 3-string lute, *saam jin* (*sān xián* 三弦). The other instrument mentioned is more problematic to interpret. While the second part of the word is the same as that used for the previous instrument ("been"), which presumably means "string", one might suppose that the first part of the word refers to the number of strings on the instrument. In this case, it is probably two, with the Cantonese "ji" meaning two and written as "yee" in the newspaper article. The instrument is likely to be a 2-string fiddle, *yi jin* 二弦, also known as *erxian*.

Roseby's talk wasn't one-off. He gave similar talks elsewhere, including one at the New Tees Street Hall in Oamaru in 1879, which also included Chinese music performed by Chinese residents (*North Otago Times*, 1879, p. 2). Such activity helps show an awareness of the need to present to the public knowledge about Chinese and Chinese music. His inclusion of local Chinese performers helped bring their presence in the community into a broader public sphere, and the occasion was such that it was deemed suitable for media coverage.

Conclusion

Acknowledging that the transfer of knowledge between performers speaking in their own dialects, non-Chinese presenters, and the local newspaper would be opportunity for inaccuracies in transliteration to occur, such reports do help in the deciphering of musical activities, as well as help in comprehending their purpose in the making of representative New Zealand music history. In a book on historical ethnomusicology, McCollum & Hebert (2014) remind us in many ways of the importance of the historical dimension of music research. While such an approach is not inherent in music ethnography, when attempting to interpret the past without a qualitative framework, recordings or musical instruments, the past presents an array of challenges for music research.

Chinese music history in New Zealand, just like many other music histories, has been a neglected aspect of the nation's musical soundscape. While this research is attempting to piece together fragmented sources of knowledge and interpret them through a contemporary and critical lens, a hidden signifier of cultural meaning points to the colonial setting as one where Chinese were active making music within and between cultures. However, their contribution has, like so many other spheres of cultural creativity in the nation, been obfuscated by hegemonic discourse that so often neglects significant areas of creative practice that have contributed through cross-border flows to the making of New Zealand.

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