

***Won Kee: A Historico-Biographical Study of Creativity, Inter-Cultural Intervention, and Discrimination in a Nineteenth-Century Goldmining Setting in Aotearoa New Zealand***

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**Abstract**

During the latter part of the nineteenth-century gold-mining era in Central Otago, New Zealand, Won Kee was a well-known Chinese merchant living in Cromwell. His activities centred on offering a base for supplying Chinese miners, yet at the same time he provided a link between the disparate cultures that made up this migrant setting. While little is known of Won Kee's roots, he was active in bringing the Chinese and European populations together, holding regular cultural celebrations and being effective in charitable activities that benefited all in the local community. While contributing to the re-thinking of music in the making of New Zealand, this discussion examines Won Kee's creative community activities that offered a setting for inter-cultural understanding in colonial context. This paper is a historico-biographical discussion of Won Kee in a setting of creativity, inter-cultural intervention, and discrimination. Including a short biography of what is known about Won Kee's background, the study focuses on several distinct case studies as a way of analysing discrete examples of Chinese creativity that contributed to the musical making of New Zealand in the late nineteenth century, yet is so often void in discourse on New Zealand's music history. The aim of the paper is to add a new perspective to music in New Zealand, and offer insight on the importance of understanding this sphere of the nation's musical creativity in a nineteenth-century goldmining setting.

Keywords: Chinese, Diaspora, Gold-mining, Migration, Music, New Zealand, Performance, Won Kee

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## Introduction

In the south of New Zealand's South Island, the goldrush of the 1860s attracted many migrant workers seeking their fortune. By 1865, Chinese working the goldfields in Australia were invited to the Otago province to work the areas that earlier European miners had abandoned (Ng, 1993a, p. 123). They arrived in Cromwell in Central Otago in 1866. Over the next few decades, the Chinese population grew and was particularly influential in contributing to the local economy and cultural sphere.

One Chinese sojourner named Won Kee was a well-known and popular merchant living in Cromwell. His activities supported the gold industry and centred on offering a base for supplying Chinese miners, yet at the same time he provided a link between the disparate cultures that made up this multicultural migrant setting. While little is known of Won Kee's roots, he was often active in bringing the Chinese and European populations together (Ng, 1999, pp. 356–363), holding regular cultural celebrations and being engaged in charitable activities that benefited the local community.

While contributing to the re-thinking of music in the making of New Zealand (Johnson, 2010), this paper examines Won Kee's creative community activities that offered a setting for intercultural understanding in a colonial context. Including a short biography of what is known about Won Kee, the paper focuses on several case studies as a way of analysing examples of Chinese creativity and community relations. Focus is given to cases of Chinese music making, which is a topic so often void in discourse on New Zealand's music history (Thomson, 1991). The aim of the paper is to add a new perspective to historical ethnomusicology in New Zealand, and offer insight on the importance of understanding this sphere of the nation's musical creativity in a nineteenth-century goldmining setting (Johnson, 2020).

In 1881, Cromwell's population is estimated as 428 Europeans and 33 Chinese; and in 1886 there were 504 Europeans and 67 Chinese (Ng, 1999, p. 356). The division between Chinese and Europeans is based on the physical living spaces of each group: while a few Chinese like Won Kee lived in the main part of the town, the majority lived in huts by the river – the Chinese camp.

Won Kee's name was also transcribed in local newspapers of the time as Won Key, Wan Kee, Woon Key, and Wong Kee. He was a storekeeper, investor and philanthropist with his store in Cromwell's main street from 1884 to 1892 (Ng, 1999, p. 356). There are detailed Presbyterian church records of Chinese in Otago between 1896 and 1913, but Alexander Don's (1857–1934) *Roll of the Chinese* does not mention Won Kee (Ng, 1993b). While Chinese from Seiyap, Panyu and Zengcheng were known in Cromwell, Won Kee's name (i.e., Wong) "indicate[s] that he originated in Taishan county" (Ng, 1999, p. 356), all in southern China.

Even though Won Kee ran a store in Cromwell for at least eight years, he is believed to have lived in the area for 26 years ("Tokomairiro", 1897), beginning in the early 1870s. After he closed shop in 1892, his name appeared occasionally in local newspapers. In 1893, he was described as a "magnate" of the town ("Cromwell", 1893) when he constructed a dwelling. In 1897, he was described as a "wealthy Chinese storekeeper" ("Tokomairiro", 1897) when he made his first journey on a local train. The same year, readers are informed that he had now "given up business and sold his property" ("Cromwell", 1897).

Even though Won Kee did much to bring Chinese and European cultures together, by the 1890s anti-Chinese prejudice had become more apparent (Ng, 1999, p. 356). There had been a distinct anxiety expressed in the community and reported by media concerning Chinese migration to New Zealand as early 1864 (Ng, 1993a, pp. 123–132), and this led to a Poll Tax on Chinese in 1881 as a distinct act of deterring Chinese entering or returning to New Zealand.

Three key themes have emerged during my study of Won Kee: (i) business; (ii) benevolence; and (iii) celebrations. Applying qualitative content analysis on newspaper articles, the focus of my research has been on music, which has often been studied in connection with community celebrations (Johnson, 2005), but the other themes have also been central for comprehending the influences of and on Won Kee at this time in New Zealand's Chinese diaspora history. In this paper, I give emphasis to celebrations.

### **Business**

Won Kee was known in Cromwell as a storekeeper, the town being located as a trading post for nearby mining areas. His was not the only Chinese store in the town, with several others present around the same time (Ng, 1999, pp. 356, 360). With Won Kee, however, such was the goodwill between himself and Cromwell's European residents that he became well-known and was often featured favourably in newspapers reporting on local events. Not only was he a storekeeper, but he also had other business investments that brought him into direct contact with Europeans, and it was because of these links, as well as for his benevolence and community celebrations, that he was "much respected by his European neighbours" ("Cromwell", 1897). For example, he held shares in the Cromwell Prospecting Association Limited ("To the Registrar of the Supreme Court", 1885), and in 1897 was granted water races rites near Cromwell ("Warden's Court", 1897).

### **Benevolence**

Won Kee made a number of significant contributions to local causes that directly benefited the community. As one newspaper noted, "Mr Won Kee has on previous occasions done good service for our local institutions among his countrymen" ("Untitled", 1886). For example, among other charitable gifts, he donated "a handsome inlaid pearl writing desk" to the Lake District Rifle Association ("Untitled", 1885); and, after a win at the races, he donated 20 guineas to the local hospital ("Untitled", 1886). Further, because of his generosity to the Cromwell District Hospital, its Trustees made him a "life governor of the institution" ("Cromwell District Hospital", 1886). In 1892, in recognition of the work he had done for the local community, the residents of Cromwell presented Won Kee with a gold locket ("Lake Wanaka", 1892).

However, despite Won Kee's work in forging close ties with the local European community, in 1892 he was the subject of an invasion on his home. On the eve of the Chinese New Year, a number of so-called larrikins went on a spree around the town:

The first signs of their intended raid upon the property of respectable citizens were noticeable during the supper given by Mr Woon Key. A number of larrikins disturbed the proceedings, and having gained admittance by a back entry endeavored to "rotten egg" those present. ("Cromwell: Tuesday, February 2nd", 1892)

## Celebrations

Won Kee was especially active in cultural intervention by hosting events that included performance and display for the community. His cultural activism in hosting inter-community functions and celebrations offered a distinct form of cultural negotiation in late nineteenth-century New Zealand.

Won Kee hosted many community events, particularly at the time of the Chinese lunar New Year (January or February). He was known for putting on annual fireworks displays. For example, one such event in 1886, which received a lengthy newspaper review, offers a valuable description of Chinese musical instruments and performance practice, although viewed from an ethnocentric gaze:

Mr Woon Key said he would get his countryman to sing. Seated on a box was the accompanist, with a banjo—the Chinese banjo much resembles the European one, but instead of striking the strings with the thumb they do so with a flat piece of ivory, like the bridge of a violin. After tuning the instrument, the singer commenced. What can I compare it to? Let me see, yes, I believe it was almost as nice as a cat singing the “Last Rose of Summer” over the back yard fence. . . . Songs and recitations were then given in good style, and it would be out of place here, of course, to individualise each one efforts. (“The Chinese New Year”, 1886)

As well as his regular Chinese New Year fireworks displays, Won Kee hosted a concert in 1886 at the Atheneum Hall with the proceeds donated to charity. Reported in a number of newspapers, one main review of the intercultural event noted:

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 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. (“Chinese Entertainment”, 1886)

As with the other review noted above, this one too offers an ethnocentric perspective on musical aesthetics. Nevertheless, within the report there is a description of musical instruments, which I have discussed in detail elsewhere (Johnson, 2020). While the use of the term “banjo” begs the question as to whether this instrument was a western banjo or a term imposed on a traditional Chinese instrument, when considering the review noted earlier where the “banjo” was described as a Chinese instrument (“The Chinese New Year”, 1886), it seems certain that for this performance this was indeed a Chinese instrument.

Two years later, another celebration hosted by Won Kee was reported. Beginning with a lengthy explanation of the Chinese New Year, it continues:

Mr Woon Key, with his usual open-heartedness, invited a large number of townsmen to spend the evening at his place. . . . The toast of the evening, “Health, wealth and prosperity to Mr Woon Key,” was then drunk with musical honors. . . . During the evening several Chinese musicians

gave an exhibition of their vocal and instrumental powers, which was much enjoyed. (“The Chinese New Year”, 1888)

Again, this review helps show the importance of music and song for Cromwell’s Chinese residents, especially at times of celebration.

In 1893, the year after the invasion of Won Kee’s home, one newspaper report noted: “Mr Woon Kee will give his annual display of fireworks on Saturday evening . . . We hear that this will be a better display than usual, as he has procured a number of novelties” (“Untitled”, 1893). The upscaling of the event was, perhaps, in response to the attack the previous year. In a review of this particular event, it was noted that Won Kee hosted “his customary entertainment to his European friends . . . There was a large number present, and a pleasant couple of hours were spent” (“Latest”, 1893). Here, his links “to his Europeans friends” is clearly observed.

Such newspaper reports help portray some of the musical, celebratory and community events that brought cultures together. While there are only surface-level descriptions of the music and musical features of the events, qualitative content analysis of the non-Chinese reports do offer at least some aspects that help piece together the Chinese musical soundscape in goldmining New Zealand at the time. While some such reports have formed the focus of this discussion, it is expected that many other events didn’t make the news at the time.

## **Conclusion**

Won Kee was an interlocutor for cross-cultural relations. He was an individual who brought European and Chinese communities together. His cultural interventions inspired non-Chinese newspaper reviews of many of his events, which have included information about musical aspects of performance. Indeed, without Won Kee’s interventions, such descriptions would be void in the historical understanding of music-making in the goldfields.

The three themes identified in this study (business, benevolence and celebrations) are intrinsically linked. Won Kee ran a store in Cromwell that interconnected with Europeans and Chinese; he was involved in local business and interacted much with the town’s European figures; he donated to local charities; and he hosted festivities and events for the town that brought people together.

Having had active involvement in the business and cultural aspects of Cromwell in the late nineteenth century, in a somewhat poignant way, Won Kee reappeared in the media in 1937 where he was acknowledged as one of Cromwell’s early residents, and it was noted that he now resides in Caversham Hospital in Dunedin and “is wheeled round at times in an invalid chair” (“Cromwell’s Early Citizens”, 1937). Lastly, and with a musical association, the same report comments that in Cromwell “the other traders used to foregather in his store on Christmas Eve and hold festivities, and sing for “He’s a Jolly Good Fellow”.

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