

Charlie King, Chinese Music, and Media Representation in a New Zealand Gold-Mining Setting

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Abstract

Charlie King (Li Kee Hing), as he was known, spent most of his life in the southern New Zealand gold-mining settlement of Waikaia. Arriving there in the mid 1870s, he was one of many Chinese miners in New Zealand, and he worked closely with other miners from his village in China who had also travelled to New Zealand. Unlike many Chinese who eventually returned to China, Charlie King remained in New Zealand. Parts of his life story are remembered at the Switzers Museum in Waikaia, and he is particularly remembered for performing Chinese music as entertainment for locals. While some objects of material culture from the gold-mining era are displayed in the museum, Charlie King is also celebrated as a personality through image and text. These media representations display a historical narrative about his life, and feature a photograph of him playing a Chinese musical instrument. This paper explores Charlie King and Chinese music as it is represented through media – both representation through historical newspaper reports and through the media imagery found in the Switzers Museum display. Drawing on literature from the fields of migration studies, museology, musical biography, and cultural representation, this new research examines not only the sounds of the past through social history and media texts, but also ideas of difference, which in the case of this particular Chinese miner were negotiated in the colonial New Zealand setting through cultural identity and sound.

Keywords: Chinese, Diaspora, Museum, Music, Representation

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Introduction

Extensive Chinese migration to Aotearoa New Zealand was initiated in 1865 following the discovery of gold and an invitation sent to Chinese miners already working Australian mines to travel to New Zealand to work areas in the Otago province (“Shipping”, 1865). At first, the miners, who were all male, were especially from Siyi (“Four Districts” in south-west Canton) and Sanyi (“Three Districts”, close to Canton), with others later coming from Panyu (north of Canton) (Beattie, 2015, p. 112). Migration of Chinese was dealt a setback with the introduction of a Poll Tax in 1881, which followed similar anti-Chinese prejudice in Canada and Australia (New Zealand History, 2020), but it flourished again from the late 1980s with the introduction of the Immigration Act 1987, which “discarded source country criteria” (New Zealand Parliament, 2020). As such, self-identifying Chinese currently make up 4.9 percent of the population and are the largest Asian ethnic group in New Zealand (Statistics New Zealand, 2018).

Two interrelated research questions underpin this study: (1) What role did music play in the lives of early Chinese in New Zealand?; and (2) How is music represented in contemporary touristic heritage culture? The discussion focuses on one museum display of goldfield heritage, that of the Switzers Museum in Waikaia in southern New Zealand, and a single Chinese resident, Li Kee Hing, or Charlie King as he was known, whose music-making is given prominence in the display. The research is faced with many difficulties, such as only having the briefest of information about the main subject, but approaches the topic critically in terms of a contemporary postcolonial perspective on the past.

Drawing on literature from the fields of migration studies, museology, musical biography, and cultural representation, this new research examines not only music-making of the past through social history and media texts, but also ideas of difference, which, in the case of Charlie King, were negotiated in the colonial New Zealand setting through cultural identity and sound. Musical biography can offer insight into the importance of the individual in music-making (Stock, 2001), but with contemporary museum displays, postcolonial attention needs to be given to power structures embedded in modes of representation (Chakrabarty, 2000; Simpson, 1996). Indeed, “[i]n the post-colonial era, a self-reflective museology has emerged from the critique of hegemonic practices of cultural representation” (Varutti, 2012, p. 298).

Following this introduction, the main part of the paper divides into two sections: the first briefly examines goldfield tourism and Switzers Museum, and the second focuses on Charlie King and musicking in Waikaia, to borrow Christopher Small’s (1998) term that highlights music as a social process.

Goldfield Tourism and Switzers Museum

Contemporary goldfield tourism in the Otago and Southland regions of New Zealand is a reflection of the “tsunami” of goldrush workers to the colony from the mid 1860s (Belich, 1996, p. 346). Throughout these regions, which have the first history of gold mining in New Zealand, there are a number of modern-day touristic sites that

celebrate the gold-mining era, and in Otago there is now an Otago Goldfields Heritage Trail that collectively recognizes over 20 such locations.

Gold was discovered at Waikaia in 1862 and this had a massive impact on the area. As such, in contemporary touristic culture, gold-mining is at the heart of Waikaia's cultural heritage. The main objects housed in the Switzers Museum in the township were collected primarily for the 125th Centennial Jubilee of Waikaia in 1988. As noted in the museum, Chinese were known in the Waikaia area from 1866, numbering around 1000 at their peak, although by 1921 there were just 21 Chinese in the area. In this township, the Chinese population was such that there was an area known as Chinatown, which was next to Welshman's Gulley ("Local Mining Industry", 1888). Charlie King was the last full-blooded Chinese in the township from this era (Ng, 1993a, p. 309). Overall, in the latter half of the nineteenth century, the number of Chinese miners in New Zealand was comparatively large, reaching its peak of 5,004 in 1881, with 3,715 in Otago in 1871 (Beattie, 2015, p. 114).

Charlie King and Waikaia Musicking

Knowledge about the Waikaia Chinese community consists mostly of fragments of information from diverse sources, such as newspaper reports, diaries, photographs, church reports, oral history, funeral records and artefacts. At the Switzers Museum, a short biography and photo of Charlie King is given prominence on one of several display boards. Based on local oral history, we know that Charlie King was from Panyu, where his family name would be pronounced Lai, and that he was a well-known local (Ng, 1993a, pp. 309–310; Weatherall, 1971). Visitors who read the information are told that he spent most of his life in Waikaia. Arriving there in the mid 1870s, he worked closely with other miners from his home region in China who had also travelled to New Zealand. Unlike many Chinese who eventually returned to China, Charlie King remained in New Zealand. Parts of his life story are remembered at the Switzers Museum, and he is particularly remembered for playing Chinese music to locals. Along with various objects of material culture from the gold-mining era, Charlie King is celebrated as a local personality through image and text. These media representations display a historical narrative about his life, and feature a photograph of him playing a Chinese musical instrument known as *sanxian*, which is a three-string plucked lute.

By the 1930s, Charlie King was the last Chinese in Waikaia, and in older age he moved to the Old Men's Home in Invercargill. However, this move was short-lived and he returned to Waikaia, although because of ill-health the police took him back to Invercargill, where he died in 1939.

At the museum, the display board identifies Charlie King using a transliteration of his name along with his English name. The name Charlie was often used for Chinese in New Zealand, sometimes with derogatory connotations. On the display board, visitors are told that he came from Shek Ma, which is close to Guangzhou. Regarding music, the display board notes: "Known by the locals as 'Charlie', he was remembered fondly around the village. He loved to host people and entertain them playing the Chinese two-string fiddle – his favourite song was reputedly 'Jesus loves me'." Such information is both useful and at the same time puzzling because while noting local musicking, and therefore the importance of music making among Chinese migrants,

the instrument identified in the text is quite different from the one in the photo. Further, his favourite song reveals a connection with Christianity, although no further details are known, except for his name appearing in the Reverend Alexander Don's roll of Chinese in the region, which is transliterated as Lai Kee Hung (Ng, 1993b, pp. 126–127, 263).

In a book marking Waikaia's centenary, Charlie King is noted as a well-known and liked member of the local community, and the text offers further information about his life:

He lived in the willows in the centre of the valley on the foothills. His hut was a frontal shelter to a tunnel and it was an experience to visit him in his beloved gloom. A gentleman at all times, he was a kindly, courteous host who knew every member of every family in Waikaia and was interested in them. He loved music and played a one-stringed violin. (Miller, 1966, p. 114)

Here, we see a further complication with the description of his instrument, which is reported as a one-stringed violin. While the *erhu* (two-string upright fiddle) was known amongst the Chinese community, a single-string variety was not and this is probably an error. The photo in the display offers a more accurate depiction of the instrument he actually played, although he may have played other instruments too, which were known in the township.

As a developing gold-mining settlement, Waikaia was reported much in the local media. As well as mining news, accounts of the township often mentioned social and cultural activities, and Chinese celebrations were sometimes included. For local Chinese, one prominent annual event was the Lunar (Chinese) New Year. The celebration also included intercultural relations, with one report noting that a local Chinese storekeeper, Mr Chow Yoke, “kept open house for Europeans, and regaled all with cakes and liquors of various sorts” (“Waikaia”, 1888, February 23). At the same celebration, another newspaper reported on Chinese music-making. While commentary is within a discriminatory discourse, we do hear of Chow Yoke's premises as a focal point. As noted, the Chinese:

in their best toggery are chatting amongst themselves, but all seeming bent on having a good time. On a sofa is seated Loo Muc, playing a fiddle, to the evident satisfaction of his country-men. Another artist, bearing the name of Ah Bun, is prevailed on to accompany him on an instrument resembling a banjo, and the twain produced some fairly passable music. (“Waikaia”, 1888, February 17).

The identification of instruments at this event is important, with a fiddle (presumably an *erhu*) and a banjo (presumably a *sanxian*).

A newspaper report of another local Chinese New Year celebration, this time in 1892, also mentions music making, but with Europeans present: “In a stifling smoke-laden atmosphere, we Europeans had the pleasure (?) of listening to some of the musical talents of the ‘Heathen Chinese.’ Three instruments were in use. In appearance they we[re] something like a banjo or guitar” (“Waikaia”, 1892). These instruments were possibly *sanxian*, the same type of instrument that Charlie King is seen playing in the

photo in the museum's display. A further local newspaper report comments that at one Chinese dwelling in Welshman's Gully in Waikaia "some twenty or thirty celestials were passing the happy hours away by smoking opium, playing the fiddle (a hollow wooden mallet, with two pieces of catgut attached), and amusing themselves generally" ("Through Our Exchanges", 1882). This short report is especially helpful in that it offers some specific detail about the construction of the instrument, and from it we can be sure that it is a type of *erhu* (two-string upright fiddle).

Conclusion

From nineteenth-century media reports, there are distinct examples of members of the Waikaia Chinese community making music. While only limited knowledge is available, the Chinese New Year celebration stood out as an annual event, along with music-making that included *erhu* and *sanxian*. The information available shows that while the idea of difference was evident in media reports of Chinese cultural activities, there was a concerted effort to bring communities together.

As a touristic site of Chinese cultural heritage, the display in Switzers Museum reveals a distinct celebration of Chinese migrants in the early years of settlement. This is extended to recognise the community importance of Li Kee Hing/Charlie King, whose cultural identity is now very much a part of New Zealand's gold-mining heritage. Even though a critical postcolonial lens shows an interpretation of musicking where colonial power structures are at the core, contemporary museum media representation in Waikaia has offered its own narrative on local cultural heritage, which includes foregrounding Chinese and Chinese music-making as a way of bringing cultures together.

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