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STAGING CHINESE KIWI VOICES:  
Chinese Representations in New Zealand Theatre

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## Abstract

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This thesis explores how Chinese Kiwi theatre makers challenge hegemonic discourses regarding representations of Chinese people in theatre. Up until 1996, narratives and representations of Chinese people in mainstream New Zealand media have been muted, objectified, or confined to fixed stereotypes. In this study, I demonstrate how four contemporary Chinese Kiwi theatre artists have (re)negotiated, reclaimed, and rewritten the subjectivity and narratives of Chinese people in New Zealand. This will be examined within the postcolonial and binational framework that is specific to Aotearoa. Through the examination of specific theatrical works by Lynda Chanwai-Earle, Renee Liang, Mei-Lin Te Puea Hansen, and Alice Canton, I demonstrate how they have challenged hegemonic discourses and Pākehā-narrated histories regarding the Chinese. Their works cover the lives of the early Chinese mining community (referred to as the ‘old Chinese’), to more contemporary representations (the ‘new Chinese’) that involve different subsets within the community. The relationship and tensions between Māori, Chinese and Pākehā will be analysed throughout. The subjectivity of Chinese women will also be reclaimed by debunking the stereotype of the ‘Oriental woman’ through matrilineal narratives and autobiography. Finally, the transformative and reconciliatory impact of their works will be examined and dissected.

In this thesis, I argue that the work of the Chinese Kiwi artists I explore gestures to the need to negotiate the Chinese place, or ‘non-place’, within the dominant hegemonic narrative. I argue that these artists make strong claims through their work for the bicultural framework that privileges the Māori-Pākehā dialogue to be expanded to include the Chinese voice. I conclude



that the Chinese Kiwi theatre artists have propelled the once muted Chinese voice from the margins, and have begun to carve a space into the dominant New Zealand narrative.

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## Chapter One: Introduction

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### **Chinese Identity and Belonging**

This thesis explores the work of four contemporary Chinese Kiwi theatre artists, and examines how their works can be viewed as vehicles to (re)negotiate, reclaim and rewrite Chinese identities and subjecthood in Aotearoa New Zealand. Up until 1996, narratives and representations of Chinese people in mainstream New Zealand media have been muted, objectified, or confined to fixed stereotypes. In this study, I demonstrate how these artists have (re)negotiated, reclaimed, and rewritten the subjectivity and narratives of Chinese people in New Zealand. Through their theatrical works, I analyse how they have challenged dominant discourses and Pākehā-narrated representations of Chinese New Zealanders.

This inquiry explores the theatrical works of Lynda Chanwai-Earle, Renee Liang, Mei-Lin Te Paea Hansen, and Alice Canton. All these artists consider themselves to be Kiwi, being at least second-generation New Zealanders and are all of Chinese or mixed-Chinese descent. I have chosen these four particular artists as I am interested in how certain groups of people who seem to straddle the East-West divide negotiate and come to terms with their own sense of ‘split’ or ‘hybrid’ identity. Moreover, all four artists are female, enabling the inquiry to explore the ‘double oppression’ of being a Chinese woman. This inquiry examines their plays and theatrical works which span from 1996 to the present, ranging chronologically from Lynda Chanwai-Earle’s *Ka Shue (Letters Home)* (1996), which has been hailed as the first play by a Chinese Kiwi playwright, to Alice Canton’s *OTHER[chinese]* (2017).



Through an exploration of the theatrical works of these artists, my thesis attempts to answer the following research question: In what ways can theatre be a tool for Chinese Kiwi artists to (re)negotiate, reclaim and rewrite the identity and narratives of Chinese people within a postcolonial and binational framework in Aotearoa New Zealand?

The binational framework in New Zealand is a direct result of The Treaty of Waitangi (1840) that puts into place a partnership between Māori and the British Crown, thus privileging the Māori-Pākehā relationship over other ethnic groups (Humpage 26; May 250–251). New Zealand's ideas of nationhood, citizenship, membership and identity are all intrinsically linked to the Treaty of Waitangi and the bicultural framework. Therefore, it is important to situate my research within the context of biculturalism when examining issues of identity, subjecthood, and race.

This research is informed by my personal background and the split-identity between East and West that I have experienced growing up in New Zealand and Hong Kong. My formative years in New Zealand and Hong Kong has led me to question where I belonged. My physical features categorise me as Chinese. Yet I am more fluent in the English language rather than my mother tongue which is Cantonese. In Hong Kong I completed my GCSEs and A Levels in an international school where we followed an English curriculum rather than the Hong Kong curriculum that is taught in a 'local school'. Because of my fluency in the English language and Western education, my peers and I would be labelled as 'non-local' Hong Kong persons, or as 'Westernised Chinese'. Growing up, this label held a certain prestige and status, associated with the perception of wealth from being able to attend an international school or study overseas which usually involved considerably higher fees. However, the label Westernised Chinese can also imply pejorative meanings. A Westernised Chinese would sometimes be jokingly called a

‘banana’: yellow on the outside, white on the inside, referring to a person with yellow skin who has forgotten the customs or identity of his or her ancestors. This history has led me to question where I sit on the East-West spectrum. Should I even be defining myself on these terms? Is one end of the spectrum seen as more ‘superior’ than the other? These questions have formed the basis of my enquiry, and seeing that the root of the issue stems from immigrating to New Zealand at the age of five, I have decided to research the current situation of what it means to be a Chinese Kiwi person living in New Zealand.

New Zealand is an interesting space in that the Chinese or Asian equation needs to be analysed within a post-colonial Pākehā-Māori bicultural and binational framework. As a Chinese New Zealander I ask myself, where do I fit in here? Since this is such a broad topic, I have decided to frame my analysis within the parameters of theatre. Theatre is an art form that can reflect representations of (un)reality as well as subvert and ‘talk back’ to dominant structures. Jacqueline Lo and Helen Gilbert argue that postcolonial theatre has the capacity to intervene publicly in social organisation and to critique political structures more extensively than the relatively isolated circumstances of written narrative and poetry (3). I will demonstrate in my subsequent analysis how the work of these theatre artists embody a political dimension as they challenge hegemonic stereotypes about Chinese people and women. My analysis will shed light on questions related to representation, misrepresentation, underrepresentation, stereotypes and the like, which can be useful when applied to the representation of minority groups within any given culture. There is an importance and urgency in discussing the representation of Chinese groups in New Zealand, since I argue that the bicultural framework is rooted in the colonial past and does not accurately reflect the changing multicultural landscape of New Zealand today. The bicultural framework tends to privilege racial and intercultural discussions and engagements that

revolve around the Māori-Pākehā dialogue, excluding other ethnic groups. Moreover, it has been suggested that the term ‘Asian’ and ‘Kiwi’ were seen to be ‘mutually exclusive’ and unable to co-exist together (Bartley 163). Through my analysis, I will argue and validate the importance of the theatrical works of Chinese Kiwi theatre artists in challenging hegemonic narratives about Chinese New Zealanders, and thus adding the Chinese ‘voice’ to the bicultural dialogue of this country.

## **Methodology**

This enquiry has employed both ethnographic and critical methodologies in gathering and analysing both primary and secondary sources. The critical methodology employed Herman Rapaport’s four common types of critical practice in literary analysis including close reading, contextual analysis, the application of a critical approach, and social critique (Rapaport 4). Details of the theatre case studies I explore were reconstructed through primary sources such as notes from attending performances, published plays, or video documentation of staged performances, as well as secondary sources such as websites, theatre reviews, and published interviews.

A large aspect of my research included reading the works of my chosen theatre artists. Rapaport states that close reading concerns detailed attention to textual details such as characterisation, setting, point of view, rhetorical style, tone, plot and allusion (4). For theatre works, I would add the important visual, oral and aural elements of lighting, sound, music, stage setting, props, use of actors, and theatrical devices. Since it was not possible to attend all of the plays under consideration during the time allocated for my research, I had to rely on written

theatre reviews by critics. These secondary sources enabled me to glean much more visceral and aural information about each production beyond relying on the written scripts alone.

The second and equally important method for literary analysis would be the application of a contextual method. Contextual analysis is known as the ‘connect the dots approach’ because a context needs to be established in order to determine the meaning of a work (Rapaport 5). This type of study presumes a work cannot have meaning in isolation, and may include contextual parameters such as the literary tradition in which the work belongs, the biography of the author, and the social, political, and cultural contexts likely to have a bearing on the work’s meaning (Rapaport 5). For my particular study, context played a crucial role as it enabled me to situate the theatre artists and their plays within the specific contours of the bicultural situation in New Zealand [see chapter four]. By applying a contextual approach, the motivations of the artists can be revealed and their works explained according to the specific historical, social, and political environment in which they reside.

The next method employed in this inquiry was the application of a critical approach in order to further understand and interpret the work within a larger body of thought or theory. This is ‘a more systematic example of interpretation in which a coherent body of thought (i.e. a theory) is mapped onto the literary work in order to explain its meaning’ (Rapaport 7). This study draws on postcolonial and feminist theories related to intercultural theatre and women’s performance in order to analyse the works of the four artists within a larger body of practice and scholarship. The application of this approach has been invaluable in situating and comparing the works of the four artists examined in this study, within a larger historical and global context, allowing for more in-depth analysis and comparisons to other postcolonial societies worldwide.

The final methodological tool utilised in this inquiry was the application of social criticism. Rapaport explains that ‘one of the chief motivations for writing literature has been political protest and advocacy’ so that ‘consciousness about our social surroundings will be morally raised’ (11). Using this method I explore the political motivations behind the plays, and how the theatre artists have used theatre to destabilise dominant narratives. This fourth tool of social criticism is closely linked and overlaps to some degree with the contextual and critical method. It is important to note that the above four tools of literary analysis are closely intertwined and at times they overlap, thus at some points I have employed the use of multiple tools concurrently.

The ethnographic portion of my methodology focused primarily on conducting a face-to-face interview with theatre-maker Alice Canton that took place on August 19th 2018. Karen O’Reilly argues that although the main method of ethnography is participant observation, interviews are also an integral part of the ethnographic research method (112). This inquiry enlisted O’Reilly’s approach to the ethnographic interview, one that enlisted an ‘unstructured’ and ‘qualitative’ interview style using open-ended questions. Given I belong to the Chinese New Zealand ethnic group, and am constantly interacting with and living amongst Chinese New Zealanders and theatre-makers, I believe that an ethnographic approach to my inquiry allows me to strike a balance between ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’ perspectives.

As there were no scripts available for Canton’s work and she declined to provide any, I decided to interview her in order to supplement my own memory of the performance that I attended. Moreover, given Canton relies on devised performance methods rather than written plays, the absence of written scripts for her work prompted me to utilise the ethnographic interview to help reconstruct details of the performance events. To this end I developed five or

six open-ended questions, and was open to the idea of the interview veering off into different directions depending on what topics were brought up by Canton. O'Reilly suggests that the benefits of conducting an unstructured interview in ethnography is that it encourages reflexivity and gives people time to delve into their thoughts. The point is that an ethnographer is attempting to see things from another's perspective which can not be achieved by imposing one's own line of questioning (116–117).

Prior to the interview with Canton, I applied for approval from Massey University's Human Ethics Committee. Approval was received and the research project deemed 'low risk'. A consent form and information sheet outlining the project and a transcript release form were prepared according to the code of ethical conduct for research involving human participants. These were signed off by Canton when appropriate.

The recorded interview was conducted on August 19 2018, and lasted for forty-seven minutes. The recording was transcribed by a professional transcription company and Canton was given an opportunity to revise and amend the transcript. This ensured that any intended meanings were not misunderstood, since the goal of the interview was to give the theatre-maker an opportunity to discuss her work.

## **Chapter Overview**

This thesis is divided into seven chapters. This introductory chapter has outlined the reasons influencing this inquiry and the methodology that was used to undertake the study. Chapter two outlines the history of Chinese migration, and provides a brief literature review of performance and scholarly research regarding Chinese Kiwi theatre. Chapter three provides a case study of each of the four Chinese Kiwi artists chosen for this study. In chapter four I begin my analysis

with a discussion of Chinese relationships with tangata whenua (or ‘people of the land’, the Māori term for the indigenous peoples of New Zealand). In this chapter I also explore the intersections of Chinese, Māori and Pākeha relationships. I argue that the bicultural framework is rooted in the colonial past, and that the bicultural dialogue should be expanded to include the Asian/ Chinese element. In chapter five, I discuss how Chinese Kiwi artists have reclaimed female subjecthood through their plays and theatrical works. I argue that the use of matrilineal narratives and autobiography have been successfully used to debunk stereotypes of the ‘Oriental woman’. In chapter six, I explore how the artists have rejected fixed binaries, and employed the use of magical realism and syncretic theatre to cause disruption from the margins. This chapter also explores how the creation of a Third Space results in a form of hybridity, leading to transformation and reconciliation in the process. In the final chapter, I conclude by arguing how the efforts of Chinese Kiwi artists have resulted in a shift of thinking and perception. The Chinese voice is beginning to be recognised and heard, moving from the margins and edging towards the mainstream.

## Chapter Two: The History of Chinese in New Zealand and Onstage

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In order to situate the theatre works I am analysing within a social and political context, in this chapter I begin by providing a brief historical account of Chinese in New Zealand. This context includes mapping patterns of Chinese migration as well as legislation pertaining to the Chinese. The chapter will then explore the attitudes of White New Zealanders, the dominant hegemonic group, towards the Chinese. This context and background will inform my subsequent analysis of the theatre works I am exploring.

### **Chinese Migration**

According to Manying Ip and Nigel Murphy, Chinese arrived in New Zealand as early as 1866 as goldminers at the invitation of the Dunedin Chamber of Commerce (*Aliens* 19). In the 1860s, large numbers of European miners had abandoned the Otago minefields for the newly discovered diggings in the Westland, thus it was decided that the Chinese, with their reputation for hard work and endurance, be invited from the goldmines in Victoria, Australia to rework the abandoned claims (Ip, *Home* 14). The first twelve Chinese miners arrived in 1866, and were soon followed by others. By 1867, there were 1,270 Chinese miners in the province, and by 1869 over 2,000 arriving from Victoria. These were soon supplemented with arrivals directly from China (Murphy, *Poll-tax* 2).

The majority of Chinese that migrated to New Zealand came from Guangdong province in Southern China, making them Cantonese (Ip, *Home* 6; Grief 2). Generally, Chinese migrants would work hard for many years in the host country to earn enough money to send to China to support their families back home, and to repay their debtors for their passage and poll tax. They



were willing to work hard for two or three decades, hoping to eventually return home for a modest but comfortable retirement (Ip, *Home* 14).

Life for these new Chinese migrants was not easy though. Apart from being away from their home country and families, and having to adapt to a new culture and language, from the very beginning the small Chinese community provoked a disproportionately strong anti-Chinese sentiment. In fact, before they even arrived, an Anti-Chinese League was formed in 1857 in Nelson against the possible ‘infiltration of Mongolian filth’ (Ip and Murphy, *Aliens* 20). As early as 1871, when the Chinese population of 2,641 accounted for less than two percent of the total population in New Zealand, ‘there was such anti-Chinese clamour that the government had to convene a parliamentary select committee to study all the allegations, in order to decide future policies towards Chinese’ (Ip, *Home* 14). From 1881 to 1920, legislation passed successive Restriction Acts to limit the number of Chinese arriving in New Zealand. The Chinese Immigrants Act of 1881 imposed a ten-pound poll tax, and a tonnage to passenger ratio of one Chinese for every ten tons of ship’s cargo (Ip and Murphy, *Aliens* 23; Fong 20). Other restrictive measures included enforced thumb-printing and the introduction of a quasi-literacy test in order to protect New Zealand against the ‘Yellow Peril’ (Ip, *Home* 14). In the history of immigration to New Zealand, the Chinese were the only ethnic group who were imposed a poll tax to gain entry into the country. By recognising the Chinese as undesirable immigrants, a ‘White New Zealand Policy’ was founded by Parliament to reinforce and ensure New Zealand’s ‘racial purity’ (Fong 20; Murphy ‘Māoriland’ 72). The impending introduction of the Chinese Immigrants Act of 1881 resulted in many Chinese leaving New Zealand and limited those wanting to come. The Government Census preceding the Act in 1876 indicates that the total number of Chinese leaving New Zealand (453 departures), exceeded the total number of those arriving (112 arrivals) (Fong

20). Those who decided to remain were forced to live marginal and lonely bachelor lives because immigration policies prevented their families from joining them (Ip, *Home* 15). The Chinese community at this time was mainly a bachelor society, since social conditions in both China and New Zealand precluded all but a few Chinese women to accompany their partners (Murphy, *Poll-tax* 2). The hardships of life may have led many to seek solace in opium smoking and gambling, thus not aiding the already negative perceptions and feelings towards the Chinese. The New Zealand government's institutionalised prejudice and exclusion policies during this period forced the New Zealand Chinese community into retreat and isolation.

Paradoxically, the restrictive legislative measures to limit Chinese migrants helped to temper the anti-Chinese sentiments that had flared up since their arrival, and feelings towards the Chinese now ranged between 'grudging toleration to patronising goodwill' (Ip, *Home* 20). By the late 1880s, the gold was running out, resulting in many Chinese leaving the goldmines to seek employment in other areas. Many began moving from the rural areas of the South Island to the urban areas of the North Island, taking up labour-intensive jobs in fruit shops, market gardens and laundries (Murphy, *Poll-tax* 2; Ip, *Home* 20).

It was not until the Second World War in 1945 that social conditions for the Chinese in New Zealand began to change for the better. A change in attitude was brought about by 'China's gallant fight against the Japanese' that 'transformed her in the eyes of New Zealanders into a brave and respected ally. This change in attitude brought a positive reassessment by white New Zealanders of the Chinese living among them' (Murphy, *Poll-tax* 2). Following friendlier and more generous post-war attitudes by the general public towards Chinese migrants, the 'White New Zealand' policy was moderated to allow a significant number of wives and children of Chinese men to join them in New Zealand, thus bringing a much more settled family atmosphere

amongst the Chinese community (Ip, *Home* 21; Murphy, *Poll-tax* 2–3). It was also during this time that the Labour Government granted permanent residency to the following groups of Chinese: ‘wives and children who came as war refugees in 1939, children born to these women in New Zealand, and Chinese temporary residents and students who had been in the country for over five years’ (Ip, *Home* 21). As a result of these new measures, a total of 1,323 Chinese people gained permanent residency status in New Zealand. The right of the Chinese to be naturalised as New Zealand citizens was only restored in 1952, forty years after it had been withdrawn (Ip, *Home* 21). By the mid-1960s, the Chinese population reached 11,040 (Bedford et al. 99), and by the 1970s, New Zealand had ‘started to consciously commit itself to racial harmony and multiculturalism, down-playing its purely Anglo-Saxon heritage’ (Ip, *Home* 27).

In 1986, Chinese people comprised 0.8 percent of New Zealand’s population, at a total of 26,544. Over half of this group were born in New Zealand, and under a quarter born in China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan (Bedford et al. 104). Together with the Immigration Act of 1987 — considered a turning point in New Zealand’s migration policy — a much more diverse and highly educated migrant population ensured. Previous immigration policies were based on ‘preferred country of origin’, whereas the new policy was based on a points system awarded according to age, education level, work experience and the ability to bring capital investment into New Zealand (Frieson 9).

Since the turn of the century in 2001, New Zealand’s changing ethnic landscape comprises a much more multicultural mix with Asians (including Chinese) accounting for 6.6 percent (237,459 people) of the total population (Bartley 159). Auckland is being rapidly transformed by Asian immigration, with Statistics New Zealand suggesting that 34 percent of Auckland residents will identify as Asian by 2021, up from 25 percent in 2006 (*Statistics New*

*Zealand*). Manying Ip suggests that the ‘two peoples, one country’ formula used as a gauge to measure New Zealand’s race relations needs to be qualified with the addition of the Asian element: ‘As the country’s demographics continue to change rapidly, the old Pakeha-Maori dialogue needs to be expanded to become a Pakeha-Maori-Asian triangulation’ (*Dragon Taniwha* 4).

Since the 1990s, Chinese and Asians have become more prominent in New Zealand society, mainly due to their increased numbers. Different Chinese groups, such as second generation Chinese New Zealanders and new migrants from China, Hong Kong or Taiwan, are adding to the mix of diverse backgrounds. Chinese or Asian people can not simply be lumped into one homogenous group. Moreover, a study conducted in the 1990s suggested that the term ‘Asian’ and ‘Kiwi’ were seen to be ‘mutually exclusive’ and unable to co-exist together (Bartley 163). It seems more pressing than ever to address these issues of what it means to be a Chinese New Zealander in Aotearoa today. Here the role of theatre may offer some useful suggestions as it is a platform in which minority groups such as the Chinese might ‘speak’ from the margins.

### **Chinese Onstage**

In order to situate the research contribution of this inquiry within a disciplinary field, this section examines both the academic scholarship written about Chinese Kiwi playwrights, and their respective staged theatre performances. Up until the present, there has been limited scholarship written concerning this group. Throughout my writing, it is important to note that the word ‘Chinese’ and ‘Asian’ will be used interchangeably, the reason for which will be explained in detail in the beginning of chapter four. In her chapter ‘A Place to Tell Our Stories: Asian Voices in the Theatre of Aotearoa’, Lisa Warrington discusses emergence of Asian voices since 1996

that disrupt bicultural theatre (349). Warrington argues that prior to 1996, the presence of Asian voices on stage were filtered through Pākehā eyes, with examples that include Vincent O’Sullivan’s *Shuriken* (1983), *Yellow Brides* (1993), and Stuart Hoar’s *Yo Banfa* (1993) (350).<sup>1</sup> Lynda Chanwai-Earle’s *Ka Shue (Letters Home)* (1996) is hailed as the first Chinese/New Zealand play, written by a New Zealand playwright of mixed-Chinese descent (351). Hilary Chung and Paloma Fresno Calleja concur that *Ka Shue* is the first theatre piece that reflects on the experience of the New Zealand Chinese community (Calleja 101; Chung 173). This is a milestone in the history of New Zealand theatre since it is the first time that the Chinese ‘voice’ is added to the repertoire of New Zealand theatrical works. Calleja explores the meaning of Asian claims within New Zealand’s bicultural model and argues that these newly emerging Asian voices should not be seen as obstacles that hinder the full realisation of biculturalism, but rather as an asset to avoid the fossilisation of a flawed bicultural paradigm (102).

It is also important to note that the works of Chinese Kiwi playwrights are often discussed together and compared with other Asian artists, such as Jacob Rajan, who along with Justin Lewis founded the Indian Ink Theatre Company. Indian Ink’s *Krishnan’s Dairy* (1997), a solo show written and performed by Rajan, is hailed as the first Indian New Zealand play (Warrington 357). Rajan and Lewis have co-written subsequent plays including *The Candlestickmaker* (2000) and *The Pickle King* (2002). Their plays have ‘arguably brought a new level of awareness of an Asian migrant voice to New Zealand’ (Warrington 357). Their most recent play *Mrs Krishnan’s Party* (2018) played in Auckland and Wellington in August 2018, with a North American Premiere at the Pittsburgh Festival of Firsts in October 2018 (“Productions”, *Indian Ink*).

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<sup>1</sup> Hoar’s play was later renamed to *Gung Ho*.

To conclude, scholarly research on Chinese New Zealand theatre have mainly focused on the pioneer works of Chanwai-Earle and, to a lesser extent, Liang. Their works are mainly situated and discussed within the binational Māori-Pāheka framework that is unique to New Zealand. Research concerning the more contemporary works of Te Puea Hansen and Canton is a neglected area of theatre scholarship. Although there has been a lot of press coverage, news releases, and interviews with theatre artist Alice Canton, not much scholarly research has been carried out on her work. The works of Chinese Kiwi playwrights are also usually discussed together with the works of other playwrights from Asia. Through the work conducted in my thesis, I aim to add a much more in-depth and focused research study on the works of Chinese Kiwi theatre artists in New Zealand.

In terms of staged performances, it is worth mentioning two Chinese theatre groups in New Zealand who stage plays mainly in Mandarin for the Chinese-speaking community. I-start Chinese Theatre was established in 2014, and have produced three original plays to date. *A Story About A Poet* (2017), written by Yabing Liu, premiered at The PumpHouse Theatre in Auckland. The play was inspired by the real life story of the Chinese New Zealand poet Gu Cheng who lived on Waiheke Island. He committed suicide in 1993 after first attacking his wife with an axe (“Story”, *Pumphouse Theatre*).

Similarly, Felix Creative Theatre is a Chinese theatre group that stages plays mainly for the Chinese-speaking community. Notable plays include *Flatting Era* (2016) and *The Intruder* (2018). *Flatting Era* was written by Fei Li and staged at the Herald Theatre in Auckland. It is inspired by the many true stories that Li has heard and his observations of overseas students flatting in New Zealand. *The Intruder*, also written and directed by Li, is based on a real life

story about Chinese parents living alone in Auckland and being confronted by a ‘thief’ (“Intruder”, *Stuff*).

For the purposes of my thesis, I will be focusing on works that bridge the East-West divide which produce ‘hybrid’ characters, forms and narratives. Unlike Felix Creative Theatre or I-start Chinese Theatre, whose works are mainly staged in Mandarin, the theatre artists I have undertaken for my study are written predominantly in English, interspersed with Cantonese, Mandarin and occasionally Te Reo Māori.

It is also worth mentioning Proudly Asian Theatre (PAT), a theatre company co-founded by Chye-Ling Huang and James Roque. PAT have staged five productions since being formed in 2013 (“Productions”, *PAT*). Recent productions in 2018 include *Roots* and *Orientation*. *Roots*, written by Oliver Chong and first staged in Singapore in 2012, is about one woman’s quest to find her ancestral roots. The play was presented by PAT and directed by Huang. It made its debut in New Zealand at Q Theatre and Uxbridge Arts Centre in Auckland, and was presented as part of the Auckland Fringe Festival and Auckland Lantern Festival (*PAT*). *Orientation* (2018) was written by Huang and premiered at Q Theatre in September 2018. This play explores sexual stereotypes of the Asian man as well as racial politics and identity in New Zealand (*PAT*; Hazou review). Although *Orientation* is a play that contains themes relevant to my study, due to the timing of its production I have not included this work in my analysis. Therefore for my thesis, I will focus on the four theatre artists mentioned: Chanwai-Earle, Liang, Te Puea Hansen, and Canton.

The theatrical works of these four artists span from 1996 to the present, ranging chronologically from Chanwai-Earle’s *Ka Shue (Letters Home)* (1996) which has been hailed as the first play by a Chinese Kiwi playwright that sheds light on the Chinese community in New

Zealand, to Canton's *OTHER[chinese]* (2017). Canton's latest work *OTHER[chinese]* has won numerous awards including Hackman's Cup for Most Original Production of the Year 2017 at the Auckland Theatre Awards (*alicecanton*; Auckland Theatre Awards). Through the examination and analysis conducted in this thesis, my research will add to a more robust and current scholarly analysis that focuses on Chinese Kiwi theatre artists and the impact of their work in Aotearoa New Zealand.



## Chapter Three: Four Chinese Kiwi Artists

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For the purposes of this study, I have chosen to focus on the works of four Chinese Kiwi artists: Lynda Chanwai-Earle, Renee Liang, Mei-Lin Te Paea Hansen, and Alice Canton. All are playwrights with the exception of Canton who considers herself a theatre-maker who works with devised methods. As mentioned in chapter one, I have chosen these four particular artists as they seem to straddle the East-West divide in terms of their personal background and the works they have created. All four artists consider themselves to be Kiwi, are at least second-generation New Zealanders, and are all of Chinese or mixed-Chinese descent. Chanwai-Earle is a fourth-generation Chinese New Zealander of Eurasian descent. Born to a Chinese mother and Pākehā father in London, she spent her early childhood in Papua New Guinea before completing her education in New Zealand. Liang is a second-generation Chinese New Zealander, her Chinese parents immigrated to New Zealand from Hong Kong in the 1970s. Hansen is a Māori-Chinese-Pākehā-Danish Kiwi playwright, with a Chinese grandfather from Guangzhou in Southern China and a Māori grandmother who met on a farm in New Zealand. Canton is a theatre-maker of Eurasian descent. She is the cross-cultural union of a fourth-generation Pākehā father and a second-generation Chinese Malaysian mother. It is important to note that the four artists are all women, thus providing an additional angle to explore the intersection of race and gender. As this thesis will show, I argue that their unique background allows them to adopt a bifurcated standpoint, in which they are able to see things from both a Chinese and non-Chinese viewpoint. This movement between ‘outsider’ and ‘insider’ status, and the negotiation of their own ‘hybrid identity’ which consists of both Eastern and Western elements is evident in their works which will be discussed in subsequent chapters.

The fact that these four artists have chosen to create theatre that feature strong Chinese characters, subjects and themes demonstrate that they have decided to ‘speak from the margins’. I use the term ‘speak from the margins’ to encompass the action of speaking for the experiences of minority groups, such as Chinese New Zealanders who have previously been excluded from the mainstream hegemonic narrative. Unlike Felix Creative or I-start Chinese Theatre whose works are mainly staged in the Mandarin language for the Chinese-speaking community, the works of these four artists are mainly performed in English and interspersed with Cantonese, Mandarin and occasionally Te Reo Māori. This demonstrates that they are writing for both the Chinese and mainstream community that includes Pākehā and Māori audiences. The idea of ‘accessibility’, reaching a wide audience, as well as ‘bridging’ the gap between hegemonic and minority groups come to mind. I suggest that it is a way for theatre artists to start a dialogue with mainstream hegemonic groups, and to add the Chinese ‘voice’ to the bicultural dialogue. As a precursor to this analysis, in this chapter I provide a survey and brief overview of the four artists under examination and a summary of their theatrical works. The four artists are mentioned in chronological order, based on the publishing date of plays or the premier date of performances. The plays and theatrical works under study range from 1996 to 2017. The survey that follows begins with Chanwai-Earle’s *Ka Shue (Letters Home)* (1996), which has been hailed as the first play by a Chinese Kiwi playwright that sheds light on the Chinese New Zealand community (Calleja 101). The survey ends with Canton’s ‘live documentary theatre show’ *OTHER[chinese]* (2017). The chapter provides a brief background to the four artists work as well as brief descriptions of some of the major themes in order to provide background information that informs the analysis and argument of subsequent chapters.

## **Pioneering Chinese Kiwi Playwright: Lynda Chanwai-Earle**

Lynda Chanwai-Earle is a fourth-generation Chinese New Zealander of Eurasian descent. Born to a Chinese mother and Pākehā father in London in 1965, she spent her early childhood in Papua New Guinea before completing her education in New Zealand. Prior to her debut as a playwright, Chanwai-Earle wrote poetry and performed as a performance poet. Her first poetry collection, *honeypants* (1994), was published under the name Lynda Earle, and was celebrated for its portrayal of the Hastings underworld, as well as touching upon her family background (Chung 175).

It was not until her first play *Ka Shue (Letters Home)* (1996), that Chanwai-Earle became a ‘pioneer’ for her representation of and advocacy for the Chinese community (Chung 173). The play premiered at Circa Theatre in Wellington, with Chanwai-Earle playing all five characters. *Ka Shue* became acclaimed as the first theatre piece to reflect on the experience of the New Zealand Chinese community (Calleja 101). The play is autobiographical, relating to the playwright’s own family history as descendants of the New Zealand poll tax, and covers the experiences of three generations of women. Themes of interracial marriage, immigration, alienation and the history of Chinese people in New Zealand are explored. The playwright says that the play is as ‘close to the bone’ as far as her family history is concerned, but that in the end she ‘hoped to write a universal story about immigration and about the systematic alienation of particular immigrant groups’ (*Ka Shue* Playwright’s Note).

Certain historical moments in New Zealand history are brought up, such as the poll tax levied against Chinese immigrants and the sinking of the steamer SS *Ventnor* which contained the bones of 499 Chinese miners. The play also references a well-known Chinese legend, Jie Zitui, who sacrificed a piece of his flesh for the Emperor Zhong Er to eat whilst they were being

driven out by Concubine Li (*Ka Shue*). The play incorporates various Chinese stylistic elements in its presentation, evident in its blend of Western and traditional Chinese instruments for music, and the ghost's movements loosely based on the performance style of the Peking Opera (*Ka Shue* Production Notes).

Chanwai-Earle's subsequent play *Foh Sarn (Fire Mountain)* (2000) explores the different sub-sets of Asian groups, countering the stereotypical notion that all Asians are the same. Set in contemporary Auckland, the play follows the lives of a group of Chinese students studying at university. Hailing from Macao, Taiwan and Hong Kong, their different backgrounds as migrants are explored. A Māori cameraman and Pākehā journalist also feature in this play, providing an interesting insight into how the different groups interact and perceive one another. *Foh Sarn* premiered at the Herald Theatre in Aotea Centre, Auckland in October 2000. This is a play that not only explores the different groups within the Chinese New Zealand community, but also the relationship between the Chinese, Māori and Pākehā groups.

Similar to *Ka Shue*, Mei-Ling's deceased mother appears as a ghost in the play. Her presence is linked to the Chinese mythological character Ch'ang O, the wife of Emperor and archer Hou Yi, who ingested an elixir of immortality and flew to live on the moon.

After *Ka Shue* and *Foh Sarn*, Chanwai-Earle debuted her first children's play, *Monkey* (2004). *Monkey* premiered at the International Festival of Arts in Wellington, and went on tour as part of the Capital E, National Children's Theatre programme. This play was considered a 'new departure' as the playwright reworked a Chinese classic into a New Zealand school playground (Chung 187). The play follows the antics of four children: Sam and Pepe are friends and new migrants from China, who come face-to-face with local school bullies Roger and Dodger. Themes related to racism and bullying are explored and resolved via a journey into a

magical world that is described in the classic Ming-dynasty novel, *Journey to the West* (Chung 187). Chanwai-Earle had hoped that through this play, she could create ‘old/new hybrid characters’ that children could identify with (Production Notes).

In 2012, Chanwai-Earle continues to break new ground with *Man in a Suitcase* (2012). This play originated from a commission by the Court Theatre in Christchurch, and grew into a collaboration with Peking University’s Institute of World Theatre and Film, making it the first major international collaborative theatre project between New Zealand and China (Chung 188). The play premiered at The Court Theatre in Christchurch, and was inspired by the real life murder of Wan Biao, a Chinese international student studying in Auckland in 2006. Although the play is fictionalised, Chanwai-Earle wanted to write a play that took a provocative look at how seemingly ordinary people react when faced with deep unethical and moral dilemmas. She wanted to incorporate a multitude of Chinese voices, as well as displaying the universal experience of being a refugee (*Man* Introduction). Themes of murder, profanity, homosexuality and violence are included.

The play focuses on the lives of the Tung family, a New Zealand Chinese family who have been living in the country for multiple generations. The conflict and tensions between different Chinese groups are also explored. There is conflict between Chinese New Zealanders who have called New Zealand their home for generations, and new immigrants arriving from China and Hong Kong. The different languages and cultures between Chinese people who hail from different backgrounds and countries are also demonstrated.

Scholars have stated that the representation of New Zealand ‘Chineseness’ in Chanwai-Earle’s work should be understood as part of a much broader repertoire of work. Between 1995 and 1999, Chanwai-Earle toured with Maori theatre company Te Rakau O Te Wao Tapu to

prisons, marae, and schools, to lead poetry and drama projects at Arohata and Christchurch Women's Prisons (Chung 173–174).

Chanwai-Earle also has a journalistic background which has probably influenced her work. Between 2001 and 2004, she was a journalist for the weekly TVNZ magazine series *Asia Down Under*, a programme for and about the Asian population in New Zealand. From 2011, she became producer of Radio New Zealand National's *Asian Report*, a weekly report that highlights Asians in New Zealand and aimed at promoting a greater understanding of Asian New Zealanders; this was later changed in 2014 to *Voices*, with a new, inclusive, multicultural agenda (Chung 191–192).

On the one hand, the playwright has encountered reservations by members of her community who questioned her right to claim herself as Chinese and to label her play as a 'Chinese' story, due primarily to her inability to speak Chinese (Ooi 328). On the other hand, at least one scholar has argued that Chanwai-Earle has managed to deny institutionalised notions of Chinese identity, resisting ethnic tokenism while finding ways to fragment the bicultural narrative, thus claiming a rightful place for the Chinese voice (Calleja 104).

### **Chinese Miners and Opera: Renee Liang**

Renee Liang is a second-generation Chinese Kiwi playwright, poet, paediatrician, medical researcher and fiction writer. She has collaborated on visual arts works, produced and directed theatre works, worked as a dramaturge, taught creative writing and organised community-based initiatives. Her collaborations include working with illustrator Allan Xia in partnership with Auckland Museum on the Golden Threads exhibition in 2017, as part of the 'Being Chinese in Aotearoa: A Photographic Journey' exhibition. The exhibition showcased the life of early

Chinese settlers in New Zealand dating back 175 years through black and white photographs and illustrations. Liang also organises community arts events such as *New Kiwi Women Write*, a writing workshop series for migrant women in association with Auckland Council, and is a regular contributor to *The Big Idea* (“Renee Liang”, *Playmarket*). An avid poet, Liang has released poetry chapbooks that include *Banana*, *Chinglish* and *Cardiac Cycle*.

Liang’s first short play, *Mask* (2009), was performed as part of Auckland’s Stamp Festival in 2009, as one of six short works that made up *Asian Tales: Native Aliens Stories from the Lips of Asia*. In an interview with Lynn Freeman on *Radio New Zealand*, Liang suggested that this was a deeply personal play, mined from her own experiences (Liang, Freeman interview). It evolves around the clashing values between a daughter and her father. The daughter, born in New Zealand of Chinese background, is ‘trying to find herself and who she is’. In contrast, the father is an immigrant and has values that are different from the daughter. The staging for *Mask* involves actors wearing Chinese opera style masks throughout most of the play. Liang explained that she was inspired by her uncle, who is a famous opera singer in Beijing. The play was also produced at the Manawatu Festival of New Arts 2008 at Massey University (Liang, *Chinglish*).

*Lantern* (2009) is Liang’s first full-length play and premiered at The Basement Theatre, Auckland in 2009. In 2014, the play was presented by Proudly Asian Theatre (PAT) as part of the Auckland Lantern Festival at the Maidment Theatre in Auckland (Wenley, interview; Delilkan, review). *Lantern* is a modern family drama about the lives of a Hong Kong Chinese immigrant family, the Chens. It is set in Auckland and the family are trying to deal with the loss of their mother who has recently run away. Themes of racism, stereotypes, and the struggles of immigrant families are explored.

The *Bone Feeder* (2009/2011) was first presented as part of Liang's postgraduate diploma of Arts at the University of Auckland, and premiered at TAPAC (Wenley review). The play is based on some early Chinese history in New Zealand, when the SS *Ventor* carrying the bones of 499 Chinese miners sank into the Hokianga Harbour in 1902. There is an interesting Māori connection in which the Te Roroa and Te Rarawa *iwi* 'adopted' the washed up bones of the Chinese settlers and buried them in their ancestral burial grounds (Cox 113).

This is a play that focuses on the struggles of Chinese miners and early settlers in New Zealand. Back then, the Chinese mining community was mainly a bachelor society as Chinese women and wives were not allowed to immigrate to New Zealand. The interweaving of Chinese, Pākehā and Maori characters and relationships are explored. Other interesting performance elements include the incorporation of Chinese and Māori musical instruments which include the guzheng (Chinese zither), drums/ percussion, erhu (Chinese violin) and traditional Māori taonga puoro instruments.

In 2017, *The Bone Feeder* was made into an opera, and played at the ASB Waterfront Theatre as part of the Auckland Arts Festival. Liang wrote the libretto, with music composed by Gareth Farr, Sara Brodie as director, and Peter Scholes as conductor. Liang had introduced music sung in the English, Māori and Cantonese languages. Liang broke new ground by staging an opera about the Chinese New Zealand mining community with a primarily Asian cast (Joe, review).

*First Asian AB* (2011) premiered at the Basement Studio in Auckland, and explores the friendship between two men of different backgrounds who share a mutual passion for rugby. Willy (Wei Jian) is a well-off Malaysian Chinese student immigrant who arrived in New Zealand at the age of thirteen and dreams of becoming the first Asian All Blacks player, and Mook



(Michael Felisi) is a Samoan-Kiwi whose working-class family arrived in New Zealand when he was three. The play traces their friendship, their subsequent fall-out, and eventual reunion

*Under the Same Moon* (2015) is a family drama that focuses on matrilineal and female-familial relationships. The play begins with Por Por (maternal grandmother) escaping from the old people's home in Hong Kong to fly to New Zealand to attend the wedding of Sarah, one of her granddaughters. The tensions between siblings and mother-daughter relationships are explored.

*The Two Farting Sisters* (2015) sees Liang working with Petit Workshop to reinvigorate a traditional Chinese fable originally titled *The Tale of The Fragrant Farting Man*. It was staged at the BATS and Maidment Theatre as part of the Auckland Fringe Festival. Liang rewrites a modern version of the story in Auckland City, using 3D puppetry, shadow puppetry and live action. The story is told through an all-female cast, and celebrates the rich multicultural landscape of New Zealand through the eyes of a feisty young heroine (Smythe, review).

### **Māori-Chinese Love Onstage: Mei-Lin Te Puea Hansen**

Mei-Lin Te Puea Hansen is a Maori-Chinese-Pakeha-Danish Kiwi playwright, and has drawn on her rich family history to create award-winning play *The Mookcake and the Kumara* (2015). *The Mooncake and the Kumara* premiered at Q Theatre's Loft in March 2015 as part of the Auckland Arts Festival. The play began as an 'extended' version of a ten minute play that Hansen wrote with her cousin Kiel McNaughton in 2008, submitting it for a collection of plays produced under the banner *Asian Tales* (Hansen, Q Theatre interview). The ten minute version morphed into *The Mooncake and the Kumara*. The play is set in 1929 on a farm in New Zealand. It is essentially a love story between her Chinese grandfather and Māori grandmother, and the hardships and racial

discrimination they faced. More importantly, the play explores the dynamics between Chinese, Māori and Pakeha people and the tensions between them.

The play follows the lives of Choi and Yee (Chinese father and son), Wae and Elsie (Māori mother and daughter), who have come to work on the farm of Pākehā owner Finlayson. The story of these five characters is interspersed with the story of Leilan, who doubles as Yee's wife left behind in China, and the wife of Ming Wang (an emperor from 14<sup>th</sup> century China), who ingests an elixir of immortality and flies to the moon.

Since this play portrays such an important part of history about the Chinese and Māori communities, it was only apt that *The Mooncake and the Kumara* toured the country starting in Oamaru South Island, where the Chinese market gardens played a significant part of its history (Hansen, Fox interview). In an interview with Liz Gunn, Hansen mentions that the play is about the 'second wave' of Chinese migrants that have started moving from the goldmines to the market gardens, laundries and green grocers. It is about the lives and hardships of people who have migrated from different countries to this rural setting in New Zealand. It is the first play that explores the Māori-Chinese mix and captures a time when Māori were increasingly dispossessed of their lands and Chinese immigrants were subjected to appalling discrimination.

### **Documenting Chinese Lives Onstage: Alice Canton**

Alice Canton is a New Zealand born theatre-maker and performer of Chinese and Pākehā descent. She is the cross-cultural union of a fourth-generation Pākehā father, and a second-generation Chinese Malaysian mother. Canton is a graduate of Toi Whakaari: New Zealand Drama School (B.PA), and the University of Canterbury (B.FA). Canton is the founder of *White\_mess*, which is described on her website as: 'a creative, open structure that facilitates the

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production of highly diverse theatre projects and collaborations' (*alicecanton*). Canton began her career as an improviser, Master of Ceremonies, and corporate entertainer with the Court Theatre in 2003. Since then she has performed and taught throughout New Zealand, Australia and Asia, working with theatre companies including Red Leap Theatre, Auckland Theatre Company, Barbarian Productions, and Two Productions.

*Orangutan* (2015) was Canton's first full-length solo work and premiered at the Basement Theatre in Auckland. This play was created whilst she was travelling through South East Asia (Canton, *Both Worlds*). The show employs the use of traditional masks to create a dialogue with the audience. The play is set in the native rainforest of Borneo and is a story about curiosity and survival. Both created and performed by Canton, the show employs the traditions of Balinese masked performance with Canton adorning a hand-made mask. During the forty-five minute show, there is no dialogue, but only sounds, movements, and gestures as the orangutan experiences a changing environment due to deforestation (Chen). *Orangutan* was selected to be a part of the Basement's Schools Programme and performed in six schools. *Orangutan* went on to win the Equity New Zealand Award for Best Show by an Emerging Artist at the 2015 Auckland Theatre Awards.

*WHITE/OTHER* (2016) premiered at The Basement Theatre, Auckland in April 2016 as a solo show written and performed by Canton. The production was an expression of identity and an interrogation of representations of 'Chineseness'. In the documentary *Both Worlds: Alice Canton*, Canton explains that she wanted to use her voice to 'challenge a system that favours white identity over all else, and to provoke the audience to show how complicit they are in this racist society' (Canton, *Both Worlds*).

Canton employs the use of an all-white set (Christian, review; Ji, review; Joe, review). The audience's seats are also slightly tilted and uneven due to a white block propping up one side. This nod to a cognitive psychology experiment found that some people could be tilted as much as 35 degrees without noticing (given their environmental cues were also tilted) makes a poignant point: 'WHITE/OTHER makes us notice the crooked room we live in, and question our complicity and alignment with its construction (Ji, review).

Canton's innovative approach to theatrical form and style carries on to her next show *OTHER[chinese]* (2017) which premiered at the Q Theatre in Auckland in 2017. Whereas *WHITE/OTHER* was a solo show in regards to Canton's own experiences, *OTHER[chinese]* encourages other Chinese New Zealanders to share their stories directly to an audience. Labelled as a 'live documentary theatre show', *OTHER[chinese]* employed the use of 'non-actors' from the Chinese New Zealand community. Canton uses the term non-actors to refer to 'real people', and not professional actors, who are on stage telling their stories. The production involved a core cast of fourteen key storytellers, and a rotating ensemble cast. The production was an interesting mix of filmed interviews, multimedia, and scripted and unscripted segments.

In a short television interview for *The Cafe*, producer Julie Zhu claims that the creation of the show was 'politically motivated', as they wanted to say 'look, we're not one lump sum of people, but have all these different opinions' (Zhu, *The Cafe* interview). In another interview with Lynn Freeman on *Radio New Zealand*, Canton says that the reason for her doing this project is to tell people that 'Chinese identity is not one homogenous entity'. She wanted to 'reject the binary of it is and it isn't', and to show that there is a lot of grey area of black and white (Canton, Freeman interview).

## Chapter Four: Chinese/Māori Relationships and The Bicultural

### Framework in New Zealand

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Starting from this chapter onwards, I begin my analysis of the plays and theatrical works of the theatre artists chosen for my study. This chapter explores Chinese relationships with Māori within the context of the bicultural framework of New Zealand. It begins by briefly outlining the bicultural framework in New Zealand, and then examines how Chinese have operated within that framework through the works of the Chinese Kiwi artists under study. Through the plays, I will demonstrate how Chinese Kiwi artists have debunked stereotypes of the Chinese as depicted by mainstream New Zealand media, and argue that the bicultural framework that includes only Pākehā and Māori is outdated and rooted in the colonial past. I suggest that the plays contest the ideology of White supremacy, as well as challenging the efficacy of a ‘White New Zealand’ in terms of nation building and national identity.

#### **One Nation, Two Peoples**

Manying Ip believes that knowledge of the interaction between Māori and Chinese ‘holds the key to real insight’ into New Zealand’s race relations and national identity (*Dragon 1*). In this chapter, I explore the relationship between Māori and Chinese, and also the Māori-Chinese-Pākehā dynamic in the plays *The Mooncake and The Kumara* (2015) and *Foh Sarn (Fire Mountain)* (2000). Through the plays, I will demonstrate how Chinese and Māori have more commonalities than initially perceived, and that Pākehā are ‘intruders’ in this dynamic, imposing their white supremacist ideology on non-whites. Whilst Te Paea Hansen’s *The Mooncake and*

*the Kumara* explores the lives of early Chinese settlers in the 1920s as market gardeners, Lynda Chanwai-Earle's *Foh Sarn* explores the lives of the more recent, diverse, and highly educated Chinese migrants after the surge of Chinese arrivals after the 1987 Immigration Act (Frieson 9). The label 'old Chinese' and 'new Chinese', or 'Old Asian, New Asian' is used to distinguish early Chinese migrants from more recent ones (Ng 10). It is important to note that the term 'Asian' in New Zealand is used interchangeably with all Chinese immigrants from different regions including mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore, Malaysia and Vietnam (Ip and Murphy 13). Ip and Murphy quote Malcom McKinnon that in New Zealand 'Asians are first and foremost Chinese, the most populous Asian community in Asia and the most populous in New Zealand' (14). 'Asians' in New Zealand usage can be extended to other nationalities in East Asia such as Koreans, Japanese, Filipinos and Thais, but seldom includes all countries in Asia. South Asian nationalities such as Indians, Pakistanis and Sri Lankans are seldom referred to as Asians in New Zealand, and are called Indians, Pakistanis and Sri Lankans as such (Ip and Murphy 14). Therefore, when scholars or artists refer to Asians in New Zealand, they are usually referring to the Chinese. Throughout this thesis the term Asian and Chinese will be used interchangeably.

The binational framework in New Zealand was officially established in 1840 with the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi between representatives of the British Crown and Māori chiefs from the North Island in New Zealand. The Treaty recognised the status of Māori not only as citizens, but also as tangata whenua or first peoples (Macdonald and Muldoon 214). Tangata whenua means 'people of the land' (*Te Ara*). The binational framework in New Zealand is a direct result of The Treaty of Waitangi (1840) that puts into place a partnership between Māori and the British Crown. The Treaty contains a strong moral and legal argument for shared

governance, and for inserting a Māori element into mainstream policies and bringing awareness of Māori values into the government sector (Humpage 26). As tangata whenua, the Māori have claims to special rights and citizenship status; The Waitangi Tribunal is clear on this point:

We do not accept that Māori is just another one of a number of ethnic groups in our community. It must be remembered that of all minority groups the Māori alone is party to a solemn treaty made with the Crown. None of the other migrant groups who have come to live in this country in recent years can claim the rights that were given to Māori people by the Treaty of Waitangi.

(May 250–251)

The binational framework in Aotearoa thus privileges the Māori-Pākehā relationship over other ethnic groups, and has a direct impact on government, social and nation-building policies. New Zealand's ideas of nationhood, citizenship, membership and identity are all intrinsically linked to the Treaty of Waitangi and the bicultural framework.

This poses a potential problem when the ethnic demographics of New Zealand are becoming increasingly multicultural (May 247), and minority groups are clamouring for greater public recognition and representation in public and civic realms in regards to their ethnic, cultural, linguistic and religious identities (May 248). A large part of multiculturalism is concerned with the social and political claims of minority groups, and the recognition of immigrant groups in the public realm. Paul Spoonley argues that 'a major impediment to the development of a New Zealand-specific multiculturalism is the privileging of biculturalism in the cultural politics of New Zealand' (52).

Although Māori and Chinese are both considered minority groups in New Zealand, their status and rights within the country differ vastly. Whilst Māori were considered second-class

citizens with some standing within the state and nation, the Chinese were the ‘quintessential outsiders’ (Pearson 40). David Pearson claims that from the 1880s to at least the 1950s, the building of a ‘White New Zealand’ meant that the Chinese held a vital role in that they functioned to reinforce ‘the borders of what was seen as the limits of national membership’ (40). Those seen as racially dissimilar to the ‘majority’ (White Europeans) were rejected.<sup>2</sup>

Mark Williams asserts that the absence of Chinese people in both colonial and postcolonial literature in New Zealand, this ‘non-place of Chineseness’ within New Zealand’s bicultural pattern impairs understanding of the present due to colonial assumptions about racial identity (302). The Chinese have been in New Zealand as early as colonialism itself, yet their place in New Zealand has not been adequately addressed (Williams 301). Chinese are the oldest non-white immigrant group in New Zealand, having arrived in the 1860s, yet their presence and intergroup dynamic with Māori and Pākehā has been largely ignored (Ip 4). Ip boldly suggests that the “‘Two people’s, one country” formula used as a gauge to measure New Zealand’s race relations needs to be qualified with the addition of the Asian element’ (4). Similarly, Emma Ng claims that the presence of the Chinese voice in New Zealand is a muted one: ‘Even the poll tax is a little known part of the New Zealand narrative — despite Helen Clark formally apologising to the Chinese community on behalf of the government in 2002. Small wonder that we have consistently failed to include the Asian population in our image of contemporary nationhood’ (39).

The works of these Chinese Kiwi artists are therefore of key importance, and signal the beginning of the disruption of a fixed binary bicultural model that is not only outdated, but does not accurately reflect the current multicultural situation in New Zealand. Ng argues that Chinese

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<sup>2</sup> The discrimination that Māori and Chinese suffered during these early times will be examined in the play *The Mooncake and the Kumara* (2015) by Mei-Lin Tu Puea Hansen which is based on the playwright’s family history [see following section in this chapter].



in New Zealand are ‘the subject of generalisations that have cast them as scapegoats for a variety of societal problems’ (13). These include Chinese market gardeners from the early twentieth century who were willing to work for lower salaries and thus undercutting the prices of other farmers, up to the present day where Chinese are blamed for driving up housing prices (Ng 13). Through *The Mooncake and the Kumara* and *Foh Sarn*, I will demonstrate how Chinese Kiwi artists have reclaimed the lives and subjectivity of Chinese people in New Zealand by giving them a ‘voice’ to tell their stories, and thus contesting the outdated bicultural model that only includes Māori and Pākehā in the country’s nation building agenda.

### **‘Old Chinese’: Early Chinese-Māori-Pākehā Relationships**

*The Mooncake and the Kumara* (2015) premiered at Q Theatre, Auckland in March 2015 as part of the Auckland Arts festival (Hansen, Q Theatre interview). The play began as an ‘extended’ version of a ten minute play that Hansen wrote with her cousin Kiel McNaughton in 2008, submitting it for a collection of plays produced under the banner *Asian Tales* (Hansen, Q Theatre interview). Hansen explained that she and her cousin had wanted to write a play about their family history, which involves her Chinese grandfather (Goong-Goong) originally from Southern China, and her Māori grandmother (Nan) from New Zealand. The play is essentially a love story between the protagonists and the hardships that they faced. Hansen claims the play is ‘a version of one of those versions of the story. It’s a wonderfully magic, yet entirely real story’ (Q Theatre interview). The play also explores the dynamics between its Māori, Chinese and Pākehā characters and the relationships between them.

*The Mooncake and the Kumara* features six key characters. Apart from the love story that blossoms between Yee (a Chinese man in his twenties), and Elsie (a young Māori woman),

there is also Choi (Yee's father), Wae (Elsie's mother), Rodger Finlayson (a Pākehā landowner and recent immigrant from England), and Leilan (Yee's wife in China) (Hansen *Mooncake* 2). The play is set in 1929 on a farm in New Zealand. The Chinese father and son, and Māori mother and daughter work on a farm owned by Pākehā landowner Finlayson. Manying Ip claims that the relationship between Māori and Chinese can be traced from their early encounters in the mid-nineteenth century, when both groups shared a certain affinity as soil-tillers struggling for survival (1). Furthermore, Ip claims that the early Chinese were never considered to be 'real New Zealanders' by Pākehā, but that Māori were largely friendly towards them. In return, Chinese regarded Māori as friends and neighbours and employed them as seasonal workers in their market gardens (1–2). The socioeconomic status of the Māori and Chinese were largely on par (Ip 2). This situation is mirrored in *The Mooncake and the Kumara*, which is a historical account of the playwright's own family history. In an interview with Liz Gunn, Hansen mentions that the play, inspired by the strong relationship between her grandparents, is about the 'second wave' of Chinese migrants who started moving from the goldmines to the market gardens, laundries and green grocers (Hansen, Gunn interview).

The play begins with a certain level of mistrust and wariness between the characters due to their different racial backgrounds. All five characters have recently moved to the rural farm, Yee and Choi migrating from China, Finlayson from England, and Wae and Yee having left their whānau 'back home' to find work (*Mooncake* 63). Finlayson has a wary attitude towards Yee and Choi, he remarks: 'They're inscrutable those Orientals. What are they working away at in those little heads of theirs? Impenetrable' (28). Although Elsie makes a remark to Yee that the Chinese have a 'funny way of doing things' (35), this is not said with the same level of suspicion as Finlayson. Asians being 'inscrutable' is an all-too-familiar comment made by non-Asians,

and is echoed in *Foh Sarn* which I will be discussing later in the chapter. Edward Said discusses ‘the mythology of the mysterious East, notions of Asian inscrutability’ as ‘Europe’s collective day-dream of the Orient’ (52). What Said is referring to is the Occident’s ‘construction’ of the Orient/ Oriental as something based on their own fantasies and projections of the Other. What this leads to are stereotypes and false representations of a group of people based on externally-driven abstractions and xenophobic attitudes. Anti-Chinese sentiments have developed since their arrival as miners in the 1860s. In 1871, an official debate about the status of Chinese in New Zealand took place in the form of a Parliamentary Select Committee hearing. A petition was launched by European miners in which Chinese were accused of being addicted to gambling, opium smoking, and immorality due to the lack of Chinese females’ (Ip and Murphy, *Aliens* 21). Anti-Asian sentiments soared in the early twentieth century and many anti-Chinese newspaper cartoons were published (Ng 60). Weekly papers such as the *New Zealand Truth* led a campaign against the Chinese in which they were portrayed as monsters (see Figure 1).



THE YELLOW PERIL.

**Figure 1. Richard Goodall, “The Yellow Peril”, *New Zealand Truth*, 16 February 1907, National Library of New Zealand.**

The ‘Yellow Peril’ in which the the East is perceived as dangerous and threatening to the West is embodied in this cartoon image published in 1907. The Chinese are portrayed as monsters and subhumans: a man’s menacing head with hair in the style of the Chinese queue, with the body and tentacles of an octopus. The traits assigned to him include ‘traffic, evil habits, opium, brutality, licentiousness, and greed’ (Ip and Murphy, *Aliens* 95). The Chinese man/ monster has his tentacles wrapped around an indigenous Māori woman, as he makes his way to the land of New Zealand. Contrary to these negative subhuman representations in cartoons, Hansen’s account in *The Mooncake and the Kumara* portrays Yee and Choi as hardworking and

responsible individuals. Their subjecthood is reclaimed by providing a ‘counterpoint’ to negative media portrayals.

In an interview with Liz Gunn, Hansen mentions that there was an undercurrent of xenophobia and racism, yet the Chinese ‘just got on with it’. Hansen explains she wanted to keep the play ‘intimate’, where ‘the outside world rarely impinges’. In fact, the only ‘outside character’ is the Pākehā landowner who is the ‘voice piece for that kind of xenophobia’. Finlayson is the one who ‘brings the outside world into the interior lives of the characters and keeps on interfering’ (Hansen, Gunn interview). Finlayson’s racial superiority and his belief that his way of life is what Māori and Chinese aspire to is evident when he asks Elsie and Wae to be housemaids and work for him without any pay. He is shocked to discover that Elsie and Wae turn down the opportunity to live in his house. He finds their rejection offensive as he thought he was doing them a favour, and responds with aggression:

FINLAYSON. But my house has a flushing toilet...solid walls...electricity!

WAE. Why did you think we’d want to come and be your slaves in that huge empty  
whare of yours? [...]

FINLAYSON. But...it was as a favour...I want to help you change your  
godforsaken lives...don’t stand there and insult me. [...] You’re as blinkered as  
those little yellow hard heads...go on then, do it on your own... You blind old  
mole...you know bloody nothing about the world.

(30)

This exchange between Wae and Finlayson is important, as not only does it demonstrate Finlayson’s white supremacist attitude, it shows that Wae does not desire the ‘modern comforts’ he

offers. This is an example of the coloniser's attitude towards indigenous groups, which perceives the indigenous people and their lives as 'inferior', thus justifying their domination of them. Frantz Fanon links the idea of colonial domination to the creation of a 'national culture' by the coloniser. He explains that colonial domination disrupts the cultural life of conquered people, resulting in cultural obliteration made possible by new legal relations introduced by the occupying power (190). This is all done to justify and substantiate the supremacist attitudes of the colonising power, where 'every effort is made to bring the colonised person to admit inferiority to his culture' (190). What is important about Finlayson and Wae's exchange, is that Wae rebukes Finlayson's offer. Thus Wae is contesting and challenging the coloniser's supremacist attitude and domination of them.

Throughout the play, Finlayson is seen as an 'intruder' into the lives of the Chinese and Māori people, who are keen to work hard and earn enough money to send back home to their families. When Wae, Elsie, Yee and Choi develop a friendship from working on the farm together, they have a party one night. Finlayson, uninvited, staggers in drunk. Feeling rejected and excluded, he starts shouting abuse at Wae and Elsie: 'You ladies like cavorting with the Orientals, aye? What is it? Their shiny yellow skins and "mysterious" ways? Superior Māoris! I wasn't good enough for you' (49).

Apart from xenophobic and racist attitudes towards the Chinese during this time in the 1920s, there also existed a concern among White New Zealanders regarding the fear of a 'hybrid race' that would result from romantic relationships between Chinese men and Māori women (Bedford et al. 94). Manying Ip claims that the early Chinese arrived as itinerant bachelor workers who had to leave their families behind in China due to restrictive immigration legislation that did not allow Chinese women to join their husbands in New Zealand (2). This

led to Chinese men forming relationships with Māori women in the form of marriage or cohabitation, resulting in mixed Chinese-Māori families and children (2). Richard Bedford, Robert Didham and Manying Ip suggest that the fear of miscegenation and intermarriage between the Chinese and Māori was strong enough to provoke Parliament to set up a Committee of Inquiry to examine the employment of Māori in Chinese and Hindu market gardens (94). In 1929 Apirana Ngata, then Minister of Native Affairs, stated in Parliament that ‘the indiscriminate intermingling of the lower types of races — i.e. Māoris, Chinese and Hindus — will [...] cause deterioration not only in family and national life of the Māori race, but also in the national life of this country, by the introduction of a hybrid race’ (Bedford 94). Moreover, this ‘race contamination’ was a ‘very real concern’ as ‘mixed race Chinese-Māori children were considered to be a “mongrel race” by the New Zealand Parliament’ (Bedford 94). In an interview with *The Wireless New Zealand*, Hansen mentions that the government was worried that a ‘hybrid race’ would cause problems in society, as ‘children born out of those relationships would not know how they were supposed to behave, or how to identify, or what to do’ (Hansen, Gunn interview).

The fear of a hybrid race resulting from restrictive immigration legislation against Chinese women is played out in *The Mooncake and the Kumara*. When Yee steps in to protect Elsie and Wae from a drunk and aggressive Finlayson, Finlayson hurls racial abuse at him:

FINLAYSON. Eee, what do you want little Chinaman? What are you going to do?

Dig up some more water works? Hey Ching-Chongs... Just cause you’re forbidden from bringing your little Oriental ladies over here, doesn’t mean you should steal all the Māori women. We all see what’s going on here. We’re not

blind. Māoris and Chinese cavorting, misbehaving... we know your plan!  
Contaminate New Zealand with your Chinese seed, that's it, right? Well  
problem is, we don't want you here. Go home!

(50)

This xenophobic attitude is rather ironic coming from Finlayson, since in a letter to his mother, he has made large financial gains from leasing and selling land to the Chinese. It is evident that Finlayson is happy to take advantage of the Chinese and conduct business dealings with them when it is in his favour, yet at the same time hurl racist abuse when he thinks they have 'overstepped their boundaries' and are no longer 'invisible' (55).

In a letter to his younger brother, Choi echoes the discrimination that the Chinese people suffered at the hands of the New Zealand government and Pākehā:

CHOI. It is good fortune that we have not enough money for you to come here...our  
kind is not wanted. Now, in Sun Kum Sahrn Chinese are being kept out,  
especially women. Whereas before, no one saw us, now they see us through  
their wide, misshapen eyes. They see what they think is bad in us. They see us  
but only so they can chase us away...

(55)

The racial prejudices against the Chinese, or the 'Orientals' as Finlayson calls them, is an example of the power dynamic that exists between the Occident and the Other. Edward Said argues that Orientalism is a 'construction' of the West in order to 'control, manipulate, even to incorporate what is a manifestly different world' (12). Orientalism is 'produced and exists in an uneven exchange with various kinds of power', and has 'less to do with the Orient than it does with "our" world' (12). Thus according to Said, Orientalism is a creation by the Occident in



order to maintain power and control over the Orient. The ‘Other’ (the ‘Oriental’) is labelled, fixed, and stereotyped. It is a way for the dominant Pākehā group to maintain dominance and control over non-Whites. In *The Mooncake and the Kumara*, this fear of the Other is what fuels the feelings of hatred and anger amongst the dominant Pākehā group. Elsie makes an insightful remark when Yee does not understand why his relationship with Elsie is frowned upon:

ELSIE. And we gotta keep doing what we do good already Yee. Work hard, look after each other — Choi, Ma. Those nose-y old Pākehā don’t know us.

YEE. Why do they talk this way?

ELSIE. They’d talk different if they knew us but they just open their big mouths full of bad advice. If we show them the way you look after me, the talk might stop, ne?

(56)

There is nothing much that Elsie and Yee can do, except continue to do things their own way, and hope that one day the Pākehā might get to really ‘know them’ and understand them.

Despite the hardships of being away from home, facing discrimination in a country that regards them as subhumans and perpetual outsiders, Yee and Choi have managed to adapt to their newly adopted country. Yee, together with the encouragement of Elsie, has created a new way of life that suits him — a life that seems to be a ‘hybrid’ between the traditional Chinese values his father holds onto, and the values and lifestyle of his newly adopted country.

YEE. Waking up here I don’t need to consider who I answer to, who must answer to me, whether I have shown enough respect to the uncles, the elders...have you seen me grieve?

CHOI. We must never forget Long Gai.

YEE. I am a ghost in Long Gai, no one understands me, not the family, not you.

CHOI. Our bones belong in Long Gai with the family!

YEE. Your bones!

CHOI. When did you start thinking we would not go home?

YEE. There is nothing there for me.

(44)

When Yee has a disagreement with his father in regards to whether to tell Elsie about his wife back in China, Yee retorts that his way of doing things is not the traditional Chinese way, yet it is ‘his and Elsie’s way’ (58). Thus, we are made aware that the new and younger generation of migrants, Yee and Elsie, are ready to forge a life that is part-Māori and part-Chinese — a life that is not bound by tradition but embodies the values that they feel comfortable with. This mirrors the playwright’s own feelings of ‘hybridity’ in regards to her own identity: ‘It’s been difficult figuring exactly how I fit because I don’t quite fit in Māori, Chinese, or Pākehā. So that has its downsides, but that’s also an amazing position to be in as I feel that I can truly be a hybrid and take from each of those cultures and create something new’ (Hansen, *Wireless* interview).

*The Mooncake and the Kumara* is a touching and poignant story that explores the sacrifices that the Chinese have made to migrant to New Zealand in order to earn a living and send money back home to support their families. This is particularly reflected in the feelings of the older generation of migrants, as embodied by Choi:

CHOI. This morning I could not get the village from my mind...its thick air, the red earth, the cool feel of the mudbrick under my fingertips. I hear the only way I

can go back there now is in my mind. We have decided that it is better for all if we never return to Long Gai. It is only while we are here, that you will get stronger there. Now, I think about my dead bones buried here, in this cold air, under these dark rocks. Please don't think I am complaining, I am not. I am pleased to be able to work here and strengthen you back there. I am just pained because I will never be home again.

(64)

Through this play, generations of Chinese migrants are given a 'voice' in which their sadness, longing, and determination are portrayed. The situation of Leilan, Yee's wife back in China, is also a sorrowful one:

LEILAN. I often thought about Elsie and the family she was making with Yee and I wondered what they thought of me. Now, I realise that we've all had to learn to live together with how we are and with the things we've done. And when I close my eyes, I know that all of those strange creatures on the other side of life know about me, I know that they're happy and that they know about Leilan, standing on this side, waving from the moon.

(68)

*The Mooncake and the Kumara* manages to bring the story of early Chinese settlers to the stage. In a 2017 review of the play, John Smythe writes that this was the first play he could recall that explored the Māori-Chinese mix, and manages to capture 'a time when Maori were increasingly dispossessed of their lands and Chinese immigrants were subjected to appalling discrimination — not least by the government, which made it very difficult for women to join their menfolk in the new land' (Smythe). Vanessa Crofskey suggested that the play 'sends us back to 1920's

rural New Zealand in a time of Anti-Chinese xenophobia and a crippling loss of rights to Tangata Whenua'. Crofskey believes that the play is 'pertinent to watch now as ever: displaying a sense of unity through struggle amongst rising xenophobia towards immigrants and Māori still struggling to have their indigenous rights recognised and prioritised' (Crofskey). The relevance of these reviews is that they demonstrate the discrimination that both migrant and indigenous groups have faced, and how racial discrimination is still present today. Ng argues that 'the 150-year plus Chinese voice in New Zealand is a muted one' (39), and that 'few non-Chinese New Zealanders today are aware of the extent to which Chinese were discriminated against in law' (44). Therefore, by writing a love story that embodies difficult themes of anti-Chinese xenophobia, the loss of rights of tangata whenua and discriminatory miscegenation laws, Te Puea Hansen has managed to raise some important issues which perhaps have been forgotten or not known about.

In an interview with Rebecca Fox, Hansen recounts how a woman in her late 70s spoke of how the play seemed to tell her grandparents' story and how there had been a picture of her grandfather's Chinese wife on the wall of the house. Hansen remarks: 'I love that it's not a story exclusive to my family; that others had similar experiences. It makes me feel part of a group' (Hansen, Fox interview). By writing about her family history from the perspective of early Chinese migrants and their relationship with Māori and Pākehā, Hansen has added a Chinese voice to the New Zealand historical narrative. Although New Zealand is an immigrant nation its immigrants were predominantly from Britain, and New Zealand adopted an unwritten white policy since the early colonial days: 'Being White' and English is equated with 'being New Zealand', whilst 'being Chinese' is equated with 'being alien and an outsider' (Ip and Murphy, *Aliens* 16, 18). The question of 'who has a right to belong?' is aptly summed up by Ng:

It is a historical fact that Pākehā identity is at its root an immigrant identity. Defending a natural right for Pākehā to be here above others asks us to deny or forget the violence of colonisation. In a country where most of us are tangata tiriti, drawing distinctions between migrant groups based on ethnicity requires us to forget that at the point of immigration we are all new immigrants, who over time, have come to be ‘from here’.

(83)

Ng suggests that reframing biculturalism between tangata whenua and tauwi (non-Māori) could be a possible starting point in negotiating multiculturalism in contemporary times (85). Whatever the possibilities, *The Mooncake and the Kumara* has brought issues of racial discrimination, miscegenation laws, and the lives of early Chinese migrants to the forefront. Ip and Murphy argue that ‘few are aware of this sorry chapter in the country’s racist past’ (17), therefore it is crucial that Hansen has written a play that explores this dark chapter in New Zealand’s history. It is also a play that demonstrates how the Chinese are an integral part of New Zealand’s colonial history, and must be taken into account when discussing issues of national identity. As the country’s oldest non-White immigrant group, their presence can not be ignored. I concur with the scholars discussed in this chapter that the Māori-Pākehā bicultural dialogue is rooted in the country’s colonial past, and does not accurately reflect the changing multicultural landscape of New Zealand today.

### **‘New Chinese’: Contemporary Chinese-Māori-Pākehā Relationships**

While the previous section explored the lives of early Chinese settlers in New Zealand, in this section I discuss theatrical representations of the dynamic between ‘new Chinese’ migrants and

their relationships with Māori and Pākehā in contemporary times. Ip argues that in the beginning, Chinese and Māori groups largely shared a peaceful and cordial co-existence, which has changed in contemporary times to become more tense and mutually wary (*Dragon 1*). The bicultural relationship which has defined New Zealand since the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi has been extended into the present, posing questions about the limits of biculturalism in a climate of significant immigration from Asia. Mark Williams argues that although ‘biculturalism has been instrumental in shifting national identity away from its settler-colonial origins towards a much more positive recognition of Māori presence and priorities’, it is ‘unable to describe the actual relations of contemporary culture and society’, inhibiting ethnicities outside of the bicultural pairing (300). In regards to present-day relationships between Chinese, Māori and Pākehā, I turn to a discussion of Lynda Chanwai-Earle’s *Foh Sarn (Fire Mountain)*, which premiered at the Herald Theatre in Auckland in October 2000. *Foh Sarn* explores the different sub-sets of Asian groups, offering an insight into New Zealand’s diverse Asian community, thus countering the stereotypical notion that all Asians are the same (*Foh Sarn* Playwright’s Note). A Māori cameraman and Pākehā journalist also feature in this play, providing an interesting insight into how the different groups interact and perceive one another.

The play follows Mei-Ling, who was born in Macao, grew up in Hong Kong, immigrated to Malaysia and has now arrived in New Zealand with her strict and conservative father Mr Tam, who manages a struggling Asian food market. Mr Tam first went to Hong Kong in order to escape the Cultural Revolution in China, and then to New Zealand in fear of the 1997 Hong Kong handover. Mei-Ling has just started university and is adjusting to her new life. She is trying to improve her English and befriends a fellow student Alicia. Alicia is from a wealthy family in Hong Kong, and having lived in New Zealand for a long time, is more ‘Westernised’

and speaks better English than Mei-Ling. Mr Tam condescendingly labels Alicia a ‘banana’- ‘yellow on the outside, white on the inside’ (21). A love triangle develops when Alicia and Mei-Ling both fall for the charms of Chia-Han, a student from Auckland University of Technology (AUT) who hails from a wealthy Taiwanese family. Chia-Han is a typical ‘bad boy’ and a compulsive gambler who joins an Auckland street gang and is suspected to have links with triads. On top of this love triangle, is the investigation of the kidnapping of university student Paul Cho. Paul is a recent immigrant from Korea whom Mei-Ling knows as he works part-time at her father’s grocery store. A hard-biting Pākehā journalist Annette, and a Māori cameraman Sam, are investigating the case in the hopes of breaking a sensational news story. They suspect that Paul has been the target of a ‘Triad style’ act of retribution, he was bound, gagged and beaten, and forced to make repeated calls to his parents demanding a \$300,000 ransom. In order to aid the investigation, Annette befriends Mei-Ling in the hopes that she would lead her to Chia-Han, who is a high suspect for this case. Annette tries to get Mei-Ling, Alicia and Mr Tam to talk, pretending to have their best interests at heart (Chanwai-Earle *Foh Sarn*).

In this play, the character of Annette is the modern equivalent of Finlayson in *The Mooncake and The Kumara*, as she takes advantage of others for her own gain, yet is unaware of her own sense of self-righteousness. In order to break a sensational news story exposing Asian crime syndicates, she plans to get Sam to gain Mei-Ling’s trust. Sam feels uncomfortable about lying to Mei-Ling, but Annette has no moral qualms about her plan: ‘We’d expose the Asian crime syndicates, how these thugs hurt their own communities, people like Mei-Ling, and it’s the human, love interest thing. Maybe you could do a little bit of casual fishing... You know. Accidentally bump into her after our interviews. Follow her around a bit. Get to know her. I mean it’s too obvious if I do it’ (38–39). All Annette cares about is her own gain and the end

goal, without taking into consideration the fact that she is lying to a vulnerable young woman like Mei-Ling.

In contrast to Annette, Sam, who is working with her in order to befriend Mei-Ling, begins to develop a real friendship with her. He initially regarded Mei-Ling as one of ‘the cute Asian chicks with loads of money’ (23), but after getting to know her better he realises his own racial prejudices. During a conversation with Mei-Ling, Sam believes that young Asian girls commit suicide because their parents aren’t rich enough. Mei-Ling counters that ‘It is not only us, not only Asian’, and that the youth suicide rate in New Zealand is extremely high (47). Mei-Ling finds Sam’s comments regarding Asian people being ‘inscrutable’ and ‘secretive’ offensive, she retorts: ‘Is rubbish. We are not so different. Only because you people so rude! Got no manners. You think is easy to be here? People so rude, thinking we Asian all the same’ (47). Sam eventually apologises, realising that he was out of line making generalisations regarding Asian people.

In a similar vein, Chinese people also discriminate against Pākehā and Māori. Annette claims that the Chinese call her a ‘guipo’, which translates to ‘foreign white devil woman’ (25). The more traditional Chinese parents do not want their daughters developing intimate relationships with Māori men. When Alicia confides to Mei-Ling that she previously had a Māori boyfriend, she could not afford to tell her parents about him: ‘I was pretty quiet about it. They’d die if they found out I dated a black guy’ (29). There is a level of wariness and suspicion towards people from a different ethnic group, which is evident when Chia-Han makes a comment about Sam: ‘He talk shit. Guilo! Try make us look bad. Sam jealous. He don’t want you go out with me — (*Mandarin*) Stupid black fuck!’ (65).



In the end, when Mei-Ling finds out that Chia-Han was not whom she thought he was, and her father gives her a beating after finding out that she became pregnant, she commits suicide. Although Sam is full of remorse, Annette does not understand she is partly to blame for the way the events have unfolded:

SAM. She topped herself.

ANNETTE. They've already given us our next assignment — What?

SAM. She topped herself.

ANNETTE. She... When?

SAM. Today. While her father was at the temple?

ANNETTE. Shit.

SAM. I'm quitting Annette.

ANNETTE. But you can't, Sam, it wasn't your fault, our fault (85)

Chanwai-Earle's play not only explores the different sub-sets of new Chinese migrants in New Zealand, but the prejudices and attitudes that the Chinese, Māori and Pākehā hold towards one another. The travails of the 'new Chinese' migrants are highlighted in *Foh Sarn*, as evident when Mei-Ling discloses that her father, a civic engineer back in Hong Kong, could not find a professional job when he arrived in New Zealand:

MEI LING. My father not always in supermarket. Back in Hong Kong he [...]

Civic Engineer! They say they give him good job here before we come over.

First we leave Hong Kong, go to Malaysia, then we sell everything to come here and we get here — no job! Say he gotta pass English exam first; his

qualification not good! So he work at supermarket instead. (*Cantonese*) *See mung gui* [stupid dead head] point system! (*English*) You know, they say we all the same! Not like us very much.

(32–33)

By showing diverse subsets of Asian immigrants, Chanwai-Earle is also breaking the stereotype of the ‘model minority’ usually assigned to Chinese people in New Zealand. Ng describes the model minority as someone who is ‘culturally assimilated, economically successful and politically passive; in other words, politically silent economic contributors who uphold the status quo’ (71). The harmful effects of a ‘model minority’ stereotype is that it ‘denies genuine diversity and encourages “good minority”/ “bad minority” categorisations that pit ethnic groups against one another, feeding the sense that they are in competition for a secure place within dominant hegemony’ (Ng 71–72). On top of this, cultural assimilation also denies the celebration of difference. Through the range of different personalities in *Foh Sarn*, including wealthy students from Hong Kong, triad members, and students working in grocery stores, Chanwai-Earle has managed to showcase a spectrum of Chinese identities which have become part of New Zealand’s social fabric. The vast range of personalities counters the limiting belief that ‘all Asians are the same’, and that the Chinese exist everywhere in-between and above the stereotypes ranging from ‘opium addicts and gamblers’ to ‘model minority’ assigned to them.

In conclusion, the act of writing plays, recounting history and performing stories of both early and contemporary Chinese migrants is a way for Chinese Kiwi artists such as Hansen and Chanwai-Earle to reclaim the subjecthood of Chinese people in New Zealand. The very act of telling stories is a way to rewrite the past, adding the Chinese voice to the New Zealand narrative, which up until the works of Chanwai-Earle has been a muted one. The interwoven lives of the

Chinese, Māori and Pākehā characters in these plays illustrate that the Chinese have always had a presence in New Zealand, but have largely been excluded from mainstream New Zealand literature. The works of these Chinese Kiwi artists are therefore of key importance, signally the beginning of the disruption of a fixed binary model that is not only outdated, but does not accurately reflect the current multicultural situation in New Zealand. As evident in the plays discussed, misunderstanding, mutual wariness, and the ‘wall of secrecy’ that exists between people of different ethnicities brings us back to postcolonial theories regarding ‘fear of the Other’ where the ‘Other’ is labelled, fixed and stereotyped. Homi Bhabha claims that stereotypes are ‘an arrested and fixed form of representation that denies the play of difference’ (75). *The Mooncake and the Kumara* and *Foh Sarn* suggests that mutual understanding and respect can eventually be fostered through increased interaction with ‘the Other’, and having come to the realisation of our own racial prejudices. More importantly, the plays show the Chinese have always been part of New Zealand’s history, and thus I argue should be included in the formation of New Zealand’s national identity.

Besides the two plays discussed in this chapter written by Te Puea Hansen and Chanwai-Earle, Liang and Canton have also discussed issues relating to Chinese relationships with tangata whenua in their works. Liang’s *The Bone Feeder* features the lives of early Chinese miners and the historical event involving the sinking of the SS *Ventnor* in 1902.<sup>3</sup> Canton’s *OTHER[chinese]* also features a brief discussion regarding Chinese and issues of acceptance by Pākehā and Māori. By discussing issues of racial discrimination and exploring the relationship between the Chinese, Māori and Pākehā in their plays, the 150-year-plus muted Chinese voice is finally being added to the bicultural dialogue. Given that most New Zealanders believe that the country does not have a race problem (Ng 44; Ip and Murphy 17), and few non-Chinese New Zealanders today are

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<sup>3</sup> I will be discussing *The Bone Feeder* in chapter six.

aware of the extent to which Chinese were discriminated against in law, it makes it all the more crucial to raise awareness of issues related to racial discrimination. It is important to add the history and lives of the early Chinese as well as more contemporary ones to the mainstream New Zealand narrative and to expand the bicultural dialogue in regards to the country's nation building agenda.

## Chapter Five: Reclaiming Chinese Female Subjecthood

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In the previous chapter, I discussed how Chinese Kiwi artists have attempted to add the Chinese ‘voice’ to the bicultural dialogue. In this chapter, I will examine how the Chinese female voice, which has been muted from historical accounts, have been reclaimed and rewritten. It is not a coincidence that the four Chinese Kiwi artists I have chosen for my study are all female. In my subsequent analysis, I will demonstrate that the Chinese female voice has been ‘doubly muted’ within the dominant hegemonic discourse. Chinese women have faced multiple levels of oppression in New Zealand, and their voices have been largely excluded from historical narratives concerning both the early Chinese settlers and New Zealand women (Grace Yee 7). The ‘intersectionality’ of combined racial and sexual discrimination leads to a form of ‘compound discrimination’, due to the reasoning that an ethnic female is two steps removed from the white male norm (Kimberle Crenshaw 142–143). Although Crenshaw applied her theory of intersectionality to Black women, I believe it can be equally applied to a discussion of Chinese women in New Zealand. For my analysis in this chapter, I will examine how Chinese Kiwi artists debunk stereotypes of the ‘Oriental woman’ in their works, thus giving Chinese women subjecthood in the process. I will also examine the power of female agency in claiming the narrative space through the desire to tell their stories, whether it be through autobiography or through the fictional lives of female protagonists. The effect of female-centered narratives are explored through matrilineal narratives that focus on the triadic grandmother-mother-daughter relationship as well as inter-familial relationships amongst women. The focus on narratives of Chinese women play an important part in reclaiming the history and lives of the Chinese in New Zealand. Manying Ip has made an effort to document the lives of eight Chinese New Zealand

women who have arrived to settle in New Zealand between 1908 to 1970, as she claims that Chinese women's voices have been largely unheard and unrepresented in social histories that only mention a few Chinese men (9–10). She believes that Chinese New Zealand women are self-effacing, an example is that they are only known as 'Mrs So-and-So', their first and maiden names never mentioned or even known (9). It is as though these women do not have a strong sense of individual identity that is separate from the men in their lives. Grace Yee draws on her personal experiences as a settler Chinese woman whose forebears arrived in New Zealand in the late nineteenth century to illustrate how dominant discourses have reproduced Chinese women's subjectivity as marginalised Others (7). Yee's research shows that Chinese women have been largely excluded from the histories regarding early Chinese diaspora, as well as narratives about New Zealand women (7). When Chinese women are mentioned, their presence is limited to narratives that only involve statistics and legislation (Yee 11). This exclusion from multiple categories relates to a form of compound discrimination mentioned earlier when race and gender intersect. In this sense, I will argue that Chinese women experience a unique form of oppression that results from being subjected to multiple and interlocking forms of discrimination resulting from being both Chinese and female. Since dominant hegemonic discourse tends to favour the white heterosexual male, Chinese women have been objectified as the exotic Other, and have been depicted in mainstream New Zealand media with stereotypical representations that include 'prostitute', 'plum blossom', 'pleading peasant', 'sexy siren', 'drug courier' and 'opium den hostess' (Yee 11, 19, 20). The Chinese Kiwi artists explored in this study challenge some of these common stereotypes that have proliferated in New Zealand's mainstream media. In the following sections, I will examine how Chinese Kiwi artist have debunked the stereotype of the 'Oriental woman' and reclaimed the narrative space for Chinese Kiwi women.

## Reclaiming Chinese Women's Subjecthood Through Autobiography

Female agency and empowerment can be reclaimed through a multitude of theatrical forms. One way is to reclaim the narrative space through the telling of female-centered stories, whether through autobiographical or fictional accounts. Since dominant hegemonic discourses feature the White heterosexual male as its norm (Crenshaw 142–143), Chinese women are usually objectified and stereotyped. The force of these Pākehā-narrated discourses is that they ‘not only diminish Chinese women as subjects, but disable their capacity to speak for themselves’ (Yee 7). There are very few stories or historical narratives written about or by Chinese women in New Zealand (Yee 10). Therefore, for a Chinese or mixed-Chinese woman to tell *her* story from *her* point of view, is a subversive act in itself. Female agency and subjectivity is thus enhanced by presenting an ‘alternative’ to Pākehā-narrated stereotypes. Through the exploration of their own identities and family histories, Chanwai-Earle, Liang, Te Puea Hansen and Canton have begun the process of reclaiming the narrative space for themselves and Chinese Kiwi women.

Chanwai-Earle’s first play *Ka Shue (Letters Home)* (1996) is autobiographical and relates to her family history. She claims that *Ka Shue* is a ‘story about immigrant women, struggling to make for themselves a sense of home and identity’ (*Ka Shue*, Playwright’s Note 5). This is a play and focuses on the triadic bond between three generations of Chinese women: grandmother-mother-daughter. I will be discussing this play in more detail at the end of this chapter. Liang’s first short play *Mask* (2009) was a ‘deeply personal play, mined from her own experiences’. The play evolves around the clashing values between a father and daughter. The father holds more traditional Chinese values and disapproves of his daughter having a Pākehā boyfriend (Liang, *Mask*). Liang claims that the play is about the protagonist ‘trying to find herself and who she is’

(Freeman interview). Te Puea Hansen's *The Mooncake and the Kumara* (2015), which I have discussed in the previous chapter, was an extended version of a ten minute play co-written with her cousin about their family history. Hansen explains that she had wanted to write a play about her Chinese grandfather (Goong-Goong) originally from Southern China, and her Māori grandmother (Nan) from New Zealand. The play is set in 1929 on a farm in New Zealand and is essentially a love story between the protagonists during a time of Anti-Chinese xenophobia (Hansen, Q Theatre interview). Canton explains that *WHITE/OTHER* (2016) was the first time she had explicitly made a show about her specific identity, as well as it being a response to political and social media reports about the Chinese in New Zealand around that time (Canton, personal interview). These plays demonstrate that the creation and performance of autobiography is a way to add their unique voice — that of a Chinese or mixed-Chinese woman — and subjectivity to the body of dominant work. In the next section, I will begin by conducting a detailed analysis of Canton's *WHITE/OTHER*.

### **Debunking the 'Oriental Woman' and Reclaiming the Narrative Space**

The marginalisation and objectification of Chinese women as stereotypes is addressed in Canton's *WHITE/OTHER* which premiered at The Basement Theatre, Auckland in April 2016. Canton described the solo show, which she both wrote and performed, as 'a journey of self undiscovery' and an attempt to correct her unthinking prejudices about race (*alicecanton*). The production was also an expression of identity and an interrogation of representations of 'Chineseness'. In the documentary *Both Worlds: Alice Canton*, the artist explains that she wanted to use her voice to challenge a system that favours white identity over all else, and to provoke the audience to show how complicit they are in this racist society (Canton, *Both*



*Worlds*). Canton begins the performance by throwing out a list of Chinese stereotypes to the audience, including those normally assigned to Chinese women: ‘Alien, outsider, disposable, unwilling to assimilate, too willing to assimilate, prostitute, tiger mother, dragon lady, China doll, war bride, victim, bookish nerd, doctor, taxi driver, fish ‘n chip shop owner’ (*Both Worlds*). Through direct address and stream-of-consciousness prose in which Canton thinks out loud, she confronts the audience regarding their racist mind-sets and challenges a system that favours white identity, she asks: ‘How can I alter the way I am perceived? Reduced into simplified lumps. But I cannot be all my otherness without white reflecting light, the default which all is viewed’ (*Both Worlds*). As a mixed-race artist of Eurasian descent, Canton holds an interesting vantage point in that she can straddle ‘both worlds’ and at times pass for being White as well as being Chinese. Indeed, Canton has mentioned her experience of ‘white passing’ in which she can pass for being Pākehā (*Both Worlds*). In this show, Canton grapples with her biracial identity and internal racism. In an interview with *Noted*, Canton explains:

To be Othered is to be put into a state of difference. Different to a measure of ordinary or normal. Different, in this case, to White. And although these processes are by no means set-up to cause overt discriminatory practice, they inherently reinforce a social narrative that comes to bear on a person’s ability to speak, be heard, or go about their daily lives. An internal racial bias carried by a system that favours some groups over others. And leaves the rest feeling invisible.

(Canton, *Noted* interview)

Perhaps it is fitting then that Canton ends the show on a rather provocative note, she declares to the audience: ‘I choose to be White’ (*Both Worlds*). I interpret her remark as a challenge of sorts, which leaves the audience thinking: Does she mean what she says, or is she ‘choosing’ to be

White since it is ‘easier’ to be a White person living in New Zealand? Are we implicit in Canton’s decision to deny her ‘Chineseness’, since being a Chinese person involves pain, discrimination, anger and sadness? No matter my interpretation, Canton has created a show that explores the complexity of her own cultural identity as well as aiming to show ‘how the system we currently operate in is broken and that we all need to be responsible for fixing it’ (Canton, *Noted* interview). Through *WHITE/OTHER*, Canton challenges and confronts the dominant hegemonic structures, and aims to have her voice heard.

Canton’s biracial or dual cultural identity situates her in a ‘hybrid third space’ that exists between the East and West, Pākehā and Chinese, White and non-White. This ambiguity and complexity is evident when she explains: ‘As a child of a cross-cultural union, I am an embodiment of the infinite and sometimes imperceptible space that exists between them’ (*Noted* interview). Her unique vantage point of being able to straddle both sides of East and West, Pākehā and Chinese, White and non-White, can be interpreted in terms of feminist standpoint theory in which ‘oppositional consciousness’ could be developed by empowering oppressed groups and valuing their experiences (Harding 2). Sandra Harding believes that by ‘starting off thought’ from the lives of marginalised groups such as women, illuminating critical questions will arise that otherwise would not have if thought had begun with the lives of dominant groups (128). Harding uses the term ‘starting off thought’ to mean that we should employ the vantage point of the oppressed in our thought processes, in order to become more aware of the ‘whole picture’ or ‘oppositional consciousness’ as she calls it. She argues that the result is fuller and objective accounts not only of women’s lives, but also of men’s lives and the whole social order (128). In this sense, Canton and the other artists under study — Chanwai-Earle, Liang, and Te Puea Hansen — have taken the stance of being a woman of Chinese or mixed-Chinese descent,

to tell stories related to their own family histories or create works that reflect the experiences of being Chinese women living in New Zealand. They are adding their own voice and subjectivity to dominant narratives that usually portray Chinese women in fixed and limiting objectified forms.

Liang's first full-length play *Lantern* (2009) illustrates this point as the play evolves around the lives of two very strong female protagonists - Rose and Jen. *Lantern* is a modern family drama set in Auckland about the lives of a Hong Kong Chinese immigrant family, the Chens, and their struggles to cope after their mother Rose has left the family home. One year after Rose has left, her daughter Jen is the one who tries to keep the family together and arrange a family dinner for Chinese New Year. Her younger brother Ken is a free-spirited young man who lives with his roommate 'Gazza' in a messy flat. Her father Henry has started to lose his mind and has recurring flashbacks of his traumatic experiences of the war and escaping Japanese soldiers (*Lantern*).

Jen encounters racist attitudes from the Western men she meets, from the well-meaning Check-Out Boy who calls her an 'Oriental' (7), to the Police Officer who sees Jen as a 'piece of meat' or the 'exotic sexual Other' (21-22). After a run-in with the police, Ken points out to Jen that no matter how hard they try, they will always be treated unfairly due to their ethnicity: 'Can't you see, it's pointless Jen. They'll never value us here' (22). Although Jen does not have much luck in internet dating, she eventually realises that she has feelings for an Asian man called Steve. When meeting for Chinese dimsum, they have a conversation regarding stereotypes associated with Chinese men being effeminate: 'A yellow guy in a white man's world. I can sympathise. People look at you, assuming you're not only weak, you also have less balls' (13).

When Henry joins Rose to begin their life as newly-weds in New Zealand, cracks begin to appear in their once passionate relationship. Henry fails to adapt to his newly adopted country, and their personality differences become apparent. Rose is a practical and hardworking woman who works long hours at the shop. She grew up in New Zealand to a family of market gardeners. In contrast to Rose, Henry is a romantic and an intellectual, he was a teacher back in Hong Kong and refuses to accept a menial job: ‘But I am educated man! I am NOT going to spend all day digging in the dirt! Like a worm... I am tired of cutting broccoli’ (*Lantern* 24). Whilst Henry escapes to his literary fantasies living in a romantic bubble, Rose is the one who keeps the family together, earning money for their livelihood and young baby:

HENRY. Rose, Oi means love. Rose means love. I learn the English (*Declarative*).

My love is like a red, red, rose...

ROSE. I’m tired.

HENRY. Rose. Do you remember? The way we danced, the first night. I held  
you — like this —

ROSE. Henry, I have work in the morning —

HENRY. — your eyes. They knew me —

ROSE. — I’m tired. Don’t you see? (28)

When Rose returns after one year of absence to join in the family dinner for Chinese New Year, Henry pretends that Rose had never left and continues to delude himself regarding the end of their relationship:

HENRY. It’s good that you’ve come home, wife. Good and right.

ROSE. But I can't stay. I can't Henry. I've made... other promises. I just came to give this back.

*(She takes out the diary and gives it to him).*

I read it. You write beautifully.

HENRY. You — how can you —

ROSE. I went back to university. I needed help, but — eventually I translated all of it. I want to tell stories, Henry. But not your stories anymore. Mine.

(38)

This is a defining moment for Rose, as not only has she managed to learn Chinese in order to understand what was written in Henry's diary, but she now declares that she wants to write *her* stories. This is different from the Rose who told her daughter to always listen to her father (13). She acknowledges that she has changed when she admits to Henry upon her return: 'I knew that one day — I'd find myself, Henry. I've changed, can't you see? I've got another life, now' (38). The change in Rose and her having acquired a strong sense of self with the desire to tell her stories is in contrast to the 'self-effacing' attitudes of Chinese women that Ip had mentioned earlier. Rose now does not just want to be 'Mrs So-and-So', but finally has a mind of her own. This behaviour is in contrast to her own mother, who always agreed with her father. When Rose got picked for the netball team back in school when she was the only Chinese girl, she could not play for the team as her father disliked the idea: 'I remember when I got picked for the netball team. It was the proudest day of my life. But your father said I couldn't play. And all mum ever did was agree' (25). When Rose finally decides to leave Henry for her childhood friend Alex (37), this action is also in discord with what her parents had wanted for her: 'My mother

couldn't believe her luck. To get a real Chinese as her son-in-law, that was something to brag about' (26). The play charts a change in the character Rose that challenges certain cultural or patriarchal expectations as well as western stereotypes about Chinese women. Liang has written a play that features two very strong female protagonists. The change in Rose is greatest when she finally takes the leap to live the life she desires, away from her husband Henry whom she realises early on was an ill match for her. She now has a new life in Sydney and is keen to pursue her studies and write her own stories. In some ways this could be understood in terms of self-definition and self-valuation, notions which offer racialised women opportunities to oppose patriarchal structures that keep them in positions of inferiority.

Patricia Hill Collins' research on Black women's sense of self-definition and self-valuation could be applied in this context to Chinese women. Collins defines self-definition as challenging the 'political knowledge-validation process' that has created externally-defined stereotypical images of Afro-American womanhood (S16), and self-valuation as a process that replaces these externally-driven images with authentic Black female images (S17). Through the protagonists of Rose and Jen in *Lantern*, I argue that Liang has created a play in which Chinese stereotypes are addressed, and female subjecthood is celebrated. The female characters in the play clearly have a mind of their own, instigating change to themselves and to those around them. Instead of remaining passive objects defined through their relationships with men, Rose and Jen have forged a life for themselves that is defined on their terms. Through Rose's newly defined sense of self-definition and self-valuation, she has replaced externally-driven images and stereotypes of Chinese women as 'tradition-bound and subordinate' (Yee 7), with empowered ones of female agency and subjecthood.

## **Matrilineal Narratives: Celebrating the Triadic Bond**

Rose's newfound sense of self and her desire to tell her stories and not that of her husband's, is linked to the importance of female or matrilineal narratives. Tess Cosslett defines matrilineal narratives as 'one which either tells the stories of several generations of women at once, or which shows how the identity of a central character is crucially formed by her female ancestors' (7). Yee claims that within Chinese families in New Zealand, women are aware of the expectation to 'comply with time-honoured patriarchal obligations' that require them to defer to their fathers, husbands, and later their adult sons (8). This ensures that patrilineal narratives are prioritised. Yee gives the example of a 'family book' in which are recorded the stories of her father's family through all generations starting from the Ching dynasty (9-10). The genealogical narrative is patrilineal and the book is inherited by sons. The stories passed down from her family are all about her father, uncles, brothers, grandfathers, and great-grandfathers. Little is said about her grandmother: 'She lived, but we know not how' (10). This thesis suggests that matrilineal narratives are important and crucial, as they counter stereotypes and externally-driven images written about Chinese women and replace them with ones that embody female empowerment and subjectivity. Collins asserts that the function of stereotypes is a form of power for dominant groups to maintain control over those being dominated (S17). She cites Arthur Brittan and Mary Maynard, pointing out that 'domination always involves the objectification of the dominated; all forms of oppression imply the devaluation of the subjectivity of the oppressed' (Collins S18). In this sense, when women tell their stories, they are reclaiming their sense of subjecthood and challenging the narrative assigned to them by hegemonic forces. Therefore, the importance of matrilineal narratives and stories about female familial relationships cannot be underestimated.

enough, both as a political intervention against patriarchal and hegemonic forces but also as an important theme/motif or artistic focus of the artists under study.

*Under the Same Moon* (2015) is another play written by Liang that involves strong female protagonists. It is a family drama about the Chan family. In contrast to *Lantern*, *Under the Same Moon* revolves around the matrilineal narrative of grandmother-mother-daughter and female familial relationships. Mother-daughter relationships, grandmother-granddaughter relationships, and relationships between sisters are explored. The play begins with Por Por (maternal grandmother) escaping from an old people's home in Hong Kong to fly to New Zealand to attend the wedding of Sarah, the younger of her granddaughters, much to her family's surprise. Their mother Lorna, although 'dutiful' in sending money to Por Por regularly, never visits her. There is tension brewing between the two sisters Sarah and Stella, since Sarah as beaten her sister to the altar (*Moon*).

Por Por is a strong-willed character with a sense of humour. She addresses the audience in the beginning of the play: 'I understand. I'm an old lady, but she doesn't see how I run from the Japs during the war. So fast. She doesn't see me dancing, dancing the tango with the handsome American soldiers. So graceful' (2). Por Por and her daughter Lorna seem to have unresolved tension between them. A first hint of their differences is when Por Por seems to have disapproved of Lorna's decision to marry a man and follow him to New Zealand: 'When she first go over, ten, no twenty year ago. I say, you my daughter, go where ever. But I don't expect she follow a man to where the darkies live. So scary, they poke out their tongues' (4). When Por Por asks why none of them have visited her for the past ten years, it is revealed that Lorna faced financial difficulties when she got divorced from Philip and had to raise her two daughters on her own (8). However, her mother's disapproval of her choice of husband seems to echo a case of



history repeating itself, and the phrase ‘like mother, like daughter’ comes to mind when Lorna disproves of Sarah’s choice of husband: ‘You shouldn’t marry Charlie. He doesn’t speak Cantonese’ (5). Yet there is also an underlying tone of possessiveness and love behind a mother’s disapproval of her daughter’s choice of partner, Por Por later confides to Sarah: ‘Listen. Mother, she love her daughter so much. Don’t want to stop look after. Whole life, she look after daughter. Someone come take over? She say no’ (14).

Lorna seems to have adjusted well to her life in New Zealand, teaching an English poetry class. When Por Por interrupts her class and begins to recite Chinese poetry by Su Shi<sup>4</sup>, she says: ‘You see this your teacher. But she my daughter still. So I ask her tell me, all her life. But she no tell me. Ten year, she send money, but no words’ (11). Stella confronts her mother about her lack of contact with Por Por: ‘I don’t understand why you keep on harping to your friends about how well you look after Por Por when you can’t even be bothered visiting her? You’re her only child’ (12). Evidence of Lorna and Por Por’s strained relationship is displayed when Lorna retorts: ‘Anyway, Por Por is not here to see me, she’s here to embarrass me’ (12).

Tensions and sibling rivalry are evident between Sarah and Stella. Sarah confides to Por Por that Stella blames her for the breakup of her parents as she was the one who found out about her father’s affair. Sarah also laments the fact that Stella was her father’s favourite and that her father did not love her (14). Stella, on her part, is unhappy that Sarah is getting married whilst she recently broke up with her boyfriend (13). When Sarah confronts Stella for being snarky, Stella retorts: ‘*You’ve* been snarky ever since you got engaged. Dropping comments like “sorry I get to be first” and “tick tock, don’t forget the clock”’ (19).

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<sup>4</sup> Su Shi is a writer, poet, painter and calligrapher from the Song Dynasty in China. He is widely regarded as one of the most accomplished figures in classical Chinese literature.

As tensions amongst the four women continue, Lorna finally confronts her mother and asks why she is angry with her and does not wish to see her. Lorna was upset when her mother sent her away so that she could not see her father before he died: ‘And then — for so long after he died, you ignored me. I did everything you wanted. I went to university, I was the son you lost when he was a baby. But when I found the man I loved — you pushed me away. For good. You didn’t even come to my wedding’ (15). Por Por later explains that she had sent Lorna away as she wanted her to study and to have a future, unlike herself. After her husband Ah-Wing died, she was too upset over his death to talk to Lorna. As for Lorna’s husband, Por Por was afraid that he would take her only child away (21). The tensions between mother and daughter are resolved after having a heart-to-heart conversation, leading to an understanding between them. Por Por explains the real reason for her visit to New Zealand: ‘No. I come to ask, why you choose, live so far away. Even after divorce. But I see. This country sharp and bright, like you. This your place’ (22).

The importance of matrilineal narratives is stressed in this play, together with the idea of the passing down of one’s genes, stories and experiences. Por Por says to Stella when she is about to depart back to Hong Kong: ‘A part of me stay. Here. (*she touches Stella’s face.*) In your face. And here’ (21). The play ends with Por Por emphasising the importance of telling one’s stories and passing them down to the next generation, saying to Stella: ‘I save last gift for you. Most precious. I go away soon, away with my friend the moon. But before I go I tell you everything. All I remember, the stories told to me by my mothers, the stories Ah-Wing told me about his family. And my own’ (22).

*Under the Same Moon* is a play that reclaims and rewrites the lives of women, and explores the relationship and tensions between the unbreakable triadic bond of grandmother-

mother-daughter. Even though Lorna wishes to escape her mother and never see her again, her mother eventually finds a way to confront her. The importance of family bonds and lineage, and in this particular case *matrilineal* lineage and the passing down of one's stories, is emphasised.

### **Matrilineal Autobiography**

Combining matrilineal narratives, autobiography, and the debunking of the submissive 'Oriental woman' stereotype, *Ka Shue* (1996) is a play that embodies all of these elements. Chanwai-Earle's play is hailed as the first play written by a Chinese Kiwi playwright that reflects on the experience of the New Zealand Chinese community (Calleja 101). The play is autobiographical, relating to the playwright's own family history as descendants of the New Zealand poll tax, and follows the lives of three generations of women in the Leung family. The play premiered at Circa Theatre in Wellington, March 1996, with the playwright playing all the characters (*Ka Shue* 4). Four key female characters featured in this play — Paw Paw (the grandmother), Abbie (the mother), Jackie (the daughter) and Lady Li who is Abbie's birth mother and appears as a ghost in the play.

Jackie, a Eurasian student in her early twenties travels to Beijing, China during the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests (also known as the June Fourth incident where hundreds of students were killed by the government as they protested for greater democracy). She has travelled to Beijing with her boyfriend Paul, a Hong Kong student who is there to report on the protests. Whilst there, Jackie corresponds with her mother Abbie using handwritten letters. Abbie was born in Kwangtung province in China. She came to New Zealand and married Nigel, a Pākehā, against the wishes of her parents who preferred that she marry a Chinese man. Eventually they got divorced. Paw Paw, thinks that Nigel is a 'guilo', a 'foreign white devil' 'who only want to

make fuck with you’ and ‘mahlee (marry) you for our money’ (*Ka Shue* 24). Paw Paw is not Abbie’s birth mother, but her husband’s ‘first wife’ who had to take care of Abbie and reluctantly bring her to New Zealand upon the orders of her husband (19). Abbie is the daughter of Lady Li, her father’s favoured concubine. Lady Li committed suicide shortly after Abbie was born, and appears in the play as a ghost.

Chanwai-Earle mentions that this play ‘is as close to the bone as far as my family history is concerned’ (*Ka Shue* Playwright’s Note 5), and it can be deduced that the protagonist Jackie, being Eurasian and a fourth-generation New Zealander, closely resembles the playwright herself. Similar to Liang’s *Under the Same Moon* and *Lantern*, *Ka Shue* features strong-willed female protagonists who are keen to live as they choose. Paw Paw’s strong-willed character is shown when living as part of the Tung clan home in Kwangtungsang, she had to fight for her right to go to New Zealand to join her husband. She persuades her mother-in-law to choose her over her husband’s concubine and Abbie’s birth mother Lady Li:

PAW PAW. [*angry*] Listen to me Ma! I want be with him. [...] I look after him better than her. She no use for New Zealand, she not even educate! [...] He got no use for concubine! I give him son already. Cyril, his son. I am first wife, Mrs Leung 梁太太 over there for New Zealand. Official. Allow only one wife.

(10–11)

This was a time of war, when the Japanese were invading Hong Kong in 1941. Paw Paw is clutching Abbie who is only a few months old. She is travelling with her two children Abbie and her son Cyril (20). Paw Paw’s strength and courage is evident as she escapes the war and travels to New Zealand. Her physical strength is symbolised as she does not have bound feet like some traditional Chinese women did in her time: ‘Least I can walk. Not like some women. With

golden lily feet. Japanese probably rape them. Me! I can run!’ (21). Paw Paw eventually makes her way over to New Zealand to join her husband, but life there is not as rosy as it seems. In a monologue, Paw Paw is disgruntled that her husband spends all his money playing mah-jong<sup>5</sup> and on another mistress: ‘No money because he spend it all on himself at stupid hotel on stupid mah-jong, and the woman. I know he has her. This not home. Not China. He think he can be married more than one wife’ (26). Paw Paw is not the typical subservient ‘Oriental woman’ who submits to her husband, she retorts ‘If he try marry another I leave him’ (26). She refuses to hand over any money to her husband to pay off his debts, as she wants to save the money for Abbie and Cyril’s education: ‘I say No. He say I ‘bitch’ or something. Say I be good to him or he go. [*with great strength*] Sure. He go. He got nothing. I work. My business’ (26). Paw Paw runs a fruit shop, and her financial and emotional independence from her husband is demonstrated. Gung Gung (Paw Paw’s husband) is described as a ‘sinking ship’ by his daughter Abbie (27), since he squanders away money for the family on mah-jong and other women. This is in contrast to Paw Paw’s strong and independent character, the matriarch who takes care of the family business and safeguards the children’s education.

Abbie, although not Paw Paw’s biological daughter, seems to have inherited Paw Paw’s strong-willed character. When her parents vehemently disapprove of Abbie being romantically involved a Pākehā man, Abbie runs away from home at the age of sixteen (18): ‘I want to marry Nigel. I don’t care that he’s white. I just want to be free!’ (19). She argues with Paw Paw and is determined to marry Nigel even though Paw Paw viciously abuses her verbally:

PAW PAW. You give us bad name. Not care about family? ... Selfish child. We  
send you to good school. What you do for us, eh? You thanking us by sleeping

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<sup>5</sup> A Chinese tile-based game that usually involves money with four players pitted against one another.

with guilo 鬼佬! [...] All guilo 鬼佬 want is ... is ... to make fuck with you. You think he wanna mahlee you? You got be choking! He mahlee you for our money 钱 that all! Don't think you can put your face round here! You not come home — no, no! Never come home now! You are ... are ... slut! [*spits*].

(24)

By choosing to marry a Pākehā and not a Chinese man, it demonstrates that Abbie is asserting her own desires and not adhering to traditional Chinese values or submitting to the desires of her parents. After marrying Nigel, Abbie finally admits that Paw Paw was right after all: I wish I could understand you Mamee. And I wonder why I hate you sometimes. Guilo men really don't make good lovers. You were right after all. But neither do our own flesh and blood. I'd rather have a tall white hairy man with a fickle temperament than marry someone like my father!...A sinking ship' (27). Abbie admits that Nigel would frustrate her by spending hours sitting 'on the loo playing correspondence chess' (27). The men featured in *Ka Shue*, both Gung Gung and Nigel seem 'weak', idling away their times on games, when compared to the strong and independent women in this play.

Jackie's independence and free-spirit is demonstrated when she travels to Beijing on a 'sudden whim' with her Chinese boyfriend Paul whom she met when she travelled to Hong Kong (9). Jackie's journey back to China seems to demonstrate a 'circular' pattern in which she is returning to the home country of her ancestors. Jackie does not speak Chinese, similar to her mother Abbie who grew up in New Zealand. When Abbie visited China with Nigel, she exclaims: There I was, Chinese in China and I didn't know my own language' (13). This brings us back to Cosslett's definition of matrilineal narratives as 'one which either tells the stories of several generations of women at once, or which shows how the identity of a central character is

formed by her female ancestors' (7). *Ka Shue* demonstrates both aspects as the strong-willed and independent characters of the women are portrayed through letter correspondence and flashback scenes. The combination of matrilineal narratives and autobiography is what Cosslett terms 'matrilineal autobiographies'. Matrilineal autobiographies reaches back through space as well as time, to the time and culture of one's female ancestors: 'The matrilineal chronotope is a journey, from the mother country to the new country; and also in reverse, by the autobiographical subject reconstructing a matrilineage which takes her back to a lost point of female origin' (Cosslett 9). This 'recovery of foremothers' is a central motif in matrilineal autobiographies, and it is evident in *Ka Shue* through the lives of Paw Paw travelling to New Zealand, and finally for Jackie (who represents the author Chanwai-Earle) to return to the country of her foremothers. It is important to note that Lady Li, Abbie's birth mother, committed suicide in China and her spirit remains there. She appears as a ghost in the play, named after a historical figure Concubine Li who was famous for her scheming (*Ka Shue* 8). Throughout the play, Lady Li narrates the historical story of Emperor Zhong Er and his loyal follower Jie Zitui, who were driven out by Concubine Li (*Ka Shue* 16). Towards the end of the play, Paw Paw picks up the thread of the story of Jie Zitui and narrates part of it (30). I see this as a 'coming together' of the two female ancestors: the step-mother and birth-mother of Abbie, 'reunited' through the telling of a Chinese legend and historical figure. Finally, the four female figures are reunited. In the last scene of the play, Lady Li mourns: 'Abbie...Abbie, who is your mamee?' (33). This is a reminder that although Lady Li was left behind in China and committed suicide thereafter, she is not forgotten in the play and her legacy as Abbie's birth mother remains.

Paw Paw's family heirloom, a gold locket and chain given to her by her mother, which she decides to give to her granddaughter is symbolic of the 'passing down' of a part of oneself

through the matrilineal line. ‘For you. It is. Very special. From my mother to me to... to baby Jackieleen. I give it to you when you big enough. You can have everything from me. Special little grand-daughter to Paw Paw’ (30). *Ka Shue* is a play that embodies the matrilineal chronotope by journeying into the future (the handing down of something to the future generation), but also journeying back into the past. It is a journey that involves the reconstruction of one’s matrilineage as well as the recovery of one’s foremothers and culture. At the same time, the women from different generations are linked through their defiant personalities and common experiences of being a Chinese woman. In this sense, Chanwai-Earle has not only written a play that explores the Chinese in New Zealand, she has created a play that reclaims and recovers the lives of Chinese women, by going back in time and culture to recover one’s foremothers.

In conclusion, the plays discussed in this chapter work to debunk limiting stereotypes of the ‘Oriental woman’, and instead reclaim female subjecthood and agency. Through female-focused narratives, whether they be female-centered stories, matrilineal narratives or autobiography, the works of the four Chinese Kiwi artists challenge the Pākehā-narrated history of the Chinese in New Zealand in which the presence of Chinese women have barely been acknowledged (Yee 11). Edward Said’s concept of Orientalism in which ‘the Oriental’ is perceived as an unchanging abstraction (8), is challenged and debunked through the telling of female-centered narratives written by and about Chinese New Zealand women. I argue that both hegemonic and minority groups need to hear and read these stories, which counter the externally-defined stereotypes of the Chinese woman. Through self-definition and self-valuation in matrilineal narratives, female-focused stories and autobiography, Chinese New Zealand women





can create narratives that reclaim their subjecthood and counter the fixed and limited 'abstractions' assigned to them.

## Chapter Six: Reconciliation and Transformation

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In this final chapter of analysis, I explore how Chinese Kiwi artists have affected reconciliation and transformation through the creation of the ‘Third Space’ in their plays and theatrical works. I use the term ‘reconciliation’ in the sense of a ‘coming to terms’ with the past. I refer mainly to discriminatory practices suffered by the Chinese, and their ‘non-place’ in hegemonic New Zealand narratives.<sup>6</sup> Homi K. Bhabha describes the Third Space as the articulation of cultural difference that accompanies the assimilation of contraries, creating ‘the occult instability which presages over powerful cultural exchanges’ (Bhabha 38). The Third Space is not based on the diversity of cultures or on the exoticism of multiculturalism, but on the inscription and articulation of culture’s hybridity (Bhabha 38). Bhabha likens cultural hybridity to ‘an interstitial passage between fixed identifications’, a liminal space that ‘entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy’ (4). David Huddart explains that Bhabha’s hybridity of cultures on one level simply refers to the ‘mixedness’ or ‘impurity’ of cultures, as no one culture can be considered ‘pure’ (6). Furthermore, in terms of cultural identities, hybridity implies that cultures are always in contact with one another, and that this contact leads to ‘cultural mixed-ness’ (Huddart 7). An important point to note is that hybridity is an ongoing process that happens on the borderlines of cultures (Huddart 7), referring to the liminal, in-between Third Space mentioned earlier. In a similar vein, Lo and Gilbert, identify this ‘hyphenated third space’ as the exploration of the interstice between cultures when discussing intercultural theatre (44). It is an act of crossing cultures that should ideally ‘activate both

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<sup>6</sup> The term ‘theatre of reconciliation’ is usually understood within a South African post-apartheid context in which theatre is used as a tool to heal trauma suffered during apartheid. I am using the term ‘reconciliation’ in a slightly different context.

centrifugal and centripetal forces in the process of mutual contamination and interaction' (44). Lo and Gilbert's idea of 'moving away' and 'moving towards' the centre is an interesting concept as it proposes that intercultural exchange is not unilinear but occurs as a two-way flow (44). The idea of a two-way exchange between cultures indicate that one culture does not 'dominate' the other, signaling a more or less equal power relationship. We can thus conclude that the creation of a Third Space through the contact and collision of two 'opposing' cultures results in a more 'level playing field' in terms of power dynamics. Through this 'mixing' and 'mingling' of two different cultures, something new is created that is neither one nor the other, but a 'hybrid' of sorts. Subsequently, I will argue that it is through this Third Space that change, transformation and reconciliation can occur. I begin this chapter by discussing how Alice Canton creates a Third Space in her theatre show *OTHER[chinese]* (2017). By challenging hegemonic and limiting representations of Chinese people, Canton creates a show that portrays difference and multiplicity, thus challenging fixed binaries of 'what is' and 'what is not' considered 'Chinese'. In the next section I explore how Chinese Kiwi artists have attempted to use theatrical form, namely magical realism and syncretic theatre, in order to destabilise hegemonic narratives and to transform reality.

### **Rejection of Fixed Binaries**

Alice Canton's *OTHER [chinese]* (2017) premiered at the Q Theatre in Auckland in 2017. Labelled a 'live documentary theatre show', *OTHER[chinese]* employed the use of 'non-actors' from the Chinese New Zealand community. Canton uses the term non-actors to describe 'real people', and not professional actors, telling their stories on stage (Canton, personal interview). The production involved a core cast of fourteen key storytellers, and a rotating ensemble cast.

The production was an interesting mix of filmed interviews, multimedia, and scripted and unscripted segments.

The show begins with the actors on stage, with their backs turned to the audience. Three large television screens hang on the wall, and different videos are played relating to Chinese or Asian people. These included media and news reports about Chinese businesses buying up farms in New Zealand, and pop songs featuring Korean pop stars. This was to showcase how Asian or Chinese people are portrayed in the media — thus leading to stereotypes being enforced in society. The actors turned around to face the audience, with black masks covering their mouths, and black and white stripes played out on their bodies (like they were inside a television screen), then when they stepped forward the black and white stripes disappeared. This could be interpreted as people stepping out of those televised and stereotypical media portrayals, and the ‘real authentic person’ emerges. In a personal interview, Canton explains:

If the idea of the show is Chinese voices; authentic Chinese voices (whatever that means); then they need to know what is not authentic in order for us to set what the agenda is. That’s why it was important to go: ‘This is representation of us; this, this, this.’ It was like a tsunami of representation.

(Canton, personal interview)

After showcasing all these ‘false’ representations in the media, the audience is now invited to hear snippets of each person’s ‘real life story’ relating to being a Chinese or mixed Chinese person in New Zealand.

In a short television interview for *The Cafe*, producer of *OTHER[chinese]* Julie Zhu claims that the creation of the show was ‘politically motivated’, as they wanted to say ‘look, we’re not one lump sum of people, but have all these different opinions’ (Zhu, *The Cafe*

interview). In another interview with Lynn Freeman on *Radio New Zealand*, Canton says that the reason for her doing this project is to tell people that ‘Chinese identity is not one homogenous entity’. She wanted to ‘reject the binary of it is and it isn’t’, and to show that there is a lot of grey area of black and white (Canton, Freeman interview).

The use of non-actors telling their stories and unscripted impromptu segments added to the ‘veracity’ of the show. The unscripted segments had Canton appear between the non-actors on stage and the audience, asking the non-actors questions such as: ‘What do you think of this statement: The Chinese are buying up all the houses in Auckland. Agree, disagree, or neutral?’ This prompted an immediate response, and the effect this had was that it added to the idea that the Chinese are not one homogenous group, but have varying opinions and individual responses. The varied ages of the non-actors ranging from teenagers to a senior in his sixties, and their different cultural backgrounds based on different Chinese ethnic groups — including Chinese people from Thailand, Malaysia, Hong Kong, mainland China, and second-generation Chinese Kiwis — also added to the debunking. This amalgamation of different Chinese people from various backgrounds on stage was a presentation of all these ‘hybrid identities’ which are all considered ‘Chinese’.

Similar to my discussion in the previous chapter on stereotypes of the ‘Oriental woman’<sup>7</sup>, Canton has managed to reject externally-driven images of Chinese people in which they are portrayed as one fixed homogenous group. A multitude of Chinese people with different opinions are presented, thus challenging dominant discourses on what a Chinese person really is. One of the pertinent and first questions that Canton asks to the non-actors on stage is: ‘What is Chinese?’, followed by ‘What is not Chinese?’. Huddart explains that colonial discourse relies on fixed binaries, where the Other is fetishised and exoticised, leading to stable if false stereotypes

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<sup>7</sup> See chapter five.

(35). Through racist jokes, cinematic images, and other forms of representation, the supposed inferiority of the colonised people is circulated as a means and justification for the coloniser to remain in power (Huddart 35). Therefore, through the creation of *OTHER[chinese]*, Canton challenges hegemonic representations of Chinese people, confronting and questioning these false and limiting stereotypes circulated in the media.

### **Transformation Through Narrative Form: Magical Realism and Syncretic Theatre**

The previous section explored how hegemonic constructions of the other are challenged on the stage through the enlisting of disparate and varied individuals as performers to challenge the homogeneity of what is considered 'Chinese'. This section explores how Chinese Kiwi artists have attempted to use theatrical form, namely magical realism, in order to destabilise hegemonic narratives and to transform reality. In addition, I argue that the use of non-realist narrative dramatic forms, in particular magical realism and syncretic theatre, can be an effective tool to 'decolonise the stage' in order to create a Third Space where hybrid identities can be recognised and celebrated. I begin by defining the term 'syncretic theatre', which is synonymous, if not closely related to the definition of hybridity explained earlier.

Christopher B. Balme claims that the 'decolonisation of the stage' can be achieved through what he terms 'theatrical syncretism', which is the amalgamation of indigenous and Western theatrical forms, cultural signs and codes (1). Balme argues that syncretic theatre is a conscious and programmatic strategy, usually brought about by the friction and interchange between cultures, resulting in a new form of theatre in light of the colonial or post-colonial experience (2). He argues that syncretic theatre is one of the most effective methods to decolonise the stage as it combines both Western and indigenous theatrical forms without

privileging one form over the other (2). Although Balme's analysis focuses on the works of Māori playwrights as examples of syncretic theatre in New Zealand, I will employ a selection of his theories and apply them to the works of the Chinese Kiwi artists under study. The experience of indigenous Māori people and their contact with European culture differ vastly from the Chinese, yet there are also similarities in the way minority groups in any given society react to and interact with dominant hegemonic structures. Therefore, I believe it applicable to utilise Balme's theories of syncretic theatre to Chinese Kiwi theatre in New Zealand, especially since the theories of the syncretism and hybridity are synonymous, if not closely related.

The form that the narrative employs is crucial as this is directly related to the discussion on colonial discourse and representation. Bhabha claims that colonial discourse 'resembles a form of narrative whereby the productivity and circulation of subjects and signs are bound in a reformed and recognizable totality. It employs a system of representation, a regime of truth, that is structurally similar to realism' (Bhabha 71). Bhabha directly connects realism and colonial discourse, in the sense that: 'if realism is not always colonial discourse, then colonial discourse is always a form of realism' (Huddart 39). This is because colonial discourse is always claiming to represent colonial reality (Huddart 39). Therefore, when 'writing back' to the dominant culture from the margins, postcolonial plays usually involve narratives that reject the realist mode. This rejection of fixed truths and binary dichotomies results in the distortion of linear narratives inherent in classical realist plays. Marc Maufort claims that such distortions reflect the difference of cultural visions represented, and parallels the cultural ambivalence at the heart of magical realism (21). He claims magical realism to be a formal equivalent to the hybridity and 'in-betweenness' as propagated by Bhabha (24).

According to Lois Parkinsom Zamora and Wendy B. Faris, magical realism functions ideologically as it creates space for interactions of diversity, creating ontological disruption with the purpose of political and cultural disruption (3). They claim that texts labelled as magical realist usually involve myths, legends and ritual as their primary narrative investment — these being collective practices that bind communities together (3). Theo L. D’haen describes this process of disruption from the margins through magical realist discourse:

To write ex-centrally then, or from the margin, implies dis-placing this discourse. My argument is that magic realist writing achieves this end by first appropriating the techniques of the ‘centr’-al line and then using these, not as in the case of these central movements, ‘realistically,’ that is, to duplicate existing reality as perceived by the theoretical or philosophical tenets underlying said movements, but rather to create an alternative world correcting so-called existing reality, and thus to right the wrongs this ‘reality’ depends upon.

(195)

Thus magical realism functions on both a narrative and ideological level in order to destabilise hegemonic narratives. Together with Balme’s syncretic theatre, there is a merging of the real/unreal, East/West, coloniser/colonised in order to create disruption from the margins. The result is a form of hybridity and in-betweenness, a Third Space where dominant discourses are destabilised so that Chinese identities can be reclaimed and rewritten.

In the following analysis, I will demonstrate how Chanwai-Earle employs the use of magical realism and syncretic theatre in order to create ‘hybrid identities’ in her play *Monkey* (2004). *Monkey* is Chanwai-Earle’s first children’s play and premiered at the International Festival of Arts in Wellington. The play reworks a Chinese classic from the sixteenth-century



Ming dynasty *Journey to the West*, into a New Zealand school playground (Chung 187). Famous mythological characters from the novel include the Monkey King, the monk Tripitaka, Pigsy, and Sandy.

The play follows the antics of four children: Sam and Pepe are friends and new migrants from China who come face-to-face with local school bullies Roger and Dodger. Their experiences and feelings towards one another are changed when Buddha transforms each of them into a mythical character from *A Journey to the West*. As the four of them are sent on a journey to find a horse, they encounter The White Bone Demon and have to work together to defeat her. Chanwai-Earle had hoped that through this play, she could create ‘old/new hybrid characters’ that children could identify with (Production Notes).

The character of Buddha, who is also a mythological character, appears as an omnipresent narrator and sets the tone of the play. Buddha begins by highlighting the theme and struggles of migration:

All of us have an ancestor who has travelled a long, long way to find a new home. We call this journey migration. Some of you may have ancestors who travelled here a long time ago, or some very recently. One thing they all have in common is the journey. Your ancestors made sacrifices; giving up their homes, leaving their loved ones behind. One such family from China is doing this now, traveling to a strange new world, bringing their children with them...

(Prologue)

The character of Buddha interacts with the four children, and possesses magical qualities as he is able to transform each child into a mythological character from *Journey to the West*:

BUDDHA. Right you little buggers! Time you learnt a thing or two about each other! [...]

It's time I sent you on a journey, a very special journey! Sam you are now the young boy monk Tripitaka, you need to find courage. Roger you greedy bully, you are Pigsy, a pig monster! And Dodger you cowardly bully, you're Sandy the water monster, once a cannibal. Pepe, you're a true friend to Sam so you shall be Monkey. After all the only thing you need to learn is patience.

(27)

The four children are transformed and need to go on a journey together to find the wooden horse. Another important magical transformation that the children go through is that they swap mother-tongues: Sam and Pepe from China are now transformed in Tripitaka and Monkey and can speak fluent English, whilst Roger and Dodger from New Zealand are transformed into Pigsy and Sandy and now speak Mandarin and broken English (28–29). The children go through trials and tribulations, having to work together as a team of four in order to defeat the White Bone Demon. They end up becoming firm friends and their misunderstandings and hostility towards one another is dissipated.

The use of magic and the transformation of four children from two culturally disparate groups into a team of Chinese mythological characters is a prime example of magical realism at work. The character of Buddha also adds to the mystical quality of the narrative. When the children swap mother tongues, this is an example of 'having to step into someone else's shoes' in order to foster understanding between two different cultures. This 'cultural exchange' between the New Zealand bullies and the new Chinese migrants is symbolic of the cultural exchange between the East and West, Chinese and Pākehā, White and Other that occurs. Through the use of magic, a liminal space and 'new reality' is created where transformation and new relationships

are able to take place. Fixed binaries are no longer rigid and unmoving, and a form of ‘intermingling’ occurs when people are transformed into mythological characters and mother-tongues are swapped. The end result is a positive one, as the four children have to work together in order to find the wooden horse and Sam leads the group out to safety.

ROGER. Look everyone, it’s our school yard. We made it!

DODGER. It worked! It worked, Sam saved us!

*The four break into a run and emerge in their school yard, blinking in daylight, the friendly sounds of a sunny day surround. ROGER hi-fives a beaming SAM.*

ROGER. (*whooping*) Thank you Sam, you da man! Sam da man!

*The whole group hugs SAM and cheer, lifting him to their shoulders, a hero.*

PEPE. You did it Sam, you did it! You finding way home!

SAM. (*laughing*) not just me, all of us. We find way home together!

(60)

A mutual appreciation between the children is fostered, the theme of which is echoed in the play’s song finale:

Far far away,

We discovered each other,

Our foe was our brother,

Our looks did not matter

On our quest for love!

(61)

By rewriting a case of school yard bullying resulting from ethnic differences through the use of syncretic theatre and magical realism, Chanwai-Earle is able to ‘rewrite’ and ‘correct’ a reality of

diametrically opposed opposites. In the words of D’haen, magical realism can ‘create an alternative world *correcting* so-called existing reality, and thus to right the wrongs this “reality” depends upon’ (195). In summary, magical realism and syncretic theatre is a narrative and dramatic form that is able create an ‘alternative world’ in which the real/ magical and the East/ West intersect. It is via this Third Space between opposing forces — likened to Bhabha’s concept of the ‘interstitial passage between fixed identifications’ (4) — that change and transformation occurs. This change is demonstrated through the transformation of the children in the play from real to fictional characters, from the Western to a Eastern mythological world, and then a return back to a new and altered reality. This transformation leads to a form of reconciliation and understanding between the children from two different cultures, as they ‘circle back’ to a new and transformed reality.

### **Reconciliation: Transforming Theatre into Reality**

Liang’s *The Bone Feeder* (2009/2011) is a play that takes this aspect of transformation and reconciliation one step further: transformation happens not only within the play but has a direct impact on reality. The play was first presented as part of Liang’s postgraduate diploma of Arts at the University of Auckland, and premiered at TAPAC in Auckland (Wenley, review). In 2017, *The Bone Feeder* was made into an opera, and played at the ASB Waterfront Theatre as part of the Auckland Arts Festival. Liang was the librettist, Gareth Farr as composer, Sara Brodie as director, and Peter Scholes as conductor. Liang had introduced music sung in English, Māori and Cantonese. *The Bone Feeder* is based on some early Chinese history in New Zealand, when the SS *Ventnor* carrying the bones of 499 Chinese miners sank into the Hokianga Harbour in

1902. The Māori tribes, the Te Roroa and Te Rarawa *iwi* ‘adopted’ the washed up bones of the Chinese settlers and buried them in their ancestral burial grounds (Cox 113).

The play’s protagonist Ben Kwan, is on the road to Mitimiti in order to find and retrieve the bones of his great grandfather Choy Kwan, so that he can bring them back home. The theme of returning to one’s ancestral roots or retrieving something related to one’s ancestors is central to this play. On his way, Ben encounters a Māori Ferryman, who helps to guide him to his destination. Ben carries with him a jade cicada, which is an important family token and is used as a sign of identification. Family secrets are revealed when Kwan, who has been apart from his Chinese wife Weiwei for many years, falls in love with Louisa, a Pākehā woman who is also the Reverend’s daughter. In the end, Ben comes face to face with his great grandfather’s ghost, and they are reunited as family (*Bone Feeder*).

This is a play that relays the struggles of Chinese miners and early settlers in New Zealand. As discussed in earlier chapters, the Chinese mining community was mainly a bachelor society as Chinese women and wives were not allowed to immigrate to New Zealand. Therefore Chinese men formed romantic relationships with Māori or Pākehā women, whilst continuing to send money back home to their Chinese wives and family.

Magical realism is used in order to bridge the gap between past and present, and the human and spirit world. Time becomes non-linear and the past and present are made concurrent when we realise that Ben can see and interact with ghosts, namely the spirits of dead people from his great grandfather’s generation. Ghosts feature heavily and are an integral part of the play. The ghosts of three Chinese miners — Sam, Dan, and Wang —together with the Māori ferryman help to guide Ben to his destination and to reunite him with the ghost of his great grandfather Kwan and to locate his bones (*Bone Feeder*). The first ghost that Ben encounters is the Māori

ferryman, who transports Ben across the harbour to Mitimiti in order to find a lady named Kere. Ben believes that Kere will know where Kwan's bones are buried (Liang, *Bone Feeder* 7). The figure of the Māori ferryman is reminiscent of Charon from Greek mythology. Charon is the ferryman of Hades, God of the Underworld, who carries the souls of the dead across the rivers Styx and Acheron that divides the world of the living from the dead. Thus, there is a symbolic crossing of a threshold in order to reach another world. This liminal status of the Māori ferryman, and the crossing of the Hokianga harbour is symbolic of Ben crossing a liminal threshold. The idea of liminality is emphasised as Ben can see and interact with the ghosts who help him on his journey, resulting in a merging/ fusing of the past and present, and the living with the dead.

Emma Cox compares Liang's use of magical realism to Māori drama and literature, as a common trope in postcolonial literature (116). Cox cites Beaufort's argument that magical realism is a genre that rejects binary forms of rationalist perception, and that this trope is evident in Liang's work (116). Cox describes Liang's imaginary world where the living merges with the dead, as a mode of remembering history that functions in a circular non-linear fashion (116). The creation of a world in which the past and present collide, and ghosts interact with the living, is demonstrative of the Third Space where new hybrid elements emerge, and the possibility of transformation takes place from the creation of a liminal space.

*The Bone Feeder* discusses an important part of Chinese culture which is the 'bai shan' ceremony (also known as Chinese ancestral worship) where the living 'pay respect' to their dead ancestors. This usually involves visiting the gravesite of their ancestors, sweeping their graves and giving them offerings of food, incense and the burning of paper goods for the deceased to use in the underworld (Cox 123). If the 'bai shan' ceremony is not performed, then the deceased

will be condemned to wander as ‘hungry ghosts’: ‘The SS *Ventnor*’s demise represented an ongoing trauma: having never been buried at home, the 499 dead were condemned to wander as hungry ghosts, unable to be venerated with gravesite offerings’ (Cox 113). The bones of the 499 miners were buried by local Māori, yet the details of the reburials remain unclear (Cox 113).

There is a circular motion in which a historical event — the sinking of the SS *Ventnor* in 1902 — is made into a play, and then translated into a real life ‘bai shan’ ceremony taking place 111 years later in 2013. Cox argues that Liang’s play had resulted in a resurgence of cultural consciousness of the historical event which otherwise would have been forgotten:

For decades the story of the SS *Ventnor* faded from cultural discourse among Chinese New Zealand communities, as an unspoken and unreconciled event. To this day, most of the names of the lost are not known. But *The Bone Feeder* contributed to a resurgence of cultural consciousness, and in April 2013, after three years of negotiation with the local Te Roroa and Te Rarawa Māori, a group of around 100 Chinese New Zealanders travelled north to the Hokianga in order to establish a reed pavilion as a permanent memorial to those lost in the sinking of the *Ventnor*.

(Cox 122)

Liang was among those who travelled, and a play reading was arranged at Opononi Hall during the four-day visit (Cox 122). Those who travelled and partook in the play reading including Jason Sew Hoy, the great-great-grandson of Choie Sew Hoy, who is the only documented and named body out of the 499 deceased (Cox 122). Liang had based her character of Kwan in the play on Choie. The event was timed to coincide with the Chinese Qingming festival of ancestral worship and offerings of food were made at the burial sites of the miners (Cox 123). It is important to note that the ‘bai shan’ ceremony was aided and facilitated with Māori assistance,

and that terms were negotiated as both Chinese and Māori customs and rituals had to be respected (Cox 123). This demonstrates the ‘intermingling’ of two different cultures, and the concept of hybridity discussed throughout the chapter. Liang had recalled that the whole event was an ‘extraordinary collision of history and theatre, descendants and ancestors’ (Cox 122–123). and I would add to that, ‘the collision of two disparate cultures’. The performance of a Chinese ritual together with local Māori *iwi* involvement over a century after the historical event, demonstrates a form of ‘reconciliation’ with the past. Cox uses the term ‘atonement’ as she views the establishment of a Chinese memorial in Hokianga as representing ‘a process of local cultural diplomacy whereby Māori people facilitated a community’s transition from the “before” to “after” in relation to a historical, unspeakable trauma’ (123). I view this event in terms of a ‘circular movement’ in which recognition and reconciliation is achieved between the past and present, the living with the dead, storytelling and history, and the Chinese community with the local Māori *iwi*.

There is a rather poignant ending in *The Bone Feeder*, which sums up my argument on reconciliation and transformation. Kwan, who previously longed to have his bones returned to China, has decided that he would prefer to stay in New Zealand. After ‘living’ in New Zealand for so many years, he finally comes to the realisation that he his feelings have changed and now considers New Zealand to be his home:

KWAN. All right. Let’s talk. I have decided to stay. [...] Leave my bones where they are. They belong here now.

BEN. [...] I thought you wanted to go home to China?

KWAN. I’ve changed my mind.

(32)



Cox describes this attachment to one's newly adopted country as a result of deracination when a person is uprooted from his birth culture: 'with deracination comes aggregation elsewhere, a biological reintegration into local ecosystems, and the possibility of newly grafted attachments' (118). This 'integration' of one's birth country and the newly adopted one is symbolic of the Third Space in which two opposing cultures collide to create something new. Kwan has integrated or 'reconciled' the dual aspects of his identity — being Chinese and being a New Zealander — to becoming a Chinese New Zealander who considers New Zealand to be his 'new' or 'second home'. Austin Tseng sums this up quite well:

Ben's journey is a metaphor for the search for home and identity. The *Ventnor* was commissioned to transport the remains due to the perception of the Chinese miners and migrants of New Zealand as 'not-home'. The loss of bones symbolises the trauma of separation from ancestors and family. Ben's reunion with Kwan throws up a surprising revelation on how the latter wants his remains treated. Ben and Kwan's odyssey suggests both a reconnection to ancestral roots, and New Zealand finally being important to Chinese as a 'home'.

(Tseng)

Repatriation of Kwan's remains to China is no longer necessary, and his decision to remain in New Zealand is symbolic of his life and story becoming part of New Zealand's narrative history.

In conclusion, the plays discussed in this chapter showcase the power of theatre in affecting transformation and reconciliation. Through the use of narrative form — magical realism and syncretic theatre — Chinese Kiwi artists have been able to evoke a different reality. Liang's play takes this one step further to demonstrate how change is affected in the real world by raising people's consciousness through her playwrighting, resulting in a Chinese ritual that

reconciles past and present, storytelling and history, Chinese and Māori. The idea of liminality and transformation occurs through the collision of cultures, time, and people resulting in the creation of a Third Space. To sum up, the importance of the techniques employed by Chinese Kiwi artists in their theatrical works demonstrate how Pākehā-created narratives about Chinese people are disrupted and challenged. As I argue in the subsequent concluding chapter, these together with the methods discussed in previous chapters help to propel the once-muted Chinese voice from the margins, carving a space into the hegemonic New Zealand narrative.

## Chapter Seven: Conclusion – Voices in the Mainstream

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The year 2017 was considered a watershed moment for Chinese New Zealand theatre, with the production of *The Bone Feeder* opera, *The Mooncake and The Kumara*, and *OTHER[chinese]*, offering audiences a variety of interpretations of the Chinese experience in Aotearoa. This trend has continued into 2018 and the present, with *Orientation* (2018) written and directed by Chye-Ling Huang, *Tide Waits for No Man: Episode Grace* (2018) written and directed by Nikita Tu-Bryant, and *I am Rachel Chu* (2019) created by Nathan Joe. It seems as though the floodgates have been opened, and now there is no turning back. Writer Austin Tseng has commented that the Chinese in New Zealand were historically known for their political passivity and not rocking the boat, but shows like *OTHER[chinese]* are an indicator of the growth of an increasingly bold, assertive and savvy generation of Chinese Kiwis. Chinese New Zealanders are now exercising the agency to take control of their own narratives: ‘We were spoken about, but now we speak ourselves’ (Tseng). With a lot more Chinese narratives taking the stage, it is important that the scholarship flourishes in tandem. My thesis has been a direct result of my personal interest in the exploration of Chinese identities and representations on stage.

The aim of this thesis was to examine the works of four contemporary Chinese Kiwi theatre artists, and explore how they have used theatre to (re)negotiate, reclaim and rewrite the identity and narratives of Chinese people within the postcolonial and binational framework in Aotearoa. Through the analysis of their works, I have demonstrated that the works of these artists have challenged hegemonic narratives and stereotypical representations, and in their place have reclaimed subjecthood and affected transformation for Chinese New Zealanders.

I began my analysis in chapter four by examining the Chinese relationship with tangata whenua, and demonstrated how the Chinese have always had a presence in New Zealand but did not have a ‘voice’. Through the analysis of two plays — *The Mooncake and The Kumara* and *Foh Sarn* — that encompassed the ‘old Chinese’ and ‘new Chinese’ migrant groups, I have argued that the bicultural framework is rooted in the colonial past and needs to be expanded to include the Chinese element into its dialogue.

In chapter five, I added gender and Chinese female subjecthood into the examination of race and representation. I demonstrated how Chinese Kiwi theatre artists have debunked the stereotype of the submissive and erotic ‘Oriental woman’ through matrilineal narratives and autobiography. *WHITE/OTHER*, *Lantern*, *Under the Same Moon*, and *Ka Shue* are works that embody female empowerment, that include having the agency to take control of one’s narrative, creating powerful female characters, and the passing down of female centered stories.

Chapter six focused on how transformation and reconciliation is achieved through narrative and theatrical form. The rejection of fixed binaries in favour of a fluid and liminal Third Space is examined in *OTHER[chinese]*, *Monkey*, and *The Bone Feeder*. The chapter explored the use of magical realism and syncretic theatre as approaches for theatre artists to disrupt from the margins and to ‘correct so-called reality’. A concrete example of how theatre has affected ‘reconciliation’ in the real world: bringing together the past and present, history and theatrical storytelling, Māori *iwi* and Chinese in the real world is examined.

In conclusion, on a personal level, the analysis of the works of the Chinese Kiwi theatre artists studied in this thesis has given me a lot of insight into the bicultural framework of New Zealand and the efforts engaged by theatre artists to give Chinese people a voice. I have gained some historical knowledge in regards to the plight of Chinese New Zealanders in the face of

racial and legislative discrimination, which I had not been aware of previously. Part of the motivation behind my research was to understand my own sense of ‘split’ identity between the East and West. I have come away from this year of research with a deeper appreciation of my own Chinese roots and sense of ‘hybridity’, understanding that we are all unique and can embody ‘opposing’ aspects of ourselves. Through my research, I have come to realise that there are many out there grappling with similar issues, and one of the ways to tell our stories and document our struggles has been through theatre.

As a Chinese New Zealander, I am extremely proud of the work done by Chinese Kiwi theatre artists in grabbing the reins to tell *our* stories. The work they have done since 1996 has been monumental in reclaiming the narratives and subjecthood of Chinese New Zealanders. The importance of my thesis has been to document and to provide a scholarly examination of their works. I only hope that the momentum continues so that the Chinese narrative continues to move away from the margins, carving a space into the mainstream.

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