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Thesis: *Chinese Town*

Exegesis: *Interesting Times*

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the requirements for a degree of Master of Creative Writing.

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Abstract

Chinese Town is the thesis component for a Masters in Creative Writing project. It is accompanied by the exegesis *Interesting Times*. *Chinese Town* is a draft of a literary novel set in rural New Zealand. *Chinese Town* begins with the opening of the Beijing Summer Olympics in 2008 and ends with the Sanlu milk scandal of the same year. The novel tells the story of the fictional South Island town of New Tower, and the impending takeover of its freezing works (South East Meat), the major employer of the town's residents. The narrative focuses on a single family (James, Isabelle, Julianne and Roger) and the young man (Sebastian) they hire to teach the townsfolk Mandarin. Unbeknownst to the family, bar James, Sebastian cannot speak Mandarin, and proceeds to teach a partially invented language. *Interesting Times* examines how the time and place setting of *Chinese Town* is important to its theme of sinophobia and xenophobia in modern New Zealand. The exegesis compares *Chinese Town* to other New Zealand novels in terms of its portrayal of New Zealanders' attitudes towards China, and to postcolonial literature in terms of its examination of language learning's role in subjugation and continuation of culture.

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Attestation of Authorship

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgements), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.

Candidate signature _____

Date _____

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Intellectual Property Rights

All intellectual property (including copyright) in the content of the candidate's thesis is retained by the candidate. For the avoidance of doubt, publication by the candidate of this or any derivative work does not change the intellectual property rights of the candidate in relation to the thesis.

Confidential Material

The content of the candidate's thesis is confidential for commercial reasons, that is, the possible publication by the candidate of the thesis, or a derivative of it, as a work of creative fiction for sale. This confidentiality remains after any commercial publication.

An application has been made by way of a PGR-16 to the School of Language & Culture, Auckland University of Technology, for restricted access to the thesis.

Exegesis: Interesting Times

Introduction

Interesting Times is an exegesis for the thesis *Chinese Town*, a work of realist, comedic literary fiction. As literary fiction is difficult to define in terms of genre tropes and conventions, this exegesis will examine *Chinese Town*'s theme of sinophobia and xenophobia in New Zealand. First, after providing a brief synopsis and commenting on my motivations and aims, I will explain my choice of setting (time and place) for *Chinese Town*. Second, I will discuss sinophobia in New Zealand's past and present, first by providing examples of sinophobia from New Zealand's history, briefly surveying Chinese characters in New Zealand-penned literature, then examining contemporary media coverage of the CraFarms sale to a Chinese business syndicate. Third, I will argue that language education can be used to both subjugate and perpetuate a culture. Finally, I will briefly discuss *Chinese Town*'s 'scam language' conceit, and how this relates to westernised consumption of Eastern culture, drawing close comparison with food.

Synopsis of *Chinese Town*

James is a small-town Cantab-cum-Hong Kong banker who spends his weeknights skulking under red lights, short-changing hookers and dodging his father's phone calls. Then, on 08/08/08, as the opening salvo of Beijing's Olympic firework spectacular blooms overhead, James gets a call he can't ignore – South East Meats, the limply-beating heart of his hometown, New Tower, is being bought out by the dread Chinese, and James's father, Roger, has accepted a hefty cash payment to ensure ownership changes hands smoothly. Sensing an opportunity to make a quick buck, James shanghaies an old friend, Sebastian, into teaching New Tower's residents Chinese

language and culture, lessons which will culminate in a presentation to the freezing-works' new owners. Sebastian is reluctant – neither he nor James can tell a dumpling from a doormat, and neither speaks a syllable of Mandarin. James insists they teach a fake language, but Sebastian believes this won't be necessary if he can stay one step ahead of his students. At first the town resists, but gradually comes to accept the language lessons. New Tower seems destined to become a tranquil Chinese Town. Then its sinophobic underbelly is exposed by a 1.5 litre bottle of green-top super-slim milk chucked through a bathroom window. With little time before the takeover presentation, Sebastian, James and his family have to race to ensure the other townsfolk greet their new bosses not with a middle finger, but with a welcoming 'Ni hao'.

Motivation for writing *Chinese Town*

Having little knowledge of China before I started teaching English as a second language, I was fascinated by the titbits of culture I could glean from my Chinese students, particularly information on food, language and mythology. I found this information endearing to China, and my previously suspicious attitude toward China and Chinese ownership softened.

The manner with which Chinese ownership has remained a contentious issue in New Zealand was another motivating factor for my writing *Chinese Town*. I thought the subject was interesting enough for people to want to read about, and could not find any contemporary New Zealand fiction on the topic.

My final motivation came from an epiphany during a pronunciation class, while I taught my students the difference between an /l/ sound and an /r/ sound, or a /p/ sound and a /b/ sound, or one of the countless other phoneme pairs with which speakers of particular languages struggle. My realisation was that, because students speak mostly with other non-native speakers, the quality of their pronunciation matters little in practice. For all our tongue-fumbling and jabbering about 'rights' and 'lights', almost no progress could be made. In fact, the more I told my students their sounds were not quite right, the more they lost confidence. I realised that perhaps it was not

only easier, but also more beneficial to the students, if I pretended that their pronunciation was suddenly perfect.

Although I ploughed on with my pronunciation class, this notion of a teacher lying to his students stayed with me, and, when combined with my burgeoning fascination with China and the divisive topic of Chinese ownership, led to the inception of *Chinese Town*.

Aims

My primary aim in writing *Chinese Town* was to write an entertaining novel. I hoped to produce a readable, funny, yet dramatic work. I did wish the novel to have some thematic depth, however, and to examine the contentious issue of foreign ownership. My key questions for the novel and this exegesis are: What is the origin of resistance to Chinese ownership of New Zealand industry and land? Does ignorance of culture play a role in sinophobia? Is education a valid solution to sinophobia? Is it important that the Chinese culture we 'consume' is not authentic? And, more broadly, how do people react when they feel their identity is under threat?

Note on references

Many of the works cited in this exegesis are e-books without page numbers. The AUT reference guidelines state that references to such texts should be marked by chapter name in double quotation marks. One cited work (*The Yellow Peril* by Stephen Faulds) contains neither page numbers nor chapter headings, so I have included the text location number, marked 'l'.

Fireworks, Frost, Meat and Milk: Time and Place in Chinese Town

Time

'May you live in interesting times.'

- Chinese proverb

On 7 April 2008, Prime Minister Helen Clark signed a free trade agreement between New Zealand and China, which reduced and eventually eliminated tariffs on goods

exported and imported between the two countries. Despite general support from large businesses (Fonterra, 2008), the New Zealand public was divided on the agreement, with a *New Zealand Herald* poll at the time finding some 32 percent against the deal, and 45 percent in favour ("Public divided over FTA, poll shows", 2008). In a blog post on the subject, then Green Party MP Russel Norman wrote that in signing the agreement, New Zealand was 'trading away its integrity.' Norman claimed that 'To offer preferential trading status to a nation that routinely abuses the human rights of her own citizens and is currently involved in a murderous suppression of the Tibetan people [was] unacceptable' (Norman, 2008).

Later that year, China dominated headlines once more with the opening of the Beijing Olympics, which *The China Post* described as 'nothing less than the rebirth of a country. China is ready to take its place as a respected and responsible member of the international community. And the world at large is bracing for this epochal change.' (Ching, 2008). The Olympics were an opportunity for China to showcase to the world its transformation into a modern nation. The importance of the event is clear when one considers the investment made by the Chinese government. In *Mr China*, Tim Clissold states that 'Twenty billion dollars had been allocated to upgrade [Beijing] . . . Huge areas of the ancient city disappeared and its character has changed for ever.' (Clissold, 2004, "Preface").

Evidently well aware of Western fears over China's rapid growth, rather than presenting his nation to the world via a rhetoric of competition, Chinese President Hu Jintao was quoted in the *New York Times* as saying, 'The world has never needed mutual understanding, mutual toleration and mutual cooperation as much as it does today.' Jintao's words were described in the same paper as an attempt to 'reassure' an 'uncertain outside world' (Yardley, 2008). "Uncertain" seems a sound description for the West's attitude to the Olympics prior to its opening. Coverage of the event focused mainly on Beijing's smog issues ("Smog still lingers in Beijing", 2008), the Chinese government's plan to disperse rain clouds via missile technology (Lewis, 2008), and continuing human rights abuses ("Activists call for China Olympics boycott", 2007).

However, said uncertainty was temporarily assuaged when the Olympics opened with a spectacular ceremony, which prompted the *Sydney Morning Herald's* to claim that 'the world may never witness a ceremony of the magnitude and ingenuity.' The paper went on to laud the opening for its pyrotechnics, musical acts and the '56 children from 56 Chinese ethnic groups, [who] carried the Chinese national flag into the stadium for the symbolic flag raising ceremony.' (Brown, 2008).

Yet, practically before the final firework had faded from the Beijing sky, reports began to surface that parts of the ceremony had been simulated. Specifically: portions of the aforementioned pyrotechnics were computer generated; a young girl who was purported to be the star of the show was actually miming a track recorded by another, less-photogenic child; and many of the 56 children praised by the *Sydney Morning Herald* were in fact Han Chinese wearing the traditional dress of China's minorities. Thus, as put by Richard Spencer for *The Telegraph*, the 'initial triumph of the opening ceremony [had] been clouded' (Spencer, 2008). Rather than emerging as a transparent, modern country, China's indiscretions exposed it as the same old 'commie' state shrouded in duplicity.

To me, the Olympics provided the perfect opening for a novel dealing with Chinese-New Zealand relations, because not only did China thrust itself into the living rooms of millions of New Zealanders, but the joy with which the Western media reported China's fakery encapsulates the paranoia and uncertainty that appears to pervade many New Zealanders' view of China. Thus, *Chinese Town* begins with James in Hong Kong witnessing an Olympic celebration parade first hand, watching in fear as the dragon dance (a blunt metaphor for China's imperial ambitions) sweeps past him and 'all is eclipsed in a rush of red scales.' (Anderson, p.11)

The second mention of the Olympics comes with Julianne's watching a replay of the ceremony on television. While Julianne echoes the public's initial enthusiasm for the ceremony, she also reveals a hint of fear and mistrust:

... a thousand people are beating drums in perfect unison. It seems unreal that so many discrete beings could be so well coordinated, and Julianne has serious suspicions that the performance may be computer animated. . . Then the

fireworks kick off and the camera swoops over Beijing as chromatic blossoms stretch across the sky [like] the luminous footprints of some incorporeal beast that stalks massive in the night sky, stomping relentlessly toward its final destination, five interlocked rings. (Anderson, p.14).

Although the Olympics plays a less significant role during the final stages of the novel, the rapid swing of opinion – from joy at the ceremony to suspicion of its flaws – is a constant, as characters are unsure whether the buyout of their freezing works will benefit New Tower.

The buyout is eventually cancelled due to another major event of 2008 – the Sanlu milk scandal, in which milk powder produced in New Zealand and exported to China was used in a toxic baby formula that hospitalised around 300,000 infants and caused 154 to suffer acute kidney failure (Branigan, 2008). The impact of the scandal is foreshadowed in *Chinese Town* when a milk bottle, carrying a threatening note, smashes through a window. But only later in the novel is the scandal's full impact revealed, when Agnew informs Roger that 'Deal's off. The Chinese lot have gone skittish over the milk poisoning. They say the market's a little volatile.' (Anderson, 118). Readers soon learn that Roger had been aware that the deal may fall through, but chose not to tell the other townsfolk as he did not wish to disrupt the festival. There is an intentional parallel here with the actual Sanlu scandal, as reports later speculated that the Chinese government had become aware of the contamination prior to the Olympics but, despite the obvious dangers, chose to suppress coverage of the issue in order to allow the Olympics to run smoothly (Hutchenson, 2008).

The Sanlu milk scandal is a strong example of the building mistrust between New Zealand and China. In essence, the scandal involves a Chinese company, partially owned by a New Zealand company, contaminating a New Zealand food product and selling it to Chinese consumers. The milk scandal also realised many of *Chinese Town*'s characters' fears over the quality of product they will produce after the takeover, and thus was an apt event with which to begin the novel's final act.

Place

'The way you cut your meat reflects the way you live.'

- *Chinese proverb*

When deciding upon a location for *Chinese Town*, I knew I wanted to set the novel in a small, South Island community. My reasoning for this was that small towns are often considered the 'heartland' of New Zealand, and represent the foundations of what Patrick Evans refers to in his analysis of New Zealand postcolonial fiction *The Long Forgetting* as the 'white settlement sublime' (p.121). They tend to have low numbers of recent immigrants, and are thus more likely to be ignorant of Chinese language and culture.

Thus, without a great deal of thought, I opened Google Maps, chose a location roughly equidistant between Dunedin and Christchurch, then zoomed along the Waitaki River until I found the town of Glenavy, which I decided to use as a model for New Tower, the fictional town in which the events of *Chinese Town* occur. Having already written several sections of the novel, I decided to further research Glenavy to ascertain whether *Chinese Town*'s plot could plausibly unfold in such a location, and to my surprise I found a number of similarities between the fictional New Tower and the real Glenavy.

Chief amongst these similarities was Glenavy's recently constructed dairy plant, owned by the Chinese Yili group (Oceania Dairy). Whether this was serendipity at play, or whether China's presence in New Zealand's farming industry is already so great that I likely would have found such a plant in any South Island town, I cannot say. But the presence of such a plant in New Tower's proxy affirms the premise of *Chinese Town* by demonstrating that Chinese investment in rural New Zealand can and has happened.

The other central location of the novel is New Tower's freezing works, which I chose as I felt it was more interesting than a dairy plant. The freezing works has long been a trope of New Zealand pastoral fiction, which Evans claims has 'become reified in our literary culture, developing into a basis of a substantial mythology that expressed the way the dominant culture felt about white settlement itself.' (p.121). Evans goes on to explain that this mythology surrounding New Zealand's frozen meat industry, which dates back as far as 1882, stems from works by the likes of Herbert Guthrie-Smith and

Walter D'Arcy Cresswell, both of whom hold the freezing works as a marker for New Zealand's becoming truly settled (p.121). Despite the fact that at the time of their writing, most New Zealanders lived in urban areas, these writers painted the rural lifestyle (to which the freezing works was an integral part) in a utopian light, suggesting that all New Zealanders are, at heart, country folk with a special relationship with the land that birthed them (Evans, p.126).

Therefore, if one considers the freezing works to be a foundational element of Pakeha New Zealand, by having the Chinese buy South East Meat I intend to subvert the feeling of settlement that early freezing works brought to New Zealand. I show this sentiment early in the novel, when at a meeting regarding the sale, one character comments that 'South East is the heart of New Tower. And it's a kiwi heart. Always has been. We don't want to become some Chinese town.' (Anderson, p.18). If the freezing works provided stability for white settlers in New Zealand, its purchase will hopefully (for the sake of my novel's aims) erode this stability and bring about massive disruption and conflict.

Not in my country: Sinophobia in New Zealand

'Those who know much speak little. Those who speak much know little.'

- Chinese proverb

Looking for xenophobia in any society is like looking for mould in a Mount Eden flat during a damp July – you will find it. However, I believe it is important to establish that New Zealand does have a history of sinophobia, and to see how our thoughts on the Chinese have changed over the years, from early history, to the point that the terms 'sinophobe' and 'racist' are frequently deployed as political weapons.

A brief history of sinophobia in New Zealand law and literature

New Zealand has a history of Chinese-focused anti-immigration laws, such as late nineteenth century poll taxes on Chinese, and restrictions on the number of Chinese passengers allowed on each ship entering the country (Ooi, p.120, 2008). As evidenced

by its enactment in law, early sinophobia was in no way restricted to the lower classes, nor was it espoused in secret. In fact, in 1880, the future prime minister Richard Seddon stated 'There is as much distinction between a European and a Chinaman as there is between a Chinaman and a monkey.' (Ooi, p.120).

In early works of New Zealand fiction, the Chinese were 'typically depicted as a massive human wave which threatened to swamp the Pakeha presence in New Zealand.' (Ooi, p.120). This representation changed over the course of the twentieth century, reflecting a general shift in New Zealanders' attitude towards and understanding of Chinese immigrants. In his essay "Canton-Bromides: The Chinese Presence in Twentieth-century New Zealand Fiction" (2005), Paul Millar provides a brief survey and analysis of Chinese characters in novels written by non-Chinese New Zealanders. Samples of fiction stretch back as far as early Katherine Mansfield stories ("Old Underwood", 1912), in which Chinese characters were used to provide local colour, and acted largely as scenery rather than major players (Millar, p.157). Other early twentieth-century fiction includes politician John A. Lee's *Children of the Poor* (1934), which contained 'odious stereotypes of Chinese. . . exaggerating them for political gain' (Millar, p.158), and Roderick Finlayson's *Brown Man's Burden* (1938) and *Sweet Beulah's Land* (1942), both of which present a 'subordinate relationship between the impoverished Maori and their Chinese employers,' which, while not openly sinophobic, does emphasise a loss of freedom for the Maori through the loss of their land (Millar, p.164).

From the 1940s onwards, Chinese characters in New Zealand fiction were no longer written as threats, but more as mysterious (Janet Frame, 'The Bull Calf', 1960), or sympathetic (Lloyd Jones, *Splinter*, 1988). Later fiction subverted early notions of Chinese as the threatening 'other', as seen in Vincent O'Sullivan's *Believers* (1998), in which a serial killer dubbed 'The Chow', who is assumed to be Chinese, is revealed to be a hermaphrodite of unknown ethnicity (Millar, p.168).

A more recent New Zealand novel that deals with early Chinese settlers is *As the Earth Turns Silver* by Alison Wong (2009). In her novel, Wong describes the real 1905

murder of Chinese immigrant Zhou Kum Yung, an elderly gold prospector, by Lionel Terry, an English-raised New Zealand resident and prominent sinophobe. Terry attempted to promulgate his sinophobic views throughout New Zealand by distributing racially-charged poetry damning Chinese immigrants, referring to them as 'plague fraught offal of the earth' (Wong, "The Shadow"). In Wong's novel, Terry's views gain some traction with the (Pakeha) protagonist Katherine's husband and son. At Terry's trial, the husband wonders why the crowd seem against Terry, as they are men with 'good British names. . . How could they not agree on the Asiatic problem?' (Wong, "The Trial"). Later in the novel, although she is seemingly sympathetic to the Chinese and has taken a Chinese lover, Yung, Katherine still finds herself confused about her feelings, and even attempts to justify them with statements such as,

He was a Chinaman. A sallow-faced, squinty-eyed foreigner. The dregs of society. Heavens, he didn't even make it into society. And yet when she was with him she forgot who he was. After all, he had a strong, almost European nose. He was tall. He didn't really look Chinese. (Wong, "The Little Orange Book").

Wong does not attempt to paint xenophobia as a wholly New Zealand nor wholly European fault. Yung makes similar observations about Katherine: 'Her nose is too big, and her breasts, and her feet. She doesn't walk like a woman. She has red devil hair.' (Wong, "The Devil"). Yet, through the course of the novel the two lovers become more familiar, not just with each other, but with each other's cultures, to the point that Katherine, when observing a group of Chinese immigrants in the street, remarks that 'If they had not spoken such halting English, if their accent had not been so difficult, if they had not looked so out of place, so very foreign, perhaps she would not have noticed the Chinese at all.' (Wong, "Lantern").

Wong differs from European authors cited in this section as she is a Chinese New Zealander, and so has more understanding of the Chinese characters in her novel, and is able to sympathise with them more easily. As such, the novel is unique in that it examines the alien immigrant experience in New Zealand. Millar claims that the use of Chinese characters by most early New Zealand authors was a 'commentary on settler culture, and never about the Chinese themselves' (p. 157), and that the eventual

disappearance of threatening, alien Chinese characters is a strong indication of New Zealand's growing sense of identity, and the development of a society in which 'racial scapegoating was more likely to be challenged and resisted' (p.168). In *Chinese Town*, none of the characters are Chinese, and none have any great knowledge of Chinese culture. The Chinese interest that intends to buy South East Meat is very much an absent threat, a looming "other". This was partly because *Chinese Town* is not a novel about China. Much like the other examples of New Zealand literature with a Chinese influence, my main aim was to use China to comment on New Zealand culture.

Contemporary sinophobia

Modern, openly-sinophobic literature is difficult to come across as not many publishers deem it worthy of publication, yet a small number of self-published novels on the subject of Chinese immigration and neo-colonisation exist. One such novel is *The Yellow Peril*, by Stephen Faulds (2010). *The Yellow Peril* presents a near-future, dystopian Australia in which, following 'the collapse of the American economy under its burden of debt to Chinese banks, China became Australia's most important ally.' (l.919) In Faulds' Australia, it is 'the Chinese dominant third of the population that created and controlled most of the nation's wealth. The mining and industrial sector had been completely taken over by Chinese interests in the 2040's.' (l.927) Although *Yellow Peril* never delves into outright scaremongering over Chinese immigration, Faulds does predict an 'ever-increasing dominance of Chinese philosophy and culture' and an eventual change to place 'individual rights subservient to the rule of law [which] contributed to the rise of Confucian philosophy and the demise of the so called free Aussie spirit.' (l.452) These fears echo those held by certain characters in *Chinese Town*, who worry that their culture will be eroded by the buyout, and they will be reduced to subservience in their own town, as voiced early in the novel by Charlie: 'They'll have us in uniforms, Lawrence. Wearing those conical hats. I can't even use chopsticks.' (Anderson, p.18)

There are other parallels between the fears present in Faulds' novel with those in *Chinese Town*, if one considers New Zealand's agricultural industry to be roughly

equal to Australia's mining industry in the sense that both are the backbone of their respective economies. Writing for *Investigate Magazine* on the sale of CraFarms to a Chinese interest, Richard Prosser begins his article "Made Into China" by claiming that he is 'not a racist. . . nor [is he] a xenophobe', and that he would be opposed to New Zealand land being sold to any overseas investors, be they 'Americans, British, Australian, Greek, Dutch, Portuguese or from the moons of Jupiter.' (Prosser, p.22). He follows this statement with:

I say come and live here, by all means, you fine wogs of every hue and visage . . . But bring only your cookbooks and not your Holy books, adopt our tongue, our dress and our ways, and give your children the names which we give ours. Demonstrate that you have accepted our culture, which by definition is better than yours – and if it isn't, what are you doing here. . .

Prosser concludes his article by urging the reader to oppose Chinese buyouts as 'we are at risk of being made into a de facto province of China by stealth.' (p.23)

Although obviously extreme in his views, I believe that Prosser's article is indicative of a general undercurrent of distrust and sinophobia present in New Zealand, and if one considers the outcry that preceded the 2012 sale of CraFarms to the Shanghai Pengxin Group, the sentiment becomes apparent. Prior to the sale, the Crafar farms were so poorly managed that they were fined on multiple occasions for effluent dumping (Waikato, 2009). In addition, The Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries claimed the farm had 'Significant animal welfare issues' ("Major animal welfare issues on Crafar farms, says MAF", 2009). Yet, once a Chinese buyout of the farms seemed imminent, there was, and continues to be, an outpouring of opposition to the sale of what Prime Minister John Key has referred to as a 'golden goose.' (Harvelt). It would be a stretch to argue that resistance to the deal is entirely sinophobic. In fact, a 2012 poll showed that 71 percent of New Zealanders surveyed were against the Crafar farms sale to the Pengxing group, and 70 percent were against the sale to any foreign investor, regardless of nationality ("Poll suggests opposition to Crafar sale remains", 2012). When asked for his thoughts on popular resistance to the sale, Key stated opposition was probably not 'related to the country involved – in this case China.' The very fact the Prime Minister had to mention that opposition may be focused on the Chinese element

of the deal implies that such opinions are being voiced well enough for him to need to respond. And if articles such as Richard Prosser's are being written, someone must be reading them. Opposition to the CraFarms sale does seem out of kilter with the actual area of land being sold, when one considers that the 16 farms have a total of just under 8000 hectares of land, a small amount compared to the 25000 hectares sold to U.S. investors between 2010 and 2012, and the almost 360000 total hectares of land sold to foreign owners during the same period, most of which garnered little media coverage (Young, 2012). Xenophobic and sinophobic views are not necessarily mainstream, in that they may only be held by a fringe element of society, or may not be openly voiced. However, I believe these views exist, and in *Chinese Town* I hope to examine their origins, and how their being brought to the fore could affect a Chinese buyout.

I believe the reason that China evokes such strong a reaction is because its culture seems so alien to our own, and, despite the fact that we now live in the age of information, China remains an enigma. This view is supported by Belich, who claims that early levels of sinophobia in New Zealand were inverse to the number of actual Chinese residents of the country (p.229). The obvious inference here being that New Zealanders grew less weary of Chinese immigrants as they grew more familiar with them. In *Chinese Town*, this sense of fearing the unknown is articulated by Julianne, when she tells Terry (the town's most vocal sinophobe) that he isn't afraid of China, but of 'the shadow you see cast across our town, cast by some gargantuan beast that will devour everything you love with a swipe of its jaw' (Anderson, p.84).

Throughout *Chinese Town*, I hope to show that the characters have little understanding of Chinese culture, and what they do think they know is based on stereotyping, and is often incorrect. For example, when asked what she imagines China to be, Isabelle has a cliché fantasy of a terraced hill covered in tall reeds, where bow-backed workers in coolie hats trudge ankle-deep through three inches of water,' as well as sweatshop workers who plunge their chopsticks into plastic bowls, tweeze out still-living millipedes, then gnash the writhing bugs between their gnarly teeth,' and all of this 'swathed in an orange haze of pollutants' (Anderson, p.73).

In *Chinese Town* I have also tried to show that education and understanding of Chinese culture can overcome such ignorance and its resulting prejudice. As Julianne explains to Terry, xenophobic hysteria comes from a lack of understanding, and education allows one to 'flick on the lights to see it's just a coat catching the light, a tree close to the window, an illusion cast by [a] cowering mind ' (Anderson, p.84). Eventually, the people of New Tower do react positively and come to view Chinese culture as exciting rather than threatening. I believe, however, it would be unrealistic to portray a world in which everyone was suddenly willing to accept Chinese ownership. Hence, Terry and his ilk do not attend the New Tower Chinese Culture Festival rehearsal, and their opposition is never fully conquered.

It is worth noting that my earliest drafts of *Chinese Town* included much more ridiculing of arguments against foreign investment. I presented straw-man versions of these arguments and assumed they originated in sinophobia. Also, my fear of readers interpreting *Chinese Town* itself as being sinophobic caused early drafts of the novel to take a very soft stance on well-documented human-rights abuses and business malpractice by Chinese investors, and the potential implications of foreign ownership. Yet, through researching this exegesis, I realised that it is unfair to label someone a sinophobe for opposing Chinese ownership, and that such aspersions are cast regularly in the political arena (Young, 2012). Hence, in my current draft of *Chinese Town*, several characters are at least partially opposed to the buyout for wholly non-racial reasons. These include Roger, who laments the potential impact of foreign ownership on the freezing works' practice (Anderson, p. 57), and Isabelle, who bluntly asks, "Why does everyone opposed to the deal have to be a racist?" (Anderson, p. 88).

Led by the tongue: Language education as subjugation, continuation and change

If one considers ignorance of the 'other' to be a major cause of xenophobia, then education seems a clear solution. In *Chinese Town*, this takes the form of James and Sebastian's culture and language classes, in which the residents of New Tower learn

basic Mandarin and discuss Chinese business customs. The notion of utilising formal education to overcome xenophobia is not entirely fictional, in fact, initiatives are already underway to do just this. For example, CEO of the private equity firm Blackstone Group New York, Stephen Schwartzman believes that there is 'hard-core, real anger' toward China, and, as such, his firm is offering US\$300 million in college scholarships for Americans to study in China. Schwartzman hopes 'familiarity with the world's rising superpower' will 'blunt growing American anxiety about changes in status.' (Barris, p.1)

The education of *Chinese Town*'s characters clearly alters their views on the Chinese. This is most apparent at the end of the novel, when James re-watches the Chinese New Year dragon dance that so threatened him in the novel's opening scene. Where he was so afraid of the dragon at first, he now seems relaxed, almost excited by its presence, and he is able to explain its features to his parents in order to calm them. Yet, I believe that such education can be polarising, viewed either as a means of subjugation or continuation. In this chapter I will discuss how I presented these differing reactions in *Chinese Town*.

Subjugation

'The spoken word is your master, and the unspoken word is your slave.'

- *Chinese proverb*

"How many words of English does Friday know?" I asked. "As many as he needs," replied Cruso.' (Coetzee, p.35)

This exchange comes from J.M. Coetzee's *Foe*, a retelling of Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*. In *Foe*, Susan, with whom Cruso is speaking in the quoted dialogue, attempts to improve Friday, Cruso's tongue-less manservant. At first, Susan treats Friday like an animal, giving his life 'as little thought as [she] would have a dog's or any other dumb beast's. . .' (Coetzee, p.85). Throughout the novel, Susan teaches Friday English phrases in an attempt to emancipate him from his silent slavery. She worries that 'Friday has no command of words and therefore no defence against being re-shaped day by day in conformity with the desires of others.' (p.188). However, Susan

realises that her teachings only make Friday better understand her commands: 'Now do, Friday! I say, and stand aside. Watch and Do: those are my two principal words for Friday,' (p. 88), and that she finds this useful: 'There are times when benevolence deserts me and I use words only as the shortest way to subject him to my will.' (p.95). Susan's despair is succinctly summarised by Defoe (who appears as a character in the novel), when he states, 'There is not need for us to know what freedom means, Susan. Freedom is a word like any word.' (p. 232). Susan's eventual realisation is that she cannot teach Friday to be free, especially through language, as language is as often used a tool for instruction as it is expressions, and for enslavement as it is emancipation.

Foe has been examined widely as an example of postcolonial narrative, and while I certainly do not intend *Chinese Town* to be a postcolonial text, its themes of cultural change and resistance are congruent to those found in postcolonial works, and therefore a great deal of postcolonial criticism can also be applied to *Chinese Town*, especially with regards to language.

In the introduction to *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader* Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin claim that 'the colonial process itself begins in language.' (1995, p. 283) This, they argue, is because:

language provides the terms by which reality may be constituted; it provides the names by which the world may be 'known'. Its system of values—its suppositions, its geography, its concept of history, of difference, its myriad gradations of distinction—becomes the system upon which social, economic and political discourses are grounded. (p.283).

In his essay *The Alchemy of English*, Braj B. Kachru goes a step further by referring to English specifically as 'a tool of power, domination and elitist identity. . .' (p.291). Yet, it would be naive to assume that English is the only language which has been used as a tool of empire. In his essay *National Language*, Edward Braithwaite makes the case that the 'Spaniards, the English, the French, and the Dutch [each] insisted that the language of public discourse and conversation, of obedience, command and conception should be English, French, Spanish or Dutch.' (p.309). China too has a history of linguistic imperialism, as noted in *The Power of Babel* by John McWhorter: 'The Chinese have exerted a similar influence over many Far Eastern

cultures. The Chinese occupied Vietnam for more than a thousand years, and as a result about thirty percent of Vietnamese vocabulary is Chinese.' ("Language Mixture Level One: Words", 2001).

In *Chinese Town*, certain townsfolk do not attend the Chinese language classes, and openly protest their existence. They do so because, much like Susan in *Foe*, they fear that the language will be used to control them. As Terry says when confronted by Julianne over his refusal to attend class, 'And you think learning the master's commands will one day make you the master?' (Anderson, p.83). Not only this, but Terry's resistance turns violent, beginning with his throwing a milk bottle through the family's window, and culminating in his aiming a gun at Julianne. Such violent resistance is commonplace in areas where a foreign culture is forced onto a people, with one example being the sense of unity created in parts of Ireland following English occupation. In his essay 'Yeats and Decolonization', Edward Said claims Irish ill-feeling ultimately, 'coalesced into resistance against an alien and occupying empire on the part of peoples possessing a common history, religion, and language.' ("Chapter 1").

Continuation through change

'If we don't change our direction, we'll end up where we're headed.'

- Chinese proverb

Language instruction plays a key role in Whiti Ihimaera's *The Whale Rider*, in which Koro Apirana runs language and culture classes 'to keep the Maori language going, and the strength of the tribe.' (p. 35, 2007). Koro is often seen to be 'preoccupied with the many serious issues facing the survival of the Maori people and our land.' (p. 34), and the entire novel hinges on themes of lineage and the survival of a threatened culture.

While the threat presented by the Chinese in *Chinese Town* is more perceived than real, I still wanted the people of New Tower to feel and act as if their culture was at risk of extinction, and I wanted to suggest that one possible method of resisting the perceived threat to their culture was to not only learn about China, but also to re-educate themselves on their own traditions and language. In doing so, I intended for the townsfolk feel more secure in themselves, and thus more likely to accept others,

because, to James Belich, xenophobia is 'a classic panacea for insecure collective identities' (Belich, p. 229). The cultural insecurities of New Tower's residents are strongly voiced by Roger, who often bemoans the possible fate of the All Blacks, or the rising tide of the river (a symbol for change and a greater, unstoppable force), ready to sweep the entire house (representing New Tower, or even New Zealand as a whole) away. Roger is well aware that the people of New Tower have little interest in their heritage, and that this lack of knowledge could be a source of their insecurity. Roger comments that he would like Sebastian to remain in the town to teach its people about their own history, although he believes Sebastian may become 'less the town's custodian, and more the executor of its final wishes.' (p.102). Sebastian himself comments that the townsfolk should learn more of their own language, as this would improve their understanding of Mandarin, and that 'There's a difference between speaking a language fluently and understanding how it's put together.' (p.78). My intention here was to suggest both that having a knowledge of grammar terminology would literally help the people of New Tower to better understand Mandarin, and, in a broader sense, it would represent an increasing knowledge of their own cultural foundations.

Roger eventually learns that culture is not a static concept, and in *The Whale Rider*, Koro receives a similar lesson. Women are forbidden from Koro's culture lessons because, according to Koro, classes were traditionally for men, and altering such traditions would completely undermine his attempts to ensure their continuation (Ihimaera, p.35). Yet other characters contemplate the future of Maori, with Koro's friend Porourangi wondering whether in the year 2000 Maori will 'have prepared the people to cope with the new challenges and the new technology? And will they still be Maori?' (Ihimaera, p.72). Several characters are aware that Koro's methods are outdated. Rawiri, the narrator, notes that Koro 'was like an old whale stranded in an alien present.' (Ihimaera, p.72). And, like the stubborn and directionless whales who strand themselves on a nearby beach, the Maori of Koro's village are potentially 'two hundred members of a vanishing species.' (Ihimaera, p.101). The implication here being

that the Maori of Koro's village, and perhaps Maori in general, are in danger of their culture disappearing lest they change their customs (particularly the role of women in society). Thus, Koro is forced to become more progressive when Kahu, a girl, is revealed to be the whale rider, and effectively Koro's heir.

Just as a genuine threat to their culture causes the Maori of *The Whale Rider* to change the role of women in their society, so does a perceived threat cause the people of New Tower to rapidly adopt Chinese elements into their culture in an attempt to ensure a congenial meeting with their buyers, and thus the survival of their town. To do so, the townsfolk adopt Mandarin phrases, such as 'ni hao' and 'xie xie' in their vernacular, although these are morphed into more Kiwi-friendly forms. Some Chinese food is also adopted and altered, as are clothing customs (no sandals), albeit temporarily (and inaccurately, as this custom is invented by James). Towards the end of the novel, Julianne examines the small changes to the staff room, noting that 'The old OSH posters that Roger once insisted on plastering across the girly calendars have themselves been covered with pinyin vocabulary charts and maps of the Middle Kingdom.' Bonsai trees have also been placed around the staff room, which, although fake, 'are calming, [and] add a fleck of colour to the place.' (p.93). When watching the townsfolk enter the same meeting, Julianne realises that,

in a town where custom dictated that a handshake be nothing more than a tight grip and a few pumps from the elbow, lingering huggers now cram the aisles, and in a town where nods and chin thrusts once vastly outnumbered spoken hellos, each and every New Tower resident blurts neehow after neehow with such joy that their voices are shrill and cracking (p.93).

This adjustment to a hybrid culture has been seen in colonised communities, where, according to Karchru in the *Alchemy of English*, communities develop 'new varieties, have their own linguistic and cultural ecologies or sociological contexts [and] the adaptation to these new ecologies has given non-native Englishes new identities.' (Ashcroft et. al, p.294).

In addition, as in *The Whale Rider* – in which the change to a less patriarchal society is driven largely by Nanny Flowers, Koro's wife – the hybridization of New

Tower's culture is internally driven, with Sebastian encouraging others to use the language as often as possible, and Isabelle suggesting an expanded rehearsal for the cultural festival. I believe the fact that the impetus for change is internal is important to *Chinese Town*, as it highlights the fact that the dangers of the South East Meat buyout are more perceived than real. Had the classes been suggested or made mandatory by the buyers, or had the buyers themselves covered the staff room in maps of China, the changes to New Tower's culture would be more akin to forced colonisation. This would likely cause the novel to read like sinophobic fear-mongering, or could cause readers to side more with the characters who are totally against the buyout.

Nah, not 'Chinese Gooseberry'. Let's call it something else – 'Kiwified' China

'Talk doesn't cook rice'

- Chinese proverb

The true source of the Chinese proverb I have quoted above, as with all other proverbs quoted in this exegesis, is unknown, and the proverb may not even be truly Chinese. In fact, the first and likely most famous quotation, 'May you live in interesting times', has no equivalent in Chinese, and its origins as a Chinese curse have been proven to be apocryphal (Van Nordon, p.53).

Similarly, the great irony in all this discussion of resistance through language in *Chinese Town* is, of course, that the people are not learning true Mandarin, as they are conjointly taught by two non-speakers, one of whom (James) makes every effort to teach as many false words as possible. I could attempt to justify this by claiming I had initially intended to make some sly comparison between the fake language and misrepresentations of China in the media, but this would be a lie; I initially chose the device because I thought it would be funny.

However, I also believe that trying to write a novel in which someone is taught "real" Chinese language and culture would be fraught with difficulty. Chief amongst these being that the author would need to be extremely familiar with China, which I am

not. By having James and Sebastian fake their way through their lessons, I mirror my own attempts to “fake” a novel that deals so heavily with a country of which I know very little.

Also, I believe the partially fabricated language poses an interesting question: If people feel more tolerant of a culture after learning about it, does it truly matter whether what they have learned is true, or whether their learning has been dumbed down to suit their needs?

In *The Power of Babel*, John McWhorter compares the spread of language to the spread of food, claiming that what Americans 'are accustomed to eating as 'Chinese' food is actually better described as Chinese ingredients adapted to a beef-stew palate.'. McWhorter goes on to say that

this is surely better than nothing (there was no won ton soup, sushi, coconut milk soup, or even spaghetti and meatballs served on the Titanic in 1912), the admittedly blanded language palate that even our most dedicated language-revival efforts will most likely leave behind is certainly better. (“What Will Happen to the First Language’s Children?”, 2001).

McWhorter’s point here is that the more widely a language is spoken the more it needs to be adapted and simplified for ease of learning, just as cuisine can be covered with bread crumbs, tomato sauce and cheap cheddar to suit the lowest common denominator of international taste. But, it is better to have a simplified language than no language at all.

While my point is slightly different to McWhorter’s, I think the analogy still holds true: the ‘Kiwified’ Chinese language taught to the townsfolk of New Tower allows a great number of them to overcome their ignorance of China and their sinophobia, just as the ‘Kiwified’ Chinese food leads some to try and enjoy more authentic Chinese cuisine. In *Chinese Town*, this occurs most obviously at a meeting to plan the menu for the Cultural Festival rehearsal. The characters are forced to compromise and dumb-down the food so that people at least sample it. And, just as someone is more likely to try baozi when they realise wontons are not filled with poison, so could ‘nee how’ lead to ‘ni hao’.

Conclusion

I approached this exegesis with some trepidation, as I was concerned that I would attempt to crowbar dialogue and imagery into *Chinese Town* to better support the arguments herein, and in doing so ruin the novel's pace and plot. However, I found that through analysing my novel's themes and comparing the novel with other works, I was forced to tighten my treatment of sinophobia in New Zealand. As previously mentioned, early drafts of *Chinese Town* contained a one-sided representation of the foreign ownership debate, and, when gathering evidence for points I thought the novel made quite clearly (such as education on Chinese culture causing more ready acceptance of ownership and immigration), I found that such evidence was weak, or very vague. Hence, the exegesis caused me to make changes that I believe benefited *Chinese Town*.

Chinese Town could find a market in New Zealand, as I believe the novel has enough pace and plot to be read widely, and its thematic concerns are divisive and very much part of the zeitgeist. I doubt whether *Chinese Town* would sell outside of the country, however, as it is rife with Kiwi cultural references, and much of its lampooning would be lost on international readers.

My intention is that *Chinese Town*, as it currently exists, provides a balanced discussion of Chinese ownership, and allows the reader to draw their own conclusions. It was not my intent to push a particular agenda regarding foreign ownership, as despite all of my research on the subject, I am still on the fence. Also, I do not think the novel is overtly political, and I believe it could be read on its surface as a breezy, caper comedy, which is fine, as the novels characters and plot drive it more than its themes. My original aim was to have the theme of foreign ownership be more at the fore of the novel, however, the characters became more interesting. The watershed moment occurred when writing Isabelle's first class, in which James attempts to embarrass her by asking her the meaning of FDI (p.75). Initially, I had intended to have him explain that China's FDI is very low compared to other major players, and how this implies that

fears of China's influence are overstated. However, I realised that this would not make sense given James and Isabelle's relationship. Eventually the characters won out and the significance of FDI remains largely unexplained, with James instead insulting his sister's choice of footwear.

Ultimately, I learned that a novel does not need to make sweeping statements about society in general, but only needs to show a microcosm of characters and their immediate environment, and if these characters and these environments are an honest reflection of real people and real places, then by making a statement about them, an author makes a statement about the world. All I can hope is that *Chinese Town's* characters are honest, and my statements are engaging. Or at least engaging enough for a reader to bother finishing the thing.

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