

NEW PERSPECTIVES ON CHINESE NEW ZEALAND MARKET GARDENERS, 1860s-2010s

A review article of:

Lily Lee and Ruth Lam, *Sons of the Soil: Chinese Market Gardeners in New Zealand*, Pukekohe: Dominion Federation of New Zealand Chinese Commercial Growers Inc., 2012, 556 pp., ISBN: 978-0-473-19619-6 (hbk.).

Nigel Murphy, *Success Through Adversity: A History of the Dominion Federation of New Zealand Chinese Commercial Growers*, Pukekohe: Dominion Federation of New Zealand Chinese Commercial Growers Inc., 2012, 168 pp., ISBN: 978-0-473-19620-2 (hbk.).

JAMES BEATTIE
University of Waikato

Both *Sons of the Soil* and *Success Through Adversity* are testimony to their authors' careful scholarship and dedication to the subject. For *Sons of the Soil*, Lily Lee and Ruth Lam have spent years going through tens of thousands of sources and undertaking many interviews. Their book, and that by Nigel Murphy, *Success Through Adversity*, is also testimony to the foresight of the Chinese community—and the Chinese Poll Tax Heritage Trust and Dominion Federation of New Zealand Chinese Commercial Growers (DFNZCCG)—in supporting an important and long-term venture that has taken several years to draw to completion. This review article will focus on the more substantive of the two books—intended, though not indicated in the books themselves, to be companion volumes.

Sons of the Soil is a detailed and fascinating social history of Chinese market gardeners in New Zealand, one that supplements and enhances our knowledge of this singularly important group of people and their contribution to New Zealand. The work's twenty-one chapters move geographically and chronologically through the country, starting, of course, with the Otago gold fields where large numbers of Chinese arrived and where, with gold running out, market gardening assumed an ever-more prominent role as an occupation especially from the 1880s onwards. In that decade New Zealand's Chinese community, and market gardeners, also began to move into cities and onto the North Island. With this geographical and occupational movement, came the establishment—or extension—of gardens in other places in the North Island, places like Wellington, the Hutt Valley, Otaki, Hawke's Bay and Whanganui. Auckland also received Chinese from elsewhere in New Zealand. Arrivals directly from China into that city and Wellington also represented a new trend in patterns of Chinese migration into the colony. Previously most Chinese had arrived in South Island ports like Port Chalmers or Bluff, often then making their way to the gold fields via settlements like Dunedin (in the nineteenth century).

Among several places, by the mid-twentieth century Pukekohe and Mangere, along with Ohakune and Otaki in the North Island, Oamaru, the Taieri Plains and Balcutha in the South Island, had flourishing market gardens. The two to three decades following the post-war years represented the boom years of Chinese market gardening. Things changed markedly in the 1990s. The decline of auctions meant market gardeners had to either sell directly to supermarkets or through an agent. With this move, as market gardener Ray Chong observed tellingly, growers became ‘price-takers, not price makers’ (p. 503). As a result, family market gardens began closing as profit margins narrowed. This hastened a generational change occurring anyway, as the children of many second- or third-generation gardeners moved away from the occupation of their forebears into the professions and other kinds of work. Accompanying these economic and social changes was urban sprawl in many New Zealand cities, and with it, a growing demand for land for housing development. Many market gardeners consequently found that their most valuable asset was land. And often with no-one to take over the business, the choice for many considering retirement was simple. The great pity, as many gardeners regretted, was the sale of wonderfully fertile land for housing development.

This summary of the profound changes in market gardening across almost 150 years of Chinese market gardening enterprise tells only part of the story of Lee and Lam’s book. The major strengths of *Sons of the Soil* are its richness of detail and its ability to personalise the lives of so many Chinese market gardeners. In parts the level of the book’s detail might be a little overwhelming for readers unfamiliar with many of the market gardening families, but that detail is nonetheless the book’s strength. We learn much, for example, of the social lives of Chinese: of families’ struggles to adjust to life in a new country and of having to cope with the sometimes hostile reactions and prejudice from others. We also learn much about the hardships and rewards they faced and of the relationships with land and people established through market gardening.

Many readers might be surprised at the geographical mobility of many nineteenth-century Chinese. Lee and Lam recount several gardeners whose families moved backwards and forwards between China and New Zealand. This point serves as a reminder of the participation of New Zealand Chinese in Chinese business and migration networks which stretched across the world.¹ Lee and Lam also reveal much about Chinese interactions with Europeans and Māori from the nineteenth century through intermarriage, the generous contributions of Chinese to local hospital boards and other charities, not to mention their participation in horticultural competitions, festivals and sporting events.² What I particularly like about Lee and Lam’s approach was that while they do not shy away from revealing the racism many Chinese have encountered, nor do they present Chinese as victims. Whether showcasing Chinese ingenuity in settling

1 Adam McKeown, *Chinese Migrant Networks and Cultural Change: Peru, Chicago, Hawaii, 1900-1936* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2001).

2 Jenny Bol Jun Lee, *Jade Taniwha: Māori-Chinese Identity and Schooling in Aotearoa* (Auckland: Rautaki Ltd., 2007); Jessica Anne Heine, ‘Colonial Anxieties and the Construction of Identities: The Employment of Maori Women in Chinese Market Gardens, Auckland, 1929’, M.A. thesis (Hamilton: University of Waikato, 2006).

disputes in the nineteenth century, whether illuminating the friendships that developed with many Europeans and Māori, or whether recounting stories of Europeans who stood up to racist colonists, the authors breathe life into understandings of the nineteenth and early-twentieth-century Chinese market gardeners in New Zealand. We get an insider's perspective (both Lee and Lam have been heavily involved in market gardening), but presented in such a manner as to appeal to outsiders.

How they are able to do this is because the authors' rely on simply exhaustive research presented in a very readable and accessible manner. The gorgeous design of the book certainly brings out the many images that enliven the page. Text boxes contain short excerpts from primary documents quoted or cited in the main body of the text while longer passages, some running to a few pages, focus on particular individuals or groups.

In obtaining this broad perspective, Lee and Lam have delved into a vast number of national and local repositories and personal and family collections, and looked at very many unpublished and published sources as well as textual and visual material. They have also relied upon the generosity of the Chinese community of which they are part. Many market gardeners shared with Lee and Lam their family histories through reminiscences and documents. Others such as well-known author Eva Wong Ng, for example, also gave Lee and Lam access to sources and interviews. This richness and depth of source material allows Lee and Lam to weave a broad and detailed narrative. The *Register of Aliens*, for example, has provided a wealth of information about numbers of Chinese involved in market gardening and their location. The authors have also made extensive use of existing published and unpublished secondary sources. Understandably they rely greatly on the strong scholarly base laid down by James Ng's groundbreaking research on the Chinese in New Zealand.³ But oral interviews have also provided a rich vein of historical material for Lee and Lam to mine. Not only do such interviews offer unique perspectives on market gardening in the recent past from the voices of those involved in the industry. But this type of source also sheds new light on the market gardening of informants' parents and grandparents. Another very well utilised source is the visual: here, Lee and Lam draw on everything from seed catalogues to family photographs, all of which are supported by very well-drawn maps.

When placed within the wider historiography of Chinese market gardeners in Gold Mountain (North America) and New Gold Mountain (Australia; New Zealand), the value of *Sons of the Soil* is immediately apparent. Its value lies in enriching global understandings of nineteenth-century Chinese market gardeners' experiences through the systematic and comprehensive geographical overview it provides of them in New Zealand. The understandings of Lee and Lam can be placed in context through just one or two examples of overseas and local scholarship. Chan Sucheng's *This Bittersweet Soil: The Chinese in California Agriculture, 1860-1910*, for example, presents a remarkable overview of the Chinese in that state. Reliant primarily on local tax records, census information and other business records, the resulting social history helped to usher in new understandings of Chinese rural labourers in North America. But, as Chan

3 James Ng, *Windows on a Chinese Past*, 4 Vols. (Dunedin: Otago Heritage Books, 1993-99).

noted, her frustration throughout the project was that she was using sources about the Chinese, not by the Chinese. Her studies revealed much about the economic lives of the workers, but not about their attitudes or cultural habits: many questions about Chinese workers' lives thus remained unanswered, and unanswerable.⁴

A similar problem strikes scholarship on Chinese market gardeners in Australia and New Zealand. Most of the sources come from Europeans who, in the main, presented snapshots or racialised generalisations about the Chinese as a group rather than as individuals. Low literacy rates among the Chinese, coupled with a lifestyle spent on the move, and with few possessions or persons interested or able to preserve records after their death, have served to mitigate against the survival of written records produced by Chinese. Chinese literacy rates from 1901 illustrate one problem. Of the 2857 Chinese in New Zealand, 13.5 per cent could read and write English, while 29 per cent could read and write Chinese. This compared with 85 per cent literacy among Europeans in New Zealand. Māori literacy was also likely to have been higher than Chinese.⁵ This official estimate of Chinese literacy tallies with Rev. Alexander Don's opinion that only about a quarter of Chinese in New Zealand could read and write in their own language.⁶ Of course written sources are only one basis for information on the Chinese.

Thanks to the valuable work by historians as well as by archaeologists—for this latter group, one thinks of the likes of Keir Reeves in Australia or Neville Ritchie and Richard Walters in New Zealand⁷—the result is rich studies of the material culture of Chinese market gardening but relatively less information on Chinese cultural history.⁸ As noted above, Lee and Lam's painstaking research undertaken using colonial

4 Sucheng Chan, *This Bittersweet Soil: The Chinese in California Agriculture, 1860-1910* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986).

5 James Ng, *Windows on a Chinese Past*, vol. 1, p. 93. On Māori literacy, see Tony Ballantyne, 'Archives, Empires and Histories of Colonialism', *Archifacts: The Journal of the Archives and Records Association of New Zealand*, no vol. or page no., (2004): 21-36.

6 Indeed, there is frequent mention in the Annual reports of missionaries carrying letters as well as them being sent by post. Note, for instance, Alexander Don and G.H. McNeur, *Chinese Mission Work in Otago, N.Z. Annual Inland Tour (1900-1901)* (Dunedin: Otago Daily Times Office, 1901), p. 25.

7 C. McConville and K. Reeves, 'Chinese places: ethnography and landscape', *Historic Environment [P]*, 23, 3 (2011): 24-29; Neville A. Ritchie, 'Archaeology and History of the Chinese in Southern New Zealand During the Nineteenth Century: a Study of Acculturation, Adaptation, and Change', Ph.D. Thesis, University of Otago, 1986.

8 Warwick Frost, 'Migrants and Technological Transfer: Chinese Farming in Australia, 1850-1920', *Australian Economic History*, 42, 2 (July, 2002): 113-131; Zvonka Stanin, 'From Li Chun to Yong Kit: A Market Garden on the Loddon, 1851-1912', *Journal of Australian Colonial History*, 6 (2004): 15-34; Frost and Keir Reeves, 'Villages, Vineyards and Chinese Dragons: Constructing the Heritage of Ethnic Diasporas', *Tourism, Culture & Communication*, 9, 2 (2009): 107-114; Barry McGowan, 'Chinese market gardeners in southern and western New South Wales', *Australian Humanities Review*, 36 (July 2005), < <http://www.australianhumanitiesreview.org/archive/Issue-July-2005/10McGowan.html>> (accessed October 2012).

newspapers, supplemented by the family memories of that time, adds flesh to the barebones of Chinese market gardening in New Zealand in this period just as James Ng's four-volume *Windows of the Chinese Past* has done so for the Chinese in New Zealand as a whole. Hopefully, too, the publication by Wuyi University (Guangdong) of selected and surviving letters written by overseas Chinese to family members in China can add still deeper understandings.

Sons of the Soil's other great strength is in providing an exhaustive overview of Chinese market gardening from the nineteenth century to the present day. This overview of the *whole* period of Chinese market gardening in New Zealand is immensely valuable. For one thing, it enables the authors to chart long-term historical change. By demonstrating the persistence of certain families' involvement in market gardening, researchers can chart occupational and geographical mobility among generations of Chinese in New Zealand. Lily and Lee also demonstrate the importance of on-going relationships with China for market gardeners in New Zealand, illustrating Chinese investment strategies of great interest to business historians. My one question here is regarding the participation of New Zealand Chinese in broader Chinese migration and business networks in the Pacific. What relationships, for example, did New Zealand-based Chinese have with Australian market gardening, especially in terms of on-going flows of people, capital and products between places such as Sydney, Melbourne, Dunedin and Wellington?⁹ John Fitzgerald's rich research on Chinese in Australia—examining such things as Chinese political and business organisations and networks—offers one possible mode of analysis for anyone seeking to build on the groundwork laid by Lee and Lam.¹⁰

At first glance it might also be surprising that *Sons of the Soil* devotes only five of its twenty-one chapters to South Island market gardeners, but this weighting makes sense, as does its emphasis on the twentieth century. Compared to the rest of the country—with the exception perhaps of Auckland¹¹—the nineteenth-century South Island is better served by studies of Chinese market gardeners thanks to the pioneering and detailed scholarship of Ng's *Windows on a Chinese Past*. The West Coast is also well served with a chapter on market gardening in Juliet Bradshaw's *Golden Prospects: Chinese on the West Coast of New Zealand*.¹² Lee and Lam's emphasis on the twentieth

9 On which question, see Reeves, Frost, Fahey, 'Integrating the historiography of the nineteenth-century gold rushes', *Australian Economic History Review*, 50, 2 (July, 2010): 111-128; Reeves, 'Tracking the Dragon Down Under: Chinese Cultural Connections in Gold Rush Australia and Aotearoa, New Zealand', *Graduate Journal of Asia-Pacific Studies*, 1, 5 (2005): 41-66.

10 John Fitzgerald, *Big White Lie: Chinese Australians in White Australia* (Sydney: UNSW Press, University of New South Wales Press, University of New South Wales, 2007).

11 Mohommod Taher, 'Asians in New Zealand: a Geographical Review and Interpretation', Ph.D. thesis, (Auckland: Auckland University, 1965); Roslind Wornall-Smith, 'The Report on the Employment of Maori Women by Asiatic Market Gardens, 1929: An Aspect of New Zealand Race Relations', History Long Essay, (Auckland: University of Auckland, 1969).

12 Ng, *Windows on a Chinese Past*; Julia Bradshaw and West Coast Historical and Mechanical Society, *Golden Prospects: Chinese on the West Coast of New Zealand* (Greymouth, N.Z.: Shantytown; West Coast Historical & Mechanical Society, 2009).

century is understandable given the importance of this occupation and the heyday of Chinese market gardening in the decades following the Second World War. Another reason is that the greater availability of sources on twentieth-century Chinese market gardening than on the previous century. The additional advantage of the twentieth century is that many of the sources on the Chinese are by the Chinese themselves, unlike those of the nineteenth century, most of which were produced by Europeans even if some, like Rev. Alexander Don (1857-1934) or those of the Canton Village Missions, were Cantonese-speaking and could read Chinese.¹³

If *Sons of the Soil* is a social history of Chinese market gardening, then Nigel Murphy's *Success through Adversity* provides a political history of the dominant Chinese growers' association. Thirteen short chapters move through the decades of the Federation's history. The DFNZCCG came about thanks to the need to expand food production created by the Second World War. The government sought advantages in having a national organisation of Chinese growers with which it could negotiate directly, especially given the pressure to produce food quickly and efficiently. Prime Minister Peter Fraser personally invited William Wah and Andrew Chong to head up the Chinese organisation. Prior to this Chinese growers had belonged, sometimes uneasily, to the Dominion Council of Tomato, Stone Fruit and Produce Growers Ltd (established in 1929).¹⁴

Wah and Chong were wise choices indeed, as Murphy notes: both men, while not from a market gardening background, moved freely and with confidence in Chinese and Pākehā worlds. Both men were highly educated, well motivated, superbly organised and fluent in Chinese and English—the last, a key skill since for many Chinese the English language remained a barrier to broader interaction with Europeans and Māori. With the support of the New Zealand Chinese Association, the Federation was officially established in 1943.¹⁵ Only the second national Chinese body representing the Chinese after the New Zealand Chinese Association, the Federation had branch organisations in major Chinese market growing areas.

Over the years since then, as Murphy shows, the Federation has been at the forefront of innovations in introductions of new varieties of vegetables. It has led attempts at improving harvesting and packaging through the application of scientific research and new technology. And, of course, it has taken a lead in such activities as marketing and price negotiations. Along the way it has been involved in several controversial issues such as the scheme in the 1970s to bring in Chinese labour to work market gardens in New Zealand. A recurring theme since 1957 until very recently

13 Ng, *Windows*. Matthew Dalzell, *New Zealanders in Republican China, 1912-1949*, New Zealand Asia Institute no. 4 (Auckland, N.Z.: New Zealand Asia Institute, University of Auckland, 1995). Catechists William Chan and Timothy Fay Loie also ministered to the Otago Chinese in the nineteenth century.

14 Although as Murphy notes, tensions were eased under the presidency of Bert Cooksley who was elected in 1938.

15 Originally called the New Zealand Chinese Growers' Association.

has also been attempts to obtain separate funding for the Federation. Under the 1957 Vegetables Levy Act, introduced by the National Party's Minister of Agriculture Keith Holyoake, growers were forced to pay a levy in support of the (European dominated) Vegetable Growers' Federation (Vegfed), successor to the Dominion Council. No direct funding was given to its Chinese counterpart. Instead the Chinese were expected to assimilate with Vegfed. This, unsurprisingly, was something many Chinese objected to: despite comprising roughly 70% of the growers in what became Vegfed, they were given no choice to whom to pay their compulsory levy. Issues simmered on over the decades, and were only resolved early in the new millennium with an apology from the chief executive of Vegfed's successor, Horticulture New Zealand, for its treatment of the Chinese organisation. As noted earlier the end of the auction system in the 1990s, coupled with the integration of Chinese New Zealanders and the declining numbers of growers of Chinese heritage, has brought challenges to the Federation.

Like the larger book by Lee and Lam, Murphy's opens up some fascinating areas for future researchers. I particularly enjoyed Murphy's chapter on the longest-running Chinese-language newspaper in New Zealand, *New Zealand Chinese Growers' Monthly Journal* which ran from 1949-1972. Like the Federation itself, the newspaper dealt with far more than just information about market gardening, but served as a mouthpiece for the Chinese community over a range of issues. An analysis of the content of its 165 issues might well be very revealing of the subjects Chinese deemed of importance and for their opinions it registers in its pages. Equally linguists might analyse its use of characters, typographers the printer's typeface and design used in the journal's production. And what can information about associations of Chinese growers, and Chinese and European growers, reveal to labour historians about voluntary organisation among Chinese. This might be especially interesting since labour historians have generally studied groups so antipathetical to Chinese interests. Finally, I must commend Lee and Lam for compiling an appendix to this book, listing as far as possible all known Chinese growers in New Zealand from the 1930s until the 2010s. Containing details of a grower's name, Chinese name, village, county, location in New Zealand and trade name, this fifty-plus-page roll brings to mind another famous one of immense benefit to researchers on the Chinese in New Zealand, that compiled by Presbyterian missionary Alexander Don.¹⁶ Lee and Lam's could well serve a similar purpose for researchers of twentieth-century Chinese in New Zealand.

Who will these books appeal to? They are undoubtedly aimed at the Chinese community, but academics and interested readers will also find much of interest, as I have indicated above. Academics will also thank the authors' for their detailed, careful prose and for their copious referencing. In *Sons of the Soil* and *Success Through Adversity*, years of dedicated voluntary research by the authors is amply awarded by two beautifully designed, copiously illustrated and high-quality publications that do the Chinese community, and its authors, proud.

16 Reproduced in Ng, vol. 4 and now searchable online at: 'Alexander Don's "Roll" of the Chinese': < <http://www.otago.ac.nz/historyarthistory/don/>>