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BYPASSING BICULTURALISM:
CHINESE-MĀORI CONNECTIONS IN RENEE LIANG'S
THE BONE FEEDER

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*The land here is tapu – protecting the bones
of many ancestors, not just your own.*

– Renee Liang, *The Bone Feeder*

Introduction

In 1902 the SS *Ventnor*, an English steamer chartered to take nearly 500 Chinese bodies from New Zealand back to their ancestral home, sank off the coast of Hokianga. All crew and passengers perished. Some of the coffins were washed ashore and taken in by local iwi, Te Roroa and Te Rarawa. This tragic event remained buried in New Zealand history until a century later, when Chinese-New Zealanders began to recover and retell the story. The story triggered a decade-long journey for the poet and playwright Renee Liang, who wrote *The Bone Feeder* in 2007, a play that went through several versions and was subsequently adapted into an opera in 2017.¹

Liang's *The Bone Feeder* takes up the story in the present day, when Ben, a fifth-generation Chinese-New Zealander, travels to Hokianga to search for the bones of his great-great-grandfather Kwan, lost to the sea when the SS *Ventnor* sank. His mission is to recover the bones and return them to China, where he hopes to reconnect with his ancestral roots and “find himself”. On the Hokianga harbour, he encounters a

1 In August 2007, at the NZ Going Bananas International Conference, Renee Liang heard a talk by Nigel Sew Hoy about the sinking of the SS *Ventnor* and the tragic “second death” of his great-great-grandfather Choie Sew Hoy, amongst many others. The story left a deep impression on Liang and inspired her to take a postgraduate diploma in theatre and playwriting at the University of Auckland that year, in order to write the story. The first version of *The Bone Feeder* became her graduation project. In 2009, Liang directed the play at the University of Auckland. The play was subsequently performed three more times – at the Hamilton Gardens Arts Festival in 2010, a Poll Tax-funded production in Palmerston North, also in 2010, and a 2011 production directed by Lauren Jackson at TAPAC Theatre in Auckland. Each new production involved some rewriting. Liang rewrote scenes for the Hamilton Chinese Garden production, directed it and added a dance element and the role of a spirit guide in this version (played by herself). The 2011 version, the first professional production of the play directed by Lauren Jackson, is the third and final version of the play (The manuscript is archived at Playmarket).

Māori ferryman and meets some strange characters who turn out to be ghosts. Ben's insistence on digging up the bones clashes with the sanctity of Māori burial grounds, and his words and actions, largely ignorant of Chinese and Māori traditions, lead to vehement protests from both human and ghost, and ultimately, from nature itself. Ben is destined to experience a metaphorical death in order to understand his own heart and find his place in the world.

In its various iterations as play, theatre, libretto and opera, *The Bone Feeder* is demanding as a work of literary creativity as well as cultural diplomacy. A second-generation Chinese New Zealander of Cantonese background, Liang had to obtain the trust of the descendants of the early Chinese settlers who were at the centre of the tragedy, as well as the Māori iwi where the subsequent events unfolded. As an English speaker, she had to meet the linguistic and cultural challenges of incorporating Cantonese and te reo Māori into her play. And she had to build and collaborate with a multicultural and multinational team of artists to put her work on stage.

This essay will bypass the familiar framework of Chinese-Kiwi identity formation pivoted on the status of Chinese immigrant communities within mainstream Pākehā New Zealand, and instead approach Liang's work as a critical response to New Zealand biculturalism. Against the background of Māori-Pākehā biculturalism which "is increasingly unable to describe the actual relations of contemporary culture and society" and "has inhibited consideration of ethnicities other than those in the bicultural pairing" (Williams 2009:300), *The Bone Feeder* takes us through to less familiar and less visible trajectories of cultural diplomacy, highlighting Chinese-Māori connections, tensions, and affiliations. By demonstrating the ways in which Liang's creative recovery of a lost chapter of New Zealand history might disrupt and challenge existing cultural patterns and hierarchies, I seek to uncover new approaches to intercultural relations that go beyond current discourses of biculturalism and multiculturalism.

I begin with an account of the critical reception of the 2017 opera production of *The Bone Feeder*, drawing attention to a critical inertia that seems to privilege Pākehā/European perspectives and perpetuate the marginal status of the Asian other. Through an analysis of the ritual aspects of the opera, informed by first-hand interview with Renee Liang as well as the broader social and cultural contexts, I delineate the mechanisms of Liang's cultural diplomacy and aesthetic interventions that have brought a Chinese-Māori story to main-stage New Zealand. I conclude by assessing the potential of Liang's intercultural work as a form of "cultural diplomacy beyond the national". As a critical position, "cultural diplomacy beyond the national" takes departure from the nation-based approaches to cultural diplomacy in Australasia, as exemplified in a recent edited volume *China in Australasia: Cultural diplomacy and Chinese arts since the Cold War* (Beattie, Bullen & Galikowski 2019), and contributes to a broader critical effort to liberate the discussion of cultural diplomacy from an over-emphasis on national interests. (see Ang, Isar & Mar 2015)

Critical reception: “too Western” and “not enough Māori”

Commissioned and produced by the Auckland Arts Festival and presented in association with New Zealand Opera, *The Bone Feeder* premiered in the ASB Waterfront Theatre in Auckland on 23-26 March 2017, with four performances. The show was hailed as the first New Zealand opera that features Chinese-New Zealanders as its protagonists and explores Chinese-New Zealand history and identity as its core theme. The breakthrough opera has generated considerable excitement amongst the critics and audiences. Alice Canton describes herself as being “incredibly moved” when the protagonist Ben (played by Henry Choo) first appeared on stage because “the implications of seeing a Chinese English-speaking male protagonist [who isn’t rendered into a stereotype] are so great”. (Canton 2017) Lamenting the dearth of leading Asian protagonists in New Zealand stage productions, Nathan Joe remarks that “an opera with a primarily East Asian cast is a big deal”. Referring to Jaewoo Kim, the tenor who performs the role of Kwan, singing in accented English, Joe asks: “How often do you hear an Asian character speak (let alone sing) and be taken seriously?” (Joe 2017)

Such positive and enthusiastic responses, while celebrating the belated diversification of mainstream New Zealand theatre, underline the fact that New Zealand opera, or opera in general, does not have a good track record of being sensitive to non-European cultures. Never mind that the two Chinese protagonists in *The Bone Feeder* were both played by Australian-Korean singers – the lack of cultural representation is so severe that any Asian face is already a step forward. *The Bone Feeder* is a major triumph for Asian representation in contemporary New Zealand culture.

Both Alice Canton and Nathan Joe are New Zealanders with Chinese heritage. Their euphoria towards the opera, which highlights theatre’s role in effecting political progress and social change, is imbued with what Dorrine Kondo has called “racial affect” (Kondo 2019). From the artistic perspective, however, the critical reception of *The Bone Feeder* is more mixed. David Larsen comments that there is much to commend in this opera, but not a lot to “enjoy”. Larsen describes Gareth Farr’s music as all texture and mood – “music to drift into” – but with no memorable melodies or standout solos. (Larsen 2017) More pointed criticism emerged in a “conversational review” of *The Bone Feeder* by Alex Taylor, Francis Moore and Alice Canton. Canton calls the opera “pleasant and mild rather than moving or wild” and attributes this creative deficiency to the “risk averse, timid” nature of high-stakes art making. Moore asks the question “why in a work that is specifically cross-cultural, all the theatrical and musical conventions are still mostly Western”. Responding to Canton’s musing on “the potential for Cantonese opera to influence this show”, Taylor admits to not knowing enough about Cantonese opera to make any judgment in that regard, but still echoes the “too Western” critique with the remark that “the cultural intersection points *felt* like they were treated very traditionally, from a Western perspective” (Taylor, Moore & Canton 2017, my emphasis).

Taylor is correct in suspecting that there might be more to the music than the superficial impression of it *feeling* “Western”. The composer Gareth Farr is not new to non-European music. For years, he has been a champion of Indonesian music,

leading one of the prominent gamelan ensembles outside of Indonesia, based at the New Zealand School of Music. Prior to composing for *The Bone Feeder*, Farr, along with Renee Liang, undertook a month-long research trip to Guangdong province, where Farr immersed himself in Cantonese music. At the suggestion of the Chinese-New Zealand composer Gao Ping, Farr devoted attention to the tonal features of the Cantonese language and incorporated them into his score. (Radio New Zealand, 2017)² These tonal features are particularly salient in the opening and concluding Cantonese choruses, although such tonal inflections may not sound apparent to audiences who are not conversant in Cantonese.³

Canton considers the need to find commonalities a hindrance to artistic expression, and maintains that “the merit of diversity is in the difference”. (Taylor, Moore & Canton 2017)⁴ However, in this particular discourse on difference, the frame of reference is Pākehā/Western culture, and the quest for difference seems to stop at some vague notion of “Asianness”. Whilst the critics consider the multicultural dimension of the opera as something laudable and that should really be the norm rather than the exception in contemporary New Zealand, the “too Western” critique of *The Bone Feeder* can be a double-edged sword: on one hand, it is a well-meaning call for artists dealing with cross-cultural material to be daring and different, to provoke and to challenge the status quo; on the other hand, it can become an imposition on artists, particularly those of ethnic minorities, to accentuate or exoticise their cultural difference, which may serve to further ghettoise minority cultures.

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- 2 For an extended study of the application of Cantonese tones in contemporary compositions, see Xuelai Wu’s dissertation, *The Fusion of Cantonese Music with Western Composition Techniques: “Tunes from My Home” Trio for Violin, Cello, and Piano by Chen Yi*, Arizona State University, 2017.
 - 3 In contrast to Farr’s restraint, Liang took a more “colorful”, attention-grabbing approach to the earlier theatrical productions of *The Bone Feeder*. In Liang’s press release for the Poll-tax funded Palmerston North production in 2010, the director Simon Zhou is quoted as saying “We are drawing inspiration from Asian theatre forms such as shadow-play, use of vibrant fabrics and puppetry” (Liang 2010). In a review of the Lauren Jackson-directed TAPAC production in 2011, James Wenley contends that “Martial Arts seem somewhat shoehorned into the story. Each time the wire was used, I felt immediately taken out of the world of the play”. (Wenley 2011) The opera version, under Sara Brodie’s direction, eschews such exotic flavouring and takes a more subtle, evocative and minimalist approach to cross-cultural story-telling.
 - 4 On commonality/difference there appears to be a generational divide within immigrant communities, with the older generation seeking common ground for acceptance and the younger generation embracing difference. In a recent article profiling the flourishing of new Chinese-Kiwi literary talent, Renee Liang notes this difference between herself as a second-generation, slightly older Chinese-Kiwi and the “young, hip” Chinese New Zealand writers who have emerged in the last few years. (Tay 2020) The younger generation may feel more comfortable in their own skin, and also have the benefit of enjoying and building upon the hard-earned acceptance through the endeavours of their predecessors. For most older Chinese Kiwis and new Chinese immigrants, however, accentuating and celebrating their difference may still be a luxury.

Critics have also taken issue with the opera's subdued treatment of Māori culture, although on very different grounds from their dissatisfaction with its subdued Chineseness. Michael Hooper notes that "[t]he weaving through of tikanga Māori is a little less overt than the Chinese traditions, in terms of depth and balance". Hooper attributes the opera's lack of strong emotion and dynamics not so much to Liang's writing, which he finds moving, but to the restrained and perhaps over-reverential staging. (Hooper 2017) Echoing Hooper's sentiment that the taonga pūoro was treated reverentially, Alex Taylor points out that the Māori elements were used only for transitional passages in the opera, and felt underdeveloped in terms of how they related to the whole. He then notes the more general tendency to flatten out cultural differences in cross-cultural production. (Taylor, Moore & Canton 2017)

In a country that abides by the policy of biculturalism, reverentiality towards Māori is officially mandated and indeed, deeply ingrained in the psyche of every culturally sensitive New Zealander. For artists who deal with historical material that directly involves Māori, such as the creators of *The Bone Feeder*, the political implications of the work can be truly "high-stakes". It is therefore ironic that critics have picked up on the reverential treatment of historical content as a limiting, rather than a winning, feature of *The Bone Feeder*. The quibble with reverentiality may have its rationale on aesthetic grounds, and being culturally irreverent can be a badge of honour for many a politically engaged artist. In the context of *The Bone Feeder*, however, the imperative to be irreverent may imply an endorsement of certain exaggerations, or even stereotypes, of ethno-racial attributes – for example, the noble savage image of Māori, or the exotic otherness of Chinese.

The critical reception of *The Bone Feeder* highlights the fact that, a cross-cultural work that falls outside the orbit of New Zealand biculturalism can disrupt the existing template of ethno-cultural relations in this country and expose the limitations of its conception and vocabulary. The "not enough Maori" critique, though as well-meaning as the "too Western" critique, can betray a certain tyranny of Māori-Pākehā biculturalism that perpetuates the othering of non-Māori and non-Pākehā cultures, thus denying their presence and diminishing their relevance to New Zealand history and contemporary culture.

New Zealand's cornerstone policy of biculturalism is not without its critics. As Manying Ip has pointed out, an obvious flaw in this concept is that "it does not define the place of anyone who is non-Māori and non-Pākehā, such as the Chinese". (Ip 2003:227) Mark Williams has argued that it is time New Zealand got beyond the bicultural framework of Māori-Pākehā relations, partly because biculturalism reinforces its colonial legacy rather than overcoming it. (Williams 2009: 300) But the question is, how? Can we speak of a Māori-Chinese New Zealand history that parallels, and complicates, Māori-Pākehā biculturalism? Can we be reverential towards Māori without reinscribing Māori-Pākehā biculturalism? How might the reverentiality that fosters Māori-Chinese connections be reinterpreted as a healthy irreverence towards New Zealand biculturalism?

It is important to remember that through writing *The Bone Feeder*, Liang is revisiting a chapter of New Zealand history that preceded the rise of biculturalism

in the 1980s and the more recent flourish of multiculturalism. The fledging Māori-Chinese friendship in the SS Ventnor story can be aptly summarised in Williams's words, as "arrested encounters", in a cultural history that had been suppressed by a preferred narrative of biculturalism (Williams 2009). Therefore, instead of celebrating *The Bone Feeder* as a high point of Asian culture in a multicultural mosaic decorating a Pākehā centerpiece, I propose to explore the potential of the Māori-Chinese connections highlighted in Liang's work as an antidote to Māori-Pākehā biculturalism, or as an envisagement of what the New Zealand cultural landscape could have been, without subjecting it to the prerogatives of biculturalism. This critical exercise is not to negate the historical importance of biculturalism to New Zealand nation building, but to challenge its narcissism and to posit a more inclusive, and dynamic, model of interculturalism.

Chinese-Māori connections: a critique of biculturalism

It is equally important to be cognizant of the fact that, whilst dealing with historical material on ethno-cultural relations dating back to the early 20th century, Liang also has to navigate New Zealand cultural politics and race relations of the 21st century. From the very start, Liang has been acutely aware of the need to negotiate and secure the right to tell the story about the sinking of the SS Ventnor, a story that involves both Chinese and Māori communities. As a second-generation Chinese-Kiwi, Liang has had to overcome several social, cultural and linguistic hurdles in order to work with early Chinese settler material. She talked with the Hoy family to gain their trust and obtain permission to write "their story".⁵ Her work is entitled "The Bone Feeder". Liang admits that the title merely refers to Ben's quest to retrieve the bones of his ancestors, and it is a good title for "grabbing attention". (Liang 2020) However, there is no denying the fact that for over a hundred years since the sinking of the SS Ventnor, the Māori had been the de facto "bone feeders". The oral history of Te Roroa and Te Rarawa tells the secret of bones found and kept safe until their families came for them.

5 Although not the focus of this article, it is important to note that the writing and production of *The Bone Feeder* highlighted the tensions and dividedness within the Chinese diaspora communities, and a certain amount of "intra-cultural diplomacy" was necessary to reconcile the competing and conflicting cultural positions on the telling and staging of the SS Ventnor story. Liang worked with an intimate group of collaborators, from Cantonese translators to Chinese musicians, to ensure the "authenticity" of her work. Although fiercely protective of her Cantonese heritage, Liang is not averse to associating and collaborating with Mandarin speakers. In fact, one of her earliest and most enduring collaborators on *The Bone Feeder* project is a Mandarin speaker, Xiyao Chen, a musician specializing in the traditional Chinese instrument guzheng. Yet the multicultural makeup of contemporary New Zealand often challenged any pre-conceived notion of cultural authenticity, and Liang's negotiations and compromises reflect the diversity and dividedness of the Chinese immigrant communities in New Zealand. In the Palmerston North production sponsored by the Poll-tax Fund, the Cantonese part of the play was performed in Mandarin because the actor who played Kwan could not speak Cantonese. This "cross-over" raised objection from an audience member (affiliated with the Poll Tax Fund), who reportedly walked out during the show. (Liang 2018)

Before the surge of interest from the Chinese community to recover this hidden history and make it known to the world as part of their story, the bones had already been woven into the local iwi history.⁶

Liang directed meticulous attention to Māori cultural protocol throughout the different phases of the making of *The Bone Feeder*. In the earlier stages of her writing, Liang's approach to working with Māori actors was consultative and collaborative, and she asked them to check if the writing was in line with their iwi. (Liang 2018) In her role as the librettist for the opera, Liang treaded some sensitive ground whilst working with her Māori collaborators.

The opera opens with a mōteatea sung by the Ferryman, as a strong gesture towards the Māori pedigree of the story. Mōteatea is a time-honoured Māori tradition of chanted poetry. Composed for many purposes and reasons, often by great poets, mōteatea has the power to call on gods and ancestors, who manifest in the world through music and the human voice.

In the opera, the mōteatea is sung in Māori. The libretto provides the Māori text, followed by the English version in brackets. During performance on stage, the English text is projected onto the background and artfully incorporated as a part of the set design. In both scenarios, the English text serves as a translation for people who have no knowledge of te reo Māori. In the actual writing process, however, the mōteatea was first written in English by Liang, and then translated into Māori by Hone Hurihanganui. It was a case of translation where the line between the “source text” and the “target text” is collapsed or at least becomes blurry. In the writing process, the English text is the original and the Māori is the translation. In the intended use of the texts, in both the printed libretto and the stage production, the Māori version acquires the status of the “original”, whereas the English takes a more secondary, translational role.

Liang's original writing of the mōteatea in English can be interpreted as a simultaneous act of homage and appropriation. She had to walk a fine line that required the exercise of considerable cultural diplomacy. In the opera programme, Hone Hurihanganui is included in the credits as translator, but on a separate list, he is also credited as the creator of the mōteatea. By giving sole authorship of the mōteatea to the Māori translator, Liang gives up a part of her own rights to authorship. This is clearly an act of “over-reverentiality” towards Māori because the same honour was not extended to Henry Liu, the translator who produced the Cantonese text for the opera in a similar collaborative procedure. However, the special status given to the mōteatea may reflect more than a superficial concession to ingratiate the Māori collaborators. Recognition of the crucial Māori dimension of the story and the gravitas of the mōteatea within that dimension, rather than a politically correct adherence to New Zealand biculturalism, may be the greater impetus behind Liang's over-reverentiality. Part of the librettist's humility may also have to do with the sanctity of the mōteatea

6 For an account of the history of the SS Ventnor's sinking from the local Hokianga point of view, see NZ Chinese Association: Ventnor Project (URL: <https://ssventnor.wordpress.com/history/>).

ritual, something that should not be “touched” by a non-Māori person. It is paradoxical that in the desire to heighten a sense of authenticity, the creative process has involved some artistic license in representing quotidian truth.

This pursuit of authenticity at all costs renders Liang’s work susceptible to the ills of political correctness, a symptom of the kind of over-reverential, risk-averse theatre-making that Canton, Moore and Taylor are critical of. In diaspora studies, authenticity has been repeatedly debunked by critics, such as Rey Chow, as a straight-jacket imposed on diaspora communities from the dual oppressors of their “mother culture” and the host culture that they have adopted. (Chow 1998)

In dealing with a cultural source, no matter how distant or intimate, is it possible to be reverential and critical at the same time? Although musically the opera has been criticised for its over-emphasis on commonality and harmony, Liang’s dramaturgical treatment of ritual is not without its critical edge. The main narrative arc of the opera is Ben’s quest to uncover his great-great-grandfather’s bones and return them to China, thus reconnecting them to their ancestry and cultural roots. This quest is driven by the underlying values of Chinese ancestral worship and familial lineage, which in many ways find sympathetic echoing in Māori cultural practice. However, to accomplish this task Ben has to dig up the bones now buried at Mitimiti cemetery, which clashes with Māori burial practice and belief.

Before proceeding to dig up the bones, Ben sings an aria to express his pent-up feelings:

Ben

Your light is all I see now no direction needed
 I’m close, I can feel it
 your bones now beneath my feet –
 I am here, your wings singing, trembling against my skin: Mitimiti, Mitimiti
 find him at Mitimiti
 from this graveyard of Maori bones I’ll take you, I’ll take you home –
 a shipwreck disinherited my family through our years of shame
 my father and my father’s father rootless, drifting
 never felt at home
 I want to claim my stories reconnect my family
 my task must be completed
 to take these bones to China and find myself
 (Liang 2016)

Ben’s words also serve as a dramaturgical device to explain the reasons for his actions, which may not be so apparent to non-Chinese audiences. This is meant to be the emotional climax of the opera. However, much of its emotional resonance is lost on the audience who might find it difficult to identify with Ben’s desire to “take these bones to China and find [him]self”. And it is not just the non-Chinese audience who may not share the notion that one’s identity and sense of belonging reside in one’s ancestral

origin. It is unlikely that a fifth-generation Chinese-New Zealander would look to China as the destination of their cultural belonging. On some level, Ben's outpourings here work better as a dramaturgical device than as an expression of emotional truth. However, if Ben's impulse to "find himself in China" were understood metaphorically, it could become a potent expression of grief and grievance from a racial minority youth who does not feel *at home* in the country of his birth.

Ben's willful act of breaking the skin of the earth to dig up the ancestral bones triggers immediate protestation from his Māori guide:

Ben picks up a spade. The sky and earth react.

Ferryman Stop. Wait, don't dig
The land here is tapu – protecting the bones
of many ancestors, not just your own.
(Liang 2016)

Tapu, in te reo Māori, means "sacred". The Ferryman's objection is driven by the communal interest to safeguard the sanctity of Māori burial grounds. However, in this case, the Chinese conflict with Māori belief and practice also serves as a reminder of the spiritual and moral limitations of Chinese ancestral worship. The collective, communal nature of Māori burial practice is foregrounded, in sharp relief against the narrower conception of Chinese ancestral worship based strictly on familial lineage. That the Chinese bones have been salvaged by the Māori iwi and buried in their own cemeteries testifies to the fact that Māori belief and practice can go beyond, and have gone beyond, racial boundaries as well.

The Ferryman's words of wisdom hold much critical potential for reimagining New Zealand ethno-racial relations. In the most immediate sense, they are a critique of Ben's selfishness, and the exclusivity of Chinese ancestral worship. Although directly addressed to Ben, these words were also addressed to the audience, and by extension, to all in New Zealand. Thus, *The land here is tapu – protecting the bones of many ancestors, not just your own*, can be reinterpreted, perhaps in ways that are unintended in the original work, as a much broader critique of all forms of parochialism, including New Zealand biculturalism.

Ancestors abound in *The Bone Feeder*, and so do ghosts. On many levels, the story can be read as a Chinese ghost tale in a contemporary New Zealand setting. The Ferryman's precaution about "many ancestors, not just your own" echoes Arthur Wolf's definition of ghosts as "other people's ancestors". (Wolf 1974) As I have previously argued, much of the Chinese ghost tale tradition could be understood as an attempt, on the part of the cultural elite, to accommodate and come to terms with the non-ancestral ghost, or other people's ancestors. (Luo 2009) Then, in what sense is *The Bone Feeder* a collective effort, in the high-stakes, elite form of opera, to accommodate, literally and symbolically, the Chinese ghosts? And what does it mean to accommodate the Chinese, the ubiquitous racial other, in the context of bicultural New Zealand?

In *The Melancholy of Race*, Anne Cheng conceptualises racial melancholia as a theoretical model of identity that provides a critical framework for analysing the constitutive role that grief plays in American racial and ethnic subject formation. Cheng reinterprets Freudian melancholia in racial terms, which manifests itself as a constitutional blind spot, and as an ailment that inflicts the psyche of both white America and its racial other. Cheng describes a relationship of mutual dependence within which the white American subject secures its identity through the melancholic introjection of racial others that it can neither fully relinquish or accommodate. Thus the racial other becomes a persistent yet ghostly presence in the American psyche. An inverse mechanism of melancholia also plagues the racial other, whose sense of subjectivity is gained, paradoxically, through a perpetual loss. (Cheng 2001: xi) This dynamic of racial melancholia mirrors the simultaneous visibility and invisibility of Chinese presence in New Zealand's bicultural paradigm, a ghostliness that is perfectly captured by the trope of the Chinese ghost tale.

In contrast with Cheng's model of melancholia, which forecloses any possibility of accommodation and offers little in the way of respite or catharsis, the Chinese ghost tale is characterised by an imbricated process of disenfranchisement and accommodation. This narrative pattern propels *The Bone Feeder* out of melancholia to contemplate the move forward. Thus we see the intercultural encounter between Ben and the Ferryman going beyond grief and grievance to effect a series of personal and cultural transformations.

After the Ferryman's warning, a more direct and forceful objection to Ben's digging comes from the ghost of Kwan, the very ancestor that Ben is trying to honour and appease. Appearing before Ben and reminding him that "the Ferryman was right", Kwan sings an aria to reveal his identity to Ben and to convey that his sense of belonging has now been transformed because of Ben's presence:

Kwan How I've longed for this
 the moment I finally meet my family
 and you're here – your eyes, your face
 this jade cicada led you here
 not to bring me home
 but to bring home to me, here
 (Liang 2016)

On his journey, Ben carries a jade cicada that once belonged to Kwan, his great-great-grandfather. A symbol of the cycle of life and resurrection in traditional Chinese culture, the cicada is not only a family heirloom that helps Ben and Kwan find each other, it also serves as an emblem that connects the world of the dead with the world of the living. The cicada/te tarakihi also features prominently in Māori folksong and decorative arts, its delirious summer singing revered as a source of immense strength. (Anderson 1923) In *The Bone Feeder*, the carved jade cicada thus becomes a shared symbol of connection between Chinese and Māori traditions. However, such symbolism is all but lost on Ben, who appears fixated on his single-minded mission.

Ben If you really were my ancestor
 you'd know how duty drives me
 how I owe this to my family –
Kwan I am your elder, I forbid you –
Ben How would you know how it feels
 have you ever been alone
 not knowing where you belong?
Kwan You know nothing. You are fake Chinese.
Ben Let me pass!
 (Liang 2016)

You know nothing. You are fake Chinese. is probably the one line that carries the most emotional punch in the entire opera. However, the term “fake Chinese” is not to be taken as an entirely negative description of Ben’s identity. Kwan’s words are both admonition of a misguided self-centeredness in Ben’s quest and affirmation of his Kiwi-ness. Yet these words fail to wake up Ben from his willful pursuit. He digs up the sand amidst the protests from both human and ghost, and above all, cosmic retribution in the form of a violent storm that engulfs and drowns him. Ben dies a metaphorical death that parallels the experience of his ancestor’s bones that were lost to the cold waters of the Hokianga harbour more than a century before. As his body is washed ashore and he regains consciousness in the presence of the Ferryman, Ben is a transformed man. The old Ben who insisted on finding himself in China against all odds is now gone. We see a new Ben who has learned his lesson from his intercultural and inter-generational encounters, now at peace with his place in the world.

Yet another transformation comes when Ben proceeds to perform the Chinese ritual of Bai-san, or “feeding the bones”. Instead of following the protocol of Chinese ancestral worship, the ritual starts with the Māori practice of hongi between Ben and the Ferryman. The Ferryman’s participation in the ritual goes beyond the role of the Māori host. He also initiates the bowing and offering of incense, key gestures in Chinese ancestral worship. As Ben takes his turn and goes through the ancestral rites himself, the originally separate Māori and Cantonese choruses at the beginning of the opera become layered and overlapping, providing an analogous soundscape for this intercultural commingling, with Chinese and Māori traditions accommodating and transforming each other. If the opera’s opening mōteatea as expression in language has necessitated the claim of authorship, its concluding ritual, expressed in gesture and in music, creates a more open and fluid space of intercultural communication, where the verbal and non-verbal can interact, and words that are otherwise mutually unintelligible can transcend ownership and generate meaning.

The spiritual and emotional impact of the opera’s final scene is nothing short of that of a communal ritual, one that the audiences observe, and also participate in. This communal ritual space is achieved through well-considered dramaturgical and staging arrangements. The opera highlights the transcultural significance of music by weaving the sounds of Chinese, Māori and European musical instruments into the score. In the staging, the communal, participatory spirit of the work is further heightened by

incorporating the music ensemble, including the conductor, into the main stage, rather than half-hidden in an orchestra pit. Julian Wong, the musician who plays the dizi (bamboo flute) also performs as the cicada dancer. Symbolising the cycle of life and resurrection, the cicada dancer rises to dance across the stage at several intervals, serving as an important linchpin between the realms of the dead and the living, between past and present, and between ritual and performance.

The final scene of the opera also echoes the broader communal efforts towards the recovery of the SS *Ventnor*, a lost vessel of New Zealand history anchored on Māori-Chinese connections. In many ways, Liang's creative work in theatre has paralleled and intersected with the communal initiatives to restore and preserve this chapter of New Zealand history. In 2009, as Liang put her play *The Bone Feeder* on stage for the first time, a delegation of Chinese, the descendants and kin of those lost, travelled north to thank the iwi for their guardianship. There, a Bai-san ceremony was performed to "feed the bones" and finally appease the wandering ghosts. In 2017, as *The Bone Feeder* premiered as a new opera, the NZ Chinese Association launched the *Ventnor* Memorial Project through various commemorative events and fundraising efforts. As of May 2020, ground has been broken on the planned memorial site in Opononi, near the Hokianga harbour where the SS *Ventnor* sank over 110 years ago. (Wenman 2020)

Cultural diplomacy beyond the national

It takes a village to make an opera. The production of *The Bone Feeder* vividly illustrates the multicultural and transnational realities of contemporary New Zealand. Apart from Renee Liang, the Chinese-Kiwi librettist, other key members of the creative team include Gareth Farr as the composer and Sara Brodie as the director. Like Farr, Brodie has been noted for her work with cross-cultural material in New Zealand and international theatre, particularly her collaborations with Chinese composers and performers. The cast is a multicultural and international assembly of singers and musicians of Cantonese Chinese, Mandarin Chinese, Chinese-Kiwi, Māori, Pākehā, Māori-Pākehā, and Australian-Korean heritage. As Liang has humbly acknowledged, the opera was less "her work" (Liang 2018). However, it must be equally acknowledged that Liang remains the heart and soul of the opera, and her tireless and nimble cultural diplomacy has played an instrumental role in "mainstreaming" the Chinese-Māori story in the relatively insular world of opera.

The success is not without compromises. As I have noted earlier, in the critical reception of the opera, the tendency to speak of a collective, undifferentiated "Asian identity" remains strong. This collectivism is reflected in the casting of the main characters. Both male leads – Ben and Kwan – are played by singers of Korean heritage. Whilst these casting decisions may have been determined by logistical and economic factors, they do raise some thorny questions about ethnic and cultural identity. Tension and rivalry amongst the different Asian ethnic groups are a well-known fact in both international politics and diaspora cultures. Yet, similar to her flexible and eclectic approach to collaborating with Mandarin-speaking actors and

musicians in the earlier play productions, Liang is open-minded about the cross-ethnic casting in the opera production. She comments: “The Korean singer who played Kwan [Jaewoo Kim] went to Australia as a young adult and totally understood Kwan’s journey”. (Liang 2018) Liang’s approach to multiculturalism evokes Mark Williams’s conception of “strategic pluralism”. (Williams 2009) There is the suggestion of an intercultural alliance that is based on altruism and shared interests, rather than narrowly defined ethnic identity politics.

In a special issue of *International Journal of Cultural Policy* (2015: 20:4), the editors challenge the predominant view that a unifying national narrative is the precondition for effective cultural diplomacy. They argue that, in a globalised world characterised by intensifying, multidirectional transnational flows, “the attempt to impose a unifying national narrative on the intrinsically diverse range of cultural diplomacy/relations activity may prove an elusive pursuit” (Ang, Isar & Mar 2015). In an effort to liberate cultural diplomacy from the grip of nationalistic soft power projection and top-down cultural policy making, the editors advocate the adoption of more dialogic, collaborative approaches to cultural diplomacy that underscore culture and its legacy as an ongoing, relational, and social process of co-production of meaning. (Ang, Isar & Mar 2015)

Liang’s *The Bone Feeder* provides an entry point for reinvigorating the discussion of cultural diplomacy beyond the national. Unlike the usual critique of the national from the standpoint of the transnational, Liang’s work points to rather different trajectories of cultural diplomacy beyond national interests and nationalistic thinking. The work reveals that there is much cultural diplomacy to be done *within* the cultural sphere of a multicultural nation state – between its dominant culture and its cultural minorities, between its various minority cultures, and between the subgroups within a cultural minority. The cultural diplomacies conducted primarily beyond and *below* the national present vital counterexamples of cultural diplomacy as being not necessarily bound to a unifying national narrative. At the same time, cultural diplomacies amongst different cultural and racial groups within a nation resonate and fluctuate with the complex cultural flows amongst the nations in the world at large. *The Bone Feeder*, although ostensibly a contemporary New Zealand play/opera, involves “border crossing” on multiple levels in its writing, production and reception, from physical, textual, musical, to ritual, communal and political.

By mainstreaming a story of Māori-Chinese affiliation and friendship that goes beyond New Zealand biculturalism, or a configuration of multiculturalism that orbits a Pākehā majority, Liang’s making of *The Bone Feeder* suggests a multi-nodal cultural diplomacy with strategically shifting cultural positions and alliances, one whose trajectories are no longer possible to be drawn along nationalistic lines. Whilst this *inter-cultural* diplomacy lays bare the many blind spots in the discourse of a bicultural New Zealand, it is, ultimately, in the service of contemporary New Zealand culture, or a New Zealand culture of the future, in which various memories of the past are kept alive.

It remains to be seen whether this recognition of intercultural affiliation and belonging between Māori and Chinese in *The Bone Feeder* signals a tidal change

in Māori-Chinese cultural relations. It could be just a flash of optimism amidst the darker realities of ethnic relations in contemporary New Zealand, as Manying Ip has documented. (Ip 2003) However, there is growing evidence in recent developments in the arts to suggest that *The Bone Feeder* is not an isolated phenomenon. As Liang worked to present her play in various stage productions, the Christchurch-based poet David Howard wrote his long poem, “The Mica Pavilion”, in 2010. Inspired by the 16th-century Chinese play, *The Peony Pavilion*, Howard’s poem tells the star-crossed love story between a Chinese miner and the daughter of a Māori elder in late 19th-century South Island. In 2015, during the time when the Auckland Arts Festival commissioned the opera *The Bone Feeder*, the Māori-Chinese playwright Mei-Lin Te Puea Hansen’s *The Mooncake and the Kūmara* debuted as part of that year’s Festival. If literary arts were the harbinger of cultural currents and social change, we might say that new intercultural perspectives and sensibilities beyond the frameworks of biculturalism and multiculturalism are already afoot in Aotearoa.

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