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CHINESE MIGRANTS AND SOCIAL CAPITAL: A FIELD CASE FROM WEST AUCKLAND

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Abstract

This paper discusses the experiences of Chinese migrants living in a community undergoing rapid change due to migration. It looks at the barriers to building inter-cultural social capital and questions the effectiveness of institutions such as Auckland Council in taking a leadership role to promote social capital building.

Background

Ehara taku toa i te toa takitahi, engari he toa takitini.

Our strength does not come from ourselves alone,
our strength derives from the many.

In 2017 I founded Story Club to create projects connecting community through sharing and celebrating the diverse cultural narratives of West Auckland. The home to many new migrants, this region has a population of more than 200 different ethnicities, creating a rich mix of languages and cultural practices. How does such a collection of peoples become a community? I believe when we listen to one another's stories empathy and understanding grow, creating a stronger, more resilient community in which diversity and difference are embraced and valued.

This field study describes my experiences collaborating with Chinese migrants on the project "Chinese Stories of the Whau". For this project I had the able assistance of Dr Elliot Collins, a successful mid-career artist and Public Programme Content Specialist at Auckland War Memorial Museum Tāmaki Paenga Hira

Engaging with the Chinese community began with a workshop to discuss their interest in a story telling project. Forty participants representing a range of social and cultural groups attended, and while they expressed strong interest, a hurdle was immediately apparent – very few spoke English. The cost of employing a translator was prohibitive so participation became self-selecting on the basis of who could provide their own translator. Two groups emerged as committed collaborators, a cultural group which performs traditional dances throughout the wider Auckland region, and an environmental protection association active in West Auckland. Most were older, ranging in age from 50-94 years, and had emigrated from mainland China. They were long-term residents, having been here for more than 10 years.

Chinese stories of the Whau

This project stimulated greater Chinese arts participation, both as creators and audience, by developing the platform “Chinese Stories of the Whau”, named after the Local Board area. While this project was co-created with its participants, Story Club was responsible for its inception and delivery. This entailed diverse tasks, including facilitating workshops with the Chinese community, recording oral histories, writing life stories based on the oral histories, photographing participants, arranging for translation of stories, designing display boards with each individual story in both Mandarin and English, overseeing their production and installation, and fundraising.

The outdoor exhibition of the story boards was opened with a cultural event coinciding with the time of the Moon Festival. Held in the adjoining community centre, this event was opened by a kaumatua from the Hokianga whose iwi had acted as guardians of the Chinese remains from the SS Ventnor. During the four hour event Chinese groups performed on-stage, there were demonstrations of calligraphy and painting, and a banquet was served by performers in traditional dress. About 300-350 people attended the event, with many times that number from both the Chinese and the wider community visiting the exhibition during its four week installation. Sited next to a main commuter road, it was also seen by thousands of passers by.

The participants were delighted – for the first time since their arrival they felt included in the wider community.

Interpretive Context

Collaborating closely with 50 or so migrants (the number fluctuated) over the course of a year was unpredictable and enjoyable as we worked together towards finding common ground. I was both the outsider of their group and the insider of the larger group in which they were situated, often trying to help negotiate between both parties – I was not an objective observer and I include myself in the findings.

I participated in this project as a whole person, drawing on my personal background as well as my sociological training. I am the daughter of a migrant who arrived in this country unable to speak English. This provided an immediate bond with my non-English speaking collaborators as they felt, rightly, that I would empathize with their difficulties in acclimatizing to an English speaking community, and be patient during the process of trying to communicate with each other.

What I learnt from my father is that when a person speaks another language, they are not thinking in English translated into other words – the language they think in constructs an entirely different thought structure, an entirely different world view. So while the process of trying to communicate with each other may have been frustrating at times, it also provided glimpses into another way of interpreting the world, which is also another way of being in the world.

Findings

Experiences with Local Government

Despite having lived here through the formation of the Auckland “supercity”, these Chinese did not understand the structure of a central council and local boards, or even the difference in role and responsibilities between elected officials and council staff.

Sometimes misunderstanding had its benefits, such as the creation of a Chinese Friendship Garden in 2014. Noticing a Chinese group out collecting rubbish, a local board member asked if they wanted to make a garden on an abandoned building site adjacent to the community centre and right behind the local board offices. As it was explained to me, in China such a question from an official is interpreted as a strong directive. So this group of senior citizens ranging in age from mid-seventies to mid-nineties, with no gardening experience and who did not even reside in that local board area, undertook to make a garden. They first had the challenging task of clearing and cleaning up the site, then they built beds and planted. Their own ideas about design and plants were rejected so they worked with council staff (who also kept an eye on their welfare and helped out) to produce a garden that would meet official approval.

Everyone was immensely proud of the results. A council staff member wrote conference papers about the project as successful inter-cultural social capital building, while the Chinese hoped that the wider community would appreciate the garden and start to think more positively about the Chinese community. The group enjoyed weekly outings to tend the garden, as much social occasions as working bees, and received a very small amount of annual funding for this maintenance. As they explained it to me, they felt recognized and valued while also being grateful for the opportunity to serve the wider community – they were being “good kiwis”.

However this was not a case of all’s well that ends well. During 2017 I felt an undercurrent of unhappiness circulating within this group but it was not until they asked me to be their representative at a local board meeting that I discovered the cause. Panuku, council’s real estate development arm, had started restoring a derelict site nearby, resulting in the homeless people from that site migrating to the Friendship Garden – they had taken up residence right behind the local board offices. The proposed solution was to demolish the Garden. While the Chinese were hurt and offended that their gift of friendship was being rejected, one board member was livid that a critical article about the board’s intentions had appeared in the local Chinese media. Consequently there was no attempt on either side to be conciliatory and work together towards a resolution.

When demolition was scheduled, I worked with two sympathetic council staff members to have the Garden closed with a ceremony which officially recognized its symbolic importance and thanked its makers. As there was little goodwill on either side, this was not a happy occasion. The three of us then worked together for the next 10 months to find another location and funding to establish a new garden. This ultimately failed because of misunderstanding due to council staff doggedly refusing to translate communications, including a funding contract, into Mandarin – despite council having a free translation service.

My observation from this and other experiences is that, even when council staff sincerely wanted the best outcomes for the Chinese, they tended to operate from the point of view of knowing what would work in terms of council policies, processes and resources, but without adequately probing what the Chinese wanted or at least preferred – a situation exacerbated by language difficulties. This resulted in disappointment and frustration on both sides.

Difficulties communicating with council due to the necessity for English impacted on Chinese wellbeing in many ways. One particular source of anguish was applying for council funding and I was often asked to assist so, in an attempt to help the whole community rather than one group at a time, I rang the central council funding office to ask if it were possible to organize a funding workshop with translators. This was dismissed out of hand on the grounds that some Chinese spoke English and they could help the ones who didn't. I then asked the local board for help and it was successful in getting the funding office to organize the workshop.

I attended the workshop and observed it that not only English but the use of council jargon which was confounding the Chinese. Council staff have so internalized the language of policy and internal planning goals that they cannot communicate simply and clearly with the community they serve. Information required on the funding forms was difficult to relate to specific community projects and during the Q&A council staff gave broad rather than specific answers. Confusion was also caused by the competitive nature of funding and the need to demonstrate being more worthy than other applicants. In trying to explain that there was not enough funding for everyone, it was commented that you were “lucky” if you received funding, and that, having received it once, you were unlikely to get repeat funding in order to give everyone a turn. This was illogical to the Chinese. The social and cultural groups they had developed were integral to their wellbeing – why was there no ongoing support?

An example of council's operating philosophy in action occurred shortly after the workshop. One group with a membership of around 450 had been renting a council venue for about three years. When some expected funding from an independent source did not eventuate, leaving the group with a rent shortfall, the facilities management was asked if a short rent holiday could be negotiated while they reorganized their finances. This was flatly refused and the group moved out of the premises, which then became vacant, resulting in a long-term loss of income for the facility – who benefits from this kind of decision making? What is its impact on community wellbeing and social capital building?

One arm of council heavily invested in social capital building is the public library service. Following the example of the former Waitakere City, the Auckland Library provides a variety of newspapers from migrants' home countries, has holdings of foreign language books and employs an ethnic diversity of librarians to help non-English speaking patrons. There is also an outreach programme, which for the Chinese features children's story time with stories told in Mandarin (very popular with the grandparents), decorations and activities to celebrate festivals such as the Chinese Lantern Festival and a variety of workshops teaching a wide range of subjects, from Mandarin to chess. Because of these efforts, the local library is a favoured meeting place.

Auckland Library supported Story Club by providing meeting room space and bilingual librarians to assist the “Chinese Stories of the Whau” project. The Library has an oral history deposit and the technical ability to produce one-off books, so was interested in discussing how the project stories and research material might be preserved as a reference after the project’s conclusion. But this stalled when Library policy concerning copyright proved to be counter to the interests of the Chinese participants.

Some Chinese, especially the older generation, are very concerned about surveillance from mainland China, making them extremely cautious about material being posted to the internet, their stories being used by others without their permission, and how public the “public domain” is in practical terms. When I met with staff from the Auckland Library Research Centre to discuss these concerns, I was told in no uncertain terms that once material was deposited with the Library, it became the copyright holder with sole discretion over use of the material. This surprised me for two reasons: it is counter to my understanding of New Zealand copyright law; the Library works with *mana whenua* and I cannot imagine Maori giving away the rights to their *toanga*. I contacted the Turnbull Library as an alternate deposit, and was assured that all copyright would remain with us as authors, that embargoes to access could be applied and that if anyone wished to use the material we would be contacted for permission.

When I reported this information to the group, they felt Auckland Library was trying to steal their stories. This then led to more accounts about mishandling of their intellectual property, including the recording of oral histories, providing stories for institutional projects and being the subjects of a documentary – all without the final products being shared with them for their approval before being made public, or even simply shared with them as a common courtesy. Some believed they were being exploited by the people working on these projects for career and financial gains. I wasn’t able to judge the accuracy of these complaints, but it was clear there had been major misunderstandings. From this discussion I learnt that while community libraries were loved as places, there was little trust in the Library as an institution.

For many of these Chinese there is little in their personal history of living in communist China to foster trust in officialdom. Not understanding the functions of Auckland Council and the bureaucratic ways in which these are carried out, compounded by unsatisfactory experiences with staff, did not promote trust in Council. It seemed to me the Chinese took a pragmatic approach. They understood Council could provide access to resources they valued, so they participated in events and community meetings even though no translation of the proceedings was provided (they spent the time on WeChat), hoping that by showing up more might follow. But when it came to observing council regulations, such as the ban on cutting down native trees, their attitude was “we cut down the trees and then pay the fine” – partly through lack of trust and partly due to the difficulties of dealing with bureaucracy in a foreign language.

Language

These Chinese migrants were very proactive in forming and maintaining strong relationships with other speakers of Mandarin and Cantonese. One woman told me how lonely she had been until the day she heard two people speaking Mandarin in a supermarket and went up to say hello – she was welcomed and invited to join their social

group, suddenly gaining 20 new friends. These social connections provided real support for older people who often had few or no family members here, for example an elderly man with mild dementia was warmly included in all group activities and participated as an equal, albeit under the watchful eye of the group, giving his elderly wife much needed respite. This help was not limited to immediate contacts. One very dynamic octogenarian was asked to provide phone counseling to a Chinese prisoner at Waikeria Prison, Te Awamutu, because he only spoke Mandarin and was on suicide watch. Although he was a complete stranger and she had no counseling training, she successfully helped him manage his depression and went on to give him lessons in calligraphy – all by phone.

It seemed that speaking together in the language they had grown up with bonded these migrants into a close community, giving them a sense of security and belonging which made settling into a new country easier. However it also created a barrier to interacting with the wider community, making me interested in why they had not embraced learning English.

Unlike my father's generation of migrants, global travel is more accessible and affordable for these migrants and many often return home – on holiday, to help with a family emergency, to participate in ceremonial duties such as sweeping ancestors' tombs during the Qingming Festival or, after being diagnosed here, to receive Chinese medical treatment. Those who don't travel still keep in contact with friends and family in China, go the library to read the newspaper and use Huawei devices programmed in Chinese. The ongoing necessity of being fluent in their own language, a complex language of more than 30,000 characters, seemed a major disincentive to learning English.

But was there also more to the situation? After all, they called themselves “good kiwis” and were proud of their nationality – what could be more symbolic of being a New Zealander than speaking English?

When I asked what made a “good kiwi”, they replied with answers such as, “caring for the environment”, “being kind to each other” and “doing good for the community”. When I then asked what the biggest difference was between living in China and living here, I was surprised to learn that here it is boring.

To put this in context, Guangzhou is sister city to Tamaki Makaurau Auckland and signatory, along with Los Angeles, to the Tripartite Economic Alliance which has enabled local companies to secure multi-million dollar business deals in China. Once a major trading hub on the Silk Road, Guangzhou is more than 2,200 years old yet also ranked as a modern Alpha global city with radical contemporary architecture by Westerners such as Zaha Hadid Architects and Rem Koolhaas. Recognized by the United Nations as the most liveable city in China, it is renowned for its cosmopolitan society, with migrants from Southeast Asia, the Middle East, Eastern Europe and Africa, contributing to its rich cultural life. By comparison, Tamaki Makaurau Auckland lacks vibrancy, amenities and cultural richness, with Chinese migrants having difficulty in finding European cultural activities that interest them.

We look out at the world, measuring it by what we know, forgetting that the world looks back at us, measuring us by their standards rather than our own. This was underlined by a story from a Chinese post-graduate student who had been very excited

about coming to Tamaki Makaurau Auckland, expecting a vibrant Polynesian city of unique cultural heritage and architecture. Instead, he was disappointed to find, "... a city just the same as all the other second-rate ex-colonial cities throughout Asia".

Despite their difficulty in connecting with English speakers, these Chinese were keen to learn Te Reo. They all knew the national anthem in Te Reo and a number of waiata – much excitement was generated when a Chinese film included Pokarekare Ana sung in Mandarin on the soundtrack. They wanted to more actively engage with Maori culture and visited marae, including staying on a Gisborne marae over the Christmas-New Year period. As I was often asked if I could arrange a cultural exchange between them and local Maori, they were thrilled to have a kaumatua open the "Chinese Stories of the Whau" event.

It seemed the Chinese lack of interest in learning English was directly related to their difficulties in finding a cultural, as opposed to a social, connection with English speakers.

Discussion

Social Capital

As the mandate for this Story Club project was building understanding and inclusiveness for greater community wellbeing, social capital is an appropriate framework for discussing my observations and experiences.

How do we understand social capital in Aotearoa New Zealand? In an address at the University of Auckland delivered by the Secretary to the Treasury, it was defined as "... the social connections, attitudes and norms that contribute to societal wellbeing by promoting coordination and collaboration between people and groups in society....societies that have high levels of social capital benefit in many ways. They have lower crime rates, better democratic functioning, better economic performance, higher educational outcomes and higher levels of individual health and wellbeing. " (Makhlouf, 2018)

In developing the Living Standards Framework, Treasury has identified five core elements of social capital: social interconnection with others; having a strong sense of community, identifying with and feeling part of the overall society; accepting and abiding by social norms and values; being actively cooperative and collaborative for the greater good, e.g. volunteering; trust in institutions.

The Living Standards Framework is to guide policy making at a national level while local government operates under the Four Wellbeings Framework introduced in the Local Government Act of 2002, which requires local authorities to promote the social, economic, cultural and environmental wellbeing of their communities. This framed the development of the Unitary Plan following the amalgamation of Auckland, and continues to shape the direction for Council's long-term planning.

There is a strong connection between the institutional interest in promoting social capital as an indicator of community wellbeing and the 21st century being dubbed the

“century of the city” with cities becoming drivers of global economic development, increasing population growth. A similar period of rapid growth occurred 1880-1900 due to industrialization, with city populations increasing by more than 50%. This growth was marked by social disruption, greater individualism and the erosion of social norms. In 1897 Emile Durkheim published his work on suicide in which he identified anomie, a personal sense of disconnection resulting from the breakdown of social capital, as a significant contributing factor. Low social capital has a great personal and social cost.

As much of Auckland’s population growth is due to migration, with more than half a million Aucklanders being born overseas, understanding and fostering intercultural social capital is a vital concern.

Guanxi

Do the Chinese have their own form of social capital building? How has it been shaped by communism, given the western importance placed on social capital as fundamental to democracy?

Kin-Man Chan points out that independent social groups were either banned during Mao’s rule or absorbed into the party-state structure (p. 242). This implies the concept Putnam explores of autonomous civic organizations located between the state and family (Bowling Alone, 2000) cannot be directly applied to China. Due to this difference in social structure the Chinese place great emphasis on “guanxi”, a different form of capital. “Guanxi or instrumental personal ties is perceived to be important in Chinese society in terms of social resources within social networks that one can access and utilize.” (1.)

Furthermore, recognizing the high levels of fear, distrust and suspicion within the population, i.e. low social capital, the Chinese government has proposed introducing strictly enforced rules of ethical conduct backed by a social credit system which enables others access to your trustworthiness rating. (2.)

Given the importance of “guanxi” it is not surprising that I was treated as a valuable resource by my Chinese collaborators. It was my readiness to be helpful (based on my experience of all the difficulties my father faced) without direct benefit to me which earned their trust.

Social Capital in the Whau

Migration has radically altered the demographics of West Auckland. Formerly predominantly European, the population is now 40.3% Asian (Chinese, Indian and Filipino) and 40.4% European (Auckland Council, 2019). Since 2013 the Asian population has grown by 32.7% and the Chinese are aware this increase is disquieting for many. They feel treated like outsiders, that they are not liked or trusted, an impression reinforced by the way our media reports on China.

There would appear to be a strong need for institutional leadership to promote social capital. The Living Standards Framework and Four Wellbeings Framework indicate the importance placed on the institutional role and past examples from the former Waitakere City, such as establishing a runanga to share governance with local mana whenua, have shown how effective institutional leadership can be. The Ethnic Peoples Advisory Panel was established by Auckland Council to identify issues and

provide advice in order to promote social capital buildng. I attended EPPAP meetings and heard only dissatisfaction from other attendees, with comments such as, “they ask us what we want and then nothing happens”. The EPPAP has no statutory powers being only an advisory board; until it becomes effective at actually lobbying on behalf of the peoples it represents, it will not be viewed by migrants as a mechanism for their greater involvement in local democracy.

The Chinese I know are very grateful to be here.They want to move into the wider community, but do not feel the need to become more like the mainstream, to lose their identity and culture, in order to be good kiwis. They come from a multi-cultural society but one in which conformity was enforced and difference could result in brutal persecution – they came for greater freedom, especially the Christians. While they feel the wider community does not like having them here and so tend to keep to themselves, they are keen to contribute and ever hopeful that through sharing their culture, greater understanding and tolerance can be created.

In effect they make a pivotal distinction between nationality and cultural identity, feeling more aligned with other New Zealand cultural groups of non-European descent. Language is not an indicator of nationality, as it has been for us, growing up in a monolingual English colony. As with the oral cultures of Maori and Pasifika, they regard their language as more than a means of communication – it is the repository of all their philosophy, knowledge, values, traditions, history, ideas, art and culture.

An unprecedented caesura in China’s cultural heritage was created by Mao Zedong’s Cultural Revolution, which purged the “Four Olds” of culture, customs, ideas and habits. These people lived through that purge, keeping their cultural practices alive in secret. Their language is their connection to the heritage they protected.

I too get frustrated sometimes at the language barrier because these are remarkable people – scientists, university professors, professional opera singers and musicians – and I would like to have more meaningful conversations with them. But it is what it is, and I learn more by accepting them as they are, just as I ask them to accept me as I am.

Issues

1. Community indifference

The Chinese themselves have identified what they believe is the major issue – New Zealanders are not interested in them. They acknowledge the popularity of cultural events such as the Lantern Festival, but feel these are only enjoyed as a kind of spectacle, not as an introduction to the culture these events are embedded in.

New Zealand has long historical links with China – not just the arrival here of gold miners during the 1860s, but the Christian missionary nuns who began visiting China from the early 1900s, and the extraordinary contributions made by Nurse Hall and Rewi Alley, who are still greatly revered today. As an elderly man said to me, “we couldn’t believe this little country so far away wanted to help us and we will always remember your kindness”. Sadly, many New Zealanders do not understand we are held in such high esteem.

2. Cultural differences

Under capitalism much of our aesthetic appreciation is channeled into shopping, with the arts regarded as “high culture” confined to institutions such as art museums. By contrast, “...since ancient times China has held the value of art to be the equal to that of philosophy – which is no small fact, given our relationship with Taoism and Confucianism. Art has a strong, multivalent tradition whether we’re speaking in terms of the imperial court or of the non-educated housewife. And this is very different from art’s role in the West.” Ai Weiwei (3.)

The Chinese I know are not likely to join you at the pub, or at a rugby match. They would love to be invited to learn a new dance or popular song, especially if it helped them become more acquainted with our culture. They bond over sharing culture, whereas Pakeha bond over recreational activities.

3. Manaakitanga

What are our hospitality responsibilities as hosts? Do we treat strangers in a warm, friendly and generous way? Does an ethos of individualism and competitiveness inhibit us in forming friendly, cooperative relationships with other cultures?

Who models manaakitanga for the community?

Under current legislation social capital building is seen as being led by central and local government. If this is where the relationship building starts, how well embedded are the policies, training and tools required?

The debacle of the Chinese Friendship Garden is very telling of a mono-cultural approach to community relationships, especially the reaction of the elected official to an article being in the local Chinese media. A translation of the article showed it did not cross any legal or etiquette boundaries, focusing on the sadness and anger of the group at having their gift rejected and asking why the local board had not acted to prevent its destruction. Clearly things had not been explained properly and tensions resolved. An elected official serves the public and is held accountable by them – he has to take complaints on the chin. We live in a democracy which endows us with freedom of speech, which is the right to impart information and opinions of any kind. We also promote a free press, a right held dear by the article’s author, a former journalist and dissident who fought against suppression of the Chinese press when investigating political corruption.

Conclusion

Based on these observations and experiences, it seems our society is not adept at embracing and learning from difference. One political party’s billboards for the 2020 general election proclaim: “Let’s Get NZ Back!”, indicating a deep sense of social division and fear of difference.

We cannot treat migrants as guests who are on probation and can be asked to leave at any time, or simply as economic assets who have been useful in driving up the value of real estate and dampening the impact of recession. They are us, we are all in this together – the sooner we find ways to build bridges, the better.

The most popular and accessible place in the community is the library, and while it is well used, it could become a more effective hub of connection. My experiences in working with Auckland Library suggest that social capital is on the agenda but without sufficient strategic vision and planning to support effective inter-cultural social capital building. Te Kauroa – Future Directions outlines the Library’s intentions to deliver world class information services and promote more community engagement with those services. Supported by specialist staff and activities, this could provide a platform for greater inter-cultural connection and engagement. The barrier to this is the siloed way in which council operates, including planning and the allocation of budgets, with each local board influencing the way the libraries in its area operate.

The Chinese themselves have lots of ideas: giving free cooking classes, taking cultural groups into schools, creating a community food garden. But without access to funding and a social platform that enables them to take a leadership role, they have limited agency.

Central and local government may have frameworks to guide policy making and institutional operations, but research is required on bridging the gap between political intentions and the current effectiveness of policy implementation in the community.

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Biographical Note

Following a high profile career as a designer, Ann undertook doctoral research in the sociology of the arts. After graduating she acted as arts planning consultant for Auckland Council and undertook a variety of projects for Jasmx, including Joint Creative Director of an entry submitted to represent Aotearoa New Zealand at 2016 Venice Architecture Biennale. Ann developed her own research programme on Auckland’s creative economy under the title SUPERSTUDIO and founded StoryClub as a creative platform for social capital building.

Ann is dedicated to creating deeper, more meaningful connections within the community through place, sharing and understanding each others’ cultures and social justice. She is passionate about the arts and how these aspects of human activity can be both wonderful in themselves and catalyze transformative processes in the community to enrich our ideas of shared identities and destinies.

