

Labour and Enterprise: Cantonese farming, work and environmental change in rural Aotearoa New Zealand, 1860s–1914



THIS ARTICLE EXAMINES Cantonese merchants and workers in rural Aotearoa New Zealand in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It builds on our already relatively extensive knowledge of Cantonese market gardening to consider some of the other ways in which Chinese were involved in the rural sector in New Zealand.¹ Chinese dominated market gardening across the country by the later decades of the nineteenth century, a dominance that extended well into the twentieth century, but a focus on this activity alone can obscure the variety of rural work in which Chinese engaged in Aotearoa. To present a better-rounded picture of Chinese activities in rural New Zealand, I present detailed case studies of Chinese rural entrepreneurs involved in tobacco growing, dairying and plantations. I also consider the role of Cantonese as labourers – both seasonal and permanent – on European-owned farms and on major rural infrastructure projects. Here, I showcase Cantonese working in rural Aotearoa as navvies, or labouring on railways, roads and waterworks. Before discussing these activities, I first overview Chinese migration to New Zealand and discuss prominent occupations within this group.

I use the term Cantonese for two primary reasons. The subject of my study is the first wave of migrants who came from China to New Zealand in the nineteenth century. Other than a handful from Fujian and possibly elsewhere, the majority of this first and second generation of migrants hailed from the Pearl River Delta in Canton Province, modern-day Guangdong. While belonging to the Chinese Empire, Canton and its people were both a distinct and a distinctive part of the empire. This region, as Robert B. Marks, David Faure and others have shown, developed a clear identity, based around place, kin and language, the last further differentiated by dialect. Environmentally, too, it was distinctive, differing from the wheat-growing north. In the rice-growing south, farmers in Canton enjoyed a remarkably fertile environment which supported the harvesting of multiple crops, and as many as three harvests a year in some places.² Where people came from is important, since the Cantonese in New Zealand continued to maintain strong connections with their homeland, through chain migration, as well as flows of capital and information.³ They were able to do this thanks to the proximity

of Hong Kong as an international port.⁴ Canton–New Zealand links furthered still others, such as the establishment of the Canton Villages Mission, which saw an over-50-year medical mission to one of the home districts of the New Zealand Cantonese.

Historiography

This article makes several historiographical contributions. First, it extends scholarly understandings of Aotearoa's environmental and rural histories. While scholarship on European — and to a much lesser extent Māori — environmental history is now quite extensive and sophisticated, aside from work on market gardening, no one has considered in detail the role of Chinese in the rural or environmental history of New Zealand.⁵ Indeed, this particular study forms part of a much broader project on Chinese environmental history in the Pacific that is revealing the extent and significance of Chinese environmental activities (in market gardening and plantation agriculture), actions (in introducing new plants and agricultural practices), views (including fengshui) and health (as vectors of disease, healers and in the sanitary revolution).

Second, the article contributes to historical studies of rural entrepreneurship. Until the recent publication of Jenny Sew Hoy Agnew and Trevor Gordon Agnew's study of the Dunedin merchant Choie Sew Hoy (1836–1901), Chinese had been mentioned only in passing, if at all, in studies of colonial rural enterprise. The only sustained treatment of such individuals is found in the general history of Otago Chinese by James Ng.⁶ The relative neglect of Cantonese in rural Aotearoa contrasts with scholarship overseas, as well as on what became one of its de-facto colonies, Western Sāmoa (1914–1962), in which just over 2000 Chinese were labouring on plantations when New Zealand took over control of the island in 1914.⁷ In the United States, since the publication of Sucheng Chan's *This Bitter Sweet Soil* (1986), a burgeoning scholarship has focused on the experience of Chinese in rural United States.⁸ The same is also true of Australia. There, for example, Warwick Frost's pioneering work has discussed the role of Chinese farmers, while Barry McGowan has considered Chinese in rural America and Australia.⁹ Similarly, other work has demonstrated the dominance of Chinese in certain rural industries, such as the banana trade, fishing and plantations.¹⁰

Third, the article extends what might be characterized as the second generation of historical scholarship on Chinese in Aotearoa New Zealand. This was pioneered with overviews of the Chinese sojourner experience,¹¹ followed by more detailed studies of Chinese social history. Examples of these early works on the sojourner experience include James Ng's studies

of Otago Chinese, Nigel Murphy's examination of Chinese poll tax payers, Manying Ip's work on migration, and a handful of doctoral dissertations.¹² This body of scholarship, as John Stenhouse and Brian Moloughney observe, largely focuses on settler racism towards Chinese, especially its institutional aspects.¹³ More recent historical work has built on this earlier foundation to present broader studies of Chinese at a national (Stevan Eldred-Grigg) and regional level (Julie Bradshaw).¹⁴ A biographical approach also highlights the role of individual Chinese and examines prominent industries in which Chinese worked, such as mining, market gardening and laundries.¹⁵ The Chinese Poll Tax Heritage Trust has commissioned a range of popular works on aspects of Chinese history, including social histories of Chinese laundries and market gardening. Still other works on Chinese history are planned in this series.¹⁶ Further scholarship will help to place Chinese history in the mainstream of Aotearoa New Zealand historiography, while also connecting it with global studies of Chinese migration. This newer scholarship includes James Ng's three-volume family history of migration and settlement in New Zealand and the work by archaeologist Richard Walter, Dylan Gaffney and me on Lawrence Chinese Camp. It is heartening, then, that scholars are beginning to take up Tony Ballantyne and Brian Moloughney's call to put Asia back into Aotearoa, but much still remains to be done.¹⁷

This is especially so for Cantonese in rural New Zealand. We know remarkably little of Chinese activities in rural New Zealand, beyond their role in the high-profile activities of goldmining, market gardening and laundry ownership. We simply do not have the level of detail of their lives in rural areas we have for urban centres, as exemplified by studies such as Lynette Shum's fine social history of Haining Street, Wellington.¹⁸

To tell the forgotten story of Cantonese in rural enterprises and environmental change, I have relied on a range of sources. This includes primary material provided by missionary accounts and other eyewitnesses, published newspaper sources and official documents, as well as material culture, including photographs and other objects. Diaries and published articles by the Presbyterian missionary Alexander Don, as well as those by the catechists Timothy Fay Loie and William Chan and the missionary William McNeur, are especially valuable sources on Cantonese in rural Murihiku, where the majority of nineteenth-century Cantonese lived and worked. These sources provide long-term, detailed information on Chinese, dating from the early 1870s to the 1920s, as a result of the Presbyterian Church of Otago's ministry to the Chinese. Another important source of information is the roll of the Chinese kept by Don, which records 3628 Chinese people in New Zealand, including potted biographical information on each.¹⁹ The roll records Chinese

throughout New Zealand, although the focus is on the mission work Don and others undertook in Otago, Southland and Westland. The long-run missionary diaries, combined with Don's roll, provide an insight into the lives of the Cantonese in New Zealand.

In this article, I have endeavoured, where possible, to provide Chinese names for the individuals I discuss. This has not always been possible, for a myriad of reasons.²⁰ Where I cannot ascertain Chinese names, I have left the orthography as it was originally; similarly, for historical figures, such as Chew Chong, I have left the spelling now commonly associated with their name. Where I can find Chinese names, I use Yale Romanization of Cantonese. Given the scattered source material, I have adopted a case-study approach, which, because of the period examined (1860s–1914) and the predominance during that period of the Chinese in one particular region, means I focus on southern New Zealand. Rather than presenting a comprehensive overview of the field, this article uses case studies to suggest ways of approaching a new topic.

Part 1: Chinese in New Zealand

Organized Cantonese immigration to Aotearoa commenced in the mid-1860s. In 1865, Cantonese goldminers based in Australia received an invitation from Otago authorities to work the region's goldfields. Otago leaders sought extra miners to prolong the mining boom, which had begun in 1861 near Tuapeka (Lawrence), but which now gave signs of faltering, as European miners were leaving for other goldfields in New Zealand and overseas. The first group of Chinese came from the Australian colony of Victoria. In the main they were men from Four Counties, southwest of the city of Canton and, to a lesser extent, Three Counties, nearer to and north of Canton. This changed by the next decade, with the arrival of many more men from Three Counties directly from China.²¹ These newcomers brought their own migrant networks to New Zealand, making 'extensive and effective use of legal structures, financial systems, and the availability of land and other resources' of the host country.²² As Madeline Y. Hsu observes, Chinese 'actively pursued the opportunities offered by the ever-quickenning spread of capitalism in the form of thickening webs of international trade, steadily improving transportation and communications technology, and the ... job opportunities in colonial economies throughout the world'.²³

Most Chinese arrived in Otago between 1865 and the 1880s, whereupon Westland became the main entry point, a reflection of the importance of its goldrush.²⁴ Otago had by far the largest population of Chinese in the colony in the nineteenth century, with 3715 in 1871, some 4200 by 1872 and 3451 in

1881.²⁵ In the late 1870s and 1880s, mining started to decline as the primary occupation for Chinese (Table 1). Chinese moved away from mining because they could not afford the new equipment required to obtain gold. The beginnings of the Long Depression (late 1870s to early 1890s) and the abolition of the provincial government system increased anti-Chinese sentiment, manifested in racially exclusionary laws from 1881. A series of poll taxes limited numbers of Chinese arrivals, as did tonnage restrictions per Chinese migrant. The poll taxes became increasingly draconian; for example, it increased from £10 per head in 1881 to £100 per head in 1896. Accompanying these taxes were a series of other, specifically anti-Chinese laws, encouraged especially by the Liberal Party under Richard Seddon.²⁶ As a consequence, the numbers of Cantonese in the colony dropped considerably. As well as a decline in population and a drift away from the goldfields, there was a corresponding move to urban areas, such that by the twentieth century Wellington had become Aotearoa New Zealand’s main centre of Chinese population.

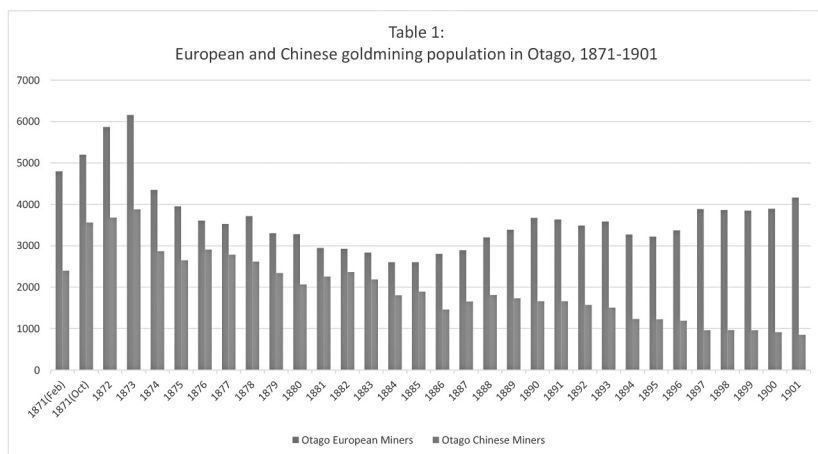


Table 1: Otago’s European and Chinese goldmining population, 1871–1902.

Source: Drawn from information supplied in ‘Table 1—Number of Chinese Goldminers in Otago’, in James Ng, *Windows on a Chinese Past ...*, vol. 1, Otago Heritage Books, Dunedin, 1993, p.156.

Part 2: Rural Entrepreneurs: Tobacco Growing, Dairying and Plantations

As historian James Ng observes, there were a number of Chinese merchants — big and small — operating in New Zealand.²⁷ These men had considerable connections back to Canton, but they also had networks into Australia and the Pacific, and were able to navigate their way skillfully in both colonial and

Chinese worlds. A significant example of Sino-colonial investment was the floating of the Sew Hoy Big Beach Gold Mining Company by Choi Sew Hoy, which received considerable backing from European investors.²⁸

Many other examples exist of Chinese enterprise in rural New Zealand. In 1871, the Wakatipu district of Central Otago had a Chinese population estimated at 1800, alongside 1300 Europeans.²⁹ A buoyant economy provided a basis for two Queenstown storekeepers, Hang Long and Ah Quie, to invest in the commercial cultivation of tobacco in Otago. Both men had clearly identified the financial advantages given to New Zealand growers of the leaf by the 1879 Tobacco Act, which reduced excise duty on domestically grown tobacco. In 1883, Hang Long and Ah Quie began leasing 18 acres of land from Herman Arndt at Thurlby Domain, Speargrass Flat (between Arrowtown and Queenstown). The *Otago Witness* indicates that they received widespread support for this venture from Arndt as well as the local community: 'The Chinamen are to be commended for the perseverance they have displayed in their trial, and it is to be hoped that they will succeed in growing a marketable article. Mr Arndt is taking a considerable interest in the experiment, and assists it in every way he can.'³⁰

According to a local historian, by the time the Cantonese men began working on the land, the property was being leased by an ex-India colonel, who also was reportedly employing Indian servants.³¹ This is a reminder of the consequences of New Zealand being part of the polyglot, multi-racial British Empire, such that Chinese could find themselves working alongside Indians in frontier, goldmining areas like Queenstown.³²

Tobacco growing required considerable investment and effort, as demonstrated by a description of the infrastructure required to successfully grow, dry and prepare tobacco for commercial manufacture. The Chinese storekeepers, noted the *Otago Witness*,

have erected large huts and sheds for the accommodation of the men and the tobacco, and the frames (of which there are several hundreds) and other appliances must have cost a considerable amount of money and as many as seven men have been engaged during the busy season. All this shows that the experiment has not been made in a half-hearted manner, and also indicates the importance of such an industry.³³

The quotation suggests the investors either knew the industry well or had brought in experts who knew how to grow the crop. Based on a later example discussed below, it is entirely possible that they had introduced Cantonese with expertise in tobacco growing for this enterprise.

Chinese experience with tobacco cultivation had developed with the introduction of New World crops into China which, coupled with economic changes, helped revolutionize post-seventeenth-century agriculture in the Qing Empire (1644–1912). Carol Benedict summarizes its significance: ‘By the 1750s, tobacco had become an important commercial crop not only for many local Chinese communities but also for the broader Qing political economy. It served as a revenue source for the government and provided a livelihood for millions.’³⁴

Tobacco was grown extensively in the Pearl River delta of southern China, so it is highly likely that both Hang Long and Ah Quie knew about the enterprise or had even been engaged in it in China.³⁵ Despite their efforts, local newspapers reported on the venture’s failure, owing to wet weather spoiling the tobacco leaf.

Despite losing about some £1000 in the failed venture, Hang Long persisted with tobacco growing in New Zealand. In the mid-1880s he invested in another venture in partnership with Lawrence entrepreneur Sam Yeck Mong (1847–1901). The latter was a well-known storekeeper and one of only 20 Chinese to have bought property in New Zealand at this time.³⁶ At Lawrence, the two men rented 20 acres of land and brought into the country a specialist Chinese tobacco grower from Australia to oversee the harvest.³⁷ Chinese skills in tobacco growing were recognized in colonial society; in 1882, a correspondent to the *Waikato Times*, for example, praised Chinese methods of clearing, manuring and watering tobacco plants as worthy of European emulation.³⁸

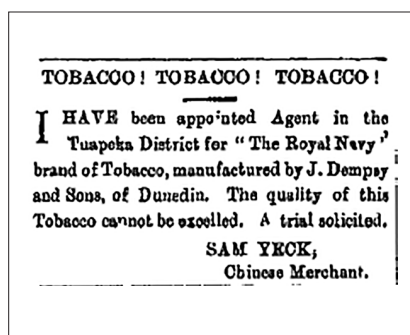


Figure 1: Advertisement for the tobacco produced in Lawrence by Hang Long and Sam Yeck Mong.

Source: *Tuapeka Times*, 14 May 1887, p.2.

Hang Long and Sam Yeck Mong invested heavily in the enterprise. They bought drying racks, erected a drying house and various other buildings, and employed numerous Chinese men at harvest time. They also set up a production centre — Wong Sing's Tobacco Manufactory—in Walker Street, Dunedin, to produce cigarettes from Lawrence tobacco leaf. Both men also paid careful attention to the marketing of their product. Sensing a change in sentiment towards Chinese, they cannily targeted a European market through the cigarette's branding: they sold 'Royal Navy' cigarettes, advertised as being produced by 'Messers. J. Dempsey and Sons' (Figure 1). They also employed a European 'sleeping partner' to front the business. Perhaps mindful of the growing criticism of cheap Chinese labour by the nascent labour movement, Hang Long and Sam Yeck Mong also employed only white labour in their Walker Street manufactory. Their early endeavours seem to have been largely successful, with the *Tuapeka Times* noting that: 'The tobacco manufactured in Dunedin by Messrs J. Dempsey and Sons is meeting with considerable favour in this district. It is pronounced a really excellent article by smokers. Sam Yeck has been appointed agent for the weed in this district [Tuapeka].'³⁹

The pronouncement of the *Tuapeka Times* proved premature, however. Hang Long's second venture also failed. On this occasion, it was not due to the weather but to changed government policy. Under an amendment to the original Tobacco Act, the government imposed an additional (£1/6s.) excise duty on New Zealand-produced tobacco. In one stroke this measure removed the cigarette's primary advantage — its cheapness — and spelled an end to this venture and others like it. Hang Long lost around £1500 and declared bankruptcy in 1894; Sam Yeck Mong lost £1000.⁴⁰

How many other Chinese were involved in tobacco growing, or worked as farmers in New Zealand in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries? In 1886, seven Chinese were listed as hop growers, but census categories then changed, and that occupation was no longer listed. As well as Hang Long and his associates, we have details of Chan Dah Chee 陳達枝 (1851–1930, commonly known as Ah Chee). Ah Chee is best known today as a leading Auckland market gardener, restaurant and fruit-shop owner.⁴¹ He developed a tobacco farm at Mangere in the late 1880s in partnership with S.G. Macrae, raising the crop on 19 acres of Macrae's land. The Tobacco Company guaranteed purchase of the crop, reported as 'a splendid one' by a newspaper in 1889.⁴² In 1890 Ah Chee advertised for tenders to three tobacco and curing sheds.⁴³ The operation was still going in 1891, but I can glean little after this date, and presumably the venture ceased.

In the meantime, Ah Chee was extending his business interests into other rural enterprises, notably overseas fruit growing. Somewhere between 1906 and 1910, Ah Chee charged his nephew, Sai Louie, with developing banana and ginger plantations in Fiji, with Ah Chee selling the tropical fruit in his New Zealand shops. In 1910, trading as Kwong Hop, he developed a ginger preserving plant at Rutland Street, Auckland, employing local women as well as, it seems, Chinese, whose poll tax and living expenses he would cover.⁴⁴ He then sold preserved ginger in New Zealand and China.⁴⁵ As well, Ah Chee invested in sheep farming and developed a poultry farm in Avondale, Auckland, on land he owned. As Ruth Lam and Lily Lee note, Ah Chee also ‘adopted the technology of egg incubators, which had been recently introduced into New Zealand’.⁴⁶

Although Ah Chee initially profited from market gardening, it was the collection of fungus which served as a mainstay of his business, as well as the businesses of many other Cantonese merchants. (Chinese usage of *Auricularia polytricha*, which grows in abundance in New Zealand’s forests, was mainly culinary.⁴⁷) The considerable profits from this enterprise enabled Ah Chee to ‘expand his operations’ in New Zealand, including into parts of Taranaki, where this particular enterprise transformed rural economies and environments.⁴⁸

Presumably, Ah Chee was one of the three Chinese farmers recorded in the 1911 Census. Frustratingly, until 1891, New Zealand’s census placed market gardening and farming in the same category, so we do not know exactly the number of Chinese farmers working in the country. Regardless, it was likely to be low. In 1891 and 1896 respectively, two and three Chinese were listed under the category ‘farmer’ (and three in 1911, when that category re-appears). The earliest Cantonese farmer in Aotearoa is probably Appo Hocton (c.1823–1920), who arrived in Nelson in 1842 and was naturalized in 1852.⁴⁹ He operated a carting business with his son, and in 1876 he purchased and ran a 485-acre farm near Motueka. After clearing the bush, he ran sheep and cattle on it, as well as developing hops.⁵⁰

Chew Chong (週 詳c.1830–1920)⁵¹ ended up pioneering dairy farming in South Taranaki, but he began by developing another industry entirely. Chew Chong identified the *Auricularia polytricha* as a potentially exportable commodity growing in abundance in Taranaki’s forests, especially on tawa, puketea and mahoe. Chew Chong’s demand for the fungus kick-started the local economy and laid the basis for the transformation of the forest to pastureland. Until Chew Chong’s arrival, reflected the *Fielding Star* of 1911, ‘settlers lived by a system of barter’ and ‘but for the fungus’, many ‘would

have had ruin staring them in the face'.⁵² Māori, in particular, benefitted from its collection, as recognized in the honorary title local Māori bestowed on Chew Chong in the early twentieth century. Chew Chong secured markets in China and sent his first shipment there in 1872 via Sydney. Within a short time, the industry was booming, and he became a wealthy man. As 'the Fungus King of New Zealand',⁵³ Chew Chong pioneered an industry which was largely sustainable, so long as the forest remained.⁵⁴

Chew Chong invested profits made from the edible fungus trade into pioneering the dairy industry in South Taranaki, even though it was left to later co-operative farms to implement on a larger scale the advances he had made. By the late 1880s, Chew Chong had invested thousands of pounds of profit from his fungus export business and shops into building three butter factories in South Taranaki. In the 1890s, he opened four creameries. (Creameries processed milk and served as holding centres of milk for their later transshipment to butter factories.) Chew Chong's creameries operated as bridgeheads of development; as areas of forest were cleared and developed into pastureland, so creameries were often converted to butter factories.⁵⁵ Heavy investment in the latest technological innovations enabled Chew Chong to produce high-quality butter and to get it to market quickly. For his Jubilee Butter Factory (Figure 2), Chew Chong imported a lever butter-worker and two Danish cream separators, each capable of processing 150 gallons of milk an hour.⁵⁶ In addition, he used and patented a new type of air cooler and butter churn, which he developed himself.⁵⁷ He also kept abreast of the latest technological developments; to speed up production, he installed a steam engine and Hall's refrigerating machine, 'probably the first freezing machine in a New Zealand butter factory'.⁵⁸ Another key component of Chew Chong's success depended on his control of milk production and sale. He introduced a key innovation — now characteristic of all modern dairy farming — of sharemilking to ensure a regular supply of milk, and he kept a herd of 200 head. The other components of his success relied on situating factories near railways which linked to ports and connected produce with overseas markets.⁵⁹



Figure 2: Although modest, Chew Chong's Jubilee Butter Factory revolutionized dairy production through its use of the very latest technology and such innovations as sharemilking.

Note, too, the use of wire fencing in the paddocks in the foreground.

Source: Reproduced with permission from Puke Ariki: William Ashburne Lightbourne, *Jubilee Factory, Eltham* (1880–1900), Collection of Puke Ariki, New Plymouth, PHO2011-2273.

Cantonese entrepreneurs tapped into Chinese, New Zealand and overseas markets, investment opportunities and labour. Just as Ah Chee went into business with Macrae and Hang Long relied on the support of Arndt, so they both also utilized Chinese markets to export fungus while also relying on local labour supplies and resources to secure their product. Their enterprises were trans-local, relying on local suppliers and local and overseas backers, as well as on local traders in Sydney and in Canton, to sell their products. At times — as with the development of Ah Chee's Fiji plantations — these networks connected Pacific resources, people and markets.⁶⁰

Typically, these were family enterprises. For example, Ah Chee's wife Joong Chew Lee — literate in Chinese and English — oversaw his business transactions; Sai Louie, his nephew, established his Fijian business arm, and various other family members worked in the enterprise. These entrepreneurs also were mindful of the shifting political winds buffeting Chinese in 1880s and 1890s New Zealand, and cannily adapted their product to a settler market. As noted above, Hang Long and Sam Yeck Mong marketed their tobacco under a European name, making sure to emphasize the white-only

staff employed in their tobacco manufactory, while Ah Chee also employed young European women at his Kwong Hop plant.⁶¹ And, of course, Chew Chong marketed his product under the patriotic title, 'Jubilee Butter'.

Part 3: Rural Workers

What, then, of the Chinese who laboured on farms and in other direct and indirect agricultural pursuits? By the 1870s mixed-crop-livestock farming, as John E. Martin shows, was coming to dominate the downs and coastal lowlands of Canterbury, Otago and Southland. Pushed out by mixed-crop-livestock farms, extensive pastoralism was retreating to the highlands. Murihiku's developing lowland and downs farms required a considerable labour force, not just at harvest-time, but also to undertake ploughing, sowing, threshing and other general farm work at other times of the year.⁶² As an example, rural labourer N. Robson recalled that at peak time in 1880 the station at Teviot at which he worked employed as many as 200 men. As well as the seasonal workers, there was an impressive list of permanent employees — 'yearly men,' as they were known: 'sub-manager, clerk, groom, ploughman, gardener, cowman, fencer, carpenter, puntman, and cook, with the head shepherd and five others ... employed all the year round'.⁶³ By this decade, as noted, with gold becoming harder to obtain using basic alluvial mining techniques, many Chinese were also looking for other forms of employment.

In rural areas, this involved both seasonal and longer-term work on farms and stations. As the missionary Don noted in 1906–1907, '[m]any of the Otago miners eke out their scanty gold earnings by turnip-thinning, gorse-cutting, drain-digging, and such work for the European farmers'.⁶⁴ Table 2 shows that, aside from miners and market gardeners, between 1874 and 1911 by far the greatest number of rural Chinese recorded in censuses were employed on farms and stations as servants, gardeners and labourers. As the *Otago Witness* observed in 1884: 'When a farmer wants labourers he may meet with a couple of Chinamen any day by driving into a township; and a comical sight it is to see the farmer, leaving for home with the two Celestials seated on the hind seat of the buggy, chattering to each other and as happy as two princes'.⁶⁵

One of several larger stations to employ Chinese, Kyeburn — in the Maniototo — records employing 'Kim Lung; Lee Kim; Peter the Chinaman — December 1884 — March 1885'.⁶⁶ Often, however, Chinese are not recorded, even if they were employed. This was especially the case into the 1880s because growing anti-Chinese sentiment made visible employment of Chinese difficult on many farms and stations. Even so, census figures indicate that several dozen Chinese continued to work on farms and stations from the 1880s and into the new century (Table 2).

Year	gold miners	hop growers	gardener on station	cane/water rice	waterworks labourers	waterworks cutters	miner/gardener	grocery butcher	farm manager	cook on station or farm	landowner	engaged in pastoral pursuits	farm, station servants, labourers (excl market gardeners)
1874	4005				6136	8267		10398	12529				
1878	1397												548
1881	3058												60
1886	3115	7	4						13	1			42*
1891	3025					1	2	90	1				45
1896	2162						3	205	14				24
1901	1313							186	14				51
1906	612							224	7				38
1911	416			4			3	376	1	4			63
1916	130				6							21	

Year	Cultivator	tailor	other connected with agriculture	gardener labourer and assistant	shepherd	wool stapler	labourer	road railway labourer, navy	wool sorter	gardener (non domestic servant)	fisherman	chalmers etc etc	factory/market gardener	market gardener, gardener	grazier/husband	other	TOTAL
1874				25			99		39	4		43					4816
1878			24			1	135	58	172	2	2	83		2			4433
1881		33	2				77	2	95	15	10	288				171	4447
1886		20					55	8	340	8		284			6	639	4542
1891		4			41		74		562	12	25				1		4444
1896		7					59										3715
1901		25			1		48	2	16	24		640					2857
1906		21					105			5		791					2570
1911			1				43			2	7	943			1		2630
1916							43	3		11							2147

Table 2: Chinese occupations by census, 1874-1911.

Source: Compiled from 1874-1911 censuses. Note, the category ‘rural worker’ includes the following census listings: hop grower, gardener on station, farmer, farm manager, farm and station servant, shepherd, farm or station gardener, rabbitier, wool stapler, grubber, fencer.

The journals of the missionaries Alexander Don and George McNeur contain many descriptions and mentions of Chinese rural labourers. Chinese rural labourers also appear in the roll Don kept of the Chinese he encountered from 1883 to 1913, when he undertook annual mission work to Chinese in Otago and Southland (and occasionally the West Coast and Canterbury). The majority of the 700 or so occupations mentioned in Don’s roll between 1896 and 1913, note Brian Moloughney, Tony Ballantyne and David Hood, comprised market gardeners (52%), followed by laundry (22%) and shop work (18%). Only some 3% came from other occupational categories.⁶⁷

In 1897 at Tuapeka Mouth, Don noted the words of a European farmer who had employed a Chinese man for the past 15 harvests: ‘I will pit him against any white man to build a load on rough ground.’ As Don observed, ‘I have yet to learn what the Chinese cannot do well if they have a mind to. Building a load of wheat sheaves in rough country is very difficult work, and certainly quite beyond home experience in the South of China; and so is butter-making. Yet we have Chinese in New Zealand supreme in both.’⁶⁸

Cantonese rural work continued into the new century, despite rising anti-Chinese sentiment. Indeed, station and farm work was often the only rural employment Cantonese could find, since by this time many councils

had banned the employment of Chinese (see below). When Don attempted to minister to Cantonese at Waikaka, Southland, in late December 1900, he found '10 of the 15 men ... away turnip-thinning'. Likewise, of Roxburgh's 21 Cantonese residents, he recorded 15 'away fencing, shearing and turnip-thinning'.⁶⁹

Nor were all Chinese just temporarily employed. In the Bannockburn area, Don encountered a man who 'was till recently working for regular wages on a sheep station'.⁷⁰ Another was working as a shepherd.⁷¹ Kyeburn Station employed two men: Ching Cong and Chu Ly for, respectively, four and three years, from 1873 to 1877 and from 1879 to 1882. The Mackenzies in the Maniototo district also relied on a Chinese contractor to arrange the hiring of larger gangs of his countrymen, as and when farming needs required.⁷² The Davidson family farm at Waikaia (formerly Switzers), northern Southland, employed Chinese off and on through the 1890s. In 1892, for example, Davidson 'made arrangements with Ah Que to work at £1 per week', promising 'him not less than two months [*sic*] work'.⁷³ Ah Que and another man, Ah Mook, worked on a range of farming activities, from removing gorse, to thinning turnips, hoeing, collecting thatch, manuring gardens and smoking rabbits. European and Chinese worked side-by-side, in pairs or individually.⁷⁴ Evidently, Davidson was satisfied with the work of both men, noting that by 2 May 1892 Ah Que had been working for him for seven weeks and three days, earning £7 and 10 shillings in that time.⁷⁵

In summer 1904, Yeung Seun Yau 楊信有 (assumed name, Ho Ging 可京) worked as a rabbitier (Figure 3).⁷⁶ Yeung typified the activities of several other rural Chinese working on inland stations. The importance of their occupation reflected the scale of the ecological and economic problems facing many uplands farms owing to the rabbit plague of the 1880s and 1890s.⁷⁷ By 1887, R. Egerton notes that rabbit-related damage had forced the abandonment of 526,000 hectares of land, 'with a consequent loss of revenue to the Crown of £32,800'.⁷⁸ As with the Mackenzies' station at Kyeburn, some Chinese rabbitiers worked in gangs, presumably with a contractor negotiating conditions with station owners. In discussing station work, Robson — introduced above for his comments on the large numbers employed on Teviot Station in 1880 — recalled 'numerous hangers-on anticipating employment, including several gangs of Chinese who had been engaged laying poison for and fumigating rabbits'.⁷⁹ Many Chinese adopted contract work, notes James Ng, to circumvent linguistic issues — with a single individual literate in both languages able to arrange work and conditions for a group body of men — as well as to provide safety in numbers.⁸⁰



Figure 3: Unnamed Chinese rabbitier, Central Otago, date unknown.

Source: ‘Unidentified European woman sites outside a stone hut, next to an Otago Chinese Rabbitier’, Kirkland collection, Presbyterian Archives of Aotearoa New Zealand, NG1.1-22.29.

Two other relatively prominent rural occupations on stations and farms for Chinese were gardening and cooking (Table 2). The 1886 census recorded for the only time the occupation of ‘gardener on station’, of which it lists four. An analysis of Don’s roll reveals far more (Table 3), as do newspapers of the time. On the 81,000-acre Otama Station, Riversdale, the *Southland Times* observed that its owner, F.W. Ibbotson, employed ‘an experienced and industrious Chinese gardener’ to oversee ‘the main attraction of the grounds’. The reporter praised the (unnamed) gardener for the variety, appearance and abundance of the vegetables he raised. The garden ‘is such a one as is seldom seen in this portion of the colony. Vegetables of almost every conceivable kind and of uniformly excellent quality are there abundantly to be seen, and the attention they receive at the hands of their painstaking cultivator is shown by their grand development and fine general appearance.’⁸¹

As well as gardening, around a dozen Chinese were found working as cooks on stations and farms in each census between 1886 and 1901 (Table 2). At Herbert Station, near Kelso, missionary G.H. McNeur ‘met some Chinese — three working in the shearing shed & one as cook’.⁸² On the same 1900–1901 trip, McNeur ‘visited the two Chinese cooks’ at Ashley Downs Station.⁸³ As well as cooks, some Chinese found employment as servants on farmsteads and stations. Redcastle runholder John McLean, himself a self-made man

from a poor background and so perhaps appreciative of the circumstances of the many Chinese in New Zealand, had the following epitaph written of his Chinese servant: 'To the memory of Fan So, a native of China, died October 3, 1885, who was for thirty-three years, the faithful servant of John Maclean of Redcastle, Oamaru.'⁸⁴

In addition to direct work on farms and stations as rabbiters, cooks, chefs, shepherds and the like, Chinese also contributed to the development of rural infrastructure, through the building and maintenance of roads, railways and water races.⁸⁵ They also tendered for contracts, such as for the supply of timber.⁸⁶ Again, as with rabbiting and seasonal work, most Chinese tendered for railway and road-making work in groups.

Railway construction

Outside mining, the numbers of Chinese working on railway construction were much higher than in other occupations in rural areas at the time. For example, Goldfields Warden Carew reported in 1874 that 'as many as 300 have been employed at one time upon the Tokomairiro and Laurence [sic] line'. Chinese railway workers earned six-to-seven shillings per eight-hour day. This was less than Europeans, who earned nine-to-ten shillings a day. Despite these lower wages, the Commissioner commented that '[t]he Chinese are also in favour for their steady perseverance.'⁸⁷

These men would have been hired through an agent. Wellington businessman John Ah Tong was one such agent. In late 1872 Ah Tong was working for London-based Messers. Brogden & Co, who had won a significant contract to develop railways in New Zealand and was clearly willing to use Chinese labour to undertake this task. According to Ah Tong, John Brogden employed him to procure some 1000 Canontese men for railway work throughout Otago. Once they had completed the contract and 'learned the work', the intention was then to send these men to undertake railway construction in the North Island. Brogden initially directed Ah Tong to obtain Cantonese directly from China, but Ah Tong insisted that he could obtain the necessary men from the Central Otago goldfields, as well as from Victoria and New South Wales.⁸⁸ Alone, Ah Tong obtained some 116 men from Lawrence and Adam's Flat (near Milton).⁸⁹ By late November, Ah Tong had secured 200, offering '5s 6d per day... and 8s per day for skilled workmen.'⁹⁰

Brogden's decision to employ Chinese labourers worried many Europeans, but it also attracted support from individuals who regarded a labour shortage as an impediment to the development of New Zealand's infrastructure. The groundwork for Brogden's scheme had clearly been laid with the government's circular of 1872, sent to provincial superintendents

asking their opinion about the employment of Chinese labour in railway construction. Auckland's and Wellington's superintendents both supported limited use of Chinese labour. Taranaki's felt a 'limited number, say 100 to 150' could find employment, while Wellington's felt that 'contractors should be allowed to employ Chinese labour to a limited extent'. Neither the superintendent of Canterbury nor the chair of Westland's County Council supported their employment.⁹¹ In response to criticism of the scheme, the government issued 'an official disclaimer ... of any participation in the Minister for Public Works proposal to employ Chinese labor [sic] on the railways'. This, claimed the *Lake County Press* in 1872, 'tended in a great measure to allay the discontent manifested by the industrial classes'.⁹² The *Press*'s assessment was premature. Alongside support for the employment of Chinese labour on railways, criticism appeared in letters to the editor and in public meetings in that year and the next.⁹³

A notable omission to the circular was Otago. James Ng believes that Otago authorities chose not to respond because the province had already embarked on a scheme to use Chinese labour. Not only that, but he conjectures that the arrival of seven shiploads of over 2000 Chinese between February 1871 and 1872 was directly connected to a plan to use them as labour for infrastructure projects.⁹⁴

Whatever the case, Cantonese railway work not only piqued Europeans but also some Chinese. In January 1873, Ah Foo took John Ah Tong to court, claiming he and his countrymen had not received wages owed to them for employment on railway construction near Milton. Ah Foo and other workers had gone on strike in early 1873 in response.⁹⁵ The court case, including matters leading up to it, is less interesting in its outcome (which found that there was no misunderstanding between the plaintiff and defendant) than it is in the insight it gives into the conditions and processes under which Chinese worked on railway contracts in New Zealand. During the hearing, Ah Tong related that he advertised for work by placing Chinese language placards around Otago, as well in his shop. Ah Tong's verbal agreement with Brogden, Ah Tong explained, required him to obtain workers for Otago and then arrange their passages to Wellington and other North Island centres for work on the railways. The plan was for Brogden 'to purchase a steamer to take men from place to place', he noted, charging them the passage in instalments deducted from their weekly pay.⁹⁶ As to conditions, Ah Tong related that, for a small sum, the Cantonese railway workers near Milton paid for a European doctor to attend to them, if required.⁹⁷ Ah Tong also leased five acres of land on a ten-year lease, presumably, as historian Charles Sedgwick notes, as a garden 'to supply the railway workers'.⁹⁸

Despite the controversy surrounding their employment, Cantonese continued to find work on railways in the 1870s. As the *Daily Southern Cross* explained, '[t]he Great Pacific Railway was made principally by means of Chinese cheap labour, and contractors in this colony are beginning to perceive the advantages offered by the industrious Celestials'.⁹⁹ As well as the several hundred in employment mentioned earlier, in 1875 there are records of 50 Chinese working as sub-contractors on the Waitahuna–Lawrence line.¹⁰⁰ Cantonese navvies also laboured on 'sections of the South Island main trunk railway between Sawyers Bay and Waitati in 1874–75', near Dunedin.¹⁰¹ In June 1876, a Wellington contractor, Oaken, brought the 60 Cantonese navvies latterly employed on the Sawyers Bay–Waitati line to Wellington to work on North Island railway construction.¹⁰² I am confident that further research will reveal many hundreds more.

Opportunities started to diminish for Cantonese in public employment with the onset of the Long Depression in the late 1870s. Competition from out-of-work Europeans, coupled with rising nationalism and the loss of protection afforded to Otago-based Chinese with the abolition of the provincial system, disadvantaged Cantonese. John Ah Tong captured the changing sentiment. In 1873 he stated that if he was questioned about the labourers he was employing, he was instructed to say that they were employed on piece work because, "'The Europeans may be jealous of the Chinamen being at work'".¹⁰³ Following the abolition of the provinces, many of the newly created county councils did not favour employment of Chinese on public works projects. Such bodies now represented the interests of all males, following the extension of suffrage to this group. For these recently enfranchised voters, Cantonese workers represented a threat to white employment. In response, a number of Central Otago councils officially banned Chinese from employment on public works. For example, despite the protestations of one councillor, in 1879 Maniototo County Council passed a resolution not to employ Cantonese on public works projects. The council explained 'that the Chinese were now so numerous and increasing and competing for contracts on public works' that it undermined the European labourer.¹⁰⁴ Despite such prohibitions in place in many councils, Chinese still continued to find employment on public projects, although often this meant their names went unrecorded.¹⁰⁵ In relation to changing employment opportunities, Alexander Don related a rather amusing story — apocryphal probably, but indicative of a shift of general sentiment nevertheless — of a Cantonese man renaming himself Sandy MacPherson on the grounds that it was "'no (adjective) use for anyone to tender in this (adjective) country unless he is a Scotchman.'"¹⁰⁶

Station	No. of employees
Ayrburn	4
Birchwood	1 gardener
Ardmore	5
Greenfield	6 gardeners & others
Mt Linton (Otautau)	5
Morven	5
Kindis	5
Brookdale	5
Ashley Downs	5
Linnburn	5
Puketoi	3
Edendale	15
Kawarau	4 gardeners & others
Galloway	6
Tarras	4
Mt Pisa	3
Nokomai	3
Kawarau Falls	4

Table 3: Chinese gardeners employed on European stations and farms, listed in Don's roll

Source: James Ng, *Windows on a Chinese Past: Don's 'Roll of Chinese'*, vol. 4, Otago Heritage Books, Dunedin, 1993.

Conclusion

When we come to write Cantonese back into the rural history of New Zealand, we might do well to consider that the majority were country folk from the Pearl River Delta. Like Wong Kim Toi, most had worked on farms.¹⁰⁷ And like Kong San Fong, they sought to use money made in New Zealand to purchase property in China. Kong himself aimed to make £200 — enough, he believed, to enable him to purchase about two acres of land and get married again.¹⁰⁸ The story of Wong and Kong — and their countrymen and women — deserves its place in the historiography of rural Aotearoa.

This article has attempted to start that process of rehabilitation, through highlighting the activities of Cantonese entrepreneurs and labourers in rural Aotearoa New Zealand. The article has outlined the broad range of rural activities in which Cantonese were involved, from pioneering the tobacco industry in Central Otago and developing dairying in South Taranaki, to harvesting wheat and catching rabbits. While clearly linguistic and cultural barriers remained — as witnessed by the practice of tendering for rural contracts in groups — the present work reveals the extent to which Cantonese were not only a visible part of rural Murihiku in the nineteenth century but also integrated into settler farming life and practices, through regular and semi-regular employment on farms, roading projects or railway building. Notwithstanding racism, some Cantonese, such as Ah Chee and Chew Chong, took the initiative to develop new industries in Aotearoa, often connecting local places and products in New Zealand with local consumers in China or elsewhere. Even the poor chef — who explained to Don in 1908 the reason why he relocated to Central Otago — made a conscious decision on where to live and work: ‘I got £30 a year [at Dunedin] and my keep; but I had only the backyard fence to look at. Here [at Cromwell] the great river is at my door with high hills beyond and around. I would rather be here without the £30.’¹⁰⁹

Further work will be needed to reveal the sinews of people, information, capital and products connecting Aotearoa to merchants in Sydney and elsewhere in the Pacific, as well as Hong Kong and China. Biography and studies of particular businesses will hopefully uncover more on such topics, including on Chinese business operations with Europeans. Environmental historians also need to examine the environmental views and traditions Chinese brought with them to Aotearoa. They will hopefully reveal how Cantonese deployed traditional concepts to frame and understand New Zealand’s environment but also to situate their own activities in relation to very different environments.¹¹⁰ Examining fengshui practices, for example,

can supplement existing work on Chinese religious systems, practices and beliefs, and their role in animating the supernatural and natural in Aotearoa.¹¹¹ Works on these topics — and others — will help to put Cantonese back into the historiography of rural Aotearoa, and demonstrate the variety of lives they lived outside those of the mining, market gardening and laundry industries.

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NOTES

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64 Alexander Don, 'Twenty-first Inland Otago Tour, 1907–1908', Reprinted from *The Outlook*, p.5.

65 *Otago Witness*, Supplement, 24 February 1884, p.1.

66 Kyeburn Station ledger book, private collection, no page. I thank Nick and Carol Mackenzie for giving me access to this source.

67 Brian Moloughney, Tony Ballantyne and David Hood, 'After Gold: Reconstructing Chinese communities, 1896, 1913', in Henry Johnson and Brian Moloughney, eds, *Asia in the Making of New Zealand*, Auckland University Press, Auckland, 2006, pp.69–70.

68 Alexander Don, *Chinese Mission Work in Otago, N.Z. Annual Inland Tour 1896–97, and opening of Church*, Dunedin, J. Wilkie & Sons, Dunedin, 1897, p.46.

69 Alexander Don and G.H. McNeur, *Chinese Mission Work in Otago, N.Z. Annual Inland Tour, (1900–1901)*, Otago Daily Times, Dunedin, 1901, pp.22, 25.

70 Don and McNeur, *Chinese Mission Work in Otago*, p.38.

71 Alexander Don, 9 September 1882, cited in James Ng, *Windows on a Chinese Past*, vol. 2, note 5c, p.89.

72 Kyeburn Station ledger book, no page. The contractor was recorded as 'Lee Gin, contractor – January 1890'.

73 15 March 1892 entry, Davidson Family, Hocken Library, MS AG-523. I am indebted to the late Peter Holland for this information.

74 Note some of the following entries, for example: Davidson, 8 April 1892; 15 April 1892; 16 April 1892; 28 April 1892; 26 August 1892.

75 Davidson, 2 May 1892.

76 Alexander Don, 'Don's Roll', in James Ng, *Windows on a Chinese Past: Don's 'Roll of Chinese'*, vol.4, Otago Heritage Books, Dunedin, 1993, no 220, pp. 64–65 (p.60 of 'Don's Roll').

77 C.M. King, 'The chronology of a sad historical misjudgement: The introductions of rabbits and ferrets in nineteenth-century New Zealand', *International Review of Environmental History*, 3 No.1 (2017), pp.139–73; P. Holland and G. Figgins, 'Environmental Disturbance Triggering Infestations of Gorse, Rabbits, and Thistles in Southern New Zealand: 1850 to 1980', *International Review of Environmental History*, 1 (2015), pp.41–81. DOI: 10.22459/IREH.01.2015.03.

78 R. Egerton, 'Unconquerable enemy or bountiful resource? A new perspective on the rabbit in Central Otago,' *ENNZ: Environment and Nature in New Zealand*, 9, No.1 (2014), <http://www.environmentalhistory-au-nz.org/2014/03/unconquerable-enemy-or-bountiful-resource-a-new-perspective-on-the-rabbit-in-central-otago/> (accessed 7 May 2021).

79 Webster, *Teviot Tapestry*, p.37.

80 Ng, *Windows on a Chinese Past*, vol.1, p.228.

81 *Southland Times*, 25 May 1887, p.2.

82 McNeur Diary, 1 April 1900 to 30 Dec. 1901, Hocken Library, MS-1007-009/001. On accounts of other Chinese cooks, note for example: Anne Cook, *The Gibbston Story*, Otago Heritage Books, Dunedin, 1985, pp.50–51, who worked at Joseph and Alfred Miller's 180-hectare property 'Rathkeltair', Gibbston.

83 McNeur Diary.

84 Kindly supplied by James Ng.

85 Ng, *Windows on a Chinese Past*, vol.1, pp.228–33. Chinese railway navvies effectively opened up the American West, often working in appalling and dangerous conditions. Huang Annian, ed., *The Silent Spikes: Chinese Laborers and the Construction of North American Railroads*, trans. Zhang Juguo, China Intercontinental Press, Beijing, 2006.

86 Don Diary, 1881–3, 7 October 1882.

87 ‘The Goldfields of New Zealand (report on)’, AJHR, 1874, Session I, H–9, p.24.

88 *Bruce Herald*, 24 January 1873, p.6.

89 *Bruce Herald*, 24 January 1873, p.6.

90 *New Zealand Mail*, 23 November 1872, p.4.

91 ‘The introduction of Chinese labour into New Zealand’, AJHR, D, 12, 1872. Quote from p.2.

92 *Lake County Press*, 17 May 1872, p.3.

93 *Cromwell Argus*, 10 October 1871, p.5.

94 James Ng, pers. comm. For the figures, see Ng, *Windows*, vol.1, p.134.

95 W.J. Cowan, *Rails to Roxburgh: the story of a provincial railway*, Molyneux Press Ltd, Dunedin, 2010, p.17. See *Bruce Herald*, 7 January 1873, p.4.

96 *Bruce Herald*, 24 January 1873, p.6.

97 *Otago Witness*, 18 January 1873, p.7.

98 Sedgwick, ‘Politics of Survival’, p.105.

99 *Daily Southern Cross*, 27 July 1876, p.2. It was also highly dangerous and highly exploitative. See Gordon H. Chang and Shelley Fisher Fishkin, eds, *The Chinese and the Iron Road: Building the Transcontinental Railroad*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2019.

100 Cowan, *Rails to Roxburgh*, p.14.

101 Ian Church, *Port Chalmers and its People*, Otago Heritage Books, Dunedin, 1994, p.49.

102 *Auckland Star*, 27 June 1876, p.2.

103 *Bruce Herald*, 24 January 1873, p.6.

104 Janet C. Angus, *Maniototo Milestone: A Centennial History of the Maniototo County Council*, Maniototo County Council, Dunedin, 1977, p.22. One of the seven councillors objected to a related motion asking the government to check Chinese immigration.

105 Archivist, Central Otago District Council.

106 *Tuapeka Times*, 6 December 1873, no page, cited in Ng, *Windows*, vol.1, p.121, note 143 (1).

107 After six months’ schooling, Wong laboured on farms for 14 years, before spending ten years in Victoria and coming to Otago. Don, *The Evangelist*, vol.3, no.1.1, 1 November 1871, p.347.

108 Don Diary, 1881–3, 2 February 1883.

109 Don, *Outlook*, 23 May 1908, p.13.

110 A follow-up paper is planned on Chinese belief systems and environmental views.

111 See, Beattie, ‘Eco-cultural’.