

ENCOUNTERING  
CHINA



New Zealanders and the People's Republic

# ENCOUNTERING CHINA

Edited by  
Duncan Campbell & Brian Moloughney



MASSEY UNIVERSITY PRESS

初  
人地事  
轉

# Contents

Encountering China | 0  
*Chris Elder*

## 初 Beginnings

---

Kwan tung Guest House: Canton | 00  
*Hone Tuwhare*

Scoria, Loess, Silt: Reflections on the Human  
Geologies of South Auckland and North China | 00  
*Lewis Mayo*

Speaking Half-truth to Power | 00  
*Chris Elder*

Muldoon Meets Deng, Autumn 1980 | 000  
*Nick Bridge*

The Canton Trade Fair, 1977: Pages from a Diary | 000  
*Leo Haks*

Finding China Relationships and Myself | 000  
*James Ng*

Images for Sages | 000  
*Diana Bridge*

China, 'A Tired Old Country'?  
The Dangers of Group Thinking | 000  
*Michael Powles*

Inside China as an Outsider | 000  
*John McKinnon*

Māori Business Relationships with China | 000  
*Mavis Mullins*

## 人 People

---

A Haunted Taste | 000

*Jacob Edmond*

Finding Dr Li Lairong:

Pioneer of New Zealand–China Science Co-operation | 000

*Tony Browne*

Madame Sun Yat-sen's Apple Pie for Pudding | 000

*Mary Roberts-Schirato*

Vic Wilcox, the People's Republic of China  
and the New Zealand Communist Movement | 000

*Kerry Taylor*

Learning from Dai Qing | 000

*Pauline Keating*

Poets in Exile: Yang Lian and Gu Cheng in Auckland | 000

*Hilary Chung*

Hong Kong Revisited | 000

*John Needham*

A New Kiwi Chinese Celebrates 50 Years of Relations | 000

*Bo Li*

Where Shi Le Used to Hunt | 000

*Michael Radich*

Lost in Shanghai | 000

*Alison Wong*

## 地 Place

---

The Temples of Xi'an | 000

*Margaret T. South*

“The Earl of Zheng Overcame Duan in Yan”:

China's Past in Our Futures | 000

*Duncan Campbell*

Stages of Enlightenment | 000

*Amanda Jack*

Song Dynasty Dragon Kiln Revival | 000

*Peter Holmes*

Return to Liangzhu | 000

*Wen Chin Powles*

Reflections on Being a Foreign

Student in Shanghai in the 1980s | 000

*Rebecca Needham*

1989: Beijing Under Martial Law | 000

*Brian Moloughney*

Winter (season of baby mandarins, apples):

Spring Onion Oil Noodles 葱油拌面 | 000

*Nina Mingya Powles*

Urumchi and the World in 2004 | 000

*Joe Lawson*

Chengdu: 12 May 2008 | 000

*Andrew Wilford*

## 事 Occasion

---

Memories of a Polisher in Beijing | 000  
*Phillip Mann*

Whakawhanaungatanga | 000  
*Meng Foon*

The Poll Tax Apology and Reconciliation | 000  
*Esther Fung*

1989 Matters | 000  
*Brenda (Englefield) Sabatier*

Crossing the 'Chinese Bridge' | 000  
*Thomas Nicholls*

Where it All Started: The Class of '06 and  
the First China Field Study Course in Beijing | 000  
*Xiaoming Huang*

Poets on Yellow Mountain | 000  
*Murray Edmond*

10,000 Lights Across the City 万家灯火: Lantern Festivals  
and Their Role in New Zealand–China Relations | 000  
*James To*

Making Friends: A China Journey Spanning 30 Years | 000  
*Garth Fraser*

Revisiting China for the First Time | 000  
*Jason Young*



## 轉 Transformations

---

Crows, Ducklings and Kiwis: New Zealand in Chinese Minds | 000

*Paul Clark*

Two Decades of Development Work in West China | 000

*Dave Bromwich*

Myths of Dumplings, Business and  
International Relations: Is it Time to Demystify? | 000

*Hongzhi Gao*

Understanding Grandmother's Buddhism:  
Lessons for Respecting the Beliefs of Others in China | 000

*Amy Holmes-Tagchungdarpa*

Bridges and Rainbows:  
Teaching Chinese Students in New Zealand | 000

*Ellen Soullière*

Between Imaginaries:  
Interconnections of a Samoan New Zealander with China | 000

*Ashalyna Noa*

They Aren't Going to Take My Organs, Mum | 000

*Adam Osborne-Smith*

Middle Kingdom, Middle Earth, My Adventure | 000

*Luke Qin*

Reflections of a NZUSA Delegation Visitor, 1971 | 000

*Philip S. Morrison*

A Young China-watcher's Take on a Changing China | 000

*Alex Smith*

About the Contributors | 000

Acknowledgements | 000

Index | 000



# Encountering China

CHRIS ELDER

The fiftieth anniversary of New Zealand's establishing formal diplomatic relations with the People's Republic of China is unusual among diplomatic occasions. Most commonly, relationships between countries develop organically over time, but in this case the Joint Communiqué signed in New York on 22 December 1972 set the scene for a whole new beginning. It provided the springboard for a multifaceted relationship that has come to occupy a central place in New Zealand's external dealings, and in the perceptions and the experiences of many individual New Zealanders.

This collection sets out to provide a patchwork built up from the memories, the experiences and the emotional responses of some of those who have been caught up in different aspects of the two countries' interaction over the past 50 years. It offers 50 at 50 — 50 contributions centred on the period 1972 to 2022. The perspective it provides is a New Zealand one, leavened on occasion by the insights of those whose lives have spanned both countries. It makes no claim to be comprehensive, or

definitive in any way. It stands simply as a record of how certain people have regarded certain aspects of the relationship at one time or another in the 50 years since the establishment of relations.

It would of course be simplistic to suggest that New Zealand's links with China have sprung up only in the past 50 years. Modern research has revealed ancient DNA links back to North Asia among these islands' first inhabitants. The earliest trade contacts date back more than 200 years — not a long time in the annals of China, but pre-dating New Zealand's existence as a nation. Māori were closely involved in those early contacts, just as iwi enterprises engaged with China today are flourishing. Appropriately, *Encountering China* takes as its starting point the response of the poet Hone Tuwhare to his opportunity to come face-to-face with China as part of a Māori workers delegation in 1973, which visited within a year of recognition.

Sojourners, and later settlers, came to New Zealand from China in numbers from the time of the 1860s gold rushes. In early years, they were subject to hostility and discrimination. In this collection, James Ng takes that period as his starting point in reflecting on his family's acclimatisation, while Esther Fung provides a coda to the transgressions of many years in her account of the process leading to a formal apology for past injustices.

It is true, nonetheless, that the agreement signed in 1972 paved the way for a substantial expansion of contacts between two countries which had spent the previous 23 years largely ignoring one another's existence. It allowed the establishment of a range of official frameworks for interaction and co-operation, it provided a way forward for linkages between institutions and interest groups in the two countries, and it created the conditions that would promote familiarity and inform judgement going forward. 'If understanding between the two countries is still not all that it might be,' New Zealand's first ambassador to China grudgingly recorded at the end of his three-year term, 'it is at least better than it was.'

The New Zealand government somewhat unconvincingly sheeted home its long-delayed decision to recognise China to the fact that 'China

has now re-entered the mainstream of world affairs'. That being the case, the official announcement noted, it was 'logical and sensible for New Zealand to recognise the People's Republic of China and enter into normal relations with it'. 'Normal relations', the Joint Communiqué made plain, included establishing embassies in each other's capitals. Cash-strapped New Zealand would just as soon have left the next step in abeyance for a few years, but was brought around by China's intimation that recognition without reciprocal representation would not, in its view, amount to recognition at all.

Inevitably, this compilation includes the recollections of some who, as diplomats, worked to support New Zealand's political objectives in China. John McKinnon reviews that process from three different points in time, while Michael Powles struggles with the discovery that those supposedly better informed often are not. The relationship has been buttressed by a remarkable series of high-level visits in both directions, lending some credence to the perception that New Zealand has been seen as sufficiently small and non-threatening to provide a proving ground for senior Chinese leaders. That such visits have not been without their perils, particularly in the early days, is attested by the accounts of Chris Elder and Nick Bridge.

It is chastening to recall the level of ignorance in New Zealand about China at the time of recognition. 'One sight is worth a hundred descriptions' (百聞不如一見), according to a Chinese proverb, but not many New Zealanders had had the opportunity for even one sight. (One of the few who did, Philip Morrison, here describes a student trip in the lead-up to recognition.) People-to-people contact was largely in the hands of the small and left-leaning New Zealand China Friendship Society; party-to-party contact the preserve of Victor Wilcox and his associates in the Communist Party of New Zealand (CPNZ). Neither commanded a large hearing within New Zealand. Press reporting about China was filtered through a small coterie of Western journalists in Beijing, and a larger but not necessarily better-informed press corps in Hong Kong.

China, for its part, had not advanced much past the condition signalled in the 1602 geographical treatise *Yueling guangyi* 月令廣義, in which a world map showed an indeterminate mass roughly corresponding to New Zealand's geographical location with the notation 'few people have been to this place in the south, and no one knows what things are there'. In the early 1970s, the best authority on what things were there was to be found in the pages of the CPNZ's *People's Voice*, which, as Chinese diplomats discovered when they arrived in Wellington, was not as authoritative as all that.

---

The half-century that has passed since the establishment of a formal relationship between China and New Zealand has seen major changes in both countries. China has become confident and outward-looking in its international dealings, to the point where it has come to vie with the United States for global influence. It has accepted Deng Xiaoping's mantra that 'to grow rich is glorious', launching a programme of economic growth that has delivered a previously-unknown level of prosperity to its people and turned China into a vital engine of international economic growth. A number of the contributions reflect aspects of this process, not always without regret: 'I cannot help but feel,' notes Phillip Mann, 'that something has been lost in the mad rush for economic prosperity.'

New Zealand, for its part, has over time shifted to a worldview that brings China into much sharper focus. In 1973, just a year after this country recognised China, Britain entered the European Economic Community. New Zealand was moved a step away from the country that had traditionally provided its foreign policy lead, at the same time as it faced major constraints on access to what had always been the biggest market for its goods. Little more than a decade later, it lost its main security guarantor when the United States withdrew from co-operation

under the ANZUS Treaty. History has increasingly given way to geography, as New Zealand has sought new partnerships and new markets. China is central to that process, not just in its own right, but also because it is itself committed to building enhanced relationships with its Asian neighbours, and more distantly the islands of the Pacific, the countries that lie to its near south, and to New Zealand's near north.

In the 1970s, prospects for trade with China were not generally seen as very bright. Total two-way trade in 1972 amounted to \$8.2 million. In 1973, then Trade Minister Joe Walding urged upon his Chinese counterpart the notion that there could be a vast improvement if only everyone in China took milk in their tea, but even the genial Mr Walding was not overly hopeful. Leo Haks, an early attendee at the Canton Trade Fair, found the prospects underwhelming: 'an educational holiday with work thrown in, and very little at that'.

How things have changed. The dilemma New Zealand now faces is how to avoid overdependence on the Chinese market, which in the year to June 2021 accounted for 31 per cent of total New Zealand goods exports, while China provided 20 per cent of this country's imports. That dilemma is based on a perception that economic dependence could be used as a bargaining chip or weapon in cases of political disagreement. Other countries' experiences suggest that this is not a baseless fear. Potential overdependence is an element in the relationship that needs to be managed in a carefully considered way, but it has not so far been sufficient to diminish the attraction of a stable and lucrative trading relationship with the main economic player in our region.

Educational exchanges were an early fruit of recognition, and remain a major contributor to bilateral understanding. In New Zealand a special programme, the China Exchange Programme (CHEP), was set up in the 1970s to manage the process. Its success is reflected in the contributions in this book of a number who were its beneficiaries. CHEP allowed Mary Roberts-Schirato to eat apple pie with Rewi Alley in Beijing; it launched

Duncan Campbell on the path of scholarship that allows him to draw lessons for today's China from a text more than 2000 years old.

CHEP, and subsequent opportunities to study Chinese language and culture in-country, have most commonly been built on interest and knowledge sparked by earlier study in New Zealand. That being the case, it is all the more worrying that, at the end of 50 years, interest among New Zealand universities in providing China-related courses appears to be on the wane. Few universities now offer courses on Chinese history, and only one offers Classical Chinese. Postgraduate work in any field of Chinese studies is generally taken up only by students who are themselves from China. Looking ahead, it is hard not to be concerned that New Zealand tertiary institutions are largely failing to provide the base that will generate enthusiasm among their students to learn more about China.

To lament the predominance of Chinese students in postgraduate Chinese studies is in no way to imply criticism of their contribution. They, and all the others who have come to New Zealand from China to undertake study — all the way from basic English language courses to those working in different fields at the highest postgraduate levels — have contributed greatly to bilateral understanding. By their very presence they have helped to normalise the relationship; on their return to China, they have helped to counter the seventeenth-century complaint that 'no one knows what things are there'.

Importantly, New Zealand has been enriched over the past 50 years by those — students and others — who have chosen to take up permanent residence in New Zealand. Their presence in New Zealand has offered a window into Chinese culture, and Chinese social norms, that has done a great deal to broaden the perspective with which New Zealanders regard their giant neighbour. Bo Li has become a successful businessman who moonlights designing stamps for New Zealand Post to mark the Lunar New Year; Hongzhi Gao teaches marketing into China, while warning 'it is dangerous to be focused only on trade'.

In his contribution, former Gisborne mayor and now Race Relations



Commissioner Meng Foon describes how he has gone about building links with China: 'It's all about relationships, face-to-face.' For many New Zealanders, people-to-people relationships are the bedrock of their association with China. That is reflected in what a number of contributors have chosen to highlight: Amanda Jack, 'a goat farmer's daughter from Kaukapakapa', being tutored on the intricacies of Peking Opera; Garth Fraser, holding on to friendships even while being subjected to Cultural Revolution-style criticism for his temerity in questioning opaque financial practices at Rewi Alley's old school at Shandan.

---

There is an odd symmetry about the beginning and the end of the 50-year period. Its beginnings came at the end of a time during which New Zealand kept China at arm's length, essentially because of the United States' unwillingness to treat with it. It ends at a time when the United States and China are once again at odds, and the stand-off between the two presents a difficult balancing act for small nations such as New Zealand.

China does not always present itself in a sympathetic light. It is perceived to be heavy-handed in the way it deals with national minorities within its borders, in its administration of the 'one country, two systems' approach to Hong Kong, even in its apparent attempts to influence the behaviour of Chinese people resident outside China. At the same time, it has demonstrated a growing and at times unwarranted assertiveness in its dealings with other countries. It is a measure of the degree to which such behaviour gives rise to dismay that some potential contributors to this volume have opted not to do so, either because of their profound disagreement with aspects of Chinese policy, or because of fear of repercussions for themselves or others should they speak freely.

*Encountering China* encompasses as many points of view as there are

contributors. For Friendship Society president Dave Bromwich, it is ‘policy filtering down from Beijing’ that provides the environment for successful development work. Support for Beijing’s policies is less apparent in the contributions of Brian Moloughney and Brenda Englefield-Sabatier, both of whom write about events during the city’s time under martial law in 1989, events that in Moloughney’s experience left the ordinary people of China with ‘a sense of incomprehension, anger and sadness’. Joe Lawson describes his experience in Urumchi, ‘a city where different worlds tumbled alongside each other’. Amy Holmes-Tagchungdarpa contributes a gentle discussion of Buddhism, in particular that practised by Tibetan communities. A teacher, she places her faith in the young, who ‘often have unique talents for respecting the beliefs of others and for cultivating tolerance, benevolence and care’.

Where to from here? Tolerance and care, and perhaps benevolence as well, will be needed as New Zealand as a nation, and New Zealanders as individuals, go forward in managing a relationship that has become too complex to be capable of easy solutions, and too important to be left to chance. Jason Young, reflecting on often formulaic academic discussions, argues strongly for continued engagement in that setting: ‘we should take every opportunity to present and hear alternative views and attempt to resolve issues’. In a broader context, Alex Smith writes of the prospect of ‘uneasy personal compromise’ that has for the time being deflected her from a China career path.

There is, as Smith points out, no singular China, and no way of knowing what it will look like in the future. Michael Radich makes the same point. ‘I have long been unsure I believe in anything called “China”, but am grateful, all the same, for a life spent grappling with many things travelling under that name.’ The past 50 years have seen New Zealand launched on a path of engagement with the ‘many things’ that make up China. If the experiences of that period, reflected in the disparate contributions to this book, are no certain guide for what lies in the future, they may at least offer some context for the way ahead.

Imposing an appropriate structure on the many-sided offerings has presented a challenge. Simple chronology did not seem to meet the need, especially since many pieces range over a considerable period of time. It was perceived, however, that contributions tended to coalesce around three broad themes: people, place and occasion. These themes seemed focused enough to provide the possibility of a degree of coherence, while still being sufficiently capacious to accommodate a range of differing approaches. It was evident, too, that for many contributors the experiences described had proved transformational. Hence the adoption of a final section that might point towards an eventual arrival at some sort of resolution, without venturing to suggest what this might look like.

Throughout this anthology, the font employed for Chinese characters, whether full-form or simplified, has been standardised. In light particularly of the time period covered here, the editors have chosen, however, to respect authorial preference in terms of both the system of Romanisation used (for the names of people and places, for instance), and, more generally, of a range of other referents: China or People's Republic of China or PRC, New Zealand or Aotearoa, Chinese Communist Party (CCP) or Communist Party of China (CPC), and so on.

*Encountering China* has been put together by an editorial group composed of Pauline Keating (organiser), Duncan Campbell, Paul Clark, Chris Elder, Maria Galikowski, Brian Moloughney, James To, Andrew Wilford and Jason Young, working under the auspices of the New Zealand Contemporary China Research Centre, housed at Te Herenga Waka Victoria University of Wellington. The editors' thanks are due to all who have contributed, and to the others whose contributions have not been able to be included for reasons of space and balance.



# 初 Beginnings





In 1973, soon after the establishment of diplomatic relations with the People's Republic of China, the Communist Party of New Zealand helped organise the visit to China of a 'Māori Workers' delegation. The delegation included (from left) the trade unionists Timi Te Maipi and Willie Wilson, Hone Tuwhare, Miriama Rauhihi of the Polynesian Panthers and Tame Iti, representing Ngā Tamatoa. Like most visitors at this time, the delegation travelled to China from Hong Kong by train, and spent their first night at the famous Kwantung Guest House in Canton. TAME ITI

# Kwantung Guest House: Canton

HONE TUWHARE

All the way from the border and in the roomy  
air-conditioned train, I try sleep. Impossible:  
my neck hurts with the swivelling.

The vastness with the colours changing, banded  
geometrical and curving off, make lonely the figure  
nearby of a peasant with a black and wide-fringed  
hat, and another further away with a water buffalo.  
With my eyes seduced by the miracle of thousands of  
reclaimed *mou* of red earth burgeoning, I wondered,  
thinking in terms of a paltry million or two, where  
on earth are all the people? Expecting, I suppose,  
to see them burst from the ground like

People's Militia units with crimson flags pulsing  
in the wind. Now at day's end, I try to sift  
impressions. My sifter breaks down: the City laughs.

I'm overwhelmed by the size of my bedroom suite.  
Below my window on the second floor, and through a  
long thin island of Saliu trees, palm and decorative

shrub, I can see large chunks of coal, glinting in the rain and banked up along an eight-foot-high concrete wall. A pathway between doesn't divide, but unites the scene in an incongruous way. From the kitchen below voices of varying intensities float up human and near. I lift the phone and ask for a beer.

Canton: City of workers — and bicycles. Teeming; alive, and set firmly into a dynamic base built painfully by their heroic predecessors and revolutionary patriots.

But Canton is a city as drab as any other on a wet day: with this notable exception. There are no bill-board advertisements for Coca-Cola, Dutch Shell

And Exxon petroleum products. Instead, a poster high and as wide as a building, flaunting a brigade of coal miners surging. But night has slipped a marker

in closing the Day Book. Tiny lights burning intermittently among the leaves of the Saliu trees fade and re-appear. *What are they?*

I fight sleep remembering only the urgent bus and truck horns blurring, underlining proletarian forms and priorities. I think of Yellow Flower Hill

and the shattered bones of seventy-two revolutionary martyrs buried there. At least they sleep easier now. For I am startled by these wide-awake thought-shifts

occasioned by the newness and press of contrasts. Like the Saliu trees and black coal gleaming: visually unlike, and with thousands of years between them:

But indistinct, like fire and hammer-blow.



# Scoria, Loess, Silt: Reflections on the Human Geologies of South Auckland and North China

LEWIS MAYO

‘History is about you.’

— Richard T. Phillips, remarks in a tutorial for ‘China Since the Opium War’, University of Auckland, 1982

‘During Cambrian times the New Zealand region was part of the continental sea floor off East Gondwana and not surprisingly our trilobites and brachiopods show a very clear East Australian–East Asia relationship. Favourable ocean conditions and land–sea relations enabled these shallow-water organisms to have easy contact between these three areas, which were much closer together then. This same Australia–China affinity continues through the Palaeozoic among these shelly fossils, but the Chinese relationship gets weaker. Some barrier to migration between New Zealand and China must have been developing, and we believe that barrier to have been a widening and deepening sea as moving plates carried the two regions further apart.’

— Jack Grant-Mackie, in Graeme Stevens, Matt McGlone and Beverley McCulloch, *Prehistoric New Zealand*, Auckland: Heinemann Reed, 1988, p. 20

Five scoria cones — Māngere Mountain, Puketutu, Waitomokia, Pukeiti, Ōtuataua and Maungataketake — appear on the map of the volcanoes of the Māngere–Ihumātao district in E. J. Searle’s *City of Volcanoes: A Geology of Auckland*. To these five scoria cones geologists nowadays would add the one in Māngere Lagoon, recently restored as a part of the attempt to recover something of the local landforms broken down by quarrying and land transformation in the decades between the 1860s and the present.

The map of Māngere–Ihumātao referred to above appears in the second edition of Searle’s book, published in 1981; a year of considerable moment in the history of Aotearoa New Zealand and in my own life, where the conflicts over sporting contacts with apartheid-era South Africa precipitated more profound and public political division than in any subsequent period in the history of the country.

As it happens, 1981 was also the year in which the Chinese Communist Party and the Communist Party of New Zealand, both founded in 1921, celebrated their sixtieth anniversaries, anniversaries that took place at significant points of transition in the history of both parties. The Chinese Communist Party was for its part engaged in shifting its economic and political programme away from the class-struggle paradigm which had rhetorically dominated in the era of Mao Zedong. The Communist Party of New Zealand (CPNZ), having sided with China in the Sino–Soviet split in the early 1960s, had at that stage repudiated not only the incumbent leadership of the Communist Party of China, but the whole legacy of Maoism, which, it declared, was simply a form of ‘bourgeois nationalism’.

The first edition of Searle’s book on Auckland volcanoes was issued by Paul’s Book Arcade in 1964, the year of my birth and the year in which the same publisher brought out Hone Tuwhare’s first poetry collection, *No Ordinary Sun*. Tuwhare spent part of his childhood in Māngere in the mid-1930s, when his father was working on Chinese market gardens there, and was thus, while young, an inhabitant of the scoria, tuff, basalt and

silt landscapes that Searle's map depicts. Beginning his apprenticeship as a boiler-maker at the Ōtāhuhu railway workshops in 1939, he joined the New Zealand Communist Party in 1942. Tuwhare moved into a different segment of South Auckland's volcanic landscapes — one depicted in the map of the volcanic deposits in the Ōtāhuhu–Manurewa district in Searle's book. There, in addition to scoria, basalt, tuff and ash, are found Pleistocene-era silts, sands and peats and recent alluvium — silt in the non-technical sense of 'fine sand, clay, or other soil carried by moving or running water and deposited as a sediment on the bottom or on a shore or flood plain'.

---

Beneath the scoria cones and basalt lava flows that make up Ngā Kaoua Kohora/Ngā Kapua Kohuora/Crater Hill in Papatoetoe, part of the Ōtāhuhu–Manurewa volcanic zone mapped by Searle, lies what is known as the Underground Press Cave. It is so named because the cave was used in 1940 to print *People's Voice*, the newspaper of the Communist Party of New Zealand, a publication which was at that stage banned because of the Party's opposition to the Second World War. Here, South Auckland's political history intersects directly with its geomorphology. New Zealand communists, active in South Auckland in the 1930s and 1940s because of its identity as an industrial area, took advantage of the geology of the region and the possibilities it provides for underground operations.

When the party shifted to support for the war effort following the invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941, its publications became legal again and were edited by R. A. K. Mason, a party member, poet, and friend and mentor of Hone Tuwhare, someone whose intellectual and emotional involvement with China is well known.

At the time that these events were taking place, the Chinese Communist

Party had its headquarters in the Loess Plateau in Northwest China, where its leaders forged the organisational, political and cultural frameworks that they would deploy when assuming power in 1949. For many outsiders who have experienced them in the modern era, the landscapes of the Loess Plateau have an almost overwhelming force. Their aridity, coupled with their stark contours — treeless and often completely devoid of vegetation — leaves an extraordinary impression on someone encountering them for the first time, as I did in 1985–86. The yellow loess of Northwest China, a soil made up of particles of fine grade deposited on the land over the centuries by the wind, and to a lesser extent by water, seems, to the untrained observer at least, a kind of antithesis to the dark, moist volcanic earth found in Māngere, Ihumātao and other parts of South Auckland.

The human geologies — the geological structures which shape and are shaped by human cultural action — of North China and South Auckland seem to be in polar opposition to each other. If South Auckland is in New Zealand contexts frequently associated with poverty, that poverty does not arise from the inability of its soil to nourish its population, but from experiences of dispossession and displacement associated with colonisation and industrialisation. If the Loess Plateau is in Chinese contexts habitually associated with poverty, it is because overtaxed soil and lack of rainfall mean that the area cannot produce enough food to support the people who live there. While South Auckland and North China were both targets of twentieth-century communist revolutionary mobilisation, the outcomes of that mobilisation, unsuccessful in South Auckland and successful in North China, seem to have much to do with the very different human geologies in both places. The social and geological realities symbolised by scoria and loess appear to be radically dissimilar.

Perhaps no cultural document from the era after New Zealand and the People's Republic of China established formal diplomatic relations in 1972 conveys the effect of the landscapes of the Loess Plateau on an outsider with as much power as Chen Kaige's 1984 film *Yellow Earth* (*Huang tudi* 黄土地), a film that had its first major public screening in New Zealand in 1987. That film sits between the official celebrations of two very different visions of China. The first is the official celebrations of the achievements of the Chinese communist revolution as an uprising of workers and peasants that led to massive improvements in production and in the material conditions of China's farmers and workers — a set of propaganda images now regarded as generally false, if not as monstrous pieces of misrepresentation. The second is the official celebrations of the achievements of market-led economic reform of the Deng Xiaoping era and afterwards, whose deregulatory unleashing of individual economic energies were seen as, if not inspiring, at least paralleling the actions of liberalising regimes in New Zealand in the years after 1984.

*Yellow Earth* is set in 1939; that is, in the same period in which the CPNZ was engaged in the political mobilisation work in South Auckland described above. In the film, a young communist soldier travels to exceptionally impoverished parts of the Loess Plateau region in northern Shaanxi to collect folksongs that can be used by the communist forces in their war of resistance against Japan. The harshness of the landscape and the poverty of the local people are depicted with great force through camera work that emphasises the emptiness of the physical environment, by acting in which emotion is communicated with extreme understatement and with limited dialogue, and through a soundtrack that relies heavily on silence punctuated by singing and by music whose diversity of styles helps to create the sense of a plurality rather than a unity of viewpoints. In place of a picture of the Party leading the people to the radiant future is a much more uncertain and ambivalent representation of China's modern history.

It is difficult to escape the impression that the loess landscapes of *Yellow Earth* are intended as a metaphor for a country historically worn out and beset by problems that a socialist revolution had been unable to resolve. Given that the Chinese Communist Party's heroic account of its own past focused heavily on its years in the Loess Plateau in the 1930s and 1940s, the bleakness of the world which *Yellow Earth* depicts can hardly be coincidental. Rather, this arid and impoverished vision seemed (and seems) to be a rebuke to the Party, reflecting the sense of exhaustion experienced by the generation of educated people born with the revolution and battered by the political upheavals of the late 1960s and early 1970s.

---

The idea of loess symbolising a China which is culturally sterile, eroded and impoverished finds its corollary and overt expression in the 1988 television documentary *River Elegy* (*He shang* 河殇). In this six-part documentary, the Yellow River — choked with silt that originates in the Loess Plateau (an area that *River Elegy* portrays as the ultimate source of a culture incapable of change) — is holding China and its people in a state of subjection and backwardness.

This depiction came as a shock to the small number of New Zealanders — including myself, an enthusiast for the Maoist cause from the age of 10 or 11 onwards — who had embraced the Chinese socialist revolution as a harbinger of a new kind of society in which manual and mental labour would be joined together in a political and cultural world defined by shared commitment to a radical conception of human equality. Instead, the vision of a North China whose culture was weighed down by the sediments of a history from which it could not escape, as projected by *Yellow Earth* and *River Elegy*, was profoundly disconcerting, not least

because it seemed to reflect what millions of Chinese people had actually experienced in the decades of Maoist radicalism.

In the 1980s, those who had dreamed of a Maoist revolution in South Auckland and elsewhere in Aotearoa New Zealand started to seem like naive dupes of a propaganda apparatus that now began to appear more and more transparently false; or, worse still, as people who had blithely ignored or even sanctioned human suffering on an enormous scale. More modest aspirations for personal economic and social betterment, above all those of hardworking business and home owners, began to look more worthy of respect than the grandiose claims about revolutionary working-class solidarity advanced by those depicting themselves as waging war on the conformist and materialistic culture of the bourgeoisie.

The depiction of loess and silt as a sedimentary historical burden weighing down upon China, which one finds in the work of critical liberal intellectuals in that country, emerged in the 1980s. In the past two decades this bleak vision has given way to a celebration of the historical bonds that link the Chinese nation to its native soil, historical bonds that are seen as validated by the economic and political might of the People's Republic.

Meanwhile, scoria and the other constituents of South Auckland's volcanic landscapes and their human geologies seem to have recently been bound up with a quite different kind of historical politics. In the struggles over the disputed land at Ihumātao, the defence of the scoria, basalt and silt structures that form the human and geological environment in the South Auckland volcanic zone, seen in Searle's maps, has been advanced as the goal pursued by all sides, but with the strongest claims being lodged by SOUL (Save Our Unique Landscapes), the chief opponents of the proposed housing development in Ihumātao.

The histories of land seizure, racism and industrial expansion that have shaped South Auckland in the years since the annexation of the area by Pākehā in the 1850s and 1860s can be juxtaposed against the histories of cultural contact and engagement, in which Chinese South Aucklanders

have had a central place. The calls by South Auckland communities to preserve and restore the old volcanic landscapes, eroded by decades of quarrying and broader commercial expansion, seem to invoke a desire for human geologies that are structured by something other than simply the dictates of economic reason.

How far these developments will parallel or diverge from those in the loess and silt landscapes of North China is something that those interested in the intersections between the histories of China and Aotearoa New Zealand might find interesting to contemplate.



# Speaking Half-truth to Power

CHRIS ELDER

In April 1976, New Zealand Prime Minister Robert Muldoon (as he then was) paid a state visit to China. He was taking up an invitation that had originally been extended to his predecessor, Labour Prime Minister Bill Rowling. His decision to do so was welcomed as signalling a bipartisan acceptance of the new relationship that had been established with the People's Republic of China.

Among the questions to be considered in the lead-up to the visit was what role might be assigned to Rewi Alley, the veteran revolutionary who had by then lived in China for 47 years. Alley was a figure of some standing in China, and was seen by many in New Zealand as the embodiment of long-standing links between the two countries.

Unfortunately, those who held this positive view did not include most members of the National Party, who viewed Alley as a dangerous subversive who had undermined New Zealand interests at the time of the war in Korea, and had continued on the same perverse path thereafter.

Rewi was by then 78 years old, and in indifferent health. The embassy suggested it would be a gracious gesture if the prime minister were to call on Alley at his home in the compound of the Chinese People's Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries (the old Italian Legation).



Prime Minister Robert Muldoon and Thea Muldoon stand either side of Premier Hua Guofeng (centre front) before the state banquet in Muldoon's honour, 29 April 1976.

CHRIS ELDER



Mr Muldoon was not attracted to the proposal, but did agree that Alley could be invited to attend a small reception to be held at the embassy. (The reception was intended to allow the delegation to meet embassy staff and other New Zealanders resident in Peking, by no means a large number.) The ambassador, Dick Atkins, had added to the guest list a few foreign representatives closely associated with New Zealand interests: the ambassadors of Australia, Canada, Japan and the United Kingdom, and the head of the United States Liaison Office.

By the time the New Zealand delegation arrived, Dick had arranged these dignitaries into an informal reception line, so they would each have a chance to meet the prime minister before he mingled with other guests. At the front of the line, he placed New Zealand's veteran revolutionary, Rewi Alley.

On being introduced to Alley, an apparently discomfited Muldoon growled, 'I've heard a lot about you.' Rewi replied with some spirit: 'I've heard a lot about you, too.' That was the beginning of an extended and apparently amicable conversation which took up a good part of the hour allocated to the gathering. Dick Atkins, uncomfortably aware of the senior representatives waiting their turn, did his best to shepherd the prime minister down the line, but Muldoon persuasively indicated that he had no wish to be so shepherded. 'I'll have your job, mate', he explained.

---

The official schedule called for departure from the embassy to the Great Hall of the People for a signing ceremony to amend the New Zealand–China Trade Agreement concluded in 1973. A state dinner would follow. At the time set for departure, Mr Muldoon, by this time circulating among the guests, showed no disposition to be hurried. His mood was sombre. He was tired. He resented having been taken away from an interesting

conversation, and being fobbed off with a group of people whom he assessed as being no more than the foreign equivalents of Ministry of Foreign Affairs cookie-pushers. A glass or two taken on his way around the room had sharpened, rather than diminished, his sense of grievance. In the words of P. G. Wodehouse, if he was not actually disgruntled, he was far from being grunted.

After some delay, however, the prime minister did indicate to his ambassador that he was ready to go and sign the agreement. This gave rise to another difficult moment, because, as everyone had thought the prime minister understood, there was no intention that he should be the one signing. The original agreement had been set in place by the two countries' trade ministers, and so it was, in Chinese eyes, inappropriate that a prime minister should stoop to amending an agreement concluded at a lower level. It was explained to Mr Muldoon that his role would be to stand in the background and nod approvingly while the ambassador appended his signature.

The prime minister, who clearly felt he had been made subordinate to diplomatic fiddle-faddle enough for one day, announced that if he was not doing the signing, he would not be going to the ceremony. When this uncompromising approach had been kicked around a little, he softened enough to ask if 'the other bloke' was going to be there ('the other bloke' being Premier Hua Guofeng, with whom he had been locked in bilateral talks earlier in the day). It had not occurred to any other of those present that the premier might not make himself available for a formal occasion involving his opposite number and guest. That being the case, no one had sought a direct assurance from the Chinese side that Hua would be there. Accordingly, no one was in a position to provide the prime minister with the cast-iron assurance that he was now demanding as a precondition for his own participation.

At this point, things got murky. An ashen-faced Dick Atkins sought out the most junior and least offensive of his diplomatic staff, and requested

him to telephone the Chinese Foreign Ministry, the Waijiaobu 外交部, in order to obtain the required assurance. The unfortunate Second Secretary Elder (for it was he) could see some flaws in this plan. The first was that the Foreign Ministry was notorious for never answering the phone (of which there appeared to be only one in existence). The second was that it was doubly certain not to be answered after 5.30pm, when Cultural Revolutionary convention dictated the workday should end — and by now it was 6.45pm. The third was that even if by some miracle someone did pick up the phone, the odds were that Elder's Chinese would not be up to conveying the urgencies and niceties of the situation.

A quick assessment of the atmosphere within the official delegation, however, suggested that the time was not right to air these objections. Accordingly, the hapless second secretary made his way to the embassy switchboard and dialled the number on record for the Waijiaobu. The phone at the other end rang (a surprise in itself). And rang. And rang. Then, remarkably, it was picked up. 'Wei?' said a disembodied voice. The situation was explained, the question asked. A long pause. Then 'Meiyou ren.' (没有人 'No one here.')

At the other end of the line, the phone went down with a sharp, irretrievable click.

What to do? The only possible expedient seemed to be to report back fully and honestly to the ambassador and the prime minister. Second Secretary Elder returned to the reception hall. He squared his slight shoulders and approached his superiors. 'I have spoken to the Foreign Ministry,' he said. 'Hua Guofeng will be at the ceremony.'

The signing went ahead on schedule. Prime Minister Muldoon and his Chinese counterpart were both on hand to witness a great step forward in Sino–New Zealand relations. Ambassador Atkins never asked about the phone call. And, at least until the next incident, peace and tranquillity reigned once more within the prime minister's delegation.

# Muldoon meets Deng, Autumn 1980

NICK BRIDGE

When Deng Xiaoping got back into power, Prime Minister Muldoon instructed that he wanted to meet him the following year, and that, as a lead-up, three of his senior ministers would make visits to China. The Chinese signed on, and so the New Zealand Embassy had visits by Brian Talboys, Duncan MacIntyre and George Gair to plan for. All three were most agreeable individuals. The visits kept us busy and broadened the relationship as only ministerial visits can. Some posts rarely receive ministers. It can make for a quiet assignment. In my nearly five years in Delhi as high commissioner, we got two! Both were junior ministers.

Each of these three lead-up visits was enjoyable. Deputy Prime Minister Talboys brought with him a business delegation of about 20. Duncan MacIntyre, Agriculture, was as relaxed as ever when he came a few months later; and in typically good voice at the traditional embassy party on the last night of the visit. He hadn't much enjoyed the two official banquets in the Great Hall of the People, the welcoming one and New Zealand's return one two nights later. They were, as usual, stilted, formal affairs.

But it was George Gair, Minister of Health, who stole the show. His small delegation was a couple of hours late arriving at Peking's old and ailing airport. On arrival, we were disconcerted to see Mrs Gair's right arm in gleaming white plaster and a sling. She'd slipped over on Canton airport's treacherous marble floor. The Chinese doctors had quickly treated the



fractured arm. Her unfortunate pain apart, it was an appropriate if bizarre start to the health minister's visit.

Health issues were to continue to take centre stage during the visit, albeit in some rather unscheduled and unexpected guises. The next day, as a special treat, the delegation attended open-heart surgery performed under acupuncture at the leading hospital. The first secretary at the embassy was John McKinnon, destined to be New Zealand's ambassador to China twice over in the 2000s. He was, and still is, very tall, at around six feet three. He fainted in the operating theatre, poleaxing to the floor and cutting his head open rather badly. Meanwhile, back at the embassy, one of the New Zealand staff cut herself on the guillotine as she topped and tailed papers for the minister. She was cared for by medical staff at the British Embassy, next to ours. Like Mrs Gair, she had her arm placed in a sling.

That night at the Chinese welcoming banquet in the Great Hall, our delegation brought the house down as it entered, half covered in bandages. Both health ministers discarded some of their texts, and instead revelled in the misfortunes and the way that the Chinese had so generously and skilfully treated them. It set the scene for a good Muldoon visit.

---

The prime minister came in beautiful, late-summer weather. Although he rather spoilt it, at the outset, with a remark at a press conference after a long day's discussions with China's brand-new premier, Zhao Ziyang. Zhao had, to everyone's expert surprise, been appointed just two days before. The Brits and Americans had immediately given us full biographies of this relatively young man who was far from the advanced age of some of the Long March veterans still in high positions.

Zhao was pretty impressive in what was his first meeting as premier. He had mastered his briefs, and when in any doubt about something



would quietly refer to his papers or his officials before replying. When Muldoon emerged from the talks, he was surprised and delighted to see on the steps of the Great Hall the full corps of the Peking foreign press correspondents, some of them justly celebrated, waiting to ask him about this new man, Zhao. The New Zealand prime minister spoke admiringly about his counterpart, but said that he'd put a reservation over Zhao's health and stamina. Consternation and pressing requests for elaboration ensued. Muldoon, who was apparently referring to the fact that Zhao had occasionally mopped a sweating face, dug himself in a little deeper before wisely halting proceedings. The international wire services reported overnight what the New Zealand leader had said.

The next morning at the Great Hall, Muldoon had his all-important meeting with China's supreme leader. Deng came into the cavernous meeting room, exuding his magnetic and seemingly personable power. Muldoon stood up to be greeted. Deng got straight to his point: 'I gather you have some reservations about my premier' was his brusque greeting. Muldoon explained that there seemed to have been a misunderstanding and apologised for any confusion. It was an historic moment, did Deng but know it: it was the only political apology Muldoon ever made.

The visit went well after that, and the whole year, as had been planned by Muldoon, set the tone for the largely constructive relationship that has followed ever since. There is probably some truth to the view that China has occasionally used the relationship with our tiny country as a toe into Western waters in the early years of its relations with Western governments.

---

On a personal level, for me Muldoon's visit was to have positive consequences. There was an incident that most unexpectedly sent my

standing with our Chinese staff sky-high. The delegation had gone down to Fujian, and I was left in charge back in the capital. They took with them a strange contraption that the PM's press secretary, Gerry Symmans, had brought with him. It contained at its heart a secure telephone link so that Symmans and others could, if necessary, talk with Wellington without the Chinese listening in. We christened it the Thunder Box.

The day after they had left, I was relaxing in my first-floor office tidying up some of the visit's loose ends, when we received a cable from the PM's private office in Wellington asking the embassy to inform Muldoon that the chairman of his own National Party had gone public in demanding that he step down. Apparently, the opinion polls had turned against him and his dictatorial ways. A second unclassified cable gave the texts of the morning's relevant front-page articles.

This clearly was a situation tailor-made for the Thunder Box. I rang the secret number and was surprised to get through to Symmans some two thousand miles to the south. However, he could barely hear me. So I relayed the news in a loud voice. 'Louder, Nick!' he shouted back. So I shouted the various headlines: 'Chapman says Muldoon must go.' 'Muldoon is finished.' 'The people turn against Muldoon.' 'Time for a new leader.' I ran through the key points from the papers. Finally, Symmans thanked me and I walked over to my open windows, overlooking the embassy forecourt and garden. It had been a bit stressful, and I welcomed the fresh autumn air. Forty years ago, Peking still had some of it.

Looking down, I was surprised to see half a dozen of our Chinese staff standing below and looking up at my windows. They looked equally surprised, stunned in fact, and I realised that, hearing my loud voice from downstairs, they had gathered outside under my windows to hear what I was saying more clearly. I went down. They looked at me with apprehensive respect. They had never heard anything like it. Clearly here was the leader of an emerging New Zealand coup, or, at the least, one of its leaders. It took a few days and the return of my ambassador for their reverence to ease.

# The Canton Trade Fair, 1977: Pages from a Diary

LEO HAKS

Established in 1957, the Canton Trade Fair (now known as the China Import and Export Fair) is held twice a year, during spring and autumn, in the southern Chinese city of Guangzhou. In the years before the establishment of diplomatic relations between Aotearoa New Zealand and the People's Republic of China, the fair offered New Zealand importers a rare opportunity to travel to China to source whatever products they thought might sell at home. For many, attendance at the fair was their first occasion to visit China; many, also, became regular attendees. The fair remains the largest such event in China.

## **Monday, 18 April 1977**

The train journey from Kowloon to Sham Chun [Shenzhen] on the Chinese border led us through the rugged hillside of the New Territories, relatively uninhabited and arid. Train stops some five times on the way towards its destination, some 1.5 hours after departure; here we have to wait for our passports which had been collected and sent to Guangzhou for visa clearance. Passports arrived at 10.30. Then the walk from British to Chinese soil, quite an experience. Uniformed people all around, quite gay with their green uniforms and red trimmings, broad smiles and courteous attention. Elaborate immigration procedures.

Eventually, we reached our destination for now, the waiting room.