

# Being Chinese

## A New Zealander's Story

by Helene Wong

## General Notes

Teachers and  
Librarians

*Being Chinese* is the autobiography of Helene Wong. Helene was born in New Zealand in 1949 to parents whose families had immigrated from China one or two generations earlier. She writes eloquently about growing up in New Zealand and searching for identity. Helene says, "Three decades ago, I began a quest – the search for my Chinese identity. My journey unravelled the personal, professional and historical threads of my life, and revealed how bound together they are by "being Chinese". I am also a New Zealander. So this became a story not only about Chinese identity but also about the country I live in. I wanted to know how I could make a connection between these two places in my life, and thus find my place in the world."

*Being Chinese* raises issues that are relevant to all immigrants and children of immigrant parents or grandparents. It also provides useful insights for those who have not had these experiences.

### KEY FEATURES

- Twelve chapters that are roughly chronological.
- Family photographs and documents.
- Maps and family trees.
- A note on the spelling of personal and place names.

### THEMES

Chinese in New Zealand, cultural identity, migration, New Zealand identity, growing up in New Zealand between the 1950s and 1970s, racism, discrimination, performing arts, filmmaking, autobiography

### CURRICULUM LINKS

Social studies, geography, history, English, media studies

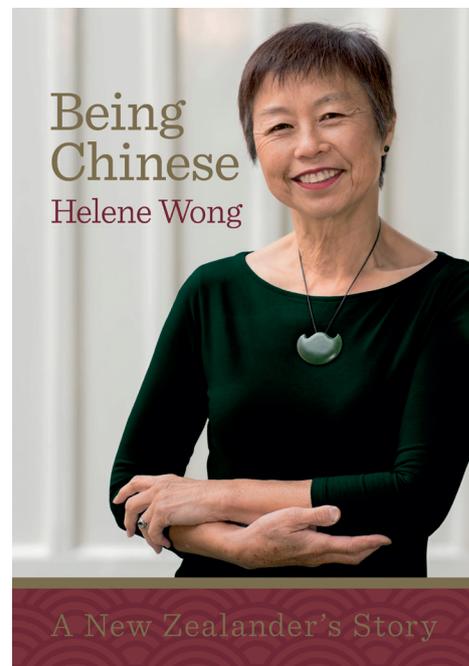
### RELATED TEXTS

Manying Ip, *Home Away From Home: Life Stories of Chinese Women in New Zealand*, New Women's Press, 1990

Leon Narbey, *Illustrious Energy*, 1998, film

Helene Wong, *Footprints of the Dragon*, 1994, television documentary

The film and documentary can be rented from NZ On Screen.



### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

After graduating in Sociology from Victoria University of Wellington, Helene Wong worked in the public service, becoming in 1978 social policy adviser to Prime Minister Robert Muldoon. She then followed her love of theatre, working as an actor and director. She was the first script development executive in the NZ Film Commission, then worked as a freelance script consultant, including on Leon Narbey's acclaimed feature film about Chinese goldminers in Otago, *Illustrious Energy*. She wrote and directed television documentaries, notably *Footprints of the Dragon* in 1995. The following year, she became film critic for the *New Zealand Listener*.

Helene Wong is now a full-time writer and occasional actor.

Students could read other accounts of childhood in New Zealand in the same period, such as *The Barefoot Years* (Martin Edmond, 2014) and *Out of the Vaipe* (Albert Wendt, 2015), both in the BWB Texts series.

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## TEACHING SUGGESTIONS

### Social studies and geography

- Research inquiries or case studies about migration, cultural identity and cultural interaction
- A source for learning about a New Zealand experience of migration, cultural assimilation and the journey to cultural awakening.

### English

- Many of the chapters stand alone and could be used to explore a theme, such as migration, survival, identity, New Zealand stories or discrimination. For example, the prologue recounts the author's reaction to visiting her father's village in China with her parents. It includes her thoughts about cultural change, migration, identity, home and family roots.
- Extracts from chapters 1–4 would provide a good model for students' autobiographical writing about childhood and growing up in New Zealand. Students could also use them to make comparisons with other writers' autobiographical writing about similar experiences.

### Media studies

Students could investigate the influences on Helene Wong's documentary filmmaking.

■ Thanks to Etomia Wilson and David Taylor for their contributions to these notes.

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