

In or Out?

Thoughts of a Chinese New Zealander

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The Chinese are particular about social circles, in which information is shared and freely exchanged. It's difficult to break into a circle, much more so to achieve acknowledgement and respect from those within. Being in or out determines an individual's potential and way of life. As China becomes the largest source of overseas migrants in New Zealand, a steadily increasing number of Chinese travel here to study, work and immigrate. They are here, but whether they can stay, and if they can assimilate into the mainstream circles are becoming topics of importance to many. Helene Wong's new book *Being Chinese* may provide some food for thought.

Helene brings her new book *Being Chinese* to the writer's seminar held by the New Zealand Chinese Writers Association on August 13 to share her creative and life experiences with the extensive Chinese readers. Helene shares 6 decades of experiences both in and out of various social circles as a daughter of 2nd and 3rd generation Chinese immigrants in 30 pages of notes and a 2-and-a-half-hour presentation. She talks about her carefree childhood in a rural township, how she feels being fully assimilated into the social circles during her tertiary years in Wellington, and the equality and respect between New Zealanders she experienced during her time as social policy advisor to past Prime Minister Sir Robert Muldoon. Naturally also included are the ridicule and racism that were attracted due to her ethnic appearance. The negativity from local New Zealanders were all in tune with the historical context and social climate at the time, for example during the 90's immigration wave people would shout "Go back where you came from" at her on the street, and the current immigration wave saw her being targeted in a carpark with "Learn how to drive", venting their dissatisfaction with the new immigrants' driving skills. Helene expresses the lack of such verbal abuse aimed at South Africans or other Caucasians, and that they happened due simply to her Asian appearance.

Helene expresses its not all bad being in and out of the mainstream circles, as it gave her opportunities to experience different societies and culture, giving her a deeper understanding of human nature. Helene's partner, Dr. Colin Knox, is of Maori descent, he watched her attentively throughout the presentation as well as helping her prepare various equipment. I witnessed a particular moment when first moved a seat out of her way, then back to place her water and copies of the book. Their 4-decade long marriage has provided a fine example of the merging of different cultures. When asked what differences there are between interracial partners, Colin gave his only answer, that "She's a girl and I'm a boy".

Helene's ancestral roots lie in China's Guang Dong province. As a native New Zealander who cannot speak Chinese, she visited China in the early 80's with her parents to perceive the homeland which she has drifted from both linguistically and culturally. It was from then that she took interest in rediscovering her family history and cultural identity of the New Zealand

Chinese population, which resulted in vast and thorough research in this topic for the next 30 years.

Helene presented her sold-out speech “InsideOutside” as a guest speaker at the Auckland Writers Festival held May this year. Demonstrating the interest in cultural identity in New Zealand Society.