∥ ∥ ∥ as the baby got blue eyes? This is what my mother tells me my brother David, almost eight, called to her through the window of her room at the Ruanui Maternity Home in Taihape where I was born. I don't know if he thought my life would be easier if I looked more like a European, or he just liked the colour blue. but he had unwittingly conjured an image of the cultural hybrid I was to become.

I was born in the same year as the People's Republic of China. The People's Liberation Army marched into Peking in January 1949, took control of Shanghai by the end of May, and three weeks later I turned up. I claim no significance to this: I'm just conscious that, had I been born in China instead of Taihape, I might have become a Little Red Bookbrandishing Red Guard, smashing artefacts and denouncing my teachers. A Brigade Leader. A Patriotic Tractor Girl. Or perhaps even packed off to some remote hill region for re-education. My identity would have been unquestionably Chinese. Instead, I was born in the town whose adopted icon is The Gumboot, a very symbol of New Zealandness.

As for my parents, home for them was more New Zealand than China. They would have known there was a war going on between the Nationalists and the Communists, and through the papers would have learned that 'the Commos" had taken over. But they were from the south, not from Peking or Shanghai, and news of what was happening down there was hard to come by Letters were infrequent, and who knew what was happening to mail under the new regime? China was almost a closed book. In any case, their lives revolved around their growing family and the busy general store they ran in the tiny railway settlement of Utiku, a few kilometres down the road from Taihape.

I don't remember anything of Utiku. I am simply a chubby presence there in black-and-white snapshots taken before 1951, when the family moved to the Hutt Valley and my father set up fruit and vegetable shops — the first, which he sold, in Upper Hutt, then in Naenae, My childhood memories begin in a white stucco house with green trim at 957 High Street, Avalon. It was next door to a Shell station and motor mechanic, so I grew up with the "ding" of the petrol pumps, the revving of cars and trucks, and the red neon Reidrubber sign framed in the kitchen window at night. Sometimes, very late on Friday or Saturday nights, I would be kept awake by drunken choruses of "Ten Green Bottles" and "Mademoiselle from Armentieres" ('Inky pinky pahlay voo!') when the boys who worked in the garage were having

We had a big back yard with a vege garden and fruit trees lemon, crab apple, Wilson's Early plum - a passionfruit vine and a Chinese gooseberry choking the chook-house down the back. There was a swing, and always a cat. Our vast expanse of lawn was cool to lie on in the summer and perfect for practising my

Helene Wong had a comfortable and typical 1950s middle-class childhood, almost. She recounts the moment the spell was broken in this excerpt from Being Chinese: A New Zealander's Story.

BEING CHINESE



Helene Wong with her parents, Dolly and Willie, outside church after a wedding in the 1950s

marching-girl moves. For me and my girlfriends, it was an afterschool playground. For a time, a corner of the vege garden became a long-jump pit - though a shorty like me had no future as a long jumper. We made mud pies and played marbles, climbed the plum tree and rode our bikes, formed and disbanded clubs (the first of many committees I was to serve on in my life, and subsequently develop an aversion to), and lounged around with our imaginary boyfriends.

We knew the Whitings who owned the petrol station, and the Chudleighs next to them. Cliff Chudleigh helped Dad with carpentry jobs. Behind us were the Mazzolas with their whitewashed glasshouses full of tomatoes, and their handsome, surly sons; on the other side of their drive, the Misses Stupples "old maids" with lustrous waved hair who set off to work each day in bright-red lipstick and high heels. And across the road, in a pensioner flat, Ethel and Stan Soper. Stan was a returned serviceman who spent a lot of time in his armchair: Ethel was ample-bosomed, with whiskers on her chin. She used to babysit me, and I remember being in awe whenever she appeared in her St John's Ambulance uniform.

Down the road were the Avalon shops: Four Square, butcher,

greengrocer, stationer, draper and the most important ones as far as I was concerned, the fish 'n' chips and the dairy. Avalon Primary was on the other side of the road, so to get to the dairy for the after-school gobstopper or Jelly Tip, you had to cross High Street. That was a big deal, because it was the main artery through the valley and traffic was busy even in those days. I used to do school patrol duty on the crossing, wielding my red-andwhite Stop sign with drilled precision.

'Sticks out!' 'Cross! 'Sticks in!'

Once, we took the number of a driver who ignored our stuck-out sticks, and the school took him to court. We turned up on the appointed morning, extremely nervous about what being "witnesses" meant. The driver never showed. I was a bit shocked to discover that not everyone did as they were told.

These were the days of postwar prosperity. A semi-automatic washing machine sat in the washhouse between the copper and the tub with its wringer and scrubbing board, and a succession of gleaming appliances started appearing in the kitchen. We got a second-hand Vauxhall Velox that reflected the optimism of the times with a repaint in what was

'Chink! Chow! Wing Wong! Flat-nose! Slit-eyes!' Their vocabulary wasn't extensive, but still there was always that shock. I longed for a clever comeback. Always, though, my brain would shut down, and by the time I thought of a rejoinder it was too late. The sniggerers were long out of

earshot

called "duck-egg blue". On Tuesdays, Mum would put on a best frock, with matching hat, heels and gloves, and catch the train into town. Sometimes she'd take me, also dressed to the nines with gloves and black patentleather shoes. We'd leap on the tram on Lambton Quay and do the rounds of Kirkcaldie & Stains, DIC, James Smith, and C. Smith, have a flash lunch in their tearooms or catch one of the lunchtime mannequin parades (the models were minor celebrities of the day and were all tall and white). Then, while I perched on a high chair beside the counters and watched the Lamson tube capsules whizzing up, down and across the ceiling with their dockets and cash, Mum tried on clothes and managed her lay-bys. We'd go down in the elevator with an elderly man in uniform announcing each floor and its contents, me giggling whenever he said "Ladies" Lingerie", then ride the tram all the way back down the Quay to the railway station and home.

I read voraciously everything from Enid Blyton to sneaked bits of Alberto Moravia's The Woman of Rome (it sat on the bookshelves behind the dining table, and the line about her nipples poking through the weave of her shawl was my favourite) and played 78s of Mario Lanza, Nat King Cole and Rosemary Clooney on the radiogram. Radio was my everyday companion. I sang along with the advertising jingles and imitated the Buckley's Canadiol storm effects. At four o'clock I mimicked the thick country accents of The Archers. and after tea there was the Australian half-hour family comedy of Life with Dexter, with Night Beat's hardboiled crime reporter Randy Stone an absolute must before falling asleep. When I was sick and home from school, I could catch up with women's programmes hosted by Aunt

Daisy and Doreen, and the soaps of Doctor Paul and Portia Faces

On Saturdays my sisters Jean and Marina played sport or went dancing, David mowed the lawns and I vacuumed the house as we called it, "doing the luxing". In the afternoon, after he came home from the shop, Dad spread the Turf Digest, the Dominion and the Evening Post out on the kitchen table, pushed his glasses up on to his forehead, and studied the form while he smoked his Capstan Corks and listened to the races up and down the country on the radio. I watched as he picked up his biro and in the $\mathit{TurfDigest}$ carefully circled the winner, put a $cross\,by\,the\,second\,place\text{-}getter$ and a 3 by the third. He'd placed his bets at the TAB before coming home, but he'd never give away if he'd won anything. Unless I asked, and there might be a bit of a grin. After tea, David or I would walk down to the dairy and buy $\operatorname{him}\operatorname{a}\operatorname{Sports}\operatorname{Post}\operatorname{so}\operatorname{he}\operatorname{could}$ confirm the results. That was the routine of my comfortable fifties middle-class world as a typical Marmite, Weet-Bix, school milk and Chesdale cheese suburban

But not quite. 'Hey, Ching Chong!' The first time I heard the taunts, I was walking home from school, lost in the bliss of a Jelly Tip. I was jerked out of reverie into shock. I looked around to see a group of boys in short pants and bare feet, jeering and sniggering from a safe distance, and I put my head down and walked home more quickly.

There were many other times. 'Chink! Chow! Wing Wong! Flat-nose! Slit-eyes!'

Their vocabulary wasn't extensive, but still there was always that shock. I longed for a clever comeback. Always, though, my brain would shut down, and by the time I thought of a rejoinder it was too late. The sniggerers were long out of earshot.

I don't think it was ever the boys in my class. There were forty of us, and although there were the usual petty jealousies and shifting alliances, we were as close and comfortable as you get when you spend five days a week together. And since I was the only Chinese kid in the school, I didn't pose the kind of threat that a group of us might have. I just slotted in. On the street, though, I was being singled out and I wasn't sure why. Apparently it had to do with the way I looked, and with my different-sounding name. With being Chinese.



Read it

Being Chinese: A New Zealander's Story, by Helene Wong, is published by Bridget Williams Books and available now.This excerpt is from Chapter 1, titled "The greengrocer's daughter"