New Zealanders and the People's Republic

Encountering CHINA

Edited by Duncan Campbell & Brian Moloughney

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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 plaint 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, 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 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.