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STAGING CHINESE KIWI VOICES:
Chinese Representations in New Zealand Theatre

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Abstract

This thesis explores how Chinese Kiwi theatre makers challenge hegemonic discourses regarding representations of Chinese people in theatre. Up until 1996, narratives and representations of Chinese people in mainstream New Zealand media have been muted, objectified, or confined to fixed stereotypes. In this study, I demonstrate how four contemporary Chinese Kiwi theatre artists have (re)negotiated, reclaimed, and rewritten the subjectivity and narratives of Chinese people in New Zealand. This will be examined within the postcolonial and binational framework that is specific to Aotearoa. Through the examination of specific theatrical works by Lynda Chanwai-Earle, Renee Liang, Mei-Lin Te Puea Hansen, and Alice Canton, I demonstrate how they have challenged hegemonic discourses and Pākehā-narrated histories regarding the Chinese. Their works cover the lives of the early Chinese mining community (referred to as the ‘old Chinese’), to more contemporary representations (the ‘new Chinese’) that involve different subsets within the community. The relationship and tensions between Māori, Chinese and Pākehā will be analysed throughout. The subjectivity of Chinese women will also be reclaimed by debunking the stereotype of the ‘Oriental woman’ through matrilineal narratives and autobiography. Finally, the transformative and reconciliatory impact of their works will be examined and dissected.

In this thesis, I argue that the work of the Chinese Kiwi artists I explore gestures to the need to negotiate the Chinese place, or ‘non-place’, within the dominant hegemonic narrative. I argue that these artists make strong claims through their work for the bicultural framework that privileges the Māori-Pākehā dialogue to be expanded to include the Chinese voice. I conclude



that the Chinese Kiwi theatre artists have propelled the once muted Chinese voice from the margins, and have begun to carve a space into the dominant New Zealand narrative.

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Table of Contents

ABSTRACT	II
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	IV
TABLE OF CONTENTS	V
LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS.....	VI
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION.....	1
CHINESE IDENTITY AND BELONGING	1
METHODOLOGY	4
CHAPTER OVERVIEW	7
CHAPTER TWO: THE HISTORY OF CHINESE IN NEW ZEALAND AND ONSTAGE	9
CHINESE MIGRATION	9
CHINESE ONSTAGE	13
CHAPTER THREE: FOUR CHINESE KIWI ARTISTS	18
PIONEERING CHINESE KIWI PLAYWRIGHT: LYNDA CHANWAI-EARLE	20
CHINESE MINERS AND OPERA: RENEE LIANG.....	23
MĀORI-CHINESE LOVE ONSTAGE: MEI-LIN TE PUEA HANSEN.....	26
DOCUMENTING CHINESE LIVES ONSTAGE: ALICE CANTON.....	27
CHAPTER FOUR: CHINESE/MĀORI RELATIONSHIPS AND THE BICULTURAL FRAMEWORK IN NEW ZEALAND	30
ONE NATION, TWO PEOPLES.....	30
‘OLD CHINESE’: EARLY CHINESE-MĀORI-PĀKEHĀ RELATIONSHIPS	34
‘NEW CHINESE’: CONTEMPORARY CHINESE-MĀORI-PĀKEHĀ RELATIONSHIPS	46
CHAPTER FIVE: RECLAIMING CHINESE FEMALE SUBJECTHOOD	54
RECLAIMING CHINESE WOMEN’S SUBJECTHOOD THROUGH AUTOBIOGRAPHY	56
DEBUNKING THE ‘ORIENTAL WOMAN’ AND RECLAIMING THE NARRATIVE SPACE	57
MATRILINEAL NARRATIVES: CELEBRATING THE TRIADIC BOND.....	64
MATRILINEAL AUTOBIOGRAPHY	68
CHAPTER SIX: RECONCILIATION AND TRANSFORMATION.....	75
REJECTION OF FIXED BINARIES.....	76
TRANSFORMATION THROUGH NARRATIVE FORM: MAGICAL REALISM AND SYNCRETIC THEATRE	79
RECONCILIATION: TRANSFORMING THEATRE INTO REALITY	85
CHAPTER SEVEN: CONCLUSION – VOICES IN THE MAINSTREAM.....	92
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	95



List of Illustrations

Figure 1. Richard Goodall, ‘The Yellow Peril’, <i>New Zealand Truth</i> , 16 February 1907, National Library of New Zealand.....	37
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