Phoebe H. Li, *Golden Enterprise: New Zealand Chinese Merchants, 1860s–1970s*, Chinese Poll Tax Heritage Trust, Wellington, 2024. 229 pp. $75. ISBN 9780473699987.

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In October 2022, Selwyn Doo, the descendant of an established New Zealand Chinese merchant family, contacted historian Phoebe H. Li to relay his families' memories of Auckland's Chinatown, stories passed down through generations of the Doo family. Li had already interviewed Selwyn's cousin, Thomas Doo III, in 2018. A graduate of China's prestigious Tsinghua University, Li's work has always drawn on a wide array of primary source material, combining intellectual, economic and social history approaches with great effect. Selwyn passed a story on to Li, and that story made its way into Li's magisterial new book, *Golden Enterprise: New Zealand Chinese Merchants, 1860s–1970s*.

Doo recalled that one day, around 1969, four or five old Chinese men came into the showroom of Thomas Doo Jnr Warehousemen in Auckland's Chinatown. The police had been raiding the men's houses weekly, searching for opium, and in the past Thomas's father had assisted the men. "We know your faither [sic] well. Now he has deceased. Can you help us?" Thomas stepped into his father's shoes and helped the men, "As an interpreter, I used to arrange the fine, 60 pounds each guy. The detective would go back in the following day with confiscated opium pipes and sell them back. They got opium through ships" (p. 188). Earlier in *Golden Enterprise*, we read that Thomas III was born in the Wong Doo family shop in 1925. By the age of 10 he was making tea for the aging market gardeners who visited the shop on their way to sell their produce. He watched the men sharing bamboo pipes. As he got older he became their interpreter, accompanying them to the doctor or dentist (p. 36).

Doo's memories in *Golden Enterprise* are more than anecdotal. They show how New Zealand Chinese merchants were far more than 'businesspeople' or 'capitalists'; they were leaders, elders, interpreters, fixers, advocates. They assisted with emigration and remittances; they liaised with the anglophone community. Their stores were never only 'shopfronts'. Rather they were connection points between Chinese villages and New Zealand towns, they were banks, they were sources of news (both local and international), they were social hubs, they were hostels for older Chinese men, they provided refuge, sometimes they were even quasi-Chinese consulates. The Sew Hoy pawnshop, for example, run by merchant Choie Kum Yok, was a bank for fellow clansmen. As Li tells us, Hugh Sew Hoy, one of Choie Kum Yok's sons, remembered that "migrants returning from overseas removed the lining of their jackets into which they had sewn sovereigns. They threw these into a basket at their feet, for his father to change into money" (p. 33).

Doo's memories are part of a tapestry of rich and original Chinese-New Zealand source material which Li has woven through *Golden Enterprise*. As part of her research, Li spoke to dozens of descendants of New Zealand Chinese merchants and old-timers. *Golden Enterprise* celebrates their legacy, contextualizing their stories in the larger history of southern Chinese economic expansion from the 1860s. Li does an excellent job telling us this story, moving between local, regional and national scales. As Li explains, 'I believe that an overall understanding of Chinese merchants' enterprising spirit and their transnational activities may cast a new light

on the history of New Zealand Chinese, and perhaps overseas Chinese history in general' (p. 16). Li's beautiful book is part of a new series on New Zealand Chinese historical texts published by the Chinese Poll Tax Heritage Trust, set up after the Clark government's 2004 formal apology to those Chinese people who paid the poll tax and suffered other discrimination imposed by statute, and to their descendants. New Zealand and Canada have both issued apologies to their Chinese populations, and funded valuable historical research as part of a move towards truth and reconciliation. Australia, where I am based, would do well to learn from their example.

This is the first text to systematically chart the history of Chinese merchants in New Zealand from the 1860s to the 1970s. One of the strengths of Li's book is its ambition and scope. Li sets out to explain the economic strategies used by Chinese merchants in New Zealand to build large, transnational operations in the face of anti-Chinese legislation. To do so she tells the history of both New Zealand and southern China, showing how British imperialism knitted these regions together. As well as oral histories, her primary sources include: remittance letters from private collections, economic data showing the scale of China–New Zealand shipping and trade, material objects unearthed during archaeological digs, evidence given to parliamentary select committees, petitions addressed to the New Zealand government, gifts bestowed on Chinese merchants by a grateful New Zealand community, and Qing imperial archives detailing the visits of emissaries and consul-generals to New Zealand. Using these sources, Li provides a Chinese perspective on New Zealand political and economic institutions. She makes a powerful argument that Chinese merchant businesses were *themselves* vital economic institutions in New Zealand's development.

To illustrate her point, Li includes the biographies of several influential merchants and their families as a through line binding this grand story together. We learn about Chinese missionary Ho A. Mee, who served as an interpreter on board HMS *Nankin* in the Royal Navy fleet which defeated the imperial Chinese military junks during the Second Opium War. After building business empires in Australia and New Zealand, Ho A. Mee took up several eminent positions on the Chinese mainland and in Hong Kong, and became chairman of the influential Tung Wah Hospital (1882) and the Po Leung Kuk (1883, 1884), both of which included the most powerful Chinese merchants and community leaders in colonial Hong Kong (pp. 45–46). We learn about John Ah Tong, who sold New Zealand fungus in China and oversaw a business empire as a result. We learn about Chew Chong, who received an illuminated address from residents of Taranaki in 1911 thanking him for building the local dairy industry. And – a favorite story of mine – we learn about the young Benjamin Wong Tape, scion of the Taper merchant family, well known for insuring his Chinese que for £1000, which meant 'any larrikin cutting or otherwise damaging it ran the risk of falling foul of the insurance company' (p. 93).

The book is richly illustrated with finely reproduced photographs. For example, the story of the tragic sinking of the SS *Ventnor* in 1902 on a reef off the Hokianga coast of northern New Zealand, carrying more than 400 Chinese coffins back to China, is told via startlingly clear photographs depicting the rescued crew, showing their faces with poignant clarity. The designs of shopfronts, group portraits of community organizations, mining activity, petitions, remittance letters and

photographs of Chinese shops in the urban streetscape will be of great interest to scholars of urban and design history.

If I could offer some criticism, I felt the book would have benefited from a greater attention to female and Māori perspectives. I wanted to know more about Chinese women in New Zealand and their role in business, and also the ways in which Māori knowledge assisted some Chinese merchants to use the New Zealand natural environment to their advantage. But in general, I was deeply impressed by *Golden Enterprise* and think it will be of great use to scholars and general readers interested in New Zealand's long history of engagement with Asia.

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