Alexander Don's Roll of the Chinese as an On-line Searchable Database

©2008 Brian MOLOUGHNEY

Introduction[1]

Thanks to James Ng's four-volume history, *Windows on a Chinese Past*, we now have a comparatively rich picture of the nature of life for the Chinese miners who came to New Zealand in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.[2] Ng's work provides much detail about the lives of the Chinese gold seekers and their descendents, especially in the extensive footnotes in which Ng quotes from the archival material upon which his study is based. In addition, he devotes Volume Four of *Windows* to a facsimile reproduction of Alexander Don's (1857-1934) 'Roll' of the Chinese. This list is the single best source of information about the early Cantonese migrants to New Zealand, and we are indebted to James Ng for representing it in a more accessible form. Our project has made the Roll even more widely available, by digitizing it and producing a 'cleaned-up' version in the form of a searchable database (http://www.otago.ac.nz/history/don) which is available to all researchers interested in exploring questions about the nature of the Chinese diaspora in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.[3] In its printed form, the Roll is already being used by those interested in the New Zealand Chinese community, especially by Chinese–New Zealanders interested in family history. But it is an extraordinarily rich repository of information that can tell us much about the changing character of the Chinese community in New Zealand. It will therefore also be of interest to those researching the global Chinese diaspora. In creating this searchable database, we hope to present the information in the Roll in a form that enables researchers to generate responses to questions much more quickly than would be possible by working through the Roll in its printed form.

Don and the Roll

Alexander Don came to New Zealand in 1879 from the Victorian goldfields. Growing up in Ballarat, Don was well aware of the challenges facing miners, and the nature of life in goldfield communities. But rather than follow his father into mining, Don became a teacher. It was his interest in mission that brought him to New Zealand, where he sought work with the Presbyterian Church of Otago and Southland, which ran a number of missions in Asia and the Pacific, as well as in New Zealand itself. Don was given the position of missionary to the Chinese miners who had begun coming to the region in increasing numbers following an invitation from the Otago Chamber of Commerce in 1865. He first went to Canton, to study Cantonese and learn something of the environment from which the Chinese miners came. After returning to Dunedin in 1881 he began his theological training, before going into the field, first at Riverton and then Round Hill. In 1886 he moved again, this time to Lawrence, where a large number of Chinese were living. From 1889 he was based in Dunedin, but continued to travel extensively around the mining regions of Otago and Southland. From 1913 onwards his direct contact with Chinese miners lessened, as Don's career took him in new directions. He moved first to Palmerston North, then back to Dunedin to take up the position of Foreign Missions Secretary.

In 1923 he retired to Ophir in Central Otago, where he wrote *Memoirs of a Golden Road: A History of the Presbyterian Church in Central Otago.*[4]

It is not entirely clear at what stage Don began compiling his Roll, but it was probably soon after he arrived at Round Hill in 1883. The first entry in the Notebook is dated 1883, and while it is possible that this was entered at a later date, it seems most likely that he began recording the names of Chinese he met at this time.[5] The early sections of the book contain a list of the names of around 400 men, covering the period between 1883 and 1896. Don provides a romanixation of each man's Chinese name, and sometimes brief notes on his appearance. Here Don also listed the names of men for whom he organized remittances, as well as those whom he had assisted by having letters carried back to their families in China.

The Roll proper begins at page 50 in the Notebook, where Don begins to set out much more systematically information about the Chinese he encountered. He gathered this information during his travels (especially his tours of Central Otago) and through many interviews with the Chinese he met. Some he knew well, others were little more than passing acquaintances. Early entries are often grouped according to location, indicating that Don would fill in a section of the Roll after visiting a group of Chinese in a particular place. There were long periods when he was able to add little new information to the Roll, but if he met a group of Chinese, perhaps gathered for a festival or congregating in Dunedin prior to the departure of a boat to China, he would be able to gather a great deal of new material, which he would then use to update individual entries. Similarly, after he shifted to Palmerston North in 1913, he was able to add many more entries for Chinese resident in the North Island, and we find long sections of the Roll devoted to people living in places like Otaki or Wanganui. After he was appointed Foreign Missions Secretary Don was not able to maintain such regular contact with Chinese people and the entries in the Roll become less frequent, but he continued to add occasional notes up until 1929.

The Roll itself, as distinct from the earlier sections of the Notebook, consists of entries for some 3682 Chinese present within New Zealand between 1896 and 1913. Each page of the Roll is divided into a number of columns, so that standard information is recorded for each individual entry. The first column records, in Chinese characters, the family name or surname of the person. In the next two columns, Don provides the person's adult name and, in some cases, their birth name (or milk name), also in characters. Then there are a series of columns listing the age of the person in 1896, the number of years they had been away from China, the number of times they had returned, and the number of years of schooling they had received. Next Don included columns listing the district (or county) in China the person had come from, the nearest market town to their family home, and the town or village in which that home was located.

All of these people came from a cluster of districts or counties in and around Canton in the Pearl River delta in south China. The majority, nearly 70 percent , came from Poon Yue (Panyu), which lies immediately north of Canton, while a much smaller number came from the two other Sam Yap counties around the city itself (Sun Dak and Naam Hoi). Another significant group came from the Four Counties (Seyip, especially Toi Saan), which lie to the south of Canton. Nearly 8 percent came from Jang Sing County (Zengcheng) to the north of the city, while 2.4

[4] Alexander Don *Memories of the Golden Road: A History of the Presbyterian Church in Central Otago* (Dunedin: A.H. and A.W. Reed, 1936). For a brief biography of Don see James Ng, "'Don, Alexander 1857 – 1934'", in *Dictionary of New Zealand Biography: Volume Two (1870-1900)* (Wellington: Bridget Williams Books, Department of Internal Affairs, 1993), pp. 119-20.
[5] Ng, *Windows*, Volume 4, p. 7.

percent came from Heung Saan (Zhongshan) and 1.3 percent from Fa Yuen (Hua county).[6]

The opposing page of the Roll was divided into two. The first column listed the location in New Zealand where the person was living in 1896, then the final column, by far the largest, was used to add a range of miscellaneous information that Don was able to collect about each individual. Here we find details about the person's movements, about Poll Tax requirements, family relationships, personal health, debts, run-ins with the law, bequests and remittances. There are some fascinating insights into the nature of individual lives contained in the brief notes included in this final column for each entry. For instance, if we just take one page of the Roll at random, we find the record for Jau Yung-Hin (Joe Wing Hen or Zhou Rongxian), who arrived in 1907 and went to join his father in Lawrence. Don provides a reference to his father's entry earlier in the Roll, so that the father and son can be connected. Jau was a Chinese doctor. Late in 1907, both father and son moved to Wellington, where they remained until 1912, when the son returned to China. On another page we find an entry for Gwok Yue Naam (Kwok Yue Nam or Guo Runan) from Baak Sek (Baishi) village in Jung Sing (Zengcheng) county. He was naturalised in 1894, and was living in Ashburton in February 1905, when Don makes first mention of him. His wife joined him from China later in 1905, and in May 1906 they had a son, Yue Sau (or Yushou), whom they also called Charles. Later that year, they sold their garden for £200 and moved to Newtown in Wellington.

While the brief records relating to each individual can be interesting stories in themselves, they provide only snapshots of these lives. When taken together, however, they enable us to begin to build a social profile of the Chinese community in New Zealand in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as well as providing insights into the nature and extent of connections to China and the wider Chinese diaspora throughout the Asia-Pacific region.

Reshaping the data

In order to provide researchers a ready access to the Roll, we had to process the information contained in it in such a way as to make it easy to use. In other words, we had to turn the Roll into a searchable database. Firstly, the details about people and place contained in the Roll were transcribed into spreadsheet form, to replicate the layout and organization in the original source. The information from the spreadsheet was then divided up and reorganized for analysis using database software.[7] The atemporal personal details for each person were stored in a database table containing people details. These details included name, age, years from China, times returned to China, years at school, year of initial entry, district of origin in China, nearest market town to home village, and home village.

All of the places mentioned in the roll were organized into 357 separate categories and these were characterized using a four-part classification of Country, Region, City or Town, and Local. For example, the Dunedin suburb Anderson's Bay was classified as New Zealand – Otago or Southland – Dunedin – Anderson's Bay. This classification enables events within the roll to be analyzed at different geographic levels. Finally, computer scripting was used to reorganize the details of events in the Roll into a common form of Person – Year – Location – Activity. This reflected the nature of Don's records, which were primarily details of a particular person doing something in a particular place at a specific point in time. We should note, however, that the database is only as accurate as the source it represents. At

---

[6] In order to make the information in the Roll of most use to researchers of the Chinese diaspora, we have had to use one of the internationally recognized forms of transliterating Cantonese names and terms (rather than the forms used in the printed version of the Roll). We use the Sidney Lau system of romanization for Cantonese names, but also provide Chinese characters and pinyin romanization.
[7] We used a MySQL database.

no stage have we attempted to revise or manipulate the data in the Roll. The database is simply an electronic, and searchable, version of Don's Roll.

We have used the database to explore questions about mobility and occupation, as we were interested to see how Chinese managed the transition to new forms of life and livelihood once the era of gold prospecting had passed.[8] But there are many other questions that can be asked of the database, and for which it will be a useful source of information. There are five different search facilities available: one for the home village in China; one for the home district in China; one for location in New Zealand; one for surname according to the Sidney Lau romanization; and one for surname in pinyin. Chinese characters are provided in all cases where appropriate and where known from the Roll. Each of the five different search facilities enables searches to be conducted for the years between 1896 and 1913. The website also provides some background to the source of the data and how it has been developed.

One of the obstacles faced by scholars who work on the history of diasporic communities is the limited nature of the archive they have to work with. The range and depth of sources that historians traditionally value are often difficult to assemble, and, because of their mobility, the records produced by diasporic peoples are frequently fragmentary and dispersed. Similarly, these communities tend to be under-represented in the state-produced sources that are the stock-in-trade of many historians. Although many states worked hard to restrict the entry of migrants (and in so doing did produce valuable records), once sojourners or migrants actually entered a country, they had only limited interaction with agents of the state, and often went out of their way to avoid any kind of contact with such agents. Alexander Don's Roll of the Chinese thus provides an unusual and particularly valuable source of information for those interested in the Chinese in New Zealand, and in diasporic communities more generally. By transforming the Roll into an online searchable database we have endeavoured to make this unique source more widely available.

---

[8] For an example of the kind of research that can be done with the data in the Roll, see Brian Moloughney, Tony Ballantyne and David Hood, "After Gold: Reconstructing Chinese Communities, 1896-1913", in *Asia in the Making of New Zealand,* ed. Henry Johnson and Brian Moloughney (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2007), pp. 58-75.