



Lo Keong, Matilda 1854-1856? - 1915
Storekeeper, homemaker, community worker

Matilda Kum, also named Cum Hong, was the first identified Chinese female immigrant to New Zealand, where she raised the first known family of pure Chinese descent. Much of her background is uncertain. It is thought that she was born in Baoan county near Hong Kong, sometime between 1854 and 1856. Her father was a basket-maker. She became a nursemaid, evidently to a Christian Chinese family who took her to Melbourne, Australia, where she learnt to speak and possibly write English. On 15 November 1873 at Emerald Hill, Victoria, she married Joseph Lo Keong, a fancy-goods storekeeper. The couple left afterwards for Dunedin, New Zealand, where they were to have six children.

In 1865 Joseph Lo Keong, a Taishan Cantonese, had been the second known Chinese arrival in Dunedin. How he met Matilda is unknown but both were Christians. Matilda Lo Keong was described as 'pure gold', a veritable 'Mother in Israel'. Joseph, baptised in 1871 in St Paul's Church, Dunedin, was also respected. He was one of six Dunedin Chinese delegated in 1874 to greet Governor James Fergusson, and in 1898 a European suggested that he be appointed a special magistrate to counter anti-Chinese larrikinism.

While working in their George Street store and bringing up the family, Matilda Lo Keong had few other Chinese wives for company: only 11 were in New Zealand by 1896. Whereas nearly all the Chinese in New Zealand were male sojourners, the Lo Keongs were settlers: Joseph was naturalised on 11 September 1882. The eldest son, William, went on to practise dentistry in

Dunedin; Norman, who in 1909 was the first Chinese in New Zealand to graduate from university, was an engineer, as was Victor, and both joined the army in the First World War; Matilda (Tilly) was a music teacher; Estelle was one of the first six women office workers hired by the Union Steam Ship Company of New Zealand; and Olive, whose occupation is unknown, died of tuberculosis on 20 July 1915. Undoubtedly, Matilda Lo Keong gave her children an advantage in assimilating European perspectives because she spoke English. Even so, her children's high level of achievement was probably unmatched by any other completely Chinese family in New Zealand for about 40 years. In 1896 William Downie Stewart stated in Parliament that the Lo Keongs were a credit to the general community.

When the Reverend Alexander Don built the Presbyterian Chinese Mission Church in Dunedin in 1897, Matilda Lo Keong offered to help and Joseph became an elder of the church. Freed from domestic tasks by her Chinese maid, Matilda for years walked to an Anglican and two Chinese services on Sunday, undertook pastoral work, taught Sunday school, catered for the Chinese church's socials, and taught English in the Methodist Chinese class. She was known for her kind deeds. For example, whenever the Chinese inmates of the old men's home attended afternoon service, she would 'quietly slip' the preacher 6d. for each of them. A loyal friend to Don, she must have helped him to understand the Chinese better. When Don left in 1913 Matilda Lo Keong became an interpreter for the struggling mission church.

Unlike Matilda Lo Keong, her children had little to do with the Chinese community. Although Norman and Victor worked in Shanghai and Hong Kong in the post-war period, Matilda failed to influence her offspring to mix with and help other Chinese in New Zealand.

Joseph Lo Keong died on 12 August 1905 and Matilda followed on 18 December 1915; both died in Dunedin. Sadly, all six Lo Keong (or Low as they came to be known) children died without issue. Norman, badly gassed in the war and probably unmarried, died in 1921. William and Victor, both of whom were married, died childless. None of the girls married, and Estelle, the last of Matilda's children, died on 23 June 1967.

JAMES NG

Obit. *Outlook*. 28 Dec. 1915

HOW TO CITE THIS BIOGRAPHY:

Ng, James. 'Lo Keong, Matilda 1854-1856? - 1915'. *Dictionary of New Zealand Biography*, updated 7 July 2005
URL: <http://www.dnzb.govt.nz/>

The original version of this biography was published in the *Dictionary of New Zealand Biography* Volume Two (1870-1900), 1993 © Crown Copyright 1993-2005. Published by the [Ministry for Culture and Heritage](#), Wellington, New Zealand. All rights reserved.