

8. Reporting diversity in New Zealand: The 'Asian Angst' controversy

ABSTRACT

A recent *cause célèbre* in the reporting of diversity in New Zealand was 'Asian Angst', an article published by leading magazine *North & South*. Following the influx of Chinese immigrants into New Zealand over recent years, 'Asian Angst' painted a picture of consequent rampant Chinese crime in the country. The article caused an uproar and the Press Council later ruled the piece was inaccurate and discriminatory. This article reveals how the article conformed to the traditional Western stereotype of Asians as the Yellow Peril, and concludes that the magazine adopted this stereotype because it was apparently determined to portray Chinese immigrants in a poor light and was unable to interpret the relevant crime statistics correctly.

Keywords: Asian, reporting on diversity, North & South, Press Council

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Introduction

NORTH & SOUTH is one of New Zealand's leading magazines. Founded in 1986 by then editor Robyn Langwell, in 2008 the magazine had a readership of 290,000, putting it among the top 20 magazines by readership in the country (AGB Nielsen Media Research, 2008). *North & South* is highly regarded, regularly performing well at the Qantas Media Awards, the country's main print-journalism prizes. In 2007, the magazine was a finalist for best newsstand magazine, a category it won in 2006 (Qantas Media Awards, 2008). Sporting high production values, the magazine proudly proclaims under its masthead 'Thinking New Zealand', a pun on the fact the magazine covers topics from across New Zealand and is a forum for informed national debate.

Yet, despite this, in 2006 *North & South* ran a cover story on Chinese crime in New Zealand that seriously damaged the magazine's reputation. Entitled 'Asian Angst', the article unleashed a storm of controversy. The New Zealand Press Council, a self-regulatory body that monitors print-journalism standards, ruled the article was inaccurate and discriminatory (New Zealand Press Council, 2007a). *North & South* was obliged to publish the council's decision, which was widely reported elsewhere in the media. An American scholar on journalism and diversity, Arlene Morgan of the Columbia Journalism School, described 'Asian Angst' as 'probably the worst example of New Zealand journalism' (Morgan, 2007, para. 6).

As one of those who complained to the Press Council about the article, I have taken a close interest in the case. Although much has been written on the 'Asian Angst' story, this article is the first to provide a systematic and comprehensive analysis of the controversy. This paper places 'Asian Angst' in the context of scholarly interest in reporting diversity, gives a narrative history of the debate surrounding the article, undertakes a content analysis of the article and provides a critical assessment of the relevant crime statistics, which lay at the heart of the issue. This article seeks to answer two fundamental questions:

1. How were Chinese in New Zealand portrayed in *North & South's* 'Asian Angst' article?
2. Why did *North & South* choose to portray Chinese in this way?

This paper makes no claims that its conclusions regarding the 'Asian Angst' article are necessarily applicable to the reporting of diversity in New Zealand generally. The focus here is on the 'Asian Angst' piece, a focus justified by the profound impact the article and its associated controversy had in the country.

Background

Internationally, it has long been recognised that the press performs a gatekeeper role, deciding what is deemed worthy of reporting and whose voices will be heard (Tuchman, 1980; Shoemaker & Reese, 1990). Critics argue that these voices often favour those that own and serve the news media, such as proprietors, advertisers, and the largest bloc of news consumers (Doyle, 2002).

In Western nations, the dominant cultural voice is taken to be White, and various groups are held to have their voices excluded, including ethnic minorities (Chambers, Steiner & Fleming, 2004; Global Media Monitoring Project, 2005). Critics charge that the media depicts minorities in stereotypical ways that conform to the preconceptions and interests of the dominant cultural voice (Wilson, Gutierrez & Chao, 2003). In doing so, the news media help set the agenda on race relations within societies. There have even been calls for regulation to encourage diversity of opinion in the highly concentrated news media industry (McChesney, 2001).

Following Black American riots in the United States in the late 1960s, for instance, the government appointed the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders (popularly known as the Kerner Commission, after the commission's chairperson) to investigate the riots' causes. The commission concluded that Black America was angry and frustrated by endemic racism in the country. The commission alleged that part of the problem was the news media, which 'has too long basked in a White world, looking out of it, if at all, with White men's eyes and a White perspective' (Kerner Commission, 1968, p. 389).

Similarly, the dominant White culture in America in the late 19th and early 20th centuries typically regarded Asians as the Yellow Peril—a potential flood of dangerous immigrants that could overwhelm the country. This image found its way into popular representations of the East Asian (Laffey, 2000; Lee, 1999).

Since then, much has been done to improve ethnic diversity and understanding in the media. For example, the ranks of journalism recruits in America are increasingly drawn from ethnic minorities and reporting on ethnic issues is undertaken by reporters from the same ethnic background. Further, multicultural sensitivity is taught in American journalism schools (Mencher, 2006; Morgan, Pifer & Woods, 2006).

But some commentators dismiss the changes as skin deep. In US newspapers positive stories about ethnic minorities may simply focus on soft-news pieces—such as Chinese New Year or Native American festivals. Success stories about minority individuals succeeding have been interpreted as actually confirming the stereotypes and emasculating the individual's ethnicity. In such stories, the individual leaves the traditional home of their minority group—Chinatown or the ghetto—by joining and adopting the mores of the dominant White culture (Benson, 2005).

Further, critics charge that minorities are still often depicted as a threat to the dominant culture, an Other. To help create this sense of ethnic threat, such journalism excludes commentary that challenges or balances this attitude. Minority groups may also be depicted in a confrontational way—an Us and Them frame in which the ethnic minority is outside the dominant culture (Wilson, Gutierrez & Chao, 2003).

Asians are today often regarded by the dominant White culture as a ‘model minority’, which silently and diligently achieves. In itself, this stereotype has been criticised for treating Asians as a homogeneous community and for inviting hostility from other ‘problem’ minorities and the dominant culture (Kim, Walkosz & Iverson, 2006; Kawai, 2005). Further, White America will quickly revert to employing the traditional Yellow Peril stereotype should Asian Americans threaten the dominant culture by over-achieving or demanding change (Lee, 1999).

New Zealand has experienced a dramatic rise in the number of Asian immigrants and international students entering the country, following legislative changes that began in 1987 (Ng, 1999). Between 1991 and 2006, the proportion of Asians in the New Zealand population rose from three per cent to nine percent, easily the largest increase for any single ethnic group over the period. By contrast, the percentage of European New Zealanders fell five percent, from 83 percent to 79 per cent (Statistics New Zealand, 2008a).

Despite the demographic changes, the depiction of Asians in New Zealand reflects the same themes as scholarly research overseas. For instance, recent studies have found that the New Zealand broadcast media typically depicts Asians in New Zealand as a mysterious Other, often involved in crime (Baker & Benson, 2008; Benson, 2006).

Nevertheless, there is genuine commitment to responsible reporting on diversity in New Zealand, such as in the 13 principles used by the print-journalism industry’s self-regulatory body, the New Zealand Press Council. Established in 1972, the council comprises equal representation from the print-journalism industry and laypeople, plus a retired High Court judge as its independent chairperson. It hears complaints against newspapers, magazines and periodicals, often in light of its 13 principles. If it upholds a complaint, the council requires the offending publication to print the substance of its decision. The council also publicises its decisions, and these can be reported in other media. The council cannot impose fines or award compensation (New

Zealand Press Council, 2008a).

Principle 8 considers diversity:

Publications should not place gratuitous emphasis on gender, religion, minority groups, sexual orientation, age, race, colour or physical or mental disability. Nevertheless, where it is relevant and in the public interest, publications may report and express opinions in these areas (New Zealand Press Council, 2008b, para. 10).

Principle 1 emphasises the need for accuracy:

Publications (newspapers and magazines) should be guided at all times by accuracy, fairness and balance, and should not deliberately mislead or misinform readers by commission, or omission (New Zealand Press Council, 2008b, para. 1).

The most significant instance of the council upholding a complaint regarding discriminatory reporting was the ‘Asian Angst’ piece (Price, 2007).

‘Asian Angst’

The ‘Asian Angst’ article looked at crimes committed by Chinese in New Zealand and questioned New Zealand’s Chinese immigration policy (Coddington, 2006. Unless otherwise stated, all page references below refer to this article). *North & South* published the article, written by then senior writer Deborah Coddington, as its December 2006 cover story—advertising the piece on its front cover as ‘Asian Angst: Is It Time To Send Some Back?’ Although the article uses the word ‘Asian’ in its title and throughout the text, the article stated that it was primarily concerned with crimes committed by those with ‘a Chinese-sounding name’ (p. 40.). So, although the terms ‘Asian’ and ‘Chinese’ are used interchangeably in the article, as much as possible this paper will confine itself to using the term ‘Chinese’.

The article created a storm of controversy, with *North & South* publishing 23 letters to the editor in the three months following publication. Eight letters supported the article, describing it, for example, as ‘a valuable insight into an underworld the public needs to be alert to’, ‘putting in print what a sizeable proportion of the rest of New Zealand say around their dinner tables’, and ‘BRILLIANT’ (Laing, 2007, p. 13; Simpson, 2007, p. 20; Cullinane, 2007,

p. 17). The other 15 letters denounced the article, describing it, for instance, as 'damaging', 'racist, xenophobic', 'the creation of mistrust', 'inflammatory', 'Intellectually lazy', and 'biased, superficial and prejudiced' (Mabbett, 2007, p. 12; Howie, 2007, p. 14; Friend, 2007, p. 16; Cho, 2007, p. 16; Campbell, 2007 p. 19; Chapple, 2007, p. 14). Another magazine, *New Zealand Listener*, published a critique of the article (Ng, 2006).

But *North & South* was unrepentant. Langwell declared that the article was an example of the magazine's desire to 'highlight issues many New Zealanders are talking and anguishing about privately' (Langwell, 2007, p. 14).

Frustrated by the magazine's intransigence, three complainants took the matter to the Press Council. The complainants were: a consortium of mostly Chinese academics, journalists and community leaders led by Chinese social commentator Tze Ming Mok; the Asia: New Zealand Foundation, a not-for-profit organisation that promotes links and understanding between Asia and New Zealand; and the current author (New Zealand Press Council, 2007a).

The council issued three decisions, one for each complainant, but the texts of all three decisions were essentially identical and are treated as one here (New Zealand Press Council, 2007a, 2007b, 2007c). The council found the article breached the principles of accuracy and discrimination, that the Asian crime rate had decreased over the period and so to 'talk of a gathering crime tide is therefore wrong' (New Zealand Press Council, 2007a, para. 27), and that the article's failure to place the crime stories and negative commentary in the context 'both of other sectors of New Zealand society and of the Asian communities as a whole, cannot but stigmatise a whole group' (New Zealand Press Council, 2007a, para. 31).

North & South was obliged to run the council's decision ('Press Council adjudication, *Asian Angst*,' 2007). The council's decision was widely reported in both the mainstream news media (for instance, 'Press Council condemns Asian Angst story,' 2007; Bennetts, 2007; 'Complaints against *North & South* article upheld,' 2007; Valentine, 2007) and the Chinese news media (for instance, 'Justice is finally delivered: The Press Council condemns Deborah Coddington,' 2007; 'Press Council says 'No' to racist author,' 2007).

Several commentators called on the magazine to apologise, including the Asia New Zealand Foundation and a Chinese newspaper (Asia New Zealand Foundation, 2007; 'Unforgivable missing apology', 2007). But rather than apologising, Debra Millar, group manager at *North & South*'s publisher, ACP

Magazines, said the magazine and Coddington stood by the article ('*North & South* defends article,' 2007). Langwell and Coddington later left *North & South* for reasons that appeared to be unrelated to the controversy (Drinnan, 2007; Welham 2007). Although Coddington continued to defend the article (Coddington, 2007a, 2008), she did recently state she was 'genuinely sorry for offending those members of the Asian community who are not engaged in criminal activity' (Coddington, 2008, p. 36).

Research method

The 'Asian Angst' article was analysed in two ways: a content analysis of the entire article and a critical assessment of the crime statistics quoted in the piece.

Content analysis

A content analysis of the article was undertaken to identify and quantify what the article said about the Chinese in New Zealand and how it said it (Neuendorf, 2002; Swoboda, 1995). The total text of the article was 1123.5 cm².

The author coded this total text area in two ways. First, the main subjects covered in the article were identified and each subject's share of the total cm² calculated. This revealed the general preoccupations of the article and the overall impression the article conveyed regarding the Chinese in New Zealand.

Second, the voices heard in the article and the tone of those voices was identified and the cm² of each calculated. Voices were categorised as either non-Chinese or Chinese, to see whether New Zealand's dominant White culture was the primary voice in the article and, if so, which sectors of that culture dominated. A voice was categorised as having a negative tone if it presented information or passed comment that reflected poorly on Asians, including Yellow Peril-like expressions such as 'Asian menace' (p. 41). Text was categorised as positive if it presented information or passed comment that reflected well on Asians, such as 'the undeniable benefits of Asian immigration' (p. 42). Text was categorised as neutral if it presented information or passed comment that reflected neither poorly nor well on Asians, such as 'In November 2005 the government introduced new health screening policies' (p. 45).

Assessment of the crime statistics

As well as presenting anecdotal evidence as to the prevalence of Chinese

Table 1: Content analysis of 'Asian Angst' article text (1123.5cm²)

Category	% of voice	% of text
Topic		
Chinese perpetrators of crime	NA	60.7
Chinese immigration	NA	18.0
Chinese victims of Chinese crimes	NA	8.0
Other	NA	13.3
Total topic	NA	100
Voices		
Non-Chinese		
<i>Negative</i>	78.7	72.8
<i>Positive</i>	4.1	3.8
<i>Neutral</i>	17.2	15.9
Total non-Chinese	100	92.5
Chinese		
<i>Negative</i>	56.5	4.2
<i>Positive</i>	14.5	1.1
<i>Neutral</i>	29.0	2.2
Total Chinese	100	7.5
Total voices		100

Source: Content analysis by the author, 2008.

crime in New Zealand, the article presented statistics to support its contention that Chinese crime in New Zealand is increasing. As these statistics form the basis upon which any claim that Chinese crime in New Zealand actually was increasing, this paper critically assesses the article's statistics.

Results

Content analysis

Topics

The largest single topic was Chinese committing crime, comprising 61 per cent of the article's total text (Table 1). The crimes reported include murder, kidnapping, drug-trafficking, and deception: 'Zeshen Zhou was jailed for 17 years after being found guilty of murdering his wife' (p. 47), 'when sentencing a 25-year-old Chinese kidnapper' (p. 41), 'Alex Kwong Wong...

received a 17-year jail term for importing methamphetamine' (p. 41), 'the commission prosecuted Jonathan Ken...for falsely labelling and selling ordinary honey' (p. 45).

The second largest topic area was Chinese immigration into New Zealand, comprising 18 percent of the text. Much of this material is couched in Yellow Peril terms. Giving figures on the number of Asians coming into New Zealand, for instance, the article suggested that although recent changes to the immigration laws 'appear to have quelled the number of Asian immigrants, this may prove to be temporary' (p. 47). Similarly, the article linked Chinese immigration into New Zealand with crime, with the standfirst (the large text at the start of the article) observing:

In the past 15 years we've opened our borders to people from North Asia and all they needed was money and a clean bill of health.

But, as DEBORAH CODDINGTON reports, they also brought murder, extortion, kidnapping, assassinations and disease (p. 39).

The Yellow Peril motif can also be detected in the article's depiction of Asians as an Other that negatively impacts on average (presumably White) New Zealand. The article says that, because of Asian crime, 'disquiet grows in heartland New Zealand about the quality of migrants we're letting through the door' (p. 40). The article describes how such crime affects 'the average New Zealander' (p. 40), the 'Frustration about Asians' attitude to New Zealand law' (p. 41) and how Asians poach paua when 'New Zealanders regard paua as a national treasure' (p. 47).

Eight per cent of the text depicts Chinese as the victims of Chinese crime: 'Tam was nearly killed by his then wife, Jai Fong Zhou, when she whacked him 10 times with his own meat cleaver' (p. 41). The other category included Asians using New Zealand health services (including tracing a tuberculosis outbreak in Palmerston North to a South Korean immigrant), Chinese retailing, and general Asian activity in New Zealand.

Voices and tone

The voices heard were overwhelmingly non-Chinese (93 percent) and, in turn, most of this non-Chinese voice was negative in tone (79 percent). Just over half of the negative non-Chinese voice was the magazine itself, which spoke of 'the gathering crime tide' (p. 40), the 'Asian menace' (p. 41),

Asians criminals' 'brazen pursuit of big money' (p. 42), and the 'monotonous regularity' of Asian crime (p. 47). The next largest category was the police, accounting for 29 per cent of the non-Chinese negative material. For instance, a detective sergeant was quoted saying 'drug peddling was becoming the 'crime of choice' within the international student community' (p. 43). Another 14 per cent of the non-Chinese negative material was community leaders and professional people, such as a district court judge lamenting, 'Hardly a week goes by...without the kidnap of a Chinese student' (p. 42).

Seventeen per cent of the non-Chinese voice was neutral in tone, again primarily the magazine itself (61 percent), followed by community leaders and professional people (20 percent) and politicians (19 percent). Four percent of the non-Chinese voice was positive. Forty-four percent of this was community leaders and professional people, such as an immigration officer who observed 'the Asian reputation as a law-abiding community is still there' (p. 44). A further 25 percent were comments from politicians, such as the immigration minister noting that 'he's seen no evidence Asian crime rates are higher than any other ethnic groups' (p. 47), a view shared by the opposition spokesperson. These positive views were frequently disputed by the magazine. For instance, the magazine said the politicians' comments revealed they were 'both ignorant of a major problem under their very noses' (p. 47). Thirty percent of the non-Chinese positive voice was the magazine, which stated near the start of the article that the 'massive influx of Asian investment in our commerce and education has indeed been bounteous' and that 'the vast majority of Asians making New Zealand their new home are hardworking, focused on getting their children well educated, and ensuring they're not dependent on the state' (p. 40).

Eight percent of the text was in a Chinese voice. More than half of this Chinese voice (57 percent) was negative in tone. For instance, the article quoted a Chinese woman who had lived in New Zealand since emigrating from Hong Kong in 1966. She was 'sad and angry at increasing criminality among recent Asian immigrants' (p. 46). Likewise, a Chinese journalist in New Zealand was quoted saying Asians regard New Zealand's laws as 'lax' (p. 42). This journalist later repudiated the comments ascribed to him, saying he was misrepresented and he did not support the article's editorial stance (Kean, 2007, para. 4).

Twenty-nine percent of the Chinese voice was neutral, comprising the description of the life of the Chinese woman who came to New Zealand

in 1966. Fifteen percent of the Chinese voice was positive, and comprised her comments on the descendants of 19th century Chinese immigrants. These New Zealand-born descendants, she said, are 'law-abiding and hard-working' (p. 46).

Critical assessment of the crime statistics

Ten percent of the article was statistical analysis, used to paint a picture of rising Asian crime and to demonstrate that Asians were more prone to criminal activity than another ethnic group in New Zealand, Pacific Islanders. Noting that Asians have been immigrating to New Zealand in increasing numbers, the article said:

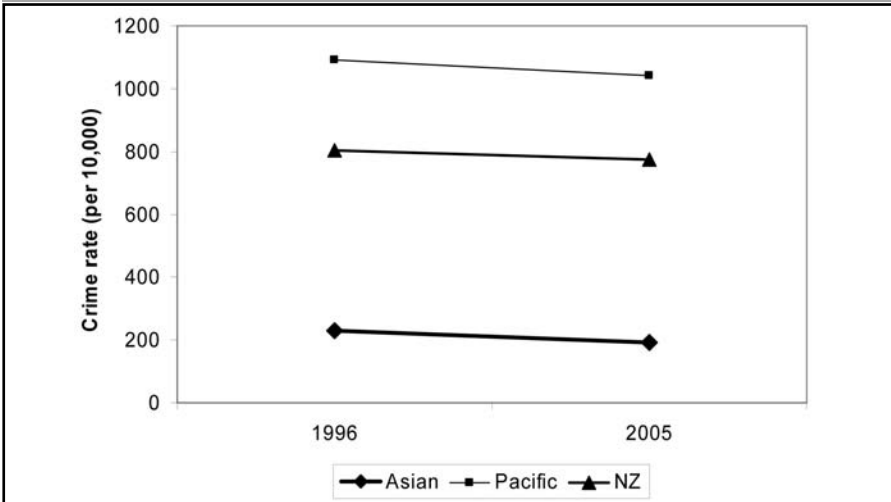
[F]rom 1996 to 2005, total offences committed by Asiatics (not including Indians) aged 17 to 50 rose 53 percent, from 1791 to 2751. Compare that with offences committed by Pacific Islanders, who make up 6.5 percent of the population. They certainly committed more offences—11,292 in the same decade—but their increase was only 2.9 percent (p. 44)

To obtain a clear picture of the relative incidence of Asian crime requires the calculation of the crime rate, the standard statistical measure of the incidence of crime (Statistics New Zealand, 2006). It is calculated as the number of reported crimes divided by the relevant population and then multiplied by some number, often 10,000. The crime rate did not appear in the article, so it is calculated here, using data for the time periods and populations used in the article. The relevant crime rates are depicted in Figure 1.

The two time periods quoted in the article were 1996 and 2005. The Asian population *North & South* used was 'Asiatics (not including Indians) aged 17 to 50' (p. 44), the population found in the original crime statistics supplied by Statistics New Zealand (Statistics New Zealand, 2008b). That is the Asian population quoted here. Obtaining population statistics from Statistics New Zealand for 1996 was straightforward, as a national census was conducted that year. There was no census in 2005, but by using census data from 2001 and 2006 I interpolated a robust population estimate for 2005.

As the article noted, in 1996 the number of Asian apprehensions (that is, arrests of Asians) was 1791. The total population of Asians that year was 78,513. The Asian crime rate in 1996 was therefore 228.1 crimes per 10,000 Asians. In 2005 the number of crime apprehensions for Asians was 2752

Figure 1: Asian, Pacific Island and NZ crime rates, 1996 and 2005



Source: Derived by author from Statistics NZ data.

(the article said 2751, presumably a typographical error). The estimated total population of Asians that year was 142,527. The crime rate was therefore 193.1 crimes per 10,000 Asians.

So the Asian crime rate *fell* by 15 per cent between 1996 and 2005 - the gathering tide of Asian crime that *North & South* identified did not exist. The number of arrests rose by 54 percent, but the Asian population rose by 82 percent. As a result, Asians were committing proportionately less crime, not more.

The article also said the rise in Asian crime was greater than for Pacific Islanders. But the crime rate was 1091.2 per 10,000 Pacific Islanders aged 17 to 50 in 1996, and 1041.3 in 2005. That is, in 2005 the Pacific Island crime rate was more than five times that for Asians. The Pacific Island crime rate did fall across the period, but by only five percent. The Asian crime rate fell by three times that.

For the entire New Zealand population, the crime rate was 801.9 per 10,000 New Zealanders aged 17 to 50 in 1996, and 772.4 in 2005. In other words, in 2005 the crime rate for all New Zealanders was four times that for Asians. Clearly, Asians were far more law-abiding than was the general population.

When this analysis was put to the article's author, she rejected it.

Coddington explained that she did not simultaneously compare the rise in the Asian population with the rise in the crime apprehension statistics because she 'did not intend to insult the intelligence of my readers' (Coddington, 2007b, p. 1). She also said the analysis was 'not comparing like with like' (Coddington, 2007b, p. 2).

Conclusions

Journalists are said to perform a gatekeeper role, publishing material that reflects the interests of the dominant cultural voice. By confirming the dominant culture's views of ethnic minorities and excluding the voices of minority groups, the media helps set the agenda for race relations in society (Chambers, Steiner & Fleming, 2004; Kerner Commission, 1968; Tuchman, 1980; Shoemaker & Reese, 1990). The frankly racist depictions of the past are no longer acceptable in the modern, more tolerant, multicultural age, but Asians are still often presented in stereotypical ways (Baker & Benson, 2008; Benson, 2005; Mencher, 2006; Morgan, Pifer & Woods, 2006). Asians have been depicted in Western media as a threatening Other, either a Yellow Peril that can overwhelm White society or an over-achieving model minority. Voices that contradict this depiction are frequently excluded (Laffey, 2000; Lee, 1999; Wilson, Gutierrez & Chao, 2003).

Following the dramatic rise in the proportion of Asians in the New Zealand population over recent years, this paper considered a *cause célèbre* in the reporting of Chinese in New Zealand, *North & South's* 'Asian Angst' article. The paper confined itself to an analysis of 'Asian Angst' because of the article's profound impact in New Zealand.

How were Chinese in New Zealand portrayed in the article?

Content analysis of the article revealed that most of it presented the Chinese as the traditional Yellow Peril stereotype—Chinese are increasingly immigrating into New Zealand, there is a consequent rise in Chinese crime, and this gathering crime tide appals heartland (that is, White) New Zealand.

Why did North & South choose to portray Chinese in this way?

There seems to be two answers to this question. First, there was the magazine's apparent determination to portray Chinese in a poor light. The content analysis revealed that the article overwhelmingly drew on non-Chinese voices to tell its story and these voices were mostly negative in tone. What few Chinese voices were heard in the article primarily also spoke

negatively of recent immigrants. Few contrary voices were heard, and those that were frequently belittled by the magazine. Chinese were therefore generally presented as a dangerous Other, with contrary voices excluded or dismissed.

Second, there was the magazine's inability to interpret the relevant crime statistics correctly. If the magazine had analysed the crime statistics correctly (or sought out those with that ability), it would have soon realised that the facts simply did not support the article's argument.

It seems fitting to give a voice from New Zealand's Chinese community the last word on the matter. A Chinese New Zealand news website welcomed the Press Council's decision with these words:

[I]n the future, any New Zealand journalist will have to be very, very careful to respect facts and truth when they report events relating to other ethnic groups. They will understand that if they selectively chose the stories without any balance, with the intention to instigate racial hatred, the result could be, 'We've got you', because there will always be people who will make them apologise, people who will complain to the Press Council (Mao, 2007, para. 5).

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