



Chinese whispers

Massey Albany has one of the highest proportions of international students for a tertiary institution in the country. Brad Heap looks into racism at Massey Albany, our habit of racial slurs, and the recent outrage at student media.

Over the past few weeks a serious rift has developed between Chinese students at Victoria University Wellington and the student magazine, *Salient* over the printing of a satirical joke in the April 24 issue.

In the magazine's weekly "Top Fives" column, *Salient* ranked the Chinese fourth in a list of "Top five species we should be wary of". Published just over a week after the murder of Auckland Chinese Student Wan Biao, whose body was found floating in a suitcase off Westhaven, the joke has caused outrage in the Chinese community.

After the release of the issue, the *Salient* office was flooded with letters of complaint from students who were offended by the joke. *Salient* editor James Robinson states that "[the joke] was a ridiculous jab that was honestly so stupid I didn't even think twice about it. We put 'the Chinese' between

'penguins' and 'very poisonous snakes' on the list, and people somehow took it seriously. People who were offended had misinterpreted it."

Robinson has had to shrug off several death threats since the publication of the 'Top Five', including bullets that had been mailed to him. The Chinese Embassy has called the gag blatantly racist and commented "[that] if you say this, you create feelings against the Chinese."

Chinese students on the popular Chinese SkyKiwi.com forums have condemned the printing of the joke and have also condemned the response of some of their fellow students. In response to the mailing of bullets to the *Salient* office, a user of the forum made it clear that they did not support those students who did such things and felt ashamed and disgraced to "see our people" do such a

thing.

News of the issue has spread quickly to the Chinese mainland where it has been reported in media and reportedly some students are considering leaving New Zealand because they feel they have been discriminated against.

In an effort to calm the situation, Robinson has printed an apology in his latest column; although in the same issue there is another satirical attack on the Chinese by listing them number one on a 'Top Five' list of "Foreign embassies who last week threatened *Salient* with blacklisting." Massey University Student Magazine, *Chaff* has also used the publicity of the incident to its advantage, and infuriating Chinese students further; by using a picture of former Chinese leader, Mao Zedong dressed in drag on the cover of its magazine.

Tempers flared as a group of about 50

students protested outside the office of Chaff at Palmerston North. Students compared the situation to that of the anti-Muslim cartoons, claiming that the cover was a form of discrimination.

Chaff editor Edrei Valath and news editor Matt Russell have responded to the protest by stressing that the cover was intended as a joke. In an open letter to all Massey students the Chaff team state that it was "a political statement, not a racial one".

"We believe that a significant amount of the offence caused by the cover is due to confusion over this fact," they say.

Mr Valath says Chinese students are "enraged for the sake of being enraged. It is ironic - in China, the students would have no forum in which to complain. Chinese students studying here should be made aware a good sense of humour is part of Kiwi culture."

The perceived seriousness of the Chinese jokes has split the Chinese Student community. Some students have responded with extreme offence while others have accepted it as a joke. Other students have fought fire with more fire. A user created 'Top Five' of the SkyKiwi forum listed:

"Top Five animals to be aware of:

1. Island People
2. Maori
3. Poor Kiwi
4. Rich Kiwi
5. Luanyao the dog

While some students have gone to the extremes of mailing bullets to the editor of *Salient*, or insulting Kiwi students, other people have seen it as nothing more than a storm in a teacup. New Zealand Chinese Students' Association (NZCSA) president, Nancy Hu sees the incidents as totally isolated. "Most students are feeling very warm and welcome here. The students themselves take part of the responsibility [for the controversy]. They just need to understand the culture here more."

Chinese Massey student Tony Song said protesters were being "too sensitive"

"It's been done to the Queen before. I'm not offended at all. I was laughing."

Media commentator Keith Ng, former Victoria University student and news editor for *Salient* also has a relaxed view on the issue. Ng, himself of Chinese heritage, states on his publicaddress.net blog that "it was a joke. It had no racist or malicious intent. *Salient* has

nothing to apologise for. Those sending death threats should be ashamed of themselves."

In the blog, Ng claims the joke is really not mocking Chinese at all. "The target of the joke was not the Chinese, but the people who consider the Chinese as a threat. This was mocking racists."

At Albany the Chinese issue has almost gone under the radar. However this is not to say that Massey Albany does not have its own problems with racism and harassment towards Chinese students.

While there have not been any major incidents between Chinese students and the rest of the local university community ala the *Salient* and *Chaff* incidents, there is no denying that Chinese students do receive racist harassment much of which is ignored or goes unreported.

I would be lucky to go a week at Massey without hearing someone slagging off Chinese students. Every day, you hear comments such as "silly Chinese", "go home", "the clubrooms smell like Chinatown. The computer labs/Massey Contact, etc look like Beijing" and the infamous "bloody Asian drivers". While these may seem meaningless and not very hurtful with constant repetition, they add up to a lot of abuse.

I will even admit to using the odd one. In particular when a driver fails to stop on one of the pedestrian crossings on the top campus and waves to me instead - like I am the one that is meant to wait for him.

The problem with these "small, non-meaningful" racial slurs is that as they become common and more widespread the barriers of use for more offensive terms are lowered, opening Chinese students up to more abuse.

Take for instance the Recreation Centre ATM robbery. Many comments heard around campus were aimed at Chinese students, such as "bloody Asian students probably did it", "Asian crime here is on the rise", "I bet it was Asian students in Asian crime gangs". In fact the police are looking for a Polynesian, not an Asian.

Massey Health and Counselling Manager, Gabrielle Graham, says that "the numbers [of harassment complaints] relating to Asian students are generally small."

"There is some harassment and bullying within ethnic groups but these are not generally reported to us. This may be because students from other countries may be afraid to report to authorities preferring to try to

handle it alone."

"I think all harassment is unacceptable and we try to assist anyone who has the courage to speak out."

I spoke to a few Chinese students about the issues of harassment at Albany. Many claimed that there was little or no racial harassment on our campus. However many claimed that students generally work in class with people from their own culture rather than mixing with others.

This was highlighted at the Massey Cultural Day where the great cultural diversity of our campus was shown. However, if you were to look beyond the people just passing through, just glancing at the stalls, you would see the majority of the students taking part did not venture beyond their own cultural stand. The Chinese students were buying Chinese, the Latin Americans buying Latin American and the Middle Eastern also staying within their cultural bounds. Most students were not game enough to go beyond their comfort zone and experience someone else's culture.

Until we do venture beyond our own cultural bounds and experience life from someone else's culture we will continue to have a culture of harassment. We need to stop being so stuck inside our own cultural identity, stop being so proud and full of our own culture we need to expand our horizons and viewpoints. We need to realise that there is more to this world than just white Kiwis, Maori or Chinese. We need to stop insulting other cultures through our own ignorance.

Remember next time you say "Asian Invasion" realise that you are being racist. How would you feel if Maori continually referred to you as the "European Invasion"? Or if the Moa referred to Maori as the "Hawaiki invasion"?

At the end of the day we need to treat all of our fellow students with respect. Making insults towards fellow students only splinters us as a student body, it hurts and upsets people and doesn't do you any good either. Then our campus would be an even better place if we respected other people's cultures and did our best not to offend people of other cultures. Frieden heraus, Paz hacia fuera, Paix dehors, Pace fuori, Paz para fora, Peace Out!