

THE CHINESE CONNECTION



In March of last year, Madame Chen Muhua, Vice-Premier of the People's Republic of China, stood on the marae at Turangawaewae and extended an invitation to the Maori people to visit her country.

The invitation was taken up. Archdeacon Kingi Ihaka, Chairman of the Maori and South Pacific Arts Council was to lead a delegation of selected experts in haka, poi, action song, taiaha and choral presentation to visit cities, factories, communes and other centres in China. Also going would be Kara Puketapu in his role as Maori Trustee and Bill Kerekere — himself a noted performer and composer, though on this occasion he was covering the tour for Radio New Zealand.

The group followed some illustrious predecessors. Previous visits had been made by such cultural emissaries as the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra, the Greek National Theatre, the Old Vic Theatre and the Bucharest Philharmonic Orchestra. The only other Maori organisation to visit China was a concert party in 1964.

Who Paid?

The tour was paid for by the Chinese government, who were responsible for all expenses incurred within the Republic. The cost to New Zealand was limited to travel to and from Hong Kong, and the gift presented to the Chinese at a special reception in Peking: a canoe prow, similar to that presented to the new New Zealand Embassy in Washington last year. New Zealand's share of the cost was paid by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Maori Trustee and Air New Zealand.

Above On their arrival at Nanning from Canton, Kara Puketapu (left) Archdeacon Ihaka (right) and the other members of the group are met by Jian Bing, Vice-Director of the Cultural Bureau.

Other members of the group were: Bill Kerekere, who covered the tour for Radio New Zealand; Vicki and Richard Wehi and Louise Kingi from Gisborne; Dean Kershaw and Mari Prime from Patea; Tui Maxwell and Donna Morrison from Rotorua; Tokanui Ihaka, Anne Tapene, Piripi Munro and Kahu Pou from Auckland; George and Ramiri Brennan from Christchurch; Muri and Lorraine Walters from Dunedin; Puti Tukukino and Hine Poa from Upper Hutt; the Rev Te Napi Waaka from Hamilton; Hinetu Dell from Invercargill; Tamati Parore from Paremata; and Judie Fishenden from Porirua.

They were chosen, in the words of Maori Trustee Kara Puketapu, "from the four winds of Maoridom". All are well known in their districts and nationally for their dedication and expertise in performance and for the contributions they have made to Maori culture, even though some are only young.

There were only two opportunities for them to get together for rehearsal before leaving for China, once in Ngaruawahia in October and once in Wellington prior to a special reception held for them at the Chinese Embassy. Nevertheless, performances were polished and professional, even if modifications to their planned concerts had to be made to cater for the needs and attitudes of audiences once in China.

But before their departure Kara Puketapu paid tribute to others who had helped to make the trip possible: "I want also to thank publicly those employers who are supporting our tour members by continuing to pay their wages while they are overseas or, in some cases, making special grants to cover this."

What For?

The group visited cities, factories, universities, communes and other centres. Through their many performances, scheduled or otherwise, they were able to show many thousands of fascinated Chinese something of Maori culture.

Through more personal contacts they were also able to achieve the kind of rapport and good will so important between nations but so unlikely to occur with tourist groups or formal trade missions. Despite the need for interpreters, discussion was lively and wide-ranging as Maori and Chinese talked about everything from martial arts to animal husbandry, from consumer spending to carving styles.

Hospitality

The party flew to Hong Kong from Auckland on 2 December, and reached Canton by train the following day. Three days were spent in Canton, followed by four days in Nanning and four days in Peking. They arrived home with a week to spare before Christmas.

Throughout, their reception was almost overwhelmingly hospitable. They were met and hosted by the revolutionary committee of each province, comparable to the state