Asian Migrants’ Experiences of Public Transport in Auckland

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Abstract

Transport research finds that the ethnicity is a critical factor in explaining travel behaviour. New Zealand cities have become increasingly ethnically diverse, and transport planning can benefit from drawing on the plurality of cultures and values that underpin the social fabric of those ethnic communities. The growing Asian population in Auckland provides an opportunity to transform an automobile-dependent city into a public transport friendly city, as in most Asian countries people make extensive use of public transport. This research explores the opportunities for improving Auckland’s public transport by studying the everyday experience and aspirations of the city’s Asian communities. This paper reports data collected from Chinese community social media to explore the community’s daily experience of public transport in Auckland. The research identifies communication, expectation and perception gaps between Asian users of existing and future public transport systems and institutional practices.

Introduction – Public transport in multicultural cities

Studying the everyday experiences and aspirations of Auckland’s Asian communities is one way of exploring opportunities for improving Auckland’s public transport system. Auckland is one of the world’s most car-dependent cities, with car travel making up nearly 80% of total trips. More than six decades of road-oriented development has resulted in a sprawling urban form with an inefficient and underutilised public transport system (Imran and Pearce,
In 2012/13, only 3.7% of trips in Auckland were made by public transport, while the estimated congestion cost amounted to $1.25 billion per annum (Auckland Transport, 2013).

The obduracy of Auckland’s transport problems contrasts with rapid change in the city’s population. Traditionally known for its unique combination of European and Maori-Polynesian cultures, in the last 30 years, Asia has become the main source of migrants to Auckland, now making up 20% of the city’s population (Statistics New Zealand, 2013). This Asian influence presents an opportunity for transformation from an automobile dependent city to a public transport friendly city, as in most Asian countries people make extensive use of public transport.

Public policies and projects need to recognise and reflect the cultural and racial diversity of multicultural cities (Qadeer, 1997; Sandercock, 2000). Sandercock (2000) argues that for a society to be functionally as well as formally multiculturalist planning policies must reflect and accommodate a diversity of values, practices and customs, drawing on the plurality of cultures and values that underpin the social fabric of communities. Burby (2003) finds that by bringing together different stakeholders, pluralistic planning can facilitate the integration of scientific and lay knowledge and build social capital, leading to improved planning outcomes. Understanding immigrant communities is also important, because they are a force, reshaping the physical and socio-economic structure of cities. This can be seen in the emergence of ethnic enclaves, shops and places of worship in many world cities, with consequences for the provision of services and facilities, including transport infrastructure (Pestieau & Wallace, 2003).

Transport planning faces increasing challenges in recognising and providing for the diverse travel needs of the communities it serves (Axhausen & Schonfelder, 2010). Wang and Lo (2007) argue that a person’s cultural background can be an important determinant of their travel behaviour. For instance, they show that Chinese immigrants in Toronto prefer to shop at more distant ethnic stores rather than mainstream stores closer-by, even if the products that they seek are available at both. Such cultural behaviours influence spatial relationships and travel patterns in Toronto.

A growing body of literature has indicated that ethnicity is an important determinant of public transport usage, even in highly motorised Western countries. People migrate for multiple reasons including as involuntary migrants and refugees. Consequent socio-economic status will impact upon whether public transport use is a preferred or forced option. However, planned skilled migration is growing in Canada, USA, Australia, New Zealand and many northern European countries and forced option to use public transport become unimportant. A study from Norway by Uteng (2009), shows that public transport makes up 32% of the daily trips undertaken by immigrants from non-Western backgrounds, compared to 8% for the native Norwegians. Meanwhile, only 41% of trips made by these immigrants are by car, compared to 66% for the natives. In a US study, Blumenberg and Smart (2010), find that immigrants are 2.8 times more likely to commute by public transport than native-born Americans. They also point out that the immigrant population has a considerably lower car ownership rate (604 per 1000 persons) than the native-born (765 per 1,000 persons). In another example, from Australia, Klocker and Head (2013) observe that 74% of foreign-born workers commute by car, which is markedly lower than the figure of 84% for the native-born.
Blumenberg and Smart (2010) argue that immigrants are often subject to the process of transportation assimilation, suggesting their preference for public transport may be time-bound. Over a period of 15 to 20 years, immigrants’ travel behaviour tends to converge with that of the native-born population. Such an assimilation process has been documented by Heisz and Schellenberg (2004) showing recent immigrants to Canada (arrived in less than 10 years) exhibit significantly higher propensity to use public transport than long-term immigrants (arrived more than 20 years ago), even when controlled for other variables such as age and income. Heisz and Schellenberg (2004) assert that higher use of public transport is mainly a result of the changing composition of immigrant source countries, with increasing immigration from countries of Asia and Africa.

Lack of understanding of local language and culture presents both opportunities and challenges for transport planners in growing public transport usage in migrant populations. Chatman and Klein (2013) observe that this may contribute to the lower driving rates among immigrants, especially upon initial arrival. However, Raje (2004) argues that language/cultural factors may discourage immigrants from using public transport, with lack of English proficiency, rendering it difficult “to navigate the transit system” (Blumenberg, 2008 p.39). Consequently, Chatman and Klein (2013) emphasise achieving a critical mass of non-English speaking public transport users important in making it easier for new immigrants to learn about the transit system. Thus, Burayidi (2003) suggests that transport planners need to develop ethnic sensitivity to formulate policies which ultimately help public transport patronage.

The planning literature emphasises creating transparent, inclusive and democratic systems of plan-making by adopting open exchange of ideas and knowledge between expert planners, engineers and communities (Healey 1997). Mees (2010) argues that the transport planning successes of Vancouver and Zurich were made possible by high levels of democracy and deliberation in strategic plan-making. Although, the transport planning process in Auckland has, in line with procedures, provided multiple platforms for consultation, there has been little debate on setting transport priorities. The mobilities paradigm focuses on the subjective factors which shape people’s everyday experiences of community (Urry, 2006; Cresswell, 2010). It is very hard to measure or quantify subjective factors but they are crucial in understanding individual (im)mobilities. Studying everyday mobility experiences provides a valuable conceptual framework, not only for improving public transport in Auckland, but also empowering Asian migrant communities, and improving fairness in transport provision. This qualitative analysis identifies Asian communities’ perceptions, biases and experiences, leading to their varied and variable use of public transport in Auckland. We are therefore, interested in unpacking their value-structures and feelings about what they regard as desirable public transport solutions. This will help in reducing the gap between Asian communities’ aspirations for public transport and the proposed projects of the Auckland Council.

**Methodology**

While this research investigates Asian communities’ everyday experience and aspirations for Auckland’s public transport, this paper specifically focuses on Chinese communities living, or with experience of living in Auckland. Social media has been used as the primary data source. According to Zafarani, Abbasi and Liu (2014), the rapid growth of social media as a communication channel has created a “novel source of rich data” (p.6), enabling researchers to study human behaviour. In this research, the views of the Chinese were studied based on
Online comments collected from three sources:

- **Skykiwi forum**: a New Zealand website targeting the country’s Chinese-speaking population. The website receives 75,000 unique IP visits per day, and is the 56th most viewed website in New Zealand. Its forum is home to the largest online Chinese community in New Zealand with over 200,000 registered members, of whom 83% live within the Auckland region;
- **Skykiwi news section**: a popular news portal covering the latest New Zealand news in Chinese. A group of active readers leave comments under the news articles; and
- **Sina Weibo**: a Chinese microblogging website very popular with the Chinese communities worldwide, with over 50 million active daily users, including many living in New Zealand.

Relevant forum threads, news comments and microblog postings between January 2010 and June 2014 were identified by keyword searches. Thematic analysis identified “the recurring messages that pervade the situation about which the critic writes” (Eisner, 1998, p. 104).

The use of social media allows researchers to access hard to reach and empirically underrepresented groups (Golder & Macy, 2014; Leng, 2013). However, researchers do need to be aware of limitations on the generalizability of findings, and validity concerns relating to anonymity and low accountability (Leng, 2013). Concerns regarding generalizability stem from perceptions that internet access and use may be centred on a younger demographic than the general population, and thus not representative, but these differences are diminishing over time (Leng, 2013), and according to Golder and Macy do not warrant the ‘widely used distinction between the web and the real world’ (2014 p. 143). Further, the high level of use of the selected social media sites by the Chinese population increases its representativeness. It is also argued that social media participants comment on threads close to their experience, thus reducing distortion and increasing validity. In addition, if participants have relative anonymity their comments may be more freely expressed, hence again increasing validity. Nonetheless, Leng does suggest that social media users who share a common identity, such as membership of an ethnic community, may feel pressured to be consistent with group norms and expectations, to some extent countering the positive impacts on validity gained from anonymity. Evidence of emotive or vitriolic responses to postings (Golder & Macy, 2014) may also indicate that discussions are not necessarily representative of ‘real world’ behaviours. The researchers are aware of these limitations, but recognise that social media is becoming increasingly representative, and useful for collecting data concerning the viewpoints of hard to reach groups such as the Chinese community in Auckland. The data does not attempt to provide comprehensive coverage of the views held by Chinese community organisations in Auckland, but it is expected that the general position of those Chinese communities on the issue of public transport will be reflected in the data.

**Results**

The Chinese are the largest Asian ethnic group in Auckland, making up over 8% of the region’s total population (Statistics New Zealand, 2013). As of Census 2013, the Chinese population in New Zealand had reached 171,000, 69%, or 118,230 living in Auckland. The Chinese exhibit a low median income of $16,000, significantly below the national median of $28,500, and low labour force participation. Only 52% of Chinese over the age of 15 were
employed in 2013, 10% below than national average. A reason for this may be that 28% of working-age Chinese were engaged in full- or part-time study, compared to 15% of the total New Zealand population.

The Chinese population in Auckland is highly concentrated in the CBD, Mt Eden, Avondale, Howick, Pakuranga, Takapuna and Birkenhead. In many neighbourhoods in these areas, more than 20% of residents identify themselves as Chinese (Statistics New Zealand, 2013). The Chinese population exhibits high car ownership rates compared to the national average, with the number of households owning two or more private vehicles being higher than that of the total national population. Nevertheless, as of 2013, public transport accounted for 8.5% of commuter trips by the Chinese, compared to 6.5% for the total Auckland population (Statistics New Zealand, 2013).

In total, 184 online comments were gathered for social media analysis. They were divided into three main themes: public transport infrastructure (48 comments), public transport services (129 comments) and public transport planning processes (seven comments). This paper focuses on the comments related to public transport infrastructure and services.

Public transport infrastructure

The City Rail Link (CRL) and Waitematā Harbour Crossing (AWHC) proposals are the most frequently discussed issues, making up 26% of infrastructure comments, and 19% of total comments across all three themes, with 69% of CRL infrastructure comments being negative. Concerns about the CRL centre around its economic and financial viability, potential profitability, and the debt burden it is expected to impose on Auckland’s population. For instance comments include:

With Auckland's small population, the question is how the CRL could possibly run profitably and generate a positive return on the investment?

A second area of concern is whether the built environment is suitable for rail:

Auckland has low population density. Rail only benefits a minority of people where it goes. It is infeasible for the majority to use rail.

Thirdly, the usefulness of light rail is debated:

Investment in the bus system and bus only lanes is superior than rail investment.

Support for the CRL sis also expressed:

Singapore and Hong Kong have much lower car ownership rates than New Zealand ... because the public transport system is so excellent ... From this point of view, Len Brown's proposal is a step in the right direction.

The AWHC received greater support with 77% of the relevant comments favouring the project, particularly the tunnel option including rail between CBD and the North Shore. Dissenters were again mainly concerned with the cost implications of the project.
Public transport services

The 129 comments made about public transport services have been subdivided into issues of i) affordability, ii) reliability, frequency, and operating hours, and iii) customer service.

Affordability

This is the most common theme making up 29% of comments, the overwhelming majority (78%) considering the fares to be excessive, and a major deterrent to public transport use:

When public transport becomes too expensive, then it doesn’t deserve to be called ‘public’ transport.

18% of the comments consider public transport costs to be equivalent to or more expensive than driving, and a major disincentive. Several users even made detailed calculations to support such claims. For those who considered public transport to be fairly priced, most cited the lower relative cost of public transport compared to driving as the primary rationale; for example:

Bus is cheaper than driving if you take into account the costs of owning, maintaining, insuring and parking your car.

One user argued that Auckland’s public transport providers could justifiably charge higher ticket prices due to the level of crowding being less than in Chinese cities.

Comments suggest the Chinese community’s negative perception of public transport affordability is influenced by constrained socioeconomic status.

Reliability, frequency, and operating hours

Reliability is the second most discussed theme, making up 22% of comments. The overwhelming majority (90%) view public transport services as unreliable. Lack of punctuality is the main issue, including a claim that:

In recent months, my bus has never arrived on time.

Most of the negative reliability comments relate to bus services; views on trains being more divided. Some consider trains more reliable than buses because “they do not get stuck in traffic jam”. Others argue that trains are also often late and sometimes experience mechanical problems. Reliability issues are seen to increase journey time, imposing a substantial opportunity cost on public transport users:

... today it took me an hour to get into the city by bus, compared to just 45 minutes by car. In conclusion, I will never travel to the city by bus again.

The issue of poor punctuality is compounded by low off-peak frequency and short operating hours. For instance:

the unpunctuality, low frequency and early finishing times of certain [bus] routes upset me more [than the high costs].
However, satisfaction was also expressed with public transport frequency during peak hours:

The bus service in the North Shore is ok. During morning and evening peak hours, there is a bus every 5-10 minutes.

The ticketing system also seen to undermine the reliability of public transport in Auckland. For example:

The Hop Card technology is too immature...There are often issues (with the ticketing system)... For that reason I have been prevented from boarding the bus for several times.

Customer Service

The data shows strong evidence of poor customer service and information deficiency limiting access to public transport. An overwhelming number of comments describe the unfriendly and rude behaviour of bus drivers. For instance:

Once I only had a $20 note when I got on the bus, so the driver asked me to go to the dairy shop nearby to get change. But once I got off the bus, he shut the door and drove away. I felt cheated.

A large number of the postings on the SkyKiwi forum inquire about public transport schedules and routes. System complexity and ticketing changes have caused considerable confusion. Some posts also clearly suggest language barriers to be an issue in using public transport. For example:

I’m new to Auckland and need to catch a bus. My English is not good. Can anyone please tell me after I get my bus card, whether I only swipe it when I board the bus, or do I need to swipe it again when I get off?

Discussion and Conclusion

This section discusses the two main themes, public transport infrastructure and public transport services, identified in the analysis of the Chinese community social media comments and draws conclusions from the analysis.

Auckland Council’s proposed public transport projects including the CRL and AWHC have sparked fierce debate within the Chinese community, the majority of comments about CRL being negative. Key concerns relate to the project’s high construction cost and limited utility. By contrast, the AWHC proposal has received strong support, with many emphasising the need for the crossing to effectively incorporate public transport.

Tal and Handy (2010) argue that residential location may have a role in explaining opinions such as those of the Chinese community on the two projects. There is a large Chinese community living in or near the CBD, but also in many other suburbs, many of which – particularly on the North Shore that do not have access to rail. The benefit of the CRL is likely to be heavily discounted by residents from these areas. The additional harbour
crossing increases connectivity between the North Shore and the rest of the city, and is more positively received, as it benefits a wider population, a point not focused upon in the Council’s prioritisation of the CRL over the AWHC.

It should be noted that many Chinese who are against the CRL are not fundamentally opposed to rail development per se. Rather, they consider it a poor fit with the low density characteristics of Auckland’s existing urban landscape, which limits accessibility to rail for the wider population and thus the profitability of train services. From this perspective, the Council’s strategy of promoting intensification may, overtime, increase the acceptability of the CRL, and increase public transport patronage.

There is a common perception among the Chinese that Auckland’s public transport is overpriced. This may relate to the community’s relatively low socioeconomic status, often as students and/or new immigrants, who are less able to afford public transport. This status and strong affordability concerns tend to support the literature arguing that ethnic travel behaviour relates to socioeconomic profile, and may differ from that of mainstream society.

The perception that fares are expensive is not limited to the travel behaviour of those on lower incomes; many commenters describe public transport as “expensive” (rather than “unaffordable”), making it an unattractive alternative to driving. Although there is no consensus about whether public transport is cheaper than driving, what emerges from the data is a prevailing view that high bus and train fares, in conjunction with poor reliability, renders public transport poor value compared to driving. This has led many to claim that for convenience they would rather spend more to drive their own car.

The Auckland Plan (2012) describes affordable living, including transport, as a guiding principle in the Council’s efforts to attain a well-connected and accessible city. However, in giving effect to this principle, Council sees public transport as a means to reduce the cost of living, usually in conjunction with affordable housing policies. By framing public transport as a positive, cost-saving modal choice within the broader context of rising house prices and costs of living, Council has avoided having to address the issue raised by the Chinese regarding the perceived high costs of public transport.

Reliability, low frequency and operating hours of services are all major shortcomings of Auckland’s public transport for the Chinese. While a few users comment favourably on the peak hour services, many consider the frequency of services unsatisfactory, especially during off-peak hours and on weekends. Claims of having to wait for up to an hour for buses were relatively common. Chinese communities’ perceptions about public transport services in Auckland are consistent with other residents of the city. According to the market perception survey, 58% people in Auckland think that public transport did not provide an appropriate choice ‘to get where I want, when I want’ (AT 2014, P. 6). While further confirmation is required, the low level of satisfaction with frequency suggests that there is strong demand for off-peak services and network planning (Imran and Matthews, 2015). Such demand is not unexpected considering the Chinese population’s low labour force participation rate, with only 35% working full-time, suggesting that these individuals (despite the overall car ownership levels within the Chinese population) may be less likely to have access to a car, and/or travel at peak hours. This possible link between the socioeconomic makeup of the Chinese population and their travel demands for off-peak services is supported by international studies by Lovejoy and Handy (2008). Auckland Council’s proposal to create a modern, efficient transport system, and Auckland Transport’s
new network will no doubt help improve the reliability and frequency of public transport. Auckland Transport (2014) market perceptions survey shows that 59% respondents feel that public transport in Auckland is improving as compared to last year.

Public transport customer service is also regarded as needing improvement. The research suggests that some Chinese bus users find Auckland bus drivers to be unfriendly and/or impatient. While customer service related issues appear to be of less significance than other matters such as affordability and reliability, they could still undermine Chinese public transport patronage. Limited English proficiency may further restrict access to information and compromise use of the complex and potentially confusing public transport network in Auckland. Incidences of missing bus stops or catching the wrong bus appear to be common among the Chinese in Auckland, especially for new immigrants. These findings coincide with the views of Raje (2004) that cultural shock and language barriers may reduce the accessibility of public transport to ethnic communities. The findings are also consistent with Syam (2014) that there is a significant difference between the travel needs, attitudes, and perceptions of transport modes among different ethnic communities in Auckland. Asians travel noticeably less than people of other ethnicities (Europeans, Maori and Pacific Islanders) both in terms of number of trips and distance travelled. Failure to acknowledge the transport needs of these communities is likely to lead to inadequate infrastructure and service provision, creating barriers to people fully participating in society.

This paper has explored the everyday public transport experiences and aspirations of the Asian communities in Auckland. This research shows that at least some members of the Chinese community would like to see improvements in existing public transport services, rather than a focus on public transport mega projects as advanced by the Council. To have a voice in the creation of improvements, the inclusive and participatory planning systems advocated in the literature need to be put in place in the setting of transport priorities. Affordability, reliability and low frequency are key factors deterring people from using public transport; a situation which can be fixed in the short-term, ultimately improving patronage (Imran and Matthews, 2015). Other issues include poor customer service, a complex and confusing network and language barriers. Auckland Transport addresses some of the issues identified in their new network design including public transport efficiency, reliability and connectivity. However, customer service and language barriers have so far been largely neglected. Perhaps more bilingual staff and drivers might help improve this situation.

This paper has exposed opportunities for improvement in Auckland’s future transport planning and policy, as Sandercoc (2000) suggests, multicultural planning can facilitate institutional change. This study of Chinese perspectives on Auckland’s public transport has uncovered many issues, including affordability and language barriers, which Auckland Transport should consider. The Auckland Plan has placed a strong emphasis on social inclusion. However, its strategy for this relies predominantly on improving the physical access of communities to public transport, and ignores the socioeconomic factors that restrict people’s access to public transport. With the affordability issue of public transport left unaddressed, the mobility of low-income Asian immigrants in general and Chinese families in particular is likely to continue to be limited, which prevents them from fully participating in New Zealand society. This paper concludes that transport policy and planning would benefit from engaging with a greater diversity of its residents to bring fresh ideas and additional perspectives to the formulation of public transport solutions.
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References


**Bio**

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