

# Culture ambassador

NEW ZEALAND'S CHINA-BORN MP TURNS AUTHOR TO SPAN CULTURAL DIVIDES AND HELP PEOPLE UNDERSTAND THE TWO COUNTRIES BETTER

By **KARL WILSON** in SYDNEY

**R**ecognizing that culture is the DNA of enterprise and goodwill, Raymond Huo, New Zealand Labor Party's Member of Parliament, wants to build bridges. Not steel structures that span rivers but social ties that bridge cultures and bring people closer.

The 48-year-old lawyer-turned-journalist and now, politician, believes that by spanning cultural divides, some of the major issues that disjoin today's world, especially in relation to emerging superpower China, can be resolved.

Huo, who was born in China, is hoping to do this with his seventh book — *The China You Don't Know*.

He hopes it will engage not only those interested in knowing more about today's China, but also business people who want to "better understand how the Chinese think and do business".

"I am constantly amazed at how western businessmen and women still think that doing business in China is like doing business in Europe," Huo says from his home in Auckland.

"Take the term *guanxi*. How often do you hear this used in relation to kickbacks and corruption? (But) many foreigners still interpret *guanxi* as bribe. The term literally means relationships. In China, business is all about relationships and not about paying bribes. This is something foreigners just don't understand.

"It is myths like this that I want to dispel in my new book and help build better bridges," he explains.

Huo wants to make a difference, in his own small way, with regard to relations between the country of his birth and his adopted homeland.

"I was born in China and now live in New Zealand," Huo, the father of two children, both born in New Zealand, says

"In many respects, I regard myself as neither Chinese nor New Zealander ... I am a product of this globalized world we now live in.

"Yes, I am Chinese and very proud of my heritage but I now live and work in New Zealand, my new home."

New Zealand's former governor-general Sir Anand Satyanand recognized this and in his foreword to Huo's earlier book *The New Zealand Quartet*, wrote: "Chinese New Zealanders have made this country their own. That point is well summarized in a beautiful phrase in the opening of Professor Manying Ip's book, *Unfolding History, Evolving Identity*, which states: 'Where my heart is at ease, this is home.'"

Huo was born into a family of medical practitioners in Anhui province in 1963. His father was a doctor, his mother a nurse, and his three siblings — one brother and two sisters — followed in their parents' footsteps.

However, medicine was not for Huo. He studied English at Anhui University in Hefei province and then law at the China University of Political Studies and Law in Beijing.

It was while growing up in the small town of Qianshan in Anhui that Huo first heard stories about Rewi Alley, a New Zealand-born writer who went to China in 1927 and never returned home.

"As a young boy growing up in Mao's China, I had certainly heard of Alley," Huo recalls the days when the People's Republic of China was governed by Chairman Mao Zedong.

"Alley spent his life working with the people on public healthcare and education projects. He was a man greatly loved in China. I knew of his work and the great affection people, including Mao, had for him. But for me, there was also the fascination with his homeland — New Zealand. A country often described as a tranquil corner of the Pacific.

"I made my mind up in 1994 to immigrate to New Zealand — partly out of curiosity but also to find tranquility."

Not long after arriving in New Zealand, Huo landed a job with the New Zealand Herald group, the country's biggest newspaper, as a translator.

"At first I was translating for a Chinese title the group owned, later I moved to the Herald as the newspaper's Asian affairs reporter."

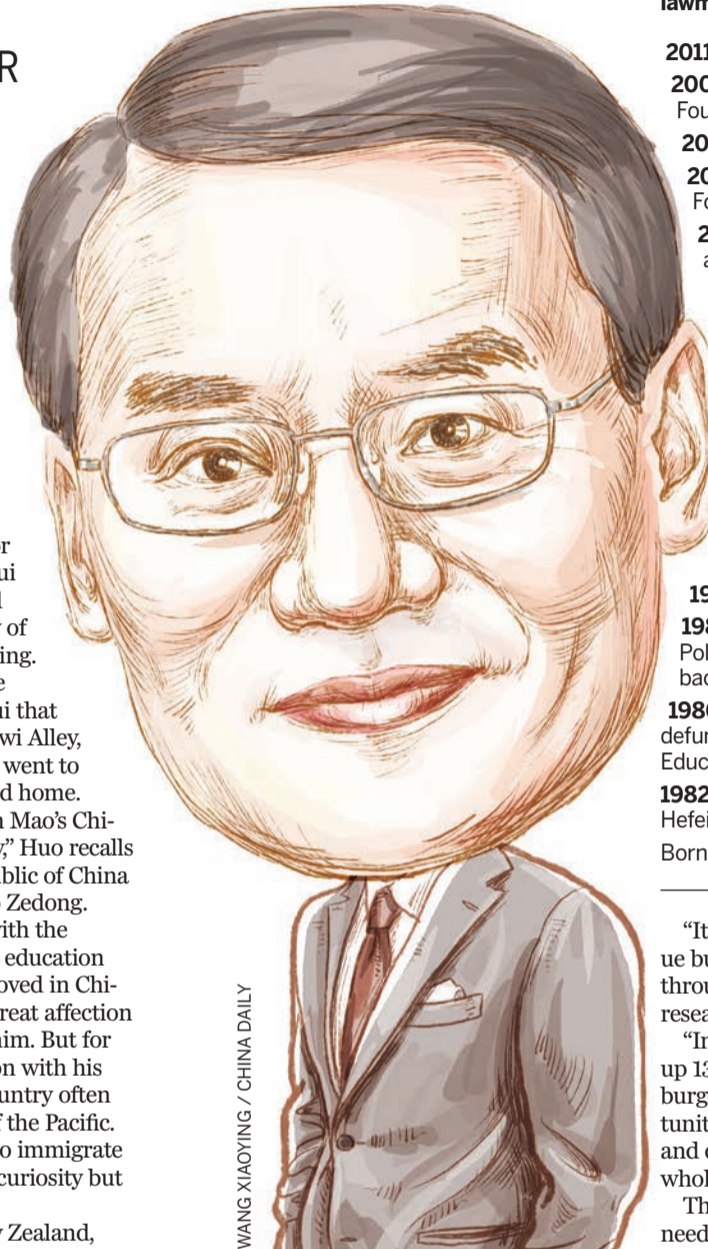
This opened many doors for Huo and gave him wide exposure to New Zealand's Chinese community which today numbers more than 200,000, or roughly, 3-4 percent of the country's total population of 4.5 million.

He studied political communication and later law at the University of Auckland before joining a local legal firm where his knowledge of Chinese law became invaluable. Many prominent members of the Chinese community began to urge him to stand for parliament.

"They saw me as a good role model for the Chinese community," Huo says. "I was the mainland who had immigrated to New Zealand rather than the United States, Canada or Australia and had done well — first as a journalist through my writing and later as a lawyer."

"I write Chinese using traditional characters or the traditional script. But at the same time, I am seen as someone who has bridged the two communities here — Chinese and non-Chinese," he adds.

Soon he was courted by the Labor Party and it seemed a natural choice for Huo to



## BIO

**RAYMOND HUO**  
New Zealand MP and the Labor Party's first lawmaker of Chinese descent

**2011:** Re-elected Labor MP.

**2009:** Appointed Asia New Zealand Foundation trustee.

**2008:** Elected Labor MP.

**2007:** Named KiwiAsian Development Forum chair.

**2001-08:** Practiced law with Brookfields and Hesketh Henry before joining Queen City Law.

**1999-2001:** Studied law at the University of Auckland, earning a bachelor's degree.

**1997-99:** Studied political communications at the University of Auckland, obtaining a postgraduate degree with first-class honors.

**1994-98:** Worked as a translator for the New Zealand Herald group, later becoming the Herald's Asian affairs reporter.

**1994:** Immigrated to New Zealand.

**1987-90:** Studied Law at China University of Political Studies and Law, Beijing, obtaining a bachelor's degree.

**1986-94:** Worked for an organization (now defunct) associated with the Ministry of Education in Beijing.

**1982-86:** Studied English at Anhui University, Hefei.

Born: **1963**, Anhui province.

"It is important for New Zealand to continue building bridges with its Asian neighbors through business, culture, education and research.

"In Auckland alone, Asians now make up 13 percent of the population. With this burgeoning population comes more opportunities for New Zealanders to travel, study and do business with the Asian region as a whole," Huo says.

The MP believes young New Zealanders need to be prepared for a world in which Asia will be highly influential and he is supportive of Asia New Zealand Foundation's education program focusing on developing "Asia-aware" students.

He advocates educating young New Zealanders about the region and the opportunities Asia holds for them.

"We no longer live in blissful isolation. We are part of a global community, a community in which China and Asia will play a major role in the years ahead," he says.

Huo shares the Asia New Zealand Foundation's motto: "By learning more about our Asian neighbors — their history, their cultures and their languages — young New Zealanders can gain a better global knowledge to take advantage of the opportunities the region offers."

He says the foundation, through grants, scholarships, exchanges and special events for school leaders, teachers and students at primary, secondary and tertiary levels, helps New Zealanders to learn about Asia "first hand".

The KiwiAsian Development Forum is pursuing similar goals.

"It all boils down to breaking down barriers and building bridges — bridges of cooperation, better understanding, tolerance and respect for our differing cultures," he says.

"There is only so much you can do in politics. But at least it gives you a national voice."

join them. Labor, according to Huo, is "a party of vision, and a party that stands for real social values in the community".

His work with the KiwiAsian Development Forum, of which he is chairman, and the Asia New Zealand Foundation, where he is a trustee, also helped him gain a great deal of respect not only within the Chinese community in New Zealand but also within business circles.

"Relations between New Zealand and China have never been better," Huo says, adding that since the signing of the Free Trade Agreement between the two countries in 2008, China has emerged as New Zealand's second-biggest trading partner after Australia.

"Our future growth, and indeed even Australia's for that matter, will depend on a resilient China," Huo says, pointing out that presently, one day's trade between New Zealand and China equals the entire year's trade back in the 1970s.

Trade, however, is just one aspect of the relationship, Huo emphasizes.

"The other is knowledge. That is why I still write — to bridge that knowledge gap."

Huo's extensive knowledge of China is eagerly sought by the Asia New Zealand Foundation which "does great work in getting the message out".