
*Chinese in Australian Fiction 1888-1988* is a masterly and innovative approach to a generally overlooked aspect of Australian literature. Thoroughly researched and meticulously referenced, the wide range of books and articles cited are measured against the backdrop of Australia-Chinese relations, changing social and cultural conventions and the histories of both countries over its one hundred year span and the twenty years beyond. The depth of insight evident in this book is the more surprising and commendable when one reads in the final chapter that it was written over a period of three and a half years, between 1991 and 1994, when Ouyang had been living in Australia for little more than three years.

Through meticulous analysis of Australian literature, ranging from now obscure works by generally long-forgotten writers to more recent publications by somewhat better know authors, Ouyang develops his thesis that ‘the white population still dominates multicultural Australia with a basic fear of an Asian, particularly Chinese, takeover’ (25).

Structurally, Ouyang has adopted a chronological approach bookended by historical and philosophical approaches to China and a conclusion that presages a blossoming in Australian-Chinese literature post 1989 in the aftermath of the Tiananmen Square Incident. The final chapter provides a commentary that highlights several Asian-Australian writers who developed and emerged in the subsequent twenty years, such as Brian Castro, Lilian Ng, Hsu-Ming Teo and Ouyang Yu himself.

Ouyang explores a series of binary oppositions through which Chinese, and other Asian people, are characterised in (Australian) western literary discourse. Such binary oppositions are contained within Religion, with portrayals of the (bad) heathen contrasted with (good) Christians; Race, White Australia and the Yellow Peril; and Politics, communism versus capitalism. The book also examines ethnocentrism; Orientalist depictions of the ‘Other’, including half-castes and Chinese women; invasion literature and a stereotypical representation of power and subservience that simultaneously underpins and nurtures development of the Australian national identity from pre-Federation to the present day.

References and quotes from noted philosophers, sociologists and historians are used to good effect in support of Ouyang’s proposition that ‘Australian identity has been constituted in racial terms by being defined against the Other, of which the Chinese comprise the major part’ (43). Literary examples cited include stories by iconic Australian writers such as Henry Lawson and Mrs Aeneas Gunn through to their modern-day counterparts Christopher Koch and Blanche D’Alpuget.

Ouyang exposes much of the seemingly positive portrayals of Chinese in Australian literature as ethnocentrism, claiming that ‘Westerners judge Chinese by Western standards’ (40). One example examined is the popular classic *We of the Never Never*. Although Gunn’s book is generally considered to write against the prevailing stereotyping of Chinese, by authors such as Lawson and other *Bulletin* writers of the time, as either ‘likable and easily manipulated lower orders [or] ... the evil, hateful merchant’ (210), Ouyang maintains that Chinese and other non-white
characters portrayed favourably by Gunn, and in later ‘Asian writing’ such as that by Koch and D’Alpuget, are depicted through an ethnocentric perspective:

What does not correspond to Western standards gets dismissed as uncivilised, immoral, and barbarian, thus not worth being represented in fiction except as the negative Other. What we regard as Westernised and materially exploitable gets appropriated and made appealing ... as an attractive Other. (50)

The period from 1950 to 1972 is sub-titled ‘Politicised Orientalism’. Ouyang asserts that the political upheaval in China and its proclamation as a communist state in 1949 resulted in further polarisation in the depictions of the Chinese. Most Australians of the time were staunchly anticommunist and regarded China as a real threat to Australia’s security. Ouyang contends that much of Australian literature of this time set in Asia, especially that published in the Bulletin, displays an anti-communist bias. The works cited demonstrate that this period gave rise to a literary dichotomy between depictions of the evil Chinese communist and brave opposing forces. Nevertheless, there was an opposing view from those of Australia’s literati who held sympathies with the communist movement. Writers such as George Johnston, Ruth Park and David Martin are described by Ouyang as writers who ‘cast their Chinese characters in a comparatively favourable light’ (276). Referring to Johnston’s later novels, Ouyang claims that while other Australian writers of this period ‘ruthlessly celebrate the difference between the Chinese and Westerners, Johnston dissolves the difference by stressing their homogeneity’ (280).

In considering the post-Tiananmen period since 1989, it is interesting to contrast Chinese in Australian Fiction with Ouyang’s own very postmodernist novel The Eastern Slope Chronicle, published in 2002, in which Ouyang parodies and inverts Australian literary representations of Chinese. The main character, an Australian-Chinese academic and would-be novelist, Dao Zhuang (which he has anglicised to Zane Dole) describes his fictional student (and alter-ego) Wu Liao, on a visit to China, reflecting on the foreignness of his new life in Melbourne compared to that of his childhood in Eastern Slope. Wu remembers being ‘unnerved by the silence Australia imposed on him ... a silence he had never experienced before ... inhuman, dead, uncanny, uniquely Western, meaningless, insidious, destructive, malicious ... disquieting.’ Dao’s Chinese, home-town contemporaries are portrayed as more financially secure than the impoverished, and ironically named, Zane Dole, who subsists on social security in Melbourne. Dao muses ‘my downward mobility all these years in a capitalist society ... would serve to show how superior the socialist system in China was to the West in general and the capitalist Australia in particular.’ In a discussion about the ease of access to news and other media in modern China, and in answer to Dao’s question about whether there was much mention of Australia, a Chinese character comments ‘with some sarcasm’, “Why would they want to know anything about Australia, anyway? Australia doesn’t have any presence here ... You are probably the only Australian I have seen in all my life.” When Dao comments that Australia wants to be part of Asia, his friends retort, ‘What for? ... They belong to

2 Ouyang 126.
3 Ouyang 120-1.

Oceania geographically and have never been part of Asia,’ and assume it is ‘Probably for economic reasons ... now that Asia is doing better than most Western countries in the world, the West wants to come in for a share.’

There is much to be learned about Australia’s self-image from Ouyang’s work; *Chinese in Australian Fiction* provides an excellent reference and counterpoint to the reading of Australian literature. Evidence for the truth of Ouyang’s claim that ‘racism creates negative Chinese stereotypes both by commission and by omission’ (45) can still be found in 2010. One such example is the white-out of the Chinese-Australian hero and his family in the recent Australian film, *The Legend of Billy Sing* (ABC, 2010). However, thanks in part to Australian-Chinese writers such as Ouyang Yu, such blatant misrepresentations no longer go unnoticed but are challenged in opinion-pieces in Australia’s national media.

It is impossible to do justice to the scope and depth of scholarship in the space of this review. I recommend that anyone remotely interested in better understanding how representations of the Other in literature and popular culture are influenced by and, in turn, influence Australia-China relations and representations read Ouyang’s book – you’ll be absorbed.

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4 Ouyang 123.
5 See for example, Rowan Callick, ‘When character is more than skin deep’, *The Weekend Australian*, 8-9 May 2010: 4