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East by South: China in the Australasian Imagination  
(review)

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*East by South: China in the Australasian Imagination*. Edited by Charles FERRALL, Paul MILLAR, and Keren SMITH. Wellington, NZ: Victoria University Press, 2005. 439 pp.

THIS WELCOME ADDITION TO CHINESE-NEW ZEALAND and Chinese-Australian studies showcases the range and thematic orientation of cultural studies in the Antipodes today. Studies of “representations” of the Chinese are growing at a pace to match the frequency of Chinese characters in Australian and New Zealand film and fiction. The two are not unrelated.

The range of the book is clear in its structure. Nineteen chapters are classified into three sections of more or less six chapters each. Two sections are brought together under a single heading, “Australasian Sinophobia and Sinophilia,” adopting two different perspectives, one social and political, the other aesthetic. The third section presents a variety of “Alternatives to Australasian Orientalism.” The book is structured to accentuate cultural readings of political, social and aesthetic representations of China and the Chinese in New Zealand and Australia.

Its thematic orientation is best captured in a brief listing of the topics covered. Seven of the chapters deal with literary representations, including poetic representations in *The Bulletin* (Noel Row), invasion fiction (Timothy Kendall), Chinese in American best-sellers (David Walker), 20th-century New Zealand fiction (Paul Millar), 1930s travel writing (Jane Stafford), contemporary Australian fiction (Ouyang Yu), and a recent work of science fiction (Phil Mann). Three deal with ideology and identity, including the historiography of New Zealand biculturalism (Tony Ballantyne), diaspora identities and the WWW (Adam Lam), and indigenous Australian and Chinese identities (Peta Stephenson). Two deal with music and performing arts (Henry Johnson and Dugal McKinnon), one with fashion (Keren Smith), and one with film (Kylie Message on Clara Law).

Historically-minded readers will also find much to enjoy, including Duncan Campbell’s delightful essay on Katherine Mansfield’s household Chinoiserie, Brian Moloughney’s reflections on the pit-falls of cross-cultural translation, and a chapter by Paul Jones on institutional networks linking Chinese Australians and China from the 1890s to 1949, without doubt the most succinct treatment of this subject yet to appear in print.

Mark William’s introduction draws meaningful comparisons between the two major sites of settlement that make up Australasia, and Wenche Ommundsen’s concluding chapter brings readers back to the question that inspired the volume: “how do Antipodeans imagine/represent/construct the Chinese?”

Ommundsen is compelled to ask, not surprisingly, who is doing the imagining. The selection of chapters suggests this question is readily answered for the

bi/multicultural eras in each country but less readily for the earlier era of White Australia and New Zealand. Ommundsen herself draws out the recurring motif of self-reflexive or “mirrored” identities in Chinese-Australian fiction and the growing preoccupation with identities in the Chinese-Australian community at large. Paul Jones’ historical study aside, however, none of the chapters makes significant allowance for Chinese-Australasian self-representations in the earlier era of White supremacy.

This is less criticism of the book than a reflection on the state of the field. It has yet to be widely acknowledged in cultural studies that there was more to the Australian and New Zealand “imaginings” than the White imaginary could conceivably imagine. Forgetting institutional history, Chinese antipodeans of the prewar era had a lot to say about their adopted countries and their rightful place as citizens. In the Australian case, at least, there were Chinese-Australian memoirs and novels, plays, actors, painters, photographers, essayists, sermonists, and close to a dozen different Chinese-Australian newspapers in print before the advent of multiculturalism. Many authors in the volume focus on the “Australasian imagination” of the pre-war period without acknowledging the limits of the “Australasia” they are themselves imagining.

In overlooking the many and varied voices of Chinese antipodeans of the White supremacist era, scholars are in danger of perpetuating the historical claim of the White imagination to be the authentic “Australasian” one before the contemporary era, and endorsing the latter-day claims of multiculturalism to have settled the issue in favor of reflective multiple identities. I suspect that Chinese Australians and New Zealanders would have far less difficulty coming to terms with their identities today if they knew a little more about the Chinese who were vocal Australians in White Australia, or proactive New Zealanders in New Zealand, long before the two countries reinvented themselves as bicultural and multicultural entities. The White supremacist period is still *terra nullius* as far as Chinese Antipodeans are concerned.

Curiously, the historical memory of White Australia seems to be more stable now than White Australia ever was as an historical experience. In chronicling the waxing and waning of pro- and anti-Chinese sentiment in Australia, for example, one author argues that a well-received Chinese procession to commemorate Sydney’s sesquicentenary in 1938 “would not have been imaginable fifty years earlier.” In fact Sydney held a far grander and more popular Chinese parade 50 years earlier, which attracted enormous crowds to Moore Parke. An even bigger parade took place in Melbourne when one to two hundred thousand people cheered and clapped the Chinese procession celebrating Federation in 1901. Chinese participation in public life was not unimaginable in White Australia. Chinese Australians made sure of that. But we are still awaiting Chinese Australasians to reclaim that period as part of their own cultural history and contemporary identity.

Returning to the book itself, there is much to commend a volume in which all serious students of literature, film, media, music, performance, fashion, and history in Australia and New Zealand will find much to read and enjoy.

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