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East by South China in the Australasian Imagination

edited by Charles Ferrall, Paul Millar and Keren Smith

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Contents

Preface 7
Charles Ferrall, Paul Millar and Keren Smith

An Introduction to Australasian Orientalism 9
Charles Ferrall

PART A: Australasian Sinophobia and Sinophilia

Section 1: Socio-Political Perspectives

1 Sentimental Racism *Mark Williams* 29

2 The View from the Edge: Chinese Australians and China, 1890 to 1949 *Paul Jones* 46

3 The Misty Ways of Asia *Noel Rowe* 70

4 Writing out Asia: Race, Colonialism and Chinese Migration in New Zealand History *Tony Ballantyne* 87

5 Using the Past to Serve the Present: Renewing Australia's Invasion Anxiety *Timothy Kendall* 110

6 Godless Heathen: China in the American Bestseller *David Walker* 136

Section 2: Aesthetic Perspectives

7 'Canton Bromides': The Chinese Presence in Twentieth-century New Zealand Fiction *Paul Millar* 156

8 'What lies beneath those strange rich surfaces?': Chinoiserie in Thorndon *Duncan Campbell* 173

9 Robin Hyde's *Dragon Rampant* and 1930s Travel Writing 190
Jane Stafford

10 Performing Identity, Past and Present: Chinese Cultural Performance, New Year Celebrations, and the Heritage Industry *Henry Johnson* 217

11 How Post Are They Colonial: An Enquiry into Christopher Koch, Blanche d'Alpuget and Bruce Grant's Representation of Chinese in Recent 'Asian Writing' *Ouyang Yu* 243

12 Other Notes: Jack Body's *Alley* *Dugal McKinnon* 262

13 The Compass of Fashion *Keren Smith* 287

PART B: Alternatives to Australasian Orientalism

14 Clara Law's *Floating Life* (Interview) *Kylie Message* 311

15 Inter Aliens: The Impact of China on the Creation of the Science Fiction Novel *The Eye of the Queen* *Phil Mann* 324

16 Cyber Space Freedom *vs.* Homeland Confinement: Virtual Chinese Communities and Diasporas *Adam Lam* 356

17 Beyond Colonial Casualties: Chinese Agency in the Australian Post/Colonial Endeavour *Peta Stephenson* 366

18 Translating Culture: Rethinking New Zealand's Chineseness *Brian Moloughney* 389

19 Behind the Mirror: Searching for the Chinese–Australian Self *Wenche Ommundsen* 405

Contributors 422

Index 427

Preface

The idea for *East by South* came from a passing conversation in a university corridor between Paul Millar and Charles Ferrall, who had just been teaching classes respectively in New Zealand and Australian literature. We observed the extraordinary number of Australasian texts featuring Chinese characters who, while minor in terms of plot and characterisation, were nevertheless charged with considerable social significance. If Jean Rhys tells the story of Rochester's first wife and Peter Carey that of Magwitch, then why not, in an academic context, write the story of the apparently minor characters who have helped form and reform Australasian literature—and indeed, Australasian attitudes to race and culture in general? For as many historians have observed, both Australian and New Zealand national identity has so often been constructed either in opposition to the 'yellow peril' or as some embrace of the exotic 'other'. Tracing some of the history of chinoiserie and its exotic appeal in the West is the third editor Keren Smith. Keren assumed her editorial role on her return from research leave in Paris, where France was celebrating the Year of China (November 2003–November 2004).

Some months after the idea had taken hold, the Stout Research Centre at Victoria University of Wellington held a series of seminars on Chinese New Zealand history. Through our participation in that series we came to recognise that any discussion of Australasian sinophobia and sinophilia would need to be put in the context of such history or risk repeating the very orientalism that it sought to critique. Much of the best recent history has been about the substantial contributions made by Chinese in both countries.

With the end results of all our reflections now in print we'd like to thank Lisa Scally for her excellent work as our research assistant, Lydia Wevers, the director of the Stout Research Centre, for providing a forum in which some of our ideas could be discussed by those more knowledgeable in Chinese New Zealand history than ourselves, and the Faculty Research

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Charles Ferrall, Paul Millar and Keren Smith

Victoria University of Wellington
February 2005

Charles Ferrall

An Introduction to Australasian Orientalism

The typology of Australasian sinophobia includes most imaginable threats to the human body. After their arrival in Australia in significant numbers as indentured laborers in the late 1840s, the Chinese were habitually represented as literal or figurative carriers of disease, in particular leprosy, smallpox and syphilis. Some believed that their 'yellow' skins indicated jaundice. But often the Chinese were simply seen as 'dirty' or 'unclean', like a repellant substance whose adhesion to the skin would blur the boundary between self and other. Perhaps it was the Chinese market gardeners' practice of using human excrement for fertiliser that in part motivated a barrage of scatological terms as though, like the excremental, they were abject, a category of matter that is produced by and yet does not belong to the body. At the same time, their unclassifiable strangeness affected all categories of being. In the Chinese opium dens they became minds without bodies; in the workforce they were bodies without minds, machines capable of extraordinary physical drudgery. In one notorious cartoon from the Sydney *Bulletin* a Chinese man is a giant head without any body at all, a spectral creature with no resemblance to humankind.

True to the contamination anxiety informing these perceptions was the suspicion that Chinese men were busy trading and polluting the bodies of white women. In accordance with the animal appetites implicit in this ghastly activity, Chinese were represented as a hybrid or indeterminate species, part human but also part ape, octopus, or insect. The prominent teeth drawn by cartoonists of the nineteenth century suggested something rodent-like. But above all from the mid-nineteenth century to the fantasies of today's white racists, the Chinese have been figured as floods, swamps, tides and swarms, as a form of fluidity lacking internal differentiation, as a vague menace and yet also possessing teeth like some kind of *vagina dentata.*

This racist suitcase of leaking body parts should come as no surprise.

According to the anthropologist Mary Douglas the human body is the most fundamental 'model . . . for any bounded system' and is the basic 'symbol of society' (115). Metaphors of pollution and defilement, she argues, express anxieties about internal and external social boundaries, and rituals of separation and purity are the means by which all societies create social order. Thus even when it occasions horror, dirt is simply 'matter out of place', something that produces epistemological uncertainty. Not surprisingly, then, this brief typology could be applied to just about any vilified social group. The typology of antisemitism, for example, includes similar images of dirt, disease, hybridity and viscosity.

Metaphors of disease are particularly pervasive in countries such as New Zealand and Australia whose national identities were forged during a period affected by the epidemiological costs of colonialism.[1] Nevertheless in Australasia no other social or ethnic group has been the object of such prolonged and intense vilification as the Chinese. No doubt this was in part because of the geographical location of these antipodean landmasses. The Antipodes or the Great South Land always lay in the nether regions of the European imagination, Down Under, a place where the social refuse of Enlightenment Britain could be hygienically disposed. While the people who constituted these societies were from the West, the landmasses that became known as Australia and New Zealand were actually further east than China in relation to Britain. Not without reason did some of the escaped convicts fleeing inland from Sydney believe that they would soon reach China. As recent statements by the Australian Prime Minister have shown, it is by no means clear whether Australia, which is, with the exception of New Zealand, further from Britain as the crow flies than any other place in the world, is a 'part' of Asia or not. The Chinese did not belong to this strange continent. But then, neither did the British settlers.

If the indigenous inhabitants of these lands did, on the other hand, belong, their forms of social order were too alien for the settlers to comprehend or assimilate. For nationalist writers such as Henry Lawson, therefore, social order did not preexist settlement or conquest but needed to be created by clearing the bush, the very word 'clearing' being resonant with associations of ordering. The bush, as it is described in, for example, 'The Drover's Wife', is a place lacking in any form of order or differentiation, a place that has 'no horizon' (18). At the same time its 'everlasting, maddening sameness . . . makes a man long to break away', as if, for all its vastness and great distances, the bush is also suffocating (23). In both Australia and New

Zealand the bush was frequently experienced as a biblical wilderness, a place of disorder, onto which order had to be imposed. Equally, in Australia, it was a 'hell on earth' to which the convicts were expelled by the British Pharaoh, a victimisation that, as Ann Curthoys points out, could justify the subsequent persecution of the Canaanite Aborigines (6–7).[2]

Judith Wright draws on this mythology in her poem 'Bullocky' where the eponymous bushman is identified with 'old Moses' and his bullocks with the Israelite slaves. The whole has a slightly crazed intensity and is described as 'a mad apocalyptic dream'. It is a measure of the strength of the promised-land narrative, however, that this outback rêverie was taken by some of Wright's readers as something more instructive. The poem was taught in Australian schools during the 1960s as a celebration of the pioneer settlers and, worse, an inspired confirmation of their mission. When Wright discovered this, she withdrew the poem from publication.[3]

But if the slaves of Britain could descend into the fertile lands of Canaan then so too could other peoples. As some pointed out, the Chinese could do to the 'white man' what the latter had done to the Aborigines and to a lesser extent the Maori, which would explain why there were virtually no attempts during the nineteenth century to identify these two indigenous populations with the Chinese. Relationships were formed between these two racial minorities in both Australia and New Zealand. As Peta Stephenson shows in her essay in this book, there was, at least in Queensland during the late nineteenth century, a racial ideology that connected these two groups if only to insist that they were 'to be separated at all costs'. Similarly Jenny Bol Jun Lee points out that while there were only 38 Maori-Chinese recorded in the 1936 census, *Truth* was nevertheless able to incite a panic about 'a mongrel race of half Chinese and half Maori . . . springing up in New Zealand' (97).

Either way, the Indigenes were always the defeated, the Chinese always on the verge of invading Australia, and both were considered 'unclean'. Thus the white settlers could represent themselves as the mediating term between the two poles of the invaded and the invader, as either the future victims of the Chinese or as the conquerors of the Aborigines. As the socialist *Boomerang* confessed in 1888, '[l]et us admit that we have no more right here than Chinamen. . . . [b]ut let us say also that we whites want Australia, right or wrong, and that we mean to have it', a battle cry that implies both the defeat of the Aborigines and the possibility of being defeated by the Chinese. It was not until much later that Pauline Hanson would identify the

two racial minorities in her maiden speech to Parliament in 1996, a principle focus of her address being 'the various taxpayer funded "industries" that flourish in our society servicing Aboriginals, multiculturalists and a host of other minority groups.' Whereas earlier white racists had seen themselves in ambivalent terms, Hanson and others would represent themselves as the true indigenes of the land, albeit victimised ones, thus equating Aboriginal Australians with such 'recent' arrivals as the Chinese. Significantly, this is an equation that even Winston Peters has been unable to make in New Zealand.

If the wild bush fired visions of order and control, uninhabited coastlines seemed to further justify a racist paranoia, both in the early settlers and in latter-day Pauline Hansons. Because of its enormous coastline Australia was seen as particularly porous and fragile, its landmass vulnerable to invasion as the body was considered vulnerable to disease. This geographical feature was compounded by the lack of consistency between the laws of the various colonies, particularly concerning Chinese immigration. In 1887, for example, the *Afghan* arrived at Port Phillip with 268 Chinese but was turned away by the authorities only to try its luck in Sydney, where its arrival provoked demonstrations and riots. Newspapers obsessively tracked the progress of ships such as the *Afghan,* thus drawing attention to the lack of an effective border between the Australian colonies. Some months later *The Bulletin* complained that Chinese from the Northern Territory, who in many places outnumbered Europeans, were moving into adjacent colonies and that the Government of South Australia,

> [i]n the face of these stupendous evils . . . has reluctantly resolved to oppose the invasion of the lepers by the imposition of a poll-tax of £10 *per head!* [about N.Z. $2,000 in today's terms] The amount, it is well-known, will not be paid by one heathen out of every five; the rest will enter as free 'Blitish' citizens from Hong-Kong, or will present the receipts obligingly forwarded by their brethren in Australia, and will then send back the papers to serve for the importation of a fresh cargo of human scum (March 10, 1888).

Clearly, the notion of porous boundaries was not informed by exclusively geographical factors. Miles Fairburn, for example, makes a strong case for New Zealand as a country suffering from an absence of social organisation despite its possessing more manageable borders than Australia. Nineteenth-

century New Zealand, he suggests, was characterised by such a high degree of social 'atomisation' and 'bondlessness' that its 'fundamental symptoms were irresistible feelings of restlessness, displacement, and rootlessness' and 'a chronic moral panic over vagrancy'. The latter phenomenon, incidentally, was frequently associated with the Chinese (11–12). Significantly, the places of most intense sinophobia, the Australasian goldfields, were also the sites of the greatest social confusion. As a consequence the Chinese miners were vilified for vices that in fact characterised the mining population in general, a population which included Europeans and Americans. If sinophobes complained exclusively of 'Chinese' crime and opium addiction, drunkenness and crime were also a problem on the goldfields amongst the non-Chinese population. The European gold-miners were suspicious of Chinese gambling 'dens' and yet hardly averse to a punt themselves. The almost exclusively male communities of Chinese were accused of homosexuality and the sexual exploitation of white women, two proclivities that almost certainly characterised the predominantly male white communities. Many of the Chinese may well have been sojourners bent on returning to their homeland with their 'ill-gotten gains'. But this was an intention shared by some non-Chinese as well. It is hardly surprising in this milieu that the 'alien' Chinese 'stuck together'. Members from some of the European communities did the same.

The nationalist movements of the late nineteenth century did not, of course, always perceive a lack of social hierarchy in negative terms. Nevertheless as Mark Williams points out, their egalitarianism fuelled if anything an even stronger sense of racial exclusiveness. Appropriately the first piece of legislation passed by the Federal Australian Government in 1901, the Immigration Restriction Act, was primarily but not exclusively directed towards the Chinese.[4] Similar legislation was passed in New Zealand, notably the Immigration Restriction Amendment Act of 1920, which according to Nigel Murphy 'has justly been called the "White New Zealand" policy' (52).

Such racial exclusiveness contrasts markedly to the British Empire's sense of race, at least according to David Cannadine. Cannadine argues that the British Empire saw many indigenous inhabitants of its colonies as possessing a complex social hierarchy analogous to its own. Precisely because of their own strong sense of class hierarchy, which involved seeing even their own urban working class as virtually another race, the British

Imperialist classes could feel a sense of commonality with some indigenous elites. Cannadine suggests, in fact, that

> hierarchical empires and societies, where inequality was the norm, were . . . less racist than egalitarian societies, where there was (and is?) no alternative vision of the social order from that of collective, antagonistic and often racial identities. (126)

This view does not necessarily discredit Said's Orientalist thesis, which is the main target of Cannadine's argument. Perhaps Said's thesis is more relevant to settler societies, which tend to project their own lack of social differentiation onto a racial other, than to the Empire, which saw its own hierarchies mirrored in those it had colonised.

If, then, many Australasian nationalists shared the Empire's perception of itself as relaxed about racial matters, in reality, such attitudes constituted for them a form of bad hygiene. As *The Bulletin* expressed it in the centenary of the First Fleet's arrival,

> [t]he time is evidently close at hand when Australia must choose between Independence and Infection—between the Australian Republic and the Chinese leper. . . . England sold [the Chinese] the right to raid Australia and New Zealand in exchange for the privilege of flooding all China with opium, strong drink, and degradation. England gave him the privilege of carrying leprosy and small pox and kitten-soup throughout these colonies that she might have Freetrade in cutlery and shoddy at Shanghai and Cantor. England authorised Hung [the paper's representative Chinese] to turn Australia into a yellow hell upon earth at Australia's own expense, and gave him due title to starve the white workman, and degrade his existence, and beguile his daughters into dens of infamy, and to corrupt his race until the New World is filled with a mongrel nation, half white and half yellow, a grotesque mixture of the rival images of Joss and God, and Hung rises to point out that England must keep her word. Australia, he holds, has no right to protest since China has paid to England the price of Australia's degradation, and while Australia allows herself to be ruled by England and to be bound by foreign treaties which England concluded solely in her own interests and on her own responsibility, Hung Fat has logic on his side (March 24, 1888).

It is precisely the tendency of Empire to cease upholding racial distinctions when in its own economic and social interest, that so incenses the author. By allowing the unimpeded circulation of money and commodities, Free Trade benefits the ruling class at the expense of the workers; but it is also seen as threatening to the national and racial boundaries of vulnerable 'young' countries. As a disease moves from one human body to another, so money and commodities under Free Trade circulate between one body politic and another destroying the hosts upon which they are parasitic. And by bringing different racial bodies into contact with one another, these flows and circulations can conceive and breed new hybrid or 'mongrel' races. Disease and sex alike thrive on the dissolution of bodily autonomy.

Ironically these discourses of racial hygiene were at their most virulent in Australasia just as the proportion of Chinese had begun to decline. In both countries the number of Chinese had increased during the 1870s, but thereafter both the total number and overall proportion of Chinese steadily decreased.[5] This was partly a consequence of immigration laws and the exhaustion of many of the goldfields but also, at least according to Bon-Wai Chou's study of Victoria, a product of the Chinese's 'cultural baggage', that is, the 'filial piety' that drew most back home to China. Moreover with its defeat of China in 1894 and Russia in 1904–5, Japan was slowly but surely assuming the role of Oriental bogeyman previously occupied by China. It is even possible to talk of a decline of sinophobia in the first few decades of the twentieth century, and of the rise of sinophilia. For example the Chinese procession during the celebrations that marked Sydney's 150th anniversary, which occurred a year after Japan's invasion of China, was extremely popular, a fact that would have been unimaginable fifty years earlier (Shirley Fitzgerald 138). In fact during the 1930s China became virtually a fashionable destination for many on the left, as Jane Stafford points out in her essay on one of these New Zealand pilgrims, Robin Hyde.

Sinophobia and sinophilia have always been twins. We have seen how virulent was *The Boomerang*'s sinophobia. The same journal also commented favorably on the 'beauty', albeit 'petrified', of luxury goods imported from the 'East' or the 'Orient' (primarily Japan, China and India), contrasting them to the unattractive aspects of mass-produced Western products ('Oriental Goods'). China was the 'other' onto which white insecurities were projected and against which white identity was affirmed; but it was also the exotic locale through which the mechanised or desiccated modern

self could be renewed. This confirms Douglas's theory on the necessity for social systems to periodically renew themselves in the 'creative formlessness' of the dirt they otherwise so abhor. The alternative is to risk becoming rigid, 'poor and barren' (161).

This philosophical ambivalence can also be seen as an extension of the tradition in Western aesthetics that, beginning with Romantics such as Wordsworth, finds 'poetic pleasure' in the language of the 'lower classes' (Wordsworth 3), or, with the modernists and historical avant-garde, utilises the *objet trouvé* in the street, or, in recent novels and academic criticism, 'celebrates' the body of the postcolonial hybrid. As Crazy Jane tells the bishop in Yeats' poem, echoing Macbeth's witches, 'fair and foul are near of kin,/And fair needs foul'.

With their cults of 'mateship' and open-air virility, however, the Australasian nationalist movements of the late nineteenth and earlier twentieth centuries reacted against this kind of aesthetic decadence. The sexuality conjured by Gilbert and Sullivan's *Mikado* or by Oscar Wilde, whose trial received considerable newspaper coverage in the Antipodes, was viewed as effete, perverse, and, above all, oriental. However as Dugal McKinnon demonstrates, the Rewi Alley who in Jack Body's opera 'swoons' in the presence of the 'homoeroticised Oriental male' is not just the antithesis of the New Zealand hero and 'good keen man'. He is his implicit partner. To adapt a phrase of Wyndham Lewis's, the puritanical New Zealand male and the decadent Orientalist were two good old enemies, inseparable in fact.

With the formation of the People's Republic of China in 1949 sinophobia became more politically charged as fantasies of invasion that had been dormant for almost half a century were awakened by Cold War ideology. The nineteenth-century invasion narrative, with a few modifications, regained credibility. Now, of course, the Chinese had nuclear weapons rather than disease, it was the Americans rather than the British who couldn't be trusted, and the figure of the self-sufficient bushman was more likely to have mutated into a landowner or pastoralist. But as Timothy Kendall shows, changes to the old narrative did not equate with any lessening of its power, ensuring the election not just of Menzies in 1954 but of Howard in November 2001.

The post-war period was also marked, not surprisingly, by sinophilia. After Gough Whitlam's visit to China in 1971, which preceded that of Henry Kissinger's, China became as exciting as sex for many Australians,