



Searching for Mr. Chin

*Constructions of
Nation and the
Chinese in
West Indian
Literature*



Anne-Marie Lee-Loy

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SEARCHING FOR MR. CHIN

For my parents

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Introduction

Chinyman

He moves haphazardly, blown along the pavement

In uneven gusts, like rice paper.

The oldest man in the world.

Not for him, beneath the mask of grey

Enamelled hair, dried dreams of palaces

Floating on their pools of silken poetry

Or orchideous concubines in rites of silk.

More likely a drab exchange of servitude,

Eastern soil for saltfish,

And the crudely offered tithes paid daily

On the mackerel counters by us lazy blacks

Who'd rather spend than sell;

The necessary sacrifice of language

And the timeless shame of burial

In this uncultured soil.

Yet in this intricate embroidery of that face

Are all the possibilities of legend:

Kublai Khan in beggar's garb.

Loub-limbed and less immediately ancient

I defer the pavement to this parchment schooner

With no port, this ivory chorale of semitones.

—MARTIN MORDECAI

If Martin Mordecai's poem "Chinyman" seems familiar on first reading, it is hardly surprising. The poem is built, after all, around a sense of jarring dislocation concerning the presence of a Chinese man in the West Indies, and the Chinese are not often the first ethnic community that comes to mind when one thinks of West Indian spaces.¹ Indeed, the poem's imagery suggests that the Chinese man is not only displaced but that his presence in the West Indies is extremely tenuous: he moves "haphazardly," is deemed "port-less," and is so rootless that he is likely to be blown

away as easily as parchment paper. He is, as the poem suggests, the false note in his environment. And yet, the picture of Chinese alienation that Mordecai so effectively constructs is subtly undermined in the poem's closing lines when the narrator defers his own place on the pavement to make room for the Chinese man. In this moment of accommodation, the ideas of estrangement and dislocation in which "Chineseness" has been constructed throughout the poem are subverted: apparently, there *is* room for the Chinese man in the West Indies. Thus, Chineseness as embodied by the "Chinyman" becomes a site of ambiguity, caught in the tension of belonging and nonbelonging; and it is this ambiguity pertaining to the literary representations of the Chinese in Jamaica, Trinidad, and Guyana that is the focus of this book.

To consider the question of belonging and nonbelonging in relation to Chinese West Indians is not, of course, abstract. Instead, belonging is located in the greater concept of nation. This book examines fiction produced in the West Indies from the earliest part of the twentieth century until contemporary times as a means of exploring and understanding the strategies and agendas behind the ways in which the Chinese are imagined within the greater construction of West Indian nationhood. At its simplest, the question at the heart of this study is: What do twentieth-century fictional images of the Chinese reveal about the construction and articulation of nationhood in the former West Indian colonies?

Before addressing this question, we must start with another: Why the nation? After all, has not the nation become irrelevant in this globalized era? Have we not been challenged to "think ourselves beyond the nation"?² Certainly, as many scholars have pointed out, national borders seem to be blurring as individuals, capital, ideas, and loyalties criss-cross the globe. Nevertheless, despite such mobility and seeming permeability of national borders, these borders have not disappeared. Indeed, as I write this chapter, new rules have just been instituted at the world's longest ungarded border, that between Canada and the United States, which, for the first time, require all Canadians to show their

passports before entering the United States.³ National borders are apparently not only still in existence but are becoming more clearly defined.

The rupture in the academic debate over the existence of the nation and its future lies in a tension between the political and the cultural. Whether or not one believes that the nation is on the wane often relates to whether or not one is speaking about a political entity or a more cultural concept. The nation-state, that political body that controls borders, may be facing new challenges to its power, but the nation as a cultural identity continues to have a powerful hold on our imaginations. One need only think of the Olympic Games to see this tension clearly: many of the competitors train and live in different nations from the one under whose flag they proudly compete.

My examination of West Indian nationhood investigates a cultural phenomenon and a social practice. It seeks to map and understand a cultural process of identity formation: "Chineseness" in the West Indies. Thus, the subject matter under investigation is essentially cultural production. Additionally, many of the texts to be explored were written in the early- and mid-twentieth century when the colonies were moving steadily toward independence. It was a period in which an awareness of nationhood was a central component of the sociopolitical environment. Such texts are often particularly interested in revealing or participating in the process of nation-building. Finally, whether or not the nation-state exists today in the form in which it was understood to exist in the early twentieth century, the relationships between individuals within (former) nation-states have long-term implications. In the same way that the implications of colonialism are still being felt long after the colonies ceased to exist as political units, the relationships between Chinese and other West Indians that were founded when the concept of the nation was more secure do not just disappear even if the idea of nation itself has changed. Thus, nation remains an appropriate—perhaps even the best—context against which this exploration into images of Chineseness in the West Indies takes place.

The moment of encounter between the Chinyman and the speaker in Mordecai's poem—an encounter that is not only literal but also represents a coming together of ideas and images—that ambiguous moment when various narratives of Chineseness collide to produce “all the possibilities of legend” is suggestive of my overall approach to this study. I want to foreground an understanding of nation space as a creative “zone of instability” within which writers work with “multiple, heterogeneous, and in many cases contradictory discourses and practices” in shaping their production of the nation's cultural identity.⁴ As will be discussed in more detail in the subsequent chapter, these discourses and practices are directly related to the conditions of modernity in which West Indian nations came into being. In particular, because they are formerly colonized countries intensely aware of their global connections, some of the foundational concepts of modern national identities, such as a belief in mythic links between landscape, history, and culture as the basis of an organically emerging cultural identity, are destabilized. This destabilization renders the nation an intrinsically unfinished “problematic” and those narratives that establish who belongs in the nation to be equally unfinished.⁵ What I am interested in, however, is not the inherent ambiguity of nation caught in the act of self-mythologization; that is, I am not interested in exposing the falseness of a homogenous nation-self as the ultimate product of national narrative. Instead, I want to connect the ambiguity of the concept of nation directly to the multiplicity of narratives that are employed in the articulation of national identity as a state of belonging. In emphasizing this multiplicity, I want to consider the ambiguous images of Chinese belonging that appear in West Indian literature as a product of the varied ways in which belonging and nonbelonging for West Indian nations in general are imagined. There is more than one way to imagine the boundaries of national belonging, and the fictional images of the Chinese capture this inherent instability.

Historical Context of Ambiguous Belonging

NINETEENTH-CENTURY CHINESE MIGRATION TO THE WEST INDIES

The ambiguous images of Chineseness in relation to nationhood that appear in West Indian literature arise not only from the peculiar pressures of modern nationhood. The particular migration history of the Chinese has also contributed to the instability surrounding the roles in which they are cast in national narratives. Chinese migration to the West Indies began in the nineteenth century as an indentured labor phenomenon and was therefore intrinsically intertwined with colonial ambitions to maintain the plantation economies that were the foundation of their power and privilege. These economies had, however, been significantly disrupted when the slaves were emancipated in 1833 and their mandatory apprenticeships concluded five years later. A further shake-up for the sugar industry, the backbone of the West Indian economy, had occurred in 1846 when the Sugar Duties Act was passed, removing measures that had protected West Indian-produced sugar from competition with other sugar sources, including European beet sugar and sugar produced by slaves elsewhere, most notably in Cuba. These two blows, often coupled with soil depletion on plantations, caused the sugar industry to fall into such severe decline that by 1850, it could be claimed that sugar estates in the West Indies had devalued an incredible 90 percent in a ten-year period, and that three-fourths of West Indian planters were on the verge of absolute financial ruin.⁶

Despite the impact of these significant changes in the world sugar market and, in some cases, the damage to West Indian soil caused by the overproduction of sugar, the dire financial state in which the colonies found themselves by the mid-nineteenth century was commonly blamed on a perceived lack of controlled labor on the sugar estates since slave emancipation. Planters sought a new source of labor that, while allowing the laborer

to be nominally free, would provide them with controls over the workforce similar to those they had wielded during slavery. Indentured labor, which provided measures to control mobility and directly addressed absenteeism in its contracts, soon appeared to be the solution to this problem, or as one writer put it more poetically:

Immigration to this province may be likened to supplying with water a reservoir employed to afford power to extensive mechanical appliances; when the supply is abundant, the machinery will work up to its full power; but, when it proves to be deficient, when the source is obstructed by any circumstances, the water in the reservoir will sink below its working level and the machinery will stop.⁷

China was just one of a number of locations that the colonial government considered as a potential source for indentured labor. Eventually, India would become the primary—and perhaps most well-known—source of such labor; nevertheless, Chinese indentured labor precedes that from India when, in 1806, 192 Chinese arrived in Trinidad to work on the sugar estates. This first batch of Chinese indentured laborers would not, however, form the real basis upon which the Chinese populations of the West Indies would be founded. Indeed, most of these migrants left upon the completion of their contracts. It has been estimated that as early as 1809 only thirty Chinese were left on the island, with this number dwindling to about a dozen by 1825.⁸ Interest in the Chinese as potential indentured laborers for the West Indies would not be revived until the 1840s, although actual indentured labor migration did not recommence until 1853.

The bulk of Chinese indentured labor migration to the West Indies occurred between 1853 and 1866. This migration did not, however, continue in a steady stream over this period. For example, the three-year period between 1855 and 1858 saw no Chinese migrants enter the colonies. Nevertheless, by the end of the nineteenth century, some 18,000 Chinese would arrive in the West Indies, with the vast majority of those migrants (around

75 percent) headed for Guyana. As was the case with most migration out of China in the nineteenth century, the immigrants were drawn from southern China and were seeking to escape desperate conditions caused by a combination of environmental catastrophes and political unrest. Canton (Guangzhou) provided many of the immigrants, although Swatow (Shantou) and Amoy (Xiamen) were eventually considered more valuable centers in terms of recruiting the type of people who were thought to be good laborers as opposed to what one observer described as “the worthless population of the towns.”⁹ The migrants were a diverse group that included individuals from a variety of ethnic groups and social and economic classes. Members of the Hakka, Punti, and Hok Lo ethnic groups have been specifically identified as participating in the migration, and it was suggested that there were representatives from 150 occupations, including doctors and schoolmasters, among the migrants in the colony.¹⁰ There were also a considerable number of Christian converts among the migrants as a result of the colonial government’s willingness to rely on Christian missionaries to assist them in their recruitment endeavors, particularly in the recruiting of family units.¹¹

The use of Christian missionaries in recruitment was just one of many measures that the colonial government used in its bid to avoid accusations that indenture was simply slavery under a new name. The government was particularly sensitive to such accusations because it was competing directly with other European powers, particularly Spain, to recruit laborers from China. In general, the recruitment of Chinese laborers was done by professional recruiters, known as “crimps,” who were paid per individual recruit, while the recruits themselves received a cash advance. Arnold J. Meagher argues that although the use of crimps to recruit Chinese labor had emerged in the first half of the nineteenth century, it was not until the late 1850s when both the demand for Chinese labor and the fees paid to crimps had increased dramatically that the system became notorious for its association with abuse and coercion, including kidnapping. Indeed, so bad was the perception of crimp-controlled

migration that it was said to be known among the Chinese as “the sale of Little Pigs,” a particularly vivid means of capturing the lack of choice that many of the “migrants” had with regard to their migration and the inhumane treatment that they often faced. This “recruitment,” along with the treatment that the migrants received, deteriorated so much that in 1874, a Chinese commission was sent to Cuba to investigate the conditions of the Chinese there. Their findings would ultimately end Chinese indentured labor on that island.¹²

In contrast, Chinese indentured immigration to the British West Indies had been permitted only under the condition that the colonial government would retain control over the process (as opposed to allowing it to be run by individual prospectors), and by 1859, the period in which the most organized and heaviest indentured migration from China began, a different recruitment system from that being used by Spain had been established. This system relied on British immigration officials who, with the assistance of Chinese officials, worked out of emigration houses where migrants were interviewed before leaving the country as a means of ensuring that they were migrating of their own free will.¹³

Through various ordinances, the colonial government’s involvement in Chinese indentured labor migration extended far beyond recruitment. For example, ordinances were passed that determined the size of the ships that could carry migrants to the colonies while others specified the rights and responsibilities of both laborer and estate management upon the migrants’ arrival in the colonies. Indeed, on a superficial level, the government involvement seemed to ensure that the migrants were well-treated,

... provided with free house-room, regular work and wages when they are in health, and in sickness have the advantages of a hospital, the attendance of a medical man and medicines free of expense, who have moreover a magistrate always at hand to hear their complaints and a department of officers with especial duty of securing their good treatment.¹⁴