



## Chinas Unlimited *Making the Imaginaries of China and Chineseness*

BY GREGORY B. LEE

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Cultural images are shape-shifting phantoms. Perhaps this is why they hold a tenacious grip on our consciousness, yet are difficult to discuss objectively. In the nineteenth century, the West imagined China and the Chinese as exotic, distant, and alien. Across the pages of newspapers and pictorials, images of the laundryman, the evil crime lord, the sex maniac, the opium addict abounded.

Do these stereotypes, or at least the essence of them, remain? Yes, according to Gregory G. Lee in *Chinas Unlimited*, his socio-cultural study of the historical representation of China and Chineseness in Britain. They remain through certain “orientalizing and racist” ideologies that the West has used to fit China into certain economic, political, and sociological agendas.

What follows is a series of linked chapters, a combination of academic discourse cum personal musings. The first, “Chinese Reveries, English Railings: Reimagining Twentieth-Century Histories,” deals with various thoughts about what it is to be Chinese. The “railings” he speaks of are the “incarcerating” bindings of English colonialism and dominant Western culture. Perhaps this book can be best summed up in his elaboration of the writer Duo Duo’s story *Going Home*, about a Chinese man’s frequent visits to the local English zoo to watch alligators, in a metaphoric light: “China . . . is the zoo, the zookeeper the colonial figurehead, and the white man the custodian. The alligator is China, Chinaman, orientalist discourse, the old Chinese man waiting . . . .” Vibrant images and strong words abound, but sometimes the meaning is lost in the scholarly language and wandering nature of the text.

In the eyes of the author, his Chinese grandfather was a somewhat mythic figure. “I realized that no-one was really very familiar with who he had been, or what he had done.” Like the indecipherable notebook he left behind, the author notes that his career in Chinese studies is an “intersection, a historical conjunction of small and large histories of the last hundred years or so.” Through the inherited notebook he tries to “decode” his

grandfather’s life but is ultimately unsuccessful. He learns Chinese and enters Academia, which he says emphasizes “tradition” and downgrades modern, equally authentic voices.

The second chapter, “Addicted, Demented, and Taken to the Cleaners: The White Invention and Representation of the ‘Chinaman,’” shows that stereotypes such as the comic Chinese laundryman and crazed opium smoker serve useful economic ends. Opium was used by both English and Chinese, but it was represented rather differently when the Chinese used it in far-off colonies. “The recent history of opium, then, can be seen as an archetypal story of modernity, . . . was reinvented as essentially a Chinese habit” when England realized its addictive powers just as it was promoting (and selling) it in China. The opium den thus became a symbol for vice and evil that hid plans of possible world domination by a completely different other, à la Fu Manchu.

The Chinese mind and Chinese language, represented as simple and incapable of change, gave rise to the idea that “the Chinese” could not run an economy by themselves—a notion that justified colonial rule in Asia and Africa. In this way the author draws interesting parallels with the “Asian economic miracle” of the twentieth century, which therefore can “only be understood as miraculous” to those previously considered incapable of doing so. So the collapsing economics in the mid-nineties, Hong Kong chicken flu, and the possible link of Chinese dried meat to the foot-and-mouth epidemic in the United Kingdom, shows the “contagion” concept had returned—and spread.

The third section, “Re-taking Tiger Mountain by Television: Televisual Socialization of the Contemporary Chinese consumer,” discusses how the Chinese projection of their identity has changed with consumer capitalism and the market economy. Ironic censorship measures, paradigm confusion, “a mélange of pre-Maoist ‘Asian values’” fill the airwaves, stage, and screen. He discusses the famous eighties series *A Native of Beijing in New York* and its interesting ambiguity: It is set in the Big Apple, but implies that Chinese capitalism will be different and more pure.

MTV can also be a vivid means of ideology transfer, as we all know. In pop star Gao Feng's video *Da Zhongguo* (Great China) video, broad vistas and nationalistic images set to tempting rhymes show us how the official media can realize its aims cloaked in a sanitized version of pop culture, while underground musicians "redeployed or diverted ethnic or national ideologies and imaginaries" by doing such things as setting classical Chinese poems to heavy metal music. As the author says, the "ethnic" can only be constructed when an "authentic" notion of the national, e.g. of the Han Chinese, has been established, which makes its own minorities more marginal.

The fourth and final section, "Paddy's Chinatown, or The Harlequin's Coat: A Short (Hi)story of a Liverpool Hybridity," is perhaps the most interesting chapter as the writer turns the spotlight on himself and his Chinese grandfather. "History and histories kept intervening," he says, and drew him to "irresistible side roads." This story of the personal makes his language much more accessible, and better highlights his concepts, although it makes discussing this book in any linear way rather difficult.

Naturally, the issue of "hybridity" is discussed. The author rightly sees this concept as essential to the understanding of many modern communities; "ideologies and discourses of race and ethnicity fail to take into account, for we all have "multiple social identities, national and sub-national identities." Given his family background and the fact that he can "pass" as a member of the dominant "white" culture, he tells us of his experiences teaching in the U.S. and Hong Kong. His students ask: Is he or isn't he? Is that a Chinese name or what? Is he foreign-born or foreign-educated? This gives him and other "hybrids" the responsibility to

tell stories of racial injustice. People like him, he says, are an "invisible presence" on the colonial margins, and they cannot destroy ethnic memories. The facts probably can never be known, so all he can do is re-imagine these "diaspora stories." Maybe we are making our own myths, as he implies when he tries to get into the heads of his grandparents. If stories are to be known they have to be written with imagination and flair. The Noble Prize Laureate Gao Xingjian's interesting narrative viewpoint springs to mind.

The book purports to facilitate seeing the reality of Chinese-ness more clearly, but by talking about "daydreams, musings, and wishful thinking" and "reimaginings" I am not sure if he achieves his aim. Although this book raises interesting thoughts and concepts, I am hesitant to recommend it as a text even for senior students as the language seems geared to academics rather than to the lay reader. It is when the narrative turns personal that it suddenly becomes much more accessible. Portions of it, however, could be selected by teachers for discussion points about the use of language and images in racial and ethnic stereotypes in the place where they live. Such a topic could not be more relevant in today's political climate. ■

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