

Despite their 130-year history in Canada, the Chinese have not assimilated because of Canadian policies which have prohibited them from participating in mainstream social life.



The Chinese in Canada

by Peter S. Li

Oxford University Press, Toronto, 1988,
164 pp.

Although Peter Li wants to write about Chinese-Canadians, he finds that their historical experience only permits him to write about them (as the title of his book indicates) as the Chinese in Canada. His book is the study of the marginality of one group of Canadians, which shatters the myth that Canada has been relatively free of institutionalized racism. With the aid of historical materials and an immense number of statistics, Li illustrates the social condition of Chinese-Canadians, from their arrival in 1858 to the present, the racism against them, the structure of their community and their recent occupational mobility in Canadian society. His work provides two main emphases: the study of Chinese-Canadians through a focus on the larger Canadian society, and an analysis of racism from the perspective of class.

The novelty of Li's book seems to stem from his first emphasis that one cannot understand a minority group in the absence of a majority. Unlike sociologists who examine the condition of Chinese in Canada through their cultural background, Li begins his study by focusing on the structure and policies of Canadian society. He claims that the experience of Chinese-Canadians and the characteristic of their community are more the result of interaction with the larger society than the influence of traditional Chinese values or in-group activities. The Chinese have not assimilated despite their 130-year history in Canada, not because of adherence to traditional values, as commonly believed by sociologists and the general public, but because of policies passed in Canada which prohibited them from participating in mainstream social life. In the history of Canada, Li tells us, no other immigrant group was subjected to as many discriminatory laws as the Chinese. They were the only ethnic group which was required to pay a head tax to enter this country. They were never regarded as permanent residents of Canada, and were often considered as a menace to racial and moral purity. They were prohibited by law from acquiring Crown lands (Statutes of B.C. 1884, c. 2), from working in mines (Coal Mines Regulation Amendment Act, 1890), from admission to provincially established homes for the aged

the charm of this play, partly defuses on the dramatic level the painfulness of Ellen's entrapment. And yet her desire to escape the bonds of her domestic prison is worked up to such a pitch that she fantasizes murdering her child. Her subsequent guilt over doing so drives the necessity for self sacrifice even deeper. The play ends with a sentimentalization and fatalization of the restrictions which her role as mother places upon her—to her son she says, "You are a child of God"—and in this way she rationalizes and capitulates to the very ideology which keeps her so insidiously oppressed.

Like *Play Memory*, Sharon Pollock's *Whiskey Six Cadenza* is dominated by men and their conception of the world. The material conditions under which men live are extremely difficult. They labour long hours in mines, drink hard, and die from a sudden accident or slow physical deterioration. For most of them there are no other options. Johnny, the only son of the Farley family who refuses his fate, failing to find a job in the East, takes up with Mr. Big, the rumrunner. The lives of the women are equally as bleak, and even more subservient. Leah is a victim of child abuse who is murdered because of her infidelity to the father/lover; Dolly is bereft of her young suitor and with his death the dream of a woman's happily-ever-after romance is shattered. Mrs. Farley, the only woman in the play with a will and opinion of her own, commands little respect from the men and has no influence upon them. An advocate of the temperance movement, with her "thin old mangy cat" manner, she is drawn as farcical, nagging, dissatisfied and utterly impotent.

In the face of their hardships, the characters fabricate multiple evasions of material reality: the miners are alcoholics; the lovers are starry-

eyed; Mr. Big rants of the cosmic significance of the universe. The final, senseless tragedy would seem to undercut these intoxications, yet Johnny's last words are, "It may have been all lies, but that still doesn't mean it weren't true." Ultimately, with its dissolving images, its gossamer and gauze, the play and its theatricality are complicitous with these romanticizations, a complicity which in the end romanticizes fatalism and hopelessness just as much as it does dreams of escape. One is left with an ambivalent yet oppressive vision of the miners and the bootleggers and the women they abuse: in this romanticization of the brutality of the patriarchal order, life is colonial yet cosmic, fated yet full of promise, coal and gossamer.

Each of these plays depicts aspects of women's oppression with some degree of insight. However, when read together, they seem to suffer from a number of disturbing tendencies. If women have in the past been victims and continue to be so in the present, is it necessary to confine our representations to such women? If in the past women have contributed to the ideologies which oppress them and continue to do so in the present, is it necessary for our representations to acquiesce to and continue this act of complicity, even if with ambivalence? While these plays expose the oppressive destructiveness of patriarchal dominance, their almost total lack of utopian vision—and, even more, their sad ability to make excuses for the patriarchal order—set definite limits on their potential to help women reinscribe themselves otherwise, and rewrite their worlds. We await the voices of other Western women, voices less trapped in despair and self deception.

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"Heathen Chinees: 'Why you sendee me offee?'

Amor de Cosmos [premier of B.C.]: 'Because you can't or won't assimilate with us.'

Heathen Chinees: 'What is datee?'

Amor de Cosmos: 'You won't drink whiskey and talk politics and vote like us.'"

—turn of the century Canadian political cartoon



(Provincial Home Act, 1893), from holding liquor licences (Liquor License Act, 1899), from hiring white female employees (The Women's and Girl's Protection Act, 1912), from working in the civil service (Civil Service Act, 1927) and from entering the professions of law and pharmacy. Anti-Chinese legislation reached its peak in 1923, when the federal government passed the Chinese Immigration Act which excluded Chinese from entering Canada for 24 years, until the bill was repealed in 1947. It was only until after the Second World War that Chinese-Canadians had the right to vote. The Chinese did not assimilate because they were not allowed to assimilate! Reduced to second-class citizens, subjected to racial, economic and residential segregation, they responded by retreating into their own ethnic enclaves. Thus, the development of the Chinese community was in large part due to factors in the larger society.

Li argues that sociologists would not be able to present an adequate analysis of racism without focusing on political economy. He steers away from the cultural aspect of race-relations, claiming that the discrimination against the Chinese and whites' fear of non-whites. It was mainly linked to the exploitation of labour within a capitalist structure. The early Chinese immigrants were recruited as cheap labour to fill the shortage of white workers during the economic expansion of western Canada in the 19th century. They worked in such labour-intensive jobs as mining, lumbering, and most of all, the construction of the Canadian Pacific Railway. Racism, Li explains, benefitted capitalism by reducing the social standing and market value of this group, and thus justifying their low wages and unequal treatment. In times of economic recession, the Chinese were convenient scapegoats for economic problems

(i.e., as threats to white workers' jobs) and social ills (i.e., as public menace because of their "inferior" culture). Such scapegoating subsequently led to large numbers of racist laws which denied their political and civil rights.

Even in the present time, with the absence of discriminatory laws, Li claims, there is still a cost for being Chinese in the Canadian labour market. The Census of Canada 1981 indicates that the average schooling for all Canadians was 11.56 years; for Chinese-Canadians it was 12.12. Yet, the census indicates, on average they had an income level of \$1,295 below the national average. Furthermore, being a racial minority still places a limit on their choice of professions. The early Chinese immigrants avoided competitions and hostilities of white Canadians by limiting themselves to restaurant or laundry works. Chinese-Canadians today are still in professions away from public involvement. Statistics show that many have occupations in the scientific and engineering field which require technical expertise rather than social skills or interactions with the public.

The conditions of Chinese-Canadians in recent years have no doubt improved. Yet these changes, Li claims, are brought about mainly by changes in the economic structure rather than by racial equality or greater assimilation into the larger society. They are mainly determined by new immigration policies in the post-war period which reflect the need for new types of workers in the contemporary capitalist economy. The make-up of the Chinese community with its large number of professionals, skilled workers and people of higher education level is the result of such need.

Peter Li's *The Chinese in Canada* is no doubt an invaluable, insightful sociological study. My only problem with it is his over-reliance on statistics. Being a good empirical sociologist, statistics are, of course, important to him. But their quantity can make his book rather dry and dull for readers who are not statisticians. At times, they can even divert from the experiential aspect of the social condition of Chinese-Canadians. In the midst of charts, graphs, numbers, decimals and percentages, his illustration of the experience of being Chinese in Canada tends, at times, to be obscured. This is more so with regard to this analysis of contemporary Chinese-Canadians. There is a noticeable difference in his analysis of Chinese-Canadians before the Second World War and those who came after the war. With respect to the former, Li conveys the experiential aspect of their condition through the use of historical documents, eyewitness reports and a style of writing that relies less on statistics and

more on sensory metaphors. The reader gets a sense of the emotional involvement between the writer and the people he writes about. However, in his analysis of the latter, such involvement is totally lacking as the pages become filled with statistic after statistic. Perhaps there is a bias on Li's part (being a sociologist who stresses class analysis) to place greater focus on the experiential aspect of Chinese-Canadians in the pre-war era, who were poor, uneducated, unskilled labourers of rural background as opposed to contemporary Chinese-Canadians who are affluent, educated professionals who dwell in large urban centres.

In spite of such problems, one must still give Li credit for presenting an original, in-depth study of Chinese-Canadians. By focusing on the structural context of Canadian society in his understanding of Chinese-Canadians, his book in essence is about Canada and how Canada has treated a minority group. So far, the picture of such treatment does not contain much to be proud of. Perhaps a better picture may emerge if we begin with the view, as Li has done, that Chinese-Canadians are not foreigners but people who do belong here.

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The Vernacular Muse by Dennis Cooley

Winnipeg: Turnstone Press, 1987, 311 pp.

Not long ago I attended a panel discussion on the relationship between writing and feminist criticism. The panellists were writers rather than academics, so they tended to approach the question of theory from the standpoint of being involved in a game as players, not as sideline strategists. I should make it clear that the participants were respectful of theory and what it could offer in terms of understanding the necessity of rigorously examining texts. But there also seemed an unstated consensus that each writer's creative process couldn't be, and shouldn't be, dictated by

theory. So the relation between feminist literary criticism and this particular forum, is not simply sharing space but also keeping the conversation open.

As a writer myself, I am inclined toward literary criticism, a close look at why I write. In reading *The Vernacular Muse*, eight critical essays by Dennis Cooley, this Manitoba critic challenges the standard and insisting upon the value of a text. Talking about the text, analyzed, and a new education, nothing to do with success, whose work has so much meaning, as Forché points out, that is not only acceptable, and should be cheering, right in the sober dwelling of criticism, a renegade declaration.

This is a common and to use yr own voice in under the smother of reported and "high." To name and proclaim a spoken but never written able to us would not

Part of me did cheer writes with (un)scholarly laid bare but because inventively. Part of me a bad thing, of course. *Vernacular Muse* is an eye pay attention. But I re often with the nature of with Cooley as a practical thinking that comes do having different relations.

In an essay called "Berger wrote that" comes from a single ambiguity of experiential work, language is at criticism, by the nature standards, an organization can't be ambiguous theory. Loses, in other which is based on na this is true even of criticism, such as that *lar Muse*.

A considerable change with the analysis of Michael Ondaatje, M Duncan and Sinclair