

East by South
Reviewed by Charles Mabbett.

East by South: China in the Australasian Imagination. Ed. Charles Ferrall, Paul Millar, and Keren Smith. Wellington: Victoria University Press, 2005.

About a year ago, a visiting Chinese expert on international relations made this comment about New Zealand: “Geographically, New Zealand is in the south, but economically it is in the north. From Europe’s perspective it is in the east, but politically it is in the west. So New Zealand is everywhere.”

The statement by Professor Shen Dingli, the deputy director of the Centre for American Studies at China’s Fudan University, encapsulates what is for him, New Zealand’s deliciously ambiguous and politically independent identity.

But how have Australians and New Zealanders viewed China, “both sweatshop and powerhouse for the global economy”, as described in *East By South: China in the Australasian Imagination*, a collection of essays edited by Charles Ferrall, Paul Millar and Keren Smith?

One could say that geographically, China is to our north and west, while economically, it is in the north and the south, and politically, it is in the east. So China too is everywhere, especially as what was once the Far East is now very much the Near North.

All of which makes *East By South* such a timely and relevant contribution to knowing more about our relationships with China and the Chinese at a time when the world is being reshaped by the juggernaut in our Asia-Pacific neighbourhood.

New Zealand and Australia have long struggled with the tension created by geography and history. Our dominant heritage is European but we are within a metaphorical stone’s throw of Asia.

The challenge facing New Zealand and Australia is one of coming to terms with our evolving national identities, to reflect the realities of trans-migration flows, changing ethnography and closer economic relations with Asian countries.

The essays in *East By South* are a collection of riches, beginning with the migration of the first Chinese to both countries, as gold miners from the 1840s in Australia and the 1860s in New Zealand, and moving on to explore

Australasian Chinese identity across media such as literature, film, fashion and music.

Despite considerable legislative and social hostility, the original Chinese sojourner communities were able to put down long lasting roots, becoming the original strand of what has since branched into a complex diasporic collection of people who are visibly Chinese but either born in Australasia or migrants from Taiwan, Malaysia, Singapore and other Southeast Asian countries.

The discrimination of Chinese in Australasia is discussed in Charles Ferrall's opening essay "An Introduction to Australasian Orientalism" in which he states "in Australasia no other social or ethnic group has been the object of such prolonged and intense vilification as the Chinese".

That racism – and indeed, that directed towards other non-white minorities – is still very much in evidence in Australasia today, deeply rooted in the historic xenophobia that is searchingly examined in *East By South*.

While there's been growing but not wholehearted acceptance of Asian migrants in the move towards more pluralistic, multicultural societies (something that was made official policy in Australia during the Gough Whitlam years), it is as yet an unresolved tension in New Zealand. This contentious issue is masterfully explored by Tony Ballantyne in his chapter "Writing Out Asia: Race, Colonialism and Chinese Migration in New Zealand History".

How fascinating it is to see writing that uses China as the prism through which to provoke a discourse on our identities as New Zealanders. Using Te Papa as a case in point, Ballantyne says "it celebrates biculturalism, but only by assimilating Asian migrants into the Pakeha past".

"At the very moment when New Zealand championing free trade and calling for commitment to cementing ties with Asia, historians are still wedded to a vision of the past that erects cultural borders, insulating New Zealand from Asia and erasing Asians from the national imaginary". This is fresh, powerful and controversial material.

The invisibility of the Chinese in New Zealand is also alluded to by Paul Millar in his essay "Canton Bromides': The Chinese Presence in Twentieth-century New Zealand Fiction." At best Chinese are depicted as perplexing stereotypes that appear as a part of the local colour in the literature of Katherine Mansfield, and at worst, as the corrupters of little white girls in John A Lee's *Children of the Poor*. But, as Millar reveals, there's little in our literature about a people that have been an integral part of New Zealand life for nearly 150 years.

Ouyang Yu's exposition on the depiction of Chinese in fairly recent Australian writing such as Christopher Koch's *Year of Living Dangerously* (1978), Blanche d'Alpuget's *Turtle Beach* (1981) and Bruce Grant's *Cherry Bloom* (1980) gives us post-colonial examples that illustrate that in the modern Australian psyche, "the grand scheme of becoming part of Asia is fraught with uncertainties, problems and wishful thinking".

There's much to amuse in David Walker's dissection of the way modern China is portrayed in popular fiction by bestselling American authors such as Tom Clancy, Clive Cussler and Stephen J Cannell. The selected examples are faithful to a long established literary tradition of Chinese arch villains, such as Sax Rohmer's 1913 creation Dr Fu Manchu who was "a brilliant adversary but his Chinese counterparts in the American novels cited here are not the intellectual equal of the Americans".

The counterculture also gets a nod in Timothy Kendall's "Using the Past to Serve the Present: Renewing Australia's Invasion Anxiety". An iconic 1970s comic superhero duo Iron Outlaw (equipped with a bucket head à la Ned Kelly) and Steel Sheila were parodies of Australian fears of Asian invasion. In *Iron Outlaw and Steel Sheila Face the Yellow Peril*, they confound the dastardly plans of Madam Loo and Warlord Nong to take over 'Australoo'.

The concept for *East By South* came from a passing conversation in a university corridor between Millar and Ferrall. The result is a collection bursting with challenging scholarship and iconoclastic perspectives. Why for example, as Peta Stephenson asks in "Beyond Colonial Casualties: Chinese Agency in the Australian Post/Colonial Endeavour", was Cathy Freeman's Chinese heritage not celebrated in the Australian mainstream media in the same way as her Aboriginal ancestry when she won the 800 metre gold medal at the Sydney Olympics?

A Chinese proverb warns not to look for ivory in a dog's mouth. That's not the case here. *East By South* addresses the historic shadow cast over the Chinese and their influence in Australasia. It also goes a considerable way to redressing obsolete perceptions of race in an era that will inexorably be – for better or worse - China's century.