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Migrant Voices: Community Collaboration and Telling Migration Histories

South Flows the Pearl: Chinese Australian Voices, Mavis Gock Yen

Edited by Siaoman Yen and Richard Horsburgh, and introduction by Sophie Loy-Wilson. Sydney University Press, Sydney, 2022. 386 pages. $40.00 (paperback). ISBN 9781743327241.

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A new wave of Chinese migrants arrived in Australia in the 1980s. These newcomers, having arrived in a post-assimilationist multicultural Australia, were more culturally aware than their nineteenth-century predecessors. The book under review considers an earlier period of Australian history. Chronicling the time that preceded Australia's multiculturalism, *South Flows the Pearl* is a collection of single-person narratives with twelve then-elderly' Chinese Australians who lived through the era of 'White Australia'. Only one of the interlocutors was alive at the time of publication.

Author Mavis Gock Yen went through the Cultural Revolution (1967–76) in China. Her experience during that period prompted her to undertake an oral history project in Australia, recording interviews with Chinese Australians between 1987 and 1995 with the aim of recording their various life experiences. Stepping away from the type of history penned by European 'outsiders', this self-initiated project was conceived by an 'insider' who understood the complexities of her subjects' lives. Not only had Mavis lived through the latter part of the same historical period as her subjects, but she also spoke the same languages. Like the narrators, Mavis was considered a foreigner in 'her country', whether she was in China or Australia. She too experienced discrimination, a family divided by geopolitics, and felt excluded from the national history in both Australia and China. During the assimilation period, the Chinese in Australia were ridiculed for not being 'white' (or 'Australian') enough. The same people would again be alienated with the advent of multiculturalism, and particularly the arrival of the new Chinese – this time, for not being 'Chinese' enough.

Various themes run through the volume, one of them being discrimination. Many narrators recall all kinds of insults and nicknames: not just stereotypical 'Ching Chong Chinaman', but also a gamut of southern Chinese appellations used by fellow Chinese, for example, *gum shan haak* (金山客, gold mountain guests), *choy gee lo* (財主佬, rich fellow), *tai jee jay* (太子仔, crown prince), *loi lek bat ming* (來歷不明, of unknown provenance) (p. 10). While some learnt to defend themselves by fighting back, others got used to it and ignored it over time. These accounts, of both the discrimination and responses to it, and accounts of it coming from within the Chinese community, enrich our understanding of the diversity of the Chinese-Australian experiences.

Despite experiences of discrimination, Australia remained a desirable destination for Chinese people, due mainly to the perception of opportunity. During the gold rush era, there was a belief that gold could be 'picked up off the ground' (p. 99), and that wealth was easily acquired. This theme persisted well into the twentieth century: as late as 1977 returnees to China and Hong Kong were viewed as 'millionaires' by relatives (p. 310). But for those who ventured abroad, their realities in the 'Gold Mountain' were often far from that: instead, wealth was gained through labour,

often confined to vegetable and market gardens or in Chinatown. Evelyn Yin Lo, for example, remembers how, in the post-war period, her poor mother 'never stopped working, not even for one day' (p. 241). Another theme that emerges is work ethic.

An interesting theme the book picks up on is the impact of peoples' return to China. For example, up to the early twentieth century, emigrants returned to their ancestral home in China's Pearl River Delta to build brick houses (pp. 68, 98, 136, 346) and invest in rice paddies or businesses (pp. 69, 143). All these transformed the fate of the villagers living in south China, bringing with them a perceived prosperity. But behind the benefits of emigration, lurked the curse of sudden wealth, where the spendthrift sons or grandson *(tai jee jay)* 'bludged on the labours of their [fore]fathers' (p. 98). In still-poor rural China, rising affluence of emigrant families depending on Australian remittances, left such families in China living in constant fear of robbery, kidnapping, and even murder (pp. 139, 155).

With interviews held far away from ancestral villages, a strength of the book is the author's skilful navigation between two worlds and two languages. Two interviews were recorded in Cantonese, while the rest (n=10) were in vernacular Australian-English. Words like larrikin (p. 128), dump (p. 346), mate (p.157) and outback (p. 90) pepper the text. Interestingly, those who spoke Cantonese generally tend not to consider themselves Australians; this was not because of exclusionary policies, but due to linguistic and cultural reasons that underpinned a tendency to self-identify as Chinese rather than Australian.

The book also describes the emergence of a Chinese-Australian identity: those who looked Chinese, but their minds were Australian (p. 257). An example is Elizabeth Lee, who vowed to never ask her children for money (p. 351). Western notions of equity and independence prevailed here, even if her ancestors depended on their children. In this way, the narratives offer a repertoire of instances of being 'fair dinkum Aussies', thus enriching Australian identity and history. In thought, language and experience, the book certainly documents an Australian way of life, albeit through Chinese bodies.

Written at a time when first-hand materials of the Chinese experience in Australia were limited, *South Flows the Pearl* is a much-welcomed addition to Chinese-Australian historiography. Chinese-Australian voices, especially during White Australia, remain conspicuously absent. As a collection of oral history on Chinese-Australian migration, the book also speaks to the future, allowing the Chinese in Australia to reclaim their own history, on their own terms.

One missed opportunity, however, was to invite someone to review the Chinese characters quoted in the text. Mavis' daughter Siaoman, who is also one of the book's editors and worked on the taped records left by her mother after her death, is also bilingual – but in Mandarin, so incorrect Chinese characters are found accompanying the Cantonese and other southern Chinese expressions in the text.

Nonetheless, this does not detract from the immense value of this historical record. Indeed, the very existence of this once-forgotten manuscript, first produced by Mavis in the late 1990s, after her interviews were completed in 1995, also raises the question of whether other unfinished or abandoned oral history projects are stashed away on old floppy disks and cassette tapes, waiting for the descendants of Australia's first oral historians to salvage them. Beyond that, this project also shows that much work remains to be done to produce more multilingual oral histories that capture first-hand immigrant narratives before a more inclusive Australian history can be compiled.