Ouyang Yu. *Chinese in Australian Fiction 1888-1988*. Amherst: Cambria P, 2008, 531pp.
ISBN: 978 1 60497 516 1
US$139.95
http://www.cambriapress.com/cambriapress.cfm?template=24&bid=192

Ouyang Yu's book *Chinese in Australian Fiction 1888-1988* is a substantial critical survey. It begins with 1888, the year the Second Intercolonial Conference decided to exclude the Chinese from Australia, and a very low point for depiction of Chinese in Australian fiction. Yu asks what has happened since then to Australian attitudes and as far as fictional representations of Chinese, what has changed? Although this study stops at 1988, the bicentenary year of white settlement in Australia, it provides a solid foundation for studies of more recent Asian-Australian literature that has 'written back' to colonial discourses that have consistently treated the non-Anglo Australian Asian subject as the eternal Other, against which Australia's own identity as a racially and culturally superior white nation could be contrasted. Most importantly the study points out how stereotyping and othering of Chinese people operates by omission as much as by commission. Because the Chinese were mostly voiceless subjects throughout Australia's colonial history, writers have assumed that the Chinese could never speak for themselves, but had to be represented.

Yu's Mainland Chinese heritage gives him an advantage of being able to test depictions of the Chinese against his own experience, and from this position he mercilessly critiques the way Australian fiction has fulfilled it ideological functions by demonising the 'heathen Chinee' and idealising the domesticated version of the stereotype, namely the 'Chinese with white hearts'. While Australia's anti-Chinese history has been well documented, Yu's own perspective gives this study an enduring originality, and as Susan Lever points out in her forward, Yu takes on Australian literature with his 'usual courage'. Wary of his own admitted tendency to be Sinocentric, Yu nevertheless steers away from 'taking sides' so as not to ignore the hybrid and diasporic conditions of Chinese-Australian migrants. Thus Yu's study ends on an optimistic note, highlighting the more sensitive depictions of the Chinese in the work of Australian fiction writers such as Brian Castro, Nicholas Jose, and Alex Miller.

Yu builds his analysis on a conceptual approach familiar to scholars of Edward Said. Orientalism in Australian fiction is a system of knowledge production that operates negatively to relegate the Chinese to a cultural status lower than that of the Anglo-Australian. Othering the Chinese who had migrated and worked in Australia in the nineteenth century served the ideological project of building a White Australia. But positive Orientalisation also produces a literary commodity that celebrates difference and gives pleasure. While Chinoiserie was popular in the late nineteenth century, between 1902 and 1949 Orientalist representations of Chinese were 'basically racist' (7); until 1972 Australian literature was polarised into pro-Communist and anti-Communist camps. From 1973 to 1988, according to Yu, multicultural writing in Australia challenged and subverted the old stereotypes. Now we are in a period in which China is again feted as the

useful ally, though Yu points out that the old fears of Chinese invasion are always under the surface.

Despite the unrelenting evidence Yu provides to prove the basic ethnocentrism of Australian literature, he pays careful attention to writers who created more favourable depictions of the Chinese, for example, Mrs Aeneas Gunn, Mary Grant Bruce, and Hume Nisbet. These writers were limited, however, by what Yu calls their tendency towards 'positive Orientalism'. Thus Chinese cooks, gardeners and other characters became the symbols of hard work, patience, honesty, and above all, loyalty to their Australian employers. Such idealisations served the writer's own need to moralise in Eurocentric ways, offering a lesson in Christian values, for example. In other cases, writers used Chinese characters to critique the shortcomings of the West; the uncomplaining 'simple' Chinese—migrants from pre-industrial rural heartlands —were displayed as examples of the West's loss of a Romantic ideal. Chapter Five of Yu's study reveals how after 1901 Australian writers were able to publish novels which praised 'the better' Chinese when they could emulate the white gentleman's virtues of Christian integrity and honour. These so-called 'Chinese with white hearts' were of a higher class and breeding and were often distinguished from those 'few illiterate market-gardeners or laundrymen they happen to meet during the course of their daily life' (Charles Cooper, *Hong Kong Mystery*, 1938). Despite the back-handed nature of Cooper's compliment, Yu argues that Cooper's white hearted Chinese were conceived in opposition to Kipling's racist formula that East and West will never meet. What Yu is suggesting is that a few Australian writers were open to the idea of the assimilated Chinese-Australian, but more importantly such an ideal could serve as a critique of Communism.

The 1920s and 30s saw the gradual growth of condescending Sinophilic images, with more positive images of Chinese women. While writers like Carlton Dawe could describe Chinese women as 'ugly little brutes' (qtd. in Yu 228), others constructed the 'celestial Madonna'. The Chinese woman became an occasion for raising western liberalism above the apparent brutality and misogyny of China itself. Mary Gaunt voices a colonial version of feminism which treats the Third World woman as doubly Othered, a victim of her own culture's injustices: 'Nothing—nothing made me so ardent a believer in the rights of women as my visit to China' (qtd. in Yu 233).

Chapter Six, 'Politicised Orientalism', deals with the effect of Australian Communism and the Cold War on writers such as Eric Lambert, George Johnston and David Martin. While many novelists of the period 1950-1972 indulged in a new genre of crime-political thriller that mixed Triads with Red Chinese and half-caste Asian femme fatales, George Johnston, Yu points out, created sympathetic portraits of the Chinese Communists. In the novel *Death Takes Small Bites* (1948), Johnston treats his Chinese characters with a deep humanism that breaks away from old stereotypes, especially those propagated by Communist haters like the Kuomintang. But by homogenising human experience, Yu argues, Johnston's work tended to idealise the Chinese workers as 'peace-loving, virtuous, and courageous people'. Nevertheless, Yu celebrates Johnston's acute vision of an Asia as 'the continent of tomorrow' (Johnston qtd. in Yu 283). David Martin is similarly praised for his narrative sympathies but Yu also points to Martin's 'positive

Orientalist tendency' to treat his Chinese characters as 'silent' pawns who could not speak for themselves and who were secondary to Martin's white heroes (297).

Chapter Seven deals with the period 1973-1988 and accords with my own readings of the Chinese/Eurasian in novels by Christopher Koch and Blanche d'Alpuget. In Koch's *The Year of Living Dangerously* (1978), the Chinese-Australian, Billy Kwan, represents the 'intermediary stereotype' who operates 'somewhere in the middle of the racial hierarchy'. Kwan is a go-between for the Indonesians and the Anglo-Australian journalists posted to Jakarta to report on the Sukarno regime (319). Kwan is never quite Australian, nor Asian, and his death is tragi-comic. Judith, the Anglo journalist in d'Alpuget's *Turtle Beach* (1981), is traumatised by the killing of Vietnamese boat people in a fictive Asian country and can never escape her Eurocentric values. Judith meets Minou, a bi-cultural 'Oriental' destined for a tragic death, and Yu concludes that the meeting of East and West in this novel does not lead the reader to any positive vision of Australia becoming part of Asia. Yu ends the chapter by reiterating the argument that in Australian novels set in China, characters still fall within two groups: the Westernised intellectual and the native, communist or 'ordinary' Chinese (340). In this chapter, one can take issue with Yu's tendency to underrate the agency of these characters, and a more nuanced analysis of the effect of Minou's status as a cultural go-between and d'Alpuget's treatment of her agency might lead to some fresh conclusions.

The last chapter, however, does provide a model for re-writing and re-appraising such stereotypes. Brian Castro's intimate treatment of his Australian-Chinese character, Seamus O'Young, in *Birds of Passage* (1983) realises a fuller subject voice and the novel's treatment of the Lambing Flat riots, and its sophisticated methods for subverting stereotypes of the Chinese as a mere 'sojourner', is applauded by Yu. Castro's work of deterritorialisation and decentralisation (366), Yu argues, challenges the racist underpinnings of Australian nationalism. Yu's last section, 'Author's Comments', provides further optimism that Asian-Australian writing and commentary is heading in what he sees as the right direction.

Chinese in Australian Fiction is a highly readable and essential resource for scholars, and its limitations are perhaps due to the fact that it does not cover the last twenty or so years, a situation that can be traced to a lack of publisher interest in this country and an imposed word limit by Cambria Press. At times there is rigidity in Yu's conclusion that Australian literature is generally racist, Eurocentric and self-serving. For example, positive versus negative Orientalism doesn't fully account for the ambivalence present in texts that deal with inter-racial relationships. While Freud's definition of paranoia is cited to account for Australia's racist fear of Chinese invasion, Yu declines to make use of more recent postcolonial theory such as Robert Young's study of interracial transgression and fascination in *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race* (1995) to unpack such complexities. If paranoia was one extreme motivation for the production of negative stereotypes (a phenomenon well documented by Australian literary scholars and historians), less is said about the productive power of the Australian white man's furtive desire for miscegenation with the Oriental woman. Writers who explore this are easily dismissed as 'fetishisers'. Nevertheless, Yu shows that Australian literature is

predominantly fearful of racial hybridisation and the ‘Dragon Ladies’, Triad femme fatales and ‘Madame Butterflies’ outnumber any other kind of representation of Chinese femininity. Yu promises further work on more recent writing and the 'other' identities constructed in it. I very much look forward to reading it.

Adam Aitken, University of Technology, Sydney