

Ouyang Yu. *Bias: Offensively Chinese-Australian: A Collection of Essays on China and Australia*. Kingsbury, Victoria: Otherland Publishing, 2007, 315 pp.

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The title of Ouyang Yu's non-fiction collection encapsulates his work perfectly. A clear reference to Joseph Furphy's iconic slogan, it suggests that Ouyang has experienced more Australian bias than democratic temper. The title also suggests that Ouyang's work is unabashedly biased, in the sense of being derived from and driven by personal experience. This gives his writing a passion and vocal quality which can be unnerving to a reader used to more detached academic writing, and he is not afraid to offend in order to get his point across. Finally, the articulation of a hyphenated identity goes to the core of Ouyang's work: a living figure of hybridity, he destabilises the purist essentialism and muted xenophobia which is a lamentable reality of mainstream Australian culture.

Since his arrival in Australia in 1991 Ouyang Yu has been an exceptionally active and prolific writer, having published over forty books in this time. What is more remarkable is that he has worked in a variety of fields and genres: as a literary critic he completed his PhD in Australian literature and has written reviews on both Australian and Chinese publications; as a translator he has translated several Australian novels into Chinese; as a poet he has published many anthologies and had poems published in several major publications; as an essayist he is a vocal cultural commentator; and he has also completed a novel, *The Eastern Slope Chronicle* (2002) with other books forthcoming. However, this success has not come easily.

Although *Bias: Offensively Chinese-Australian* is not explicitly autobiographical, the story that emerges is one of a man who has found it difficult to make a new life, especially as an intellectual, in Australia. The first essay in the collection is characteristically strident, railing against the difficulty of securing an academic position and identifying an absence of Asian writers in Australian poetry anthologies. To accusations that he is too confrontational, too aggressive and 'in your face' Ouyang replies, 'But the fact that no Asians are included is just as 'in your face' as anything else, and as 'aggressive'. Look at the recent issue

of *Granta* featuring so-called Australian writings. It's nothing but a show bag of colonialism clothed in gaudy rags of big names that have ceased to interest anyone except their own ilk' (23). This trenchant kind of critique is certainly representative of these pieces, but it is also balanced by more introspective, measured discussions.

Ouyang's writing is conditioned by a deeply-felt sense of difference which is hardly the stuff of multiculturalist rhetoric. In his 'Self-Introduction' he writes, 'For me [...] the difference feels like an invisible scar left deeply in my heart and my mind, simultaneously serving as the division as well as the joint' (15). To a reader unfamiliar with his work this may sound like a self-indulgent lamentation, but it is in fact his lived experience. Furthermore, the paradox of differences serving as both division and joint takes this statement beyond self-pity or complaint and evokes the complex dynamics of intersubjectivity.

Bias: Offensively Chinese-Australian is divided into eight thematically divided sections which broadly move from literary criticism to a concern with linguistic and cultural identities. The sheer breadth of concerns is impossible to do justice to in a short review. There is no clear chronological pattern: the essays range through the 1990s and up to 2004, where translations and poetry seem to have taken up more of the author's time. This lack of chronology does make it difficult to discern progression or development in Ouyang's experiences and thinking, but perhaps it is misguided for a reader to seek an autobiographical narrative in the text. In any case, the thematic ordering is more effective at giving an overview of Ouyang's life and works, and a diachronic narrative is another project entirely.

Another problem with the book is also simply a result of its nature; because it is a compilation of different pieces over time, there is a recurrence of ideas and expressions which sometimes amounts to repetition. This reminds the reader that the book has not been written as a unified entity, and the author has used various outlets over the years to give expression to persistent concerns within his work. This is a minor problem in that it tends to alienate the reader, but it does serve the purpose of highlighting particular threads which are central to Ouyang's thinking.

The only really annoying occurrence of this type of repetition is in some reviews, which tend to follow a 'plot summary, evaluation' formula. This is particularly noticeable towards the end of certain reviews when a phrase such as 'There are, however, some problems with the book' precedes a list of errors or weaknesses. This is, however, entirely forgivable in a form like reviewing which has such generic constraints.

Having said this, Ouyang's literary criticism is insightful. An accomplished poet himself, his readings of other poets are particularly perceptive. He is certainly acute in his criticisms, and particularly aware of the kind of 'Orientalist will to power' that he finds in the poetry of Leith Morton and Dane Thwaites (33). However, he is also generous with praise when he finds a suitable subject, such as Gary Catalano (36) or the Chinese poet Chao Sheng (39). Indeed, much of Ouyang's reading is indebted to the critical discourse approach of Edward Said; he discerns a continuous Othering of Chinese characters in Australian literature, but also a type of 'positive Orientalism' in Alex Miller's *The Ancestor Game* (238). In his *Modern Times* review of this novel, there is a deep ambivalence in the claim that it 'is a breakthrough in that stereotyping and orientalizing tradition' (64), given that it also offers both 'spiritual consolation' and 'a profound insight into the theme of displacement' (65). It is when Ouyang explores these problematic aspects of linguistic and cultural identity that his writing really sings.

While any intelligent reader can write adequate reviews, such multifaceted reflections on identity could only come from a cultural commentator as passionate, engaged and committed as Ouyang Yu. On the one hand he feels displaced from China: he has been long enough from home that it no longer feels quite like home. He finds that upon more recent returns he longs for the quiet, space and clean air he has become accustomed to in Melbourne. He also has had difficulty getting published in China: for political or moral reasons (such as his concern with personal or sexual experience, or his colourful language) no publishers would incur the ire of the establishment by publishing his work.

However, Australia is no idyllic refuge: Ouyang has found it, variously, like 'living after death' (113), 'living in hell', or 'living on the reverse side of paradise' (162). He writes that it is particularly difficult living as a Chinese-Australian intellectual: he has to deal with both the pervasive anti-intellectualism of mainstream Australian culture as well as racism and more subtle forms of xenophobia. This is perhaps the most discomfiting aspect of Ouyang's writing for a white Australian to read. Even for a reader who is already critical of the comforting myth of tolerant multiculturalism it is confronting to read of a very different reality by the author of poems like 'Fuck you, Australia'. Needless to say, this confrontation is crucial to unsettling self-comforting claims of equity and a 'fair go'.

Nonetheless, not all of Ouyang's meditations on his displacement are quite so negative. Just as a soul-destroying mimicry can develop into life-affirming hybridity, Ouyang gestures towards possibilities for a more than usually

fulfilling life inhabiting the interstices between dominant cultures. This is clearly what he finds so uplifting in Miller's novel. Combining this positive vision with his characteristic iconoclasm he writes, 'More than a hundred years ago, Henry Lawson said: Chinese have to be killed or cured. Now I say: The fear of hyphenation and hybridity, two great keywords of our times, has to be killed or cured' (139). For Ouyang the process of translating language feeds into the translation of cultures, and self-translation in particular enacts a hybridity which cannot but be evocative of Homi K. Bhabha's 'Third Space'. These forward-looking essays are as inspiring as the trenchant pieces are confronting.

The standout essay in the collection is 'My Father Tongue' (119). Here Ouyang begins by exploring the peculiar linguistic associations of 'mother' and 'father' in Chinese literature: 'The absence of Father is as interesting as the presence of Mother, particularly when I come to reminisce about my own father's absence' (120). This leads to a deeply moving account of the author's relationship with his father and their communication across vast geographical and cultural distances. An emotive memory work depicting poignant moments in Ouyang's upbringing, this essay is also a tribute to his father's gift for learning languages and his love for ancient Chinese poetry. It concludes with a wistful acceptance of death within life and absence within presence.

Bias: Offensively Chinese-Australian is an important book for anyone interested in either Chinese or Australian literature and culture, but is especially important for those interested in both. It is an unsettling testament to some of the faults and failures of both countries but also reflects a yearning for a more positive future. It is at once dismaying and hopeful, and evokes the potential for real change for a nation which has just elected its first Chinese-speaking leader. Hopefully, in an Australia which hears the Prime Minister wish a Happy New Chinese Year on Australia Day, Ouyang's writing to date will become a testament to things past.

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