

The Overseas Chinese

Ever the Golden Venture

Book Review by Denis McCormack

Thousands of years ago, according to mythology, there lived the Yellow Emperor, Huang Ti, who in the Han Chinese heartland of the Yangtze Valley was the first patriarch of "the Middle Kingdom." This term itself epitomizes how the Chinese came to see their place in the known world. Their ethnocentricity was therefore easily explained within their role as a civilizing influence on surrounding peoples whose duty it was to pay tribute, as do spokes to a hub. The Chinese admitted no other state to equality...barbarians were the names the Chinese gave them, the Chinese never had any myths about the "noble savage." One of Lynn Pan's sources, Professor Wang Gung Wu, vice-chancellor of Hong Kong University and acknowledged doyen of overseas Chinese history scholarship, has recently stated, "where most Asians are concerned, the survival of aboriginal peoples and cultures has never had any priority." In contrast to the modern white man's burden, collective racial guilt about the impact on different peoples of history's unfolding events is not a concept the Chinese ponder.

The Yellow Emperor is considered to be the progenitor of all who recognize themselves as Chinese in race, culture, language and lore regardless of local variations and passports. "The idea of foreign blood is distasteful to a people so strongly imbued with a sense of Chinese and barbarian, Us and Them...the Chinese became the world's most obsessive genealogists." As

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a result of the cultural emphasis on ancestor worship as a past tense of filial piety in the present, it has always provided an added impetus to maximize reproductive success among Chinese. In the absence of the demographic transition which follows industrialization and provision of state welfare for the aged, etc., one needed children and grandchildren aplenty to pay respect to ancestors including oneself in the family/clan temple if the ancient traditions continuum was to be maintained, the fields plowed, and the clan's interest extended. No doubt the time-

tested efficiency of this socio-biological survival strategy is one cause of China's ever-present population problem. "In a country where there had appeared no new kinds of material, technical or political improvements to absorb the proliferation of people, such numbers made for destitution, popular demoralization, corruption, apathy, and the

breakdown of public order and personal morality."

Although some Chinese had earlier gone to Southeast Asia, the modern historical backdrop painted by Pan is that the overseas Chinese were brought forth in big numbers and spread around the globe as a result of European mercantile/colonial expansion's capacity to harness and redirect some excess humanity from a China, "[h]appy to be relieved of the crush of its own population" even though emigration for any reason was thought to be unfilial, unpatriotic, and therefore officially forbidden on penalty of death, at least in theory, until well into the 19th century.

Regardless of wherever they came to reside, or under which flag, the overseas Chinese were liked and encouraged by newly ensconced European traders and colonial administrators for their industriousness, their forbearance as reliable labor, and their business acumen as traders and merchant middlemen. The

Sons of the Yellow Emperor: The Story of the Overseas Chinese
by Lynn Pan
New York: Kodansha America
432 pages, \$16.00



profits and dividends to be had by utilizing the networking talents of the overseas Chinese were deemed to be self-evidently a good thing by those in control. As Pan relates, however, less sanguine views and assessments of the overall impact of the overseas Chinese on the host society's economy and culture always emerged eventually.

"He knew he was not wanted," be it in Southeast Asia, Canada, Britain, The U.S., South Africa, Australia or Peru! Pan's account of 19th and early 20th century immigration restriction legislation aimed at the Chinese in all these countries is enlightening. The local folks in all these countries who were forced into economic, cultural and demographic competition

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with overseas Chinese, have, without exception, and to varying degrees, become wary and resentful of a stratum of people they came to perceive as an unnecessary imposition, an alien and complicating factor introduced into their societies by, and for the benefit of, powers beyond their control. "The British seaman did not disguise his distaste for the Chinese... although in fairness to him, it should be noted that the Chinese, on top of being a threat to his livelihood, were strike breakers." "The consternation...confirmed in many an anxious European his dread of being swamped by the Chinese, in whose formidable numbers and tenacity he perceived a threat..."

Pan explores and explains "Chineseness" and the in-group, in-built solidarity factors which maintain it. Associations based on family-clan names, dialects, guilds, regional origins, secret societies, criminal organizations and schools were formed or transplanted to wherever the Chinese settled.

These institutions formed potent culturally re-

enforcing mechanisms supportive of a widely scattered people who knew that the differences between each other in language or regional origin in China, although obvious to themselves, were far less obvious than the contrast they collectively represented in the eyes of the host majorities of the foreign lands in which they settled. On the bottom line of "Chineseness" maintenance, Pan says "the replenishing of Chinese settlements with fresh tides of immigration ensured that there were enough first-generation immigrants around to keep the communities looking and feeling Chinese.

It seems little is new in legal or illegal immigration regarding the Chinese. Student refuge was offered in 1949 post the communist takeover a la post the Tienanmen Square massacre. The author explains the mechanics of 19th century indentured labor migration or "credit-ticket system" which "was subject to countless abuses....Secret societies were organic to overseas Chinese communities. The two had gone together from the very beginning, with the immigration business." Much of this hasn't changed, according to recent INS analysis of the aptly named *Golden Venture* voyage which would have eventually returned between \$9 and \$15 million to its Triad organizers should its human cargo have been safely and discreetly landed into U.S. sweatshops to work off their passage.

With countless millions of Chinese facing a lifetime of relative scarcity in relation to what they observe of the West on TV, their tradition of pain today for gain tomorrow or "deferred gratification" will guarantee the flow of risk-takers. Even after the Chinese Exclusion Laws of the late 1800s "...it took some ingenuity and some money, Chinese continued to enter the United States as illegal immigrants, smuggled across Canadian or Mexican borders, or through chicanery — in 1901, for example, it was estimated that fraudulent entrants were arriving at a rate of twenty thousand a year." There were also some ingeniously simple ways to circumvent the system in any country, such as the "slot racket" whereby fictitious offspring or "paper sons" would be created by American Chinese with re-entry rights. They would announce the birth of a non-existent child in China, thus creating a "slot" for sale to a prospective immigrant or relation. Even the 1906 earthquake in

San Francisco was exploited because of "...the destruction of immigration records of U.S. Customs. This gave thousands of illegal immigrants their chance to claim residence rights and to apply to bring their families over from China."

Pan gives the reader a short course, including some case studies, on the business ethics and psyche of the overseas Chinese. Some frank admissions are made about the near impossibility of distinguishing between legitimate business, political patronage, organized crime, and a culturally ingrained bias toward perpetuating this status quo. Expanding markets, networks, and bank balances take priority and are fueled by a quiet confidence in themselves to accomplish what they consider to be required.

The Chinese preference to, and for, their own kind is a recipe for blending economic success with racial and cultural solidarity was stated most clearly by Singapore's founding strongman and long-serving ex-Prime Minister, Lee Kuan Yew, when speaking at the World Chinese Entrepreneurs Convention in Hong Kong, 1993:

The potential for economic networking is considerable... People feel a natural empathy for those who share their physical attributes. This sense of closeness is reinforced when they also share basic culture and language. It makes for easy business rapport and trust...

That logic sounds honest, fair and reasonable, and good enough for Chinese but what about the non-Chinese? Perhaps if there was a more universal understanding and mutuality of respectful acceptance between races — that the age old "Yew-them-and-us" principle simply articulated above has always existed and always will — much future conflict could be avoided. Issues such as international trade, world government, immigration and deliberately fostered multiculturalism and multiracialism spring to mind. In the second sentence of her preface Pan, who like Lee Kuan Yew, is overseas-Chinese born, writes, "...race is necessarily a theme of the book and no one can be entirely neutral when it comes to race." This is an honest statement that many a modern faddish tome on race relations and multiculturalism could usefully employ on page one!

Pan's own research has been extensive. She has

mined well the already rich literature on the overseas Chinese, as evidenced in her bibliography, notes and index, all of which, along with some maps, enhance the book's utility. Her sweep of history brings to mind the perfect pun — "Pan-oramic" — but it is the book's comprehensiveness, attention to detail and basic honesty which makes it "Omnimax" in its projection of the good, the bad and the ugly about the overseas Chinese. Sympathetic as she naturally is to the story of her own people, nothing deters her from dealing very candidly with some tough, discomfiting topics. Pan

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lauds or condemns when appropriate, while entertainingly performing a valuable service to her own people and those who wish to learn about them. Everything, from the historical origins of the rickshaw to Chinese lesbian societies, comes into focus.

It is doubtful that some of her observations could have passed a mainstream publishing editor but for her own Chinese background and the natural immunity this afforded her against charges of racism. Pan's chapter titled "The Melting Pot" gives a vivid profile of "anti-racists" in the race relations industry that many would recognize, be they in Britain, Australia, the U.S.A., Canada, New Zealand, France, etc. "The anti-racist can be as intolerant as the racists." Pan discusses with compassion and accuracy the dilemma of overseas Chinese born in America, Britain or wherever, who have become culturally "deracinated," yet still bear the distinct physical appearance of their race.

The ongoing existence of China is a massive, inexhaustible well of culture, capable of "re-sinicizing" its prodigal sons and daughters on a visitational basis, a generation or two after entering some melting pot, or salad bowl. That existence is a formidable resource that is able to salve the racial and cultural soul of those Chinese who, through their

lengthy time of geographical estrangement, feel the need of re-bonding to their roots.

What is left undiscussed, however, because it is not relevant to the enterprise of this book, is just what long-term implications this phenomenon holds for the core cultures of western countries like Australia, New Zealand, Canada, the U.S. and Britain — the destinations for ever-larger numbers of migrating Chinese who know “deep in their hearts ... that they love China best when they live well away from the place.” ■