Orientalism and its Stereotypes

*Chinese in Australian Literature, 1888-1988*
By Ouyang Yu
Cambria Press, 558pp, US$139.95, 2008
ISBN: 978-1-60497-516-1

Reviewed by Deborah Madsen

Ouyang Yu is best known for his poetry, fiction, translations, and editorship of the Chinese-language literary journal *Otherland* which he co-founded in 1994. This book is a revised version of Ouyang’s doctoral thesis which he completed at La Trobe University in the early 1990s. He mentions in the Introduction that he submitted a proposal for the book to Cambridge University Press in 1995. This history is important because the book does show its age: when Ouyang seeks to establish a parallel between his effort to study representations of Chinese immigrants in white Australian fiction and similar Chinese-American studies, the books he cites date from the middle part of the twentieth century, bibliographical references throughout the book are similarly dated, and following the conclusion is a brief discussion, entitled ‘Author’s Comment,’ in which Ouyang fills in the gap between 1994 when he completed the research for the book and its publication date of 2008. Unfortunately, this kind of postscript is just not the same as updating the scholarship and theoretical contexts of the entire project.

It is in Ouyang’s methodology, particularly its lack of substantive theoretical engagement with his subject, that the real weakness of the book lies. He explains that he brings to the project his experience and intellectual background as a person of Chinese descent who was educated in the PRC until coming to Australia as a doctoral student in 1991. He claims: ‘With my experience in and knowledge of Chinese culture, my voice will certainly contribute to the understanding of the Chinese. Where Australian works of fiction directly involve China and Chinese experiences, I can read them from within the culture they claim to represent, testing them against my own experience’ (5). But the culture represented is not Chinese—they are Australian representations of Australian racial attitudes that constitute Ouyang’s subject. This is a fundamental confusion and one that leads to the expectation that perhaps this study will do little more than expose and deplore anti-Chinese sentiments and policies that are no secret in Australian (literary) history. And when Ouyang confesses that he received no theoretical
training in China and had to adopt ‘Western theories, such as Edward Said’s *Orientalism*’ (6) during his doctoral studies in Australia, then concerns about the rigour of his study are hardly put to rest. The resolution of the methodological problem of cultural relativism is achieved in a disturbing way when Ouyang dismisses as ‘nonsensical’ these concerns with the observation: ‘Now that I am a naturalised Australian, writing creatively as a novelist and poet within the literature, I certainly am in an advantageous position to offer Australians my perspectives by interlacing the work with my own writings as a challenge to their reading’ (6, original emphasis). This positioning as an ‘insider outsider’ does not persuade, especially when the claim to ‘insider’ status is based on a certificate of naturalisation alone. Cultural differences cannot be dismissed so lightly; cultural relativism as a methodology for literary study needs careful and nuanced representation.

The book begins in 1888, the year of the Second Intercolonial Conference which determined upon a policy to exclude Chinese immigrants from Australia and ends in the year of the bicentenary. After the historical and theoretical opening section, the second part discusses representations of Chinese in the work of *Bulletin* writers, other Anglo-Australians, and concludes with a discussion of representations characterised by what Ouyang calls ‘positive Orientalism’. This ‘positive Orientalism’, in the discussion of Henry Lawson and Charles Cooper’s work, provides an exception to the Orientalist representations of the post-Federation period, the heyday of the White Australia Policy, which is the topic of the third part of the book. The fourth part takes us from 1949 (marking the Communist victory in the PRC but the post-World War II period in Australia) to the bicentenary of 1988 with an emphasis upon political and multicultural literary trends. Unfortunately, Ouyang’s study stops just at the beginning of the burgeoning of Chinese Australian writing in particular and Asian Australian literature in general that characterises the contemporary Australian literary scene. Thus, the book is an historical artefact in several senses.

Having said that, the opening chapter provides a very useful abbreviated historical account of Chinese migration to Australia, documented with numbers of migrants in specific historical periods and the legislative response of the colonies. This history is divided into the periods that Ouyang uses to structure his book, 1888-1901, 1902-1949, 1950-1988, so the historical overview helps to clarify the contexts in which literary texts were produced. When we turn to the second, theoretical, overview then some of the methodological issues mentioned above become urgent. Ouyang’s account of Edward Said’s work does not take into consideration the substantial scholarship that has been published in response to *Orientalism* and other works. Indeed, Ouyang reduces the idea of Orientalism to ‘negative’ (the Chinese as ‘inferior and backward’) and ‘positive’ (where the Chinese are depicted as ‘superior and civilized’ [38]).
These categories are then related to historical change in ways that are simplistic, such as the claim that, in figures such as Ah Soon and Cheon the Cook, Henry Lawson and Mrs Aeneas Gunn ‘stressed these qualities [of servility and loyalty to their masters] because the time had moved from a period of fierce exclusion to a less severe period of assimilation’ (41). The ‘because’ in this claim asserts a logical, causal connection between literary figures and public sentiments that needs to be argued and rationalized with a theory of how literary meanings relate to meanings circulating in public discourse. The naïve reflection model that Ouyang assumes but does not argue undermines the value of the literary patterns he reveals.

These stereotypes, which defy historical change by persisting in Australian representations of Chinese characters over the course of a century, require analysis and explication. But when Ouyang turns to the issue of racism, it is as what he calls ‘a valid theoretical approach’ (43). It is difficult to imagine how racism can be a theoretical approach to literature until Ouyang invokes the context of nationalism. Racism as a key discursive component of Australian nationalism has been discussed by Ien Ang with great perspicacity; the relations between racism and territoriality have been illuminated by the work of Ghassan Hage: neither is mentioned in this book although Orientalism and the historical experiences of Asian Australians are central to their work. Instead, the reflection model dominates and produces false problems like the following: ‘One question that raises itself is whether any racism remains after the dismantling of the White Australia policy in the late 1960s and the establishment of Sino-Australian diplomatic relations in the 1970s’ (46). That legislative and foreign policy change should necessarily produce a change in the public sphere that would, in turn, be expressed in literary forms, is a question that only arises out of a naive parallelism between literary and governmental discourses. Generalisations are allowed to stand unquestioned—for example, ‘Nationalism finds in the Chinese a convenient scapegoat and a necessary antithesis. Thus most Australians, in their social attitudes, banished the Chinese to the position of Other, and an undesirable Other at that’ (62)—while the scholarship on anti-Chinese racism in the US, which Ouyang himself invokes, has shown some of the ways in which government manipulated public sentiment and public discourse to produce support for anti-Chinese policies. Whether such practices also took place in the Australian context is not raised by Ouyang.

If literature is a distinctive way of communicating through a particular use of language (something that a poet and novelist like Ouyang should appreciate), then these discursive and linguistic differences need to be addressed. Ouyang has provided a service by making available in one place an archive of literary titles that engage with the issues of Chinese immigration and Australian racial diversity. With some pauses to discuss writers like Xavier Herbert, Henry
Lawson, George Johnson and David Martin, Christopher Koch and Brian Castro, Ouyang surveys an extraordinary field. He compensates for the lack of close analysis of most of his primary texts by exhaustively bringing to light the vast literature about Chinese Australians of the century 1888 to 1988. As an archive that can be mined by future scholars, this book deserves a place in most reference libraries.

Deborah Madsen is Professor of American Studies at the University of Geneva. Her most recent publication is the co-edited book, Diasporic Histories: Archives of Chinese Transnationalism (Hong Kong University Press, 2009).