

Il faut donc lire l'histoire de Félix Albert, de préférence en version française, pour prendre conscience une fois de plus de la complexité du monde rural québécois du siècle dernier, et pour se rendre compte que dans ce domaine, le travail des historiens commence à peine.

Yves Frenette
Collège Glendon, Université York

Kay J. Anderson — *Vancouver's Chinatown. Racial Discourse in Canada, 1875-1980*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1991. Pp. x, 323.

In general, the immigration and settlement of Chinese people in North America since the mid-19th century has stimulated two different kinds of historical inquiry. Some scholars seek to understand the experience of the Chinese themselves and to address issues in their life, work and community. Others focus sharply on the Chinese encounter with racism; they pay attention primarily to the perspectives of the non-Chinese and discuss how and why they treated, or mistreated, the Chinese the way they did. This study of the Vancouver Chinatown by Kay Anderson is a most recent addition to the Canadian literature in the latter category.

Anderson argues that the place known as "Chinatown" was in fact a cultural construct that belonged to the Eurocentric Canadians. It was a result of racial thinking that drew on the ideas of "China" and the "Chinese" in centuries of European thought and the "scientific" discussion of "race" in the contemporary western world. It was essentially a way of cultural management by which the majority marginalized the Chinese and referred to them perpetually as "outsiders" in the Canadian society. Whatever the Chinese immigrants and their descendants thought of themselves is not important, according to Anderson, for they were the subject of a cultural hegemony and their presence was defined, and prescribed, by people other than themselves.

To delineate the process of racialization, the author carefully weaves together two analytical issues. The focus on a single Canadian "Chinatown" enables her to locate the racial discourse within a historical context. The discussion of the cultural trajectory of Vancouver's "Chinatown" in western minds — as a "Celestial cesspool" and a "Vice-town" in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, as the "Little Orient" in the 1930s, as a "slum" in the 1950s and 1960s, and as an "ethnic neighbourhood" since the early 1970s — is therefore very concrete and clear.

Anderson further attributes primary importance to the Canadian state in the articulation of the racial ideology. Just as Ottawa created and maintained a separate category for the Chinese in its immigration policy from 1885 to 1947, Victoria was no less vigilant in denying this group of residents political rights and economic opportunities. By comparison, the most active agent in neighbourhood definition seems to be the Vancouver city government, no matter its actions were aroused by sanitary concern, moral indignation, or perhaps the desire to celebrate the cultural uniqueness of the Chinatown area.

This study furnishes a valuable perspective on racism as a historical process unfolding in a western society (Figure 1). The introductory chapter is particularly

useful for those who are interested in the relevant social and cultural theories. Historical documentation in the substantive chapters is generally abundant. However, the work is weakened by a certain degree of inconsistency. Some of the themes developed in the earlier chapters are not followed through. The kind of empirical discussion on the Vancouver Chinese community in the 1900s-1930s (63-71, 74-80, 146-151) is not provided on the post-war period. Traditional images of "China" deep in European consciousness are said to have a lasting impact on how the Chinese were perceived (95-97). One wonders if the "threat" of Communist China during the Cold War era and later, the "China" euphoria in the West in the 1970s would similarly affect western views of the Chinese.

Another problem in Anderson's thesis is its highly selective and biased discussion of the Chinese. The author is right that this work is about western perception of "Chinatown" and no elaborate treatment on the self-identification of the Chinese is needed (94). Nonetheless, she does repeatedly draw conclusion from what she considers as the internalization and appropriation of those externally derived categories by some Chinese (the victims?) to support the argument of a cultural hegemony (25, 27-28, 203-204, 221, 249). This reader for one would question if that is a fair representation of the Chinese. Does it mean that the Chinese have no cultural baggage or entitlement of their own? Is it true that any of their self-presentation that resembled western perception is necessarily a sign of cultural subjugation? Moreover, the book itself gives numerous examples of a counter culture among the Chinese in contesting the validity of those imposed categories. A case of legal action against unfair legislation took place as early as 1887 (66). Towards the 1970s, the flourishing of community resistance against further bureaucratic harassment and negative stereotyping in the media is noteworthy (200-202, 207-209, 236-243). Without playing down the Chinese reactions and initiatives, is it really possible to speak of a cultural hegemony for the entire period under study?

This brings us to another interesting point in the book. Previous studies of Canadian racism with respect to the Chinese and other Asians seldom go beyond the Second World War on the assumption that the ugliest phase of overt discrimination was then over. Anderson insists that the improvement in racial relations thereafter has actually obscured the fundamental continuity in the discourse on "race" — and that is, the Chinese were still defined by others as distinct and separate, though in a more benign and subtle fashion (145). The argument is fine as far as it goes, but how useful is it in putting the developments since World War II in perspective. Has the progressive "dismantling of the racial hierarchy" in government legislation since the 1940s (170) not altered the discourse on "race"? Have the search for a new form of Canadian identity and the unprecedented appreciation of cultural plurality since the 1960s not ushered in a different paradigm in the discussion of "ethnic" and "racial" issues? Was the Canadian state playing the same role in matters of cultural definition in the 1970s as it had been around the turn of the century? What about the growing assertiveness of the ethnic Chinese as "Chinese Canadians"? Have they finally emerged as full participants in the discourse on "race" in Canada?

Wing Chung Ng
University of Texas at San Antonio
