Searching for Mr. Chin: Constructions of Nation and the Chinese in West Indian Literature. Anne-Marie Lee-Loy. Philadelphia PA: Temple University Press, 2010. (Cloth US$ 42.00)

In the conclusion to Searching for Mr. Chin, Anne-Marie Lee-Loy explains the personal origins of her interest in the subject of the Chinese in West Indian literature. Coming from an Afro-Chinese family in Jamaica, she recalls her childhood curiosity about her father’s brother, who had been sent by his father to live in China with his grandparents at the age of five and returned to Jamaica twenty-five years later. Despite his clearly Afro-Chinese features, his Hakka Chinese cultural mannerisms and speech characteristics fascinated her and eventually stimulated her interest in the place of the Chinese in Jamaican (and West Indian) society: “My underlying claim is that the representations of the Chinese found in literary and other texts provide us with a significant position from which to explore the ambiguities, potentialities, and limitations of nation as an imagined construct in the West Indies” (pp. 142-43).

Until recently, the minority Chinese community was barely acknowledged by scholars of Caribbean society. This marginal status, in life as in scholarship, has been shared by all of what British sociologist David Lowenthal (1972) has called the “status gap minorities” (or what others have called “middlemen minorities”) in West Indian society: the Portuguese, Chinese, Syrian/Lebanese, and Jews. The Chinese (like the Portuguese) originally came as indentured workers in the mid-nineteenth century, but during the twentieth century the number of free Chinese immigrants was either more than or almost equal to the numbers of early immigrants (Jamaica and Trinidad, respectively). Where they have appeared at all in the creative literature produced by new nationalist writers they have generally been presented as peripheral and fleeting figures, marginal to the central focus. Lee-Loy is the first critic to have unearthed and critiqued the ways in which the Chinese have been portrayed during the colonial and postcolonial periods. She also examines the ways in which the slim literary output of Chinese West Indians themselves has presented the existential experience of being and belonging in these societies.

One difference between the literary portrayals of the Chinese in the West Indies compared with Cuba has to do with the writers’ backgrounds—primarily Spanish and Cuban Creole elites in Cuba, and literary artists
emerging from the black nationalist movement in the West Indies. (British and white Creole perceptions of the Chinese community in the West Indies do exist, but they date back to the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, in the form of official colonial reports, travel diaries, missionary documents, and journalistic accounts; their perceptions often make an interesting contrast with the views of their Hispanic counterparts [see Look Lai 2009].) In the twentieth century, British West Indian literature was the direct product of the black anticolonial movement (see, for example, Lamming 1960, James 1963 [Appendix], 1977). This has tended to produce its own logic. Most West Indian literature has been confined to the celebration of the life of the folk, the village dwellers and urban masses whose aspirations have been the central driving force of modern West Indian history. Many of its perspectives have been distilled by members of an anticolonial intelligentsia who originated from these very communities (or, in rare cases, by artists from the other communities who sympathized with their anti-colonial worldview). As a consequence, their perceptions of “the Other” in their midst have generally been framed less in terms of a racist or “Orientalist” condescension from above (see López-Calvo 2008) than from a “victim” perspective of the colonized: “Are these people one of ‘us’ or one of ‘them’?”

That is exactly how Lee-Loy has structured her discussion in this book. After an introduction and a chapter on national identity and literature, she discusses the literary treatment of Chinese under three headings: those works that view them negatively as “outsiders,” those that view them favorably as “insiders,” and those written by West Indian Chinese themselves.

Both the “Chinese as Outsiders” and “Chinese as Insiders” themes can be glimpsed in the works of 1930s writers like Ralph de Boissière and Alfred Mendes, 1950s and 1960s writers like V.S. Naipaul, Samuel Selvon, Michael Anthony, Edgar Mittelholzer, Sylvia Wynter, Ismith Khan, Eric Walrond, and Robert Standish, and more recent postcolonial writers like Patricia Powell, Margaret Cezair-Thompson, Elizabeth Nunez, Paule Marshall, Marion Patrick Jones, Shiva Naipaul, Alicia McKenzie, Earl McKenzie, Noel Woodroffe, and N.D. Williams. In very few of these works is the main character Chinese, but the angles of vision all tend to coincide regardless of the centrality of the character or the orientation of the writer. The “outsider” theme tends to focus on the “power” of the middleman Chinese figure, whether exercised as a predatory economic exploiter (Mendes, McKenzie,
Powell, and others), or as a sexual exploiter of village women (McKenzie, Wynter, Nunez). Aloof and unknowable (Mendes, Standish, Powell), or social misfits (Patrick Jones), with no clear location in the colonial social order (Mittelholzer), living parallel but separate lives from the urban and rural working class, the Chinese characters’ class and national loyalties are depicted as antagonistic to the assertion of working class aspirations (de Boissière), especially when they feign attachment to a questionable radical cause (V.S. Naipaul).

Refreshingly, the Chinese as “insiders” theme also exists as a parallel mode of discourse in the literature, whether as a lovable and “assimilated Creole” figure (Selvon), a valued foreigner in a multicultural village setting (Anthony), or a person who cannot hold back the forces of cultural assimilation inherent in West Indian society (Powell, Wynter, Cezair-Thompson). The character is also sometimes present as a victim of the same oppressive history as the majority society. In Selvon’s *Turn Again, Tiger* he has undergone the same indenture experience as the Indian. Nunez portrays her Chinese character’s attitude toward women as a product of the same debased past that all the others in the society are striving to overcome. Cezair-Thompson’s *The True History of Paradise* manages to flawlessly integrate the story of political turbulence in Jamaica in the 1980s with the organic multiculturalism of the island as experienced by all her Chinese (and other ethnic) characters.¹

The Chinese West Indian writers discussed by Lee-Loy are Willie Chen of Trinidad, Meiling Jin and Jan Lowe Shinebourne of Guyana, and Easton Lee and Victor Chang of Jamaica. These writers are not single focused. Lee-Loy points out that Chen seldom addresses the Chinese presence, but concentrates on other figures in the multicultural milieu, since, as he observes, the reality of the Afro- and Indo-majority cannot be escaped. Chang’s short stories provide a counter-image of the “privileged space” of the Chinese shop, exploring its interior life as a place of alienation and ethnic withdrawal. On the other hand, Lee and Shinebourne portray the existential space of the shop and the rural estate as a humanizing space where issues of identity

¹ Lee-Loy has omitted two powerful visionary statements of the multicultural potential of West Indian society, one more explicit than the other, which take the whole discussion to a different level: George Lamming’s *Of Age and Innocence* and Wilson Harris’s *The Whole Armour*.
and belonging are imperceptibly worked out among people of different ethnicities. Both Shinebourne and Jin point to the Chinese experience of indenture and the colonial embrace of all things British as indications of a shared, rather than separate history. Shinebourne sets her novels against the backdrop of Guyana’s anti-colonial struggles for self-determination, and discusses the Chinese place in the society as evolving within the context of nation-building and social struggle. Her views are clearly influenced by the racial dynamics of Guyanese society, just as Lee tends to speak largely to the racial dynamics of village Jamaica. Jin, whose stories are more of a personal nature and hardly venture into social commentary, nevertheless talks about “Black against East Indian and we Chiney in between.” To the extent that any of these writers look nostalgically to China as a source of inspiration, only Lee’s poems seem to show any of this concern, although several of Jin’s stories have pure Chinese characters and backgrounds, including the haunting “Song of the Boatwoman” (curiously unmentioned by Lee-Loy). All the others (and Lee himself) are more concerned with the racial realities and potentialities of the Caribbean existential landscape.

How complete is a folkloric view of the Chinese that confines itself largely to the existential realities of the rural and urban small shopkeeper? What is the relation between the Chinese seen in West Indian literature and those described in terms of “status-gap minorities” by sociologist David Lowenthal? What do we make of the Chinese portrayed in an English historian-bureaucrat’s 1915 study of the Chinese in British Guiana (Clementi 1915: Chapter 14)? Or of the professional portraits of Trinidad Chinese society in the 1940s presented in the community volume Chien Chiao—The Chinese in Trinidad (see Look Lai 2006)? There seems to be a great gap between the folkloric depictions of rural race relations found in West Indian literature and the multidimensional lived experience of the Chinese themselves, a deeper “invisibility” within the stereotypical “invisibility” of this community.

Is this important? It is if we are concerned with how much this particular ethnic experience shares or does not share with other Chinese diasporas. In the case of the West Indian Chinese, it is perhaps still true that only in those rare works of a nonliterary nature can we glimpse some of this inner group complexity. But the output is growing, and the readiness of mature nationalist societies to learn about their many social selves is today greater than it has ever been. Lee-Loy’s study represents a worthy attempt to focus on a
dimension of West Indian multicultural social life still, like others, awaiting revelation and evaluation.

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References