
Until this special issue, Caribbean Quarterly had published only one article on the Chinese in fifty-plus years of its existence. The scarcity of publications on diasporic Chinese in this region is not unique to the Caribbean Quarterly; in fact, it is reflective of the larger field of Caribbean and Latin American Studies. While only a handful of texts were available before the 1990s, the past decade and a half has seen tremendous growth in the studies of Chinese — and Asians, more broadly — in the Caribbean and Latin America. Certainly, this special issue marks an important shift in at least the scholarly recognition of the Chinese presence in the Caribbean. Several factors have contributed to this. First, Chinese immigration in the 1980s and 1990s has led to an increase in the Chinese population throughout the Caribbean and Latin America. Second, there has been a tremendous growth in Chinese investment, both private and state sponsored, in this region. Third, academic and popular interest in the global phenomenon of Asian diasporas has encouraged more research on the subject matter. On account of these three factors, I am hopeful that we will be seeing more publications such as this one.

The unique contribution of the Caribbean Quarterly special issue is that it focuses on the Chinese in Jamaica. In commemoration of the 150th anniversary of the arrival of the Chinese in Jamaica, the guest editor, Victor L. Chang, has selected five essays that offer historical, sociological, and literary perspectives. Together, they provide insight into Chinese migration patterns, community organizations, literary representations, and women’s experience.

Walter Look Lai kicks off the issue with an overview of Chinese global migration and raises several topics for comparative inquiry, including the shift in places of origin and settlement, contexts of emigration and settlement, and processes of adjustment and assimilation. Look Lai’s overview essay is followed by Patrick Bryan’s brief history of the Chinese in Jamaica. Bryan divides Chinese immigration into three general waves. Between 1854 and 1886, the first wave of Chinese arrived as contract laborers. The second wave, arguably the largest in number and greatest in impact, consisted primarily of businessmen; they arrived between 1900 and the 1940s. The third wave refers to the post-1980s immigrants. While the Chinese in Jamaica consisted primarily of male laborers in mid to late 19th century, Bryan notes that late 19th- and early 20th-century Jamaica saw an increase in Chinese shopkeepers and Chinese women. The emergence of the Chinese middle class in Jamaica did not go unnoticed, and like so many other diasporic Chinese communities, its economic mobility aroused much antagonism.
among the indigenous population. This aside, the Chinese put down roots and established various community institutions, including various Chinese Associations and the Sin Min School.

Extending Bryan’s discussion, Aaron Chang Bohr offers a detailed discussion of Chinese associations in Jamaica, which include a variety ranging from those that replicate institutions found in the homeland and others resembling Jamaican organizations. While Chang Bohr notes the significance of these associations to the Chinese community and shows how they play important cultural, economic, and political roles, he also points out the paradoxical effect of these associations: they help maintain Chinese cultural identity and promote ethnic solidarity even as they facilitate Chinese integration into Jamaica and mediate relations between the Chinese and Jamaican society.

Examining two Jamaican novels and one communal biography by a Chinese Cuban, Lisa Li-Shen Yun challenges the longstanding erasure of Chinese presence in Caribbean cultural productions and argues at the same time that the case of the Chinese in the Caribbean compels us to rethink “who is Chinese and what is Chinese.” She suggests that the portrayal of “contrarian diasporic identity” in all three texts — characterized by the coolie, the culturally and racially mixed, and those who have embraced the Caribbean as home — expands our notion of what constitutes Chinese identity, making it more inclusive and at the same time disrupting presumptions of homogeneity and essentialized authenticity. Her analysis highlights the culturally mixed world and entangled webs of relations within which each of the Chinese figures is embedded. One is racially mixed, being Afro-Chinese; another speaks his last wishes in patois, not the expected Chinese; and all interact and form intimate relations with non-Chinese. With these examples, Yun urges us to re-imagine the Chinese diaspora as “people, ideas, cultural flows, and creative sensibilities, characterized by hybridization and creolization…” (p. 29).

M. Alexandra Lee, the only non-academic in this group, concludes the volume with an essay that focuses on immigrant Chinese women in Jamaica. In an effort to recover their experiences, Lee interviewed the first generation of Jamaican-born Chinese about their immigrant mothers. Her interviewees discuss the challenges these women confront in their adopted home. What comes across is how hardworking, pragmatic, and responsible these women are, even as they remain socially isolated, have few options, and lack decision-making power. One of the questions I am left with is how did the immigrant women themselves make sense of their own lives. If given the opportunity of being interviewed, would they represent their past differently than their children? I suspect that interviewing these women directly will provide a different set of insights into how they made sense of their everyday lives, the conditions in which they had lived, and the choices they had to make. I appreciate Lee’s effort in examining women’s history