

The Chinese in Canada, by Peter S. Li. Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1988. Pp. xi, 164. \$10.95.

Peter Li's book is the work of a well-known analyst of Chinese-Canadian society and race relations. It has several merits: it is short and easy to read, and it presents a clearly stated theoretical position as its theme. It is more readable than *From China to Canada*, more comprehensive than *Gold Mountain*, and more integrated in its analysis than David Lai's recent *Chinatowns*. Essentially, it is a short history of the Chinese in Canada organized around the theme of institutional racism. Both brevity and theme should make it a usable book for relevant courses in sociology and history. Two particularly well-done passages in the book present life histories (there are all too few of these in the literature so far) and an analysis (on pp. 69-70) of the costs of labour reproduction.

Merits, however, are balanced — and perhaps even overbalanced — by shortcomings, mostly associated with the basic theory and its application. By "institutional racism" Li means racism not confined to social encounters but racism systematically made a part of law and policy. The origin of institutional racism, he believes, lies not in the cultural or economic reactions of private individuals; that kind of racism would be unimportant if it were not for its use in institutionalized form. The real origin of racism lies in the needs of capitalism for an assured supply of cheap labour at the lowest possible reproductive cost. Thus, the needs of capitalism result in a set of laws, policies, and practices that ensure the subordinate status of "minorities" like the Chinese in Canada, justified by magnifying otherwise superficial differences of appearance and culture. Thus, "race" and assumptions about it are inventions that justify the creation and maintenance of a split labour market. Li rejects what he sees as the opposing argument, one that stresses culture. That argument, he believes, is one that blames the victim: it says minorities are discriminated against because they deserve it; they should abandon "old ways" and become like the majority.

From my perspective, there are several limitations to the use of this interpretation as the explanation of the history of the Chinese in B.C. and Canada, or, indeed, in analyzing "race relations" anywhere. There is no doubt of the institutional discrimination applied to Canada's Chinese, especially prior to the 1950s. It is a reasonable argument that capitalist labour need was behind much of that institutionalized racism. Li is not the first to suggest this; he is, however, the first to make this idea applicable to all of Chinese-Canadian history and, presumably, to all forms of economic life. Li sees certain kinds of employment as economic core occupa-

tions (e.g., resource industry labour in B.C.) and others (petty self-employment) as marginal and “ethnic.” Chinese, he seems to say, were pushed out of “core” occupations into marginal ones. But the place of the latter occupations in the economy is not discussed; nor is the well-known preference (relevant here) of migrating Chinese for being one’s own boss.

The greatest problems, in my view, lie in the post-1940s era. Canada’s changing policies towards the Chinese had nothing to do, Li believes, with changes in attitudes. They were a recognition that labour markets had changed and in the post-industrial world of the 1960s and after a different kind of immigrant was needed. Yet this argument does not quite fit. One could argue that by the late 1960s policy-makers recognized that the new, skilled immigrants now sought could only be attracted if allowed to bring their families, even though that greatly increased the labour reproduction costs that had been so slight before. But how does one account for the policy changes of the 1940s and 1950s that allowed for the reunification of the families of the earlier, unskilled immigrants, with all the attendant reproduction costs? In short, I would be willing to accept an argument that stresses capitalist labour need if not made the only argument and if not applied to all historical periods and all parts of the Canadian economy.

In a more general way, I see severe limitations to this theory as the sole explanation of any ethnic community’s history. There is no doubt that institutional racism played a major role in the experience of Chinese-Canadians. But must this interpretation be applied in such a severe and exclusive way; and must it be necessarily associated with capitalism? The necessary association of racism with capitalism here implies that non-capitalist societies do not institutionalize racism and that its occurrence in them is therefore a trivial matter. Black African students in socialist China might not agree. It also ignores the non-economic purposes for which a would-be-dominant group uses definitions to control who gets society’s rewards and opportunities. Recent work on Vancouver’s Chinatown by Kay Anderson is relevant here. Are recent cries by some Vancouverites that wealthy Asian immigrants are about to “take over,” the expressions of capitalist dupes, or the anxieties of today’s rule-making group that sees its power in jeopardy?

Second, Li’s approach rules out culture as a factor. His discussions of Chinese-Canadian institutions are superficial and often based on pre-1970 sources. His interests lie elsewhere. If culture is irrelevant — if the story is not one of the interaction of discrimination and culture — then all comparative work about what Chinese migrants do elsewhere can be ignored,

including Yuen Fong Woon's piece in *Pacific Affairs*, which specifically compares Chinese migrants in North America with those elsewhere.

Finally, this approach, which rightly avoids blaming the victim, puts not only the blame but all of the initiative in the hands of his oppressor. The victim is nothing but a victim; he has no other role in history and no initiative. Some of us who write ethnic history try to bring out the historical creativity of those who are the subjects of the policies of the powerful. But it sometimes seems that some members of the current generation of Chinese-Canadian scholars are willing to honour their ancestral generations for their sufferings even as they rob them of any role in creating their history. Surely that history does not belong exclusively to the current generation.

Li's book is provocative and thereby useful. Our next step is not, however, to engage in further revisionist assertions, but to see how we can incorporate several analyses into a more sophisticated understanding than we now have of Chinese-Canadian history.

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Fishing With John, by Edith Iglauer. Madeira Park, B.C.: Harbour Publishing, 1988. Pp. 306.

About fifty pages into this book, I flipped to the back to see if it had an index. It does not, and probably it should have. A reader is likely to want to return to specific sections of the book: on how to select and prepare a dead second-growth cedar for a mast, on the delicate engine manoeuvres required to catch spring salmon hiding among the rocks, on the recipe for bread made from flaxseed, rolled rye, and a can of Pacific Milk. *Fishing With John* is filled with such information — details of working techniques, nautical suspicions, folk culture, and local lore.

Edith Iglauer has written something approaching a handbook to salmon trolling on the West Coast. She lets out several possible narrative lines — the education of Edith, the biography of John, the love story of Edith and John, the romantic life cycle of the salmon, or the seasonal cycle of the fishing life — but none catches on and holds. She baits her opening with some intriguing metaphors — the boat as a bird, John as a fish — but they get snagged and disappear. She places an odd premium on objectivity: we read how the salmon tasted to John, but not to the author. Iglauer sketches her main character tentatively: a potentially revealing detail, such