

Chinese Canadians -

VOICES FROM A COMMUNITY

This book sets itself a difficult task:

"Nothing brings history to life as well as its impact on the lives of those who survived it...we have been fortunate to assemble a diverse group whose personal experiences illustrate the major events in the history of the Chinese in Canada in the twentieth century...Personal anecdote exposes character and the dynamics of the subject's relationship to society better than any description and analysis penned by another author."

The book is *Chinese Canadians - Voices from a Community* by Evelyn Huang with Lawrence Jeffrey (Douglas & McIntyre Ltd., 1992). In fact, it is not an oral history at all, but a collection of interviews with Chinese Canadians of various ages and backgrounds. While it does not entirely achieve its goals, it is an interesting and worthwhile effort.

Many of the interviewees are well-known outside the Chinese Canadian community, and almost all are identified as leaders within that community.

"Burn your bridges.

Burn them.

And walk away."

David Lam is, of course, the Lieutenant-Governor of British Columbia. He repeats his famous advice to new immigrants from Hong Kong to "Burn your bridges. Burn them. And walk away." At the same time, he says that the impact of immigration from Hong Kong is "one of the best things that will happen to Canada. We get talent. Those talents, education and experience represent billions of dollars of time and investment. We get all that plus the entrepreneurial spirit and the capital. What more could you want?"

Television personality Adrienne Clarkson also appears. She says: "I'm not obsessed by being a woman or by being Chinese or by being my age or anything. I just wish to enjoy life and to live a full and enriching life and to contribute something and create something. That's what I really want to do, so I don't think about these other [political] issues

that much. If I'm asked to participate in a Chinese Canadian event I do, or I lend my name to it."

One of the more colourful interviewees is Dock Yip, a lawyer/actor in his late eighties. He was the first Asian called to the bar in Canada and was active in lobbying for repeal of the Exclusion Act. His hope for the Chinese community is for "the Chinese [to] become more Canadian. Take part in Canadian life. Join the Rotary Club, the Lion's Club. Take part, and contribute money to Canadian society. But I also believe the Chinese should retain their ancestral language. For instance, my children, they should learn Chinese and learn the Chinese culture."

"Be proud that you come from

a Chinese heritage,

but be proud of being Canadian"

One of the more thoughtful interviewees is Der Hoi-Yin, who is the national business correspondent for the CBC. She says that Caucasians in Canada do not understand that "[there] are divisions within the various communities, be it Chinese, East Indian or whatever. It's all broken into little cliques; and then you've got divisions between the ethnic groups. What we must try to do, is to help bridge the gap, so our children are not ethnocentric but multicultural, cosmopolitan."

Asked for a message for her children, Ms. Der says: "Be proud that you come from a Chinese heritage, but be proud of being Canadian. I want them to work hard in this country, excel in this country. This country is theirs now. Regardless of what others may say about them because they are a visible minority, they are a part of this country...While they may look Chinese, while they may speak Chinese, all of which is important, I know they will never be truly Chinese. They will be Canadian, Chinese Canadian."

The book also contains an essay by Peter S. Li of the University of Saskatchewan entitled *The Chinese Minority in Canada, 1858-1992: A Quest for Equality*. It sets out a brief history of legalized

racism against the Chinese, a sad history that is not sufficiently acknowledged in Canada today. The essay also contains interesting data about the demographics of the Chinese Canadian community over the years. In striking contrast with the majority of the interviews, Mr. Li concludes: "It would appear that despite the economic and occupational advances made by Chinese Canadians in recent decades, they have yet to cross the social barriers to full acceptance into Canadian society."

Most of the interviewees express faith in Canada and optimism for the future of the Chinese community in the country. They also stress the importance of assimilation and seem to suggest that any lack of integration by the Chinese into mainstream Canadian society arises at least in part from self-imposed isolationism. This appears to be contrary to Mr. Li's views, as well as those of the interviewees, who ask insistent questions about racism.

However, it must be noted that these interviewees are really voices from a segment of a community. Almost all are long-established in Canada and, as mentioned above, are identified as leaders within the Chinese Canadian community. They are highly successful people. It might be interesting to hear from some less successful voices in the Chinese Canadian community. As Ms. Der notes, there are divisions within every ethnic community.

The interviewees are generally also interesting people. Unfortunately the book is marred by gushy introductions and amateur photographic portraits of the interviewees, and shallow questions. However, the interviews illustrate a few more tiles in the cultural mosaic that is Canada. Notwithstanding Mr. Li's pessimism about the future for Chinese Canadians, it is clear that their influence is growing. This book is a record for the Chinese Canadian community, and a source for other Chinese, and other Canadians, to learn something about this community. ♦

Margaret Coates is a Canadian lawyer at Baker & McKenzie in Hong Kong and a member of the Chamber Publications Committee.