

# The Overseas Chinese

## Ever the Golden Venture

**Book Review by Denis McCormack**

Thousands of years ago, according to mythology, there lived the Yellow Emperor, Huang Ti, who in the Han Chinese heartland of the Yangtze Valley was the first patriarch of "the Middle Kingdom." This term itself epitomizes how the Chinese came to see their place in the known world. Their ethnocentricity was therefore easily explained within their role as a civilizing influence on surrounding peoples whose duty it was to pay tribute, as do spokes to a hub. The Chinese admitted no other state to equality...barbarians were the names the Chinese gave them, the Chinese never had any myths about the "noble savage." One of Lynn Pan's sources, Professor Wang Gung Wu, vice-chancellor of Hong Kong University and acknowledged doyen of overseas Chinese history scholarship, has recently stated, "where most Asians are concerned, the survival of aboriginal peoples and cultures has never had any priority." In contrast to the modern white man's burden, collective racial guilt about the impact on different peoples of history's unfolding events is not a concept the Chinese ponder.

The Yellow Emperor is considered to be the progenitor of all who recognize themselves as Chinese in race, culture, language and lore regardless of local variations and passports. "The idea of foreign blood is distasteful to a people so strongly imbued with a sense of Chinese and barbarian, Us and Them...the Chinese became the world's most obsessive genealogists." As a result of the cultural emphasis on ancestor worship as a past tense of filial piety in the present, it has always

provided an added impetus to maximize reproductive success among Chinese. In the absence of the demographic transition which follows industrialization and provision of state welfare for the aged, etc., one needed children and grandchildren a-plenty to pay respect to ancestors including oneself in the family/clan temple if the ancient traditions continuum was to be maintained, the fields plowed, and the clan's interest extended. No doubt the time-tested efficiency of this sociobiological survival strategy is one cause of China's ever-present population problem. "In a country

where there had appeared no new kinds of material, technical or political improvements to absorb the proliferation of people, such numbers made for destitution, popular demoralization, corruption, apathy, and the breakdown of public order and personal morality."

Although some Chinese had earlier gone to Southeast Asia,

the modern historical backdrop painted by Pan is that the overseas Chinese were brought forth in big numbers and spread around the globe as a result of European mercantile/colonial expansion's capacity to harness and redirect some excess humanity from a China, "[h]appy to be relieved of the crush of its own population" even though emigration for any reason was thought to be unfilial, unpatriotic, and therefore officially forbidden on penalty of death, at least in theory, until well into the 19th century.

Regardless of wherever they came to reside, or under which flag, the overseas Chinese were liked and encouraged by newly ensconced European traders and colonial administrators for their industriousness, their forbearance as reliable labor, and their business acumen as traders and merchant middlemen. The profits and dividends to be had by utilizing the networking talents of the overseas Chinese were deemed to be self-evidently a good thing by those in control. As Pan relates, however,

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**Sons of the  
Yellow Emperor:  
The Story of the  
Overseas Chinese**

by Lynn Pan

New York: Kodansha America  
432 pages, \$16.00

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*Denis McCormack is Australian correspondent for THE SOCIAL CONTRACT. He is one of the principal activists for immigration reform in that country.*

less sanguine views and assessments of the overall impact of the overseas Chinese on the host society's economy and culture always emerged eventually.

"He knew he was not wanted," be it in Southeast Asia, Canada, Britain, The U.S., South Africa, Australia or Peru! Pan's account of 19th and early 20th century immigration restriction legislation aimed at the Chinese in all these countries is enlightening. The local folks in all these countries who were forced into economic, cultural and demographic competition with overseas Chinese, have, without exception, and to varying degrees, become wary and resentful of a stratum of people they came to perceive as an unnecessary imposition, an alien and complicating factor introduced into

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their societies by, and for the benefit of, powers beyond their control. "The British seaman did not disguise his distaste for the Chinese... although in fairness to him, it should be noted that the Chinese, on top of being a threat to his livelihood, were strike breakers." "The consternation...confirmed in many an anxious European his dread of being swamped by the Chinese, in whose formidable numbers and tenacity he perceived a threat..."

Pan explores and explains "Chineseness" and the in-group, in-built solidarity factors which maintain it. Associations based on family-clan names, dialects, guilds, regional origins, secret societies, criminal organizations and schools were formed or transplanted to wherever the Chinese settled.

These institutions formed potent culturally reinforcing mechanisms supportive of a widely scattered people who knew that the differences between each other in language or regional origin in China, although obvious to themselves, were far less obvious than the contrast they collectively

represented in the eyes of the host majorities of the foreign lands in which they settled. On the bottom line of "Chineseness" maintenance, Pan says "the replenishing of Chinese settlements with fresh tides of immigration ensured that there were enough first-generation immigrants around to keep the communities looking and feeling Chinese."

It seems little is new in legal or illegal immigration regarding the Chinese. Student refuge was offered in 1949 post the communist takeover a la post the Tienanmen Square massacre. The author explains the mechanics of 19th century indentured labor migration or "credit-ticket system" which "was subject to countless abuses....Secret societies were organic to overseas Chinese communities. The two had gone together from the very beginning, with the immigration business." Much of this hasn't changed, according to recent INS analysis of the aptly named *Golden Venture* voyage which would have eventually returned between \$9 and \$15 million to its Triad organizers should its human cargo have been safely and discreetly landed into U.S. sweatshops to work off their passage.

With countless millions of Chinese facing a lifetime of relative scarcity in relation to what they observe of the West on TV, their tradition of pain today for gain tomorrow or "deferred gratification" will guarantee the flow of risk-takers. Even after the Chinese Exclusion Laws of the late 1800s "...it took some ingenuity and some money, Chinese continued to enter the United States as illegal immigrants, smuggled across Canadian or Mexican borders, or through chicanery — in 1901, for example, it was estimated that fraudulent entrants were arriving at a rate of twenty thousand a year." There were also some ingeniously simple ways to circumvent the system in any country, such as the "slot racket" whereby fictitious offspring or "paper sons" would be created by American Chinese with re-entry rights. They would announce the birth of a non-existent child in China, thus creating a "slot" for sale to a prospective immigrant or relation. Even the 1906 earthquake in San Francisco was exploited because of "...the destruction of immigration records of U.S. Customs. This gave thousands of illegal immigrants their chance to claim residence rights and to apply to bring their families over from China."

Pan gives the reader a short course, including some case studies, on the business ethics and psyche

of the overseas Chinese. Some frank admissions are made about the near impossibility of distinguishing between legitimate business, political patronage, organized crime, and a culturally ingrained bias toward perpetuating this status quo. Expanding markets, networks, and bank balances take priority and are fueled by a quiet confidence in themselves to accomplish what they consider to be required.

The Chinese preference to, and for, their own kind is a recipe for blending economic success with racial and cultural solidarity was stated most clearly by Singapore's founding strongman and long-serving ex-Prime Minister, Lee Kuan Yew, when speaking at the World Chinese Entrepreneurs Convention in Hong Kong, 1993:

*The potential for economic networking is considerable... People feel a natural empathy for those who share their physical attributes. This sense of closeness is reinforced when they also share basic culture and language. It makes for easy business rapport and trust...*

That logic sounds honest, fair and reasonable, and good enough for Chinese but what about the non-Chinese? Perhaps if there was a more universal understanding and mutuality of respectful acceptance between races — that the age old “Yew-them-and-us” principle simply articulated above has always existed and always will — much future conflict could be avoided. Issues such as international trade, world government, immigration and deliberately fostered multiculturalism and multiracialism spring to mind. In the second sentence of her preface Pan, who like Lee Kuan Yew, is overseas-Chinese born, writes, “...race is necessarily a theme of the book and no one can be entirely neutral when it comes to race.” This is an honest statement that many a modern faddish tome on race relations and multiculturalism could usefully employ on page one!

Pan's own research has been extensive. She has mined well the already rich literature on the overseas Chinese, as evidenced in her bibliography, notes and index, all of which, along with some maps, enhance the book's utility. Her sweep of history brings to mind the perfect pun — “Pan-oramic” — but it is the book's comprehensiveness, attention to detail and basic honesty which makes it “Omnimax” in its projection of the good, the bad and the ugly about the overseas Chinese. Sympathetic as she

naturally is to the story of her own people, nothing deters her from dealing very candidly with some tough, discomforting topics. Pan lauds or condemns when appropriate, while entertainingly performing a valuable service to her own people and those who wish to learn about them. Everything, from the historical origins of the rickshaw to Chinese lesbian societies, comes into focus.

It is doubtful that some of her observations could have passed a mainstream publishing editor but for her own Chinese background and the natural immunity this afforded her against charges of racism. Pan's chapter titled “The Melting Pot” gives a vivid profile of “anti-racists” in the race relations industry that many would recognize, be they in Britain, Australia, the U.S.A., Canada, New Zealand, France, etc. “The anti-racist can be as intolerant as the racists.” Pan discusses with compassion and accuracy the dilemma of overseas Chinese born in America, Britain or wherever, who have become

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culturally “deracinated,” yet still bear the distinct physical appearance of their race.

The ongoing existence of China is a massive, inexhaustible well of culture, capable of “re-sinicizing” its prodigal sons and daughters on a visitational basis, a generation or two after entering some melting pot, or salad bowl. That existence is a formidable resource that is able to salve the racial and cultural soul of those Chinese who, through their lengthy time of geographical estrangement, feel the need of re-bonding to their roots.

What is left undiscussed, however, because it is not relevant to the enterprise of this book, is just what long-term implications this phenomenon holds for the core cultures of western countries like Australia, New Zealand, Canada, the U.S. and Britain — the destinations for ever-larger numbers of migrating Chinese who know “deep in their hearts ... that they love China best when they live well away from the place.”

**TSC**



# Recent Reports of Interest

by Wayne Lutton

*The Net Costs of Immigration: The Facts, the Trends, and the Critics* by Donald Huddle, Ph.D.

Department of Economics, Rice University

October 1996, 101 pages, \$15.00

Carrying Capacity Network

2000 "P" Street, NW, Washington, DC 20036

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The 24.4 million legal and illegal immigrants who settled in the United States since 1970 cost American taxpayers \$65 billion in 1996, in excess of the taxes those immigrants paid, according to the latest comprehensive study on immigrant-related costs prepared by Rice University economics professor Donald Huddle. Over 62% of the net national cost of immigration in 1996 was attributable to legal and legalized (thanks to the 1986 amnesty) immigrants. Illegal immigrants generated about 38% of the total net cost.

Furthermore, Professor Huddle determined that approximately 2.3 million, predominantly low-skill, Americans were displaced from employment during 1996, due to the continuing high influx of immigrant workers. Public assistance to these displaced workers, including Medicaid, Aid to Families with Dependent Children, food stamps, and unemployment compensation, in 1996 totaled more than \$15.2 billion.

Although high levels of immigration have been portrayed by Ben Wattenberg as the "life saver" of the Social Security system, Dr. Huddle determined that a net deficit of \$8.5 billion to Social Security is attributable to the foreign-born population.

Dr. Huddle has been tracing the mounting costs of our current immigration policies nationally, and to such states as California, Florida, Texas, and New York, in a series of reports published by CCN. His work has come under fire from pro-immigrationists, such as Julian Simon and Jeffrey Passel of the Urban Institute. In his latest study, Prof. Huddle responds to his critics, and reveals the serious flaws in the Simon and Urban

Institute studies, which have been widely cited in the popular press and by anti-immigration reformers, such as Michigan Senator Spencer Abraham.

Even if the 1996 welfare reforms aimed at reducing immigration-related costs remain in effect [President Clinton has pledged to repeal or "revise" them], Dr. Huddle estimates that the net cumulative costs for the decade from 1997-2006 are projected to reach \$866 billion, for an average of around \$86.6 billion annually. Data from the 1990 Census indicate that the poverty rate of the entire foreign-born population is 42.8% higher than among native-born U.S. citizens, and the average value of public assistance received adjusted for the public assistance reciprocity rate was 44.2% higher than the average for all U.S. residents.

Huddle sees that cost savings can be realized only by significant cuts in legal as well as illegal immigration.

*What is the Relationship Between Income Inequality and Immigration?* by John L. Martin

October, 1996, 28 pages, \$7.50

The Federation for American Immigration Reform

1666 Connecticut Ave., N.W., Suite 400

Washington, D.C. 20009, (202) 328-7004

Reviewing 1990 Census data for the 51 Metropolitan Statistical Areas (MSAs) that account for about half the U.S. population and 75% of our immigrants, John Martin concludes that large-scale immigration is linked to the shrinking of the American middle class. Because current U.S. policy favors the admission of poorly educated and unskilled immigrants, it is not surprising that they and their children are contributing to increasing income inequality.

Like some other observers, Martin sees the United States possibly heading toward a future resembling conditions prevailing today in many Third World countries, where a relatively few wealthy secure themselves in private communities, while the rest of the population wallows in poverty and crime. As he remarks in the Introduction to his study, "To the extent that the economic strength and political stability of the United States have been forged on a large middle class, any factor that diminishes that pattern must be looked at as a challenge to the stability of our fundamental institutions."

Martin insists that reforms in legal immigration and

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Wayne Lutton, Ph.D., is associate editor of THE SOCIAL CONTRACT and co-author, with John Tanton, of The Immigration Invasion (The Social Contract Press, 1994, 192 pages, \$4.95. Call 1-800-352-4843).