

ALL UNDER HEAVEN

Book review

Accone, D (2004) **All under heaven: The story of a Chinese family in South Africa.** Cape Town: David Philip. ISBN 0-86486-648-8 pbk. Pages 283.

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The erstwhile arts and media critic Darryl Accone has written this entertaining and illuminating auto/biographical "novel", which opens a window on the experiences of the small but not insignificant population of South African Chinese. Or is that Chinese South Africans? The ambiguities of identity and belonging alluded to in such a question are pondered in a narrative of origins and acculturations that traverses two continents and almost a hundred years. The book begins in poverty-stricken rural China in 1911, in which Accone's great grandfather *Langshi* and grandfather *Ah Kwok* are leaving for the fabled "gold mountain" of *Namfeechow* (South Africa). Their purpose is to make a quick fortune and then return to China, but they both become entangled in their new lives in Africa and *Ah Kwok* never sets foot in China again. The writing is part historical narrative, part autobiography, and part fiction, and slides between the genres as it weaves together childhood stories told by the author's grandparents, archival material, and imaginative reconstruction to trace the fates and fortunes of his family in the noxious and highly racialised terrain of colonial and apartheid South Africa. The first half of the book reconstructs his ancestors' converging journeys to *Namfeechow*, interspersed with recollections and recreations of the China of his forebears' youth. This rural China is portrayed in sometimes wonderfully poetic and evocative prose as naturally beautiful, steeped in ancient myth and culturally complex. Landscapes, smells and foods are all minutely detailed and tied to ancient and elaborate tradition.

One of the quandaries the book touches on is what it means to call oneself "Chinese" in South Africa, and treads an uneasy path between, on the one hand, an appeal to origins, "roots" or ancestry as a basis for "Chineseness", and on the other, more hybrid, syncretic notions. In this context, what Accone's detailed and almost idyllic descriptions of China seem to achieve very powerfully is the construction of a Chinese identity firmly rooted in the soil and traditional culture of the Chinese "homeland". This is a clearly ethnicised notion of a Chinese diaspora, which imparts a "sense of being a 'people' with historical roots and destinies outside the time/space of the host nation" (Clifford, 1997, quoted in Ang, 2003:142). This claiming of "difference" within the nation state bestows a symbolic emancipation from "minority" and/or marginalised status, and is an emotionally powerful basis for identification and belonging (Ang, 2003).

When read in contrast to contemporary literature by Chinese authors from the “mainland” (e.g. Gao, 2000; Ha, 2001), Accone’s “China” seems always already bound up with his own immersion in South African life. For example, there are moments in the book that resemble popular cinematic representations of ancient China, while others resonate with my own childhood memories of growing up in Johannesburg’s Chinatown. “Chinese” dialogues in the book reproduce the same sparse Chinese sounds and phrases that make up my own scattered vocabulary, and images of China repeat my childhood imaginings of what it, “where I came from”, must be like. This montage of images and sounds make up the diasporic dream of the cultural exile: a profound feeling that deep inside there exists a true identity that would make sense of the experience of alienation, of the feeling that one must belong elsewhere. But Accone’s is an illusory Chineseness that is irrevocably distorted and altered by its South African context. Accone’s writing, far from celebrating the hybridity that emerges in this “in-betweenness” (cf. Ang, 2003), seems intent on unearthing a true Chineseness, which in the end, ironically subverts its own claim to “authenticity.”

There are aspects of Accone’s story that unsettle, even if only implicitly, an uncomplicated identification with ethnic origin. A significant theme of the writing is the conflict his family experiences between “fitting in” to the host nation and the very strong imperative to remain true to their origins. The characters in the book play this out in ways that challenge the easy appeal to historical origin as a basis for identity. This is seen very specifically in the details of the everyday lives of his family in South Africa in the second half of the book. After years of integration and “acculturation”, Accone’s parents and grandparents are insinuated very profoundly into South African life: they live in places like Sophiatown, play the saxophone, speak Chinese and Zulu, dance to Rogers and Hammerstein and *maskanda*, and eat mielie pap as well as congee. The hybridity implied in the way they live their lives and their modes of cultural consumption points to a more complicated entanglement between “South African” and “Chinese.” It is these characters, and the “hybrid identities” they imply that blur and puncture the boundaries that separate nations and challenge the power of the homogenising identity projects of nation-states (cf. Ang, 2003).

Importantly, the book also purports to shed light on the position and experiences of the Chinese under apartheid, and therefore to locate the Chinese within the current South African sociopolitical arena. The back-page blurb introduces this theme by describing the Chinese as having been classified “non-white” under apartheid but who are now not seen as having been previously disadvantaged. To be sure, the Chinese were subject to, and undoubtedly suffered under the same discriminatory laws and policies as other “non-whites” under apartheid, but the book does give the impression that the Chinese were not actively persecuted, at times slipping through the “cracks” of the absurd and over-elaborate apartheid system of racial classification. It also seems that little in the way of active resistance to apartheid was mounted by the Chinese, and that they lived relatively low profile lives and kept to themselves. And significantly, the successful mobilisation of diasporic links to “Chineseness” allowed appeals to the then Taiwanese government (with whom the apartheid government maintained links) to lobby for better treatment for South African Chinese on certain minor issues (cf. Yap & Leong Man, 1996).

The recent revival of interest in Frantz Fanon and Steve Biko in South African psychology (due largely to writers like Hook, 2003; 2004) has brought some powerful theoretical resources to bear on questions of identity in South Africa after apartheid. Without suggesting too close an affinity with the (post-) colonial experience, there might still, perhaps, be a substantive question as to whether such theoretical resources would apply to the Chinese experience in South Africa. Accone's book, rather than allowing insight into this, fails in its easy invocation of an essentialised and enduring Chinese identity as a counter to racist objectification. Feelings of inferiority, engendered by racism, or living a "double consciousness," in the Fanonian sense (cf. Hook, 2003), which have surely been a part of my own experience as a "Chinese" growing up in South Africa, are not even alluded to. At one point Accone's mother – rejected by her primary school friends – cries out in a moment of desperation "I want to be white". Her father's fierce rebuke is that she is Chinese, a member of the "most civilised and cultured race on earth", and should never wish to be otherwise. Under apartheid therefore, being "Chinese" seemed to grant an important sense of positive identity, with its links to an enduring and ancient civilisation, allowing one to see oneself outside of the derogatory racial classifications of the time. This being said, in the context of an apartheid system that (violently) imposed identities on individuals according to the "obvious facts" of racialised bodies, Accone's book does not seem to question "Chineseness" as a natural fact in itself, or the idea that it could be an identity that was not necessarily welcomed by those so identified.

The Chinese community itself was not exempt from its own practices of exclusion, and Accone's "mixed" ancestry was just as much a target of discrimination. For example, Accone tells of how as a child, his grandmother Gertie was refused admission to the local Chinese school because she was not considered "pure" Chinese. These instances in the book illustrate the essentialist and fundamentally exclusionary politics of the notion of a Chinese diaspora. Despite their attractiveness to postcolonial, liberatory endeavours, such constructions of diasporic Chineseness are quite different to conceptualisations of an *African* diaspora, as so lucidly espoused by Paul Gilroy (1997). While identity in the former relies on the exploitation of an "alienation from an assumed cultural core" or homeland (Chun, 2001:99), the latter is built on shared memories of suffering and enslavement, a traumatic and forced rupture from home, and the criss-crossing of the Atlantic Ocean, what Gilroy refers to as "the black Atlantic" (1997:321). Here identity is situated "in-between", in movement, and in new, hybrid cultural forms, rather than in a connection to an imagined home nation, or a pure, original culture.

Accone's book may be seen as a claim to belong to the "Chinese nation." It is also an expression of nostalgic yearning for a return "home," in which the hope of belonging, of an end to alienation (that is inevitably always disappointed) is seen to lie. Seen in the South African context it is an assertion of difference. And yet, in its accounts of Chinese people's ordinary lives and suffering under apartheid, it is also a simultaneous assertion of sameness, of "South Africanness." The details provided, for example, of life in "non-white" group areas like Newclare, Johannesburg, being excluded from "white" buses and schools, and encounters with cultural and musical icons and anti-apartheid heroes, seem to lay a foundation for claims to a, albeit equivocal, moral or political legitimacy for the Chinese in South Africa. And these claims blur – or extend – the boundaries of what it means to be either "South African", or "Chinese", or both. This is a heartening sign, as we are bombarded, daily, with images of our new, "multicultural" South Africa.

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