

Reviews in History

Published on *Reviews in History* (<http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews>)

Race, Law and ?The Chinese Puzzle? in Imperial Britain

Review Number:

815

Publish date:

Saturday, 31 October, 2009

Author:

Sascha Auerbach

ISBN:

9780230609495

Date of Publication:

2009

Price:

£50.00

Pages:

280pp.

Publisher:

Palgrave Macmillan

Place of Publication:

Basingstoke

Reviewer:

Flemming Christiansen

Sascha Auerbach's *Race, Law and ?The Chinese Puzzle? in Imperial Britain* is a truly unsettling account of how in the 19th and early 20th centuries media, politicians, trade unionists, writers, thespians, film makers, and not least police and court officials across the British realm stolidly and uncompromisingly articulated and executed racist, Sinophobic judgements, deliberately whipped up anti-Chinese sentiments in the population, and elaborated on lurid, racist narratives about Chinese people. Auerbach's book is from cover to cover packed with detailed evidence of the 'yellow peril' and other infamous myths about 'John Chinaman,' extracted with great care from rich archival and media sources from the time. His effort proves that the odd dog-eared copy of a Fu Manchu novel encountered in a car boot sale is not an outrageous anomaly, but represented mainstream beliefs of its time.

The book is a welcome addition to the growing literature of the ethnic Chinese in Britain, because it gives substance, social and political context and depth of vision to some of the racist themes that today are only vaguely known as a handful of jaded slogans, names and topics of another age. The great effort that has gone into collecting the evidence and creating this excellent volume allows us to gain an unprecedented and extraordinarily detailed understanding of the protagonists and outlets of multi-layered racist hate-campaigns waged against Chinese in Britain and its colonies.

The evidence is rich and clear and presented eloquently, providing excellent pointers to the historical context

of how these ideas about the Chinese emerged across the British empire, serving the diverse 'needs' of colonial administrators and politicians in Transvaal, Hong Kong and Australia, of trade union leaders in Britain, and of shipping magnates. The rich material of racism is skilfully narrated into the social and moral discourses of wider society, leaving the reader with a vivid impression of how common and normal anti-Chinese bigotry once was. The sources from press, pulp literature and official archives, which the author has consulted and cited from, reveal the wide range of diverse prejudices held by different groups of people. Their voices, in verbatim quotations, give life to Auerbach's account, showing the personal foibles and individual modulations of what ultimately could be a pretty boring and repetitious affair: the articulation of racist stereotypes.

Auerbach must be commended for his systematic exploration of a huge collection of scattered sources, the basic integrity and thoroughness of his account, and his subtle analysis of racism as a cultural phenomenon. The book is easy to read, attractively written with an unassuming, somewhat underplayed style that allows the content to stand out in its grotesque, hyperbolic and self-important absurdity. This enables the reader to be drawn into a sound and reflecting engagement with the issues. I was made to wonder whether the protagonists were cynical manipulators of race for their own purposes or buffoons believing what they said and wrote in spite of the glaring evidence of its falseness. The human cost of the deliberate invention of allegations, the manipulation and falsification of facts and the malicious recycling of slander was too great to be ignored: people died, went to jail, were deported, and were exploited in the most horrendous ways due to what in retrospect seem ridiculous and absurd charges. Just because we, with the hindsight of a few decades, find the racism of the past scurrilous and laughable, it cannot, and should not be, a laughing matter.

Sascha Auerbach focuses his account on London's Limehouse Chinatown, thereby cleverly binding the narrative to a specific place and allowing its demise in the 1930s, destruction during the Blitz in the 1940s and final demolition in the 1950s to conveniently end the story. This is, of course, necessary, for by the 1940s other matters were on people's minds, and the empire slowly commenced its decline, calling into question many of the presumptions the bigotry had lived off. Yet, ending the story around the Second World War is a great pity, for one wonders how the anti-Chinese sentiments fared in the shadow of Holocaust, in the age of human rights, the ideals of the United Nations, and of post-colonialism and multiculturalism. Were they forgotten or have they continued a new life under a new identity?

Auerbach's book rightly limits itself to the story of London Chinatown during a century of colonialist anti-Chinese racism. This focus means that a range of important themes are not addressed; the author, for example, sidesteps the obvious question about anti-Chinese racism in relation to other types of racism at the time and in more general terms; the different and evolving attitudes to blacks, Jews, Arabs, Chinese, and Japanese mean that an exclusive focus on the Chinese may skew the picture. Although there are some references to the concerns about miscegenation, he avoids the wider perspectives of the development of the scientific advances at the time, related to genetic inheritance, racial hygiene, eugenics, and other ideas now considered erroneous, which no doubt had a strong influence on the anti-Chinese racism. He also evades the possible comparison and link between the horror stories about Chinese evil and the genres of gothic narratives of evil, depravity and dark powers that became so popular in 19th century Britain, for example in novels by Robert Lewis Stevenson, Bram Stoker and Mary Shelley: What, if anything, set Sax Rohmer's novels about Fu Manchu apart from an existing dark trend in literature? Did their main character signify something that was deeper and more fundamental than racial angst directed against the Chinese? He does not mention Fu Manchu's afterlife on the international rock scene as adrenaline pumping punk and heavy metal visions of doom and total power that draw on the dark and ominous sides of Sax Rohmer's figure, oblivious of its racist connotations. He meticulously tells the stories of the politicians, administrators, media people, businessmen, trade unionists and artists that together create the racist public imaginations, indicating how they are closely linked to a mixture of economic interests and the empire's perceived need to control and edify colonial populations, but he shies away from discussing his topic in terms of *discourse*. The selection of sources is also very narrow in the sense that descriptions of Chinese across the world and in China published in mainstream scholarly and popular books, journals and pamphlets, in particular ethnographic accounts, memoirs, travelogues, cultural studies, and Orientalist works about Chinese civilisation are not

consulted, an omission that also extends to the rich church and missionary society media and archives related to Christian missions in China and among Chinese elsewhere. The significance of this, of course, is that the racist 'Chinese puzzle' perceptions documented by Auerbach are far from representative of the public images of China and the Chinese; there is no end to anti-Chinese bigotry in many such works, but many have very different perspectives, more complex judgements, showing cultural admiration, empathy and in some cases strong anti-racist opinions. People who lived through the time covered in Auerbach's book were thus exposed to a much broader cacophony of voices when it came to a public appreciation of China and the Chinese. However, Auerbach is probably right in limiting his account, for his terse and simple presentation of the embarrassing facts and his low-key analysis evoke the maximum effect in his readers, focusing the attention on a truly shameful phenomenon. Even so it is a pity, as the *general* significance of that phenomenon is not explored, and because an awareness of the broader social and cultural discourses could have thrown a much more revealing and comprehensive light on anti-Chinese racist discourses.

Auerbach's book provides substantial ammunition for a wider analysis: It elegantly reveals how racial prejudice is constructed. Judgements of immorality, criminality, lack of hygiene, ethnic otherness, incivility, low class, promiscuous and dangerous sexuality, dishonesty, violence and many other perspectives merge together in invented views of the Chinese as the other. Crime was in many cases described as instances of presumed culpability; formal rights were often circumvented; the practice of police and other government officials, judges and the media was to create uncertainty, a sense of subliminal danger based on hearsay and invention, presenting it to the general public in suggestive media formats. Where Chinese had rights, laws were changed to undo those rights. Where Chinese, believed to be unable to adopt to British ways, actually assimilated, this was held against them as an example of their deceitful cunning. Confrontations where only one Chinese was slightly injured and no harm was done went down in media reports and memory as 'London's tong feuds' (alluding to the violent warfare between different *tongs* in San Francisco Chinatown), and the fact that the Chinese had *refrained* from violence was another proof of their devious nature. The starting point for a broader approach lies exactly in the intersection of prejudice in media and public policy and the murky association between concerns in different discrete policy areas directed against certain groups, in particular social classes and ethnic groups. It is commonly observed that modern civic pride is associated with public hygiene, civility, public order, proper sexual conduct, moral comportment, soberness, honesty, sanity, rationality, legal behaviour, religious uprightness and so on, which the public authorities, the courts of law and the church were in charge of policing, lest, of course, the horrors of depravity, dishonesty, drunkenness, illness, insanity, immorality, soberness, criminality, deviousness, infidelity, and incivility were able to take hold. The blurred association of moral contagion and criminality was used to keep the working class in their place and as a pretext for deportation and containment of people of other races through the enforcement by state agencies and by *de facto* deprivation of rights. The discourse, seen from this angle, has broad social significance in both defining the social mainstream and in creating class and race control. The racial and class identity becomes an intractable 'other' beyond the norms of society and therefore beyond the *normal* rules of public policy. Where Chinese men were better and more caring husbands of white women, and sober, less obstinate and more reliable workers, the 'reality' generated by public opinion, claimed that they were leading white women astray, into depravity, often using opium, and paving the way for a degeneration of the white race. Policemen investigating the marriages and cohabitation of Chinese men and British women found 'nothing illegal?', but felt compelled to note their worries and disgust in the case notes. Their degenerate character and by implication culpability was taken for granted, and they 'only' escaped on a technicality, thereby creating the need to bend the rules.

Auerbach records, but never really analyses, the development over time of the prejudices; the different labour market needs for Chinese workers across the empire manifests itself in many inconsistencies in racist invention, and as time goes by the media and the authorities gradually negotiate new rationales and purposes that suit the diverse conditions. Rules employed in Transvaal and Australia against Chinese had awkward implications in Britain, but ultimately were superseded by the invention of gang violence among Chinese, of their seduction of innocent women, and of their role in providing opium to British people, in short creating a myth about Chinese as vectors of unrest, depravity and the decay of British society, thereby making the earlier views obsolete.

Those of us who do feel that, in spite of race equality policies, political correctness, and strong public displays of ethnic unity, there are in Britain today still discernible echoes of the prejudices so pervasive just a couple of generations ago will find little in the book that confirms it. I am probably not alone in thinking that an analysis *today* of statements on Chinese and China by media, politicians, police, court officials and various activists will reveal a similar realm of racial bigotry, malevolence and ignorance, albeit often articulated in less overtly offensive ways. We need not go far, looking at media reports on the Morecambe Bay disaster, the tragedy in Dover Docks and the political debates, policy making, police and court practices relating to immigration of Chinese people, snakeheads and gangland crimes, seemingly calibrated with assertions about China as a repressive and totalitarian state, the exploitation of labour in sweatshops, and China's aspirations to be a great power. The racial themes and prejudices *have* found a new life.

Sascha Auerbach delivers the raw materials on which we will be able to build our analyses of how racist discourse works. In that sense, it is a timely and highly accomplished contribution to the literature about both anti-Chinese racism and to race relations in the colonial period.

Source URL: <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/815>

Links:

[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/3798>