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In Case You Missed It: Big White Lie

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By Peter Zarrow
I want to share some impressions of a book that the sinologically inclined (like me) might otherwise ignore. *Big White Lie*, by John Fitzgerald, is most importantly a polemic about Australian history—subtitled “Chinese Australians in White Australia”—but it also has a lot to say about modern Chinese culture, politics, and business. What follows is not a systematic review

but a few *xinde*: somewhat random and incomplete notes on what I got out of the book.

The study of overseas Chinese has always seemed to me like an orphan field—an interesting and important area of research that has long produced major scholarship, but lacking a home of its own. In the post-war American universities, it didn’t quite fit into Asian studies—sometimes researchers didn’t even know how to read classical Chinese!—nor history departments with their national pigeonholes. None of this prevented a rapid growth of the field (or subfield?), perhaps in part because of the rise of identity politics, at least in the case of the United States, since the 1970s. And there is no doubt today that more recent academic trends in global history (and real-life trends in international business), are showing up the inadequacies of national history, and the importance of diaspora studies. About a decade ago, one of its masters, Wang Gungwu, suggested that overseas Chinese studies couldn’t be just one thing: he highlighted the differences among the various Chinese communities that had emerged outside of China and the need for comparative work on them.

Whether overseas Chinese studies will become a key part of sinology, as Wang thinks, and a sub-field of ethnic and minority studies, as he hopes, remains to be seen. An explicitly comparative approach was followed by Adam McKeown in a stimulating attempt to break out of the national framework.[1] By highlighting the role of Chinese in the global circulation of people, goods, and money and Chinese networks in both local and transnational contexts, McKeown is able to transcend the limitations of national history and the “settler versus sojourner” debate of traditional migrant studies. Whether more assimilated or more tied to transnational Chinese networks (or of course both), Chinese migrants and their descendents around the world have always been active participants in constructing their identities.

As well, recent work has emphasized (or reemphasized) the roles that Chinese migrants played in China itself. This view highlights the maintenance of connections and networks among the overseas Chinese and between overseas Chinese and family and businesses back home. The turn to overseas
Chinese studies by "mainstream" China historians like Philip A. Kuhn may presage a more general recognition "that neither Chinese history lacking emigration nor emigration lacking the history of China is a self-sufficient field of study" (p. 5). Here, migration emerges as a strategy for family survival in economically pressing circumstances. And in the modern era, from the turn of the twentieth century, Kuhn shows the political appeal of Chinese nationalism for overseas Chinese, who were to one degree or another isolated among larger host populations.

Fitzgerald's Big White Lie is not primarily aimed at cataloging the contributions of Chinese-Australians to the development of Australia, though there is some of that. Nor is it aimed at discussing their contributions to China, though we learn a good deal about that as well. Rather, Fitzgerald wants to show exactly how Chinese migrants shared so-called Australian values (really universal values), in spite of attempts to exclude them. Australians, especially elites, appear to have been less crudely racist than Americans at the turn of the twentieth century, but they argued that an unchanging Chinese culture was hierarchical and slavish. Chinese thus could never fit in with the culture of (supposedly) free, egalitarian, and individualistic Australia. And this "big white lie" is maintained even today by historians who attribute White Australia policies to an underlying clash of national values.

Fitzgerald argues that all you have to do is listen a moment to actual Chinese Australian voices, to hear their commitment to freedom, equality, and fraternal solidarity. Taking "mateship" and "fair go" as the local Australian idiom for these universal principles, and adding what he regards as an implicit Australian value—the yearning for respectability—Fitzgerald finds these principles were just as attractive to Chinese migrants as to European migrants or the native-born. It is true that many Chinese migrating to Australia in the nineteenth century were not initially familiar with the terms "freedom" and "equality," but the irony is that it was Australian whites who excluded the Chinese from their scope. That did not stop the Chinese from founding town clubs, Masonic fraternities, workers' brotherhoods—and, yes, secret societies—that were expressions of community solidarity. Such organizations were far from absolutely egalitarian (any more than their white counterparts), but Fitzgerald's point is that they shared "similar myths about similar values" (p. 29).

Anti-Chinese discrimination was hardly unique to Australia, but again in contrast with the United States, as well as New Zealand and Canada, in Australia it was intimately tied to the nation-building program that came with Federation, or independence from Britain, in 1901. Australian identity was thus perceived to emerge from a clash of cultures—egalitarianism and freedom versus the intolerance and despotism of the lands to the north (as well as with the British class system).

In historical fact, Chinese migration was severely restricted but never quite cut off, and Chinese Australian argued vociferously, if futilely, for their legitimate place in a land of freedom. White Australians, perhaps especially the labor movement as in other white settler societies, claimed the Chinese were indentured workers willing to work under slave-like conditions and wages. In fact, Fitzgerald shows, while indentured labor existed in colonial settings, migrants to Australia were largely individuals who (or whose families) may have borrowed funds for their passage but who were free laborers, miners, and farm hands.

The involvement of overseas Chinese in the anti-Manchu revolutionary movement of the early twentieth century is well-known, and certainly included many Chinese-Australians. Some also became radical labor leaders in the ensuing decades, with ties to the Guomindang, before the party turned rightward. Many, even with strict White Australian policies in place, were able to travel back and forth to China, and establish successful businesses. At the same time, Chinese Australians were often full members of their communities—footballers, soldiers, and Freemasons as well as gold-miners and greengrocers. They had enthusiastically supported federation because they understood it as a step forward in human freedom. However, they imagined a continuation of the norms of the British empire, which at least allowed travel and commerce within its vast territories. The loss of these rights as a new Australia firmed up its borders as a White outpost, strikes one as a double tragedy—for an Australia that might have become a more dynamic place as well as for individual Chinese deprived, for example, of their businesses. Fitzgerald’s account, though, is certainly not one of victimization. Chinese Australians still built major Australian institutions, not to mention several of the great department stories of Shanghai, Canton, and Hong Kong, which so enriched the Republic of China’s
commercial culture as well as the investors. Yet the book neglects the Chinese Australians who never became “successes.”

It is perhaps not a coincidence that Fitzgerald was a student of Wang Gungwu, an Australian, and a mainstream China historian himself. *Big White Lie* has a great deal to offer China historians—from insightful discussions on Liang Qichao, who visited Australia at the time of federation, to Australia’s fateful role in the machinations of the Versailles Peace Conference, to a new (to me) view of the Guomindang as a thoroughly internationalized organization. This book has even more to say about Australian history, including the Chinese side of the ancient Sydney-Melbourne rivalry that I reckon few Australians know about. More importantly, it should force Australians to rethink the very basis of their national identity. When I taught in Australia in the late 1990s, many of my students were Asians fairly fresh off the boat. Embarrassingly, I took this to be the case with one student who turned out to be fourth-generation Chinese-Australian. He wasn’t a very good student, but perhaps that just proved how thoroughly assimilated his family had become to that other Australian value, leisure.

References:


[1] McKeown does not see his research as comparative in the social scientific sense of isolating variables that explain differences (p. 24), but I take his work, based on in-depth analysis of Chinese communities in three locations, to be comparative in a broader sense of the term.