

Chinese Fatherhood as Alternative to Hypermasculinity in West Indian Fiction

Dr. Anne-Marie Lee-Loy
Associate Professor, Department of English
Ryerson University

The Chinese community of the Caribbean region of the Americas has its roots in 19th century indentured migration. In the former British West Indian colonies, the Chinese were specifically introduced into the post-emancipation environment because it was hoped that they would become a “buffer community”; namely a community who would help to diffuse revolutionary activity amongst the Black working class by ensuring the continuance of the economic and socio-political structures of these societies. By the early 20th century however, the Chinese were no longer working as field labourers. Instead, they were heavily involved in the small retail industry, particularly in Jamaica where the Chinese were perceived as dominating this sector of the economy.

The political and economic context in which the Chinese arrived in the West Indies had a significant impact on their relationships with the other ethnic groups that made up the broader community within which they lived. In many ways, the Chinese were the consummate outsiders. Their race and socio-economic class barred them from reaching the higher echelons of plantation society. Yet, because of their history as replacement labour on the plantation, brought in to drive down the wage demands of the freed Black labourers, and as shopkeepers who made their money off of the Black working class, they were often perceived as having little interest in the issues facing those of their Black neighbours or as directly threatening their economic ambitions. Throughout the 19th and 20th century, West Indian fiction reflected such popular perceptions of the Chinese in both the common marginalized position of Chinese characters in novels and short fiction, as well as the repeated stereotype of the exploitative shopkeeper. In the latter case, the Chinese shopkeeper’s association with economic oppression often found its parallel in implicit and explicit suggestions of sexual exploitation of Black working class women. In such situations, the outsider status of the Chinese is re-emphasized in the bastard status of their offspring. Simply put, their presence in the nation is deemed as illegitimate as that of their children.

In the relatively recent novels, *Bruised Hibiscus* and *The True History of Paradise*, however, the image of Chinese fatherhood in the West Indies is radically revised. Tong Lee and Mr. Ho Sing are represented as legitimate progenitors of the modern Caribbean nations of Trinidad and Jamaica – as being, in other words, founding fathers. What accounts for this change in representation? Does it, for example, reflect a re-evaluation of ethnic relations within the Caribbean? This paper argues that while such images speak to a willingness to embrace a more complex and nuanced vision of West Indian history, ultimately, these representations of Chinese fatherhood are produced as foils against the perceived hypermasculinity of West Indian males in general. Thus, while seeking to include the Chinese in their imaginative landscapes, the authors also come dangerously close to re-affirming the stereotype of the outsider Chinese in the Caribbean.