

Kevin Wong Hoy. *Cheon of the Never Never*. Melbourne: Australian Scholarly Publishing, 2012, 111 pp.

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Chinese Australians have long been preoccupied with retrieving records of their forebears and claiming their rightful place in our history. Facing privation and hardship in a strange land, Chinese pioneers in Australia found their Chineseness challenged and their culture threatened. As Shen Yuanfang (2001) has shown, by their own accounts Chinese men (predominantly) were guided by traditional Confucian conceptions of how should comport themselves abroad: with diligence, perseverance and frugality; ceremony, propriety, ritual, and virtue. The Chinese community shared a desire that Australian mainstream society should recognise this exemplary behaviour. Early leaders of Chinese in the Australian colonies, proud of achieving public status in local government, business, or the law, repeatedly argued the case of their hard-working, long-suffering kinsmen and the contribution they made to the colonies, putting their case in a long series of petitions and remonstrances, as they were called. Shen detects in some early Chinese narratives a social hierarchy with English people positioned at the top, Chinese second, and Aboriginal people at the bottom. Several of the remonstrators argued for Chinese to be promoted to equal top status, including Mei Quong Tart, the prominent Sydney tea-merchant, who suggested that the behavior of Chinese in Australia, reflecting the antiquity of Chinese civilisation, was generally superior to that of the British settlers (Broinowski, 2001).

Almost a century later, in biographies and novels in English and Mandarin by male Chinese writers, these themes persist. Some tell of gaining wealth and success in Australia, but more often they describe lives of unrewarded virtue and disillusionment (Huang 2012). Two common, but contrasting tropes in these narratives are the boorishness and vulgarity of Australians, and their irrelevance to the Chinese, amounting almost to invisibility. As more writing by Chinese women in Australia has been published, those perceptions reappear, together with similar accounts of the diasporic experience, while some of their novels have the added variety of magical realism and imagined shifting locations. These apparently sustain the writers and their characters, seeking personal survival in what Julie Hsia Chang, a Taiwanese-Australian novelist, found a strange and disappointing country (Chang 1997). Kevin Wong Hoy, a historian of Chinese Australians in the Northern Territory, begins his account of the life of Hung Bak Cheong by expressing a hope made familiar by the remonstrances, that even after many years of historical neglect, he will belatedly 'come to occupy a significant role and command no little respect'(x). Hoy records that even in Australia where white masculinity and superiority were the norm, Cheon (as he was called) was 'a male Chinese cook of exceptional capabilities and a big personality,' a 'breakout' Chinese Australian historical figure (2). Hoy traces Cheon's rise in stature from an energetic station cook, to a senior member of his family, to a venerated elder. He cites contemporary descriptions of him as a 'gentleman, high class, not a coolie,' and even as 'exemplar of our Australian way of life' (4, 5).

Such recognition, Hoy admits, became Cheon's after he was memorialised by Mrs Aeneas Gunn in *We of the Never Never* (1908), as 'among the best known characters in Australian literature' (2). During his year as the cook at The Elsey, a remote Northern Territory cattle station, Cheon produced a monumental Christmas dinner, nursed Jeannie Gunn when she had influenza, and challenged her husband for not providing well enough for her needs. She and Cheon became lifelong friends, and after the early death of her husband, they continued to correspond as she returned to Melbourne and travelled in Europe, and as Cheon made trips to China. But Hoy also credits Cheon's success to his personal qualities and his zodiac sign, adding that Jeannie's description of him is 'astonishingly consistent with those that one might anticipate from a man born in a Tiger year' (17). Dismissing others' descriptions of Cheon as portly, Hoy describes a 'handsome, alert man' with 'unbridled self-confidence,' entrepreneurial, resourceful and energetic, whose qualities, and his association with his employers and their guests, made him 'a major celebrity' (14). After Gunn, called by some 'the whitest man in the Territory,' (26) died suddenly in 1903, Cheon went on to work for the owners at Bradshaw's Run and Carlton Hill, for the Administrator of the Northern Territory, the Government Medical Officer, and a wealthy developer, Felix Ernest Holmes. The chapter on 63-year-old Cheon's last job is headed, 'Cheon Cooks for one of Darwin's Most Commercially Powerful Men'.

All this is in the tradition of the writers of the remonstrances, arguing for proper status for their Chinese compatriots. Determined as he is to claim due recognition for Cheon, Hoy searches Northern Territory newspapers and finds no other Chinese cooks 'who could justifiably lay claim to a celebrity equal to or greater than that attributed to Cheon' (61). Taking issue with the way Cheon is described by some historians, Hoy sifts through the scant records of Cheon's life from Taishan to the Californian gold rush, then to the Northern Territory, and back to China. He stitches shreds of information together with threads of speculation. In the process, becoming increasingly devoted to his subject, Hoy several times refers to him as 'our Cheon'. In the epilogue, he bids Cheon 'a fond and final adieu' (15).

As his hunt for evidence widens, and as he finds it less necessary to emphasise Cheon's status, Hoy's enthusiasm becomes more engaging. At the outset he was unfamiliar with *We of the Never Never*, and reading it inspired him to undertake this project. I confess to having not read it myself, and will make amends for that very soon.

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