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What Does It Mean to Live with the Physiognomy and Cultural Heritage of Chineseness in the Caribbean?

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What does it mean to live with the physiognomy and cultural heritage of Chineseness in the Caribbean?

Anne-Marie Lee-Loy, Ryerson University

Jan Shinebourne, *The Last Ship*. (Leeds: Peepal Tree Press), 1 – 156 pp.

In 2007, I witnessed Guyanese-born author Jan Lowe Shinebourne negotiate the loaded terrain of that question at a conference at the University of Miami that explored The Asian Experience in the Caribbean and the Guyanas. Shinebourne, author of the novels *Timepiece* and *The Last English Plantation*, was one of the special guests who had been invited to attend; however, as the conference progressed I began to sense an underlying tension regarding how Shinebourne presented herself and how we, the conference attendees, wanted to see her. We wanted Shinebourne to somehow “show us Chineseness,” a positioning that she seemed to resist by consistently asserting a political-cultural identification that, like that of her character June LeHall in *The Last English Plantation*, defined itself in the terms of a “Coolie Woman”. We wanted her to perform Chineseness in the coded gestures that we were familiar with – identifiably Chinese foods, language, cultural heritage and history – but in this regard, she left us unsatisfied. We were expecting her to be both the face and the voice of a Chinese Caribbean literary landscape. She had the face, but the voice that many were expecting remained bafflingly silent.

In her 2015 novel, *The Last Ship*, Shinebourne finally gives her readers what they think they want: a story that explicitly sets out to explore the question, is it possible or even desirable to “be Chinese” within the fraught history of colonial Guyana? And if so, what would such a Chineseness look like? To be fair, it is not as if Shinebourne’s earlier works avoided the question of Chineseness entirely. Her protagonists have, for the most part, been of Chinese descent, albeit mixed race with Indian. Nevertheless, particularly in her earliest work, these characters are depicted as being uprooted from anything that would identify them culturally as Chinese, seeming to have emerged organically from the brutal culture of the sugar estates. Questions of Chineseness are addressed in passing references to the differences between Shinebourne’s protagonists and a vaguely portrayed urban Chinese community these characters inevitably encounter. In more recent work, *The Godmother and Other Stories* and *Chinese Women*, Shinebourne brings her readers tantalizingly closer to consider what Chineseness might mean in a Guyanese context, but does not provide the type of extended consideration that she now engages with in *The Last Ship*.

The Last Ship is a family story. It follows the lives of three generations of Wong women spanning the years from 1879 – 1970s. Although not strictly chronological, the novel has a clear beginning: the arrival to British Guiana of the two women who would become the matriarchs of the Wong family, Clarissa Chung and Sarah Leo. But the novel does more than simply attempt to follow the trials and tribulations of one family during a turbulent period of Guyanese history. Instead, at its core, the novel seeks to unravel the complicated machinations of racial discourses in Guyana – to explore how racial discourses (in this case, concerning Chineseness) manifested themselves in the everyday intimate spaces of family and friends, and to better understand how racial myths could support, obscure and even destroy the various threads that were weaving themselves into the social fabric of British Guianese society. Thus, even more specifically, the novel begins with a point of decision that each woman must make regarding their Chinese heritage upon their arrival in the colony: What will “being Chinese” mean to them in terms of the new geographical, cultural, and political context that British Guiana presents? The individual (and vastly different) responses that each of these women makes to this question will shape not only their lives, but will have a lasting impact on the lives of their children and grandchildren, and, by extension the broader society that surrounds them.

Shinebourne’s short stories contain some of her best writing because it allows her to focus myopically on minute but significant details as a way of nuancing the larger themes she works through. The intensity of the short story format is maintained within *The Last Ship*. Each chapter is, in many ways, a self-contained episode which, when read together, creates an intricate layering effect in terms of understanding the characters and the underlying tensions and concepts of the novel. Similarly, Shinebourne is at her best when her characters are unsettled and unpredictable – the despotic tyranny of Clarissa evident in her search for her sons’ used condoms in the back house balanced against the memories of her gentle courtship with John Wong or the lullaby she sings to her granddaughter; the adult Mary’s short temper and willful insensitivity set in relief against the wounded, scared and abandoned child that she had been; and, the silent, observant Joan finding a voice to challenge the naïve idealism of her sister and her friends in London’s Swinging Sixties. Further, while Shinebourne remains a strongly political and historical writer in *The Last Ship*, it is the very real humanness of the characters – their paradoxical frailty and strength in the face of global and local socio-political forces that threaten to overwhelm them – that remains the focus of the novel as opposed to the historical events within which the novel takes place. As readers, we may not fully like all the characters or the choices they make, but we do recognize their full humanity.

Ultimately, however, for those wanting pat answers about the configuration of Chineseness in Caribbean spaces, *The Last Ship* will prove disappointing. Rather than coming away from the novel with a stable idea of Chineseness, readers will be struck by how little about Chineseness the novel has revealed – at least if Chineseness is reduced to the performance of consistent and constant ethno-cultural gestures. Instead, both the characters in *The Last Ship* and the novel itself locates Chineseness in the stories we tell; in the myths we create. In so doing, the novel implicates the reader in the meaning-making process of Caribbean Chineseness and challenges the reader to think more deeply about not *what* is told, but *why* these stories are told; for it is in the flexible, malleable space of “why Chineseness” that *The Last Ship* finds its deepest and most significant answers to the question, “What does it mean to be Chinese in the Caribbean?”