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‘Grace Gassin (Editor), Between Dreams: Resistance and Representation in Asian Aotearoa’

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Grace Gassin (Editor), *Between Dreams: Resistance and Representation in Asian Aotearoa* (Te Papa Press, 2026), 288pp. Flexibind. NZ\$50. ISBN: 978-1-9911-6558-9.

Between Dreams, edited by Grace Gassin, brings together activists, artists, filmmakers, researchers, and political commentators. Contributions range from biographical accounts and oral histories to more theoretically grounded analysis, interspersed with a rich selection from Te Papa's Asian Aotearoa collections, including historical artefacts, artworks, and photographs. All contributions are grounded in the authors' personal histories, portraying the diverse experiences of Asian communities from the viewpoint of a younger generation of migrants to Aotearoa who look both forwards and backwards.

Diversity is the starting point. 'What even is an Asian,' asks Tze Ming Mok. 'Of-times, our homelands have been or are still at war with each other, even as others cannot tell us apart in the suburbs of Auckland' (p.11). It is good to see substantial South Asian contributions to the book alongside the perspectives of East Asians, while necessarily brief glimpses of Myanmar, the Philippines, Malaysia, and Kurdistan invite further exploration. Asia cannot be reduced to a colonial geography of trade, commerce, and geopolitical interests.

Contributors probe below such geography to expose undertows of ethno-nationalism (and its political economies) that more mainstream celebratory versions of multiculturalism – or Sen's 'plural monoculturalism' (p.114) – often refuse to engage with. Contributions from Samant, Shingade, and Dutta are to be commended for a particularly timely intervention in their critique of Hindutva, given the recently concluded New Zealand-India Free Trade Agreement.

Samant, for instance, shows how contemporary celebration of Diwali in Aotearoa serves to homogenise the extraordinary and vibrant diversity of alternative identities – southern Indian, Fijian, Muslim, socialist, and more – that belong to India. Not for nothing, Samant relates an anecdote that the Diwali festival was conceived originally as a 'why-not' counterpart to the popular Chinese lantern festival.

Importantly, contributors to the book draw our attention to those minorities within minorities (p.171) – the disabled, queer, the neuro-divergent – whose stories show how inherited and migrated prejudices intersect with identity, public policy, and the everyday lives of everyday people. Banal multiculturalism has often refused to confront these tensions. In that vacuum, the resurgent right can now weaponise prejudices – for example, towards sexual minorities – to discredit anyone who speaks about injustices towards those communities.

Here the book moves, as promised, beyond the comforting myth of a model minority to explore what is more interesting, more problematic, and more real. And in doing so, it points towards alternative possibilities. A strong strand twined through the whole volume is a reflexive identification with *nga tangata whenua* – a sense of shared identity against growing anti-Māori sentiments on the political right.

Another, much needed, emphasis is on the long history of Asian New Zealanders in the labour movement. We meet, for example, Nancy Kwok (1923-2012), whose life-long devotion to China, communism, and working for society's marginalised, was a reminder that 'Communist China' – today yet again a bogeyman – was once a different China, and a different vision. Nancy's Marxism was what she

called 'ordinary living...the most common sense thing to do'. And it fitted 'comfortably' with true Confucian values.¹

Wāhine āhia are still active in the labour movement today, as Sue-Min Elle Park shows in her profile of six unionists from varied backgrounds. At the same time, as she also demonstrates, they experience ongoing under-representation in official and leadership positions (pp.157-167).

Deconstructing the model minority narrative opens up many possibilities. What could be explored in the future, in my view, is an equally sensitive exploration of those who find themselves part of the imagined majorities. What, for example, are the dreams, fears and experiences of recent migrants from mainland China who have become neither members of the model minority nor 'trouble makers' at the forefront of history.

Contributors to the book capture the frustration of those 'trouble makers.' Keith Ng, for example, writes passionately about the Cantonese community whose long history in Aotearoa has become obscured by the promotion of a singular 'Chinese' identity. As a Hokkien speaker, I share his indignation. Yet as a mainlander, I also remember when the finest restaurants in my home town admitted only 'Hua Qiao' whose hard currency bought privileges beyond the reach of ordinary locals. The language spoken under those restaurant chandeliers was Cantonese, not Mandarin.

That is a story for another day. Overall, *Between Dreams* makes an important, timely and insightful contribution to the study of Aotearoa, written with intelligence, generosity, and care. It deserves to be widely read.

Dazheng Zeng

¹ Ip, M, 'Nancy Wai-lan Kwok-Goddard: a pioneer humanist-socialist,' *New Zealand Journal of Asian Studies* 16, 2 (December 2014): 141-158.