

The Chais Racism turned rural idyll into redneck hell for May-lee, third from left, and her family



## BOOKS

# Alone on the Range. A Eurasian writer's childhood in the U.S. heartland underlines the link between intolerance and fear

BY DON MORRISON



WHEN MAY-LEE CHAI first moved to the tiny South Dakota town of Vermillion, she was amused to find that her family could stop traffic just by walking down the street. "Cars and pickups slowed, sometimes in both lanes, and the passengers turned to stare out the windows," she recalls. At first she thought that the Chais, as strangers, were natural objects of curiosity to their new neighbors. "I didn't know then, because I was 12, that they were staring because they had never seen a Chinese man with a white woman before."

They did more than stare. Over the next few years Chai, her younger brother, their Chinese father and Irish-American mother were insulted, harassed and ostracized. Their house was shot at from passing cars, and their pet dogs gunned down on the lawn. Her father ultimately resigned his academic job in frustration over narrow-minded colleagues. "It felt as though we were being punished for crimes we hadn't realized we had committed," Chai writes in *Hapa Girl*, her searing memoir of growing up half-Chinese in the American heartland. "There were many people who wanted my father to suffer. They were going to show this 'Chinaman' his place."

Chai's father, Winberg Chai, was a respected professor of Asian studies whose own parents had left Taiwan for New York when he was a boy. He married Carolyn Everett, a beautiful California artist and, in 1979, accepted a vice presidency at the University of South Dakota. It was an opportunity to move his young family from the crime and crowding of greater New York to the healthier and supposedly friendlier air of rural America. As for race, writes his daughter, "we had imagined the segregated past was just that, past."

It was, mostly. The 1960s civil rights movement had swept away official racism in the U.S., along with the last anti-miscegenation laws. But word had evidently not yet reached the Chais' corner of South Dakota—a bleak, windswept realm of farming and ranching, where rising interest rates and falling prices for agricultural goods were pushing many of their neighbors toward bankruptcy. "My father didn't realize that he was moving his family into a region whose economic base was, in fact, being devastated," says Chai. That economic anxiety, plus growing unrest among Native Americans on nearby Indian reservations, only deepened a long-standing resentment of outsiders and non-whites. "We soon discovered every law contained two parts, the part that was written down and the part that could be enforced."

The drive-by shooters were somehow never caught. When the Chais decided to flee Vermillion, they could not sell their house because no local bank would write a mortgage on it. So they stayed. By the time Chai was a teenager, Vietnam veterans would sidle up to her on the sidewalk to talk about hookers they had known in Southeast Asia. "I had given up trying to fit," she says. "I was merely trying to survive."

Chai retreated to her studies. "Only losers without boyfriends needed to get A's," she writes of her peers' reverence for learning. She escaped to college in Iowa, but during a junior year abroad at Nanjing University, race again intruded: she stumbled into the city's 1988 riots that were sparked by false rumors about African students misbehaving. The incidents proved to be an epiphany. Chai discovered that her South Dakota neighbors' fears "of change, of economic uncertainty, of racial anxiety, of the unknowable future compared to the known past were the same as China's. And I realized finally that it had not been my fault."

*Hapa Girl* (the adjective is a Hawaiian word for mixed race) is published by Temple University Press. Why the book did not find a commercial publisher is a mystery. The writing is vigorous, and Chai's descriptions of the murderous winters and corrosive boredom of the Great Plains are compelling. Besides, Chai is hardly an unknown: *The Girl from Purple Mountain*, the World War II family history

## Race runs through U.S. history like a varicose vein, half-buried and chronically painful

she co-authored with her father, was a finalist for the 2001 National Book Award. Could it be racism, stalking the hapa girl once again?

More likely, Chai's book suffers from a surfeit of coming-of-age memoirs by Asian Americans, as well as a blessed obsolescence: China's diaspora has largely fared well in the U.S. since Chai was a girl. Her father even tells her, "There's no such thing as racism against Chinese. You just don't know how to get along with people."

If only. The U.S. has a curious preoccupation with race, which runs through its history like a varicose vein, half-buried and chronically painful. Just ask disgraced talk-show host Don Imus and the Rutgers University women's basketball team, or any Arab American trying to board a flight. *Hapa Girl* is a reminder that Americans cannot have too many reminders of the un-American things they do when they're afraid. ■