

# From Fantasy to Strategy: Frank Chin's Cultural Revolution

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## ABSTRACT

The author's current research project is an inquiry into Frank Chin's strategy of a cognitive remapping of American's racial formation in order to find the weak link where pro-democratic forces can attack. The author's critical stance toward this strategy is clear: We can raise the questions that Chin has tried to narrativize: Is "racist love" now eliminated by this new phenomenon of performative, not normative or even "accidental" Asians? Or are those now gifted with exorbitant amounts of symbolic capital still compelled to traverse a Gunga Din Highway filled with supermalls, reproducing an exchangeable use-value at the service of global capitalism? These are questions that Chin has attempted to answer and that Chinese as well as other Asian writers will have to respond to in the next millennium for the sake of much more worthy ideals.

## KEY WORDS

cognitive remapping  
model minority  
buffer race  
agonistic strategy

symbolic capital  
racist love  
internal colonialism  
logic of capital



Caught in the unflagging “culture wars” of the United States, any inquiry into the status of a region of creative expression like Asian American, more specifically here Chinese American, writing is fraught with all the old issues concerning the relation of art to the political and social formation which it inhabits. According to the dominant liberal consensus, literature occupies a transcendent space free from prior moral or ideological commitments, hence readers can enjoy Amy Tan and Maxine Hong Kingston on the same level as they would Gertrude Stein or Katherine Anne Porter. Since the sixties, however, the consensus has called for the reconfiguration of “minority” or ethnic writing in the new category of multicultural literature of the United States, according it an “equal and separate” position. This gesture of tolerance is both compromising and complicitous.

One may ask: Is Amy Tan’s *The Joy Luck Club*, inserted into the diverse curriculum, now to be celebrated as an integral part of American literature? That question is more contentious if trivial than the one as to whether Maxine Hong Kingston, now canonized as a major American writer, is so perfectly assimilated as to erase her ethnic patina and render her safe for general, not just elite, consumption. Has the original “Chinese” aura produced by reviews and public opinion of her novels been sufficiently subsumed into the pluralist hegemony of multicultural America to make her representative? Clearly the question of nationality, of identifying with a nation or citizenship granted by the nation-state, becomes crucial when we (I from the Philippine perspective, my colleagues in Taiwan from another) view a concrete literary formation in the context of specific times, places and their interrelations among them.

Before I shift the focus from the general to the particular, I want

to remind you that the antagonism between the aestheticist and the socially committed stance persists among the litterateurs of Asian America. Consider, for example, the opinions expressed by Garrett Hongo on Cynthia Kadohata and Pulitzer-winner Robert Butler. Hongo chides Asian Americans for being “immature” because they are “so unused to seeing cultural representations of [themselves]” so that they criticize Kadohata for not mentioning the internment camps in her novel *The Floating World*. Hongo praises Butler for creating “commonality” in his stories of Vietnamese refugees, for his “humanistic politics” and “powerful artistry.” Hongo then blames the confusion of “general thought in American culture (as shown by media and the ephemeral communal mind) [which] tends to oversimplify complex social and artistic issues, commingling and making false oppositions between matters of art and matters of social justice. The problem, ultimately, has to do with confusing and, finally, conflating the two realms” (55). Although Hongo evinces awareness of the dangers of “minstrelsy by the white culture ventriloquizing the ethnic experience and colonizing the mind of the Other for the purpose of reinforcing cultural dominance” (53-54), he is curiously naive in accepting the contrived separation between art and society, humanism and racism, that generated in the first place the confusions he himself suffers from. The symptoms of extreme alienation, instanced for example by the fragmentation of human activity and schizoid behavior, found in late capitalist society cannot be diagnosed without grasping the larger history of the socio-political formation of the United States as a complex overdetermined totality of social relations. Racism, the underlying cause of the “culture wars” between a white supremacist order and the subordinated peoples of color, cannot be grasped fully and resolved without transforming the material historical conditions that make it possible. What is imperative is a critical review of the racial/class hierarchy that constitutes the social order of the United States, its historical construction as a hegemonic articulation of classes, races, nationalities and sexualities, together with the manifold contradictions that define the parameters for change.

Our chief obstacle to situating Frank Chin’s accomplishment in

elucidating the U.S. racial problematic is, of course, the “model minority” myth. Chinese Americans are praised by arch conservative Linda Chavez as superachievers who are quickly climbing the ladder of social and economic mobility, and serving as protowhites placed between African Americans and the EuroAmerican majority. Peter Gran describes the “buffer race” strategy for preserving the status quo: “The state through its immigration policy inserted one or more groups, the buffers, into society between blacks and whites to conflict with the interests of both, thereby deflecting the focus on race off the black-white issue, diffusing it into what is now called multiculturalism” (347). This complicates the race/class/gender dialectic. The mutations in social relations of reproduction that accompany the change from finance capitalism at the turn of the century to the Depression, the Cold War, and the new globalization schemes of the industrialized states are elided by a narrow focus on bureaucratic adjustments. The absence of a dialectical construal between the logic of capital and the hegemonic process vitiates the critique of assimilationism and intervention from outside through local agencies. Taking account of transnationality will not challenge capital’s corporate monopoly of power over the processes of immigration, job discrimination, residential segregation, and other institutional mechanisms of the regulatory state.

Empiricism vitiates any simple tabulation of factors surrounding racism and extraterritorial intervention. Starkly absent from the orthodox textbook summary of Chinese American “settlement” is the change of the older stereotypes of Fu Manchu or “heathen Chinese” as evil incarnate to the model minority exemplar in tandem with the rise of neoconservative Asian American “middlemen” as key players on the political scene. Neil Gotanda takes note of this dramatic transformation of the Asian American “yellow horde” into the overachievers, that intermediate racial category or “racial buffer” between whites and a burgeoning “underclass.” Add to this the phenomenon of what Peter Kwong calls the “new Chinatown” whose underground economy of “internal colonialism” outside the mainstream U.S. economy and labor market escapes the dual paradigm of the Chinese in the process of Americanization and the Chinese as the permanent alien in our midst.

We should factor in *fin de siècle* pettybourgeois anarchism and the neoliberal agenda for universalizing “free trade” and privatization. Glenn Omatsu describes the emergence of Asian neoconservatives in California, exploding the panethnic racialization of the sixties with the resurgent class antagonisms of a declining industrial economy.

In retrospect, I think it is perfectly conceivable that freedom from the dual tyranny of racial exclusion and extraterritorial domination (which the Chinese as a nationality/ethnic group have suffered from) can take the form of a pluralist/multicultural ethos and an ethnocentric politics of identity. Despite its challenge to orthodoxy, both Tan’s *oeuvre* (from *The Joy Luck Club* to *The Thousand Secret Senses*) as well as the more sophisticated inventions of David Hwang, Fae Mae Ng, Shawn Wong, Wing Tek Lum, Marilyn Chin, and others, can and have been appropriated for disempowering their agents and entrenching a “separate but equal” prophylactic compromise. Kingston herself is now a sacred icon of pluralist feminism. Civil rights demands for some have been fulfilled by the fetishism of hybridity and heterogeneity, making the hyphen the erotic marker of a privileged difference. If the margin has moved to the center, or has been accommodated at the core by a strategy of cooption and displacement, racism is preserved and strengthened in its political-economic functionality and ideological effects. Postmodernist discourse and criticism, eulogizing boutique multiculturalism above the political economy of consensus, runs rampant at the service of a pluralist metaphysics of the free market and individual freedom via consumerism (San Juan, *Beyond*; “From the Immigrant Paradigm”).

One way of exploring how to seize the “weak link” in the U.S. sociopolitical formation is to pursue a historical-materialist critique of the contradictions that underlie the U.S. racial order. I want to use Frank Chin’s writings as allegories of Chinese American historical specificity. In “Revisiting an ‘Internal Colony’: U.S. Asian Cultural Formations and the Metamorphosis of Ethnic Discourse,” a chapter in my book *Beyond Postcolonial Theory*, I alluded to Chin’s attempt to dismantle the bipolarizing logic of the hyphenated sensibility found in Jade Snow Wong and other pre-World War II writers, and project in-

stead a heroic myth of the Chinese workers who built the railroads, excavated tunnels, cleared the wilderness of Hawaii, and made enormous sacrifices to lay the infrastructure for industrial capitalist America. I alluded to how Chin has been able to neutralize the humanist, neoliberal reconstitution of the self with a “postmodern pastiche that may be an astute maneuver to undermine commodity fetishism” (189). “Commodity fetishism” is my shorthand term for the whole regime of alienation, more exactly reification (as defined by Lukacs and Goldmann), that distinguishes everyday life in a society centered on exchange-value, on the operations of the market. Reification manifests itself as racial oppression, exclusion, marginalization, and subordination of peoples marked as Others/aliens in order to constitute a majoritarian identity, articulated with class, sexuality, gender, and nationality.

Reification in the cultural field today expresses itself as the valorization of difference to compensate for the damages inflicted by a homogenizing Eurocentric universalism. What David Harvey calls the “Leibnizian conceit” (69), in which a monadic subjectivity internalizes the world and its totality of relations, was displayed earlier in Hongo’s bifurcation of aesthetics and politics as two separate realms. This conceit also legitimizes the idea of the artist as demiurgic force so prevalent in postmodernist apologetics. Chin succeeds in destroying the Leibnizian conceit by emphasizing historical specificity and the socio-political constitution of the mode of literary production. Deploying a distancing slyness reminiscent of Brecht (see Jameson), Chin reuses his own life-history as a means of carrying out a painstaking demystification of the paradigm of assimilation.

In a contribution to Studs Terkel’s volume, *Race*, Chin explores the embeddedness of the Chinese *habitus* in American life and its invisibility in tracing the vicissitudes of the class/race/nationality parameters of subordination. He states that from his childhood he has been “trying to find out exactly what” he is, an American of Chinese descent. I should like to emphasize that this is not a quest for an essential quality or attribute of “Chineseness” but a cognitive and pragmatic mapping of the terrain of a racialized formation. Sucheng Chan,

King-kok Cheung, and others condemn Chin's "machismo" and his alleged claim to be the only "authentic" Asian American writer. There is some basis for this, but we must be aware of the larger project: a disarticulation of the hegemonic order and re-interpellation of the erased and subjugated subject.

Unlike Asian postmodernists, Chin strives for a synthesizing appraisal of the social totality. Chin's mode of calculating how the "ethnic" negotiates the American scene implies a critique of liberal pluralism as well as of the essentialism of an ethnicizing metaphysics:

Oakland is the Tower of Babel. All these languages. And nobody even speaks English like everybody else. I've come to believe that monotheism encourages racism, whoever practices it. There is only one God and everyone else is an infidel, a pagan, or a goy. The Chinese look on all behavior as tactics and strategy. It's like war. You have to know the terrain. You don't destroy the terrain, you deal with it. We get along, not because we share a belief in God or Original Sin or a social contract, but because we make little deals and alliances with each other. (310)

Chin points out that because he was raised by white folks during World War II, he was saved from ideas of Chinese inferiority, of parents having proprietary rights over children, from the seductions of yellow minstrelsy. The powerful influence of the black radical movement in the sixties—dramatized in satiric and elegiac ways in *The Chickencoop Chinaman* and *The Year of the Dragon*—is mediated in the typical *gestus* of the Chinatown Red Guards who violently command Chin to "Identify with China!"—the California Maoists beat him up and accuse him of being a "cultural nationalist." As a teacher, Chin was attacking stereotypes, racism in its overt forms, a racism that reduced Chinese Americans to "an enclave, like Americans working for Aramco in Saudi Arabia. Chinatown may be a stronghold of Chinese culture, but we're Chinese Americans" (312). He denounces the practices that have converted the Chinese Americans into "a race of Helen

Kellers, mute, blind and deaf,” the perfect minority worshipping Pearl Buck and embracing Charlie Chan, “an image of racist love,” as “a strategy for white acceptance” (313).

Chin takes account of how social peace via individual/group competition is preserved by the inculcation of prejudice throughout the population. He recalls how David Hilliard of the Black Panthers got up in Portsmouth Square and said: “You Chinese are the Uncle Toms of the colored peoples” (314). Chin finds this apt, but Chinese youth imitating black populism is not the solution. Nor is the temporary strategic ruse of using English “as a matter of necessity” in a white man’s world, which he observes among the Indochinese immigrants whom he describes as “the unredeemed Chinese Chinese” (314).

A kind of peasant cunning using the “weapons of the weak” characterizes Chin’s bravado, his predilection for exhibitionist belligerence. This has earned him sharp rebukes from the self-avowed gatekeepers of Asian American culture and assorted academic moralists. Chin’s method is not a matter of reversing discourse but a retrieval of a submerged tradition: the practical materialism of the Chinese plebeian grassroots, the proletariat in city and countryside (Needham). To interrogate self-contempt as a tactic of survival and legitimize a Chinese American sensibility in his works, Chin is often quoted as adopting a heroic martial posture and outlook based on his application of Sun Tzu’s *Art of War* and the Chinese cultural tradition embodied in the classic texts of *Three Kingdoms*, *The Water Margin*, and *Monkey’s Journey to the West*. Some commentators also impute to Chin the role of reconstructing the Chinese tradition in the way of Caliban and Kwan Kung (Leiwei Li). But Chin, I think, is not interested in postcolonial mimicry or a recovery of a putative Chinese American tradition. In his essay “Our Life Is War,” Chin argues that “What is of supreme importance in war is to attack the enemy’s strategy” (28), hence the importance of surveying the terrain or context of the struggle, analyzing the contradictory trends immanent in the forces engaged, and seizing the “weak link” to resolve the contradictions by stages and enable a release of human potential for future projects of liberation.

In an ongoing research project, I am inquiring into Chin’s strate-

gy of a cognitive remapping of the U.S. racial formation, its uneven-and-combined development, in order to ascertain the “weak link” where popular-democratic forces can attack. But for the moment, I want to conclude by commenting on Chin’s response to a recent event. Last October 15, Prof. Murray Davis, president of the Western Literature Association, recommended to his organization that Chin be given the Distinguished Lifetime Achievement Award at its 2000 meeting. Davis’s colleagues objected on various grounds: Chin was abrasive, a misogynist and also a homophobe, in short he was unacceptable. Davis threatened to resign; eventually, a compromise was reached and Chin was invited to speak/read at the 2000 WLA Conference.

Informed about the entire situation, Chin wrote Russell Leong, editor of *Amerasia Journal*, and dismissed the event as a “kangaroo court.” Chin compared it to the way the Asian American Studies Association treated Lois Ann Yamanaka when the Filipinos objected to her receiving a prize from the Association. Chin claims that, while the literary merits of her novel were not considered, “Yamanaka became the asteroid that killed the dinosaurs.”

Having warmed up by denouncing the Filipino Caucus as a bunch of ignoramuses, Chin now launches into a tirade against specific and vaguely generalized enemies, the specific ones being those “feminists” on the executive board of the Association who “had heard about my rotten personality, not anything of mine they’d read . . . .” He goes on:

I wonder how many Asian American writers have heard of the Western Literature Association? I wonder how many will mount up their mighty superior minds and demand they give me the association lifetime achievement award? No, I don’t. And there’s no need to wonder at how many Asian American writers will write the association saying, they have no business telling the Association what to do with its lifetime achievement award, except never to stick them with it. There’s only one like that. And I’m it. And they’re not giving me their award. They’re giving me a kangaroo court instead. And the incoming president of the association is mad.

The association magazine won't publish his account and protest of what happened in Sacramento. Perhaps you will.

A character in *Gunga Din Highway*, Diego Chang, intones: "Life is war . . . Let the good times roll!" Chin's agonistic strategy is basically satiric in intent. We can discern Chin's satiric stance in the letter to Leong, a strategy explained by Ulysses in the novel: "Satire is where you make fun of how *they* think and what *they* say in order to make *them* look stupid" (*Gunga* 257).

Writing and living, for Chin, are matters of strategy concerned with relations, transitions and passages from one position to another. Strategy is involved with establishing connections, linkages, and modalities of change from one situation to another. Structured between cultures/histories—China/America—the Chinese American artist confronts the additional predicament of mediating differences brought about by the whole racialized history of the United States: genocide of the American Indians, slavery and segregation of African Americans, colonization of Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, Filipinos, Hawaiians, and so on. Asians as a "buffer race," the "model minority" disengaged from the State apparatus of institutional racism—this condition is one way the in-between predicament is resolved, but ironically it reproduces the lower classes of the group as inassimilable or permanent aliens. In "Back Talk," Chin urged that the strategy of resistance must replace the psychology of laying low, the habitual exercise of "forestalling the Great Deportation" for those who have accepted the status of sojourners (557). Lacking "an articulated, organic sense of our identity" and plagued by a suicidal "dual personality" produced by America's racist love, Asians need to reflect on their history, on their positions and locations in the American landscape. Although Chin insists that Asian culture is martial and migratory, not migrant, he is unable to escape the nexus of America as the road, depot, marketplace, and its tropological construction as a moving terrain for immigrants. By indigenizing this trope, Chin safeguards himself from being instrumentalized by a conservative cultural nationalism such as that of Singapore, for example, which recuperated David Henry Hwang's *M. Butterfly* to serve

reactionary authoritarian-capitalist ends (Lye).

Given this materialization of history for Chin, American culture is not a fixed but a pidgin or bastard culture; like the language it is “a pidgin marketplace culture” (295). Anything has value so long as it can be exchanged (the sensuous particulars reduced to quantitative abstraction), so long as it enters into market circulation. If this is so, then what awaits the new immigrants from Taiwan, Hong Kong, and China who conceive of the United States not as a temporary place to work but as a new home with great economic opportunities (Takaki)? Why are these new immigrants still perceived as the perpetual foreigners, countless potential Vincent Chins indistinguishable from the aggressive “oriental” competitor, the Japanese (Chasin)? In fact, we now have a situation where the new rich Chinese immigrants from Hong Kong, whom Aihwa Ong calls “transnational cosmopolitans,” have rearticulated the resonance of extraterritorial domination with their familial biopolitics and parachute kids, a force strong enough to supposedly challenge the “American class ethos of moral liberalism” (284). We can raise the questions that Chin has tried to narrativize: is “racist love” now eliminated by this new phenomenon of performative, not normative or even “accidental” Asians: “cultural citizenship as subjectification and cultural performance” (Ong 286)? Or are those now gifted with exorbitant amounts of symbolic capital still compelled to traverse a Gunga Din Highway filled with supermalls, reproducing an exchangeable use-value (a quintessential Chineseness, whatever that is) at the service of global capitalism? These are questions that Chin has attempted to answer and that Chinese as well as other Asian writers will have to respond to in the next millenium for the sake of much more worthy ideals.

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