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The Deployment of Chinese Classics by Frank Chin and Maxine Hong Kingston

King-Kok Cheung

One of the longest controversies in Chinese American literary studies has been Frank Chin's attack on Maxine Hong Kingston, on her alleged distortion of Chinese folklore. Yet Chin and Kingston have more in common with each other than with any other Asian American writers, especially in their persistent pursuit and deployment of Chinese classics. Both of them are determined to "claim America" for Chinese Americans, and yet both look to Chinese lore for inspiration. At a time of growing interest in Chinese diaspora literature, particularly among scholars in China and Taiwan, I wish to demonstrate that Chinese American literature should be judged, *pace* Chin, not according to how faithfully it reproduces the original Chinese material, but according to how the author tailors that material to his or her artistic and political design. Chin and Kingston, I believe, use Chinese classics not to disseminate Chinese culture or to promulgate Chinese ideology. Rather, they recast and reinterpret Chinese legends strategically so as to further Chinese American agency, which is intricately tied to the construction of gender. Chin uses Chinese legends to promote a heroic masculine identity, whereas Kingston uses them to forge a feminist, pacifist, and androgynous identity. Therefore, questions about fidelity to the original must be asked in conjunction with their artistic, political, and for-

mal purposes. Owing to space limit, this paper focuses on Chin's invocation of *Water Margin* in *Donald Duk*, Kingston's conflation of the Yue Fei and Mulan's legends in *The Woman Warrior*, and her allusions to *Flowers in the Mirror* in *China Men*.

1. Frank Chin's Use of *Water Margin* in *Donald Duk*

Because of the history of skewed representation of Asian American men as being either effeminate or villainous in American popular discourse, it is understandable that Chin, one of the editors of *Aiiieeeee! An Anthology of Asian-American Writers* and of *The Big Aiiieeeee! An Anthology of Chinese American and Japanese American Literature*, sets out to redefine "Asian American manhood." In *Aiiieeeee* Chin, along with the other male editors, links the affront to masculinity with the deprivation of history, language, and a literary heritage. In *The Big Aiiieeeee* he attempts to refashion Asian American masculinity by espousing an "Asian heroic tradition," glorifying the martial heroes featured in Chinese epics such as *Water Margin* (水浒传), *Three Kingdoms* (三国演义), and *Journey to the West* (西游记), and implicitly presenting these heroes for contemporary Asian Americans to emulate.

Chin's effort to redefine Asian American masculinity has sparked many debates. Although I will dwell on his blind spots, I do appreciate his determination to revive an alternative history and literary tradition to counteract the Eurocentric tendency of American education. The emphasis on loyalty, honor, wisdom, courage, and resistance in these works helps to combat established stereotypes of Asian deviousness and conformity. But his unthinking resuscitation of manly codes that require violence is problematic. In an essay at the beginning of *The Big Aiiieeeee!*, entitled "Come All Ye Asian American Writers of the Real and the Fake," Chin foregrounds a Chinese ethos that at once contradicts Orientalist perceptions of Chinese culture and aligns Chinese masculinity with white

masculinity. He distills the following essence from *The Analects* (论语) by Confucius: "We are born to fight to maintain our personal integrity. All art is martial art. Writing is fighting . . . Living is fighting. Life is war" (Chan et al. 35). To me such a worldview is less reflective of Confucius — famous and notorious for his abiding respect for hierarchy — than of the American "national character" which, according to Richard Slotkin, embraces "the myth of regeneration through violence" (*Regeneration* 5). Confucius also would have been shocked to hear his teaching summarized as the "ethic of private revenge [and] the ethic of popular revenge against the corrupt state" (34 - 35). Chin's drive to counter Orientalist constructions thus generates an equally singular interpretation of Chinese culture. Despite his avowed intention to combat white supremacy, his selective and tendentious invocation of Chinese lore echoes Western ideologies of masculinity, and his cultural nationalist gesture is undermined by an apparent counterinvestment in patriarchal prescriptions.

Chin's fiction, however, is more compelling than his analytical writing. The tenets set forth in *Aiiieeeee* and *The Big Aiiieeeee* are fleshed out in Chin's *Donald Duk*, in which the eponymous teenage protagonist struggles to overcome his racial self-contempt by learning about the Chinese heroic tradition and the history of his predecessors in America. As one of the few works by Asian Americans that contain sympathetic father figures, the novel also addresses a concern first articulated in *Aiiieeeee*: "the failure of Asian American manhood to express itself in its simplest form: fathers and sons" (xvi). Both Donald's father, King Duk, and his namesake, Uncle Donald Duk, are unusually patient in teaching Donald about his Chinese legacy. King Duk initiates the project of building 108 paper airplanes for the Chinese new year to commemorate the 108 outlaws in *Water Margin*. As the man who invites and cooks for an entire

opera troupe of three hundred people and who distributes rice to every household in Chinatown during the lunar new year, King Duk himself exemplifies the bounty of Soong Gong (宋江), one of the most respected heroes in the epic. When Donald mischievously burns one of the airplanes, named after Lee Kuey (李逵), Uncle Donald Duk gives him a lesson about his real surname: "Your Chinese name is not Duk, but Lee. Lee, just like Lee Kuey" (23). This passing reference to names is one of the many details in the novel that provokes Donald to learn more about his ancestors and the fabled outlaws.

Chin skillfully interweaves the experiences of early Chinese immigrants with the exploits of the legendary characters. The heroes in *Water Margin* are mostly righteous men victimized by a corrupt government; they become rebels with a price on their heads and live separately as a fraternity away from society. Similarly, because of the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act, many early immigrants came to the United States as "outlaws" — illegally, as "paper sons," by forging immigration documents (hence Donald's fake last name). The strategies by which these men defied racist American legislation were not unlike those adopted against Chinese officialdom by the 108 outlaws. Furthermore, the immigrants were confined in Angel Island before they were allowed to set foot in the U. S., where they were ghettoized in various Chinatowns, segregated from mainstream America. The poems of protest against the U. S. government, carved by the Chinese on the walls of the detention center in Angel Island, recall the poem of anger and frustration written by Lin Chong (林冲) on the wall of an inn on the edge of the marsh, against the corrupt Chinese authority. Both Angel Island and Chinatown can be compared with Liangshan, the refuge for the outlaws.

For Chin, bent on refiguring Asian American manhood, *Water*

Margin offers a wellspring of possibilities. By linking the Chinese forefathers in America with the fabled outlaws, he recasts those abused "Chinamen" who built the trans-Pacific railroad as undaunted pioneers, turning the illegal immigrants into heroic outlaws. The Chinese epic also provides Chin with Chinese characters that match well with European American worthies. According to Uncle Donald Duk, "The *Water Margin* was a place like [Sherwood Forest] All the good guys who want better government are badmouthed by the [bad] guys in charge, and they go outlaw Just like Robin Hood. But in the Chinese book, there are 108 Robin Hoods" (22). The lively heroes in *Water Margin* belie the pervasive American perceptions of Asians as lacking in individuality, courage, and leadership. As Uncle Donald Duk points out, each of the 108 outlaws is as brave, magnanimous, resourceful, and colorful as Robin Hood, the favorite outlaw-hero of English folklore.

Yet some of the Chinese rebels are far more savage than Robin Hood and the Merry Men. It is especially surprising to see that of the 108 colorful outlaws who appear in the Chinese classic, including some very civil ones, Lee Kuey — one of the most brutish and ruthless — should soar to greatest prominence in *Donald Duk*. In the words of Uncle Donald Duk, who introduces the character to Donald:

Lee Kuey . . . gets mad very easily He goes naked and runs into a fight with a thirty-pound battle axe in each hand. He loves to fight and kill people. When he runs out of the other side of a battle, his body is covered with layers of other peoples' [sic] drying blood. (22-23)

The implication is that this renowned ancestor should inspire the young Donald with awe, though one similarity between Lee Kuey and Donald is that they both lack good judgment. Another figure celebrated in *Donald Duk* is Kwan Kung (关公) in *Three King-*

doms, whom King Duk describes as "the most powerful character" (67). Power here is again construed as the ability to kill: "One look into your Kwan Kung's eyes and he's dead" (67). Although the book effectively explodes the myth of the passive and submissive Oriental, it conflates lethal fury with fortitude.

I believe a pacifist strain is no less pervasive in Chinese literature and culture than is the heroic heritage presented as dominant by the editors of *The Big Aiiieeeee*. Where inherited notions of gender are concerned, the linking of virility and violence in *Donald Duk* is sadly at odds with the challenges posed by gender studies. If white media have chosen to highlight and applaud the submissive and non-threatening characteristics of Asians, Chin is equally tentative in acknowledging only the militant strain of the Chinese literary heritage. Refutation of effeminate stereotypes should not simply reverse them and thereby glorify machismo.

Nevertheless, Chin's exaggeration of the militant strain in Chinese literature should be read in the light of his revulsion against the kind of Chinese history taught in Donald's American school:

The Chinese in America were made passive and nonassertive by centuries of Confucian thought and Zen mysticism. They were totally unprepared for the violently individualistic and democratic Americans. From their first step on American soil to the middle of the twentieth century, the timid, introverted Chinese have been helpless against the relentless victimization by aggressive, highly competitive Americans. (2)

Vis-à-vis such Orientalist genealogy, Chin's spotlight on aggressive outlaws in *Donald Duk* stands as a welcome corrective. Furthermore, his novel does include other contours of masculinity. As mentioned earlier, what makes King Duk (Donald's father) an admirable figure is not so much his ability to play the menacing Kwan Kung as his unusual capacity to minister to the many less fortunate

members of his community and to instill ethnic pride in his son by countering dominant perceptions of the Chinese. In explaining Chinese customs to Donald and imparting to him a sense of communal responsibility, King Duk also plays the role of a cultural transmitter, a role often reserved for strong mothers in Asian American literature. Donald's own courage in disputing the stock Chinese images presented in the classroom and in standing up for a falsely convicted criminal also bespeaks valor that is life-affirming rather than life-threatening.

2. Kingston's Amalgamation of the Yue Fei and Mulan Legends in *The Woman Warrior*

Although Chin is an accomplished writer in his own right, he is perhaps best known for his unrelenting attack on *The Woman Warrior*. He is especially incensed by Kingston's superimposition of the Yue Fei (岳飞) legend on to that of Mulan (木兰). But he fails to note that in the scene in which words are inscribed on the woman warrior's back by her parents, Kingston is not repeating the Chinese legend of Mulan but recounting the narrator's *fantasy* about herself as the woman warrior. Chin believes that Kingston gives the woman warrior a prolonged "tattoo" to "dramatize cruelty to woman," (BA 3), to support "the stereotype of the Chinese woman as a pathological white supremacist victimized and trapped in a hideous Chinese civilization" (3), and to indict Chinese "misogynistic cruelty" (6). While Kingston undeniably deplores Chinese patriarchal practices in *The Woman Warrior*, attributing the parental inscription solely to her rejection of Chinese culture misses the multiple functions served by her merging of the two legends. First, it allows the narrator to acknowledge both the limits and the strengths of her Chinese upbringing. For all we know the dorsal script mirrors the demeaning sayings the narrator has grown up with (such as "girls are maggots in the rice" and "feeding girls is like feeding cow-

birds”), which are etched into her consciousness by her parents. The mementos of grievances are on her back because the Chinese American warrior is fighting against hurt she cannot see — prejudices against girls that her parents brought from old China. But in her fantasy the source of pain is also the source of strength; the words, arranged “in red and black files, like an army,” fortify the warrior. Indeed the parents who disparaged her have also encouraged her to emulate the woman warrior. Brave Orchid’s endless tales, which could well have clogged the memory of the young narrator, have actually nourished her imagination. From this mother tongue — her Chinese heritage — she now invents tales that sustain and affirm her Chinese American identity.

Second, giving the magical words to the narrator-as-warrior allows the author to claim literacy for Chinese women, who in the past were commended for their illiteracy (女子无才便是德). Because traditionally boys are the ones honored for succeeding in school, the narrator’s “straight A’s” life in the U. S. has been one of “disappointment,” getting little praise from her parents. The textual empowerment of the woman warrior thus reflects the narrator’s yearning for recognition from her parents, who should take pride in her linguistic resources and literary accomplishment.

Third, the merging of the two tales allows Kingston, an avowed pacifist, to redefine heroism, to transform the traditional woman warrior into a word warrior, into a forerunner for the narrator:

The swordswoman and I are not so dissimilar What we have in common are the words at our backs The reporting is the vengeance — not the beheading, not the gutting, but the words. And I have so many words — “chink” words and “gook” words too — that they do not fit on my skin. (62-63)

Unlike the mythical Mulan, the narrator as warrior avenges herself less by brandishing swords than by spinning words. Instead of excelling in martial arts, she has learned the art of storytelling from her mother. Her invocation of Chinese legends in her English writing demonstrates her bilingual prowess, her ability to use words to defy patriarchal and racist prescriptions in both Chinese and American cultures. She draws on “ghost,” “chink,” and “gook” vocabulary in her writing, transforming the aching words into amulets, scars into escutcheon, and humiliation into heroism.

Finally, Kingston’s combination of the Yue Fei and Mulan legends is fully integral to the structural design of *The Woman Warrior*, which traces the narrator’s evolution from her childhood fascination with Mulan, the martial warrior, to her mature identification with T’sai Yen (蔡琰), the female poet renowned for her crosscultural stanzas; from her childhood struggle with silence to her emergence as an eloquent bicultural writer.

3. Kingston’s Use of *Flowers in the Mirror in China Men*

While *The Woman Warrior* focuses on the development of the female narrator, *China Men* portrays the ordeals of early Chinese immigrants. The most prominent legend in both *The Woman Warrior* and *China Men* pivots on gender reversal. In the first book the narrator as woman warrior impersonates a male soldier and enters the masculine world of martial adventures; Tang Ao (唐敖), the central figure in the opening legend of *China Men*, falls captive in the Land of Women where he is transformed into an Oriental courtesan. Femininity — a negative quality in patriarchal binary oppositions — is imposed on the racial “other” in *China Men*. Through these “men’s stories” Kingston draws connections between sexual and racial subjugation, and defamiliarizes patriarchal practices by reversing sex roles.

This opening fable collapses racist and sexist oppression. The

China Men mostly commemorates the founding fathers of Chinese America, this companion volume to *The Woman Warrior* is also suffused with "feminist anger." The opening myth suggests that the author objects as strenuously to the patriarchal practices of her ancestral culture as to the racist treatment of her forefathers in their adopted country. Her attempt to write about the opposite sex in *China Men* is, as suggested earlier, a tacit call for mutual empathy between Chinese American men and women. In an interview, the author likens herself to Tang Ao: just as Tang Ao enters the Land of Women and is made to feel what it means to be of the other gender, so Kingston, in writing *China Men*, enters the realm of men and, in her words, becomes "the kind of woman who loves men and who can tell their stories." To extend the analogy further, she may be trying to prompt her male readers to think as women. Where Tang Ao is made to feel what his contemporary women felt, Chinese American men are urged to see parallels between their plight and that of women and perhaps also gay men. If Chinese men have been emasculated in America, as the aforementioned male critics have themselves argued, they can best attest to the oppression of those who have long been denied male privileges.

4. Conclusion

Both Kingston and Chin have drawn heavily from the Chinese heroic tradition in their respective construction of gender. Because this predominantly patriarchal tradition is quite compatible with Chin's intent to fortify Asian American masculinity, he does not depart radically from the original Chinese material, except in his tendentious selection and reinterpretation of the original texts. In contrast, Kingston, because of her feminist and pacifist persuasions, cannot simply transplant Chinese material without some deliberate alterations. What Chin describes as her falsification and distortion of Chinese texts is, I believe, prompted by her determination to re-

cast these texts for subversive ends. Despite the agonistic relationship between these two Chinese American authors, both Chin and Kingston are likely to go down in Chinese American and Chinese diaspora literary history as pioneers who have fabricated out of ancient Chinese material innovative tapestries that reflect the struggle of men and women in the New World.

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在传统的碎片上翩翩起舞

——汤亭亭对经典的改写

陈 潇

在《金山勇士》中，汤亭亭着力描绘了她的先辈华人漂洋过海寻找“金山梦”的辛酸历程，表现了生活在两个国家、两种文化传统夹缝中的华裔美国人痛苦、悲怆、迷茫以至无所归属的心态，反映了东西方两种文化传统在他们身上的撞击与融合，尤其是他们渴望融入异质文明而不得的深切焦虑。看完这部作品，印象最深的就是其中对中西文学经典的改写。

一、对中国经典的改写

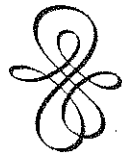
《金山勇士》第一章《发现》实际上是对中国古典小说《镜花缘》中最著名的一段改写。《镜花缘》是18世纪中国清代小说家李汝珍所著，汤亭亭改写的这段见于原书第十九至二十二回唐敖和林之洋同游女儿国的经历。书中的原意是：林之洋“面似桃花，腰如弱柳，眼含秋水，眉似远山”，（李188）女儿国国王对他一见钟情，把他留在宫中，强制对其穿耳、缠足，欲将其变成她的臣妾。洞房花烛夜，林之洋洋装不胜利第之欢，巧妙地摆脱了国王的纠缠，最后由唐敖将其救出与家人团聚。

《金山勇士》中，汤亭亭将主人公林之洋改成了唐敖，还增加了唐敖的手足被扣上枷锁，双唇被缝合，以及被迫洗涂自己的裹脚布等情节。特意加上双唇被缝合的细节，预示了《金山勇士》中所呈现的缄默的主调。正因

问谱系：

中美文化视野下的美华文学研究

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Studies in Chinese American Literature




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