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"The Dragon Is a Lantern": Frank Chin's Counter-Hegemonic Donald Duk

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Critics of American literature-even those specializing in Asian American literature-have paid scant attention to Frank Chin's 1991 novel, Donald Duk, despite Chin's influential position in Asian American literature as both a playwright and a co-editor of two seminal collections of Asian American literary works.[1] Perhaps distracted by controversies about (and sometimes generated by) the author himself, critics largely ignore Chin's first foray into the genre of the novel.[2] Well-founded criticism against Chin's notoriously androcentric-arguably misogynistic-vision of Asian America complicates but does not counteract his achievement, even if examined on the same political grounds upon which he often is excoriated. Donald Duk transcends the traditional bildungsroman, offering a protagonist whose coming-of-age represents a counter-hegemonic gesture, contributing not only a description of, but also a prescription for, improved race relations in the United States. The novel thus complements, rather than negates, the artistic and political achievements of other important Chinese American writers, such as Maxine Hong Kingston, Amy Tan, David Henry Hwang, and Gish Jen. For its aesthetic and political achievements, the text deserves readership and scholarship.

An appropriate assessment of Donald Duk hinges on appreciating its artistry in service to its progressive, counter-hegemonic directive regarding American race relations: Chin calls for anti-racist action on the part of his readers. Chin creates a deeply thoughtful and complex protagonist, Donald Duk, who is about to turn twelve in San Francisco's Chinatown, a community that irritates and embarrasses him because he has internalized the dominant society's attitude that "American" means "white," even for native-born citizens who are of Asian descent. In Antonio Gramsci's conception, hegemony entails the complex admixture of coercion and consent necessary in a given society for the achievement and consolidation of one group's rule over another group or groups (Omi and Winant 67). Although the dominant group can establish and solidify its power via coercion alone, it cannot maintain this domination without the consent of the subordinated group. This point is crucial to understanding Donald's internalized racism and the novel's resistance to it: the dominant group obtains the consent of the subordinated group not by compulsion but by seduction. By producing a popular ideology so pervasive and persuasive that the superiority of the dominant culture seems natural and a matter of, in Gramsci's phrase, "common sense," the dominant group captures the consent of the subordinate group. As Chin renders plain in Donald Duk, white domination of Chinese America takes place not in the community of Chinatown but in Donald's own mind. Chinatown, in fact, is the locus not of white hegemony but, to the contrary, the locus of resistance in the novel, and only when Donald reconnects with this community does he throw off an oppressive white hegemony.

The novel opens with Donald Duk on the verge of his twelfth birthday. Chinese Americans, following Chinese custom, traditionally mark their birthdays collectively on the Chinese New Year. The Chinese concept of time is cyclical rather than linear, which is reflected in the traditional twelve-year cycle of animal signs. A child turning twelve, therefore, has come full-cycle, an achievement celebrated by the family and community.

At this culturally significant moment, however, Donald wishes he could be Fred Astaire, that mythologized paragon of white culture. Therein lies Chin's principal statement regarding the insidious nature of white culture's hegemony: young people from non-dominant American communities reject their liberating and empowering cultures in favor of the values, norms, and expressive forms that bombard them from white American culture. Movies, television, and educational institutions colonize the minds of young people like Donald; they desire to be something they are not and become grist for the white capitalist mill. As Ellis Cashmore points out, the racism underlying global colonialism continues in capitalist popular culture, manifested in what he calls the "colonial mentality" (67). Although now chiefly a vestige of political and economic colonialism, the colonial mentality retains its power through evolving social conditions, he argues. In Donald's case, white hegemony has led to his internalization of a colonial mentality.

The completeness of Donald's internalized racism becomes clear in the first half of the novel. The omniscient narrator notes that Donald enjoys the books he reads in school not despite of but because of their denigration of Chinese culture and exaltation of Anglo culture. He avoids and is avoided by other Chinese American pupils. "This school is a place where the Chinese are comfortable hating Chinese" (2), the narrator states in a passage typifying the novel's ironic tone. As a premier element in the socialization of children, the institution of the school serves as an important tool of Eurocentric domination; it exemplifies what Louis Althusser calls an Ideological State Apparatus, an institution that generates and inculcates dominant cultural values (Klages). In fact, when his uncle gives a Chinese minop jacket to every child in Donald's school, Donald resents the intrusion of Chinese culture into his personal haven from Chineseness: "Why can't the Chinese leave Donald Duk alone here at school, Donald Duk wants to know" (80). When his teacher, named (with a certain lack of subtlety) Mr. Meanwright, claims to know the Chinese better than Donald does, Donald declines to contradict him: "Donald Duk doesn't care. He knows nothing about China. He does not speak Mandarin. He does not care a lot about Chinatown either," but he does tense up when Mr. Meanwright launches into a patronizing lecture about Chinese passivity. In the beginning, however, Donald refuses to acknowledge his nascent feeling that Mr. Meanwright is wrong.

In fact, a striking aspect of Donald's character is that he is latently aware of the value and power of his own culture, but has been socialized to deny its strength. His father and his uncle forcefully argue to young Donald that Chinese American culture offers him rather than denies him personal power. His uncle tells him, "Here's a flash for you, kid. I know how that snooty private school you go to has pulled the guts out of you and turned you into some kind of engineer of hate for everything Chinese …" (23). And when Donald spouts assimilationist rhetoric, such as, "Hey everybody's gotta give up the old and become American. If all these Chinese were more American, I wouldn't have all my problems" (42), his father, a richly complex, insightful character, responds, "I think Donald Duk may be the very last American-born Chinese-American boy to believe you have to give up being Chinese to be an American" (42). Rather than absorbing the wisdom of his elders, Donald cowers in embarrassment, for this lesson comes in the presence of Donald's white friend, Arnold Azalea. Donald even denies his own experience regarding the power of his culture, as depicted when his joking, in Cantonese, disarms a local gang ready to humiliate him on the street (6).

Meanwhile, he continues to fantasize a literal transformation from Chinatown's Donald Duk to America's Fred Astaire, white star of the silver screen (45). Donald initially celebrates, as Chin critiques, Astaire's conservative, mainstream American values.[3]

One of the twelve greatest entertainers of the twentieth century according to E! Online Entertainment ("Jockstrip"), Astaire represents the elite, high culture to which American fans aspired. His films studiously avoid critique of social or economic problems or inequities, including those of gender, class, and race.[4] When, in one of his fantasies, Donald tells Astaire that the Chinese Americans around him are not American like Astaire and himself-noting, "I'm not like them"-the response is ironic: "'Oh, no,' Fred Astaire says. 'That's obvious'" (92). Astaire's speaking directly to Donald and, by extension, to the reader, exemplifies in a most literal way what Althusser calls "interpellation" (Klages). Althusser posits that dominant ideology interpellates-calls to-its Subject, the implied receiver of the message. When an individual subject (a human being) assumes the position of the hypothetical Subject, he or she then views the ideology as the unquestioned truth. In this case, Astaire, representing the dominant ideology, hails Donald, the subject. By stepping into the role of Astaire's auditor, Donald assumes his position as Subject, the unquestioning believer in the dominant ideology.

Finally, in a scene reminiscent of Louis Chu's Eat a Bowl of Tea, of which Donald Duk is an admiring pastiche, Donald's father takes his boy to a Chinese herbalist.[5] King Duk tells the herbalist, "I can't believe I raised a little white racist. He doesn't think Chinatown is America. I will tell you one thing, young fella, Chinatown is America," he says, turning to Donald (90). Before the herbalist offers a remedy, the scene slips into one of Donald's increasingly frequent and vivid dreams of the legendary Kwan Kung as foreman of the Chinese laborers building the Central Pacific Railroad. These dreams, which gradually replace Donald's misguided and misinformed Eurocentric perspective on Chinese America, become the key to his real education. In these dreams, his subconscious mind overtakes his whitewashed, Anglicized mind. Suddenly amid the thousands of Chinese laborers whose toil and achievement are omitted from the history books that Donald has encountered in school, Donald symbolically becomes one of them, surprising himself as well as the workers in the Chinese camp, who marvel, "A Chinaman, Donald Duk's age, born and raised in American [sic] in 1867!" (115). After setting a record for tracklaying, the Chinese laborers are intentionally omitted from the famous picture at Promontory Point at the completion of the transcontinental railroad, as Charles Crocker promises his Union Pacific counterpart, T. C. Durant, that the work of Durant's Irish men will be commemorated without being sullied by the presence of "heathen" Chinese: "Admire and respect them as I do, I will show them who built the railroad. White men. White dreams. White brains and white brawn" (131). Finally, Donald becomes indignant, but not yet fully credulous of what he has witnessed.

Returning to the waking world ("Even it [sic] that real world is nothing but Chinatown" [29]), Donald and his friend Arnold initiate their own research and find that Donald's dreams are true. He tells his father, "Everything I dream is true. Or was true. I dreamed we set a world's record, and it's true. I dreamed we laid the last crosstie, and it's true" (138). Significantly, Donald no longer refers to Chinese as "they" but rather as "we." Now, he claims, "everything that I dream makes me mad at white people and hate them. They lie about us all the time." His father replies, "No, don't hate all the white people. Just the liars" (138).

This somewhat conciliatory attitude toward well-intentioned white folks who strive to understand genuine Chinese American history and culture rather than remain satisfied with stereotypes marks one of the novel's most interesting aspects. It appears again toward the end of the novel when, after Donald has a falling out with Arnold, his father upbraids him: "You say, he wants to know the truth. You say, you and Arnold dream the same dreams about trains at night. You should have the brains to reckon it out: in this war he is your ally" (157). This spirit challenges but invites, rather than alienates, the

novel's white readers. After all, from Chin's perspective, his readers must be interested in genuine Chinese American culture for they have chosen to read a novel by one of the primary, self-proclaimed arbiters of "authentic" Asian American writing (Cheung 11).

Donald's father points out Donald's new predicament now that he no longer enjoys the luxury of ignorance: "'You know what is true. You know what is true. [sic]' Dad says again. 'That makes your life hard, kid. You have the choice. If you say Chinese are ching chong, you have to choose to do it and lie about what you know is true" (139).

In the face of this truth, Donald first chooses to avoid school. "They're nothing but stupid racists there …," he says (149). "They don't like Chinese …," he adds, prompting his sister to ask pointedly, "Since when do you like Chinese?" (149-50). Donald's mother adds her own wry wisdom: "What's wrong with racists, anyway?' Mom asks. "We have been living with them for over a hundred years now, and we get along with them fine'" (150). At last, Donald does return to school, and adopts his new Chinese warrior persona. So, when Mr. Meanwright once again characterizes the Chinese as passive and noncompetitive, Donald speaks out:

"You are … sir, Mr. Meanwright, not correct about us being passive, noncompetitive. We did the blasting through the Summit Tunnel. We worked through two hard winters in the high Sierras. We went on strike for back pay and Chinese foremen for Chinese gangs, and won. We set the world's record for miles of track layed [sic] in one day. We set our last crosstie at Promontory. And it is badly informed people like you who keep us out of that picture there." Donald Duk jerks his chin up to look down his face with killer eyes at the slide of the Last Spike ceremony, still easy to see, like a faded painting projected on the wall. (151-52)

As if on cue, a costumed Kwan Kung then bursts into the classroom amid the martial sounds and smells of firecrackers to publicize the upcoming Chinese New Year performance of the Chinese opera. Grinning at the stunned Mr. Meanwright, Donald says, "Goong hay fot choy" ("Happy New Year"; 153).

Donald's coming of age-marked by the arrival of his twelfth birthday-and his eventual reconnection with his Chinese American roots coincide with the Chinese New Year celebration in Chinatown, providing the novel with a culturally correct climax. Symbolizing his immersion in his newly rediscovered heritage, and his return to a communal rather than individual orientation-which, as Bonnie TuSmith demonstrates (esp. 21-28), is a characteristic feature of ethnic American writing-Donald undergoes a rite of passage as one of several young Chinese Americans who animate the dragon for the New Year parade. The narrator states, "And the dragon is a lantern, he sees" (169), symbolizing Donald's enlightenment. Thus, in a crescendo of noise and activity at the celebratory ceremonies of the Chinese New Year, Donald ultimately embraces his Chinese American heritage while reconnecting with his family and community. Donald thus personifies Chin's model for Asian Americans: learn and seize your ancestral heritage, but resist the cultural colonialism that attempts to devalue that heritage as un-American. You, too, are American.

Of course, Donald's version of genuine Chinese American culture is peculiarly Chin's version, which is notably androcentric if not misogynistic. Numerous critics, including King-Kok Cheung (11), Sau-ling Cynthia Wong (49), and Shirley Geok-lin Lim (289-90), point out that Chin's insistent return to Chinese warrior mythology represents an attempt to reclaim Chinese American males' masculinity in a society that depicts Asian men as passive, effeminate, or asexual, or creates combinations of these stereotypes. Most of

Chin's critics acknowledge that the reclamation of Asian American male identity is an important goal but one that comes at the expense of representations of Chinese American women in his plays and stories. In Donald Duk, certainly, female characters are relegated to the background. Jingqi Ling further argues that the way Chin depicts Chinese American maleness itself lacks depth and complexity, constructed simply as an image to counter the ones prevalent in white American culture. Therefore, "his construction necessarily loses a considerable degree of its force as a radical critique," she states (318-19). Ling characterizes Chin's famously relentless antipathy toward Maxine Hong Kingston's memoir, The Woman Warrior, as rooted in Chin's refusal to acknowledge the connection between women's oppression at the hands of men and Asian American men's oppression at the hands of whites (320). Rather than counteracting Asian American men's movement toward a reclamation of self-definition, such as represented by the landmark anthologies of Asian American writers, Aiiieeeee! and The Big Aiiieeeee!, edited by Chin and his colleagues, The Woman Warrior adds another dimension to the Asian American struggle, despite Chin's angry denouncements of Kingston as a race traitor, Ling argues.

Furthermore, as much as Chin's work accomplishes in its deconstruction of the Asian versus American dichotomy (Chin's own self-definition in the context of the Chinese heroic tradition he depicts and champions relies upon cultural assurance "at the same time as he insists on his Americanness," Donald C. Goellnicht points out [358n5]), it does so by attacking and thus reifying and reinforcing what Stephen H. Sumida calls the "racial, cultural, and nationalistic constructs of a perceived 'majority' American culture" (281). Yet Sumida's critique of Chin-and, notably, also of Chin's perceived rival, Kingston-implies that the racist constructs of the dominant culture are essentially artificial concerns. It is difficult to imagine denying the prevalence of stereotypes of Asians and Asian Americans, including the socially constructed dichotomy between East and West so persuasively described by Edward W. Said. In Orientalism, Said argues that the West imagines Asia in ways marked by "inferiority, irrationality, and exoticism" (A. Ling) through discourse that deals with Asia (the "Orient") by "making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it" (Said 3).

This constructed and interested dichotomy is notably deconstructed by David Henry Hwang's play, M. Butterfly, which, like The Woman Warrior, earns Chin's enmity despite its potential political alliance with his own work: Hwang's character, Song Liling, describes the West's "rape mentality" toward the East by noting, "The West thinks of itself as masculine-big guns, big industry, big money-so the East is feminine-weak, delicate, poor … but good at art, and full of inscrutable wisdom-the feminine mystique" (83). Hwang's portrayal of foolish but potent Western imaginings of Asia and Asians seems to be in perfect political alliance with Chin's perspective, but Chin apparently is put off by the play's theme of homosexuality. In any case, if one acknowledges the presence and the power of such Asiaphobic stereotypes, one must wonder how Asian American artists can combat them without reifying them. The ubiquity of misinformation about Chinese American culture is evidenced even on the novel's back cover. In an excerpted, apparently glowing review that must annoy Chin, Tom Robbins likens the novel to "red hot chop suey," which, of course, is as un-Chinese, as much a product of American imaginations, as Charlie Chan and the fortune cookie.

Chin's novel itself mirrors the resistance advocated thematically in the novel. Donald Duk masterfully infuses the American novelistic form with Chinese imagery, mythology, and lore. The novel, like its title character, resists white cultural hegemony by insisting

upon Asian American authenticity (at least Chin's definition of it), refusing to adopt white American hegemonic attempts to co-opt the themes and images of Chinese Americans. As much as Chin seems intent upon alienating his allies-like Donald initially alienates his friend Arnold-his novel, Donald Duk, stands as a powerful assertion of Chinese American identity and a hopeful, civil step toward reconciliation across races. Without deprecating the persuasive feminist criticisms of Chin's politics, I contend that Asian American literature is capacious enough to include-indeed, is enriched by-the counter-hegemonic statement of Donald Duk, particularly its portrayal of the power of internalized racism and the power of heritage and community to overcome it. As Donald's father says to him, "Poetry is strategy, you see? Strategy" (125). In that context, we might view Chin's novel as one of several counter-hegemonic tactics.

San Francisco's Chinatown Gate.

A telling bricolage: McDonalds dominates this corner of San Francisco's Chinatown.

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Notes

[1] Chin's collection of short stories, The Chinaman Pacific & Frisco R. R. Co. (Minneapolis: Coffee House, 1988) won the American Book Award, and his play, The Chickencoop Chinaman, was the first by a Chinese American to be produced in New York City. He co-edited the influential, and openly partisan, anthologies, Aeeeiiiii! and The Big Aeeeiiiii!.

[2] Several critics accuse Chin of privileging his view of Asian American masculinity by ignoring patriarchy embedded in Chinese and Chinese American cultures. Chin and his supporters, however, claim that his work aggressively seeks to counter the emasculating Western stereotype of the weak and passive Chinese American male. I shall argue that Chin's mission to reclaim Asian American masculinity need not preclude an acknowledgment of patriarchal attitudes in Chinese and Chinese American cultures, and, conversely, that Chin's androcentric projects like Donald Duk should not be discredited outright. For Chin's perspective, see Chan et al. and Chin et al., especially the introductory essays of those volumes. Cheung, Goellnicht, Lim, J. Ling, Sumida, and Wong exemplify Chin's critics.

[3] Readers of the conservative magazine, The National Review, name Astaire's classic 1953 film, The Band Wagon, as one of three "best conservative musicals" (Warren).

[4] Julie Dercle notes that Astaire and his popular companion, Ginger Rogers, typically play city dwellers "oblivious to what's going on around them," blissfully ignorant of urban problems.

[5] In Chu's novel, the father of protagonist Ben Loy takes the young man to a Chinese herbalist to cure the recently-married man's impotence. Chu sets Eat a Bowl of Tea in New York City's Chinatown, a dying community of old men. As Ben Loy and his wife, Mei Oi, finally have a baby (albeit one fathered by another man), the newly vital family moves to San Francisco, thereby linking youth and vitality to the Western city already imbued with a sense of frontier freshness. By setting his novel in San Francisco, Chin pays homage to Chu, picking up, in a sense, where Chu leaves off.

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