


# UNDERSTANDING FRANK CHIN: THE TRAILS OF CHINESE AMERICAN IDENTITY IN “RAILROAD STANDARD TIME” AND “THE EAT AND RUN MIDNIGHT PEOPLE”

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## ABSTRACT

*In “Rail Road Standard Time” and “The Eat and Run Midnight People,” published in the short story collection titled The Chinaman Pacific and Frisco R.R. Co. (1988), Frank Chin focuses on several issues such as cultural heritage and transmission, identity, railroad narrations, food, and masculinity. In the first short story, Chin is going to his mother’s funeral, and during this journey, he jumps between his memories that help the reader to see the trails of his Chinese American identity formation. In the second story, Chin once more returns to his memories by taking up the role of the narrator and reveals the issues of double discrimination, masculinity, and the influences of American culture on his identity formation. The aim of this article is to analyze Chin’s selected short stories from a thematic and social perspective. The article also aims to reveal how the author tries to maintain his ethnicity and reflect his identity molded by two different cultures.*

**Key Words:** Frank Chin, Asian American, Chinese American, identity, ethnicity

## Frank Chin’i Anlamak: “Railroad Standard Time” ve “The Eat and Run Midnight People” Öykülerinde Çinli Amerikalı Kimliğinin İzleri

### ÖZET

*Frank Chin, The Chinaman Pacific ve Frisco R.R. Co. (1988) adlı kısa öykü kitabında yayımlanan “Rail Road Standard Time” ve “The Eat and Run Midnight People” isimli öykülerinde kültürel miras ve aktarım, kimlik, demiryolu anlatıları, yemek ve erkeklik gibi çeşitli konulara odaklanmaktadır. İlk kısa öyküde Chin annesinin cenazesine gitmektedir ve yolculuk esnasında okuyucunun Çinli Amerikalı kimlik oluşumunun izlerini görmesine yardımcı olan anılarından bahseder. İkinci hikâyede Chin, anlatıcı rolünü üstlenerek tekrar anılarına geri döner ve çifte ayrımcılığın, erkeklığın ve Amerikan kültürünün şahsi kimlik oluşumundaki etkilerini gözler önüne serer. Bu makalenin amacı Chin’in seçilmiş iki öyküsünün tematik ve toplumsal bir bakış açısıyla analiz edilmesidir. Makalede aynı zamanda yazarın nasıl kendi etnik kökenini korumaya ve iki farklı kültürün şekillendirdiği kimliğini yansıtmaya çalıştığı da ortaya koyulacaktır.*

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Frank Chin, Asyalı Amerikalı, Çinli Amerikalı, kimlik, etnik köken

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## Introduction

Within the multicultural structure of the United States, Asian Americans have always had a significant place. Their history in the US is a very old, turbulent yet resistant one. Beginning in the 1840s, big waves of immigrants came to America from the west coast, settling particularly in California to find the *Gum Shan* – The Gold Mountain. In the hope of finding gold or well-paid jobs, Chinese immigrants yet faced frustration very quickly. They worked in lands, factories, and most importantly in the construction of the transcontinental railroad. However, they could not find the riches they had come for; on the contrary, they had to endure discrimination, exploitation, and violence because of the anti-Chinese sentiment, or the fear of "yellow peril," first witnessed in this period. Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 was the result of this sentiment, which put Chinese immigration on hold for ten years, separating the immigrants from their families waiting to join them. This act also has historic importance, as it is the first one to restrict immigration of one particular racial group. It was only after the 1940s that the immigration restriction of Chinese people was loosened due to the alliance with China in WWII. The Magnuson Act of 1943 allowed Chinese people to enter the US, thereby repealing the Chinese Exclusion Act after sixty-one years. The immigration rate increased after the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1952 and the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965. This progress, however, did not entirely diminish the discrimination against Chinese Americans or Asian Americans in general. Even though they are presented as a "model minority" since the 1960s on the grounds of "their high medical family incomes, unusually high level of academic achievement and low rated of unemployment, crime, mental illness and dependence on welfare..." (Mauk and Oakland, 2009: 103), many Asian Americans today mention a "glass ceiling" of prejudice that keeps them out of higher positions in business and other aspects of life (Mauk and Oakland, 2009: 104).

This being the case, Asian Americans, and Chinese Americans in particular as the focus of our study, have found ways to cope with their frustrations since their first arrival. The authors of 19<sup>th</sup>-century Chinese American writings were mostly workers and students. While these first works were written in Chinese, 20<sup>th</sup>-century works were published primarily in English. Beginning from the poems carved to the walls of Angel Island, Chinese American immigrants and citizens wrote memoirs, autobiographies, and texts in every genre that became a part of the American literature corpus. Along with the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, similar to the literature of other ethnic minorities, Chinese American literature also witnessed a transformation. The 1970s and 1980s particularly become the period in which Asian American literature finds its unique voice. Authors such as Maxine Hong Kingston, Amy Tan, Frank Chin, David Henry Hwang, and Gish Jen became worldwide famous with their works that tell Chinese Americans' lives and struggles.

Among these authors, Frank Chin appears with a body of works that holds a great space in ethnic studies. Born on February 25, 1940, in Berkeley, California, Chin spent most of his childhood in Oakland Chinatown, which gave him the opportunity to observe the lives of Asian Americans closely. As a prolific writer, Chin produced numerous works including novels, short stories, and plays, which are considered the pioneers of Asian American Theatre, in addition to essays, comic books, and documentaries. Chin's unique place in the literary history of Asian Americans comes from his historic works and actions.

Frank Chin is regarded by some as the "Godfather" of Asian American writing. He is the first Chinese American to rise to literary stardom; in 1970 he helped organize the first Asian American literature curriculum at San Francisco State University; he was also the founder of the Asian American Theater Company; most of all, he is the first Asian American playwright to have his plays produced both by a major New York theater and on national television. Chin himself claimed that

he was also "the first Chinese-American brakeman on the Southern Pacific Railroad, [and] the first Chinaman to ride the engines." (Oh, 2007: 41)

In addition to these, Chin and three other authors, Jeffery Paul Chan, Lawson Fusao Inada, and Shawn Wong, published *Aiiieeeee! An Anthology of Asian American Writers* (1974), which is still considered among the most influential and significant anthologies of Asian American Literature. While this anthology keeps its significance, a second anthology is also published under the title *Big Aiiieeeee! An Anthology of Chinese American and Japanese American Literature* in 1991. Chin's efforts of reclaiming authentic Chinese American identity are also rewarded; he received three American Book Awards, the first in 1982 for his theatre plays; the second in 1989 for *The Chinaman Pacific and Frisco R.R. Co.* (1988), the book from which the stories examined in this article are chosen; and the third one in 2000 for Lifetime Achievement.

Apart from all his works and achievements, Chin is also known for his debates with other Asian American writers. His notion of "Asian American sensibility" becomes a critical point for assessing the authenticity of Asian Americans' works. "Chin is a tireless and influential promoter of Asian American literature, though his vision of it has often been criticized for its exclusionary tendencies," says Daniel L. Kim (2006: 2646). Chin particularly dwells on his disapproval of other Asian American authors in "Come All Ye Asian American Writers of the Real and the Fake," his famous essay in the second anthology, *The Big Aiiieeeee!*. He harshly criticizes these authors and accuses them of faking and falsifying Chinese American culture, history, and heritage (Chin, 1991: 3). As Zia and Gall explain,

He and his three Aiiieeeee! editors have been dubbed "the gang of four," fighting in an Asian American literary war between what they describe in an introductory essay as "the real," with its "sources in the Asian fairy tale and the Confucian heroic tradition," a "the fake," with its "sources in Christian dogma and Western philosophy, history and literature" as represented by such. (1995: 50-51)

While he accuses these writers, they criticize him back for being misogynistic and homophobic. Even though these debates sometimes overshadow his writing, it would nevertheless be unelaborate to say that they do not jeopardize his privileged place in ethnic studies.

In his effort to authenticate Asian American writing, Chin focuses on several subjects that he considers problematic. "The new Asian American writers of the 1970s," says E.D. Huntley, "were neither completely Asian nor definitively Western, but considered themselves to be members of a distinct new culture or set of cultures. Frank Chin, one of the new writers, articulated his position vis à vis the dominant landscape into which he was expected to assimilate by explaining the cultural force behind his writing..." (2009: 49). In this respect, even though he shifted to a different vision in the mid-1980s, we see that Chin's early writings contain autobiographical elements, which usually revolve around a male protagonist who is alienated from his family or his community, and "... the writings from this period tend to revel in masochistic self loathing. The male heroes find only momentary relief when they are able to articulate their agony in elaborate monologues and when they gain tenuous access to a Chinese American history of mythical dimensions—a history usually associated with the railroad" (Kim, 2006: 2646). We see many of the mentioned early works in Chin's short story collection, *The Chinaman Pacific and Frisco R.R. Co.* (1988), in which he "... attacks racial stereotypes and indicts white supremacy and imperialism. He also attempts to synthesize the myths and history of Chinese America based on the legends of early Chinese railroad builders and miners to empower and restore masculinity to Chinese American males" (Lu, 2009: 156)

Two of these stories, "Railroad Standard Time" and "The Eat and Run Midnight People" are chosen in this article for analysis with the aim of understanding how Chinese American identity is revealed within the literature of Frank Chin. In these stories, it is seen that Chin uses several literary devices to reflect issues such as nostalgia, loneliness, desperation, manhood, cultural heritage, stereotypes, railroad, and food. These themes and symbols constitute the framework of these two stories in which he explains what it is like to be a Chinese man in America and especially to be Frank Chin. Because the writer uses many biographical elements and anecdotes, it is inevitable to think that he writes about himself as the representative of Chinese American men. He criticizes and ridicules the common conceptions about his ethnic group and tries to take off the stereotypical labels. In this regard, it would be more beneficial to examine these stories separately through thematic and cultural analyses.

### **"Rail Road Standard Time"**

"Rail Road Standard Time," the first story of the book, conveys biographical anecdotes from Chin's life, which he narrates sometimes nostalgically and at times resentfully. The story is set when Chin's mother died, and actually, he is on the road to the funeral, but then he jumps from one memory to another, explaining his feelings and thoughts until he arrives at the funeral home. At the very beginning of the story, the narrator travels back in time and starts telling a very important incident he experienced after the funeral of his grandmother when he was still a boy around twelve or fourteen years old. Her mother approaches him with a big railroad watch that belonged to his grandfather once.

Ma put it on the table. The big railroad watch. Elgin. Nineteen jewel movement. American made. Lever set. Steam wound. Glass facecover. Railroad standard all the way... She lay the watch on the table, eased it slowly off her fingertips down to the tabletop without a sound. She didn't touch me, but put it down and held her hands in front of her like a bridesmaid holding an invisible bouquet and stared at the watch. As if it were talking to her, she looked hard at it, made faces at it, and did not move or answer the voices of the old, calling her from other rooms, until I picked it up. (Chin, 1988a: 1)

As a very valuable family relic, Chin's mother holds the watch very dearly and patiently and waits for him to pick it up. This watch, as his mother claims, is the best watch that his grandfather collected, and now it belongs to Chin. This symbolic moment of transmission between a mother and a son regarding their heritage, identity, and culture brings up the most intimate feelings between them. The intimacy also presents itself in their choice of language, as such feelings can only be told in their native tongue. Thus, the mother speaks to Chin in Chinese:

As if my mother would say all the important things of the soul and blood to her son, me, only in Chinese from now on. Very few people spoke the language at me the way she did. She chanted a spell up over me that conjured the meaning of what she was saying in the shape of old memories come to call. Words I'd never heard before set me at play in familiar scenes new to me, and ancient. (Chin, 1988a: 1)

His relationship with his mother constitutes the most important bond in his life, as she apparently is the source of his sense of being Chinese and his roots. The fact that she gives him the watch creates a sense of belonging to his family history and his ethnic group. He uses the watch for a long time and the watch hence symbolizes Chinese American history and Chin's family history, which he cherishes most of the time. He states:

I wouldn't give it back or trade it for another out of the collection. This one was mine. No other. It had belonged to my grandfather. I wore it braking on the Southern Pacific, though it was two jewels short of new railroad standard and an outlaw watch that could get me fired. I kept it on me, arrived at my day off courthouse wedding to its time, wore it as a railroad relic/family heirloom /grin bringing affectation when I was writing background news in Seattle... (Chin, 1988a: 2)

While the watch becomes a symbol of his Asian roots and identity, it also becomes a witness to his life full of different experiences. He chooses to keep the watch even though it may cost him his job on the railroad and sees it as an object of anchor to his roots. Like his identity, which he always carries around, the watch is also there to enforce this embodiment. In the multinational American society, identity may have numerous meanings. While a person of minority may choose how much he or she wants to acknowledge his/her ethnicity, others do not have such a choice as they have to carry around this designated identity and its consequences in life such as racism resulting in bias, stereotyping, discrimination, and violence.

However, even though Chin recognizes his Asian roots, he is also an American and he was brought up in America, causing another identity formation. He continues the story by telling how he learned American values and way of life, and he mentions more than a few memories of him watching television, cinema, and cartoons. His relationship with these is an important part of his acculturation process as a child due to the fact that Chin was born in 1940. The 1940s and 1950, which are his childhood years, are also the times when television became the pastime of the nation. "Cartoons were our nursery rhymes," says Chin and continues, "summers inside those neon and stucco downtown hole in the wall Market Street Frisco movie houses blowing three solid hours of full color seven minute cartoons was school, was rows and rows of Chinamans learning English in a hurry from Daffy Duck" (Chin, 1988a: 4). The television, particularly cartoons, has been the source of language and information in the lives of Chinese Americans. Cartoons, in these terms, symbolize the American culture and we see how this is imposed on the children and other members of the Chinese community in the quotation below.

When we ate in the dark and recited the dialogue of cartoon mice and cats out loud in various tones of voice with our mouths full, we looked like people singing hymns in church. We learned to talk like everybody in America. Learned to be cheerful losers, to take a sudden pie in the face, talk American with lots of giggles. To us a carton is a desperate situation. Of the movies, cartoons were the high art of our claustrophobia. They understood us living too close to each other. How, when you're living too close to too many people, you can't wait for one thing more without losing your mind. Cartoons were a fine way out of waiting in Chinatown around the rooms. Those of our Chinamans who every now and then break a reverie with, "Thank you. Mighty Mouse," mean it. Other folks thank Porky Pig, Snuffy Smith, Woody Woodpecker. (Chin, 1988a: 4)

It is obvious that these cartoons have a highly significant effect on the Chinese American community; the cartoons teach them how to be American. What they learn from cartoons, television or cinema also allows them to impart what they learned to the member of their community and family. As the adaptation to American society was harder for the first generations, the younger generations become a vessel for the acculturation of the elders who are more Asian than American. Chin remembers one instance when he skips school to teach his paralyzed father English. This, however, causes Chin to miss his precious cartoons, which he compensates for by going to a movie. When he comes back, the scene he narrates is rather intriguing.

I liked the way Peter Lorre ran along non stop routine hysterical [in the movie]. I came back home with Peter Lorre. I turned out the lights in Pa's room. I put a candle on the dresser and wheeled Pa around his chair to see me in front of the dresser mirror, reading Edgar Allan Poe out loud to him in the voice of Peter Lorre in the candlelight. (Chin, 1988a: 4 5).

A Chinese American boy reading from one of the most well-known American authors, Poe, in Lorre's voice and candlelight alarms the reader with its irony. Such transmission of culture between the two generations becomes the epitome of the acculturation of ethnic groups in the US. Nevertheless, there seems to be a conflict between these two identities because being

an American brings some features that challenge the Chinese identity, consequently putting Chin in a difficult position. Apart from teaching how to be American, the TV also teaches them how to be "Chinese" and "Asian/Chinese American." They learn the characteristic of being Chinese in America and try acting that way.

This situation recalls mentioning the "model minority" term first used by William Peterson in "Success Story: Japanese American Style" (1966). Here Peterson points the Japanese Americans (the term quickly would be used for Asian Americans in general) as the model minority as he sees them as "better than any other group in our society" (1966: 21). The characteristics of the "model minority" stereotype such as being hardworking, academically successful or uncomplaining become a serious responsibility to keep up with for Asian Americans. "Frank Chin argues that for Asian Americans the result of living under racial oppression was the internalization of dominant society's perceptions of Asian Americans as generally docile and submissive, especially in comparison to the seemingly more recalcitrant African American and Latino populations" (Nguyen, 2002: 143). In this context, Chin usually emphasizes that this situation creates pressure on the male members of their community, especially because Asian American women see men as weak and incapable of action because of the high expectations attributed to these people. Chin stresses that "My mother and aunts said nothing about the men of the family except they are weak" (Chin, 1988: 5). Therefore, the role of men in his family loses its traditional, patriarchal features, and according to Chin, this emasculation of Asian American men should be rewound and altered. At this point in the story, Chin writes about how he wants to abolish that "weak man" stereotype; he finally gets weary of the expectation of being "good" and experiences a breakthrough when his wife leaves him:

I stood it. Still and expressionless as some good Chink, I watched Barbara drive off... I'll learn to be a sore loser. I'll learn to hit people in the face. I'll learn to cry when I'm hurt and go for the throat instead of being polite and worrying about being obnoxious to people walking out of my house with my things, taking my kids away. I'll be more than quiet, embarrassed. I won't be likable anymore. (Chin, 1988a: 3)

As he has always been "likable" like a good Asian American – or a "Chink" – should be, he suffered from the stereotypical associations of identity. However, when his wife leaves him, he decides that he will not try to keep up with the idea of "how he should be" and act on his feelings and intellect instead of being "weak." Such appropriation of Chinese American male identity is a significant part of Chin's writing. This identity is molded by the Chinese tradition and American culture, which creates a new and hybrid form of identity. While Chin adopts the American lifestyle due to deterministic reasons such as being born and raised in the US or being educated in English, he also cherishes his Chinese culture and customs. Such hybridity, for instance, can be seen in Chin's comment about his grandmother's funeral. The tradition is that Chinese people would serve white food (the same food they cooked for themselves only without sauces) at the house of the deceased person and burn money. However, this tradition changes over time, and at the grandmother's funeral dinner, Chin's mother declares her refusal to serve white food and to burn money after her own funeral. When she actually dies, Chin's aunts take on the responsibility of the funeral and dinner, which "would most likely be in a Chinese restaurant in Frisco. Nobody has these dinners at home anymore. I wouldn't mind people having dinner at my place after my funeral, but no white food" (Chin, 1988a: 6). In this sense, we understand that Chin wants to keep some of his ethnic traditions while he also eliminates or alters some under the influence of his acculturated identity. Such hybridity of two cultures embodies the fluid existence of Asian American or other ethnic identities that are always under constant changes. Therefore, "rather than considering 'Asian American' identity as fixed, established 'given,' perhaps we can consider instead 'Asian American cultural practices' that produce identity; the processes that produce such identity are

never complete and are always constituted in relation to historical and material differences" (Lowe, 2003: 136).

One final note about this story is that while Chin maintains his Asian identity with great care, he also opposes and criticizes the efforts of other authors as mentioned before. While Chin rejects the "weak" and "silent" stereotyping of Asian American men, he also rejects the orientalization of Asian culture by authors of the same descent. For instance, he mentions *Father and Glorious Descendant* by Pardee Lowe, *Fifth Chinese Daughter* by Jade Snow, and *The House That Tai Ming Built* by Virginia Lee and states: "Books scribbled up by a sad legion of snobby autobiographical Chinatown saps all on their own... We always come to face art and write the Chinatown book like bugs come to fly in the light" (Chin, 1988a: 3). As understood from the quotation, Chin's critique of the same and popular image of Asians in the US is also directed against such literary figures and their works in an aim of purifying and de-Orientalizing Asian American literature.

Overall, "Rail Road Standard Time" consists of Chin's autobiographical anecdotes and its ironic tone reflects the writer's style very successfully. The journey to his mother's funeral also becomes a journey through his past, memories, and perceptions about his ethnic group and the history of this group in the US, embroidered by narrations of the railroad, identity, and masculinity. As he states at the end of the story, "This is how I come home, riding a mass of spasms and death throes, warm and screechy inside, itchy, full of ghostpiss, as I drive right past what's left of Oakland's dark wooden Chinatown and dark streets full of dead lettuce and trampled carrot tops, parallel all the time in line with the tracks of the Western Pacific and Southern Pacific railroads" (Chin, 1988a: 7). As the author implies, what is left of Oakland's Chinatown seems to be what is left of Chinese culture in the US. In addition, he criticizes the stereotypes and labels created by American culture in addition to writers who support this mindset with their works while he tries to abolish those fixed identity molds. Amidst his critical comments, Chin reveals the trails of his Asian American identity by narrating his identity forming memories.

### **"The Eat and Run Midnight People"**

The second story, "The Eat and Run Midnight People," also reveals the trails of Chin's Chinese American identity. Highly similar to the previous story, Chin also repeats many themes and symbols such as cultural heritage, cultural transmission, identity, railroad narrations, food, and emasculation of Asian American men. In this story, we see that Chin shifts narrations: firstly, he is with a woman, an ex-nun, on a Hawaiian island trying to escape from his past and problems; secondly, he connects every action to a memory from his past, usually to the train and the railroad. While he is with Lily, the ex-nun, his sexual moments with her become the manifestation of Chin's reshaping of the calm Asian manhood myth. As Jachinson Chan states:

For Chin, masculinity is defined by the discourse of a hegemonic masculinity. He believes that Asian American men should be a part of mainstream America's patriarchal and heterosexual manhood. Frank Chin consistently reminds us of the historical legacy of Chinese men since Chinese male immigrants were not allowed to marry outside of their race due to anti miscegenation laws, while the immigration of Chinese women was rigorously monitored. Such an emasculatory history disempowers Chinese American men by subordinating and marginalizing them from a hegemonic heteromascularity. Chinese American men are thus burdened with the need to prove their manhood or risk the stigmatization of being labeled as feminized. (2001: 12-13)

In this sense, Chin becomes hyper-masculine and depicts several sex scenes with Lily on the beach. With such scenes scattered throughout the story, he reassures manhood and masculinity of his own as well as emasculated Asian American men. A very valid point is stated

by Xu on this subject: "... he offers the narrator's sexual encounter as a voyeur's feast. Yet it is a feast prepared by men to benefit men as it glorifies the submission and the objectification of women and proves the power of masculinity via aggressive and indiscriminate appetite, velocity, and violence" (Xu 99). While Chin tries to regain his manhood, this is done at the cost of objectifying and trivializing women, which has been a point that Chin is criticized.

However, with this newborn power regained from the hegemonic masculinity, Chin also takes upon the role of a storyteller by narrating his life story and Asian American history to children. In this history narration, he questions his past and identity traits from an older age. In this regard, he usually writes several anecdotes about the times he had on the railroad, the Asian American stereotypes, or food. The watch metaphor of the previous story leaves the floor for the engine metaphor, which keeps the train and so his past and culture still running. He begins the story lying on the beach and sees the sea as a train engine riding him back to his Asian American past.

This is my ancient ship. I am the Iron Moonhunter mounted in the cab, rigged for silent running, warm in deep space, on the move for sleep and worlds beyond. Ride with me, Grandfather. Going home, Grandfather, highballing the gate down straight rail to Oakland. Ride with me on enginemen's forever longtime hungry stomach home again and again and I will sing of us to your great grandchildren, write them home of how fathers come passing through now and then, ghostly roaring iron on the mainline past their backyard... the mountains were bed. Clouds were breath. (Chin, 1988b: 8-9)

While mentioning the endless cycle of Asian American men working in the railroad away from their families, he also resembles himself to the Iron Moonhunter, which is a significant mythical relic of their history in the US. Interestingly, Chin claims to be the first brakeman to ride the train on the Southern Pacific line (Oh, 2007: 41), which ironically puts him in an apt position for taking up the role of the Iron Moonhunter. This name is first seen in Chin's play, "Chickencoop Chinaman" (1972), in which Chin explains the myth of how it is built. Iron Moonhunter is a train constructed by the Chinese workers of the First Transcontinental Railroad in the Sierra Nevada Mountains dating back to 1866. This train, as the myth goes, is built up by the workers who stole iron and parts to take them home (Chin, 1981: 31). The same myth is seen in Kathleen Chang's<sup>1</sup> children's book *The Iron Moonhunter* (1977) in which the myth is narrated with slight differences compared to Chin's story. This time the train is built by the workers to give relief to the spirits of their friends who died in the railroad construction. From the leftover parts, they built a train in the shape of a dragon, and named it the Iron Moonhunter (Chang, 1977: 17). While they ride this train, the spirits become happy and stop bothering them, in addition to that, they help their troubled kin along the way. Even though the initial workers died, as the story ends, the spirits continue riding the train (Chang, 1977: 24). Chang, on the back cover, states "The Iron Moonhunter is based on an old legend that still circulates in Chinese America: that the Chinese American railroaders built a railroad of their own while they were building the Central Pacific Railroad. Perhaps it's a fairy tale our grandparents concocted so we would think of the bitter past with wonder and pride; perhaps it's an explanation of abandoned railroad tracks in Sierras that seems to lead nowhere; and perhaps it's true" (Chang, 1977). The elaboration of this motif seen in Chin's story is very significant as Chin identifies himself with the train, thus acclaiming its role in relieving the tormented Asian American souls of the past and today. He travels to tell the tales of Chinese Americans to the next generations, as he suddenly becomes the embodiment of all Chinese American men who worked in the railroads and emphasizes that their history is a very old one. He takes up the responsibility of

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<sup>1</sup> Chang and Chin were married between the years 1971 and 1976, which might suggest that in those years they may have created or developed the myth and reposition it within Chinese American writing.



transmitting their cultural heritage to the children and tells them about their fathers who dedicated their lives to the railroads. As the story continues, we see that the author continues these narrations about their ethnic groups' past. For instance, he mentions how a Chinese American man, a "moonhunter" worked in the past:

The giant moonhunter awoke each morning as quietly as he could, yawning like ships at sea... As quietly as he could, yes. And carefully leaned over his mountains, sheltering the town, in order not to hurt your ears, children with terrible width, height, depth and loudness of the fiery voice, whispered of his coming down across the valley, ... the ways aunts whispered what the rare children knew meant "Good morning, town." The voice rose birds from the bushes, lifted eagles from their nests... Listen, children. Ride with me, Grandfather. (Chin, 1988b: 9)

It is understood that they wake up very early, move extremely quietly, work as ants to finish their work, and protect their children and wives from the heavy work. This quotation demonstrates how the railroad and iron were important in Chinese Americans' lives and the sufferings and hard work of their ancestors are still remembered and passed on to later generations. One instance of this transmission is symbolized by the song that Chin's children sing to him. In one part of the story, he recalls his times working hard on the railroad, which gave him almost no time to see his family. Such that, the only meal he eats during the day is breakfast, and he always comes home too late to see his children awake. He remembers when his children sang a railroad song to him once: "I was out town or asleep all the time they were awake. I worried about them recognizing me, on my way home, riding. Once when I come home in the dark, Barbara brought them into my room in their pajamas. They scuffled in, dazed. They blearily sang and whined, 'I've Been Working on the Railroad' to me while I unlaced my boots" (Chin, 1988b: 20). As his wife tries to create a connection between Chin and his children, she fails in her mission as Chin obviously resents this and says: "You shouldn't have made them learn that dumb song and then get them out of the bed to sing it" (Chin, 1988b: 20). This song, which Chin finds meaningless, is indeed a part of the American cultural history. The folk song associated with the railroad may seem like a harmless children's song, yet from Chin's reaction, the readers recognize that there is more to that. Published as "Leeve Song" in 1894, the claims about the song are that it may be of African origins, or came from minstrel shows. (Raph, 1964: 195). Today, the song is usually criticized for being racist and offensive particularly due to the lyrics of "Someone's in the kitchen with Dinah" part. The cultural appropriation of the song bothers Chin; however, he also regrettably knows such songs: "I walked knowing that I'd been sung about, that this ground, the rails and crossties, whistles, bells, switches, wheels, lights, and me messing with all that has fattened um many jukeboxes... I knew most of the songs... I felt them humming in my bones, coming down. Damn that boy! I'll teach him to fight back. I'll throw him from the train, shake those songs out of him once and for all" (Chin, 1988b: 16). While the exploitation and hard work of him and other Asian American people become the subject of entertainment, looking back to his past, Chin regrets getting along with this commodification and not revolting against it. As Daniel Kim outlines, Chin offers "a literary self portrait of an Asian American masculinity in ruins, of men who seem only to hate themselves for their inability to be men" (296). In this context, "Chin's anger and longing seem to be interwoven in a rather painfully ambivalent relationship to the normative model of masculinity" (Xu, 2007: 80). Hence, these lines of regret, similar to the previous story, comes from his inability to resist to the model minority myth or the stereotype that he grew into. However, in this story Chin dwells upon his stance as such:

I was older his time. Happier, more miserable, angrier. On an island without real trains, or great highways. And afraid this time. I would take fear into my throat, my breath. I'd take it into me and let it have me like outlawed wine, let it occupy me organ by organ, grow fat on me, mother me, make me a monster. Then, I'd let it out from time to time. In front of friends, women, strangers

whose looks I didn't like... Listen, children. I've picked up distant thunder like a radio ever since, been blood kin to dark storms and bad weather. (Chin, 1988b: 22-23)

As it is understood from the quotation, Chin learns to live with his fear and does not hesitate to reveal his true emotions now that he has had many bitter experiences in life as a Chinese American. In both stories, Chin seems to reconcile with his past of silent obedience and finds his voice that may be out of tune at times, which he also welcomes with wisdom.

Such wisdom, however, does not come easily. The trails of his Chinese American identity reveal the influence of both cultures. Thus, when Lily asks Chin what it feels like to be of Chinese descent, his answer exposes one of the most important parts of the story that must be examined; "She's been locked up all her life and never saw anything like me before. From way down in comfort I tell her being a Chinaman's okay if you love having been outlaw born and raised to eat and run in your mother country like a virus staying a step ahead of a cure and can lie that way, fine. And that is us! Eat and run midnight people; outward bound" (Chin, 1988b: 11). As it can be grasped, Chin defines Chinese people as "eat and run midnight people" because they are seen in their homeland, America, as something to be scared of. Consequently, they are neglected and isolated.

Moreover, people from Cantonese background, such as Chin and his family, also face double racism and discrimination. While these people share the same fate in the US as other Chinese people, they are also being discriminated against by their own. Why such discernment occurs among Chinese people is a consequence of the fact that individuals of Cantonese background come from southern China, where they are labeled as being "inferior" to northern Chinese people. Chin continues his answer to the question above by emphasizing this difference between southern and northern Chinese people: "Chinaman from the Cantonese, yeah, I tell her, we were the badasses of Chine, the barbarians, far away from the high culture of the North where they look down on us southerners because we do not have the noble nose, because we are darker complected, because we live hunched over, up to our wrists in the dirt sending our fingers underground grabbing after eats" (Chin, 1988b: 11). As the quotation reveals, physical differences and economic situation become a matter of discrimination among Chinese people themselves. While this discrimination influenced Chin's identity formation deeply, matters of physical appearance or occupation are not the only issues underlying this situation. These people are also labeled as having a "low" culture in terms of manners and culinary habits. For instance, these Cantonese people, as Chin continues writing, eat almost everything:

Our culture is our cuisine... Up North they had time to wait for the mellowing of the wine. They cooked a lot of wine, a lot of vinegar. Us, it is three day quick whiskey and fast rice wine. We eat toejam, bugs, leaves, seeds, birds, bird nests, treebark, trunks, fungus, rot, roots, and smut and are always on the move, fingering the ground, on the forage, embalming food in leaves and seeds, ... Up north they used all kinds of grains and fancy goodies, while everything with us was the rice of long wars and bad ground... I'm proud to say my ancestors did not invent gunpowder but stole it. If they invented gunpowder, they would have eaten it up for sure, and never borne this hungry son of a Chinaman to run. (Chin, 1988b: 11)

The stark differences in the culinary habits of the two different groups are among the identity markers of these people. While northerners seem to have "superior" eating habits, southerners do not have such luxuries. In an ironic manner, Chin is glad that his ancestors have not invented gunpowder, as he states they might have just eaten it. This sort of hunger that the Southern people experience due to their economic conditions reveals itself in Chin's disposition of his Chinese identity.

However, Chin is not only Chinese but also American. This amalgamation of both identities is bound to several traits. While being Chinese, in Chin's case, is associated with hard work, life on the road, and distinct eating habits, being American is associated with exposure

to popular culture. At this point, similar to the previous story, Chin begins writing about his American formation again, identifying it with the television. He narrates how cartoons played a role in his identity formation as a child before, but this time he exemplifies what kind of effect television has on adults and the perception of television in Maui with this quotation:

On the restroom walls of Chinese restaurants and a few selected gas stations all over the American continent I'd passed my piss reading warnings against Chinamans watching too much TV on Maui... the quarter blooded Chinese cook said it was no good here for Chinese blooded people to watch TV.

I told him I couldn't help it. TV movies were in my blood. (Chin, 1988b: 10)

The warning that Chinese men watch television a great deal finds itself a place even in the restrooms in Maui. However, being also an American, Chin considers this habit a natural one, as he claims it to be transmitted via "blood." Growing up with cartoons leaves its place for movies, which he adamantly keeps watching. The movie *North to Alaska* comes up several times in the story, and the readers understand that one of the reasons he spends time with Lily is because her television is colored (Chin, 1988b: 10). As the story reveals, he even tries not to pick a fight and stay calm so that he can watch the movie again in her TV: "All I could think of without going crazy, crying beating fists, screaming all kinds of false alarms was getting back in the house for *North to Alaska* coming on the tube for twenty minutes..." (Chin, 1988b: 13). Such dedication surely demonstrates Chin's ties to American television, which is an essential part of his character formation.

Akin to the previous short story, "The Eat and Run Midnight People," reveals the trails of the Chinese American identity of Chin by means of his experiences in the railroad, family, race, culture, and relations with others. While he embodies the role of a storyteller again, a second role, the mythical Iron Moonhunter, also presents itself in this story. As he goes on to narrate the history of Chinese Americans, Chin, on the other hand, tries to revert to the stereotypical image of obedient Asian masculinity. Finally, another aspect of the story becomes the double discrimination Chin and his people face discernment based on their cultural and physical differences. In light of all, Chin puts great effort to reveal how his Chinese and American identities are built up with this short story.

## Conclusion

Being one of the largest ethnic minorities in the US, Asian Americans have a history of pain and success woven into one another. Since their first arrival in the 1840s, they have become an indispensable part of American society, culture, and economy. Yet, they also faced discriminatory acts on the levels of individuals, communities, and laws. In the sense of maintaining its homogeneous identity, the dominant culture has used assimilation and colonization strategies against Asian Americans, as in other minority groups, and at times reduced them to the position of the "other" in American society with negative representations. As a result, they have experienced a dilemma between the white American-oriented culture as well as the capitalist system that supports it and the preservation of their own marginal cultural identity, which sometimes created conformist and other times radical attitudes (Silkū, 2005: 101).

One of the notable figures with such radical attitudes is the author and playwright Frank Chin, whose short stories are examined in this article. It must be stated that Chin occupies one of the most substantial positions in American ethnic literature. As the producer of many successful works, he exists as a milestone in literary history. His works and anthologies, fierce

battles with other authors, and further endeavors make him an undeniable force that empowers Asian American literature. Chin states:

I'd never wanted to be any kind of first yellow writer, badmouth, hard core discoverer, crusader, seer, prophet, or inventor of any new language, sensibility, culture history, none of that. The only references I had were my instincts, and common sense that refused to believe stereotypes and racist renditions of my people that were never remotely confirmed by anything my people did, no matter they said what whites said was true. My models were men whose voice and language had a commanding presence and set me off to cap them or make something I sensed just out of reach of their word power. (Chin, 1976:16)

While he mentions his motives above, he undeniably becomes all and more of these during his career. His work is groundbreaking in the sense that it rewrites Asian/Chinese American stereotypes by revolting against the existential cones that were appropriated for them. Even though he is also American, he especially refuses to abide by the model minority stereotype and "back-talks" to the demands of white American society.

In this respect, Chin mostly writes autobiographical works in the earlier periods of his career, which focus on his life as an Asian American in the US. He opposes nostalgia, sentimentalism, and exoticism. Having an anti-elitist ideology, Chin reflects the experiences of ordinary Chinese Americans. He makes bold and somehow brute observations of their troubles and writes about the psychological effects of living in the bad conditions of ghettos as well (Tanrisal, 2012: 88). Embroidered with themes and symbols that stem from his ethnic background, he writes with powerful imagery. Among these themes and symbols, nostalgia, masculinity, desperation, loneliness, stereotypes, cultural heritage, food, and railroad can be listed as the most noteworthy ones.

"Railroad Standard Time" and "The Eat and Run Midnight People" are among the stories in which one can distinguish those themes and metaphors best. In the first short story, Chin writes about his travel to his mother's funeral, yet this event becomes a journey through his past via railroad, manhood, food, and identity narratives. In the second short story, the themes do not change immensely, yet this time Chin is far away from home and tries to define who he is in a more serious manner. He acknowledges the duty of a storyteller and narrates some stories from his past and background to the younger generations. These narrations mostly include themes of railroad memories, culinary culture, the impact of television, stereotypes, and masculinity issues. As diverse as it is, being of ethnic descent in the US always has its problems, and the case of Asian Americans is not different. Molded by the cultures of both, writers such as Chin are always in an effort to find, define, or redefine their identities amidst these discussions, even if sometimes it may mean "... a loss of the 'original' culture in exchange for the new 'American' culture" (Lowe, 2003: 135). Trying to avoid this fate, Chin preserves and transfers Chinese stories, myths, and history to the next generations, with a tint of American influences.

### **Information Note**

The article has been prepared in accordance with research and publication ethics. This study does not require ethics committee approval.

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