Veridian E-Journal, Silpakorn University
ISSN 1906 – 3431

Tam Lum: A Chickencoop Chinaman as an Asian American Tragic Hero

Sani Chartudomdej*

Abstract

This paper examines how Frank Chin re-appropriates the tragic hero trope to critique a profound modern problem of identity crisis in the play *Chickencoop Chinaman*. The focus is on investigating how the struggles and failures of the protagonist and the tragic hero, Tam Lum, reflect the crisis most Chinese immigrants living in the 1960s were experiencing, when Asian American as a national identity was beginning to form.

Keywords: Asian American literature, *Chickencoop Chinaman*, Frank Chin, stereotypes, tragic hero

Chickencoop Chinaman is in every sense a tragedy. This article investigates how the author Frank Chin re-appropriates the classical trope to critique a profound modern problem of identity crisis. It argues that the play's protagonist Tam Lum is an ultimate Asian American tragic hero, whose struggles to find footing reflect the crisis most Chinese immigrants living in the 1960s were experiencing when Asian American as a national identity was beginning to form. The play highlights the unfortunate life story of Tam Lum, whose tragic flaw is neither moral nor intellectual, but cultural. Chinese by blood and American by birth, Tam Lum is rendered a victim of poignant stereotypical traits commonly associated with Asian men: passivity, emasculation, misogyny, and white-woman predators. This article first examines and discusses the ways in which Tam fights against racist misconceptions in the hope to search for his true identity and to gain the sense of security. It further explores how each of Tam's strategies fails to reward him the things he sets off to look for, while explaining what these failures mean in the context of the cultural formation of Asian American as a national identity.

Written by Frank Chin and premiered in 1972, *Chickencoop Chinaman* was the first Asian American play to have a major production in New York (Lee, 2003: 142). It was also among the first to openly address and critique the crisis of Asian American identity through the portrayal of the protagonist Tam Lum, who in every sense is a tragic hero. Tam is a filmmaker

* PhD, Lecturer at the Department of English, Faculty of Arts, Silpakorn University.
Email: chartudomdej_s@silpakorn.edu

working on a documentary about an African American boxer called Ovaltine. At every important turn in his life, Tam exhibits characteristics of Aristotle's tragic hero: hubris, peripeteia, anagnorisis, and nemesis. With excessive pride (hubris), Tam believes that his Chinese ancestors were not the least bit heroic. He becomes disrespectful of them and turns to look for role models elsewhere. He mistakes the Lone Ranger (a white racist) and Ovaltine (a black boxing champion and a liar) for his heroes, marking the start of the reversal of his fate (peripeteia). He adopts the wrong means to deal with his problems: the powerful language that he uses to cure his loneliness only drives people away from him, while his way of coping with sexual anxiety only turns to abusive treatment of women. When Tam learns the truth about his false idols, he discovers (anagnorisis) he has overlooked and mistreated the real heroic figures in his life: his own father and Chinese ancestors. His ultimate inability to connect heroism and masculinity with his Chinese heritage devastates him and leads him to a tragic end, when he retreats to the kitchen to cook for others—a gesture of an absolute surrender to the stereotypes of Asian Americans he tries so hard to fight against.

Tam's problems have historical and cultural implications as the central question *Chickencoop Chinaman* deals with is what constitutes Chinese American identity. Act one, scene one opens with Tam's dream, in which he converses with Hong Kong Dream Girl about what he believes to be the origin of Chinamen. When asked about his birth, Tam answers: "Chinamen are made, not born, my dear" (Chin, 1981: 6). Tam's ambivalent answer is significant in many ways. First of all, it indicates his hesitation or inability to offer a definite answer about his heritage, which in turn demonstrates how he is caught up in the complexities of being Asian American. Scholars have argued that the formation of Asian American as a national or cultural identity was very difficult, if not impossible, up until the first half of the twentieth century. Daryl J. Maeda explains that, previously, organizations among Asian Americans living in the United States mainland were only arranged according to "ethnic or national lines," and sometimes these groups also "strategically distanced themselves from each other" (2005: 1081). Before they could meaningfully connect with others, these ethnic groups needed to first bond with their own people to strengthen their communities socially and economically during this diasporic stage. Only in the late 1960s did the Asian American movement[1] emerge, whose main objective was to fight against "anti-Asian racism and exploitation" (Ibid).

Another reason for the difficulty in assimilation was caused by the racist laws and treatment Chinese immigrants were experiencing, which led to long lasting stereotypes and discrimination that still affect Asian Americans today. *Chickencoop Chinaman* also tackles this

issue. To elaborate on the previous question the Dream Girl asks Tam how he came into being. He explains that Chinamen were made:

> Out of junk-imports, lies, railroad scrap iron, dirty jokes, broken bottles, cigar smoke, Cosquilla Indian blood, wino spit, and lots of milk of amnesia. (Chin, 1981: 6)

Tam here is implying that "Chinamen" are purely an invention originating from stereotypes surrounding the Chinese and their culture. By linking "Chinamen" with cheap and worthless elements such as "junk-imports," "railroad scrap iron," and "broken bottles," Tam points to the low opinion racist people usually have of the Chinese. The phrase "railroad scrap iron" is also a reference to the cheap Chinese laborers that were employed to build the First Transcontinental Railroad[2] between 1863 and 1869. It also alludes to the 'cheap' way, in which these Chinese workers were treated: the meager wages of about $28 a month (which were significantly lower than those paid to white workers for the same kind of labor) as well as the deprivation of any right to ride on the train they constructed and to live in a decent environment during the construction. Many of these workers could not make it through to the end of the project because of the harsh weather and the dangerous working conditions they faced ("Chinese-American").

When pursued further by the Dream Girl with another question about how he came into being, Tam replies:

> TAM: *(as a Bible Belt preacher)*: Born? No! Crashed! Not born. Stamped! Not born! Created! Not born. No more born than the heaven and earth. No more born than nylon or acrylic. For I am a Chinaman! A Miracle synthetic! (Chin, 1981: 8)

Here, Tam reveals other related misconceptions surrounding Asian American identity by inviting a comparison between Christian and Chinese creation myths. While the Holy Bible recounts the story about humans being created in God's image, the "birth" of a Chinaman is associated with mundane and artificial materials like "nylon" and "acrylic." This suggests that the birth of Chinamen is at its core artificial because of the prejudiced notions the general public associate with these people, without having a true insight into the Chinese culture. Besides, the word "Stamped" also refers to the paper-son/daughter[3] phenomenon, which further emphasizes how American racist laws have complicated human relationships. The above quotation, in short, reaffirms the unnatural way the Chinese were turned into Chinese Americans.

In reality, the word "Chinaman"—a derogatory term which repeatedly appears in these quotations and throughout the play —is utilized to reflect the negative preconceptions

about the inassimilable Chinese, which is another stereotype or the "tragic flaw" that plagues Tam's life. The title of the play "*Chickencoop Chinaman*" illustrates the idea of the Chinese being farmed and segregated by the laws and ordinances aimed at limiting them to Chinatown. Hence, they were forced to live "in isolation by a society built on internal colonialism" (McDonald 1981: x). One of the racist assumptions about Asian Americans is that they are unable or unwilling to be assimilated into the mainstream American culture. However, Frank Chin believes that the commonly held view that the Chinese decisively flock together to safeguard their foreign culture is purely "a myth" (McDonald, 1981: x). Chin explains in his essay "Confessions of the Chinatown Cowboy" that 'Chinatowns' are the byproducts of the construction of the Transcontinental Railroad, when Chinese laborers were detained in a camp. Chin notes that the people who experienced the creation of this first "Chinatown" are almost all gone. He bemoans that when none of them is left "no one will know it was not [the Chinese] that created a game preserve for Chinese and called it 'Chinatown'" (Chin, 1981: 60).

To Chin, that the Chinese clustered together in Chinatowns is closely linked to racism. In fact, it was by force rather than by choice that Chinese immigrants lived in Chinatowns in the first place. A large number of the Chinese started to immigrate into the US when the country was undergoing transformations socially and economically. Industrial capitalism was expanding quickly in the middle of the 19th century and cheap labor was badly needed (Kim, 1914: 44). The Chinese workers were willing to work harder, for longer hours, and for lower wages than the local laborers. By 1882, there were approximately 300,000 Chinese laborers working on the West Coast (Coolidge, 1986: 15-18). Many had replaced African American slaves on plantations in the south (Konvitz, 1946: 11-12). These together with the upsurge of Chinese immigrants during the gold rush led to the implementation of the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882, which prohibited the entry of skilled and unskilled Chinese workers into the United States. The Act intensified an anti-Chinese sentiment, which was expressed in both politics and journalism. A number of newspapers were utilized as tools to propagandize antagonism towards Chinese workers. For example, the *Los Angeles Times* headlined one of its issues in 1886 "The Yellow Peril" – an expression originally referring to the deadly yellow fever, but during that time was used to signify the threat local white laborers felt the Chinese immigrants were posing to their economy (Hing, 1993: 23). Racist discourses such as this fueled the sense of hostility directed at Chinese Americans even further. This led to many cases in which Chinese laborers were physically assaulted or even murdered[4].

Fundamentally, "stereotype" is a keyword in many of Frank Chin's works and he once explained how he communicated with his audience:

Veridian E-Journal, Silpakorn University
ISSN 1906 – 3431

> Before I could talk about our literature, I had to explain our sensibility. Before I could explain our sensibility I had to acquaint them with our history. Before I could acquaint them with our history I had to dispel the stereotypes they carried in their system like antibodies to the yellow truth. Before I could dispel the stereotypes I had to convince them they held stereotypes about yellows. (Chin "Afterward," 1976: 14)

Chickencoop Chinaman is a work that does all of those: it discusses Chinese American "sensibility" by introducing a brief yet poignant history of Chinese immigrants in America while exposing stereotypes surrounding them as well as their ancestors. Essentially, stereotyping people is grouping them together based on oversimplified conceptions. Because of his Chinese heritage, Tam is rendered a victim of many misconceptions, some of which are illustrated in the following excerpts:

> LEE: I know you hated being Chinese. You're all chicken! Not an ounce of guts in all of you put together! Instead of guts you have...all that you have is is...culture! Watery painting, silk, all that grace and beauty arts and craft crap! You're all very pretty, and all so intelligent. And...you couldn't even get one of your own girls, because they know...
>
> TAM: Know what?
>
> LEE: They know all about you, mama's boys and cry babies, not a man in all your males...so you go take advantage of some stupid white girl who's been to a museum, some scared little ninny with visions of jade and ancient art and being gently cared for. (Chin, 1981: 24)
>
> .....
>
> TAM: What're ya talking about. What's bein Chinese gotta do with "homosexuality"?
>
> TOM: In American eyes we don't appear as he-men types. (Chin, 1981: 58-59)

What Lee says in the first five lines indicates a common image associated with the Chinese culture. Jeffrey Partridge argues that Chinatowns are most typically depicted either as "a mysterious and dangerous place" where one should be most careful when visiting, or as "a foreign and strange place" which serves as a hub of cultural prosperity for one to explore, examine, and admire, but never to take part in (2007: 27). This notion reinforces the inassimilation myth and the "Yellow Peril" discourse discussed previously.

Moreover, what Lee says in the above lines also reflects an Orientalist idea in that it implies biased assumptions the West has had about the East. Through Lee, Chin here is alluding to one of Edward Said's arguments that throughout history Eastern art and literature have been distorted and stereotyped by and to the advantage of the West: "The Orient was almost a European invention, and had been since antiquity a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences" (Said, 1978: 1). Orientalism connotes "subtle and persistent Eurocentric prejudice against Arab-Islamic [and Asian] peoples and their culture", procured from the West's patronizing cultural representations of the East (Marandi, 2009: 24). These representations usually portray the Orient as the irrational, weak, and feminized other, as opposed to the rational, strong, and masculinized West. By creating this order of weakness and strength (Said, 1978: 65-67), the West has claimed to be the Emissary of Light to enlighten (and conquer) the East. By focusing on the Chinese art like "Watery painting" and "silk" and by saying that they are "very pretty" to the eyes while implying that they are not very practical and useful in reality, America is no different from other western countries because it is inclined to romanticize and feminize the Chinese and their culture. These prejudiced attitudes towards the Chinese and their culture have been a factor that perpetuates internal colonialism within the United States.

The rest of what Lee says in the above quotation from the play addresses another stereotype about the Chinese being asexual, passive, predatory, childish, and lacking in masculinity. There are at least two major popular misconceptions about Asian/Chinese men's sexuality, which are two opposite extremes: the emasculated and the predatory. When Lee scolds Tam "not a man in all your males," she is practically referring to the popular myth about the emasculated image of Chinese men—that they are totally deprived of any sexual ability. It can be argued that the prejudiced association between Chinese men and emasculation also originated during the time of the massive influx of Chinese laborers discussed previously. These men were spotted having a small and thin physique, wearing a queue, and were often dressed in a long costume made of silk. Furthermore, the image of effeminate Chinese men is arguably the byproduct of discriminatory laws that were issued between 1882 and 1924. In his paper entitled "Asian American Masculinity Eclipsed: A Legal and Historical Perspective of Emasculation Through U.S. Immigration Practices", critic Michael Park argues that Asian American men have been emasculated by the United States' immigration laws and practices, which "barred citizenship to Asian men, and in effect designating them as 'other' and emblematically 'non-male.'" (Park, 2013: 5). This is because up until 1870, only white male persons could receive American citizenship (**Nationality Act**).

In addition, these racist laws further feminized these men "by restricting their access to heterosexual norms and ideals, including nuclear family relations" (Park, 2013: 5). Two laws were related to female exclusion and anti-miscegenation: The Page Law and the Cable Act. The Page Law was issued in 1875 to outlaw the importation of Asian workers from "China, Japan, or any oriental country" and of women "for the purpose of prostitution" (Park 2013: 10). In practice, this law was used to specifically prevent Asian females from immigrating into America. Consequently, the number of Asian women entering the country went down by 68 percent (Ibid). Moreover, the Cable Act of 1922 stated that a female citizen – white or nonwhite – would lose her American citizenship if she married an "alien ineligible citizenship" (Ibid). To make things worse, "wives of Chinese laborers were also banned, which helped to effectively halt the immigration of Asian women" (Ibid). This means that "no woman married to a Chinese laborer could come into the United States, unless she herself could prove prior residence here" (Sucheng Chan, 1991: 112).

Finally, the economic hardships caused by "disenfranchisement and legalized exclusion, feminized Asian American men by forcing them into professions generally associated with women" (Park, 2013: 6). In other words, these unjust laws forbade Chinese workers to pursue labor-intensive jobs. As a result, Chinese men were forced to resort to doing what was deemed as women's work such as washing clothes, making food, and taking care of children (Prasso, 2005: 116).

When Lee scolds Tam for taking advantage of "some stupid white girl" who gets infatuated with the exotic Chinese culture displayed in a museum, she is addressing another extreme stereotype about Asian men, that is, they are sexually predatory especially to white women. Through Lee, Chin here is attacking the American media, which have played a big part in perpetuating the stereotypes of Asian Americans. As part of the propaganda against the outbreak of Chinese labor and against Japan's growing military power, the American popular media, especially the films made between 1850 and 1940, portrayed Asian men as sexual predators or seducers posing a danger to white women. This was meant to illustrate how threatening they were to the country in general (Wu, 1982). To add to this conversation, authors of *The Big Aiiieeeee!*—An Anthology of Chinese American and Japanese American Literature—point out that "Chinese men, at their best" are portrayed as "effeminate closet queens like Charlie Chan and at their worst" as "homosexual menaces like Fu Manchu[5]" (Jeffery Paul Chan et al., 1991: xiii). This proves, as Darren Hutchinson asserts, that Asian American males are sexualized from a heterosexual standpoint, which "seeks to stigmatize Asian American male hetero-sexuality by feminizing it, or even labeling it as 'gay'" (1999: 91).

These stereotypes about Asian Americans affect Tam's life profoundly and there are several ways Tam responds to them. Tam admits being raised in a way that would help him "escape" these misconceptions and become as "white" as possible. The young Tam was not allowed to wear green clothes because they would make him look obviously "yellow." He was forbidden to mingle with black people. For many years after World War II, he could not be seen with his best friend Kenji, for fear that the white folks would mistake him for Japanese. He was told to do well at school, "to talk proper, and be civilized" (Chin, 1981: 26). In short, Tam was raised to be the so-called model minority, which is just another stereotypical view of Asian Americans that implies another form of oppression. The term "model minority" basically suggests educational, economic, and social accomplishments of minority groups specifically Asian Americans, and thus invoking a sense of pride among them. It is therefore linked to the ideal notion of the American Dream, that is, no matter what ethnicity one belongs to, s/he can become successful if s/he works hard enough. Nevertheless, the term has a racist connotation as it often means that in order to be successful and accepted, one needs to act as white as possible. Model minority, therefore, connotes white supremacy and cultural superiority of the white. It also disregards other sub-minority groups who might not fit into this definition and are still struggling to survive. Vu Thai accurately sums up the history and problematic nature of the concept:

> The term "model minority" first appeared in a 1966 *New York Times* article called, "Success Story Japanese American Style." This was a countermovement attempt during the Civil Rights Movement to try and maintain the status quo by presenting social inequalities as an innate and cultural problem rather than racial injustice. The title of "honorary whites" hides the history of racism against Asian immigrants and makes it seem as though Asian Americans have always been a successful immigrant group due to their cultural values around family, education, and hard work.
>
> The phrase "model minority," unfortunately, implies that there is a lazy, underachieving "other." The use of the success stories of Asian Americans has been used to help maintain an investment in meritocracy and the idea of the American Dream. ("Model Minority")

Stacy Lee adds to this conversation arguing that this is a "hegemonic device" that is used to preserve "the dominance of whites in the racial hierarchy by diverting attention away from racial inequalities by setting standards for how minorities should behave" (2009: 6)

Veridian E-Journal, Silpakorn University
ISSN 1906 – 3431

The character in the play that fully represents the model minority is Tom. Structurally, Tom is characterized as Tam's foil in almost every aspect. While Tam somewhat struggles against total assimilation into the hegemonic American culture, Tom totally embraces it. Their names are highly symbolic of this fact. At one point Tam says he is tired of people telling him what to do in order to fit into the mainstream American culture. He complains that these people even tell him he was "mispronouncing" his name and that it should be pronounced "Tom" instead (Chin, 1981: 25). The name "Tam" implies that he is in a state of limbo, not Chinese but not yet American, while the Anglicized name "Tom" suggests total assimilation. Responding to Tam's frustration regarding his identity, Tom offers a 'consolation,' proving that he has become one of the model minority:

> I used to be like that. I wondered why we didn't speak up more, then I saw we don't have to. We used to be kicked around, but that's history, brother. Today we have good jobs, good pay, and we're lucky. Americans are proud to say we send more of our kids to college than any other race. We're accepted. We worked hard for it. (Chin, 1981: 59)

However, unlike Tom, Tam eventually grows out of that model minority mode. He has learned to rebel against the misconceptions surrounding his ambivalent cultural identity through his distinctive speech style. Frank Chin is highly praised for his expressive and articulate use of language that is filled with energy, rhythm, power, and charm. Tam's speeches in the play capture all of these remarkable qualities. It is arguable that Tam adopts a loquacious speaking style in order to search for his true identity and to gain a sense of security. Throughout the story, "Tam goes through voice and accent changes. From W.C. Fields to American Midwest, Bible Belt holy roller, etc. His own 'normal' speech jumps between black and white rhythms and accents" (Chin, 1981: 6).

Critics have attempted to explain why Tam adopts such dramatically changing voices, rhythms, and accents. Among them is David Leiwei Li, who argues that Tam's unique language demonstrates his attempt to fight against the Orientalist views mainstream Americans tend to have towards Asian Americans, and his desire "to claim a Chinese American language that is self-referential and that will relate to others" (1992: 323-4). Dorothy Ritsuko McDonald contends that Tam's rhythms and accents "deny the stereotype of the Asian American dual personality – he is neither Chinese nor assimilated American, but a new breed of a man created by the American experience" (1881: xvi).

What both critics agree upon is that Tam's speech challenges the commonly accepted perceptions of Asian Americans. The fact that Tam, an American of Chinese descent, has adopted both an African American accent and dressing style challenges the easy assumption the general public have about the dichotomy of the Asian American identity that McDonald mentions. The effects of this defamiliarizing technique is illustrated in the frustrations Popcorn has when he first meets Tam. Tam calls Popcorn on the phone before he pays a visit to him. Once Tam shows up in his office, Popcorn for some reason feels the need to repeatedly ask Tam to clarify his identity:

POPCORN: Isn't it strange, you're Chinese.

POPCORN: You don't talk like a Chinese, do ya? No, I don't think so...

POPCORN: The way you talked, why, I took you for colored over the phone.

But "Lum"? Why would a Chinese talk like a colored man? (Chin, 1981: 40)

This scene demonstrates how the discrepancy between Tam's physical appearance and his speaking style disrupts Popcorn's convenient assumption about another person's identity. Speaking on the phone with Tam and hearing his African American accent, Popcorn forms a conclusion that Tam must be 'black.' However, when Tam appears at his office looking apparently 'yellow,' Popcorn finds it difficult to digest this surprise. This disruption of expectations thus leaves Popcorn puzzled and frustrated.

Popcorn's frustration points to Tam's attempt at challenging racial assumptions he and many other Asian Americans experience. Several scholars have highlighted the importance of Tam's unique language, contending that his adoption of an African American accent and dressing style suggests Frank Chin's attempt at using performances of blackness to discuss the construction of Asian American identity. Daryl J. Maeda, for example, explains that "Asian American radicals and cultural workers (such as Frank Chin and the Red Guards[6]) turned to blackness as a model for Asian American identity as a way to resist assimilation into whiteness" (2005: 1083). Appropriation of blackness helped Asian Americans to "consider their own racial positioning...insert[ing] [them] into racial paradigm" as "Asian Americans constituted a racialized bloc, subject to the same racism that afflicted blacks" (2005: 1081). In short, performance of blackness facilitated the construction of Asian American identity by creating the sense of empathy that bonded Asian Americans with African Americans, allowing them "points of conjunction around which...[they] could connect political and cultural movement" (2005: 1082).

Two characters in *Chickencoop Chinaman* clearly perform blackness to fight against white oppression: Tam, and Kenji. Since childhood, Kenji identified himself as black and was

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referred to as “Black Jap Kenji” (Chin, 1981: 20). He explains to Lee that he may “act black but it’s not fake” (Chin, 1981: 19) adding "...I'm not imitating no black people. I'm no copycat. I know I live with 'em, I talk like 'em, I dress...maybe even eat what they eat...” (Chin, 1981: 21). He even lives in a black ghetto. Tam is not too different. Apart from his black accent and clothing style, Tam also joins force with Kenji in challenging the Lone Ranger, who represents white supremacy. The Ranger insists that Asian Americans remain “legendary passive” and “kiss” his “white...ass,” meaning to succumb to white superiority (qtd. in Maeda, 2005: 1085). Thus, that Tam and Kenji “act black” (Chin, 1981: 19) serves as a political statement to demonstrate that they both recognize the same struggles that the black have undergone and to challenge blind assimilation into the mainstream white culture.

However, what is missing in most criticism about Tam’s unique speech style is the accent of frustration and isolation inherent in his language:

> TAM: I am the natural born ragmouth speaking the motherless bloody tongue. No real language of my own to make sense with, so out comes everybody else’s trash that don’t conceive. But the sound truth is that I AM THE NOTORIOUS ONE AND ONLY CHICKENCOOP CHINAMAN HIMSELF that talks in the dark heavy Midnight, the secret Chinatown Buck Buck Bagaw...(Chin, 1981:7)

Tam characterizes himself as a “linguistic orphan” (McDonald, 1981: xvii). The “motherless bloody tongue” he mentions suggests the sense of isolation Tam feels because of his inability to identify himself either as a Chinese or as an assimilated American. Frank Chin once expressed in an interview: “For us American born, both the Asian languages and the English are foreign. We are a people without a native tongue” (Chin “Back Talk,” 1972: 2). That the language Tam speaks is full of “slang, obscenities and unusual grammar” (Chin, 1981: xviii) suggests an attempt to find a new way of speaking that he can identify himself with, and implicates a rebellion against the standardized languages others employ. That he is a “ragmouth,” out of which comes “everybody else’s trash” implies the hidden sense of insecurity that plagues Tam as it alludes to the low opinions associated with the Chinese culture discussed earlier. Tam talks “in the dark heavy Midnight” when nobody can hear him and about “the secret of Chinatown,” which will never be heard or understood by others. Lee is one of the characters who sees through Tam’s hidden isolation and anxiety:

> LEE: ... Look at him he’s like those little vulnerable sea animals born with no shells of their own so he puts on the shells of the dead. You hear him when he talks? He’s talking in so many goddamn dialects and accents all mixed up at the same time, cracking wisecracks, lots of oh yeah, wisecracks, you might

think he was a nightclub comic. What's sa wrong with your Chinatown acka-cent, huh? (Chin, 1981: 24)

Having faced discrimination all through his life, Tam has developed and mastered a special kind of language that can serve as a shield to protect him from these vulnerabilities. Even though his style of speaking makes him unable to be taken seriously by some people, it can, at least, assist him in coping with the feeling of emptiness. In a conversation in which Kenji asks Tam why he speaks all the time, Tam reveals that he simply cannot stop:

KENJI: Why do you talk so god dammed much? I used to think it was funny, brave, man, the way you ripped everybody up with your tongue, showin'em up for clowns and bullshit. Your tongue was fast and flashy with the sounds, man, savin your ass from this and that trouble, making people laugh, man, shooin in the girls…I used to know why you were mean and talkin all the time. I don't anymore, and you're still talkin the same crazy talk. (Chin, 1981: 61)

TAM: Really…really tired of talking, especially talking. But every time I stop it's so goddamned awful! (Chin, 1981: 62)

The above quotations demonstrate that Tam uses his gift of language to his advantage in several ways. He wields it to make fun of other people and to get him out of trouble. He also uses it to avenge the mistreatments he has been a victim of, and to give him protection from stereotypes. Tam admits that he cannot stop talking because he feels "awful," as whenever he keeps quiet, the sense of emptiness takes over him. Sadly, even his linguistic talent cannot heal this.

When Tam's language fails to make life meaningful for him, he gets even angrier. Part of his anger is rooted in the emasculated image white racists associate with Chinese men, including him. Daniel Kim notes that in a lot of Chin's early works, he presents "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" (1999: 296). To prove his manliness, Tam marries a white woman, who later leaves him for another white man. This failed marriage leaves him more bitter and hateful towards himself and other women, in particular. Wenying Xu argues that even though many of Chin's heroes are created to challenge "the normative model of masculinity," they often fail to achieve significant success because [Chin's] "'new' model of masculinity turns out to resemble, more than differ from, what he had set out to subvert" (2007: 80).

Veridian E-Journal, Silpakorn University
ISSN 1906 – 3431

Over the course of the play, Tam turns from the abused to the abuser, victim to victimizer, being stereotyped to stereotyping other people. He tries to appear manly by continually insulting others, especially women. Xu further observes that although Chin's main objective is to "dismantle the hegemonic, emasculating representations of Asian American males in the United States, ...his agenda sometimes must be carried out at the expense of Asian American women and gay men" (2007: 78). From the play, we can see that Tam's quest for his masculinity is made possible by abusing at least two female characters: Hong Kong Dream Girl and Helen Keller.

Basically, Tam's fantasy about Hong Kong Dream Girl has two functions. On one level, the Dream Girl serves as an imagined psychotherapist, allowing Tam to reveal his frustration and to release his anger. However, on another level, the dreams he has about her indicate his potential to abuse or harass women. After Tam has explained what he believes to be the origin of Chinamen, he immediately resorts to sexual metaphors, suggesting his belittling attitude toward women:

> Now you, my Hong Kong flower, my sweet sloe-eyed beauty from the mysterious East, I can tell that your little fingers have twiddled many a chopstick. Your smoothbore hands have the memory of gunpowder's invention in them and know how to shape a blast and I dare say, tickle out a shot. Let me lead your hands. (Chin, 1981: 6)

Here, Tam reveals his inability to take the Dream Girl seriously. He adopts the view of an orientalist, associating her with decorative ornaments and other exotic qualities that have no real practical functions. The sexual connotations are also overwhelming with the "gunpowder" and explosion metaphors. All of these point to his misogyny. Act one, scene two ends with Tam assuming an image of a predator seducing a woman, therefore fulfilling another stereotype of predatory Asian men: "TAM moves to put her hand on his fly and stuff one of his hands inside her shirt. TAM licks his lips and puckers up for a smooch, breathing heavy...(Chin, 1981: 8)"

From a psychoanalytical point of view, Tam's dreams about having sexual power over women suggest that he feels insecure about his manliness. These dreams help him cope with the belief that he lacks physical and sexual ability in real life.

Tam tries to achieve masculinity by abusing not only Asian women, as critic Wenying Xu observes, but also "white" women. He makes multiple rude remarks about Helen Keller in act one, scene two. Keller was the first deaf and blind person to earn a bachelor's degree and has been considered an American heroine due to her contributions as a writer and political

activist. Tam totally disregards her good name and humiliates her by mimicking her "deaf accent" and satirically calling her the "Great White goddess, the mother of Charlie Chan, the Mumbler, the Squeaker" (Chin, 1981: 10-11). The reference to Helen Keller not only reveals Tam's sexist attitudes, but also implies that being born as a Chinese is comparable to having a birth defect – a biological flaw that one has to overcome. In referring to Helen Keller as "the mother of Charlie Chan," Tam condemns America's infamous double standards. He at one point utters:

> Helen Keller overcame her handicaps without riot! She overcame her handicaps without looting! She overcame her handicaps without violence! And you Chinks and Japs can too. Oooh I feel the power, children. Feel so goooooood! I feeeeeel it! (Chin, 1981: 11)

Tam's humiliation of Keller serves a thematic purpose. Here, Tam further satirizes the hypocrisy of American society, where acceptance is also discriminating. While a person with birth defects like Keller was wholeheartedly embraced, a person with Chinese heritage like Tam is not. Helen Keller could achieve fame and respect through her remarkable strength and perseverance. However, no matter how hard Tam tries to defy the misconceptions people have of him and his heritage, he cannot defeat them. Out of spitefulness, Tam scorns the unjust treatment of Chinamen by assuming an authoritative role of a white person instructing the Chinese and Japanese to overcome their "handicaps" the way Keller did.

Another way Tam seeks to gain acceptance is by marrying a white woman. McDonald argues that Tam's decision to marry a white woman is driven by an "urge toward assimilation and extinction" (1981: xiii). This also has a historical connotation as previously discussed. The exclusionary laws that were serially issued between 1882 and 1924 rendered Chinatown an exclusively bachelor community. Out of necessity and fear of extinction, a great number of Asian Americans resorted to "marry out white" (Chin "Yellow Seattle," 1976: 11). Despite his previous attempts to resist total assimilation, Tam like many of his bachelor ancestors chose survival over distinction. However, given the ruthless way Tam is inclined to treat women, it is barely possible that marriage would save him. We learn later in the story that his wife ran away with a white man, leaving him another deep wound.

When anger, language, and marriage fail to help him cope with anxiety; masculinity turns toxic; and manliness changes into sexism; Tam searches for another way to give himself security. At the heart of the play is Tam's quest for a role model. Act two, scene one starts with an interesting parallel between his grandmother's and his own ideal heroes. While his grandmother had an ear for "nothing but ancient trains in the night", trying to listen to the

sound of "The Chinaman-known Iron Moonhunter" as well as the Chinese workers who stoically built the railroad despite the incredibly hard work and great danger, Tam ignores the sound, spinning the dial on the radio searching for a story of someone else he thought he can identify with. Unable to find a role model within the Chinese culture, the young Tam turns elsewhere. Tam later finds the Lone Ranger, whom Chin describes as a "legendary white racist" (Chin, 1981: 3), and mistakes him for the hero he had been looking for.

Tam reckons that the Lone Ranger's black hair meant that he was Asian and that he wore a mask to cover his slanty eyes. He also believes that the Ranger came to right the wrongs that had been done to the Chinese. What the young Tam fails to see was that the Lone Ranger is just another white supremacist who tries to convince him of his racial inferiority. He attempts to suppress Tam by distracting him from the sounds of the train and the true Chinese heroes, who built the legendary railroad across the Sierra Nevada. The Ranger orders Tam to obey the "white" laws and urges him to simply follow the oppressive model minority myth by remaining passive and staying exclusively within the demarcated Chinatown, where he can just preserve his exotic culture:

> RANGER: You don't hear no train, China boys. Hear no evil, ya hear me? China boys, you be legendary obeyers of the law, legendary humble, legendary passive. Thank me now and I'll let ye get back to Chinatown perservin your culture! (Chin, 1981: 37)

The discovery about the Lone Ranger's racist nature leaves Tam emotionally damaged and psychologically injured. Critics have pointed out that one of the functions the dream sequence serves in the play is to portray the severity of Tam's wounds: how deep-rooted Tam's problems are. McDonald interprets the Lone Ranger's shooting of Tam—a writer and filmmaker—in the hand as symbolizing Tam's "deep sense of his own emasculation, his inability to achieve" (1981: xvi).

Tam is constantly haunted by the feeling of worthlessness; and this is not limited to his career. Believing himself to be a failed father, Tam is convinced that he has done his two daughters a service by leaving them. When Lee asks him about his family, Tam confesses that he has not met his daughters for a long time because he wants them to forget him. When she warns him that he cannot just turn his back on his family, Tam sadly responds: "My back's all that's good for them. My front's no good…" (Chin, 1981: 25). Tam's estrangement from his

family mirrors the alienation experienced by the old Chinatown bachelors: those who "burned all their diaries, their letters, everything with their names on it...hopin that that much of themselves could find some place friendly" (Chin, 1981: 26). The old man tells Tam that in order to thrive in America, Tam needs to "let all that stuff die with the old," "forget" everything and "get along with 'Americans'" (Chin, 1981: 27).

Tam follows this advice by trying to forget his false childhood hero and replacing him with a new one. He later finds a new model of masculinity: Ovaltine Jack Dancer—a childhood friend, now a black boxing champion. He is making a film about him to honor his heroism and their friendship. Tam invests all his money in the production of the film and travels across the country to interview Charlie Popcorn, whom he believes to be Ovaltine's father. Tam soon finds out that Popcorn is not the father of Ovaltine.

That Tam becomes hysterical after he discovers the true nature of his 'hero' is understandable for several reasons. First of all, the film gives him a purpose in his essentially pointless life marked by an overwhelming sense of guilt and a conviction that he is doomed to fail. Tam reveals to Lee that he has no other ambitions than to make this hero movie, which will allow him to "Keep busy" and to "Just do one thing" that is "right" (Chin, 1981: 27). Besides, Tam also intends the film to be a gift for his daughters to remember him by. Even though Tam insists that it is best for his children to totally forget him, he secretly wishes they cherished a fond memory of him: "...in case they don't forget. I should leave them something... I should have done some THING. One thing I've done alone, with all my heart. A gift. Not revenge..." (Chin, 1981: 27). This would allow him for once to fulfill his role as a father—one of the most defining masculine assets.

Most importantly, Tam has invested so much of himself into his 'hero.' He has adopted black accents, gestures, and clothing styles partly to show his admiration for Ovaltine, who has proved to be nothing but a liar. His quest for an ideal role model fails once again and he loses it all. At first Tam refuses to believe the truth and becomes verbally and physically violent. He attacks Popcorn and scolds Kenji. Later, he becomes uncharacteristically quiet and starts to lose all his gifts of language as he can no longer speak with the same power and fluency. Act two, scene three vividly portrays Tam's psychological devastation. In this particular scene, he is depicted as being in a state of "Limbo" (Chin, 1981: 51). He is now losing all of the many voices, accents as well as the energy and articulacy he used to possess. Unable to find the right language to convey his feelings, he resorts to a mixture of English and Chinese, which does not make much sense to either the audience or himself. This shows that both his language and his life are losing all their meaning.

Veridian E-Journal, Silpakorn University
ISSN 1906 – 3431

Tam's quest for an ideal role model and a hero is doomed to fail because of his inability to connect heroism with his Chinese heritage — his ultimate tragic flaw. Infatuated with heroes elsewhere, Tam fails to appreciate the integrity of his father and Chinese ancestors. He once admits having joined white friends in making fun of the old Chinatown bachelors: "Well, they're all dead now. We laugh at'em with the 'Americans'..." (Chin, 1981: 27). Afraid of being insulted and rejected by these white folks, Tam repeatedly denies that the old dishwasher is his father: "He wasn't my father. He was just a crazy old dishwasher" (Chin 1981: 17). Tam believes that the dishwasher was insane and that he always wore ~~a~~ swimming trunks when taking a shower for fear of being seen by old white women (Chin, 1981: 16-17). However, through Charlie Popcorn the audience learns that the dishwasher was a highly dignified man. He was known as "The Chinatown Kid", who always came to see boxing matches at Popcorn's gym and insisted on paying admission even though he could get in for free.

Not only is Tam blind to the dignity of his own father, he is also ignorant of the heroism of his ancestors: the Chinese laborers who legendarily built the "Iron Moonhunter" or the Transcontinental Railroad. These people risked their lives in the ambitious project of the railroad construction that cut through the gigantic Sierra Nevada, aware that "they'd never be given passes to ride the rails they laid," and that they would never get any credit for it (Chin, 1981: 31). To Chin, these Chinese workers are heroes but to Tam, they are just part of a forgotten past.

The play ends with Tam retreating to the kitchen offering to cook for others. This is a gesture of Tam's absolute surrender to the stereotypes of Asian Americans he has tried so hard all his life to fight against. Tam fails with every means he employs to rebel against the mistreatment he has been a victim of. His hope to rescue his masculinity is shattered as his marriage to a white woman fails because he is inclined to treat women poorly. His powerful and unique language does not work well because it is essentially a language of frustration, isolation, and anger that drives everyone he loves away from him, leaving him even more lonely and desperate. His quest for an ideal hero who would rescue him from shame and disgrace only teaches him about human hypocrisy. Heartbroken and devastated, Tam loses all his power and will to live. Tam's tragic end is a punishment Chin gives his 'hero,' who decidedly betrays his own origins, ancestry, and culture. Among Tam's last words in the play are "Buck buck bagaw," a derogatory expression referring to the funny way the Chinese talk. It also signifies Tam's total failure at making himself appreciated, respected, or accepted. It is a cry of frustration, of isolation, and of desperation. What makes Tam an ultimate tragic hero is:

as loudly as he tries to cry out the "Buck buck bagaw," he can only be heard but never understood.

Tam's tragic end leaves the audience with a curious catharsis, if it can be called as such. The discourses that Frank Chin presents in the play introduce a significant dilemma about the formation of Asian American as a national identity. Total assimilation only means total submission to white supremacy and total loss of cultural roots. Inassimilation, on the other hand, denotes further segregation, adding more to this problem of identity crisis. Essentially, *Chickencoop Chinaman* demands that Asian Americans be put strictly within the context of America. This sets Chin apart from the Red Guards. While the Red Guards aimed to link "anti-Asian racism in the United States to Western imperialism in Asia," Chin believed that "Asian Americans were bound by a common culture that was born and bred strictly within U.S. national borders" (Maeda 2005: 1082). Once urged by the Red Guard Leader to "Identify with China!", Chin responded "We're in America. This is where we are, where we live, and where we're going to die" (Terkel, 1992: 311). For Chin and *Chickencoop Chinaman*, Asian American is literally both Asian and American.

Notes:

1. Asian American Movements: Even though the movement consisted of different groups and people who had varying beliefs and ideas, they shared two foundational propositions. Firstly, they believed that Asians were experiencing the same racial discrimination other ethnicities were facing. And secondly, they were convinced that cooperation among different ethnic groups would serve as a competent approach to dealing with and repelling racism (Maeda, 2005: 1081).

2. The First Transcontinental Railroad: This was a mega railroad project that ran for approximately 2,000 miles, linking the U.S. rail network with the Pacific coast (Vernon, 1870: Table 215 and 216). The plan was at first considered to be impossible to build because the tracks would have to go through the Sierra Nevada, and this would involve digging and drilling through granite mountains and crossing steep canyons, which had never been tried before in the U.S. (Linda Hall Library, "The Pacific Railway").

> However, the Chinese laborers were the key factor that made the project possible. After many Irish immigrants abandoned railroad work and the plans to hire Civil War prisoners as well as African American workers from Mexico failed, the program

managers, out of desperation, resorted to the idea of hiring Chinese immigrants, who were thought to be too frail to sustain the physically demanding railroad construction. Yet, these Chinese laborers proved to be astonishingly competent, disciplined, and sedulous. ("The Pacific Railway"). In sum, over 95 per cent of all the construction work was done by Chinese immigrants and they "had created one of the greatest moments in American history" (Ambros, 2000: qtd. in "Transcontinental Railroad History"). And the project was completed seven years ahead of schedule (Linda Hall Library, "Transcontinental Railroad History").

3. Paper sons or paper daughters is an expression that refers to many Chinese men and women who forged legal documents saying that they were sons or daughters of a Chinese American who had U.S. citizenship in order to permanently move into the country. This mass immigration was partly an aftermath of the Chinese Exclusion Act and the 1906 San Francisco earthquake. The Chinese Exclusion Act was passed in 1882 to debar Chinese immigration and outlaw the naturalization of Chinese immigrants thought by many Americans to have stolen their jobs. The great San Francisco earthquake led to a huge fire that ravaged the city killing thousands of people, causing billions in damage, and destroying the office that contained birth records. As a result, many Chinese immigrants were able to claim American citizenship because the government had no evidence left to prove otherwise. Some of these Chinese men would go back to visit China and upon their return, they would falsely claim that they had fathered some off-spring in China and wanted to bring them back to the states.

4. **Murder cases:** Among the most infamous and horrific murder cases, in which Chinese immigrants were the victims was the Rock Spring massacre, which happened in Rock Springs city in Wyoming on September 2nd in 1885. This incident was a result of long-term tensions between white and Chinese miners. The Chinese immigrants, who played a key part in the construction of the Transcontinental Railroad, proved themselves to be very capable laborers. They were willing to work hard for lower wages. This angered many white miners, who thought that these Chinese workers were stealing their jobs while keeping wage rates low for everyone. The dispute between the two became physical when ten white men raided a coal pit assigned to Chinese laborers and demanded that they left. They fought and a Chinese worker died of injuries. This led to a series of rampages that killed at least 28 Chinese laborers, but it was believed that the number could have been as high as 40 or 50. (Lyman, 2001: 132-

34). Some of the bodies were mutilated, burned, and dismembered. The Chinatown was totally looted and burned.

5. **Charlie Chan and Fu Manchu:** See Park's note, in which explains that Charlie Chan - a Honolulu police detective created by Earl Biggers in the 1920s - is among the first characters representing the model minority. Charlie Chan is a "non-sexualized" character who is asexual and submissive (Jachinson Chan cited in Park, 2013: 13). Fu Manchu, on the contrary, is created by Sax Rohmer. This character is closely linked to the "Yellow Peril" stereotype (Park, 2013: 13).

6. **The Red Guards:** Formed in 1969 in San Francisco, the Red Guard Party was a Chinese-American political youth organization. One of its objectives was to fight against the oppression they experienced as a minority group. The group had the "style, language, and politics" that clearly resembled those of the Black Panther Party, "with whom they had significant contact and by whom they were profoundly influenced" (Maeda, 2005: 1079).

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