INGO PETERS

Passion, Plainness, Allegory: Frank Chin, American Literary Tradition, and the Question of Style

Abstract: The Chinese American writer Frank Chin owes his current status as a marginalized figure in Asian American Studies not only to his anti-feminist vitriolics, but also to his writing style. Judged by common contemporary standards, Chin’s novels appear disjointed and crude: He routinely puts blunt, didactic statements from his essays into his characters’ mouths without even trying to give them any literary embellishment; yet at the same time all these doctrine-like, straightforward, and obviously instructional passages are infused with complex hints at ancient myths, and his competently lecturing protagonists are prone to irritating sudden irrational outbursts of emotion. This article proposes that these peculiarities of Chin’s style – a combination of passion, plainness, and allegory – do not necessarily have to be seen as literary weaknesses; they can also be interpreted as a radical employment of strategies that helped form an important strain within the American literary tradition: the strategies that the first distinctly American writers (the plain, passionate, and allegorical Puritans) used. Viewed in this light, Frank Chin seems much less of an ‘outsider’ than before.

Frank Chin is not exactly popular among practitioners of Asian American Studies. The Chinese American writer, born in 1940 in Berkeley, author of the first Asian American drama that made it onto an important New York stage, and co-editor of the seminal anthology Aiiieeeee!, suffers from an “institutional negligence” (Li 1991, 211), being regarded as “chauvinist, nativist, or nationalist” by a majority of scholars (Goshert 2000). The demonstrative Asian hyper-masculinity he displays and advocates, and his vitriolic and by now legendary attacks on The Woman Warrior by the nearly untouchable Maxine Hong Kingston, in the late nineties the most widely taught author in American academia (Simmons 1999, 15), appear to have turned Chin into a pariah of sorts: When he was nominated for the Distinguished Achievement Award of the Western Literature Association in 1999, massive protest mainly from feminists led to his ending up as the first nominee ever to be rejected (Davis 2000). John Goshert reports that when he attempted to discuss Chin with academics, “respondents at a number of conferences quickly called me to task for even broaching the subject” (2000).

The Kingston-Chin dispute with its literary and cultural implications has been competently and comprehensively analyzed already (for instance, by Cheung 1998, 107-24), as has been the question of what Chin’s marginalization tells us about the state of Asian American Studies (Li 1991, 211-23). What I am interested in here is something else, something that is related to the judgment of the literary merit of
Chin’s work, especially his novels: The dislike of the aggressive author and his positions is inextricably linked to a general condemnation of the quality of his writing, as if a person with views and attitudes like Chin’s could by definition not write good fiction. In articles that examine his prose, the writer often comes across as a literary buffoon whose single-mindedness, self-absorption, and unabashed adherence to ideology prevent him from creating or finding the nuanced plots, characters, and — last but not least — words necessary for a successful novel. Sucheng Chan, for instance, dismisses his tendency to employ “characters that embody a certain quality dear to Chin’s heart” and suggests that he model his stories on more appropriately “naturalistic works” in the future (1991, 184). Such criticism has the side effect that it is now Chin himself who is responsible for his — now rightful — exclusion from the Asian American literary canon (due to his own bad writing), not his opponents; thus, the ‘literary merit’ argument is of great relevance for the question of how justified Frank Chin’s treatment as an irrelevant outsider is, and it makes sense to have a closer look at his style. While I am in no way qualified to evaluate the important debate within Asian American Studies, I wish to propose that taking a few steps away from that debate and looking at Chin’s writing style through the lens of American literary traditions (and the reasons for and effects of the emergence of certain writing techniques) can give us useful new alternative perspectives on this particular author: His admittedly clumsy-looking novels can be read as a radical combination of plainness, passion, and allegory that aligns Chin with the very foundation of a distinctly American literature, the earnest, driven attitude behind the sermons of the Puritans and the tradition that they started, ironically making this much-maligned misfit and alleged Chinese nationalist arguably more ‘American’ than the critics who would like to banish him from U.S. anthologies.

The three distinct stylistic features are apparent in both of Frank Chin’s novels: First, Donald Duk (1991), whose eponymous eleven-year-old protagonist, the son of a Chinatown restaurant owner in San Francisco, is embarrassed for being Chinese but gradually realizes with the help of his father and recurrent dreams of the forgotten construction of the Transcontinental Railroad by Chinese workers that it is the misrepresentation of his culture in America that is the problem, not the culture itself. Second, Gunga Din Highway (1994), a Bildungsroman that follows over a fifty-year span the turbulent lives of Ulysses, Diego, and Ben, three Chinese Americans who as kids made a pact to always stay true to the vision of a tough, confident Chinese America that takes its inspiration from the ancient epics and (in contrast to Ulysses’s pathetic Hollywood actor father who used to play Charlie Chan’s stereotypical son, and Pandora Toy, a Kingston-like writer whose bestseller portrays Chinese culture as cruel and inferior) does not fall into the trap of selling out or pandering to White tastes. Each of the three stylistic features, taken by itself and isolated from the others, easily looks awkward and is indeed often judged as a flaw. Moreover, the features don’t seem to fit together, which naturally strengthens the impression of weak writing.
Perhaps the most striking of the three is Chin’s tendency to have his characters recite ideas from his countless programmatic essays – so persistently and frequently that one might be forgiven for thinking of *Gunga Din Highway* and *Donald Duk* as manifestoes in the disguise of novels. A comparison with just one article, “Come All Ye Asian American Writers,” provides already more than enough proof of how numerous the parallels are, and how even small details are in agreement. The following passage is taken from the essay:

> The differences between Western and Asian civilization are real, sharply defined, profound, and easily stated: Western civilization is founded on religion. Asian civilization – Confuciandom – is founded on history. Confucius was not a prophet. He was not religious. He was a historian, a strategist, a warrior. [...] Living is fighting. Life is war. (1991a, 34-5)

In *Gunga Din Highway*, a teacher of the three adolescent protagonists, called “the Horse,” proclaims something that sounds rather similar:

> [T]he Horse [...] says the idea of a church is not Chinese, [...] Chinese are not religious. ‘Chinese morality, called Confucian morality, is not built on a foundation of faith, like faith in the Christian world, but on knowledge, on history. Life is war. In war it is what you know, not what you believe, that wins battles,’ [...] (1994, 94)

The same message is being communicated here twice, each time in the same straightforward, matter-of-fact, and didactic manner. *Donald Duk* also offers countless passages mirroring the essay in such a fashion. “The mandate of heaven. *Tien ming* [...] The Chinese say, Kingdoms rise and fall. Nations come and go” (1991b, 11), Donald’s father explains to his son again and again. “ [...] Ah-tien ming, mandate of heaven, is Confucius. [...] Kingdoms rise and fall. Nations come and go. That’s the mandate of heaven” (123). In the non-fiction text, we learn:

> The second [idea of Confucius] is the [...] Confucian mandate of heaven. [...] Ssu-ma Ch’ien, the grand historian of the Han [...] so completely absorbed the mandate of heaven in his writing that every sentence he wrote contains the kingdoms rising and falling, the nations coming and going of the mandate. (1991a, 35)

Another essay by Chin ends with “Whaddaya say? Whaddaya know? Kingdoms rise and fall. Nations come and go“ (1996, 20); while „Kingdoms rise and fall, Nations come and go“ is also what the final sentence in *Donald Duk* reads (1991b, 172). The last chapter of *Gunga Din Highway* is even closer to the non-fiction model. “[W]haddaya say? Whaddaya know? Kingdoms rise and fall. Nations come and go” (1994, 401), declares Ulysses, the main character.

Chin’s placement of the same arguments – almost verbatim – in both essays and novels suggests that his primary motivation to write is the wish to spread one fixed, preconceived doctrine that the concrete texts merely repeat again and again. The extended piece of prose fiction and the opinionated non-fiction article are little more to him than two different means to the same end, allowing him to distribute his message widely. “All art is martial art. Writing is fighting,” Chin writes (1991a, 35), implying that the generic differences between essays and novels, great as they might be, are irrelevant for what he is trying to achieve. Both are, to keep in line with Chin’s metaphor of warfare, weapons of the opinion leader in the never-
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ending epic battle for hegemony. The novel as a distinct genre or art-form is only of secondary interest to him. As a logical consequence, both the specific contents and the form of, for instance, individual dialogues in a narrative are relatively unimportant, as long as they allow the doctrine to stand out.

This serves to explain why the author always installs the arguments from his essays in the novels unaltered, in all their raw bluntness, keeping the tone of the original, without bothering to work them in in a more elaborate, literary manner. Not only abstract theses as those above are given the unprocessed treatment, but Chin’s personal experiences as well. When he, in Gunga Din Highway, brings up the Chung Mei Baptist Home for Chinese Boys in San Francisco, an institution founded by Charles Shepherd in 1923 where missionaries turned Chinese American children into a minstrel troupe, he borrows his own earlier account of the place, almost unfiltered. “My Uncle Paul was a Chung Mei Minstrel. His picture is in Shepherd’s book, in costume and blackface, between pages 124 and 125. [...] On the photo facing 125, a Chinese boy in blackface, big white lips, a tooth blacked out, wears a wig and a dress,“ is what the essay asserts (19). Benedict, one of the protagonists in Gunga Din Highway, tells of the same book by Sheperd:

Ulysses [...] opened the book to the slick pages of pictures, pointed to the kid on the right end of the top row of kids in a group photo captioned ‘The celebrated Chung Mei Minstrels.’ [...] It was Uncle Mort [...]. The next picture showed the same boys in their shiny minstrel show tuxedos and blackface makeup. (1994, 79-80)

In both cases, the reader encounters the same situation, described in the same terse, functional language. Except for the effeminacy of the first uncle, one could swap the two scenes without making them appear out of place. The same is true for the other passages, like the previously mentioned ones about the mandate of heaven and human existence as a battle. Whether “Life is war” or “Whaddaya say? Whaddaya know? Kingdoms rise and fall. Nations come and go” – it is the same style everywhere; clear-cut, direct, colloquial, and with a dashing verve signalling decisiveness and creative energy at the same time. Every time a truly important character in one of Frank Chin’s novels voices something, it is really the Frank Chin from the essays who is speaking, frank (no pun intended) and undisguised.

The latter, in turn, sees himself as a mere representative and instrument of the Chinese ‘heroic tradition,’ which he wants to revive and which, nurtured by the classical epics and the strategist Sun Tzu, is supposed to teach Chinese Americans the valiant toughness and mental strength of the ancient heroes (1991a, 34). As a self-styled “Chinaman” (1998, 329), Chin claims to be their natural successor; he feels especially close to Kwan Kung, the “god of fighters, blighters, and writers” (Chin 1991b, 158): “Chin in his own life and work has maintained the heroic stance of the old Chinaman god,” writes Dorothy Ritsuko McDonald (1981, xxix). Diane Simmons puts it even more drastically: “He seeks to be Kwan Kung” (1999, 20). Thus, the language that most of the characters in the novels share is not just the language of Frank Chin, but rather that of the whole ‘heroic tradition’ as Chin understands it. There are only four kinds of Chinese Americans in Donald Duck and Gunga Din Highway: Those who are like Kwan Kung (the grown-up Ulysses,
Donald’s father), those who strive to be like him in the future (Donald, Ulysses as an adolescent), antagonists unwilling or unable to model themselves on the heroic ideal (Ulysses’s father, Pandora Toy), and unimportant peripheral characters like Donald’s sisters.

All aspects of the ambitious didacticism of Chin’s novels are commonly portrayed as literary weaknesses. Susan B. Richardson, whose opinions can be called representative in this respect, criticizes his tendency to communicate whatever he has to say about Chinese America via knowing mentors who instruct eager students on their way to heroism:

Various formal features, such as [...] the use of characters as surrogate-learners, serve to distance readers from the text and from the characters. [...] The comfort gained by readers has a cost [...] a reduced potential for emotional commitment or cross-cultural understanding. (1999, 58-9)

She views the fact that a doctrine is propagated openly and persistently as a sign of “an authorial distrust of the audience and of their capability to work out the proper conclusions on their own” (62). The clarity of the message, achieved by Chin through all his protagonists collectively speaking in the tone of the ‘heroic tradition,’ has a negative effect, according to Richardson:

Issues and behavior are clearly marked as bad or good. These features create an economy of form that allows Chin to foreground his didactic agenda; again, however, the form discourages the reader’s commitment to the story or characters. (1999, 59-60)

Richardson’s evaluations are obviously not made up out of thin air. Anybody who sets out to examine Frank Chin’s novels using the common criteria of contemporary literary criticism will in all likelihood reach similar conclusions. An author who employs his characters as mouthpieces, putting his own well-documented sentences into their mouths, easily risks coming across as un-literary, un-skilled, and crude. However, if one makes a conscious effort to separate oneself from the usual approaches for once, and chooses a completely different kind of approach towards Chin, the negative impression of the writer as a literary misfit changes. Accordingly, there is a chance of viewing Chin’s style in a new light if one takes the detour of asking (1) if there are distinct stylistic features in Early American Literature that helped give it its identity but that have been so watered down over the centuries that they are hardly recognizable in current American writing, (2) if there could be writers today who purposefully or inadvertantly resort to similar strategies because they feel the need to distinguish themselves from ideologically different writers as much as the Puritans needed to distinguish themselves from the Anglicans, (3) how a new novel that employed such features uncompromisingly would appear today, and (4) to which extent Chin’s mannerisms could thus be interpreted as decidedly American ways of writing.

The long-term literary effects of the establishment of the Puritan Jeremiad as a dominant form of discourse in America are brilliantly described in a small article by Larzer Ziff that deals with a largely unknown English (and Anglican) clergyman named Abraham Wright. Wright, who was born in 1611, like many other loyalists regarded Puritanism as fatal, but, in contrast to most, focused his criticism on the
style of the sermons and other Puritan forms of expression, rather than on theo-
logical or political issues. “Wright felt more keenly than most that one of the chief
evils of the Puritan reign was literary, that a great tradition of letters, both sacred
and profane, was being destroyed […]”, explains Ziff. “[He talked] of the baneful
influence of Puritan style as part of, but yet distinguishable from, Puritan policies”
(1974, 37). In order to call attention to what he believed were the fundamental stylistic
differences to the Anglicans, Wright wrote five sermons and published them in
one volume (Wright 1656). Each of them skillfully imitated a specific manner of
composition, ranging from that of an Anglican bishop to that of the radical Puritans.

According to Ziff, the crucial difference lies in the role that the literary arrange-
ment and design of the texts (i.e. the concrete formulations) occupy in the process
of the reception of the message. The sermons in the Anglican style are highly liter-
ary; Ziff observes “extremely verbal performances in which even transitional sen-
tences glitter with puns” (38). They consist of artfully arranged words whose sense
and relations must be illuminated by rhetorical analysis. This is the only way for
the reader or listener to arrive at an understanding of the meaning. The message is
completely hidden in the formulations, the wording, the style. Decoding the liter-
ary design of the Anglican sermon equals grasping its substance fully, “once the
words have been split into their parts and made to stand in revealing relations to one
another the task is completed” (38).

In the Puritan sermon, however, the formulations are so clear and obvious that
a rhetorical analysis intended to bring a possible deeper meaning to light is self-
evidently useless here to begin with. Admittedly, the sermon in the ‘plain style’ is
not free of metaphors, but its consistently schematic, didactic presentation of the
doctrine robs the single words of any potential ambiguity. So unimportant are the
words themselves, so little chance to wrestle with them do they give the recipient
that “a sense of the concrete behind the word emerges, a sense that the words
themselves are artificial vehicles but that the truth they are intended to carry is
absolute and independent of them” (38). The message is not hidden in the literary
design. “[T]he sermonizer […] disregard[s] the beauty of words in favor of the word”
(41). In contrast to the Anglican, the Puritan preacher is not interested in verbal
expressions per se or the artful arrangement of sentences and their building blocks,
he cares about the one true message, whose vehicle he claims to be, and which is
intended to reveal itself as holy inspiration behind the formulations, independent
from them and not distracted by them:

[T]he active ingredients [of the Puritan sermon] are […] a speaker with non-verbal access
to the meaning of his text; […] an audience which is seeking with his aid to penetrate
through the words of the text and the words used in the sermon in order to share that
non-verbal meaning; and the meaning itself, imperfectly captured in any set of words but
capable of breaking through a sufficiently inspired presentation – one which will not be
deluded by words themselves.

[…T]he preacher [was] regarded as an instrument of the Holy Ghost, as a speaker of the
saving word. And this saving word was something different from any particular words
he might use, but was, rather, the force which hovered behind them. (Ziff 1974, 39)
For Ziff, these differences between Anglicans and Puritans in the communication and reception of meaning also constitute the central feature that separated the nascent American literature from the English. The “plain style” and the “word behind the words” (43) that it reveals, says Ziff, are distinctions that have long been typical of American literature:

[T]he much debated matter of the difference between English and American literature could very well be illuminated by a consideration of the literary consequences of Puritanism, which is to say that American literature seems strongly marked by the characteristics I have described. (Ziff 1974, 43)

As for the judgment of Frank Chin’s novels and their literary merit, Abraham Wright’s juxtapositions and Ziff’s conclusions do provide new insights. The peculiarities of Chin’s works that I have described so far are clearly reminiscent of the Puritan way to write and communicate meaning. If this way, in turn, was what made American literature autonomous and gave it its identity, then one does not have to read Chin’s literary mannerisms as deviations from the standard any more, as weaknesses that at best relegate him to a position at the margins of U.S. literature. Now, one could also read Gunga Din Highway and Donald Duk as novels that can be traced back to and that represent an important strain of the American literary tradition.

Frank Chin’s direct, unadorned, and didactic style corresponds to the ‘plain style’ of the Puritans. His taking arguments from his essays and putting them, without substantial revision, straight into the mouths of many different, interchangeable characters, testifies to a quasi-Puritanical fundamental disdain for “the words,” “the beauty of words,” and thus the stylistic and rhetorical devices a writer has at his or her disposal. Chin’s view of literature as a means to a higher end matches the Puritan treatment of the sermon’s text as an imperfect vehicle that is independent from the divine meaning and has no literary merit of its own. Like the Puritans, Chin regards himself as instrument and inspired mouthpiece of the one and only truth (i.e. “the word”), in his case the ‘heroic tradition.’ As with the sermons, rhetorical analysis provides no help in finding the meaning here, the reader is supposed to penetrate through or pass over the words and arrive at the word behind them. Chin himself divulges one way to do this in his positive comments on the writings of Confucius:

The sum and ultimate art of Confucius’ knowledge and wisdom, The Analects, is [...] not an essay, not a novel, and not an autobiography. It is a ‘set.’ [...] The fighter expresses his wisdom and essence in a set. One learns [...] by memorizing a set of poses, stances, and movement in a specific order and rhythm. Then one recites the moves of the set. In the advanced stages of recital, one begins to free-associate with the moves and poses of the set. One’s life and knowledge are in conversation with the set and even inform the set. (1991a, 35-6)

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1 As a primary example, Ziff mentions Emerson.
The appraisal of Confucius as a warrior, and the comparatively deprecatory portrayal of the genres essay and novel, make clear that Chin, who loves to present himself as a fighter too, wishes to see his own works rather as ‘sets’ than as novels or essays as well. The path to the truth via the set, as described by Chin, again shares crucial features with the path to the truth via the Puritan sermon. In both cases, the text is not the final product that merely has to be analyzed. In both cases, the text is monotonous. In both cases, the reader or listener actively has to gain access to the inspiration that informs the text, and, if successful, is in the possession of a truth that goes far beyond the words of the text.

Once a critic engages in such a comparison of Chin’s works with the consequences of Puritanism for literature in America, the above-mentioned criticisms by Richardson lose a substantial amount of their plausibility. The idea that the recipient must penetrate through or leave aside the words of the author to arrive at the word behind them does not exactly suggest “an authorial distrust of the audience and of their capability to work out the proper conclusions on their own.” Neither does the statement that the active reader interacts with the ‘set’ and even changes it. And while the argument of Chin’s style creating a distance between the reader and the text (and its rhetorical building blocks, the words) is certainly valid, it merely describes the necessary prerequisite for the understanding of the true meaning by the recipient.

What has been pointed out so far, however, solely refers to those characteristics of Chin’s writing that are related to the plain, didactic, essay-mirroring element of his style. Yet, as I stated at the beginning, there are two other important stylistic phenomena, which appear strange by themselves and also do not seem to fit with the matter-of-fact straightforwardness. These phenomena are the passionate emotional outbursts of the novels’ characters and Chin’s tendency to give the events described in the books – primarily by references to myth and the incorporation of mythical figures – an allegorical quality.

The routinely and competently recited tenets and teachings are often interrupted by passages where the protagonists seem strangely electrified, losing control and saying things in strung-up diction like the intermittent narrator Ben in Gunga Din Highway: “I couldn’t break windows or glass. It was a chickenshit, bullshit, horse-shit tantrum. I was a bullshit playwright. A bullshit Hamlet” (1994, 290). Equally typical are these thoughts by Diego Chang in the same book, shortly after he scolded Ulysses as a “pig buggering monkeydick motherfucker” (327):

Why am I so angry? she wants to know. Am I so angry? Nothing for me to get angry about. No fuck is worth this shit at my age, man. […] Fuck it, the ‘60s are gone, man, the new parade of old young honeys are gone too. (1994, 340)

In Donald Duk, where Chin shows some consideration to his intended juvenile audience, Vietnam veteran Homer Lee lets out a high-strung torrent of words:

And some started crying Momma momma momma, I love you! and fall down sobbing, the first shot they hear! And when they got shot. Oh, momma, momma, momma! I don’t want to die! Ha ha. (1991b, 19)
The hyperbole, the manic, wound-up slang with which Chin furnishes his characters’ speech whenever they cannot teach or learn, can easily appear artificial and annoying. Moreover, it seems to clash with the plain style analyzed above.

The same could be said about the murmur of myths in the books. Chin’s characters are weighed down by the heavy load of names fraught with meaning. The wandering protagonist is called Ulysses, Pandora’s book means fateful disaster, and Homer tells of a great war. *Gunga Din Highway* is preceded by a (non-paginated) introduction to the “twin stories of ‘Poon Goo, the Creator of Heaven and Earth’ and ‘Nur Waw, the Mother of Humanity […],’” which mark the beginning of “[t]he world of Chinese myth.” The two tales are clearly intended to provide a mythical framework into which the following plot has to be placed: “This book is therefore divided into four parts: *The Creation, The World, The Underworld,* and *Home*” (1994). In *Donald Duck*, all of a sudden the 108 outlaws from a Chinese epic appear in the United States:

The thunder does not stop. […] Horsemen and flags announce the Thirty-six Stars of Heavenly Spirits, armored and girded for war, accompanied by their banners and pennants followed by the Seventy-two Stars of Earthly Fiends, fancy names for outlaws and rebels against the Song Empire. These are the famous outlaws of Leongshan Marsh. (1991b, 113)

All these mythological underpinnings suggest that every single event in the novels – every action or statement by any character – has to be read in an allegorical sense as well, as a reference to the same universal stories that the myths tell. The opening of a second, allegorical level of meaning seems to contradict the straightforwardness and plainness, too.

Yet, these two challenges can be countered with another comparative look at the literary consequences of Puritanism. Just like the plain style, the passionate emotional outbursts of Chin’s characters and his allegories may be interpreted as stylistic features that connect him to the foundations of early American literature and thus should not automatically be construed as odd weaknesses. What is more, Larzer Ziff illuminates that both features do in fact harmonize very well with the ‘plain style’; the three downright necessitate each other.

With regards to uncontrolled hyperbolic outbursts, Ziff first stresses how common these were among the Puritans, and how strongly contemporary observers believed them to dominate public discourse and ritual forms of expression; “a significant seventeenth-century body of opposition to Puritan style was based on the irresponsible flood of passion […] to be found in Puritan expression” (1974, 40). He then takes one of the critics, once again Abraham Wright (1927), and explains through the latter’s comments the reasons behind the Puritan “flood of passion.” The Anglican Wright valued poetry highly, regarding outstanding poems as divine even if the author happened to be a heathen. What he disliked about the Puritans was that they – who did write and study poetry as well, no less than the Anglicans – declared the divine inspiration of the author to be the yardstick for quality, which of course meant a corresponding loss of respect for traditional literary standards:
Puritanism, Wright is saying, shifts the glory of literature from the form and content of the work which, of necessity, speaks through respected conventions, to the alleged inspiration of the writer who insists that the glory of his work is that it is the product of the Holy Ghost speaking through him. (Ziff 1974, 41)

The emphasis on personal inspiration, in combination with the abandonment of the literary value system that had been in effect until then, made floods of passion a legitimate – even imperative – stylistic device:

To some extent in poetry, sermons, and polemics […] this belief justifies the passionate outburst, the long exclamation of a writer seized with a supernatural transport and committed to setting it loose where it can work as it will among other men. (Ziff 1974, 41)

Thus, the massive emotionality can be traced back to the same cause as the ‘plain style,’ namely, the priority of the inspiration that leads the preacher to disregard the words in favor of the word. “Passion and plainness are not contradictory,” as Larzer Ziff points out (41). They are two related stylistic consequences of the same idea.

Accordingly, the frequent outbursts that various characters in Frank Chin’s novels are subject to do not have to appear jarring any more either; they make sense again. The unnaturally extreme tension that so many of the characters suffer from may be meaningfully interpreted as the tension of the author (whose mouthpiece they are), when he is immediately seized by the sacred ‘heroic tradition’ and wants to present this inspiration to the reader in its purest, unprocessed form.

“[W]ild allegorizing” was also a characteristic feature of Puritan discourse, if Larzer Ziff is to be believed (40). The reasons he gives serve to explain Chin’s propensity for allegory as well. For all the emphasis on the divine word behind the words, the Puritans, who after all were pursuing the practical goal of a reformation of the Church of England, were in fact very interested in real historical events, current affairs, and contemporary politics – just like Frank Chin, who deals with the construction of the Transcontinental Railroad by Chinese Americans, denounces the passing over in silence thereof in history books, and criticizes stereotypes in the media, like Charlie Chan. For both the Puritans and Chin it was or is difficult to communicate the meaning of concrete historical events to the reader, precisely because of their beliefs in the incapability of literature (mere words) to really catch and express the true message, and in the irrelevance, in comparison to the inspiration of the author, of form and contents of a text. The Puritans had barred themselves from access to the combined knowledge of literary strategies. They could not use the customary effective images or rhetorical devices to illustrate important events, since after all the audience was instructed to ignore such images or rhetorical devices. The same is true for Chin.

The New Englanders’ solution was to put all incidents and processes in allegorical reference to the universally known and accepted foundation of their faith, the Bible. The preachers made sense of current affairs by presenting them as recurrences of biblical types:
They were relating their experiences to the patterns in the Bible. The meaning which had been drained by their dismissal of words in favor of the word was, in a sense, to be regained by making the most of biblical patterns and their relation to modern experience. (Ziff 1974, 42)

Correspondingly, what is left for Frank Chin to give meaning to unique events in history and in his novels are the myths of the ‘heroic tradition’ – the foundation of his faith. He has to allegorize, has to put what happens in his plots in connection to the myths of the ‘heroic tradition’ (which for Chin contains not only the Chinese ones, but also the Greek myths and elements of modern popular culture, like the American Western), or else his novels would be devoid of any substance. Because a large part of the conventional rhetorical devices is – according to his own philosophy of literature – not available to him, Chin can supplement his straightforward, ‘plain’ narration only by allegories. The Puritan authors equally jump, to use Larzer Ziff’s words, “from the literal over a vast range of expression to arrive at the allegorical” (42). In both cases, allegorization is the logical consequence of the ‘plain style.’

Ziff concludes his article by summarizing that the style of the seventeenth-century Puritans was marked by a “characteristic combination of plainness, passion, and allegory,” and this combination “has ever since been a strong feature if not a separate tradition in our literature” (43). It follows from what I have shown so far that the same combination also defines the novels of Frank Chin. It is thus more than appropriate to label them ‘American.’ In fact, one could even give them credit for making the foundations of American literature, which are much less evident in other writers today, visible again by the uncompromising, at first rather odd-seeming radicality with which Chin uses the original style, without watering it down. Another punch line of the comparison with the Puritans is that now someone, of all people, who is often described as a Chinese “cultural nationalist” (Wei 1993, 114), who extols Chinese myths, and who hates Christianity with a passion, emerges as a true die-hard American in genuine accord with the protestant (literary) beginnings. This fits in well with the oft-pointed-out goal of Chinese American writers to present a Chinese America that does not have to assimilate, but that already is no less American than the Euro-American norm anyway.

Frank Chin would furiously deny any conscious connection to the Puritans, and explain his style with references to Chinese culture. However, this would not deprive his works of their status as representatives of an autonomous yet at the same time radically ‘American’ Chinese America. On the contrary, when certain novels can demonstrably be read as being in the American tradition, while their style can also be interpreted as determined by China and its myths, then a strong case against the either-or philosophy that treats Chinese and American culture as mutually exclusive alternatives has just been made.

Besides, allegory also comes natural to the Puritans and Frank Chin because they are equally influenced by cyclical ideas of history. Chin’s frequent allusions to kingdoms rising and falling, and nations coming and going, leave no doubt about this; and “the Puritans had a lingering sense of the cyclical, inherent in their belief that the Bible contained archetypal patterns of collective human experience as well as of individual human behavior” (Ziff 1974, 42).
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