

# Remapping Chinatown on the Diagonal: Frances Chung's *Crazy Melon*

*By Anastasia Wright Turner*

In the opening sentence of *Beyond Literary Chinatown*, Jeffrey Partridge asserts: "Literary Chinatown is an imagined community, not in Benedict Anderson's sense, but in Edward Said's Orientalist sense: it is a community imagined by others – for their own purposes and at their own pleasures" (ix). Outsiders' portrayals and images of Chinatown, and more specifically for this essay, of New York's Chinatown, abound. These images, largely narrated and framed by outsiders' eyes, have traditionally painted Chinatown as, at best, an exotic, "other" location, and, at worst, a corrupt frontier ghetto of unsavory living conditions. As K. Scott Wong confirms in his essay, "Chinatown: Conflicting Images, Contested Terrain," "Ever since Chinese immigrants in America began forming communities in the mid-to-late nineteenth century, their residential, business, and cultural space, generally referred to as 'Chinatown,' has been layered with [largely negative] imagery" (3). Though New York's Chinatown is no longer viewed as a hot bed of illicit activity, most accounts still see it not as a place to live, but as a place of consumption – a business district of restaurants and shops that offers sightseers an exoticized look at "Chinese" culture within the relatively safe haven of American society. As a tourist location, then, Chinatown today offers Americans not only a place to buy Chinese food and oddities but also a locale that codifies and commodifies the continuing exotic image of what Lisa Lowe has famously called "the foreigner-within" (5).

Such negative portrayals of Chinatown have spurred numerous attempts by Chinese American writers to craft alternative visions of Chinatown. In her essay "Ethnic Subject, Ethnic Sign, and the Difficulty of Rehabilitative Representation: Chinatown in Some Works of Chinese American Fiction," Sau-Ling Cynthia Wong surveys the different tactics Chinese American writers have adopted in order to "intervene in this crisis of representation" (252). Like K. Scott Wong, she views Chinatown itself as a "contested" locale where Chineseness is always already spoken for and largely on display. Hence, Chinese American writers face the double bind of demonstrating what is Chinese American about Chinatown "without falling into the trap of exoticization and playing into ahistorical essentialism" (254). K. Scott Wong further argues: "Unless Chinatown is viewed as a living, vibrant part of the city at large, it will continue to be represented primarily through the imagery created by others" (14). To truly capture Chinatown, writers must navigate between affirming orientalized, hackneyed notions

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of Chineseness thereby reducing the inhabitants of Chinatowns to representative, signifying shells, validating and valorizing the uniqueness of Chinatown and its ethnic and historical heritage, as well as its connection to the rest of the nation state.

Frances Chung's relatively obscure posthumous collection of poems *Crazy Melon and Chinese Apple* offers remediation of the contested territory of Chinatown through a rich poetics of place that offers a native insider's view of the diversity, hybridity, and lived experience of New York's Chinatown.<sup>1</sup> Chung was born in Chinatown in 1950. After graduating from Smith College and spending two years in the Peace Corps in South and Central America, she eventually returned to Chinatown where she worked as a teacher until her early death in 1990 (Yung). Originally conceived of as two separate manuscripts, *Crazy Melon* (most likely completed in 1977) and the later *Chinese Apple* differ slightly in their poetics and approach. While the second half of her collection, *Chinese Apple*, draws on Chung's experiences abroad and in other cities, *Crazy Melon* zooms in on her own neighborhood via a paratactic poetics that reveals the contested images and socioeconomics of New York's own Chinatown; even the two poems entitled "Taiwan" and "Hong Kong" draw references to the U.S. and serve more to remind the reader of the Chinese diaspora than to draw the focus away from the borders of Chinatown. As her dedication states, *Crazy Melon* is truly written "For the Chinatown people" (2); within its pages, she records intimate images of the minutiae, rituals, and day-to-day routines in Chinatown alongside more pointed corrections to outsider understandings of her home in order to craft a clearer sociohistorical picture of New York's Chinatown from the late 1960s to the 1980s. Ultimately, Chung's interlingual, imagistic, and frank poetics in *Crazy Melon* remap the rich multiplicity of life and identity in New York's Chinatown and register the fragmentation and exploitation characteristic of lives lived on the border.

Throughout *Crazy Melon*, Chung's untitled imagistic snippets create a kaleidoscopic, museum-like collection; rather than narrating our experience with titles, Chung instead allows us, as tourists in *her* Chinatown, to come at each poem on our own terms. She invites us to reread Chinatown, not as it has been presented in the media and by outsiders, but instead on the diagonal as "we know that those who are / brave cross Mott Street on a / diagonal" (4). Indeed, her first poem subverts reader expectations in its opening lines: "Yo vivo en el barrio chino / de Nueva York" with the complementary translation: "I live in / New York's Chinatown" (3). Instead of the expected English or Chinese, this startling linguistic shift destabilizes stereotypical perceptions of Chinatown; isn't this a Chinese American piece we're reading? By beginning in Spanish, Chung underscores not only the multiplicity of languages spoken in Chinatown, but also reveals that Chinatown is not exclusively Chinese; in this poem as in others, Chung confronts the image of Chinatown as an ethnic enclave by revealing

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<sup>1</sup> Though Chung's work was published in several multicultural and not-for-profit anthologies during her lifetime, including the important Asian American anthologies *Bridge* and *Premonitions* (posthumously), her poetry remained uncollected and largely unpublished until Walter K. Lew's editing and publication of *Crazy Melon and Chinese Apple* in 2000. Her work continues to go unremarked in Asian American literary criticism outside of Lew's "Afterword" and a handful of critical blog entries.

its porous boundaries. Doing so not only confirms Chinatown as a living, breathing, moving part of New York, but also denies the prevalent belief that Chinatown and Chinese Americans themselves are insular.

Chung returns to such moments of interlinguality throughout her text. I define interlinguality as the interstitial dialectic Chung utilizes to vividly capture the linguistic milieu of her neighborhood. As Juliana Chang reminds us in “Reading Asian American Poetry,” “many Asian American poets practice interlinguality by writing primarily in English but consistently portraying the multiplicities, contradictions, and hierarchical relations within and between languages” (92). Doing so allows us to “reimagine these languages and cultures not as discrete entities, but as radically relational” (93). More than merely incorporating a stock phrase here and there, Chung combines Chinese and English in quite a few poems, such as the short: “If I said ming to you / would you answer / would you hear me” (79). She also returns to Spanish, most notably in “Priopos de la Chinita,” which uses only Spanish, and “of three minds” which translates English to Spanish to Chinese (42; 82). Chung’s recurrent use of interlinguality unseats the hegemony of English and celebrates her own hybridity, while it simultaneously challenges stereotypical portrayals of Chineseness by confirming the multiplicity of cultures and linguistic heritages within Chinatown.

Chung persists in destabilizing mainstream versions of Chinatown throughout “Yo vivo en el barrio chino” by using geographical location, not only linguistics, to denote the almost arbitrary way dominant visions of an area can label and define it, giving it an identity contrary to what actually exists within that space. “Yo vivo” continues by noting “Little Italy or Northern / Chinatown, to my mind, the / boundaries have become fluid” (3). Chinatown and Little Italy, two distinct locales in the minds of many tourists, actually intertwine and overlap in the reality of New York geography. Here Chung’s use of short, broken lines intimates both the fragmentation and dislocation imposed upon her as an ethnic resident of Chinatown as well as the very porosity of this primarily imagined border constructed by economics (here the economics of tourism). In reality, however, the flow of everyday life erupts over such man-made boundaries; these boundaries instead are contact zones, where inhabitants come and go, as in a later poem which references her “Italian girlfriends” who part ways with her on Sundays only to “eat chinks / after confession” (31).<sup>2</sup>

Chung continues “Yo vivo” by again referencing the labels with which Chinatown is saddled: “Some / call it a ghetto, some call / it a slum, some call it home” (3). These different labels, delivered in fragmented, staccato lines, echo the very real sociological terms applied to Chinatown and smack of what Barbara Jane Reyes terms “academic orientalism,” which reveals “a Chinatown that is coldly oversimplified” by reducing a vibrant community “into an imaginary, fantastical otherworld, robbing the Chinatown people of their community.” Ultimately, Chung’s poem denies these labels and instead echoes the sentiments of K. Scott Wong’s essay – Chinatown is more than

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<sup>2</sup> Like Mary Louise Pratt, I use *contact zones* “to refer to social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power” (34).

the sum of its images or an ethnographic study; it is a vivacious, prismatic community and a “home” to many. Chung concludes the poem with the assertion:

I have two Chinatown moods.  
Times when Chinatown is a  
terrible place to live in.  
Times when Chinatown is the  
*only* place to live... (3)

Chung’s final juxtaposition of these competing ideas of Chinatown, as both a heaven and a hell, coupled with her evocative ellipsis and frank first-person testimony work in concert to both establish her honest, unmediated voice and entice the reader to enter and explore Chinatown anew.

Throughout the rest of the collection, Chung’s poems run the gamut from simple painterly renderings of the area such as the lines,

a flower lifts on Mott Street  
through window pane and  
oily morning  
.....  
to touch the stones on the  
streets that bruised  
the knees of the children. (26)

Moving on to more imagistic and modernist poems like one entitled “dream collection,” which in its entirety reads: “a man with dashiki lips / two peaches beneath a tree” (48). These quiet, unassuming sketches give the reader her own space to identify with and respond to Chinatown. Yet, Chung also moves beyond the merely reminiscent and static to include poems describing the varied inhabitants of Chinatown in a mode Christina Baik refers to as the “snapshot poem,” which “evoke[s] the visceral immediacy of the snapshot photograph in subtly complex ways....capturing quotidian, seemingly arbitrary encounters, which unravel structurally rich sociocultural meanings.” These collected “snapshots” include the Chinese-American men she describes as “beautiful anachronisms,” who “study the martial arts, practice / calligraphy, consult the I Ching and go to sword flicks / to blow their minds” (45), the Chinese bums on the streets, (“one of them looks like a poet”); Goofy Lala, the “wicked woman who lived on Elizabeth / Street who caught children and put them in her basement”, and “Louisa the bum,” whom the children tease for not wearing underwear (29). Layering in intimate portraits of these named “downtown Chinese” humanizes the location, nullifying the effects of academic orientalization and tourists’ exoticization by reflecting the living, breathing, shifting community entangled in its own hierarchies and social space.<sup>3</sup> Even in her evocations of distinctively Chinatown traditions, like the

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<sup>3</sup> I will use the term “downtown Chinese” to mean “Chinatown residents” in keeping with Peter Kwong’s delineation of the two groups of Chinese immigrants in New York: the “downtown Chinese” and the “uptown Chinese.” Downtown Chinese, as Kwong reveals, “live in Chinatowns, speak little English, and work at low wages in dead-end jobs” (5). In contrast, uptown Chinese are typically more educated, live in more affluent neighborhoods outside of Chinatown, and are generally professionals with larger incomes.

poem which begins “Chinese New Year,” Chung is careful to include the human, to entangle living, breathing, corporeal participation into the spectacle:

Chinese New Year. Yellow chrysanthemums  
on the middle of the kitchen table make  
everyone smile inside and out. The  
festive octagon of candy and nuts is  
waiting for the hands of children and  
visitors. Isolated firecrackers.  
Firecrackers blazing from parking meters.  
Old men hats. Baby Smiles. Banners  
across Chinatown. So many dragons to  
follow. Oranges to cut. Shrimp chips  
flowering. (24)

More than just a parade, Chinese New Year unites the generations in the poem and occurs not only on the street, but also within the home, giving the reader an intimate portrait of Chinese American tradition (“octagon of candy and nuts”) and hinting at the “many dragons to follow” – the different ways to celebrate, to be Chinese American, to exist in Chinatown.

However, though Chung’s poems offer a corrective to many outside observations of Chinatown, her poetry remained largely out of print and unknown to the larger Asian American literary community until 2000, when Walter K. Lew painstakingly assembled her unpublished poems into one slim collection. Lew attributes her absence to her early death and lack of a publisher as well as her poetry’s “untranslatable equivalence” which “perpetuates doubt as to whether the volatile meanings swirling about her particular position among languages, communities, and formidable social and political forces can ever be brought to unity, historical harmony” (163). Lew is gesturing toward the prevailing modes of poetry privileged by, not only the general public, but also the nascent Asian American literary movement. While Chung’s writing in the 70s and 80s did not conform to Orientalist ideas of what Chinese American poetry might look like, and thus was not published by major publishing outlets, it also was not courted by Asian American anthologies either, as it didn’t fit into what Viet Nguyen has critiqued as Asian American literature’s preoccupation with resistance – resistance against orientalized and stereotypical ideas of Chineseness, Chinese Americanness, and, by extension, Chinatown.<sup>4</sup> Asian American studies emerged as a movement predicated on sociocultural and political concerns; as such, early Asian

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<sup>4</sup> In *Race and Resistance*, Nguyen argues that Asian American literary criticism “tends to read for signs of resistance or accommodation because critics are reacting to the demands of American racism, which have historically treated Asian Americans as the bad subject to be punished or expelled or as the model minority to be included or exploited for complicity” (5-6). Therefore, many texts like Chung’s which don’t conform to this binary but rather straddle a midline have sometimes gone unremarked in Asian American literary criticism. In her work on what she calls “subjectless discourse,” Kandace Chuh further confirms, “the dominant narrative of Asian American studies consistently foregrounds activism” to the point that it “has tended to overshadow other possible narratives of the field’s emergence,” thus obfuscating less overtly political works by Asian Americans (5).

American publications like *Aion* and *Aiiieeee* privileged activist and populist lyrics like those of Janice Mirikitani, Fay Chiang and Lawson Fusao Inada.<sup>5</sup>

As her childhood friend Susan Yung pointedly affirms, “Frances’ quick observant words express feelings that many Asian artists and writers lack. Most major AA writers only write about their ID Crises whereby they are constantly dependent and too busy find a role model to emulate” (5). Rather than “writing back” against dominant narratives, Chung writes about what she knows – the mundane everyday life of Chinatown residents. As Xiao-Huang Yin establishes in her informative study on Chinese language writing in the U.S., for many downtown Chinese the “anxiety and deprivation of being an immigrant class in a ‘strange land’ ... forces them to repress their political enthusiasm and emotional expressiveness to wrest a living” (392). Thus, instead of focusing on social inequality issues, American Chinese-language literature is more likely to focus on “issues unique to the fate of immigrants” (387). Authors like Frances Chung, who represent the downtown and immigrant communities, often go unheard as they are, at least on the surface, more concerned with exploring the living of day-to-day life than abstract issues of social justice.

Yet, Chung’s poems also contain a modicum of resistance as many interrogate the darker economic and legal structures that hide beneath the bright lights of Chinatown. Rather than overtly proselytizing against depictions of Chinatown, Chung constructs a poetics that [re]imagines images of Chinatown while simultaneously invoking the historical and economic binds of the geographic area. In these poems, Chung not only narrates the shifting history of Chinatown in the 60s and 70s, when greater numbers of “outsiders” began to flood Chinatown shops and restaurants, but also toys with the idea of Chinatown as a place to consume culture whether through eating exotic food or buying Asian trinkets at a curio store. Chung’s poems register the shift Chinatown went through in the 60s and 70s as it moved in the American imaginary from dangerous and hopelessly foreign to a destination where outsiders might express and test their worldliness. As Peter Kwong writes in his historical study of Chinatown, the 1960s brought both economic (and demographic) changes to Chinatown, which served to position Chinatown as a viable tourist destination.<sup>6</sup> Notable among these was the extreme growth in garment factories. Between 1960 and 1965, the number of garment factories in Chinatown more than quadrupled, moving from 8 to 34. By 1974, garment factories numbered 209 and by 1984, 500 (32). The influx

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<sup>5</sup> For example, Mayumi Tsutakawa explains the selection process for poems in the feminist Asian American anthology *The Forbidden Stitch*: “we had to bypass some manuscripts reflecting experimental forms, some by very young writers and some which did not carry a recognizable Asian voice” (14). Her explanation here is representative of other Asian American editors’ desires for “representative” voices resistant to dominant Orientalist ideologies.

<sup>6</sup> Firstly, the traditional hand wash laundry businesses and restaurants in Chinatown in the 1960s struggled as washing machines became more available to middle class families and as American competitors introduced hand press machines. The decline of the laundry also affected local restaurants. Coincidentally, the “Uniting the Family” provision of the 1965 Immigration Act (along with the War Brides Act of the 1940s) generated the large scale immigration of women into Chinatowns. While, as Kwong notes, this growth of population at first further exacerbated a depressed economy in Chinatown, it also opened up the possibility of a new Chinatown industry: the garment industry. See Chapter 2 of Kwong’s text for further information.

of these industries and the labor conditions of its workers, many of whom worked 10 to 12 hours a day with no time for cooking, necessitated an expansion of the Chinese restaurants in the area. The restaurants catered to the local inhabitants, serving quick, fast meals at relatively inexpensive prices (33).

While Chinatown remained relatively isolated in the 1960s, by the 1970s it had become a more popular destination for Euro-American tourists. In the 1970s Chinese food became more popular among Americans, thanks in part to Nixon's 1972 visit to China and an increase in the number of professionals and white collar workers inhabiting areas around Chinatown (like Wall Street) (Kwong 34-35). With more money to spend, these professionals began to seek out new "exotic" locations and cuisines such as Chinatown to demonstrate their cosmopolitanism. As Jan Lin incisively notes, "the typical American encounters Chinatown as part of a process of alimentary gratification" (171).<sup>7</sup> Thus, by the 1980s, Chinese restaurants in Chinatown numbered well over 400, and Chinatown became a must-see tourist destination (Kwong 26).

Such outsider traffic, while encouraging to the economics of Chinatown, also brought with it blatant voyeurism, which can often remove the human element from its surroundings, leaving only an objective shell of ethnic Chineseness. Akin to academic orientalism, the abstraction inherent in tourism positions Chinatown residents and Chinese American visitors to Chinatown as part of the show. As seeming cast members, Chinese Americans are reduced to non-participatory inhabitants who exist only on the stage of Chinatown and in the imagination of the onlooker. As Sau-ling Cynthia Wong further explains, "Chinatown means spectacle, a diverting, exotic side show. The gaze of cultural voyeurs effectively disappears the people: every Chinese in its sight is reduced to a specimen of Otherness devoid of individuality and interiority" (253). The shell left by such a reduction substitutes for the actual Chinese American human and thus becomes the image and signifier of Chineseness, making Chinese food into Chinese people, thus confirming, in the words of Chung, "Chinatown is a place to go eat chinks" (7).

Chung explores these issues as early as page 7 in her text:

welcome to Chinatown ladies and gentlemen  
the place where you tourists come to look  
at the slanted eyes yellow skin scaling fish  
roast duck in the windows like a public hanging  
ooh the pitter-patter of the slippers  
oh look at the cute Chinese children with their schoolbags  
hurry grab your camera to take a picture  
next to a pagoda telephone booth (7)

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<sup>7</sup> In addition, Kwong reveals that the "uptown" Chinese, those living outside of Chinatown with more economic and social mobility than the "downtown" Chinatown inhabitants, also began to frequent and return to Chinatown during these years as they no longer viewed it as a "ghetto" and were less ashamed by it (35). They patronized the Chinese restaurants and went "downtown" to buy Chinese ingredients, prompting the opening of at least 6 new grocery stores.

At this juncture, Chung more overtly takes a position as tour guide. Yet, far from the food pornography criticisms of poets like Frank Chin, Chung's ironic tongue-in-cheek positioning of herself as "ringmaster" of Chinatown betrays her contempt for such voyeurism as well as her uneasiness about her position within it. Chung's tone is evident in her use of second person: "where *you* tourists come to look" [emphasis mine]. Positioning the reader as tourist, then, Chung's snapshot poem, as Baik calls it, draws back the viewfinder to ironically ape and capture the snapshot-taking in progress by tourists eager to remember the "cute" children next to the "skin scaling fish" and the "pagoda telephone booth." This move allows Chung to mirror the voyeurism of the tourists. Here also, Chung intimates that many of the downtown Chinese find themselves to be part and parcel of the tour by virtue only of their ethnic features. Chung is not exploiting Chinatown to her own gain but lamenting the orientalization and objectification that becomes a part of living in Chinatown.

Chung moves beyond simple censuring of outside observers in the second half of the poem as she asks with startling frankness:

Does anyone know the number  
 Who owns the list of dreams wives and families  
 Left behind somewhere far across an ocean  
 See what you can behind the dragon lights  
 The taut faces that mask thought and feeling (7)

Chung, unlike other activist poets, approaches exotification on the diagonal. Instead of adopting a lyric testimony format to emote the loss suffered by the inhabitants of Chinatown, Chung relies on the idea of masks, mimicking the mask Chinatown itself seems to present to the US. This tactic demands the reader reflect on the constructed nature of Chinatown, the already projected image of its inhabitants, and his or her own response to it. Yet, just as quickly as Chung pulls back the mask, she returns it, closing out the poem with:

(the bus leaves for the Statue of Liberty at two)  
 Chinatown is a place to go eat chinks  
 where happiness has resigned itself  
 to have tea every Sunday afternoon (7)

Returning to the voyeuristic tour guide mode abruptly, Chung replaces insight with the reality of the tourist business and the many Chinatown residents engaged in what Sau-ling Wong terms "fooling the Demon" (253).<sup>8</sup> "Happiness" seems less an elated state of being than a forced smile, a mask again, but this time one worn by perhaps not only the Chinatown residents but the voyeurs as well, who perhaps willingly submit to such foolery and commodification of culture. This complex poem mediates not only the

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<sup>8</sup> In "fooling the Demon," Chinese Americans play out the dominant culture's stereotypes for financial gain. As Wong notes, this "double coding" is also double edged: "Chinese Americans who learned the dominant cultural code and, aware of how they themselves are read, turned handicap to advantage, insult to last laugh, by clever double-coding – are now rampant mis-readers, mistaking fakery for the genuine article" (253).



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constructed nature of Chinatown, but also the fragmentation and loss necessary to construct such a postmodern voyeuristic space.

Similarly, in the poem that begins "Neon lights warm no one," Chung continues to comment on the empty gestures of commercialization and commodification in Chinatown:

the streets are so crowded with people  
that to walk freely I have to walk in  
the gutter. The visitors do not hear  
you when you say excuse me. They are  
so busy taking in the wonders of Chinatown.

.....

the couples hold each other they make  
it seem like Coney Island. They are  
busy looking for Buddhas and gifts to  
take home. Some men are looking for  
'Asian chicks.' (9)

In this brief sketch, Chung moves beyond the mode of tour guide to show the imperialism of tourists to Chinatown; she must walk "in the gutter" as she moves from scenery to unseen, becoming something that must be moved away to "get at" the culture of Chinatown, or as she codes it "look for Buddhas." Chung's poem corroborates and embodies Sau-Ling Wong's contention that voyeuristic looking enables the ostensible metamorphosis of local inhabitants into objectified, impotent proxies of otherness (253). As Chung states perhaps too bluntly in the last two lines of the poem: "The / irony reeks." Chung, as a live cultural being and potential decoder/translator of Chinese American culture, is passed over for souvenirs that can confirm the orientalist ideas of Chineseness the tourists possess. Yet, she is quick to point out that at the same time, men prowl for "Asian Chicks," a dual objectification of race and gender. Her final comparison of Chinatown to Coney Island completes the fun house tourist metaphor, confirming the narrow space Chinatown has been given in the American imaginary.

Against the capitalistic expanse of tourism she imagines in the first few pages of the book, Chung's poems also give the reader a look at the underbelly of that consumption. The image of the cockroach, symbol of unclean living conditions, appears in a number of her poems, such as the two-line "where is the cockroach who left / its footprint in my bowl" (53). Here, this recurrent symbol alludes, not only to the unsanitary and dilapidated housing situation in Chinatown, but also invokes a sense of loss and emptiness; the cockroach is gone, leaving behind only a footprint in a bowl empty, lacking food. Similarly, many of her other poems echo this scarcity of resources:

the winter wind sits in the living room  
so we huddle in the kitchen  
in our winter coats looking silly  
and too cold to do anything  
but light a candle eat melon seeds  
as I wonder

what do we wear when we go outside? (25)

Behind the perceived success of Chinese and Chinatown, beneath the façade of the jade dragons, and behind the masks of its inhabitants is the unpleasant reality of a racialized American labor market which forces many unskilled non-English speaking Chinese immigrants and downtown Chinese into a life of harsh working conditions, low wages, and relatively little government oversight or assistance.

Chung's attunement to these economic issues is further indicated in the number of poems in *Crazy Melon* that focus on life in Chinatown factories. In a most affecting poem, Chung juxtaposes the economic output of Chinese American women with their reception in the public realm. The first half of the poem reads:

On Saturday it is 14<sup>th</sup> street for shopping. Clothes at a bargain. Women who work in the clothing factories find the clothes that they sew in the department stores selling at a much higher price than what they received for their labor. For a treat, you can have lunch at Nedicks or pizza at the five-and-ten (32)

Chung's understated narration, that finding one's hard work marked up at such a price is as commonplace as "lunch at Nedicks," reveals the deep flaws in the socioeconomic engine of Chinatown and the complacency with which many residents face it. As Peter Kwong confirms, despite the fact that the garment workers are all members of the International Ladies Garment Workers Union, the garment factory is in Chinatown, beyond the attention of the American union, so that these women are often paid below both union and national minimum wage: "contractors [in Chinatown] change piece rates daily, to the point that the average worker cannot keep up with shifting calculations and rarely receives even the national minimum wage, let alone the union minimum" (64). In contrast to many of her contemporaries' focus on using their poetics to agitate for social justice, her pointed statements quietly call careful attention to labor conditions and unflinchingly reflect both actual Chinatown life and the downtown Chinese's acceptance of it.

Chung moves further beyond such profiteering, tying economic exploitation with general American perception. The poem continues:

The earring peddler on the street  
will see that you don't want to buy from him and will tell  
you to go back to Chinatown only you really don't know  
this happened because you don't understand English. Little  
do you know that this same man will tell the same thing to  
your daughter on an uptown street (32).

Despite the fact that these women's handiwork graces the windows of uptown department stores, their racialization and position as unseen workers makes them unwanted in that same area. Adding further insult to injury, the "Uptown" Chinese daughter of the unnamed factory worker – one we may assume has attained the "American Dream" of wealth and privilege – still remains foreign despite her Americanization. While the final lines move Chung more firmly into the tradition of resistance writing, her focus on economics adds a new element to such writing and

suggests the socioeconomic structures in place that prevent these women from bettering their situations and understanding that their situations could be bettered. Chung echoes Xiao-Huang Yin's observation that "the process of racialization is never based just on race but is determined by a number of other factors, and most certainly among them, economic conditions" (388). In contrast to theories about the "ethnic solidarity" of Chinese Americans and the existence of a model minority, many Chinese Americans find themselves in Chinatown not by a desire to stay within their own ethnic enclave or due to the benevolence of other Chinese Americans, but because their limited skills and English proficiency prevent them from leaving Chinatown. Chung's poetry then draws on not only the social situation of Chinatown workers, but also gestures toward the very real nexus of socioeconomic exclusion that prevents integration and continues to cast Chinese Americans as non-participatory actors in the making of the United States.

Crossing Chinatown diagonally, through the poetics of Frances Chung, extends and enlivens the current corpus of Chinese American writers as its understated images limn the contexture of social, economic, historical, and cultural forces that narrate the reality of Chinatown and its portrayal to outsiders. Unlike many of the other poets writing in the activist period, Chung's poetry is refractory, imagistic, and rooted in the community concerns of Chinatown. Instead of focusing on resistance and narrating against negative/stereotypical conceptions of Chinatown, Chung simply states what it is while subtly gesturing to the socioeconomic exploitation that undergirds the area. As her grade school friend Judy Yung asserts, "Her subtle words slowly stings [sic] with angry. Unfortunately, she never expressed it through participatory demonstrations, joined any grassroots organizations, be a political activist or bona fide artist. She just became a teacher in the Lower East side." And yet, like her poetry, I imagine Chung's work in the classroom took on activism via another form, encouraging future generations to carefully reflect on the world around them. Though her mode and method differ from many of her contemporaries, Chung's poetry also keenly meditates on issues of consumption, tourism, multilingualism, and Chinese American identity and hybridity: all key concerns among Asian American writers and critics. In so doing, she fulfils Nguyen's premise that "Asian American literature literally embodies the contradictions, conflicts, and potential future options of Asian American culture" (Nguyen 3). Thus, through her careful problematization of the dichotomy of Chinatown as both imagined destination and lived experience, Chung offers to readers a new map of Chinatown, revealing its inherently hybrid, shifting identity:

if it is true that you are what you  
eat then I am many souls, many flavors  
and essences. Ginger root, salty balls,  
.....  
winter melon, western  
melon (56)

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