

FATHERS AND THE SEARCH FOR AN IDEAL FATHER IN FRANK CHIN'S *THE CHICKEN COOP CHINAMAN* AND *THE YEAR OF THE DRAGON*

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Psychoanalysts must probe the imagination; whether one conceives of an imaginary father, a symbolic father, or a real father (keeping in mind that the real does not exist), the profusion of signifiers associated with the father hides one important fact: these father signifiers are empty.

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Far from their heritage land, Chinese Americans reside in an alien, even hostile territory. While the need for a father is an archetypal human necessity, they, specifically, need a father who can not only give them the knowledge of their ancestry, but also teach them how to behave like Americans. More importantly, as they feel inferior living in such an alien place as America, they prefer a father who is strong and victorious, rather than loving and caring. Besides, the father should be able to guide them to establish their American identity. Yet, an ideal father is always absent, as Freud, Lacan, and Jung have investigated. For example, in Frank Chin's *The Chickencoop Chinaman* and *The Year of the Dragon*, the figure of an ideal father is absent in a transcendental form. Compared with Freud, Lacan, and Jung's concept of the absence of the father, however, the absence in the two plays derives from different reasons and has different manifestations. In this essay, I argue that the two fathers' life stories are reversed versions of Freud's father. Meanwhile, the sons' search for an ideal father is in fact a quest for their own identity, which consists of their Chineseness and Americanness.

To elaborate on my argument, I first recapitulate the psychological concept of the father. Then, by comparing Freud's father with the fathers in Chin's two plays, I argue that, because the fathers in the two plays are weak in American society, their life stories, in particular, their deaths, are the reverse of Freud's father. After that, I theorize in *The Chickencoop Chinaman* that the son's search for the ideal father is in fact an attempt to define his Chineseness, which is to be masculine. On the other hand, in *The Year of the Dragon*, the son's struggle to move out of Chinatown is actually to constitute his Americanness, for which his immigrant father is incapable to set an example. The masculinity and Americanness are essential for the first Chinese American generation to establish their identity in America.

The Absent Father: a Symbolic Figure of the Patriarchal Culture²

The father is an unstable or volatile figure because fatherhood is closely connected with absence. First, the father can never be absolutely verified in the process of conception and gestation. Second, the father is usually outside of the family, working as a breadwinner.

¹ Guy Corneau, *Absent Father, Lost Sons: the Search for Masculine Identity*, trans. Larry Shouldice (New York: Random House, 1991), 7.

² I am indebted to Paul Rosefeldt for this part. The citations quote from his book *The Absent Father in Modern Drama* (New York: P. Lang, 1995), 5-8.

Alex Pirani claims that it is the “father’s business to be absent: away hunting, earning a living, functioning in the wider world.” He is free from “body ties” and “detached from maternal concerns.” More significantly, the father is a construct of culture. Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan and Carl Jung all view the father as a powerful figure that stands behind the patriarchal culture. According to Freud, at the origin of civilization, the father of the primal horde possessed all the women until his sons killed him and devoured him. Freud clearly notes: “The violent primal father had doubtless been the feared and envied model of all the brothers...devouring him, they accomplished their identification with him.” In order to alleviate their guilt, the sons reestablish the father in the totem animal. In Lacan’s term, the Symbolic Father represents the Law, the language and culture. He is absent in his presence. The sons and daughters search for the Symbolic Father unendingly because he “can only be imperfectly incarnate in the real father.” Like Lacan, Jung also claims the father archetype “represents authority, hence also the law and the state. He...is the creative wind-breath...the spirit pneuma, the atman.” In other words, the father, as a metaphor, invents the history and culture for all human beings; because of this, the absence of the father means the void of a particular history and culture.

The Fathers in Frank Chin’s *The Chickencoop Chinaman* and *The Year of the Dragon*

To borrow Paul Rosefeldt’s words, “Freud’s powerful figure of the Dead Father as sacrificial victim, Lacan’s symbolic father behind the artifice of patriarchal culture, and Jung’s archetypal father as spiritual force and divine speaker of the Word or Logos, all point toward a powerful absent father in a transcendental form.”³ The examples of the absence of an ideal father are manifested in Frank Chin’s *The Chickencoop Chinaman* and *The Year of the Dragon*. Compared with Freud’s archetypal father, however, the fathers’ life stories are the reverse of Freud’s father due to their powerlessness in American society. Dishwasher, the father in *The Chickencoop Chinaman*, is weak all the time; on the other hand, Pa, the father-dictator in *The Year of the Dragon*, is feeble outside Chinatown even though he exerts the extreme patriarchy within his family.

Dishwasher in *The Chickencoop Chinaman*

I argue in this section that bluntly contrasted with Freud, Lacan and Jung’s powerful figure of the father, Dishwasher, the father in *The Chickencoop Chinaman*, is extremely weak. Not only have the roles of father and son in his family been reversed, but also he is stripped of his virility in America. It is only in an Asian American context that the discrepancies between Dishwasher’s story and that of Freud’s father can be explained.

In Freud, Lacan and Jung’s concepts, the father is a powerful figure: Freud’s father owns all the women; Lacan’s Symbolic Father determines his children’s subjectivity by bestowing his family name on them; Jung’s father represents the law and the state. By contrast, Dishwasher in *The Chickencoop Chinaman*, is defeated and pitiful - weak. For instance, he cannot get around outside of Chinatown without his son, Tam; he depends on Tam’s English to do things. Not only does he essentially need Tam to survive, but also the roles of father and son in his family have been reversed, which is epitomized in Tam’s bathing him. In contrast with the traditional act of parents giving their child a bath, Tam

³ Rosefeldt, 9-10.

partly takes the parental responsibility of helping him bath. In the last bath, Tam even has to help him “into” (Chin 1981:17) the bathtub, rather than just “wash his back” (Chin 1981:17). Since only an infant needs to be carried into the tub, the scene implies Dishwasher is similar to a baby near the end of his life. In addition, before being brought into the bathtub, Dishwasher beseeches for his son’s help: he says Tam “had to” (Chin 1981:17) help him, which suggests Dishwasher recognizes his own inner weakness.

The story of Dishwasher is in every respect opposite to that of Freud’s father. For example, he does not even have one woman (the play does not mention his son’s mother), let alone all the women; he “finished” (Chin 1981:17) himself off instead of being murdered by his son, although Tam was suspected of being involved in killing him; Tam is indifferent to his death rather than showing any feeling. Not surprisingly, an Asian American context accounts for the contradictions. First of all, Dishwasher does not have a woman because of the particular historical circumstance: the law prohibited Chinese women from entering America, and white women risked losing citizenship for marrying Chinese men. Second, Dishwasher’s suicide occurs right after he is being taken “to the police to get a form filled out for the Immigration” (Chin 1981:17). It does not matter that he is afraid of the police or deportation; he is literally scared to death. Perhaps he is already frightened on the way he goes to the police office, even though at that point he does not even know what the form is for. He only knows it is about immigration. Just the very existence of the form is sufficient to destroy him because it signifies the absolute power of U.S. Immigration Law over him. Ironically, he dies in vain because the form is not serious. Last, his son does not feel sorry for his death because he has no basic respect for Dishwasher. Tam does not even acknowledge Dishwasher is his father. The dysfunctional relationship should be attributed to the incompetence of Dishwasher in American society.

Dishwasher is not only weak, but also afflicted with autism. Because he cannot speak English outside or even Chinese at home (his son speaks very poor Chinese), he has no chance to communicate with anyone when he is in distress. As a result, he always withdraws into the bathroom to take a bath. While he is bathing, he suspects that white old ladies are peeking at his body through the keyhole, which is bluntly contrasted to Laura Mulvey’s concept of looking and being looking at. Laura Mulvey reckons that in patriarchal order, “pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female.” It is the male who projects his fantasy onto the female figure; consequently, the woman is displayed as an erotic spectacle.⁴ From the father’s perspective, however, the gender roles of looking and being looked at have been reversed. The white ladies’ gaze propels Dishwasher in the bathtub to put on his underpants, in which the penis’ being enveloped implies a symbolic castration. Thus, the white ladies emerge as the representation of power. The voyeuristic-scopophilic illusion strips Dishwasher of his virility, hence he loses his identity as a man. Dishwasher’s story in the bath signifies that the Chinese immigrant father in America has regressed into the pre-paternal civilization.

Dishwasher is not a respectable father, nor a virile man. Moreover, he does not even have his own name: he is named “Dishwasher” by unknowns. Obviously, people name him like this out of his occupation, which indicates nobody cares about who he is. In fact, he does

⁴ Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” in *Media and Cultural Studies: Keywords*, ed. Meenakshi Gigi Durham and Douglas M. Kellner (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers, 2001), 397.

not have a clear-cut character himself throughout the play, let alone determine his child's subjectivity like Lacan's "name-of-the-father."⁵ In short, America totally devours him.

Pa in *The Year of the Dragon*

I argue here that in *The Year of the Dragon*, Pa's behavior on the surface is worse than prototypical patriarchy: he is a tyrant in the family. Nevertheless, the extreme patriarchy of the father-dictator reflects his deep down inside helplessness beyond Chinatown. Whereas Dishwasher disappears from the stage without having been acknowledged by his son, Pa, the father in *The Year of the Dragon*, is psychologically absent even after having been addressed as such. He is a patriarchal father: he smothers Fred's talents and thereby slays his son's attempts at self-affirmation. Moreover, he behaves in an exaggerated patriarchal fashion—he even expects his sons to dress him, including spraying deodorant, tying his necktie, and putting on his shirt and pants. The image that Pa is sitting, and China Mama and Johnny each puts a shoe on his foot, suggesting that everybody in the family must succumb to him. It also indicates that Pa is a tyrant, demanding uncompromising and unconditional submission.

The extreme patriarchy of Pa, however, reflects his powerlessness outside Chinatown, as Luigi Zoja points out that "the 'terrible fathers' were themselves a special manifestation of the crisis of the father, insofar as they attempted to alleviate it by turning themselves into powerful, tyrannical national fathers."⁶ His refusal to allow Fred to move out of Chinatown, which propels the dynamics of the story, stems from his own experience that is not explicitly displayed in the plot; he himself cannot survive outside. Pa knows clearly that he only can be famous within Chinatown; that is illustrated while he is abusing himself: "You my son obba Chinatown famous pa" (Chin 1981: 109). Ironically, Pa, who should be dignified to be the Chinatown's mayor, nonetheless favors American culture. For instance, he mimics Charlie Chan, the stereotypical Asian American figure produced by Caucasian Americans, in his Chinese New Year speech, although the occasion is exclusively Chinese and his audience is purely Chinese. The conspicuous incongruity does not bother him at all; on the contrary, he is even elated by his ability to insert something "American" into his address. Even though Fred is an English major, he asks Ross, an American, to revise the speech. The self-contempt of his own verbal culture⁷ reveals his subjugation to Americans.

Like that of Dishwasher, the death of Pa in *The Year of the Dragon* is very different from the one of Freud's father. Yet, the death of Pa is also divergent from the one of Dishwasher. Dishwasher dies out of his fear of what is signified by the immigration form, the disastrous result of which has nothing to do with his son. By contrast, Pa's son encourages his death even though Fred does not mean to destroy him on purpose. Pa collapses because Fred eventually erupts to resist his dictatorship. When Fred shouts "No!" (Chin, 1981: 139) to his order, Pa slaps him. It appears that Pa demands unconditional surrender to his authority. In fact, by slapping Fred, Pa attempts to conceal his dread of any opposition. It is because he needs to cover his weakness that Pa slaps Fred. Moreover, the *mise-en-scène* that his family

⁵ Thomas A. Hanzo, "Paternity and the Subject in Bleak House," in *The Fictional Father: Lacan Readings of the Text*, ed. Robert Con Davis (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1981), 34.

⁶ Luigi Zoja, *The Father: Historical, Psychological and Cultural Perspective*, trans. Henry Martin (Philadelphia: Brunner-Routledge, 2001), 297.

⁷ David Leiwei Li, "The Formation of Frank Chin and Formations of Chinese American Literature," in *Asian Americans: Comparative and Global Perspectives*, ed. Shirley Hune et al., (Pullman, Wash.: Washington State University Press, 1991), 218.

is watching compels him to continue abusing his son so that he can sustain his mask of powerfulness. While he is slapping Fred, Pa loses his ego;⁸ even though he knows it would only destroy himself, he keeps slapping until the very action exhausts him.

Although his son destroys Pa's life inadvertently, Fred does intentionally stop his family from saving Pa. He also wants to thoroughly sever any relationship with his father, which is also opposed to the story of Freud's father. With Freud's concept, murdering one's father brings the father to life: "Rather than dissolving his power, death magnifies and perpetuates it. His death in nature produces his life in culture as symbol (a totem god), as source of the law."⁹ By contrast, in *The Chickencoop Chinaman*, because Pa reminds his son that both of them are failures in America, Fred utterly breaks away from his father: "He's a flop! Couldn't even make your stupid speech without hanging onto me couldya? You flop! 'Mayor of Chinatown' Flop!" (Chin, 1981: 140). Unlike his father, Fred believes he is able to succeed in America.

Because of his powerlessness outside Chinatown, Pa is afflicted with power fantasy in his family. He not only acts as a tyrant with his family, but also fancies being a worldwide celebrity like Charlie Chan. He imitates Charlie Chan by ordering his sons to call him "Pop," even though he has no idea about what "Pop" is (Chin, 1981: 130). He also copies Charlie Chan's dialogue to appear as if he is in control of everything: "You got dah case solve yet?" (Chin, 1981: 130). Pa's feelings of inferiority in reality explain why he fantasizes having authority. In conclusion, Pa's inadequacy in America brings about the psychological absence of an ideal father in *The Year of the Dragon*. This play and *The Chickcoop Chinaman* diverge in that, on the surface, the two fathers are polarized: whereas Dishwasher is symbolically castrated, Pa is extremely patriarchal.

The Search for an Ideal Father: Chineseness and Americanness

Because a strong and victorious father is absent in both *The Chickcoop Chinaman* and *The Year of the Dragon*, the sons search for the ideal father throughout both entire plays. In this section, I argue that, the sons' search for the ideal father is in fact a quest for their own identities. On the one hand, in *The Chickencoop Chinaman*, Tam's search for the ideal father is actually an attempt to define his Chineseness, which is to be masculine. On the other hand, in *The Year of the Dragon*, Fred's struggling for moving out of Chinatown is to establish his Americanness. The masculinity and Americanness are essential for the first Chinese American generation to constitute their identity in America.

To be masculine: Chineseness

Tam, the son in *The Chickencoop Chinaman*, defines the essence of Chineseness as masculinity. Through this definition, Frank Chin, the author of the play, fights against the dominant discourse about Chinese in America. Tam is looking for a "fighter" (Chin, 1981:48) father because his real father is too weak. In his imagination, an ideal father would teach his son "no matter how bad he ever got beat, or however he got beat, to always smile, stand up

⁸ Laura Mulvey thinks that "the cinema has structures of fascination strong enough" to make the audience lose their ego temporarily. Vice versa, in this scene, Pa is so obsessed with both showing his absolute authority and covering his essential weakness in front of his family that he is experiencing the alike loss: he has no regard for his own life at the moment when he is slapping Fred. The citation is in Mulvey, 396.

⁹ Rosefeldt, 6.

and say, loud, ‘I did enjoy the fight so very much’” (Ibid.). If the son beats up a white boy, the father will protect him. For Tam, the ideal is not only the repercussion of his lack of a strong father, but also the reflection of his own weakness in America. In contrast to his father who at least takes some responsibility to raise him, Tam gives up his children to a white man. Biologically he is already a father; by nature he is still a son who was born having no virile father, thereby doomed to a life of searching for one. In fact, for Frank Chin, in order to fight against “the Word” (Chin, 1981:6) invented by the white the Chinese American as a group needs to identify with the ideal father’s masculinity. Chin’s writing itself is fighting against the dominant discourse about the Chinese American. As Patricia P. Chu writes:

Chin, beginning his project of Asian American cannon formation in the early 1970s, models his criteria after those established for the American canon: he fashions a central myth as definitive of the culture, and he marks this myth in terms of gender. Second, the myth Chin constructs and obsessively repeats is the story of a lone hero, or preferably a band of brothers, battling the forces of a corrupting society.¹⁰

During Tam’s narration about his father, Dishwasher lacks fierceness and “dignity” (Chin, 1981: 46). Although he knows Dishwasher likes to watch boxing, he never considers it an indicator of his father’s hidden manliness. When Tam finally realizes that he will never find the ideal father, he also realizes that he does not know about Dishwasher at all: “The Chinatown Kid would’ve liked to have seen ... How do I know what he would’ve liked” (Chin, 1981: 63). This discovery implies Tam will get to know his father better in the future, and thus pave the way somehow Tam will dig out his father’s masculinity.

Frank Chin has been particularly obsessed with discovering Chinese people’s masculinity in Chinese culture and Chinese American history, which has become his “own sires.”¹¹ This striving allows Chinese American to author their own personality and culture, rather than being imposed upon by “the Word” of the mainstream discourse. This is significant because the positive Chinese American figure is absent from general American literature, and is thus missing from the American’s mind. Moreover, the venture shapes the Chinese American’s own fantasies and transforms the fantasies into compelling and instructive Chinese American literature.¹²

Leaving Chinatown: Americanness

In *The Year of the Dragon* Fred’s struggle to move out of Chinatown is in fact a quest for his Americanness. While he is constructing his Americanness, which is confrontational to his father’s identity, Fred also finds his subjectivity. Fred’s attempt to leave Chinatown and Pa’s insistence on staying formulates of the main plot of *The Year of the Dragon*. The Chinatown, as a signifier, overlapping with the figure of Pa, poses a burden on Fred. Fred’s desire to leave keeps being restrained by Pa, until the end of the play when Pa dies. The whole quest for leaving testifies the transformation of Fred, who is eventually unfettered from Chinatown, and articulates his subjectivity as Americanness.

¹⁰ Patricia P. Chu, “Authoring Subjects: Frank Chin and David Mura,” *Assimilating Asians: Gendered Strategies of Authorship in Asian America*, (Durham [N.C.]; London : Duke University Press, 2000),70.

¹¹ Chu, 69.

¹² Chu, 69.

Being a tour guide, Fred does not have the subjectivity because he mimics everybody else's talk. He never uses the first person pronouns "I", "Me" or "We" (Chin, 1981: 114). The scene where he teaches his "China Mama" to learn the pronouns illustrates his intense desire to assert his subjectivity. Significantly, not only does he initiate the learning without being asked, but also speaking the first person pronouns is the only subject in his first and only conversation with his biological mother. The desire, however, only can be satisfied through another person's cooperation. It is only because the "China Mama" is a passive figure in the play that Fred has the opportunity to practice declaring his subjectivity.

The crucial question for Fred is whether he is Chinese. Fred does not consider himself Chinese: Chinese language is "foreign and ugly" (Chin, 1981: 115) to him; he does not understand his "China Mama" at all. Moreover, he cannot identify with his biological mother because he has been separated from her for almost his whole life. Surprisingly and significantly, only she helps him claim his subjectivity, and only she listens to him when he is pondering who he is.

Fred cannot communicate with both his biological mother and father. The people who can understand him are his step mother, sister, and brother because, being the first generation of Chinese Americans, they encounter the same problem even though they handle it in different ways. In particular, the problem is that they have to choose one from the binary identities: Chinese/American. Their parents demand them to be Chinese; on the other hand, they feel they are American. According to Lowe, "the reduction of ethnic cultural politics to struggles between first and second generations" is undesirable, because they imply the impossibility of hybridity by portraying immigration history "in term of a loss of the 'original' culture in exchange for the new 'American' culture."¹³ Frank Chin provides a confrontational situation in the play.

A critical moment that leads Fred finally to locate his subjectivity in Americanness happened some years ago, when he was still a tour guide. One day a white man happened to talk to him about the Fred he knew in high school. Fred did not admit who he was. While he was listening to the white man saying that Fred would be very successful, Fred "looked straight ahead and there he [the white classmate] was in the mirror behind the pies" (Chin, 1981: 138). In the mirror, "he [the white classmate] looked at me [Fred] over the lemon meringue and I [Fred] was over the pound cake" (Chin, 1981: 138). Lacan has demonstrated how the moment when a child recognizes his own image in the mirror is crucial for the constitution of the ego.¹⁴ The moment when Fred looked at the mirror was likewise significant. The white man's description of his potential, which was much more brilliant than he had experienced himself, propelled him to outstrip his role as a tour guide. Consequently, the image of himself in the mirror was conceived as his ideal ego, giving rise to his bright future.

The identification with his perfect ego ultimately prompts Fred to articulate the "I," the subjectivity to his father. At the end of the play, his shout "No" declares not only his denial of the patriarchal order, but also his Americanness that differs from his father's identity. Being one of the first generation of Chinese Americans, Fred eventually asserts his

¹³ Karen Fang, "Globalization, Masculinity, and the Changing Stakes of Hollywood Cinema for Asian American Studies," in *Asian American Literary Studies*, ed. Guiyou Huang (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005), 86.

¹⁴ Mulvey, 396.

distinct identity from his immigrant father. As Patricia P. Chu says, “In the absence of legitimizing recognition by Asian American or white fathers, Asian American sons may adopt the trope of self-fathering, seeking to claim Americanness by constituting themselves as literal and literary fathers, or they may seek to prove their Americanness by demonstrating their expertise in deploying the discourse of American democracy.”¹⁵ Indeed, while he is demanding democracy from his father, Fred establishes his identity by claiming his Americanness. Since there is no example for him to follow, Fred has gone through so much to find his own subjectivity, Americanness, which unavoidably varies from his father’s.

Conclusion

Displacement has profound influences on the life of Chinese American immigrants. After entering America, they lose all their superiorities that they possessed in their native land. Thus, their life story is the reversed version of Freud’s father, since the powerful father exists only when he is holding patriarchal authority. In the meantime, because the immigrant fathers in America cannot demonstrate masculinity and define Americanness, their sons have to search for both of them simultaneously, in order to establish their identity that is inevitably distinct from that of their fathers’.

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¹⁵ Patricia P. Chu, “Tripmaster Monkey, Frank Chin, and the Chinese Heroic Tradition,” *Assimilating Asians*, 185.