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Onward, Confucian Soldiers?

By

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Abstract

This thesis revisits the work of Frank Chin to consider what it might mean for Asian American literary scholars to take seriously his investment in Confucianism. While previous critiques of Chin's ideas emphasize the heteropatriarchal and masculinist dimensions of his cultural nationalism, I critically close read the religio-philosophical components of his arguments. I expand Patricia P. Chu's schematization of Chin's extinction, emasculation, and authenticity theses by taking a more diachronic view of his essayistic writings and by tracing the development of what I call his genre thesis and his religio-philosophical thesis. Through his religio-philosophical thesis, Chin eventually arrives in "Come All Ye Asian American Writers of the Real and the Fake" (1991) at an anti-Christian conceptualization of Confucianism that grounds a supposedly secular and universalist Asian American historiography, literary practice, and subjectivity. However, his construction of an areligious, universal Confucian subjectivity paradoxically replicates the religious call to profession which Max Weber characterizes as the heart of the capitalist work ethic and which Rey Chow describes as the mechanism by which capitalism subjugates ethnic subjects. I conclude by reading Chin against the grain in order to consider how his original notion of the "set" as a Confucian cultural form can provide an immanent critique of his reductive association of Edith Maude Eaton with authentic Asian American subjectivity. Reading Edith Maude Eaton's "Leaves from the Mental Portfolio of an Eurasian" (1909) in a literary set alongside Chin's work and Confucian texts allows us to recognize how such a set presents a view of Asian American subjectivity that troubles the call to profession, authenticity, and universalism.

The rather tongue-in-cheek title of this thesis recalls a touchstone—and touchy—moment in Asian American literary history,¹ Frank Chin’s “Come All Ye Asian American Writers of the Real and the Fake.” Published in 1991 as a sort of secondary introduction for *The Big Aiiieeeee! An Anthology of Chinese American and Japanese American Literature*, Chin’s essay is well-known for the equivalence that it draws between a masculinist cultural nationalism on the one hand and a framework of cultural authenticity on the other. There has certainly been no shortage of discourse and critiques surrounding Chin’s ideas, but critics often underestimate the centrality of Confucianism to Chin’s work, just as they overlook the importance of Asian religious philosophy to Asian American literature at large. I thus revisit “Come All” by asking how careful and sustained attention to Chin’s emphasis on Confucianism and his positioning of Confucianism in opposition to Christianity might enhance our understanding of his essay, particularly its contradictions. I am especially interested in the contradiction enacted by Chin’s own title, which at first glance appears to be little more than a satirical spin on the Christmas carol “O Come, All Ye Faithful.” After all, Chin famously rejects Christianity as a source of “fake” Asian American culture. He declares in “Come All” that “Christian conversion is cultural extinction and behavior modification,”² and he castigates authors like Maxine Hong Kingston and Amy Tan for using the autobiographical mode, which he labels a “Christian form, descended from confession and ... from testimony,” and a “traditional tool of Christian conversion.”³ The polemic tone and content of his essay seem to extend to the title, and yet, as an injunction upon Asian American writers to come forth, the title also performs the same function as a religious imperative to signify oneself

¹ In her foreword to the third edition of *Aiiieeeee!* Tara Fickle describes the publication of the first edition in 1974 as “Asian American studies’ controversial origin story.” Tara Fickle, foreword to *Aiiieeeee! An Anthology of Asian American Writers*, ed. Frank Chin et al., 3rd ed. (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2019), xx.

² Frank Chin, “Come All Ye Asian American Writers of the Real and the Fake,” in *The Big Aiiieeeee! An Anthology of Chinese American and Japanese American Literature*, ed. Jeffery Paul Chan et al. (Meridian, 1991), 18.

³ Chin, “Come All,” 11.

as a member of the faithful.⁴ Though he takes other authors to task for their reliance on autobiography and confession, his own essay begins with an attempt to appropriate the Christian call to profess. Does this rhetorical move parody or subvert the charge to align oneself with “true” faith, or does it duplicate more straightforwardly the command to come forward and bear witness to what Chin considers to be Asian American—that is, Confucian—orthodoxy?

To answer this question, this thesis traces the development of Chin’s claims—what Patricia P. Chu calls his extinction, emasculation, and authenticity theses—across his essayistic writing, which culminates with his confirmation of Confucianism as a basis for real Asian culture in “Come All.” In particular, following Chu’s schema, I introduce what I call his genre thesis—his disavowal of confession and the autobiographical mode—and his religio-philosophical thesis—his rejection of Christianity and gradual turn to Confucianism as an explanatory basis for Asian American historiography and subjectivity. Then, drawing on the theories of Max Weber, Rey Chow, and Kandice Chuh, I argue that understanding “Come All” as a project of Confucian or ethnic subjectification does indeed reveal how Chin’s title enunciates a call to profess. Though profession in the Weberian sense refers to vocation, Chow reframes the Protestant and capitalist calling as coercive mimeticism, the process by which capitalism draws the ethnic subject into self-mimicry by the interpellation of cultural stereotypes. Profession becomes a self-referential act, an admission of ethnicity, a confession that one is an ethnic subject. By reading Chin through Chow, I show that the paradox of Chin’s attack on the internalization of racist tropes by other Asian American writers is that he replicates not only a religious call to profess but the Protestant call to profession which Weber places at the heart of the capitalist work ethic and which Chow identifies as the epistemological pattern into which ethnic subjectification falls. Chin’s

⁴ The implicit effect of identifying the faithful, I would argue, is distinguishing from them the unfaithful. Chin’s title renders this explicit in its reference to both the “Real” and the “Fake.”

“Confucian Protestant subjectivity” thus reinscribes Asian Americans within the religious logics that drive the capitalist subjugation of the ethnic subject.

However, I am not interested in merely adding my own criticisms of Chin to the mix. Plenty of scholars have already dissected Chin’s theses, and my own examination owes much to prior ones. In identifying the slippage between profession as vocation and profession as confession as the core problematic of “Come All,” I offer an analysis that parallels what many others have already observed as a perhaps inadvertent but inevitable consequence of Chin’s argumentation—a return to rather than an escape from the Western logics he decries.⁵ Confucianism leads not away from Christian confession but back into the workings of capitalism via the Protestant call to profess. Thus, one of this thesis’s primary aims is to extend preexisting critiques of Chin and thereby demonstrate a need to understand how literary engagements with Asian religio-philosophies can consign antiracist projects to the bounds of racial capitalism.

At the same time, I am also interested in reading Chin against the grain by taking seriously the antiracist goals that motivate Chin’s attachment to Confucianism in the first place. To that end, I delve into his genre thesis by considering the counterpoint to Chin’s rejection of confessional autobiography: his definition and elevation of the “set.” Though he describes the literary and martial form of the set as a loan from Confucian, and primarily Chinese, culture, I focus on his active construction of the set as an immanent critique of his own notions of “real” or authentic culture. The set offers a way for us to reconceptualize the literary history of Asian American autobiographical writing and its expressions of ethnicity. I look specifically at the

⁵ See King-Kok Cheung, “The Woman Warrior versus The Chinaman Pacific: Must a Chinese American Critic Choose between Feminism and Heroism?” in *Conflicts in Feminism*, ed. Marianne Hirsch and Evelyn Fox Keller (New York: Routledge, 1990), 168; Elaine H. Kim, ““Such Opposite Creatures’: Men and Women in Asian American Literature,” *Michigan Quarterly Review* 29, no. 1 (1990): 79; Susan Koshy, “The Fiction of Asian American Literature,” *The Yale Journal of Criticism* 9, no. 2 (1996): 325, <https://doi.org/10.1353/yale.1996.0017>; Quynh Nhu Le, *Unsettled Solidarities: Asian and Indigenous Cross-Representations in the Americas* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2019), 31.

example of Edith Maude Eaton (Sui Sin Far), whom Chin names as a “lone champion of the Chinese American real” in her time and one of only a handful of authors who “write knowledgeably and authentically of Chinese fairy tales, heroic tradition, and history.”⁶ I borrow Chin’s method of citing not just early Asian American authors like Eaton but also classical texts like Confucius’s *Analects* to read Eaton’s personal essay “Leaves from the Mental Portfolio of an Eurasian” (1909) not as a model of the “real” but as a piece of writing that is aware of and ambivalent about the abstraction of Confucianism as cultural capital. Positioning Eaton within a transhistorical group of texts that include the *Analects* and “Come All” need not take the form of delineating a genealogy with Chin’s “real” as its teleological end. What emerges out of tracing Chin’s and Eaton’s quotations of the classics is a citational practice that denaturalizes rather than bolsters “Chin’s dogmatic and seemingly Luddite insistence upon the fake and the real,” as Gloria Heyung Chun puts it.⁷ As a set, this grouping can be thought of in terms of its differences, as works whose analytical merit lies not in revering them as urtexts that support a universal, authentic subjectivity but in treating them as texts whose various receptions reflect the social and political conditions of the disparate moments in which they are received.

This thesis thus seeks to present a reading of Chin and “Come All” that is both critical and generative. Chun states that “Chin’s retelling of Chinese American culture, even if positivistic, is a powerful testimony against the cultural practices of white racism.”⁸ His work also demonstrates the necessity of paying critical attention to the religio-philosophical components of Asian American literature, lest those elements also become nothing more than stereotype. Still, as Kandice Chuh observes in her seminal book *Imagine Otherwise: On Asian*

⁶ Chin, “Come All,” 12.

⁷ Gloria Heyung Chun, *Of Orphans and Warriors: Inventing Chinese American Culture and Identity* (Rutgers University Press, 2000), 135.

⁸ Chun, *Of Orphans and Warriors*, 135.

Americanist Critique (2003), “Despite the powerful critiques of cultural and state-driven racisms afforded by such paradigms as cultural nationalism, ... such frameworks have seriously hindered the critical negotiation of difference through their emphasis on uniform subjectivity—and identity.”⁹ She also reminds us that even the most “sophisticated interrogations of representational objectifications of Asian-raced peoples in the United States” are incomplete without the recognition that “a subject is always also an epistemological object.” As an alternative approach, she calls for the reconstitution of Asian American studies as a subjectless discourse that “prioritize[s] difference by foregrounding the discursive constructedness of subjectivity” and also highlights the “regulatory matrices” of the nation-state upon which subjectification depends for legibility and legitimacy.¹⁰ Honoring Chin’s antiracist goals requires that we push his arguments away from subjectivity and toward a subjectless critique that fully accounts for how Asian religio-philosophies are implicated in the politics of the nation-state and the flow of capital. The set can help accomplish this. Chin’s conceptualization and implementation of the set are processes of discursive construction, and emphasizing their constructedness highlights as well the constructedness of the supposedly universal Confucian subjectivity they imagine.

Chin’s Religio-Philosophy Thesis

Confucianism has not been entirely absent from considerations of Asian American literature, but it nonetheless features only lightly in past scholarship. Shirley Geok-Lin Lim starts her 1986 article “Twelve Asian American Writers: In Search of Self-Definition” with the observation that, within Asian American literature, a sometimes unconscious but “strong

⁹ Kandice Chuh, *Imagine Otherwise: On Asian Americanist Critique* (Duke University Press, 2003), 31.

¹⁰ Chuh, *Imagine Otherwise*, 9.

Confucian patriarchal orientation is a dominant element and with that the corollary of female inferiority. ... Another major motif is the urge to find a usable past.”¹¹ However, in her 1996 essay “The Fiction of Asian American Literature,” Susan Koshy characterizes the first part of Lim’s statement as “incredibly reductive,” adding, “the collapsing of distinctions between Asian and Confucian reveals what Gayatri Spivak has called a ‘sanctioned ignorance’ about the cultural diversity of Asia that, interestingly enough, has its antecedents in American Orientalist writings, which have long centralized East Asian cultures.”¹² Koshy’s trenchant critique of Asian American literary studies’ tendency to prioritize East Asian perspectives remains relevant today, but while we should certainly avoid casting Confucianism as representative of all of Asia or Asian America, her evaluations in no way preclude further critical engagement with Confucianism and religio-philosophy. Her invocation of Spivak, after all, invites us to engage in a project similar to the one that Spivak conducts in *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, that of addressing the sanctioned ignorance of the “disciplinary mainstream” through a “dredging operation” initiated from a post- or anticolonial standpoint.¹³ This section rearticulates Chin’s theses by centering them around his interpretation of Confucianism. The goal is to join Koshy’s anti-reductivist stance together with Kandice Chuh’s subjectless critique into a more comprehensive rubric for dredging the Confucian undertow of Chinese American literature. Instead of restoring Confucianism to some rightful place as the foundation of East or pan-Asian American identity or dismissing in turn Chin’s “real” as “fake,” I am searching for what Spivak

¹¹ Shirley Geok-lin Lim, “Twelve Asian-American Writers: In Search of Self-Definition,” *MELUS* 13, nos. 1 & 2 (1986): 57, <https://doi.org/10.2307/467225>.

¹² Koshy, “Fiction of Asian American Literature,” 328.

¹³ “[T]here can be no doubt that the apparently crystalline disciplinary mainstream runs muddy if these studies [postcolonial/colonial discourse studies] do not provide a persistent dredging operation. ... The mainstream has never run clean, perhaps never can. Part of mainstream education involves learning to ignore this absolutely, with a sanctioned ignorance.” Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (Harvard University Press, 1999), 1–2.

calls a “constructive rather than disabling complicity between our own position” and the literary past.¹⁴

In an odd sense, Chin has a similar objective. If, as Lim describes, authors like Jade Snow Wong and Maxine Hong Kingston search for a “usable past” through an implicit criticism of Confucian patriarchy, then Chin’s definition of real culture combines these motifs into a single purpose by treating the notion of Confucian patriarchy as mere stereotype, thereby rendering the Confucian heroic tradition available for reference—and reverence—without qualm. According to him, “[r]ampant Chinese misogyny is a bum rap, a product of white Christian imagination, not history,”¹⁵ and in “Come All” he accuses both Wong and Kingston of perpetuating in place of history “the racist stereotype—of despicable Chinese men propelling a sadistically misogynistic culture that had no moral right to survive, and of victimized Chinese women seeking rescue and moral superiority in American and Western values.”¹⁶ These statements offer a strong sense of his extinction, emasculation, and authenticity theses, which Patricia P. Chu lays out as follows:

In ... Chin’s extinction thesis, he argued that the underlying idea of America as a white nation ... had been translated into the cultural exclusion of colored peoples from positions of unmarked, or universal, subjectivity in American culture. Thus, Asian Americans were expected to identify with Asian cultures even if born and raised in the United States. They were never perceived as American, and they found their particular experiences as Asian Americans devalued or erased from cultural productions.

A significant corollary of this point (the emasculation thesis) was that Asian American men were not only materially and politically marginalized but culturally emasculated as well, both as characters in cultural productions and as authors, creators, or interpreters of such productions. ...

Chin’s second major point, ... his authenticity thesis, was that Asian American authors who catered to white perceptions of Asian Americans as fundamentally foreign ... were guilty of “faking” Asian culture. In the two decades between the publication of the first *Aiiieeeee!* anthology [1974] and the second [1991] ..., the definitions of *fake* and *real* Asian American culture shifted. *Faking* at first meant offering traditional Chinese culture as in any way representative of Chinese American consciousness, but later, after Chin came to embrace the images of Chinese masculinity

¹⁴ Spivak, *Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, 3–4.

¹⁵ Chin, “Come All,” 24.

¹⁶ Chin, “Come All,” 26.

he found in the Chinese ‘heroic tradition,’ he singled out for attack authors who constructed their own versions of traditional Chinese stories or who made up Chinese customs wholesale.¹⁷

Chu’s formulation is a remarkably clear and concise summary of Chin’s arguments, and what is particularly insightful is how she notes that the authenticity thesis does not remain static across Chin’s body of work. Quoting her at length allows me to propose a few adjustments to her outline. The first is a small addition. We can distill from Chin’s work a genre thesis that aligns autobiography with “fake” culture as an instrument of extinction and also constructs “real” genres like the heroic tradition and the set in opposition. One might call this genre thesis a corollary of the authenticity thesis, but I would also like to suggest a more dramatic rearrangement by taking the transformation that Chu observes in the authenticity thesis and positioning it not as a property of a single postulate but rather as a separate thesis of which the other theses are consequent. This is what we might call Chin’s religio-philosophy thesis, which is premised on the rejection of Christianity, a feature that remains constant over the arc of Chin’s essays. What changes, as Chu indicates, is his initial suspicion of Asian tradition, which gradually gives way to an embrace not just of the heroic tradition but of Confucianism. Chu does not mention Confucianism in her schema, implicitly folding it into the heroic tradition. However, I would argue that, though Chin at first also seems to subsume Confucianism under the heroic tradition, he eventually repositions Confucianism as the heroic tradition’s foundation in “Come All.” As Confucianism comes to stand in for the “real,” Chin increasingly adheres to an Asian historiography that is decidedly not religious. Thus, by the time he writes “Come All,” his religio-philosophy thesis pits Christianity and religiosity against a Confucian and areligious philosophy of history. In reconciling with Confucianism, he sets it up as Christianity’s antithesis,

¹⁷ Patricia P. Chu, *Assimilating Asians: Gendered Strategies of Authorship in Asian America* (Duke University Press, 2000), 64–65.

and so this Christian-Confucian conflict is the epistemological basis of his cultural arguments.

This becomes more apparent when we take a closer look at key essays, which include “Racist Love” (1972), the 1974 preface to *Aiiieeeee!*, “This Is Not An Autobiography” (1985), the 1991 preface to *Aiiieeeee!*, and “Come All.” (The 1991 edition of *Aiiieeeee!* is a separate anthology from *The Big Aiiieeeee!*, which was also published in 1991. “Come All” appears only in *The Big Aiiieeeee!*) In their preface to the 1974 edition of *Aiiieeeee!*, Chin and his coeditors, Jeffery Paul Chan, Lawson Fusao Inada, and Shawn Wong, do not actually use the word “fake,” but they do lambast the stereotypical “concept of the dual personality” and condemn authors whose works convey similar themes. They write with their signature wry style, “The essence of the formula was, ‘I’m an American because I eat spaghetti and Chinese because I eat chow mein.’”¹⁸ One detects as well a certain anxiety around the distinctions that the editors draw, which are resonant with but not isometric to the “real” and the “fake” as Chin would later define them: “Sensibility and the ability to choose differentiate the Asian-American writers ... from the Americanized Chinese writers Lin Yutang and C. Y. Lee.”¹⁹ They were intimate with and secure in their Chinese cultural identity in an experiential sense, in a way we American-born can never be. They consciously set out to become American, in the white sense of the word.”²⁰ Here, what characterizes “real” Asian Americanness is the impossibility of being intimately familiar with and confident in one’s cultural heritage. Such knowledge is a privilege that is incongruent with Asian American lived experience, and Americanized Asian writing on Asian America, according to the *Aiiieeeee!* editors, can only ever “come from a white tradition,”²¹ a literary tradition in

¹⁸ Frank Chin et al., preface to *Aiiieeeee! An Anthology of Asian-American Writers*, ed. Frank Chin et al., 1st ed. (Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1974), xi.

¹⁹ They also add Yone Noguchi and Sadakichi Hartmann to the list of “Americanized Asians.” Chin et al., preface, xv.

²⁰ Chin et al., preface, x.

²¹ Chin et al., preface, x.

which active Asian American participation is precluded by default because Asian Americans are its representational object. At this stage, then, the extinction thesis describes not just the mainstream expectation of “identification with Asian cultures,” as Chu says, but also the inability of Asian Americans to meet those expectations. This is not to imply that Chin’s objective is to meet those expectations. As Chu suggests, his early views on authenticity do not reflect a desire to identify with Asian tradition.

What the 1974 preface articulates is not the trite aphorism of Asian Americans belonging to neither Asian nor American culture but a more complex theorization of how American discourse coopts Asian voices into reproducing their own stereotypes. The conflict between the desire for and the unattainability of cultural grounding is elaborated more clearly in the earlier essay “Racist Love” (1972), cowritten by Chin and Chan. In this piece, they declare that what is most pernicious about the dual personality concept is that it “deprives the Chinese-American of all authority over language and thus a means of codifying, communicating, and legitimizing his experience. ... The denial of language is the denial of culture.”²² As Chu indicates, they also derive the emasculation thesis as a logical consequence of a loss of linguistic authority: “The deprivation of language ..., for the Chinese-American, has contributed to ... the lack of a recognized style of Chinese-American manhood.” Interestingly, Chin and Chan foreshadow Rey Chow’s theory of coercive mimeticism when they go on to write that “a man, in any culture, speaks for himself. Without a language of his own, he no longer is a man but a ventriloquist’s dummy at worst and at best a parrot. The concept of the dual personality ... subjugates him by forcing him to define himself in terms he knows are not his.”²³ At this point in 1972, though, the

²² Frank Chin and Jeffery Paul Chan, “Racist Love,” in *Seeing through Shuck*, ed. Richard Kostelanetz (Ballantine Books, 1972), 76.

²³ Chin and Chan, “Racist Love,” 76–77.

search for a usable past and linguistic authority are not fully in concert with Confucianism. Indeed, Western stereotypes about Confucianism contribute to “the effeminization of the racial stereotype.”²⁴ According to this myth, ... Confucianist Chinese culture was making law-abiding citizens of us.” Chin and Chan demur, though they do not bother to deconstruct this myth, and they treat “Confucian mumbo jumbo” rather dismissively themselves. For an Asian American to fall back on tradition, in this case, is to give in to the idea that “identification with his foreignness is the only way to ‘justify’ his difference in skin color.”²⁵ The implication of this early argument is that if cultural security is unavailable to Asian Americans, then turning to Confucianism can only result in ventriloquizing the mumbo jumbo of stereotypes.

Following the thread of linguistic authority, we can track how Chin’s opinions shift dramatically over the 1980s. “Real” and “fake” enter his vocabulary in “This Is Not An Autobiography” (1985), and he gradually grows less wary of Confucianism until he fully embraces it in “Come All.” In “Racist Love,” Chin and Chan do not seem fully ready yet to remedy the denial of language, but they do express their dissatisfaction with autobiography in that essay and in the 1974 edition of *Aiiieeeee!* Their ire is directed more at the content than at the genre of autobiography, however. In their introductory section on Chinese and Japanese American literature in *Aiiieeeee!*, the editors quote a separate anthology on the issue: “‘There is nothing wrong with autobiography,’ [write] Kai-yu Hsu [and Helen Palubinskas] in [their] introduction to *Asian-American Authors* (1972),²⁶ ‘except when one realizes that the perceptions

²⁴ For a similar argument, see Ben R. Tong, “The Ghetto of the Mind: Notes on the Historical Psychology Of Chinese America,” *Amerasia Journal* 1, no. 3 (1971): 1–31, <https://doi.org/10.17953/amer.1.3.0715q06215542nl7>.

²⁵ Chin and Chan, “Racist Love,” 71–72.

²⁶ The 1972 anthology *Asian-American Authors* was compiled and edited by both Kai-yu Hsu and Helen Palubinskas, and the book does not contain editorial or copyright information that suggests that Hsu was the sole contributor to the section “Chinese-American Literature.” I find Chin et al.’s omission of Palubinskas to be rather straightforward evidence of their narrow purism. I amend their citation to point out their absolutism, even if unintended.

of reality revealed through these works seem to continue to confirm rather than to modify a stereotyped image of the Chinese and their culture.”²⁷ The *Aiiieeeee!* editors certainly see autobiographies as a way to confirm popular stereotypes, though “Racist Love” places blame on “education and the publishing establishment.”²⁸ Perhaps the institutional and editorial demands placed upon Asian American writers to produce work that aligns with stereotypes (or, once more anticipating Rey Chow, the call issued to the ethnic subject to mimic their own ethnicity) filters the types of autobiography that reach publication.

Slightly over a decade later, this nuance is gone, and Chin makes no such allowance in “This Is Not An Autobiography.” I examine this essay a bit more closely because we find in it explicit statements of how his extinction and authenticity theses change. Though Confucianism appears in a relatively minor capacity, Chin also outlines the heroic tradition and part of his genre thesis as a response to the anti-Christian thread of his religio-philosophical thesis, which no longer views Asian tradition as mumbo jumbo but as a heritage that can be reclaimed, thereby setting up the more prominent role that Confucianism plays in “Come All.” From the get-go, “This Is Not An Autobiography” adopts a far more hardline position. Within the first paragraph, the vitriol of his title translates into a complete rejection of the autobiographical mode: “Monotheism, Christianity, and obfuscation in an arty fog of expressionist fear and pessimism have destroyed knowledge of Chinaman history and culture through that peculiarly Christian literary weapon: the autobiography.”²⁹ Here, Chin ties the genre thesis explicitly to religion—autobiography is the vehicle by which inauthentic culture is transmitted. His totalizing view pits

²⁷ Kai-yu Hsu and Helen Palubinskas, “Chinese-American Literature,” in *Asian-American Authors*, ed. Kai-yu Hsu and Helen Palubinskas (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1972), 10; Frank Chin et al., “An Introduction to Chinese- and Japanese- American Literature,” in *Aiiieeeee! An Anthology of Asian-American Writers*, ed. Frank Chin et al., 1st ed. (Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1974), xxiii.

²⁸ Chin and Chan, “Racist Love,” 67–68.

²⁹ Frank Chin, “This Is Not An Autobiography,” *Genre* 18, no. 1 (1985): 109.

him against Asian and non-Asian purveyors of the autobiography alike. The essay's themes, he writes, "are straight from the heroic tradition ...: loyalty, betrayal, revenge. The war is the same too. Personal integrity against historical extinction." The anxiety of the extinction thesis widens; the extinction Chin fears is decidedly not that of American status but of a Chinese cultural past: "My fight as a writer and a Chinaman is against extinction and the white western civilization that demands my extinction and the traitors, the ... yellow agents of yellow extinction and white acceptance and assimilation."³⁰ His account of his intellectual journey helps to explain his unyielding harshness:

I've been the teacher, done the scholarship, verified the universe that I'm a natural for. I'm a Chinaman. I have mining, the Motherlode, the railroad, opera, outlaw, and Kwan Kung in my blood,³¹ and boyhood. I was born to read THREE KINGDOMS and WATER MARGIN.³² I've written the literary histories, and researched the history, searching for why Asian American writers have chickened out of dealing with the issues and moments that threaten to tear people apart and destroy the integrity of the race, in their art, or at all, in words.³³

One immediately notices how Chin essentializes race—the history of the Chinese in America is bloodborne. Kwan Kung's placement at the end of the list of Chinese attributes suggests that the heroic, legendary past is not simply a distant origin but is inherited as a consequence of Chineseness. Of course, as is so often the case with essentialist paradigms, race is apparently not so natural or fundamentally innate that it cannot be overwritten. This property of "boyhood" must be re/activated through a cultural return as an adult, and the state of activation does not

³⁰ Chin, "This Is Not An Autobiography," 110.

³¹ Kwan Kung (關公 [Yale Cantonese, *Gwāan Gūng*; pinyin, *Guān Gōng*], also known as 關羽 [Yale Cantonese, *Gwāan Yūh*; pinyin, *Guān Yǔ*]), or Lord Kwan, was a general of the Eastern Han dynasty and died c. 220 CE. He is a central figure in Chen Shou's third-century historical text *Record of the Three Kingdoms* and a major character in *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*. For more on Guan Yu's deification into a so-called "god of war," see Barend J. ter Haar, *Guan Yu: The Religious Afterlife of a Failed Hero* (Oxford University Press, 2017).

³² *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* is a fourteenth-century Chinese novel attributed to Luo Guanzhong. *Water Margin*, dated to the Ming dynasty, is attributed to Shi Nai'an. For an introduction to these texts, see C. T. Hsia, *The Classic Chinese Novel: A Critical Introduction*, rev. ed. (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 2015).

³³ Chin, "This Is Not An Autobiography," 109–10.

extend to others beyond Chin's first-person "I." Other authors are "[a]ll from the Christian autobiographical tradition. All fake it." And Chin offers "no advice ..., only a warning and a promise: as long as I live, if you fake it, I will name you and your fake tradition."³⁴ He makes no concession to institutional pressure, and his language implies that to chicken out is the very choice that invalidates one's cultural authority. Chin, in contrast to those sellouts (he names his usual suspects, including Maxine Hong Kingston and David Henry Hwang), at last takes a stand against the linguistic denial that the dual personality concept imposes. His claim of ownership also comes as a warning. Again, I quote him at some length:

You, dear reader of English, aren't used to a Chinaman act in "your" language. You have rules of style and decorum about raging personal in intellectual exercise. Forget it. Your language is mine. I speak in the Chinaman "I" here, and write a Chinaman act. I don't mean to be impolite in my taking your language and dashing the moral universals you've built into it. But betrayal is at the heart of your English. You speak the "I" of "Revenge is mine sayeth the Lord."³⁵ Mine is the Chinaman "I." Whatever language a Chinaman speaks, it is always Chinaman, and the first person pronoun I, in any language, means "I am the law."³⁶

I will return to his invocation of the Chinese "I" later, which evolves in "Come All," but it is worth noting once more the tension that is already apparent between its singular function and Chin's generalization of it. Either a Chinaman always speaks Chinaman, or this fixity is assumed only after a Chinaman attains linguistic authority and full subjectivity by trading in the "fake" for the "real." Contradictions aside, what is more relevant at present is that, where familiarity with Asian tradition was once the privileged realm of the Americanized Asian, authenticity is now achievable through rigorous historical research and cultural consumption.

Another key aspect of this passage is how Chin reappropriates and supplants what he sees as a Judeo-Christian ethic at the heart of the English-language self-referential statement by

³⁴ Chin, "This Is Not An Autobiography," 110.

³⁵ Dt. 32:35, Rom. 12:19.

³⁶ Chin, "This Is Not An Autobiography," 110–11.

appealing to a supposedly universal assertion of personal sovereignty through use of the first person. According to Chin, personal sovereignty in the Chinese context is secular and not rooted in divine authority: “Chinese civilization is founded on history. Specifically the five classics, selected by Confucius the historian, are the basis of Chinese civilization. The first book is ‘The Book of History.’³⁷ Religion as the foundation of civilization is a silly and offensive sissy notion in Chinese thought.”³⁸ The emasculation thesis rears its head here less as a corollary of the extinction thesis and more as its equivalent, and both are firmly imbricated with the religio-philosophy thesis. Chin’s association of religiosity with a negative femininity marks historicism as masculine by implication, and he sets up Confucius’s supposed editorial work as an areligious foil connected to a historiological basis for the cultural expressions that comprise the heroic tradition. The defense of secular historicity—Chin’s war of personal integrity against historical extinction—is tantamount to the defense of masculinity. So, too, does the genre thesis become increasingly inextricable from this war. As a response to the Christian autobiography, Chin counters genre with form. Confucius takes a backseat to Sun Tzu in “This Is Not An Autobiography,” and Chin stresses *The Art of War* as the paragon of the heroic tradition’s form:³⁹

Form has a nature all its own. Form is governed by certain universal laws. The instinct for form will automatically apply the lessons learned from one form, say boxing, to any problem affecting your nervous system, from literature to politics to war. The basic form is war. Sun Tzu and Wu Chi and their manuals of strategy and warfare are more than manuals of strategy and were always used as more,⁴⁰ for the rules that shape the art of

³⁷ The Five Classics (*Wujing*) consist of the *Shijing* (*Book of Songs*), the *Shujing* (*Book of Documents* or *Classic of History*), the *Liji* (*Book of Rites*), and the *Chunqiu* (*Spring and Autumn Annals*). Parts of these texts are traditionally but likely inaccurately ascribed to Confucius, and their authorship and compilation remain the subject of debate. Emperor Wu of Han (r. 141–87 BCE) canonized them as the “Five Classics” over three centuries after Confucius’s death. For more, see Michael Nylan, *The Five “Confucian” Classics* (Yale University Press, 2001).

³⁸ Chin, “This Is Not An Autobiography,” 115.

³⁹ As with the other figures and texts that Chin invokes, the historical Sun Tzu (Sunzi) and the authorship of *The Art of War* are difficult topics. For more on Sun Tzu’s historicity, see Jens Østergård Petersen, “What’s in a Name? On the Sources Concerning Sun Wu,” *Asia Major* 5, no. 1 (1992): 1–31; and Albert Galvany, “Philosophy, Biography, and Anecdote: On the Portrait of Sun Wu,” *Philosophy East and West* 61, no. 4 (2011): 630–46. For more on reading and interpreting *The Art of War*, a useful starting point is Derek M. C. Yuen, *Deciphering Sun Tzu: How to Read “The Art of War”* (Oxford University Press, 2014).

⁴⁰ Wu Chi (Wu Qi) is another figure from the Warring States era. The *Wuzi*, also a classic text on military strategy, is

war are rules of form itself. Sun Tzu's thirteen chapters on the Art of War are a manual of style, a manual of ethics.⁴¹

If Chin was concerned earlier with autobiographical content more than autobiographical genre or form, then here, form absolutely takes precedence. The form of war is internalized into one's unconscious and manifested in broad application. The militant, strategic, and secular psychology of the war-form stands in direct contrast to the pathological, effeminate, and religious affectivity of the autobiography. Chin scorns the latter as "the form of perpetual self-contempt and redemption, self-hatred and forgiveness, confession, prayer or autobiographical treatises," or, in other words, the stuff of fake tradition. The masculine "fighter writer," meanwhile, "uses literary forms as weapons of war, not the expression of ego alone, and does not fuck around wasting time with dandyish expressions of feeling and psychological attitudinizing."⁴² So it is that Chin categorizes "This Is Not An Autobiography" itself as a commentary on Sun Tzu, which he characterizes as an aggressively programmatic mode of literature that is insistently historical and not religious, externally combative and not internally confessional, real and not fake. Christianity has long been a cause of woe for Chin; in "Racist Love," it is one of the "sources of Chinese-American self-contempt."⁴³ Now Christianity and autobiography are inseparable. Autobiography is a "weapon" whose religious affective structure and self-reflexive mode supersede its content or cause its content to reproduce inauthentic culture. Chin's work is essentially a search for his own instrument of war, a literary weapon with which to do battle.

The upshot of rehashing Chin's critical perspectives ad nauseam, again, is recognizing the religio-philosophical throughline of his arguments. By this I mean that his extinction,

attributed to him.

⁴¹ Chin, "This Is Not An Autobiography," 111.

⁴² Chin, "This Is Not An Autobiography," 112.

⁴³ Chin and Chan, "Racist Love," 68.

emasculatation, authenticity, and genre theses all pit religion against a philosophy of history that sees the heroic tradition as areligious and martial. We see as well that his views are not constant but evolve from essay to essay. Whereas Confucianism was once mumbo jumbo, it is now a part of “real” history. Indeed, it is necessarily part of that history, or else extinction cannot be prevented. These arguments retain a certain sharpness. His belligerence leaves no doubt as to his conviction, and his anxiety about a self-perpetuated cultural endangerment, as I have indicated, is similar to Rey Chow’s theory of coercive mimeticism, to which I turn in the next section. What dulls his blade is the tension between the individual and the universal, the Chinese and the Asian. The Chinese philosophy of a personal sovereignty based on a secular historical tradition is, apparently, “a deep Asian universal.”⁴⁴ “Come All” only exacerbates the issue, as Chin elevates Confucianism and collapses it into a universal Asian subjectivity, performing the very type of slippage that Susan Koshy warns against. Here, too, is where Chow remains a step ahead of Chin, as this ethnic subjectification is what morphs his religio-philosophical argument from a campaign against the Christian confessional form into yet another instantiation of confession. Still, the dynamic quality of his theoretical development perhaps presents a way out of his contradictions.

The Confucian Eth(n)ic and the Spirit of Capitalism

Critiques of Chin abound, and many of them trace lines of his thought that reinscribe the oppressive structures that he hopes to dismantle. Gender, especially, has been the understandable focus of previous discussions. In 1990, King-Kok Cheung and Elaine H. Kim published definitive responses to Chin’s ideas that affirmed the place of feminist theory within Asian

⁴⁴ Chin, “This Is Not An Autobiography,” 115.

American studies. Cheung cautions against using “the Asian heroic dispensation to promote male aggression,” lest Chinese American men “remak[e] themselves in the image of their oppressors—albeit under the guise of Asian panoply.”⁴⁵ Similarly, Kim writes, “By not questioning the legitimacy of patriarchy’s closed universe, accepting instead his oppressors’ definitions of ‘manhood’ ..., the Asian American male writer can only seek the white male center for himself at the expense of women.”⁴⁶ Viet Thanh Nguyen, in *Race and Resistance* (2002), prominently describes Chin’s project as one of “remasculinization,” premised on a “collapse between emasculation and feminization.” Nguyen also points out that this remasculinization is concerned with “a crisis of the ‘real’” not only in the sense of authenticity but as “a crisis of the material.” “Come All,” according to Nguyen, concludes with “a mantra of materialism,” revealing that “Chin is not only ... a sexist or misogynist but also a historical fundamentalist. History is real for Chin in the sense that it is absolute.”⁴⁷ More recently, Quynh Nhu Le cites Cheung, Nguyen, and others in *Unsettled Solidarities* (2019) to decisively locate remasculinization within heteronormative gender politics, as it operates “primarily by upholding the gender binaries structuring the nation-state.”⁴⁸ As a literary strategy for ameliorating the crisis identified in the emasculation thesis, remasculinization thus fails to detach Asian American gender dynamics from the structures—both Eastern and Western—that regulate gender norms in the first place. If we combine Chu’s and Nguyen’s approaches and see Chin’s work not just as the postulation of interrelated problematics but as overlapping methodological responses, then what we might call his re-Confucianization of Asian America as a counter to cultural extinction and

⁴⁵ Cheung, “Woman Warrior versus Chinaman Pacific,” 168.

⁴⁶ Kim, “Such Opposite Creatures,” 78.

⁴⁷ Viet Thanh Nguyen, *Race and Resistance: Literature and Politics in Asian America* (Oxford University Press, 2002), 104.

⁴⁸ Le, *Unsettled Solidarities*, 31.

inauthenticity leads to a similar result as remasculinization. That is, Chin's project of Asian American cultural nationalism, unsurprisingly, reinforces the logics of the nation-state. In this section, rather than continue to use as unwieldy a term as "re-Confucianization," I follow Patricia P. Chu and David Leiwei Li in using the terms of subjectivity to analyze Chin. However, I argue that his version of subjectivity cannot be thought of separately from his views on Confucianism, especially in "Come All."

The difficulties of any attempt at subjectification have been mapped out by numerous scholars within Asian American studies.⁴⁹ Chu's articulation of the extinction thesis emphasizes Asian Americans' exclusion from universal subjectivity, and Li argues that the editors of *Aiiieeee!* address this exclusion by "constructing a collective identity" that quickly narrows into a "conceptualization of an Asian American exclusivity based on nativity." In Li's interpretation, the editors' objective is thus to "embody Asian Americans as proper U.S. subjects."⁵⁰ Li also points out how this subjectivity, as expressed in the notion of an Asian American sensibility that Chin and Chan outline in "Racist Love," creates an exclusionary binary between Asian Americans and Americanized Asians. Even for U.S.-born Asian Americans, the tension between this sensibility as a naturalized (bloodborne) and as a fostered trait means that it is unable to account for "the mutability of culture, the multiplicity of identity, and the fluidity of experience."⁵¹ At least, such a sensibility cannot account for these factors outside of the reductive binary of "real" and "fake." As a consequence, the concern with historical materialism that

⁴⁹ Even in 1974, the rhetoric of Chin and his collaborators raised eyebrows for its contradictions. As David Hsin-Fu Wand writes in the introduction to his own anthology, the "militant young" to which Chin belonged "[p]aradoxically ... are not unlike some Anglo-Americans, who claim descent from the voyagers of the *Mayflower* and suggest that they alone are *the Americans*." David Hsin-Fu Wand, introduction to *Asian-American Heritage: An Anthology of Prose and Poetry*, ed. David Hsin-Fu Wand (New York: Washington Square Press, 1974), 8.

⁵⁰ David Leiwei Li, *Imagining the Nation: Asian American Literature and Cultural Consent* (Stanford University Press, 1998), 31–32.

⁵¹ Li, *Imagining the Nation*, 32.

Nguyen perceives in “Come All” is undermined by the tendency, already present in Chin’s earlier writings, to offer ahistorical readings of “fake” authors like Jade Snow Wong.⁵²

Even so, Nguyen’s recognition of Chin’s obsession with history is a crucial addition that helps us better understand the position of Asian religio-philosophies like Confucianism to the nation-state. Li writes that cultural nationalism “affirms ... the nation space of the United States as the symbolic terrain of Asian American writing.”⁵³ This would appear, as Susan Koshy claims, to generate yet another contradiction: “Paradoxically, in order to claim an Asian American identity in defiance of hegemonic codifications, Chin is led to disclaim connections with Asia. He focuses on the domestic context of ethnic identity formation and on generational distance from Asia.”⁵⁴ Yet, as I showed in the previous section, Chin’s theses gradually shift to allow for and embrace Asian history. Li and Koshy, unlike Nguyen, do not address “Come All” in their critiques of Chin. Taking “Come All” and Confucianism into consideration does not negate Koshy’s conclusion that Chin’s “formulation is vitiated by its obsession with the white gaze,”⁵⁵ but it does push deeper the racial terms of Koshy’s analysis toward an understanding of the constituent role that religio-philosophical dynamics play in racialization. Despite coming to recognize the importance of Asian history, Chin’s formulation of a Confucian subjectivity that is disentangled from the U.S. state is similarly vitiated by his latent reliance on the Protestant and capitalist mechanism of profession.

Chin begins to construct his subjectivity in his earlier writings, and “Come All” picks up the threads of the Asian American first person signifier and the masculine “fighter writer” from “This is Not An Autobiography,” in which he invokes the Chinaman “I.” In “Come All,” the

⁵² Li, *Imagining the Nation*, 33.

⁵³ Li, *Imagining the Nation*, 32.

⁵⁴ Koshy, “Fiction of Asian American Literature,” 325.

⁵⁵ Koshy, “Fiction of Asian American Literature,” 325.

Chinaman “I” is superseded by the Chinese “I,” though the association of the pronoun with revenge remains. He begins by referring to the famous oath of brotherhood sworn between three characters at the start of Luo Guanzhong’s novel *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, and he then proceeds to offer commentary on the oath, reiterating his claim that Chinese personal sovereignty does not derive from God:

The Chinese first-person pronouns that the three brothers speak and write—the Chinese *I*, *me*, and *we*—are all made of two crossed battle-axes. The ancient form of that character looks like a coat of arms. Like every coat of arms, the Chinese *I* means “I am the law.” This is the first-person pronoun of the language of “life is war, and we are all born soldiers.” Unlike the personal pronoun *I* in the languages of the West, the Chinese *I*, *me*, and *we* do not descend from the mysterious syllables *Yahweh* The Chinese *I* is not an act of submission to a higher authority but an assertion of the Confucian ethic of private revenge.⁵⁶

Supplanting the English “I,” the Chinese character 我 (*wǒ*), for its visual etymological connection to 戈 (*gē*; “dagger-axe”), signifies the martial, soldierly qualities of the Asian (male) individual. While such qualities were tacitly essentialized in Chin’s earlier work, in “Come Ye” they become the result of a subjectification that stems in part from the ability of 我 to function in both singular and plural first-person constructions. (For instance, “我三人” [*wǒ sān rén*] translates to “we three.”⁵⁷) Chin’s Chinese “I” is thus always grounded by and evocative of a

⁵⁶ Chin, “Come All,” 38.

⁵⁷ Chin’s description of the three brothers’ oath is ever so slightly misleading. The phrase “we three” is not part of the original Chinese text of the oath itself in *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, though it does appear prior to it. In fact, the original oath does not include any first-person pronouns at all. The original oath reads, “「念劉備，關羽，張飛，雖然異姓，既結爲兄弟，則同心協力，救困扶危；上報國家，下安黎庶；不求同年同月同日生，但願同年同月同日死。皇天后土，實鑒此心。背義忘恩，天人共戮。」” Chin’s rendition is as follows:

We three, Liu Pai [Liu Pei], Kuan Yu, and Chang Fei, though of different families, swear brotherhood, and promise mutual help to one end. We will rescue each other from difficulty and aid each other in danger. We swear to serve the state and save the people. We were not born on the same day, but we hope to die on the same day. May all seeing heaven and the abundant earth read our hearts, and if one of us turn away from righteousness or forget this oath, may heaven and earth and man strike him down.

While the necessary addition of the pronoun “we” somewhere certainly makes the text more readable in translation, a more pedantic translation of the opening phrase might forgo the pronoun. The names of the characters are not appositives of “we three” but are themselves the subject of the sentence, which could be given more literally as, “Liu

Chinese—and by extension, Asian—“we.” More specifically, when Chin declares that “[t]he soldier is the universal individual,”⁵⁸ he is describing a universality that is less an innate racial or bloodborne quality (as was the case with his Asian American “sensibility”) and more a cultural basis maintained through subjective development. All the same, this cultural basis retains an abstract essentialism as a sort of primeval constant: “Myths are, by nature, immutable and unchanging because they are deeply ingrained in the cultural memory, or they are not myths. New experience breeds new history, new art, and new fiction.”⁵⁹ If the “new experience of the Anglo-Saxon in America did not result in forgetting and confusing Homer with Joan of Arc but in new stories, informed by ethics” expressed in Western Greco-Roman and Judeo-Christian mythology, then nor did “the Chinese who settled and established Chinese America” have “an ethical intelligence any less informed by any less effective myths.”⁶⁰ Chin is not describing a

Bei, Guan Yu, and Zhang Fei bear in mind that, though of different families” It is also worth noting that, throughout the text of *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, both 我 and the more formal 吾 (*wú*) are used in singular and plural first-person constructions. The former pronoun’s connection to the character for “dagger-axe” better serves Chin’s martial interpretation, and his point still stands, as 我 is the most common first-person pronoun used in contemporary Chinese.

However, Chin’s translation is actually a slightly edited—and uncredited—version of C. H. Brewitt-Taylor’s translation. Omitting any citation of Brewitt-Taylor elides the complex process through which literary and linguistic authority are reclaimed by Asian Americans. Translations by non-Asian scholars are valuable but certainly mediating factors for any turn to classical texts, but because Chin opts to present his access to the heroic tradition as direct, unmediated, and even original, his notion of the real cannot acknowledge or scrutinize the nuances of its own scholarly genealogy even as it benefits from work like Brewitt-Taylor’s. Luo, Guanzhong 羅貫中, *Sanguo Yanyi* 三國演義 [*Romance of the Three Kingdoms*] (Shijie shuju, 1962), 1:3. Chin, “Come All,” 37.

⁵⁸ Chin, “Come All,” 6.

⁵⁹ Though Viet Thanh Nguyen views the central thesis of “Come All” as a historical materialist one, I would add that Chin’s is not a historical materialism that aligns itself with what Fredric Jameson calls “the primacy of History.” Jameson’s mode of historicization famously positions “the political perspective not as some supplementary method ... to other interpretive methods ...—the psychoanalytic or the mythcritical, the stylistic, the ethical, the structural—but rather as the absolute horizon of all reading and all interpretation.” Chin’s statement suggests that history (but only history that has yet to happen) is malleable because it is always being formed, whereas myth and its ethical lessons remain static and therefore at times take precedence. “Realness” could very well still describe materialism in application to history, but it refers to static and therefore reductive authenticity and accuracy in application to myth. Because Chin’s views are unable to accept that myths may change, they are unable to account for the material conditions that lead to mythic and narrative evolution. Even if new history can be produced, preceding history must remain uniform and unchanging. Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), 14, 17.

⁶⁰ Chin’s collapse of Chinese and Asian finds its counterpart in his collapse of Anglo-Saxon, Greek, and French. Chin, “Come All,” 29.

passive possession, though. In order to meet new experiences with “the ethics of the heroic tradition in Asian childhood literature and myth,” Chinese Americans had to actively “identify themselves with [those] most common and universal ethical values.”⁶¹

Throughout his description of the relationship between myth and subjectivity, we see how Chin’s “obsession with the white gaze,” as Koshy puts it, persists. His comparison of the Chinese 我 to coats of arms and his repeated insistence that Chinese myths and ethics are not any less than their Western counterparts reveal his desire to elevate the heroic tradition and its attendant subjectivity to the same status as Western culture and subjects. Chin’s appeal to the European heraldic tradition and Greek epics cannot escape an anxiety over Chinese culture’s position in relation to Western benchmarks. For all his emphasis on the differences between Asia and the West, he only manages to simultaneously emphasize their equivalences. Even when he rejects Western psychoanalytic theory’s hold on Asian subjects, he remains reliant on its explanatory power. Freud may have articulated the “flow of the Western subconscious, from myth through literature,” but the “Chinese do not need a Freud to find the books and myths containing the keys to the most deeply rooted, most fully grown Chinese subconscious. The Chinese people ... have already set the canon.”⁶² Chin claims authority over the application of the psychoanalytic paradigm, but he does not deny the paradigm itself. In fact, he still needs to appeal to Freud to clarify the process by which myth is textually incorporated into individual and cultural consciousnesses. This reference by itself does not necessarily invalidate Chin’s separatist theory of subjectivity, but it does reveal that the substrate of Eastern and Western subjectivities, for Chin, is the same; variation is a product of myth and literary tradition.

Where the commonalities between Asian and Western subjectification do begin to vitiate

⁶¹ Chin, “Come All,” 30–31.

⁶² Chin, “Come All,” 33.

Chin's aims is in his assertion of Confucian collectivity. Universality is premised on the collapse of Asian into Chinese, already seen in his conflation of "Asian childhood literature and myth" with Chinese pronouns and Chinese American experiences. Distinct mythical and literary canons would indicate distinct subjectivities, but Chin makes this point by bringing his Chinese subjectivity under the overextended rubric of Confucianism, meaning that the line of differentiation is drawn between East and West, whereas intraracial differentiation is overlooked. Rhetorically, this enables Chin to position Confucianism as Christianity's direct opposite. He reiterates that the difference between "Judeo-Christendom and Confucianism" is that "Western civilization is founded on religion. Asian civilization—Confucianism—is founded on history. Confucius was not a prophet. He was not religious. He was a historian, a strategist, a warrior."⁶³ Though meant to contrast with Judeo-Christendom, Chin's coinage of the term "Confucianism" inadvertently reveals the similarities between these labels. Broadly speaking, both give name to civilizing projects that conjoined imperial power with a state orthodoxy.⁶⁴ We get a sense of Confucianism's geographic scope when Chin states that "*Three Kingdoms*, *Water Margin*, and *Monkey [Journey to the West]* are the staples of Asian childhoods from Korea to Japan, to China, Vietnam, Laos, Thailand, and Cambodia."⁶⁵ History, strategy, and war are useful to Chin insofar as they imagine a single Asian front, united by common subject development, against a Western enemy. So it is that Confucianism mirrors Christendom's ambiguous relation to history. Just as

⁶³ Chin, "Come All," 34.

⁶⁴ According to Shao-yun Yang, for instance, the development of Neo-Confucianism during the Song Dynasty is characterized by an anxiety surrounding "the importance of Classicist ('Confucian') moral values to the integrity and continuity of the Chinese state," and so, in the ideology of the literati, Confucianism marks an ethnic boundary between upright Chineseness and foreign barbarianism. Shao-yun Yang, *The Way of the Barbarians: Redrawing Ethnic Boundaries in Tang and Song China* (University of Washington Press, 2019), 4–5. For primers on the relationships between Confucianism and both Chinese and Japanese imperial power, see Keith N. Knapp's "Early Imperial Confucianism," Tze-ki Hon's "The Formation of Neo-Confucianism in the Song," and Kiri Paramore's "Confucianism in Japan," all in Jennifer Oldstone-Moore, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Confucianism* (Oxford University Press, 2023), 140–152, 153–163, 255–270.

⁶⁵ Chin, "Come All," 40.

Latin Christendom coalesced politically and ideologically through holy war against the non-Christian world,⁶⁶ Confucianism as a concept comes together through the declaration of supposedly secular war against Christianity. At the same time, just as academic focus on Latin Christendom hinders recognition of Christendom's continued status as "a plural, global, and contested imaginary" that is "historically inconsistent, geographically differentiated, and theologically disputed,"⁶⁷ Asian universality must gloss over intra-Asian wars, religio-philosophical differences, and tributary and imperial relations. To define a universal Asian subjectivity, Chin does not so much set up Confucianism as Christianity's opposite as he does use Confucianism to overwrite cultural specificity within an Asian domain.

So far, I have framed Chin's religio-philosophy thesis as an ideological opposition between religiosity and confession on the one hand and a secular philosophy of history on the other. This opposition falls flat in his framing of a universal Asian subjectivity, which follows a vaguely Freudian or psychoanalytic line of reasoning to designate myths and Confucian texts as originary repositories for and influences upon Asian history and consciousness. Chin must treat these repositories and the secular history they underwrite as inviolable and invariable.

To elaborate on why this view of history cannot counter the supposed threat of Western religiosity and confessional literary forms, we might briefly continue Chin's line of psychoanalytic reasoning not to be glib but to consider seriously the stakes of his Asian subject. Taken as fetish objects, myth and history assuage the loss of cultural and linguistic authority with which late-twentieth-century cultural studies and multiethnic literature are, broadly speaking, preoccupied. As Rey Chow notes, in North American ethnic studies and especially Asian

⁶⁶ Tomaž Mastnak, *Crusading Peace: Christendom, the Muslim World, and Western Political Order* (University of California Press, 2002), 92–93.

⁶⁷ John Heathershaw, "What Is Christendom to Us? Making Better Sense of Christianity in Global Politics," *International Studies Review* 24, no. 4 (2023): 4, <https://doi.org/10.1093/isr/viad051>.

American studies, “epistemic authority is frequently and implicitly located in the bodies of the ethnics themselves” because “many of them no longer have the claim to ethnic authority through the possession of ethnic languages.” For this reason, “the *imagistic, self-referential turn* and the *confessional mode of representation*” maintain markers of ethnicity as “referential limits” upon much of Asian American literature.⁶⁸ Chow goes further by arguing that, even more than linguistic authority, what is lost is a collective form of narcissism. Freud defines narcissism on an individual level as “the libidinal complement to the egoism of the instinct of self-preservation,”⁶⁹ and in Chow’s psychosocial reading, narcissism must be given up so that the individual may develop a sense of self-regard that is produced in relation to an “observing collective conscience.”⁷⁰ For Asian Americans, however, the loss of narcissism is the product of representational and societal marginalization, and this loss is experienced at a group and not merely an individual level. According to Chow, under such circumstances, “autobiographical writing is perhaps not simply a straightforward account about oneself but more a symptomatic attempt ... to create a transindividual narcissism,” and so “autobiographical writing could be seen as the narcissistic act par excellence.”⁷¹ Autobiographical writing seeks to cohere Asian American collective self-regard in relation to mainstream culture and Asian American individual self-regard in relation to both of the former.

To what degree is Chow’s diagnosis of Asian American literature applicable to Chin’s own writing, particularly when Chin insists that his own writing is not autobiographical? After all, though his Chinaman “I” and subsequent Chinese “I” (我) do indeed seek to restore linguistic

⁶⁸ Rey Chow, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (Columbia University Press, 2002), 125.

⁶⁹ Sigmund Freud, “On Narcissism: An Introduction,” in *Freud’s “On Narcissism: An Introduction,”* ed. Joseph Sandler et al., trans. James Strachey (Karnac, 2012), 3–4.

⁷⁰ Chow, *Protestant Ethic*, 140.

⁷¹ Chow, *Protestant Ethic*, 142.

authority, he frames these self-referential gestures as disencumbered by confession's "[a]dmission of guilt, submission of [the] self to others for judgment," and "expression of self-contempt."⁷² Chin's first-person statements belong instead to Confucian genres and forms like the commentary (in the case of "This Is Not An Autobiography") and the set (in the case of "Come All"). Yet, his project of the "real" can certainly be said to cohere a collective self-regard, formed from the passage of the Chinese "I" into a universal Asian "we," for Asian Americans who subscribe to his view of the Confucian heroic tradition. For this reason, as much as Chin's distaste for confessional autobiography as a vehicle for self-stereotypy might seem to herald some of Chow's own arguments, his ostensibly non-confessional "I" serves much the same purpose as the autobiographical "I." In other words, his anti-confessionalism does not quite cross over from the semantic into the practical. For Chow, self-referentiality is "the symptom of a collective subjection."⁷³ As such, "real" and "fake" are almost inconsequential. Though Chin points to confession as an indicator of internalized ethnic stereotypes to explain the existence of "fake" literature, his self-referentiality constitutes what Chow might deem "a second-order autobiography ... about the failure of a narcissism" that supposedly "takes as its point of reflection the history of the entire group."⁷⁴ Chin's impressions of Confucian heroic tradition, myth, history, and the sovereign "I" attend to the loss of narcissism and linguistic authority by devising—not unveiling—a cultural unconscious.

To further illustrate how Chin's recourse to a self-referential "I" does not exceed the realm of confession, we might return to the title of his essay, "Come All Ye Asian American Writers of the Real and the Fake." The title not only directly addresses other writers but also

⁷² Chin, "This Is Not An Autobiography," 121.

⁷³ Chow, *Protestant Ethnic*, 114.

⁷⁴ Chow, *Protestant Ethnic*, 144.

demands a response; it voices a call to profess in the confessional sense. Like Chin, Michel Foucault, in *The History of Sexuality* (1976), traces confession back to Christianity, but he recognizes that confession's secular, contemporary forms exist well beyond literature and are also present in scientific, medical, and juridical discourse and practice. The power to compel confession is similarly dispersed, such that "the obligation to confess is now relayed through so many different points, is so deeply ingrained in us, that we no longer perceive it as the effect of a power that constrains us."⁷⁵ While Chin takes issue with the naturalization of the confessional act via autobiography, he is far less concerned with the naturalization of the power to induce confession, to constrain an individual or even an entire group until they find absolution through divulgence. As arbiter of the "real," Chin becomes "the presence (or virtual presence)" of an "authority who requires the confession."⁷⁶

Meanwhile, Max Weber understands the Christian call to profession in terms of vocation. Weber famously argues that capitalism secularizes the moral premium that Protestantism places on specialized labor. He writes that the "peculiar idea ... of one's duty in a calling" is "what is most characteristic of the social ethic of capitalistic culture, and is in a sense the fundamental basis of it. It is an obligation which the individual feels towards the content of his professional activity."⁷⁷ Capitalism discards the religious idea of a providentially ordained vocation, but it preserves the veneration of work and labor. As Chow explains, the accumulation of capital is the material replacement for spiritual salvation. "The attainment of what was once believed to be divine grace," she writes, "is now reconceived in terms of a drive to do well—that is, make

⁷⁵ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: Volume I: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (Vintage Books, 1990), 60.

⁷⁶ Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, 61.

⁷⁷ Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons (Routledge, 2004), 19.

profits.”⁷⁸ Labor is morally justified not by God but by material return, or by bread alone.

Chow synthesizes a Foucauldian line of reasoning with Weber’s theories to reveal a continuity between confessional profession and vocational profession. She explains that “the psychological mechanism of ‘calling’” is how capitalism defines ethnic subjects and draws them into what she terms coercive mimeticism,⁷⁹ or the unwitting reproduction of ethnic stereotypes even when ethnic communities attempt to resist—or protest against—those very stereotypes. She claims that articulations of ethnic subjectivity, though imagined as a form of antiracist or anticapitalist protest, typically do not achieve “actual emancipation of any kind” but instead yield “the benefits of worldwide visibility, currency, and circulation.” Ethnicity “constitutes an economically logical and socially viable vocation,” or a sort of profession that ensures legibility under capitalism.⁸⁰ According to her, “resorting to the self-referential gesture as an ethnic minority is often tantamount to performing a confession ...: it is to say, ‘Yes, that’s me,’ to a call and a vocation.”⁸¹ Even though Chin shares with Chow the view that confession is a religious tactic that perpetuates an unliberated mode of ethnicity, his use of the calling and his emphasis on the role of the ethnic writer doubly anchor his Confucian subjectivity as a profession in both senses—an avowal of loyalty to the “real” and a commitment to a martial authorial career. The Asian American writer is a cultural worker responsible for the production and vocalization of authentic ethnicity. As a result, Chin’s attempt to rescue Confucianism from its abstraction within Western stereotypes in turn reifies Confucianism as a form of cultural capital that translates to literary authority and visibility.

To summarize, the expression of an Asian, Confucian subjectivity through a Chinese “I”

⁷⁸ Chow, *Protestant Ethnic*, 44.

⁷⁹ Chow, *Protestant Ethnic*, 33.

⁸⁰ Chow, *Protestant Ethnic*, 48.

⁸¹ Chow, *Protestant Ethnic*, 115.

and “we” maintains a confessional self-referentiality by positing a group identity to alleviate the loss of a collective narcissism. For all his assurances that Confucianism is historicist and areligious, Chin cannot avoid replicating—or mimicking—the Christian mechanic of calling and confessing infused in ethnocapitalist discourse. What matters in this case is less the stated genre of a text (autobiography, commentary, set) and more the attachment of the first-person mode to a universal subjectivity or process of subjectification. The title of Chin’s essay converts the individual sovereignty that he reclaims through his “real” heroic tradition into a cultural authority that empowers him to mandate confession from others, to call them to profess ethnically and vocationally as Asian American writers. Yet, the personal sovereignty and power of the law that Chin invests in the Chinaman or Chinese “I” are not so much reclaimed as they are earned as a reward or return once that “I” or that “we” is spoken. Foucault distinguishes from “other forms of work [which ensure] the accumulation of capital” the “immense labor” of confession, which produces “men’s subjection: their constitution as subjects in both senses of the word.”⁸² Coercive mimesis and the call to profession join these forms of labor together by turning confessional, ethnic subjection into both a prerequisite for participation in capitalism and an abstract gain in and of itself. Chin’s “I” thus does not represent a departure from the workings of the racial capitalist state.

Building Sets: Chin, Eaton, Confucius

This is not to say that we cannot read “Come All” with an eye toward different possibilities for the self-referential statement within Asian American literature. In this concluding section, I want to turn to an immanent critique of Chin’s essay by taking a closer look at his idea

⁸² Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, 60.

of the Confucian set. “Come All” reveals the final piece of Chin’s genre thesis. Chin refines the somewhat vague claim, made in “This Is Not An Autobiography,” that “the basic form is war” into the more concrete idea that the set is the representative Confucian form. In the set, Chin finds the ideal literary weapon against confessional autobiography. However, Chin’s definition of the set places too great a burden upon the Chinese “I” to consolidate a collective self-regard, and “Come All” reveals not an alternate, non-confessional “I” but rather the limits of the “I” and of self-referentiality. These limits are not lines of authenticity but of ethnicization, generalization, and subjectification; universalism gives way to a multitude of subject positions in relation to Confucianism and Asian literary tradition. The idea of the set might even enable us to reconceptualize the various literary subject positions that Chin labels as “real” or “fake.” To illustrate this, I conclude by revisiting Edith Maude Eaton’s “Leaves from the Mental Portfolio of an Eurasian,” which Chin hails as a pillar of the real. Her essay, I argue, stages a more complicated relationship with Confucianism, one wary of using religio-philosophy and culture as abstract capital. I pinpoint two misquotations at the end of her personal narrative not to undermine her importance as a literary and historical figure but to put pressure on scholarly tendencies to interpret her essay either as a straightforward construction of Asian American identity or as a text that escapes ethnonational subjectification.

As a literary form, the set plays a central role in how Chin understands the development of “real,” Confucian subjectivity. The prime example of a set, after all, is found in Confucius’s *Analects*. He writes in “Come All,”

The sum and ultimate art of Confucius’ knowledge and wisdom, *The Analects*, is not a book of dogma or formula for moral improvement And, though it is Confucius’ most personal and creative work, it is not an essay, not a novel, and not an autobiography. It is a “set.”

As a form, the set expresses the civilization founded in history, the ethic of life that is war, and the belief that all men and women are born soldiers. ... All art is martial

art. Writing is fighting. In Western civilization, which is founded on religion, the individual trains himself to better express faith, belief, and submission to a higher moral authority The individual in the Asian moral universe trains to fight. ... The Western believer sums up his life in the form that expresses the religious content of the civilization, the autobiography, a combination of confession and testimony that follows the ... heroes of religious literature

The fighter expresses his wisdom and essence in a set. One learns ... martial arts by memorizing a set of poses, stances, and movement

The way the Chinese learn martial arts is the way Chinese learn everything: memorization, recitation, and internalization. It's called "the internal process."⁸³ ... Thus, to be properly awestruck by the big picture of Confucius' wisdom and art ..., one has to memorize *The Analects* in childhood and to recite them every day. The discoveries of meaning are so profound ... that they can be made only at certain stages in one's life, only after one has experienced so much life Every day throughout your adult life, a verse of Confucius will light up your mind and make sense of everything that's happened since the day you were born.⁸⁴

This process of memorization, recitation, and internalization encapsulates Chin's theory of literary subject development; it describes how myths and fairy tales, which are allegedly unchanging in their most "real" form, act uniformly upon Asian people from childhood. It does not take much to draw a broad comparison between Chin's set-internalization model and a religious devotional practice which includes the frequent memorization, recitation, and internalization of holy texts and which assumes that scripture is unchanging. As with Freudian subject formation, confession, and Christendom, so with internalization—Chin's framework mirrors its supposed Western antithesis more often than not.

The set is useful to us, though, not because it is inherently Confucian or naturally capable of producing subjectivity but because Chin actively constructs it as such. Sets in and of themselves are compiled and assembled, and Chin's claim that the set is essential to Confucianism is an original discursive construct. No literary term in Chinese corresponds directly to "set" to denote the form or genre of texts like the *Analects* (or, for that matter, *The Art*

⁸³ "Internal process" could translate 内化 (*neì huà*), to internalize.

⁸⁴ Chin, "Come All," 35–36.

of War, the Mencius, or the Tao Te Ching). Given his emphasis on martial arts and fighting, it is more likely that Chin is riffing on 套路 (*tào lù*), which refers to a series of movements in a martial arts routine. (The first character, 套, can serve as a measure word for sets of things.) In my definition, the set is a compilatory form that emphasizes its own constructed multiplicity, either as a literary text that deploys multiple representational strategies or as a metacritical grouping method for shaping an archive comprised of such texts. In building a set, we become aware and critical of how the parameters we choose shape the analyses afforded by a particular grouping.

Even in Chin's active theorization of the set, we can detect two concessions that betray the constructedness of literary sets and of their resultant subjectivities. The first such concession is that sets do not act unidirectionally upon subjectivities. In fact, in the example of martial arts, "[o]ne's life and knowledge are in conversation with the set and even inform the set."⁸⁵ Internalization is not a purely receptive process; when it comes to the *Analects*, "experience," apparently, is also deterministic. Even if myths are immutable, Chin concedes that there is such a thing as new experience, and if experience shapes the way one understands the *Analects*, then there is no guarantee that Chinese people, much less Asian people in general, must develop in such a universal, predictable manner from birth through adulthood.

This leads to Chin's second concession, which casts doubt upon the ability of the "I" to implicate a "we." Important though the *Analects* may be, Chin admits, "But the days when every Chinese learned to read *The Analects* and the five Confucian classics are gone. Those who did memorize *The Analects* as children, and then forgot them, find themselves attracted to Confucius in their fifties. Most Chinese have made brief passes at the five books" He reiterates that, in

⁸⁵ Chin, "Come All," 36.

lieu of the *Analects*, “Confucius’ main line into the depths of young Asian brains is the fairy tale and the heroic tradition of *The Romance of [the] Three Kingdoms*, *Water Margin*, and *Journey to the West*.”⁸⁶ This passage in effect enumerates roughly three possible relationships to Confucianism, one marked by complete ignorance of the *Analects*, one marked by forgetting and re/turning to the classics, and one marked by internalizing some set of classics from childhood. None of these are identified explicitly by Chin as fake, real, or something more ambiguous; Chineseness precedes the classics and any evaluation of authenticity.⁸⁷ The too-easy equation of subjectivity (sensibility) with ethnicity, race, or culture (blood, myth) that, I would argue, Chin implicitly takes for granted throughout many of his essays crumbles along with the possibility of a universal Asian subjectivity. Chin’s own relationship to these different modes is unclear in “Come All,” though his early anti-Confucian stance and the classical scholarship he describes in “This Is Not An Autobiography” portray his connection to Confucian literature as a preexistent birthright fulfilled by his later research. (“I’ve verified the universe that I’m a natural for”; “I was born to read [the classics].”) The elision of the self-referential “I” in this passage from “Come All” elicits several tensions. Avoiding personal confession clearly bolsters the cultural authority of Chin’s voice, but would it be possible to insert an ostensibly anticonfessional “I” here in the first place? To do so would be to legitimate multiple states of literary subjectification. Speaking in this context of “every” or “most” Chinese without an “I,” “we,” or “us” frees Chin to associate the Chinese “I” and “we” with the Confucian spirit of personal sovereignty two pages later when he introduces the oath of brotherhood from *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*. Or, perhaps, the exclusion of the “I” in the first instance throws into relief the limited scope of

⁸⁶ Chin, “Come All,” 36.

⁸⁷ I do not mean to reify race or ethnicity as something essential; I simply mean to show that Chin’s construction of race and subjectivity is inconsistent.

the Chinese “I” in the second instance. This “I,” already confessional for its imbrication with Weber and Chow’s call to profession, cannot completely mitigate the collective loss of the *Analects* or of narcissism. Far from leaving us adrift with no genre or first-person mode to make use of, the failure of the “I” to constitute a universal subjectivity might give us room to analyze alternate functions of the self-referential statement, and it certainly pushes us to heed the myriad individual, specific, and dynamic subjectivities that find expression or construction in Asian American literature.

That subjectivities are not in totality literary, and that Asian and Asian American signify diverse subject positions, are by now much more widely accepted, if not already axiomatic, tenets within Asian American and literary studies. Chin’s preoccupation with classical texts and Chinese antiquity is an extreme, transhistorical variant of what Lisa Lowe calls the “‘vertical’ generational model of culture.” While Lowe is addressing a literary critical obsession with familial conflict and cultural misunderstandings between generations, Chin’s denial of cultural discontinuity across millennia has the same effect: he “essentializes Asian American culture, obscuring the particularities and incommensurabilities of class, gender, and national diversities among Asians”; such “reductions contribute to the aestheticizing commodification of Asian American *cultural* differences, while denying the immigrant histories of material exclusion and differentiation.”⁸⁸ Might not “real” Confucianism, after all, in throwing a hawkish karate chop at Christianity, merely maintain an Orientalist East-West binary?

This is the very problem with which Edith Maude Eaton wrestles at the end of “Leaves from the Mental Portfolio of an Eurasian.” Chin celebrates Eaton as a “champion of Chinese integrity in America,” an author of the “real” who, in “Leaves,” “movingly confronted

⁸⁸ Lisa Lowe, *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics* (Duke University Press, 1996), 63.

[stereotype's] effect on people's perception of her and on her own perception of the Chinese."⁸⁹ Within Asian American literary studies at large, earlier scholars tend to position her as a founding figure of an entire genealogy of Asian American writing and literary subject development. Patricia P. Chu, for instance, claims that "Leaves" "begins the process of constructing a new type of subject, a Chinese American," a project with a fictional counterpart in short stories like the ones in Eaton's 1912 collection *Mrs. Spring Fragrance*.⁹⁰ Later scholars are skeptical of such canonization, though they do not discount Eaton's contributions or her importance. David Shih takes a different approach from Chu's. He writes that Eaton's "installation as a foremother to current Asian American writers ... requires her interpellation as a discrete *racial* and *national* subject—a Chinese American—to the neglect of alternate subject positions developed in her autobiography," "Leaves." Shih reminds us that, as a Eurasian, Edith was biracial and spent parts of her life in England and Canada and that she "resisted identifying herself exclusively along racial or national lines."⁹¹ Chin places her in an exclusive literary genealogy of real Confucian Asian American culture, but Viet Thanh Nguyen cautions us against this because it dehistoricizes early writers like Eaton and because genealogy too often becomes teleology.⁹² If we consider Eaton and Chin as two members in a larger set of authors, forms, and methods, we can avoid imputing to Eaton Chin's telos of authenticity. We sidestep a linear genealogy and allow Eaton and Chin to subvert one another dialectically in ways that help us dismantle the connection between Confucian authenticity and capitalist abstraction.

Eaton clearly demonstrates her resistance to abstraction in a passage at the end of

⁸⁹ Chin, "Come All," 12.

⁹⁰ Chu, *Assimilating Asians*, 105.

⁹¹ David Shih, "The Seduction of Origins: Sui Sin Far and the Race for Tradition," in *Form and Transformation in Asian American Literature*, ed. Xiaojing Zhou and Samina Najmi (University of Washington Press, 2005), 49–50.

⁹² Nguyen, *Race and Resistance*, 57.

“Leaves.” She recounts meeting some Californians, “funny people who advise [her] to ‘trade’ upon [her] nationality”:

They tell me that if I wish to succeed in literature in America I should dress in Chinese costume, carry a fan in my hand, wear a pair of scarlet beaded slippers, live in New York, and come of high birth. Instead of making myself familiar with the Chinese Americans around me, I should discourse on my spirit acquaintance with Chinese ancestors and quote in between the “Good mornings” and “How d’ye dos” of editors.

*“Confucius, Confucius, how great is Confucius, Before Confucius, there never was Confucius. After Confucius, there never came Confucius,” etc., etc., etc.,*⁹³

or something like that, both illuminating and obscuring, don’t you know. They forget, or perhaps they are not aware that the old Chinese sage taught “The way of sincerity is the way of heaven.” ...

After all I have no nationality and am not anxious to claim any. Individuality is more than nationality. “You are you and I am I,” says Confucius.⁹⁴

Through her disdain for the idea that she might “trade” on her nationality and through her defiance of the recommendations made by those who pigeonhole her career as a writer with sartorial and literary-philosophical stereotypes, Eaton articulates an early critique of

⁹³ This refrain appears almost word for word and less sardonically in an earlier, unsigned piece of Eaton’s titled “Chinese Religion. Information Given a Lady by Montreal Chinamen” (1895) from the *Montreal Daily Star*. She may have encountered these lines in texts by missionary sinologists like S. Wells Williams, A. W. Loomis, and James Legge. Williams, in *The Middle Kingdom* (1848), links this “pæan” to a “Sacrificial ritual,” and Loomis’s 1882 edited volume of Confucian works lifts much of Williams’s biographical account of Confucius. In his entry for Confucius in the ninth edition of the *Encyclopædia Britannica*, Legge writes, “They are very few among all the millions of the Chinese people who would not heartily repeat the lines with which the first paragraph in a popular history of the sage conclude.” Chinese sources attribute the original lines (“孔子孔子，大哉孔子。孔子而前，未见孔子。孔子而后，更无孔子。孔子孔子，大哉孔子！”）to the Song calligrapher Mi Fu. It might be tempting to problematize the lack of a citation or speculate as to whether the omission is intentional, but “Leaves” suggests a very different relationship between Eaton and the work of sinologists than “Come All” does for Chin. For Eaton, reliance on translations does not compromise a claim to “realness.” Also, Eaton does not neglect to mention her time in libraries reading about China. Sui Sin Far [Edith Maude Eaton], *Becoming Sui Sin Far: Early Fiction, Journalism, and Travel Writing by Edith Maude Eaton*, ed. Mary Chapman (McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2016), 67–69; S. Wells Williams, *The Middle Kingdom; A Survey of the Geography, Government, Education, Social Life, Arts, Religion, &c., of the Chinese Empire and Its Inhabitants* (Wiley and Putnam, 1848), 1:530; A. W. Loomis, ed., *Confucius and the Chinese Classics: Or, Readings in Chinese Literature* (A. Roman, 1882), 50; James Legge, “Confucius,” in *Encyclopædia Britannica: A Dictionary of Arts, Sciences, and General Literature*, 9th ed. (Adam and Charles Black, 1877), 6, CLI–DAY:258, National Library of Scotland, <https://digital.nls.uk/193819048>; Zhu, Guozhen 朱国祯, *Yongzhuang Xiaopin* 涌幢小品, vol. 2, ed. Wang, Genlin 王根林 (Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2012), 435.

⁹⁴ Sui Sin Far, *Mrs. Spring Fragrance and Other Writings*, ed. Amy Ling and Annette White-Parks (The University of Illinois Press, 1995), 230.

commodifying modes of Asian racial discourse. As laid out by the “funny people” here, Chinese nationality is both defined by and expressed through the aestheticization of various elements of Chinese culture. Under such a cultural and economic scheme, ethnic difference is at once incorporated and underscored through conversion into social capital and monetary value. However, even in directing these quotes from Confucius against commodification, Eaton cannot help but use Confucius’s name and sayings as a form of cultural currency that authenticates her own awareness and recall of Chinese tradition over the ignorance and expectations of certain Californians. Though Eaton constructs a conception of Chineseness (or, at least, association with Chineseness) that does not rest on tradability via commodification, she still relies on a discursive strategy that closely resembles capitalist processes of cultural abstraction. Cultural authenticity, or “sincerity,” becomes validity and authority, which still in theory enable literary success. Though Eaton’s citations are a “concrete” answer to others’ racist abstractions, they are an answer nonetheless, a response to a call to Chinese profession as, once more, both writer and ethnic subject. Paradoxically, Eaton must still “trade” in Confucianism even when denouncing this capitalist, transactional mode of cultural exchange. Eaton’s “I” is not so easily detached from nationality.

Nor is Eaton’s “I” wholly inscribed within nationality. She succeeds in using the self-referential mode to draw our attention to commodification. She also declines to give in passively to the calling to ethnic profession and instead opts to use autobiography to challenge the implicit patriarchalism of that call; even as she grapples with the abstraction of Asian thought, her own voice as a Eurasian woman takes precedence over Confucius’s. Eaton’s text interrupts the line of literary descent that Chin might draw from Confucius to her to the present. Her own knowledge of Chinese culture draws in part from research, a pursuit dating back to her youth: “Whenever I

have the opportunity I steal away to the library and read every book I can find on China and the Chinese.”⁹⁵ In Nan Z. Da’s reading, this line indicates that “Leaves” romanticizes “the idea that books are readily available and immediately act on one’s sensibilities,”⁹⁶ though she credits Eaton’s fiction with presenting a more complex view of the relationship between literature and subjectivity. Da stresses that, as readers, we should remember that once “you imagine subjects as completely sensitive to the mediatory power of literature you also imagine their psychic space as a finite space in which books vie with other books for presence. ... Subjectivity as literary subjectivity can have a kind of unforgiving economy” in which the amount of either Chinese or American literature that one reads determines one’s (ethnic) subjectivity.⁹⁷ The same caveat applies to “Leaves.” Eaton’s reflections on nationality as an adult are far different from her views as an adolescent. Roughly around or before the age that she would steal away to the library, Eaton also made and sold lace. She laments, “My nationality, if I had only know[n] it at that time, helps to make sales. The ladies who are my customers call me ‘The Little Chinese Lace Girl.’”⁹⁸ The economic power of nationality, of the call to ethnic subjectivity, is quite literal here. Eaton’s narrative interjection is somewhat ambiguous—does she mean that, as a child, she would have liked to take advantage of her nationality to earn more, or does she regret that her younger self did not yet know to question the concept of nationality? Either way, her self-referential statement is a retroactive one that reveals how her subjectivity changes with time and maturity. Her refusal as an adult to market her Chineseness applies not only to the act of selling lace but also to the economy of literary subjectivity. Though as a girl she loves unspecified “heroic

⁹⁵ Sui Sin Far, *Mrs. Spring Fragrance*, 222.

⁹⁶ Nan Z. Da, *Intransitive Encounter: Sino-U.S. Literatures and the Limits of Exchange* (Columbia University Press, 2018), 197.

⁹⁷ Da, *Intransitive Encounter*, 209–10.

⁹⁸ Sui Sin Far, *Mrs. Spring Fragrance*, 222.

pieces” and “fairy tales” and imagines herself as a “great genie” proclaiming the greatness of the Chinese,⁹⁹ her readings do not culminate in a permanent, solidified sense of subjectivity. The “I” of “I have no nationality” cannot grasp a solid ethnic subjectivity that can be pinned down. Not for nothing is Eaton’s response to the call to aver a nationality a confession that she has none.

Eaton’s personal subject formation, as laid out in “Leaves,” does not support Chin’s vision of a universal, uniform literary subjectivity transmitted from Confucius to the contemporary moment. If we understand “Come All” in terms of its set-building agenda, though, then we might expand the narrow, linear limits of a genealogical model and see how set elements bear upon each other more dynamically. According to Chin, advanced familiarity with a martial arts set allows one to “free-associate with the moves and poses of the set,”¹⁰⁰ and in placing Eaton in a set of “real” Confucian literature, he opens the entire set to a comparative analytic that need not be sequential or chronological (constructing sets and tracing genealogies are already retrospective acts). That is, we might evaluate every example of the “real,” not just in “Come All” but in *The Big Aiiieeeee!* as a whole, according to Chin’s standards of authenticity. If we borrow Chin’s philological habit of using and citing classical texts as a method, for instance, we may find a way to undermine the currency of Confucianism in “Leaves.” Indeed, Eaton’s two citations are actually misquotations. The first, “The way of sincerity is the way of heaven,” appears in the *Mencius* and closely matches James Legge’s translation.¹⁰¹ The second quote,

⁹⁹ Sui Sin Far, *Mrs. Spring Fragrance*, 222.

¹⁰⁰ Chin, “Come All,” 36.

¹⁰¹ Legge simply writes, “sincerity is the way of Heaven.” The same phrase also appears in the *Zhongyong* (*Doctrine of the Mean*), in which the source passage initially takes the form of a dialogue between Confucius and the ruler of an ancient state. The author of the *Zhongyong* (traditionally but questionably held to be Confucius’s grandson, Zisi) offers as commentary, “[a] perfect state of integral wholeness can only be attributed to the Way of Heaven.” In both texts, the Chinese reads, “誠者，天之道也”；the first character, 誠 (*chéng*), can mean “sincere” or “integral wholeness.” Mencius, *The Works of Mencius*, trans. James Legge (Dover, 1970), 303. Andrew Plaks, ed., *Ta Hsüeh and Chung Yung (The Highest Order of Cultivation and On the Practice of the Mean)* (Penguin, 2003), 42.

“‘You are you and I am I,’” also appears twice in the *Mencius*.¹⁰² This exercise in literary provenance is not meant to detract from Eaton’s authority or knowledge (she correctly cites Mencius elsewhere¹⁰³), but it does destabilize the currency of Confucianism, which in turn destabilizes Chin’s framework of authenticity. Even if Eaton cannot fully escape the structure of transaction, we can at least scrutinize the cultural goods that are being exchanged.

A close reading practice tuned to Asian American literature’s religio-philosophical strains can untangle the ways in which Confucianism, subjectivity, and genre are bound up in works like Chin’s. Reviewing “Come All” from this angle can bolster what by now are common critiques of attempts from within Asian American literary studies to forge a canon, lineage, or common subjectivity. At the same time, we might uncover how such attempts contain their own immanent critiques. It is worthwhile to take Chin’s essays in good faith, as it were, if only to understand how a text like “Come All” lays out the pitfalls of taking a quick exit route from the nationalist and capitalist logics that inform aims like canonization or subjectification. Tracing that route a ways along his allusions to Eaton and classical Chinese literature enables us to think through how “Come All” and “Leaves,” as a dialectical pair within a set, make tenuous religious confession and commodification. Their first-person statements reference selves that are not simply caught up within profession and abstraction but flex in their own ways against their double bind. Nor do these statements add up into a unified “we.” In moving between texts, we approach an analytic, or possibly an emergent “I,” that troubles state-driven and cultural nationalisms and unsettles the cultural capital that often underwrites ethnic authority. Accordingly, continued analysis of Asian American literature ought not assume outright that Asian thought and Asian religio-philosophy are inherently anticapitalist or antiracist or that

¹⁰² “爾爲爾，我爲我。” Both instances are spoken by Hûi of Liû-hsiâ. Mencius, *Works of Mencius*, 207, 371.

¹⁰³ See Sui Sin Far, *Becoming Sui Sin Far*, 227.

dealing in them decisively subverts Western religious or economic hegemony. Setting aside such expectations, which would constitute a call in and of themselves, we might turn to other schools of Asian religio-philosophy in search not of easy alternatives to Chin but of the ways in which different authors and genres also open windows into the uneasy relationship between Asian thought and the nation-state; in that unease, we are looking for that constructive rather than disabling friction.

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