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Masculinity, Food, and Appetite in Frank Chin’s *Donald Duk* and “The Eat and Run Midnight People”

The male body is understood as powerful, big and strong, “with enormous, imperative, brutal needs” which are asserted when eating.

—Deborah Lupton, *Food, the Body, and the Self*

The stereotype of male eating habits originated in the bush, and included a lack of table manners for the expression of a rude, hearty appetite, simply cooked meat, damper baked in the ashes of camp fires and meat pies and tomato sauce.

—Michael Symons, *One Continuous Picnic*

The name Frank Chin provokes controversy among Asian American readers and scholars, but almost all agree that masculinity has preoccupied his entire literary and critical career. Almost all his writings aim at dismantling the U.S. hegemonic, emasculating representations of Asian American males, even when this agenda must sometimes be carried out at the expense of Asian American women and gay men. Recognizing his homophobic and macho tendencies, I nevertheless value Chin’s literary attempts to assail the prevailing stereotype of Asian American male sexuality. His is not only an important but also a necessary project in the evolution of Asian American aesthetics. Moving away from the black masculine model (such as in *The Chickencoop Chinaman*), Chin in his imagination of a proud Chinese American manhood turns to Asian and Asian American cultures in his 1991 novel, *Donald Duk*. While *Donald Duk* is no exception in its goal, it is a departure from the angry tone that dominates his earlier works, such as “Racist Love” (1972), “The Chickencoop Chinaman” (1981), and “Come All Ye Asian American Writers of the Real and the Fake!” (1991). In *Donald Duk* Chin is more humorous than angry, more tolerant than accusatory. Unlike his earlier works, whose angry tone, directed at the mainstream culture, only painfully reveals Chin’s unwitting obsession with
the “white gaze.” Donald Duk offers a witty and confident portrayal of several Chinese American men whose gender formation is largely anchored in pan-Asian cultures—Chinese literature, Chinese cuisine, and Hong Kong kung fu movies. Yet Chin’s new construction of Chinese American manhood is, unfortunately, not very remote from the hegemonic white masculinity that he has fought against throughout his literary career.

Food is a crucial signifier in this novel’s gender imaginary. Eileen Fung’s essay on this novel, an inspiration for this chapter, argues convincingly that “food becomes a discourse of a masculine culture which reinscribes male aggression and domination” (259). In Donald Duk the kitchen becomes a site for the assertion of masculinity, with the language of cooking repeatedly evoking images of martial arts and war. Chin’s short story “The Eat and Run Midnight People” (1988) also employs tropes of food and appetite in capturing the voice of a hypermasculine narrator. There Chin portrays a Chinese culture whose prowess resides in its gastronomic promiscuity and a Chinese American man whose sex act travels between the signifiers of food and trains. Alimentary references in both works help pave the most conventional path to the construction of masculinity—the path of violence. With Donald Duk and “Eat and Run” juxtaposed, we will see that Chin the writer, produced by as well as productive of transcultural and competing forms of masculinity, cannot help but rely heavily on the masculine pleasures of consumption, sex, and violence in his effort to remasculinize the Asian American male subject.

Chin’s effort to rescue Asian American manhood, as King-Kok Cheung points out, is based upon a hegemonic conception of masculinity that is largely white, heterosexual, and propertied. Although there are critics favorably disposed to Chin’s evocation of the Chinese male heroic tradition, such as Jinqi Ling, who advocates “a more nuanced and less reductive” reading of Chin, their appreciation of Chin’s struggle does not compromise their disapproval of his masculinist agenda (Narrating Nationalisms 83). Robert Connell attributes hegemonic masculinity to “the cultural dynamic by which a group claims and sustains a leading position in social life,” one that is maintained by “the dominant position of men and the subordination of women” (77). In exploring the complexity of minority masculinities, Jachinson Chan remarks,

Men of color, who are excluded from the hegemonic model of masculinity, may unwittingly buy into this notion of [masculinity]. In spite of exclusions based on race, men of color can still benefit from patriarchal dividends and they may demonstrate a longing for inclusion to a hegemonic masculine identity. The seduction of a hegemonic masculinity can be a powerful force that lures men of color from a place of complicity to an aggressive pursuit of being a part of an elite group. (10)
Hegemonic masculinity is by no means a secure and stable identity. Michael Kimmel in his study of American masculinity demonstrates that the story of “manhood as a relentless test” has been and continues to be a dominant one in American life. Furthermore, “It is a story of a chronically anxious, temperamentally restless manhood—a manhood that carries with it the constant burdens of proof.” Gender anxiety manifested through this “relentless test” takes an even heavier toll on men of color.

In much of his earlier works, as Daniel Kim outlines, Chin offers “a literary self-portrait of an Asian American masculinity in ruins, of men who seem only to hate themselves for their inability to be men.” Chin’s anger and longing seem to be interwoven in a painfully ambivalent relationship to the normative model of masculinity. His knowledge that it is through the desexualization of Asian American men that white American patriarchy forges itself cannot free him from the desire to identify with this very model. In Donald Duk, however, he seems to be less preoccupied with the model of white patriarchy and more engaged in constructing an Asian American manhood that relies on Chinese icons of masculinity, such as Kwan Kung and Lee Kuey. Different from his earlier works dominated by themes of insurmountable alienation and nonidentity, Donald Duk is driven by a homing plot that, in Goldstein-Shirley’s words, “transcends the traditional bildungsroman, offering a protagonist whose coming-of-age represents a counter-hegemonic gesture.” Chin’s counterhegemonic gesture, however, gains only a small measure of success inasmuch as the “new” model of masculinity turns out to resemble, more than differ from, what he sets out to subvert. By pointing this out, I am not so much chastising Chin for his failed effort as underscoring the seductive power of hegemonic masculinity and its demand that one must prove oneself to be a man. Neither am I suggesting that it is impossible to construct a Chinese American masculinity that is not an ethnicized version of the hegemonic model.

**From Sissy to Man**

The tale of Donald Duk takes place before the Chinese New Year, a major threshold in its protagonist’s life as the title character is about to become twelve, completing his first zodiac cycle to signify his transition from boyhood to manhood. The novel’s central conflict is Donald’s self-loathing instilled by the orientalist education he receives in a private school—“a place where the Chinese are comfortable hating Chinese.” The education he receives is a process of what Frantz Fanon calls “cultural estrangement.” Fanon writes in *The Wretched of the Earth,*

> Colonialism is not satisfied merely with holding a people in its grip and emptying the native’s brain of all form and content. By a kind of perverted
logic, it turns to the past of the oppressed people, and distorts, disfigures, and destroys it. [...] In the efforts made to carry out the cultural estrangement [...] nothing has been left to chance. (210)

In Donald's case his private education schools his shift of social norms and cultural allegiance in its effort to erase ethnic identification in favor of assimilation, and this process of cultural estrangement has rendered the ethnic practices ridiculous and shameful.

Much like Stephen's in *Obasan*, Donald's repudiation of his ethnicity also occurs in his relationship to food. In desiring and consuming what he thinks of as “pure American food. Steaks. Chops” (8), as though ingesting American food would turn him white inside out, Donald practices what Camille Cauti calls “culinary passing” (10). Such passing offers an anxious identity because it requires the passer to revile his or her own kind, and in Donald's life, it is the Chinese cuisine that he must spurn. At the New Year Eve's lunch, for example, he denigrates the king clam dish as looking “like the sole of my Reeboks sliced real real thin” (46). “By comparing a rubber sneaker to an authentic Chinese dish, Donald demonstrates his sense that Chinese American food and culture is [...] literally inedible” (Ho 31). Furthermore, Donald regards everything Chinese as “funny,: “the funny things Chinese believe in. The funny things Chinese do. The funny things Chinese eat” (3, emphasis mine). In this ambivalent, slippery word “funny,” Donald exhibits what Fanon coin as “the colonized personality” (*Wretched* 250).

In speaking of the affects of the culturally estranged, Fanon remarks that “the emotional sensitivity of the native is kept on the surface of his skin like an open sore which flinches from the caustic agent; and the psyche shrinks back, obliterates itself and finds outlet in muscular demonstrations” (*Wretched* 56). Donald's debilitating embarrassment with his ancestral culture and his ethnicity, symptomatic in the word “funny,” displays an open sore that inflicts emotional and physical discomfort. “[W]hen Mr. Meanwright talks about Chinatown, Donald Duk’s muscles all tighten up, and he wants Mr. Meanwright to shut up” (34). What becomes apparent in Chin's portrayal of Donald is that the boy's ideological indoctrination has given him a heightened emotional sensitivity toward and repugnance for his home culture—the culture in Chinatown. However, his repeated usage of “funny,” or his lack of concrete descriptions, also reveals that the process of cultural estrangement remains fortunately incomplete, which is evident in his incompetent ventriloquy of the colonial/Orientalist discourse. Significantly, this leaves the possibility of the character's development and initiation into a proud Asian American manhood.

Donald's self-loathing is often expressed in the enmeshed lexicon of race and gender. He tends to believe that being Chinese is no different from being
sissy and ridiculous. To him “Chinese are artsy, cutey and chickendick,” a language that has proved durable in American culture and an image fraught with the culturally enforced inferiority of Asian American men (3). In this adolescent character, Chin creates an allegory of the open sore that inflicts many Asian American men in the sense that Donald’s self-loathing recapitulates the Asian American male subjectivity as masochistic in the face of “the predicament of being yellow and male, of being formed as masculine subjects, in a culture in which most of the dominant images of manhood are white” (Kim 293). Donald’s obsessive yet frustrated identification with whiteness purports a self-splitting that David Eng names “a melancholic form of racialized subjectivity” (72).

The white iconic figure that preoccupies Donald’s consciousness is Fred Astaire, with whom he carries on imaginary conversations. “I’m like you. We speak the same language. We talk the same lingo. We dig the same jive” (93). His idolization of the Hollywood star is resonant with Daniel Kim’s observation of Frank Chin that “many of his […] literary endeavors betray his own intense and loving obsession with an array of iconic American images of white manhood” (270). One might view in Donald’s characterization Chin’s own obsessive relationship with the icons in American popular culture. Donald’s identificatory complex with Astaire turns on a degrading differentiation from the alienness and awkwardness of the Chinese. In his imaginary conversation, he tells his idol that the Chinese in Chinatown are not “American! Like you and me. The kind of people who make American history. The kind of people actors play in American movies” (91). Having been trained to speak from the regime of American history, Donald cannot but represent Chinese Americans as nonnational and thus unworthy of heroic portrayals. In this demarcation between “us” and “them,” Donald participates in the hegemonic process of “othering” that produces a schizophrenic self—a self torn between body (yellow and foreign) and mind (white and American).

To loosen the assimilationist hold on Donald’s consciousness, Chin employs the narrative strategy of dream scenarios that thrust the boy repeatedly into the male world of the transcontinental railroad construction. Interestingly, Chinese food punctuates each of Donald’s dream sequences, in which he becomes an eating and laboring member of the Chinese community, remaking Asian American history. Ho succinctly points out, “To consume Chinese food is to consume Chinese history” (38). Donald’s preference for American food and rejection of Chinese dishes are an overt expression of his subscription to white culture and his belief that only white people are men enough to make history. When shopping with his father for the New Year’s banquet, the most important and elaborate meal of the year, he asks for “a filet mignon wrapped in bacon” (39). But in his dreams he feels at home among the Chinese and relishes their cuisine. In the morning before work, he follows the crowd to “the deem sum people’s camp.”
“The juk is made, hot and fresh. For a penny he gets a steaming bowl of fresh white juk and a dish of three steamed pastries stuffed with fish and chicken” (72). Nourished by dim sum, Donald enters the heroic, historical event of the record-breaking track-laying contest between the Chinese and Irish workers.

Donald’s dream world is populated not only with familiar people from San Francisco’s Chinatown but also with mythical characters from the Chinese classics. Through these dreams that spill from time to time into his waking consciousness, Donald comes to understand and value Chinese American prowess, and eventually comes to embrace his ethnicity. Donald’s dreams constitute the heroic history of the Chinese contribution to the building of the United States—the return of the repressed that renders real the officially erased history, which, via the oral lore, has become the Chinese American collective memory. In his dreams Donald lives this history, visceral in its triumph and disappointment, its toil and dignity, its violence and pride.

The construction of the transnational railroad, therefore, becomes a privileged site for the attempt to constitute a new Asian American male subjectivity. This new subjectivity, however, challenges as well as colludes with the dominant culture. As Viet Thah Nguyen notes, “Donald embarks on his masculine young adulthood through a journey from the Chinese ghetto to the frontier West, a space of violent character formation […] fundamental to the American imagination” (135). Powerfully shaped by Hollywood representations of the West and cowboys, Chin locates the primary site of Donald’s character formation in the body politic. Ironically, this bodily based subject making has always already been inscribed in the practices of domination “because the history of American legislation concerning Asian immigration has been explicitly a biopolitics of bodily regulation, shaping the Asian American community through acts targeting gender, sexuality, race, and class” (V.T. Nguyen 133).

What Nguyen refers to are the numerous laws that prohibited the entrance of Chinese women (the Page Law of 1875 and the resulting formation of the bachelor societies), Chinese laborers (the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Law and its ensuing revisions), and a variety of city ordinances of San Francisco that targeted the Asian body as the object of discipline and punishment (regulations on living space, the cutting of the queue as a penalty, etc.).

The masculine presence in Donald’s dreams is no longer the white iconic figures Chin has evoked elsewhere—John Wayne, Gary Cooper, and the Lone Ranger. Instead, it comes from Chinese literary tradition. Kwan Kung—a legendary figure in the Chinese classic The Three Kingdoms—leads the Chinese railroad workers. In a significant scene, Kwan seizes Crocker’s “sixgun in his hand” and leaps onto Crocker’s white horse, “splashing mud all over Crocker” (78). Single-handedly, Kwan secures the first victory for his followers. “Kwan lifts Donald Duk into the saddle behind him and rides off to the Chinamen’s
camp. Crocker chases after on foot, a white suit in a crowd of black” (78). Sitting high and proud on Crocker’s horse, Kwan boldly declares to his followers, “They say it is impossible to lay ten miles of track in one day. We begin work at dawn. By sunset we will look back on more than ten miles of track. Do that and Crocker’s horse here is ours to eat” (78). Here Kwan’s offering of the enemy’s horse for a celebratory feast constitutes a hypermasculine act. To eat the white horse, to assimilate the power of one’s enemy by eating him or his horse, is metonymic of the neutralization of white men’s power and of the feminization of the dandy owner of the Central Pacific Railroad dressed all in white. (In both the East and West, a man’s relationship to food and appetite gauges his virility, a connection I explore in the next two sections.)

Under Kwan’s tutelage, Donald shifts his identification away from Fred Astaire. Kwan places on him the demand of loyalty and revenge—loyalty to Chinamen and revenge for the injustice against them. Donald performs his vengeance through reconstructing the obliterated history of the Chinese railroad workers. It is through his vengeance that Donald unlearns his identification with whiteness. Three-fourths of the way into the novel, Donald, for the first time, is able to turn the tables on Fred Astaire with a poignant question, a question with a tone of vengeance: “I have always dreamed of being Fred Astaire. Did you ever dream of being like me?” (124). Astaire replies, “Oh, no. I have always dreamed of being Fred Astaire” (124). To both Donald and the reader, Astaire’s answer illuminates the asymmetrical nature of the minority’s identification with white icons and thus the coercive power exerted at the site of subject interpellation by the hegemonic culture, particularly by the ideology of assimilation. Anne Anlin Cheng writes,

Racialization in America may be said to operate through the institutional process of producing a dominant, standard, white national ideal, which is sustained by the exclusion-yet-retention of racialized others. The national topography of centrality and marginality legitimizes itself by retroactively positing the racial other as always Other and lost to the heart of the nation. (10, emphasis mine)

Astaire’s answer to Donald’s question denies the possibility of a two-way traffic of looks between the white national Self and the racialized Other—the possibility for Donald to see Astaire looking at himself through Donald’s eyes. Both lost in and angered by the chasm that Astaire’s answer has opened up, Donald falls back on a cliché, but one with some edge: “All that matters to you is you are what you always dreamed you’d be” (125). The palpable melancholia in Donald’s remark seems to initiate an effort to break free from his obsessive identification with the white icon. This small vengeance constitutes the first act.
of what Anne Anlin Cheng calls “the conversion of the disenfranchised person from being subjected to grief to being a subject speaking grievance” (7).

In becoming a subject speaking of grievance, Donald avenges the wrongs done to the Chinese railroad workers by first researching the history of the transcontinental railroad construction in Chinatown’s library and then, when finding nothing about the Chinese in that particular history, by articulating the injustice of the historical elision. “Report[ing] a crime,” as defined by Maxine Hong Kingston, “is vengeance” (53). In Donald’s character development, his realization of the historical erasure of Chinese labor becomes a defining moment. He says to his father, “I dreamed we set a world’s record […] I dreamed we laid the last crosstie, and it’s true. […] We made history. Twelve hundred Chinese. And they don’t even put the name of our foreman in the books about the railroad” (137, 122, emphases mine). Donald’s claim to the collective marks the beginning of the novel’s resolution.

Before his journey concludes, Donald confronts the hegemonic culture epitomized by Mr. Meanwright and thus proves to be a man. In the classroom when the teacher begins to lecture on the Chinese, Donald feels for the first time “flashing hot blood and angry […] at what he hears all the time” (149). He raises his hands and says,

“Excuse me, Mr. Meanwright. You are incorrect, sir.” […]
“Mr. Meanwright, what you just said about the Chinese is not true.” […]
“Yessir, I am offended.” […]
“You are … sir, Mr. Meanwright, not correct about us being passive, noncompetitive. We did the blasting through Summit Tunnel. We worked through two hard winters in the high Sierra. We went on strike for back pay and Chinese foremen for Chinese gangs, and won. We set the world’s record for miles of track laid in one day. We set our last crosstie at Promontory. And it is badly informed people like you who keep us out of that picture there.” (150)

In this public fashion, Donald finally faces and triumphs over his worst fear: being identified and identifying himself as a Chinese. Chin ends this chapter with Donald wishing Mr. Meanwright a Happy New Year in Cantonese—“Goong hay fot choy”—a language he has disowned until now (152).

**Cooking as Martial Art**

*Donald Duk*’s plot, centering on the rite of passage of a Chinese American adolescent, in the form of instituting his ethnic as well as gendered identity, hinges chiefly on four father figures, two real and two mythical—his father King Duk,
Uncle Donald Duk, Kwan Kung, and Lee Kuey. The real men incarnate the mythical men by playing them in a Cantonese opera. In the portrayal of the father character, the owner and chef of a thriving Chinese restaurant in San Francisco’s Chinatown, Chin's strategy is to embed the discourse of masculinity in that of food. One of the recurring scenes is King’s kitchen, where Donald and his white friend Arnold often observe and sample Dad’s cooking. It is a kitchen in which the “steam and smoke bloom and mushroom-cloud about Donald Duk’s father as he tosses piles of raw shrimp paste and bowls of cold sliced fish and fruit, and waves his tools into and out of the roiling atmospheres” (63). Larry Louise, the Chinese Fred Astaire, appropriately describes this scene as “Godzilla versus the nuclear missiles” (64).

Alluding to the original Japanese “Gojira,” a cautionary tale against nuclear escalation, this image invokes a samurai-informed masculinity rising up to avenge its annihilation by America’s wanton power and technology. Even though in Godzilla the giant lizard is created by French nuclear testing, it is Manhattan, the birthplace of the atomic bomb, not Paris, that is trashed. With this allusion, Chin transforms the kitchen into a symbolic site of violence and destruction. In this kitchen the wok becomes “the hot steel,” the spatula the sword, and the chef a “swordsman” (64, 65). The military ambience surrounding this chef is further enhanced by the history of his training, for King has learned to cook “in the kitchens of the most powerful men in the world” and often tells “the story of how he passed the war in the kitchens of presidents, prime ministers, premiers, lords and generalissimos” (9). Painstakingly, Chin eradicates all feminine vestiges from King’s kitchen not only with analogies of war and martial arts but also by making his cooking performative. Like a martial artist, King takes on challenges. Donald and Arnold often sit in the kitchen and “challenge the extent of Dad’s knowledge of food and cooking. Whatever the boys read about and ask for, Dad cooks without a book. Whatever it is, he cooks it” (9).

Others often address King Duk as sifu, which means simultaneously a master chef and a kung fu master. The interchangeability between these two identities becomes apparent in the scene of ancestral worship, a ritual always performed via food and drink. The family shrine is set up on the altar table in the dining room. In front of it “stands an incense burner with smoldering sticks of incense punk. A steamed chicken on a platter and three little rice bowls filled with perfect mounds of rice [. . .]. There is a bottle of Johnny Walker Red [. . .]. The red envelopes of lay see are the donations of the immediate family to immediate family causes [. . .], the war chest” (65). Family and friends take turns paying respect to the ancestors’ shrine. Their stylized manner is unmistakably associated with martial arts. “He lights a stick of incense and holds it in his right hand and covers his right hand with his left, like a swordsman in a
kung fu movie meeting a swordsman on the road of life” (65). With one sweep of the pen, Chin transforms what has been demeaned as a demonstration of Chinese heathenness and passivity into a masculine scene of militancy.

Metaphors of war and martial arts thus sustain the descriptions of this kitchen and its owner—a semiotic site where the enjoyment of masculine assertion colludes with that of cooking and eating. Chin's predilection for food is gleefully indulged in this novel, as it is set significantly around the Chinese New Year, a time of cooking and feasting and performing rituals. This is also a time when King must incarnate his mythical model, Kwan Kung, “the god of fighters, blighters and writers,” by playing, or more accurately by becoming, him in the Cantonese opera (67). King fits this role not simply because he is a good actor but because he embodies the god’s virtues—fierceness, loyalty, and self-discipline. It is significant that Chin makes Kwan Kung (or Guan Yu), the most worthy warrior in *The Three Kingdoms,* the god of both literature and war, who thus embodies the *wen-wu* dyad that has been central to the historical construction of Chinese masculinities. *Wen* means “cultural attainment,” and *wu,* “martial valor.” While these two qualities have been given different weight at different moments in Chinese history, their balance has never ceased to be the ideal. As Kam Louie explicates, “Ideal masculinity can be either *wen* or *wu* but is at its height when both are present to a high degree” (16).

Chin's transformation of the god of war into the god of literature and war serves to idealize King as a cosmopolitan model of the balanced *wen-wu,* with his American birth, martial arts training in Hong Kong, military service in the U.S. Army, opera performance, and culinary arts. All of these contribute to King’s Asian-American-ness as the new model of Chinatown masculinity “to replace,” as Ho points out, “Hop Sing of *Bonanza*” (24). In *The Three Kingdoms,* however, Kwan Kung is not known for cultural attainment; his reputation as the best warrior rests on courage, loyalty, and discipline when it comes to women. He regards desiring and desirable women as obstacles to true brotherhood; he “would rather decapitate a beautiful woman than be tempted by her” (K. Louie 46). Therefore, for King to take the Kwan Kung role, he must exercise the ultimate self-control. He explains to Donald,

Nobody wants to play Kwan Kung. Too risky. What if they accidentally forget and eat a hotdog? Or one bite of a *cha siu bow* goes down their throat before they remember? Kwan Kung does not accept the mess up of responsibility allowed by Western psychology. Real men, real actors, real soldiers of the art don’t lose control. Just like Doong the Tattooed Wrestler in *The Water Margin,* when the most beautiful woman in the empire […] coos and croons all her seductive know-how on Doong, he never gives in and never forgets his mission. Never. (68)
Here Chin’s distinction between real and fake men pivots on a man’s relationship to appetite, both sexual and alimentary. The punishment for undisciplined appetite, curiously, falls on women. “There are stories about the actor who played Kwan Kung recently and did not take the part seriously, and maybe slept with his girlfriend that night before [...] and when he takes the stage his girlfriend’s hair turns white and she has a miscarriage” (67). Misogyny is an indisputable component in this model of contained masculinity.

Ironically, the mainstream culture’s distinction between “real” and “fake” men is precisely what has incited rage in Chin, but only because the mainstream’s distinction has been made along racial lines. He writes in *The Big Aiiieeeeee!*

It is an article of white liberal American faith today that Chinese men, at their best, are effeminate closet queens like Charlie Chan and, at their worst, are homosexual menaces like Fu Manchu. No wonder David Henry Hwang’s derivative *M. Butterfly* won the Tony for the best new play of 1988. The good Chinese man, at his best, is the fulfillment of white male homosexual fantasy, literally kissing white ass. (xiii)

Fraught with homophobia, Chin’s rage doesn’t simply derive from the white man’s stereotype of Asian American manhood but also from Asian American men’s own subscription to it. It would become particularly maddening to Chin if he had any inkling, however slight, of the near totalizing extent of this stereotype, so much so that he himself has operated within its matrix as well, and that is exactly what Daniel Kim charges. In reading Chin’s “Riding the Rails with Chickencoop Slim,” Kim argues persuasively that Chin has put “his own libidinal investment in white men and the manhood they embody”; “his fervent loathing for Fu [Manchu] also expresses a kind of homophobic self-loathing: what he sees and hates in Fu—an eroticized desire for the white man—is something he sees and hates in himself” (286). Though a victim of this mainstream distinction between “real” and “sissy” men, Chin nevertheless reevokes the same divide in *Donald Duk* in his attempt to remasculinize its Chinese American male characters.

Buttressing Chin’s delineation of “real” Chinese manhood in *Donald Duk* is the intertextuality of another Chinese classic, *The Water Margin*. This warrior tale, which portrays 108 exiled and self-exiled renegades, whose code of ethics is nothing but fraternal loyalty, is essential for advancing *Donald Duk*’s narrative and for achieving its final resolution. This classic is also the source of the third father figure for Donald, Lee Kuey, representing another competing form of masculinity, the singularly *wu* model. At the onset of the novel is the description of the 108 balsa-wood model planes that King’s family is making. Each of
them is painted with the face of and named after one of the 108 warriors. King plans to fly these airplanes off Angel Island on the night of the fifteenth day, a day customarily called the Little New Year, and watch them burst into flames over the Pacific Ocean. Chin’s choice of Angel Island is patently significant as it is the most historical and thus most recognizable site where America has exercised its emasculating power over Chinese immigrants by confining, interrogating, traumatizing, and sometimes deporting them. What could be a better symbol of revenge than launching the 108 renegades, firing and afire, into the sky off Angel Island? Donald doesn’t understand yet the symbolic value of his father’s plan and steals one of the planes on New Year’s Eve for an early taste of the thrill. He sets it flying and in flame over the rooftops of San Francisco’s Chinatown. This stolen and consummated plane, bearing the nickname the Black Tornado, happens to be Lee Kuey’s, thus establishing Lee’s relationship with Donald early on in the narrative. Deserving the nickname, Lee Kuey is a killing machine and a dark and fearless devotee of the outlaw brotherhood in the marshes. Chin’s description of this mythical character runs amok. “All the Black Tornado’s muscles balloon and pull at their roots pounding rage. It’s the battle-axe freak who likes to run naked into one end of a battle and come out the other covered in layers of drying blood, with a bloody axe in each hand” (159). In this presentation of a warrior is an extravagant masculinity that Chin glorifies and covets. In a ventriloquist moment, Chin becomes Lee Kuey by having King declare publicly, “I wish Pearl Buck was alive and walk into my restaurant so I can cut out her heart and liver” (135).

Lee Kuey becomes the means of Donald’s final identification with the Chinese heroic wu tradition and thus instrumental to the young protagonist’s completion of the rite of passage. Like Kwan Kung, Lee appears in Donald’s dreams, demands Donald’s attention, and imparts lessons of pride and valor in his own right. “You better remember me!” Lee Kuey talks in a voice of crunching gravel, ‘Cuz I am out to get ya! I have the blood of punks like you drying into scabs all over my body!’” (114). Although Lee, invariably appearing in disarrayed, bloodied clothes with one axe over his shoulder and another in the other hand, is not exactly a model of manly responsibility, as Kwan is, he nevertheless exemplifies characteristics that are bedrocks of masculinity in both the East and the West, qualities such as valor, loyalty, and a big appetite.

Chin revises the classical character of Lee Kuey to enhance masculinity with the other extreme: undisciplined appetite. Lee boasts to Donald, “I am the only one to eat the flesh of his dead mother, because I was hungry and knew she loved me”—an episode Chin has invented despite the original character’s reputation as a filial son (159). The plot that Chin suppresses goes like this. One day Lee carries his mother over a mountain, and when his mother becomes thirsty, he leaves her sitting on a big rock while going off to find water. When
he returns, his mother is gone. Upon a closer look, he finds blood and shreds of clothing scattered in the rock’s vicinity. Following the blood trail, he comes to the opening of a cave where two tiger cubs are eating a human leg. He kills the cubs and their parents. On the surface, Chin’s deliberate reworking of this classical character serves to incarnate the male catechism: a man must do what he must do. In other words, a real man cannot be bothered by female scruples. But more disturbing is its deep, subliminal root in patriarchal religions that supplanted original matriarchal religions by killing and devouring the Mother Goddess (who bore variant names such as Isis, Demeter, Gaia, Shakti, Dakinis, Astarte, Ishtar, Nu Wa, Rhea, Nerthus, Brigid, and Danu). For instance, Zeus swallowed Metis, Goddess of Wisdom, when she was pregnant with Athena. Abundant in Greek mythology, Judeo-Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and many other religions are tales of slaying dragons and demonizing serpents. Prehistoric dragons and snakes, known as the energy source of life—“of healing and oracular power, fertility and maternal blessing” (Sjöö and Mor 251)—are often associated with female deities such as the Amazonian Medusa, the Chinese Nu Wa, and the Hebrew Lilith.

In light of these motifs of mother killing and devouring in the cultural landscape in which and against which Chin operates as a writer, his offering of a mother eater as a father figure cannot be read simply as an expression of male bravado. Male cannibalism, commencing with Zeus’ swallowing of the pregnant Metis and striking again recently in Thomas Harris’ character Hannibal Lecter, has been repeatedly reenacted in literary and cultural productions, including Chin’s own (such as “Eat and Run,” which I discuss in the next section). Carol Adams defamiliarizes us with the daily representations that collapse sexuality and consumption by unveiling the linguistic, imagistic, symbolic, and literal relationship of animal slaughter and meat consumption with violence against women. “Images of butchering suffuse patriarchal culture. A steakhouse in New Jersey was called ‘Adam’s Rib.’ […] The Hustler, prior to its incarnation as a pornographic magazine, was a Cleveland restaurant whose menu presented a woman’s buttocks on the cover and proclaimed, ‘We serve the best meat in town!’” (60). Although in Chin, Lee Kuey’s cannibalistic appropriation of his dead mother is empty of the connotation of sexual violence, the archetypal impulse to strangle and usurp the feminine power of creation is implicit. To devour Mother is to denounce one’s connection with the feminine and to usurp the maternal power in the attempt to give birth to oneself. (Zeus, after swallowing pregnant Metis, birthed from his head Athena, who became his mouthpiece. After killing Semele, the mother of his son Dionysus, Zeus sewed the fetus in his thigh for it to reach full term.) Chin furnishes Donald with four father figures that embody competing and yet overlapping masculinities. Their task is delivering him from his eroded
and threatened psyche and giving birth to a confident and proud Chinese American man. These father figures find no rivalry in the mother Daisy Duk, who effaces herself quite jocularly. Daisy, after all, is not meant to be a mother. With its unisexual origin in Walt Disney, the Disney Duck family knows no mother figure.

The father figure of Lee Kuey is indisputable, given claims to both Donald’s ancestral history and biology. Chin insists that Lee Kuey remains a hero in Chinese history despite his senseless killing of the innocent and has him proclaim, “I am the only one to murder a little boy and still be counted a hero. Because I did it out of stupid loyalty […], everything sort of worked out” (159–160). As it is, Chin also makes Lee Kuey Donald’s ancestor, for Uncle Donald Duk tells the child, “[Y]our Chinese name is not Duk, but Lee, Lee, just like Lee Kuey” (160). This blood connection entitles Lee to his claim to Donald’s education and well-being. Thus, he commands, “Don’t back away from me, boy. I thought you and me were alike, kid. Anger! Hate! I thrive on it” (160). Then “he pulls a red envelope out of his bag. ‘Goong hay fot choy!’” wishing Donald Happy New Year like a regular uncle (160).

The novel’s first resolution takes place at this moment, having established the kinship between our young protagonist and Lee Kuey, having succeeded in schooling Donald in the proper behavior and attitude that comport to masculine conduct, and having forged an ethnic identity secured in the Chinese heroic tradition. Hence, near the end of the novel, Chin revisits the scene of male competition (Donald’s encounter with the Chinatown “gang kids”) that initially demonstrates Donald’s “sissy” self (5). Donald watches a “tall thin Chinatown kid in a camouflage field jacket, military web belt with an army plastic canteen […], plastic helmet-liner and steel helmet […], blue jeans bloused into the top of highly polished black jump boots laced with white parachute cord […].” As this kid approaches, “Donald says, ‘Don’t mess with me,’ with his shoulders, his chest, his neck, his face, his eyes, and walks on. No one messes with him” (134).

Both Donald’s masculinization and ethnicization are partially made possible through an embedded discourse of food/appetite and masculinity, and this discourse becomes actualized in part by ridiculing women as well as by excluding their participation in food production and ethnic existential choices. In other words, the portrayal of women as culturally impoverished consumers is one of the necessary conditions for Chin’s restoration of Chinese American male dignity. His language describing the food practices in King’s kitchen evokes cooking’s affinity to martial arts and war. This affinity further disassociates the two kinds of cooking—restaurant and home cooking. The traditional divide between these two modes of the same activity solidifies the system of value in gendered labor. While restaurant cooking has been regarded as male
and professional, categorized as production and generating exchange value, cooking at home has been seen as female and domestic, thus belonging to the categories of reproduction and use value.\textsuperscript{15} Cooking at home as nonremunerative work does not even enter into the orthodox Marxist analysis of labor and capital. Chin’s masculinization of King’s kitchen not only relies on the gendered divide between professional and domestic cooking but also attempts to banish the association of cooking with women by excluding Donald’s mother and twin sisters from productive labor. Rather, they are but passive consumers.

As representatives of passive consumers, these women necessarily lack individuality. All three female members of the Duk family are given identical character traits, so identical that it is hard to tell them apart; they are cheerful, uncomplicated, theatrical, cartoon funny, callow, and whitewashed. Eileen Fung points out that Daisy Duk’s “subjectivity—if there is any sense of that at all—stems from her theatrical impersonations of performers in American cinema (i.e. Greta Garbo, Katherine Hepburn), which further reinforces her distance from Chinese traditions and cultures” (262). With the erasure of her ethnicity, Daisy Duk must relinquish her parental responsibility toward her son and must leave his ethnicization to her very ethnic husband, to Kwan Kung, to Uncle Donald, and to the mother eater Lee Kuey.

Indeed, none of the women agonize over their ethnic or cultural identity as their men do. Their primary presence in the novel comes through their naïve bantering with each other and cute interjections into men’s conversation. Chin describes, “The twins often talk as if everything they hear everybody say and see everybody do is dialog in a memoir they’re writing or action in a play they’re directing.”\textsuperscript{16} This makes Mom feel like she’s on stage and drives Donald Duk crazy.”

“Is that Chinese psychology, dear?” Daisy Duk asks.
“Daisy Duk inquires,” says Penelope Duk.
“And Little Donnie Duk says, Oh, Mom! and sighs.”
“I do not!” Donald Duk yelps at the twins.
“Well, then, say it,” Penelope Duk says. “It’s a good line […].”
[…]
“I thought it was narrative,” Venus says.
“Listen up to some Chinese psychology, girls and boys,” Daisy Duk says.
“No, that’s not psychology, that’s Bugs Bunny,” Dad says.
“You don’t mean Bugs Bunny, dear. You always make that mistake.”
“Br’er Rabbit!” Dad says. (5–6)

Although this dialogue also presents King in a somewhat cartoonish manner, his characterization gets plenty of time and space to develop into a unique
individual. Yet the Duk women remain flat and stunted throughout the novel. Fung correctly charges that Chin denies these women “any sense of human authenticity” (263).

As their characterization precludes much possibility of agency, these women serve to set off the men as agents, producers, and providers. King’s kitchen regularly feeds crowds of diners, and when it is closed for the New Year holiday it offers free dinner to more than “150” relatives and friends at one time (31). Such a highly productive site banishes the association of cooking with domesticity. In creating such a situation, Chin places women outside the kitchen and assigns them the position of passive consumers. Except for one occasion in which Daisy is found “shelling shrimp, busting crab, blanching chickens for Dad to finish and sauce in the woks,” all the women in the novel are denied participation in the now masculine economy of cooking and feeding (69). King as the primary producer/provider not only cooks for armies of people but also offers free food to the community. The Frog Twin sisters “wait outside Dad’s restaurant when the garbage is put out. Now and then, when Dad knows they are out in the alley, he gives them a fresh catfish to take home” (10). On New Year’s Day, King drops fifty-pound sacks of rice at his neighbors’ doorsteps. As Chin bestows the glory of generosity on King, he assigns the disgrace of being charity cases to women. Fung writes of Donald Duk,

Here, the ethnic men are both laborers and consumers, displacing the ethnic women from both public and domestic work as well as denying them their consumption. As the men construct a kind of social reality based on the context of market economy and nationalist discourse, the women, like food, embody exchange and fetishistic values. In other words, the process of producing and consuming food constructs complex power dynamics based on gender and class differences that ultimately lead to a language of legitimacy and exclusion: namely, deciding who gets to obtain, cook, and/or eat food signals an economy of power, exchange, and desire. (256)

Chin’s presentation of cooking as masculine/productive labor in this novel engenders a class divide and thus an economy of asymmetrical power relationships between men and women, between the working and the nonworking, between producers and consumers, and between consumers and charity cases. One may argue that the masculinization of cooking succeeds in breaking down the binary between the public and the private in blurring the distinction between home and restaurant. It is precisely through this breakdown, however, that Chin exiles the Duk women from their traditionally gendered space without offering them an alternative location for meaningful labor and subject formation.
Appetite, Trains, and Masculinity

The demonstration of masculinity via disciplined appetite as exercised by King during his preparation to impersonate the god of war and literature disturbingly accompanies another masculinity of undisciplined appetite, embodied by Lee Kuey, who brags about his cannibalization of his dead mother. Both models register masculine prowess in Chin's gender imaginary. A flippant, undisciplined, and corporeal masculinity finds its playground in Chin's short story “Eat and Run,” in which indiscriminate appetite gauges the virility of a culture. Chin's narrator defines “Chinaman” this way:

We were the badasses of China, the barbarians far away from the high culture of the North [...] sending our fingers underground grubbing after eats. We were the dregs, the bandits, the killers, the get out of town eat and run folks, hungry all the time, eating after looking for food. Murderers and sailors. Rebel yellers and hardcore cooks. Our culture is our cuisine. There are no cats in Chinatown. [...] We eat toejam, bugs, leaves, seeds, birds, bird nests, treebarks, trunks, fungus, rot, roots, and smut and are always on the move, fingerling the ground, on the forage, embalming food in leaves and seeds, on the way, for the part of the trip when all we'll have to eat on the way will be mummies, and all the time eating anything that can be torn apart and put in the mouth, looking for new food to make up enough to eat. [...] I'm proud to say my ancestors did not invent gunpowder but stole it. If they had invented gunpowder, they would have eaten it up sure, and never borne this hungry son of a Chinaman to run. (11)

This equation of an exotic (peasant) cuisine with Chinatown culture has its class orientation, differentiating “the barbarians” from “the high culture” of Confucianism, whose ideal, couched in the wen-over-wu (culture-over-valor) paradigm, is often represented in the West as soft masculinity. The Analects states, “The master said of the shao [music] that it was perfectly beautiful and perfectly good but of the wu that it was perfectly beautiful but not perfectly good” (Lau III.25.71). In the Confucian classic Spring and Autumn Annals, it is said, “The virtues of wen are superior, the greatness of wu is lower, and this has always and will always be the case” (qtd. in K.Louie 18). Chin's description of tough Chinamen as bandits and murderers contemptuous of the elite Confucian culture resonates with his essay “Come All Ye Asian American Writers of the Real and the Fake,” in which he chooses to militarize Confucianism, insisting that Asian children grow up with “the Confucian ethic of private revenge” (The Big Aiiieeeееееee! 34). This revision energizes Chin's mantras: “Life is war. Every human is born a soldier.” “All art is martial art. Writing is fighting” (xv, 35). Interestingly,
Chin unifies the wen-wu dyad in this moment by equating the scholar with the soldier, rather than balancing the two, in order to make Confucian masculinity resemble the Western normative masculinity, rendering brain equivalent to brawn. Chin's unification of the wen-wu dyad also directly subverts the Chinese literary tradition of scholar-and-beauty romance in which a pale-faced scholar falls in love with a beautiful girl. In this tradition, masculinity and sexual attraction reside in the scholar's intellectual ability or artistic creativity rather than in his physical strength, wealth, or political power. To assert a masculine dignity that is acceptable in the West, Chin must turn the scholar into a soldier.

Chin's maneuver invites further meditation on food. If our cuisine is our culture and our culture is Confucian, then his logic follows that the way we eat is inseparable from the ethic of revenge and war. This masculinized complex of gender, food, and culture finds its precursor in Chin's play, The Chickencoop Chinaman, in which the emasculation of the Chinese male is allegorized by the reference to the protagonist Tam as a dish. Via an alimentary metaphor, Tam remarks on the futility of racial mimicry. “My whiteness runneth over and blackness . . . but people still send me back to the kitchen” (63)—a dish being sent back to the kitchen for being underdone (too white) or overdone (too black). Chin's play concludes with Tam entering the kitchen, where he recalls the Iron Moonhunter; thus he is connected with the heroic in his Chinese American forefathers, a forefather figure that he had been seeking erroneously through the black boxer and Charley Popcorn. It is in the kitchen, too, that Tam appears to realize an identity for himself as a food provider (hence a father figure). This conclusion anticipates the appearance of a new Chinese American chef figure, King Duk, who is a father, a warrior, and an actor as well.

In contrast to King, the narrator of “Eat and Run” enacts a diasporic breed of masculinity that can trace its sources to both East and West through the signifiers of appetite and trains. Both versions are heteromasculine in surfeit, defined by unappeasable hunger, as though masculinity is consolidated only through the consumption of a female body. The story begins with the hyperbolic trope of food and appetite that not only casts the Chinese subject as male but also attributes to it a hypermasculine quality—aggressive potency. Chin's alimentary figuring of the Asian American male subject can be interpreted as an act of transcoding, which Stuart Hall defines as “taking an existing meaning and re-appropriating it for new meanings” (“The Spectacle of the ‘Other’ ” 270). Inescapably operating from the maxim of white masculinity (“T.V. movies were in my blood” [“Eat and Run” 10]), Chin transcodes the cowboy ethos of guns, horses, and solitude to bizarre food matters, bottomless stomachs, and indiscriminate appetite, and he encodes this new Asian American masculinity with a mighty power residing within the physiology of its male body rather than in weaponry. Although not a radical departure from the cowboy cliché, which also
aggrandizes the male body’s power and stamina, Chin’s transcoding of masculine prowess via food and appetite nevertheless subverts the white masculinity in its self-deprecating and ironic tones: “I’m proud to say my ancestors did not invent gunpowder but stole it. If they had invented gunpowder, they would have eaten it up sure” (11).

Such transcoding, however, goes only so far in challenging the hegemonic codes of masculinity. More than having a subversive value, Chin’s endeavor unwittingly collaborates with the very discourse he intends to combat in that the relationship between appetite and sexuality is a stable fixture in Western culture. Carol Counihan, in her study of European women’s fasting, points out the long-standing association of sexuality with the appetite for food and the limited space in which women were permitted to exercise agency in dominating their bodies through controlling their appetite (105–106). Similarly, Victorian culture also regarded appetite as a barometer of sexuality (109). Chin’s picture of a culture and its people who frantically convert nature into nourishment that enables them to “run in your mother country like a virus staying a step ahead of a cure” invites this very association; eating and running and eating around the clock are unmistakable acts of masculine aggression as well as transgression that are appropriate for “bandits,” “killers,” and “[m]urderers” (“Eat and Run” 11). In this context, the concept of “[f]ood pornography” seems apt in describing the sexualized relationship between the eaters and their food (“Railroad Standard Time” 3).

In this story the Chinese gustatory prowess and gastronomic indiscrimination symbolize the virility and sexual appetite essential in Occidental masculinity. Knowingly or unknowingly, Chin also falls back into the masculinist discourse of ancient Chinese *ars erotica*, which teaches men how to bring women to orgasm without themselves emitting semen, thereby converting female fluids into nourishment. Van Gulik explains a standing belief in Chinese sexology that “during the sexual union the man’s vital force is fed and strengthened by that of the woman, supposed to reside in her vaginal secretions” (17, emphasis mine). Judith Farquhar correctly points out that in this belief “nurture life” (*yang sheng*), not pleasure, is its primary concern (although in practice pleasure is essential to the production of the vital force, *jing*), and it is the health of the males that is the gravitating center in this sexual/medical discourse. The mutual production of *jing* in coitus benefits men only when ejaculation is interrupted, with *jing* being “a fundamental substance that constitutes and maintains the living body” (Farquhar 265). All benefits (men gain) in this practice are strictly dependent on a man’s abstinence, a virtue Chin celebrates in his characterization of both King and Kwan Kung.

Contextualized in this Chinese tradition, Chin’s masculinization of Asian American males via food and appetite can be interpreted to hinge on the
conversion of the feminine into nourishment. What becomes compelling in the juxtaposition of Donald Duk to “Eat and Run” is the apparent intertextuality between Lee Kuey’s cannibalistic appropriation of his dead mother and Chin’s analogy of the Chinaman to a virus parasitic on the “mother country.” Implicit in the gendering and sexualizing of food and appetite is a not-all-metaphorical subthesis that the masculine consumes the feminine (nature and women). Here, masculinity takes on the forms of an unappeasable hunger that devours whatever lies in its way and of a tough digestive system that metabolizes all that it encounters.

“Eat and Run,” after its presentation of a spectacle of Chinese gastronomic excesses, enters into the narrative of a literal sexual metabolism enacted by the male narrator upon a former Catholic nun named Lily. The language describing the sexual act is couched in that of food and appetite. “I rolled over onto her sandy breasts, her sandy belly, her sandy thighs, and stuck it in. […] my grumbling snarling stomach wringing itself out after food. […] All around sizzling meat. […] going and going with my thing […] pointing it into the sound of a stove cooking up a feast” (13–15). With this imbricated language of sex and food, Chin participates in the patriarchal traditions (of both the East and West) in which the female body assumes food metaphors to be sampled and devoured by men. Not only is Lily’s body narrated as “sizzling meat” and “a stove cooking up a feast,” but she is made an active and willing participant in her own consumption. Lily initiates the sexual act by moving “her hand back and forth, flat, round and round my breast, sanding off a nipple. She breathed in my ear, put her tongue inside, dribbled beer off her kiss” (10). Symbolic of her bodily fluids (jing) that are famed for their nourishing properties, she “poured Primo beer down her belly to wash my prick off on the outstroke” (13–14).

The male narrator, fully conscious of the allegory of sex for consumption, momentarily confuses the consumer with the consumed—“Her twat was feeding on me” (23)—but soon the confused state mutates back to the paradigm of the male consuming the female through a reevocation of the initial spectacle of exotic food that defines a masculine Chinese culture. “It [her twat] gnawed on me with fat lips, bone gums, bombardments of marshmallows, rosy slugs, swelling dough” (23). Chin’s linguistic contortion disguises this inequitable sexual relation between the consumer and the consumed by a brief illusion of circularity: he consumes her and she feeds on him. Yet the unmistakable conversion of her body to “bone gums,” “marshmallows,” “rosy slugs,” and “swelling dough” directs the image of consumption to his eating of her. Consequently, Lily’s body-turning-into-food-matter empowers male virility and inflames Chin’s language to such an uncontrollable extent as to become an unabashed, hilarious male fantasy. “The beer down my spine killed everything
of me but my prick. The prick that grew bigger than New York and nudged the
moon in outer space was loose” (23).

Food, sex, and male virility in both Donald Duk and “Eat and Run” are
major motifs that enact the masculine discourse of violence, whether con-
tained or unleashed. Its enactment happens through an association, both meta-
phorical and literal, of food, cooking, and eating with what Viet Thah Nguyen
describes as “the performance of violence by the male body” (134). In the
previous section, I have demonstrated how Chin transforms the kitchen into a
masculine space underscored by the references to war and martial arts. Similar
strategies are employed in “Eat and Run,” and the male narrator in this story
performs his masculinity by evoking the signifier of trains as male violence and
virility. “Eat and Run” makes a collage of food, sex, and trains that attests to
the sexual aggression of the narrator. Soon into the story he declares, “I am the
Iron Moonhunter mounted in the cab, rigged for silent running” (8). Chin’s
Iron Moonhunter, a significant symbol for Asian American manhood, appears
first in The Chickencoop Chinaman. Tam tells the story in act 2:

“[G]randmaw heard thunder in the Sierra [. . .] and listened for the Chinaman-
known Iron Moonhunter, that train built by Chinamans who knew they’d
never be given passes to ride the rails they laid. So of all American railroaders,
only they sung no songs, told no jokes, drank no toasts to the ol’ iron horse,
but stole themselves some iron on the way, slowly stole up a pile of steel [. . .]
builted themselves a wild engine to take them home.” (31)

At the end, afflicted with both racial and gender anxiety, Tam reaches a resolu-
tion by marrying the kitchen to this uniquely Chinese American train story.
While he “works out with the cleaver on green onions,” he declares, “a China-
man borne, high stepping Iron Moonhunter, lifting eagles with its breath! [. . .]
Listen, children, I gotta go. Ride Buck Buck Bagaw with me . . . Listen in the
kitchen for the Chickencoop Chinaman slowin on home” (63, 65, 66). The
Iron Moonhunter returns to “Eat and Run” as “the vengeance train” and brings
home both the narrator and Grandfather (16). “Ride with me, Grandfather.
Going home, Grandfather, highballing the gate down straight rail to Oakland”
(8). By summoning the narrator’s grandfather to take a ride with him, Chin
assigns the narrator the task of assuming the collective body of “Chinamen.”
The narrator’s sexual encounter with Lily, therefore, becomes a collective act, if
not of all Chinese American men, at least of him and Grandfather. The fantastic
language, in which sex, food, and trains cut and spill into each other, pictures
the male body as a potent machine, an engine unstoppable in its racing and
“digging” (13).
Inside her twat was like I was mixing concrete. It was wet cement and sand inside there. I moved back and then I moved in, in cold blood, in and out, fascinated with the motion, pistoning grit, digging an escape tunnel out of camp, banging down the right of way, going home, Grandfather. This is my ancient ship. The Iron Moonhunter is out of the devil’s roundhouse, called out to roll a Chinaman Special down the mainline home, out of the mountains of night. (13)

Even Lily’s body takes on a machine-like quality—“her oily aluminum skin,” “[h]er cunt clutches me like a baseball bat”—to serve as the instrument of masculine assertion (9, 14). Lost in his train fantasy of power and velocity, the narrator “grunted while […] fucked. Fucked and grunted, beating up a railroad song to make sense of this Hawaii” (13).

Engaged in sex, the narrator rides and becomes the Iron Moonhunter all at once. In a seamless manner, his narration races from sex to trains and back to sex again. “I ran it in a long time, panting behind my dong, exploring the terrible length of her cavernous sigh with it, pushing toward the source of her heat. […] Highballing deep into the night […]. Making the stillness whistle off the shells of my ears with my speed” (15). After this, the narrative flashes back to a literal train ride. Like the author, the narrator is “[t]he first Chinaman to brake on the Southern Pacific line” (15). A long reverie cuts into the scene of sex: the narrator “was off the train” and walks through the “railyards,” bursting with pride (16). When the narrative returns to the present, the narrator has morphed into a train himself. “My blood has turned into thin gas” (17). When Lily speaks and interrupts his fantasy, he screams, “Shuddup! […] Don’t talk to me” (17). Within this brief moment of narrative rupture from the railroad memory, the narrator is transformed into a bandit and Lily into a hostage. The scene of sex takes a step closer to real violence. Just as if the interruption didn’t occur, his reverie returns to the railroad without a gap. The language of trains now, however, reverberates with sexual innuendo.

The loudness of our four locomotives […] increased […] the rising pitch of vibrations and concussive thunders that reached right through the flesh and clutched the heart and deeper into the valves of the heart, the lips of the valves. […] The racket of the engines had settled into my flesh, my muscle, all of me and become the sounds of me alive. (17)

Appropriate to the coupling of trains and sex, the narrative goes on to describe a scene of violence in sexually charged language. Shannon, the narrator’s co-worker, in the process of “coupling” two cars, becomes “coupled up” himself and dies a violent death (18). Chin’s diction blatantly associates male
sexuality with trains and sex with violence. As if the language of coupling were inadequate for this association, the narrator moves on to tell us of his drunken self who couples with Shannon’s widow. “[T]hat night! That night! I learned once and for all that I am rotten to the core, and she was too. Well, after we proved that, to get the smell […] to […] come clean, we went swimming bar-eass naked” (19). With all of the imaginative leaps between times, trains and sex, the female body and nature, Lily’s “twat” and food, violence and virility, the narrative predictably gravitates toward one maxim—the aggrandizement of masculine aggression.

Just as the sign of trains travels between male sexuality and violence, so does the sign of the female body vacillate between nourishment and danger, between food and eater. Lily’s body becomes equated to nature that feeds and comforts as well as threatens to harm the narrator. “Her body, the moon, the beach, breath, splash, sea heaving, through the sand, her body all one, grinding in my euphoric hunger pangs” (14). The ambiguity of Lily’s body as a sign serves both to propel the surreal morphing of Chin’s imageries and to denote the danger of female power. The transcultural misogynistic discourse warning men of the threat of women is rich in references to food and consumption. The danger of the feminine materializes either through the incorporation of inedible or tabooed food into the male body or through the consumption of male virility by women. In the West, other than the biblical story of the Fall in which a fruit becomes the incriminating evidence against Eve, it is the lore of witches and witchcraft that best demonstrates this discourse. After all, the witch is a cook who stews natural ingredients into potions that heal, transform, or kill when necessary. According to Neumann, the witch’s three-legged cauldron has been a symbol of female transforming power; “the magical caldron or pot is always in the hand of the female mana figure, the priestess, or, later, the witch” (288). The witch threatens the patriarchal power so much that she is called “an anti-cook” (Fischler 284). Only in a culture in which female transforming power is feared is there a frenzy to identify and eliminate witches. Their shamanic practices have presented such peril to the male institutions of medicine and cuisine that witches are perceived as a diabolic antithesis to health and epicurism. Although an admirable scholar, Fischler collaborates with this patriarchal interpretation. He notes that “cookery […] serves to tame the wild, threatening forces that inhabit nature and the universe, the same ones that the witch’s anti-cookery is able to unleash” (285). In this contrast between cookery and anticookery, cuisine takes on a masculine identity (“to tame the wild”) in distinction from the female form—the witch’s malicious mimicry of cookery.

The fear of female power in classical Chinese culture finds expressions in the figure of a glutinous female ghost or fox spirit who preys on pale-looking and romantic male scholars. In the famed Qin collection of ghost tales, Liao
zhai zhi yi, female ghosts in the form of beautiful maidens seduce sedentary young men, ironically the future of the Chinese patriarchy, who have been slaving over the four great books in order to score well in the civil service exam and therefore to obtain official positions. Once they succeed, and they always do, these beautiful maidens take on vampiric qualities and consume their victims. Through sexual intercourse, they extract male virility to nourish and empower themselves, a fact frighteningly antithetical to traditional Chinese ars erotica that values the very opposite.

Straddling both Eastern and Western cultures and their mythical and literary traditions, Chin projects his misogynous fear in infusing the description of sex with motifs of ghosts and vampires. “We were corpses skull to skull, full of worms, adjoining buildings in an earthquake. Bats in the upper hollows. Wrestlers grunted and smacked the floor with their bodies. Footsteps click out of the dark of a long corridor” (14). Chin’s ambivalence toward the female body, both an object to be acted upon to demonstrate heteromasculine prowess and an agent that presents peril to the male body, results in a dizzying narrative. “Exploding war all around. […] I heard the rumble before maniacal laughter. […] Something coming, I heard, too late to get out of the way” (14). Chin’s narrative breathlessly enacts the most staple motifs in the lore of witches and vampires, with “worms,” “bats,” “corpses,” “skull,” and “maniacal laughter” driving the narrator’s sexual act violently frantic. Out of this symbolic war between the two characters, the narrator or (shall we say?) Chin emerges triumphant, replete with all the masculine glory deemed necessary in his gender imaginary. “I’d been Shanghaied by my monster dong that was rocketing me away with one long hysterical streamline sensation toward parts unknown. I was the great rider, Jonah in the whale, a load of shot in my dad’s primed hardon pumping grease out of Ma’s little cunt that night in a backyard chicken-coop, in Chinatown, Oakland, California” (23). The collective act of masculine assertion is therefore accomplished in this completion of a circle beginning with Grandpa and ending with the conception of the narrator himself. One cannot help detecting, however, an undertone of caution in Chin’s last image of the narrator being “Shanghaied” by his “monster dong.” Too much corporeality can result in deviancy and loss of control, thus not being a “real” man. Set alongside the martial arts ideal of self-discipline, we may interpret the East as the repository of “real” men exemplified by King and his mythical counterpart, Kwan Kung.

Chin seems to be traversing in a contradictory field of competing masculinities in the hope of finding or negotiating an alternative model that restores masculine dignity to the Asian American man while still affirming his “yellow pride” (Ho 29). As admirable and necessary as this project is, it is, however, sadly trapped in a diasporic cross fire of masculinities, without one that is
sensitive to women and nature. Concretized by food references, this project becomes unfortunately pinioned to many conventional traits of patriarchy and machismo. In “Eat and Run,” he offers the narrator’s sexual encounter as a voyeur’s feast. Yet it is a feast prepared by men to benefit men as it glorifies the submission and the objectification of women and as it proves the power of masculinity via aggressive and indiscriminate appetite, velocity, and violence. Although Chin’s beefing up of culinary arts in *Donald Duk* promises a departure from U.S. hegemonic patriarchy, which has emasculated Asian American men precisely through their association with food service, his narrative remains irresistibly drawn to existing discourses of masculinity. Cuisine and appetite in Chin solidify rather than dismantle a transcultural paradigm of patriarchy by equating cooking with martial arts, by relegating women to the positions of consumers and charity cases, and by converting the feminine into food matter that fuels the masculine subject formation of Asian American males.

It becomes apparent that the intersection between ethnicity and masculinity is a site of conflicts and contradictions. To further complicate their relationship, I next introduce the issue of class, because race/ethnicity often determines class position and in turn class and race/ethnicity often affect gender formation. These three are generally inseparable in the study of ethnic literature. In the next chapter I juxtapose these three forces in the lives of the male characters in David Wong Louie’s culinary novel *The Barbarians Are Coming.*