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Interview with Marilyn Chin

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Marilyn Chin has been inventing a literature of Pacific Rim cultural assimilation, resistance, and hybridization throughout a distinguished career as one of the leading authors of her generation, but perhaps never more so than in her genre-bending first novel, *Revenge of the Mooncake Vixen* (2009). Always a prolific experimenter, Chin here constructs a new kind of pastiche fiction, a feminist magical realism built from both ancient Chinese erotic ghost tales and contemporary Asian and American (manga, kung fu) character concepts, spun through narrative modes ranging from Buddhist tales and Zen texts to other Chinese folktales, animal fables, and revenge tales—all within an overarching picaresque. Through the multiplicity and open-endedness of this hybrid genre, Chin finds a formal and tonal equivalent to the assimilative tensions and disequilibria lived out by her characters, featuring especially her decadent, precocious, part-superhero twin Southern California protagonists, Moonie and Mei Ling in *Revenge of the Mooncake Vixen*, and the novel's anchor, their “cleaver-wielding” (53) family matriarch, Grandma Wong. In the Mark Twain mode of culturally explosive comic novels, Chin's characters struggle with psychologically brutal forms of exile, racism, and sexism—all within the context of multiple patriarchies, absurd generation gaps, and the equally unsettling vagaries of new world decadence.

Born in Hong Kong and raised in Portland, Oregon, Chin has created poetry collections that are Asian American classics, featured in numerous anthologies—including *The Norton Anthology of Literature by Women* (1985), *The Norton Anthology of Modern and Contemporary Poetry* (2003), *Anthology of Modern American Poetry* (1999), *Unsettling America: An Anthology of Contemporary Multicultural Poetry* (1994), and *The Open Boat: Poems from Asian America* (1993). She was also featured in Bill Moyers's PBS series and companion anthology, *The Language of Life: A Festival of Poets* (1995). Throughout Chin's career as a writer—starting with *Dwarf Bamboo* (1987) and especially with the publication of

her second and third poetry collections, *The Phoenix Gone, The Terrace Empty* (1994) and *Rhapsody in Plain Yellow* (2002)—Chin has steadily gained a reputation for artistic range and accomplishment: for hybrid forms that draw from both Chinese and Western poetic traditions, for a voice that moves from tenderness to searing irony, and for her elegant and eloquent subversion. Chin's is not a poetry satisfied with standard forms of lament, homage, or irony (although each tone is foregrounded). Rather, she conjures an overarching tone of satiation and determination—less the groan under empire, more the yawp of a fierce resistance—for her mother, her grandmother, and her soul. Multiple exiles (political, cultural, familial, and linguistic) haunt Chin's poems and her new novel; all in turn shimmer with original and potent voicings. In *Revenge of the Mooncake Vixen*, Chin's vision remains edgy-feminist, often sobering, yet formally and tonally dizzying and ebullient, again marked by a range that can at once ennoble her subjects with high lament or pierce them with searing irony or raucous parody.

Always a fan, but now captivated by her switch to tale spinning and this new penchant for comedy, in the summer of 2009, I spoke with Marilyn Chin about *Revenge of the Mooncake Vixen*, including its manuscript history and the evolution of the novel's characters and experimental form; its use of parody and other comic elements; and its literary, political, and feminist roots and contexts. We also spoke about that most basic context of all: what is a poet doing writing fiction, anyway?¹

Ken Weisner: Marilyn, there's much we want to ask you about your genre-bending debut novel, *Revenge of the Mooncake Vixen*. Since the book was ten years in the making, first of all, congratulations on the persistence and daring that brought you, an accomplished poet, to undertake an experimental novel. You call *Revenge of the Mooncake Vixen* a novel. Did you always think of it that way? Tell us a little bit about how the book came into being.

Marilyn Chin: I began with one tale, "Moon," which was published in an anthology called *Charlie Chan is Dead* [1993]. Then, I started to build pieces and characters around it. Moon transformed into Moonie; then Moonie morphed into a twin to Mei Ling. I started playing with ancient Buddhist tales, and I stuck these wild girls into them with their cleaver-wielding grandmother. Then, I layered the tales with the idea of reincarnated animals and brought in a layer of secondary characters. I thought that I was writing a book of interlinking tales. My editor Jill Bialosky at Norton

decided to call it a novel, and . . . although it is nonlinear, it does follow the girls from adolescence to adulthood. On a basic level it is a coming-of-age immigrant tale, made up of forty-one episodes, vignettes, fables, and allegories of varying lengths and degrees of wildness. I just wanted to keep going, telling outrageous tale after tale. It was fun and addictive. I kept the best tales and threw out the weaker ones. It was a miracle that it all came together into an integrated whole.

I believe that the form of this novel is like a transformer puzzle. One can look at the book as an integral novel—and that can work—but if you want to take shards and pieces out to teach or to savor, that's great, too, because each piece is crafted to have its own mischief and integrity. It could be taught as a novel or as a collection of flash fiction. As the tale spinner, I just wanted to keep the fun going.

Revenge of the Mooncake Vixen could overlap many terrains: it could be appreciated by religious studies and classical Asian studies enthusiasts, feminist and chick-lit readers, post-colonialists and Asian Americanists, and it could be read as just bad-girl, sexy fun, with tons of playful jokes and jabs hurling at you continuously.

KW: Throughout *Revenge of the Mooncake Vixen*, twins Moonie and Mei Ling, your precocious and part-superhero protagonists, battle many evils: ubiquitous sexism, racism, and exoticism; temptations of American decadence; their own vengeful and lustful urges; overwhelming assimilationist forces; and absent and overmastered parents, not to mention a majestic, cleaver-wielding grandmother. How and why did you settle on the idea of protagonist twins as a way to tell this story? For its comic and symbolic possibilities? Also, please sort out for us the twins, Moonie and Mei Ling—and perhaps how they relate to your own life—for a reader who may be new to the novel or even to your work as a whole.

MC: Don't you love the idea of twins? Twins—multiple births, quads, quint, sextuplets, octo-girls, are all the new rage, the magical gifts of fertility drugs. Multiple births are the new mysterious other. They will certainly vivify the diverse landscape of twenty-first-century America. Twins are part of the double consciousness expressed by [W. E. B.] Du Bois. The dominant world can never understand them. Goodness, they have their own languages and inscapes. They're the unity of opposites: the yin/yang, parity/duality—Chinese fearful symmetry: double the happiness, double the fun; double the hated mouths to feed in a poor family.

They are two sides of the integral self. Mei Ling is all hetero-Dionysian appetite and unconscious desire. Very bold, bad-girl American, yet very

classical Chinese, from the erotic tradition of ghost tales and vixens in vernacular novels and of contemporary and ancient manga and kung fu novels.

Moonie is Amazon lesbo but is the stoic, cautious Apollonian and is the conscience of the pair. She is Mei Ling's nemesis and fierce protector. Mei Ling is girlie-glam and self-absorbed, and Moonie is an athletic tomboy and shaves her head, always ready for war. They are not exactly ego and id oppositional forces; they are inextricably bound by blood and history. They both contest the stereotype of the passive, submissive Chinese female. They are impolite, and they talk back and wage war against their oppressors.

The characters were torn out of my own flesh. My Chinese birth name is Mei Ling. Remember my poem, "How I Got That Name," in which I declared to the reading public, "I am Marilyn Mei Ling Chin"? The tongue-in-cheek Mei Ling in that name is transmogrified into the book's vixen. Secretly, I have always wanted to be a devil-may-care, libidinous creature, but my Moonie side always pulls me back, forces me to finish my chores, and makes me behave. In real life, I have two sisters. Neither of them is very wild right now, but don't put us three on the same stage. We could be a wild, potent force. We could walk into a room and explode it with continuous performances. One of us might "moon" an unsuspecting male nemesis at any moment.

KW: In addition to being a delicious satire, *Revenge of the Mooncake Vixen* is also an earnest and moving homage to stalwart Grandma Wong (Granny, the Great Matriarch), who is the girls' conscience, cook, and protector, and she wields a potent and unflinching cleaver in the face of legion enemies. To be sure, Grandma has her own questionable qualities in the face of great oppression and anxiety. But she also stands out as probably the novel's truest superhero—as a worker, woman, grandmother, immigrant, and member of carefully particularized communities of both women and men. Is your novel's homage to Grandma Wong—her forms of wildness, compassion, daring, and strength—actually closest to the center of your undertaking here?

MC: Granny Wong is the true hero of the book: she is matriarch/goddess/kung fu master/restaurant entrepreneur/community leader/possibly a killer. She is both magical and hyperreal, as she is created after my own fierce, cleaver-wielding grandmother. She haunts us in life and in death—her voice in the cell phone and in our nightmares. She reminds us that we are tied to our ancestors and history in amazing ways.

In many immigrant families, the grandmother is a very important figure, and she could be the single reason why a family thrives or fails. Look at the Obama family. The very first thing they do is to move in the grandmother. She is the supreme caretaker of the children. Working American parents are often too busy to take care of the dailiness of raising children. I am trying to raise awareness about grandmothers; globally, grandmothers must take over the childrearing because of war, AIDS, poverty, drugs, and trauma. Often, they alone must deliver the next generation. I want to pay homage to these underappreciated women. I want to pay homage to all grandmothers, but not without some ambivalence. The cleaver is not a paper cleaver, it is sharp and brutal. The secret to the success of some Asian American families is the brutal suppression of girls and children. My grandmother wanted obedience, success, and straight-A grades and would have severed one of our limbs if we tarnished her objectives for the family. She was all tough love.

KW: *Revenge of the Mooncake Vixen* transparently seeks to advance feminist discourse with ambition, not unlike *The Woman Warrior* [1975]. But your novel is also absurd, fundamentally parodic, and breaks cultural silences (creating heroines who do so) in ways that often make us roll our eyes. Can a work as ironic and self-deconstructing as this still brand itself as feminist? The revenges undertaken are frequently portrayed as adolescent, comic strip, or caricatured, and yet the book is tinged by an underlying female audacity and brilliance of imagination that stays with the reader. In addition, Grandma Wong's world presents a vital counterpoint, inclusive of and compassionate to men as well as women. Do you see *Revenge of the Mooncake Vixen* as part of the great tradition of North American feminist novels written by women of color—or a departure from it?

MC: I wrote this book partly for a younger generation of women readers: my students and my nieces—their beautiful ilk! I want to engage with third-wave feminist readers who might listen to Bikini Kill, rap, and Mozart simultaneously. They mix signs, wearing high heels with tattoos and nose rings with corsages. They are openly bi: they have boyfriends, girlfriends, and “friends with benefits.” They can say the words *ho* and *bitch* out loud and are able to neutralize their negative power against them. They read manga and Shakespeare, blog incessantly, and make handmade cards. [They are] techno-savvy, yet green and earth-conscious. They are bitchy and nice. They might eat potato chips for breakfast, sushi for lunch, and kimchee and cookies for dinner. They seem to wear the contradictions

beautifully and without fear. I really like this generation. Of course, they have taken for granted all of the hard work that other women/feminists have done before them, and that's their birthright, as far as I'm concerned. And I don't think that there are enough smart novels about or for these young women.

I, of course, was born out of the "second-wave," "woman-of-color" literary movement—we needed to be in-your-face serious to get a place at the table. At this point in my life—the "post-racial," "post-feminist" era (ha!)—I feel more courageous than ever. And I shall continue to write as a screaming feminist, but the term *feminist* has changed with the times—it's personal. It has evolved to a new hilarious phase in my life. At the apex of my creativity, I want to lace the message with unbridled laughter. All this said, women's issues are urgent human rights issues: all over the world women are being raped, murdered, and marginalized. Gynocide still exists in this world, and American writers must address these atrocities against women.

Regarding the North American "feminist" novel—as far as I'm concerned, as a Chinese American novelist, all roads return to the pioneering book *Woman Warrior* by Maxine Hong Kingston. *Revenge of the Mooncake Vixen* is a bad-girl, postmodern, absurdist update, only it's more extreme and it takes no prisoners. I am proud to be a part of a vibrant transnational feminist fiction tradition.

As for feminist fiction: just off the top of my head, I can name some favorites: Angela Carter's *Bloody Chamber* [1979], Luisa Valenzuela's *The Lizard's Tail* [1983], Toni Morrison's *Beloved* [1987], and Octavia Butler's *Kindred* [1979]. People forget that *The Color Purple* [1982] is an amazing epistolary novel, one of a kind. Tillie Olsen's *Tell Me a Riddle* [1956], Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* [1818], Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* [1969], and Leslie Silko's *Almanac of the Dead* [1991]. One can see that feminist fiction is various and waxes between formal realism and the magical and surreal. Feminist writers love to occupy this otherworldly space. I see *Revenge of the Mooncake Vixen* as part of the tradition of feminine magical realism. But, as always, my brand of magical realism has strong Chinese roots.

KW: One of your parodied Buddhist tales, "The Theory of the One Hand," records a catalogue of Grandma Wong's inspired castigations of the sexual adventures of her granddaughter Mei Ling. The tale ends like this: "The Great Matriarch says: I am not joking, girlchild. / The girlchild says: But it's all very funny. / The Great Matriarch says: No, it's not" (122). Much of *Revenge of the Mooncake Vixen* walks this tonal tightrope in terms of

how to think about the maw of assimilation, racism, multiple patriarchies, and absurd decadence and generational estrangements.

MC: Yes, indeed, all these issues are very important. The book tries to use humor and satire and in-your-face allegorical tropes to contemplate and deconstruct them. I offer the question: “Is it possible to rape a man?” (68). Rape is a historical and contemporaneous violent weapon against women. The very question has serious ramifications, and it makes the reader pause. Its irony is in your face.

At fourteen, I read Swift’s “A Modest Proposal,” where he uses the metaphor of devouring children as an extreme way to present their oppression. In my novel’s opening tale, Moon’s power decapitates a pair of blond boys who molested her. Is this manga justice? Many women have come up to me and told me that they were bullied in their youth because they were fat or brown, or because they were poor and spoke bad English. I believe that fiction is a valid podium for arguing important issues, which has always been my brand of political writing. The answer is that it is all terrible and it’s all ironic, and salting the wound with some dark humor deepens the assault. The art of satire is perilous and extreme, and it works best when the metaphors and images evoked are so terrifying that they make you laugh out for relief.

KW: Revitalization of genres and subgenres is central to your undertaking. As a poet, you’ve always been interested in creating hybrid forms to reflect the cultural collisions that you illuminate and analyze. Your use of a variety of narrative forms in the novel, including animal fables, parables, koans, ghost stories, folktales, revenge tales, and parodied Buddhist and Zen texts—as well as your overarching picaresque—work to mirror with pastiche and formal fracture the assimilative tension and fragmentation of your characters. In other words, your forms reflect your content; your scholarship and experimentation allow you to mirror in your forms some of the exasperations and absurdities of the lives of your characters. Of your animal tales section, titled “Beasts of Burden,” you write in your endnotes: “The pieces are allegorical fables, revitalized in the postcolonial and contemporary American context” (211). Could you talk about a few of the formal experiments that you felt were the most fun overall—and the most successful or fruitful?

MC: Ken, you and I both studied at Iowa with the master poet Donald Justice. I remember walking into his office with a loose ballad about “eating dog.” He first analyzed how well the poem used the ballad form, and

how it worked well to loosen the form. Then, he went through each quatrain and praised me for the effects line by line: caesura, balance of line, where line breaks were well done, where they needed mending. He didn't say anything about my using "eating dog" as a metaphor for the Chinese Cultural Revolution. As far as he was concerned, I could have used any extended metaphor I wanted. I could have been talking about eating ice cream, but it was important to him that in my handling of form and variation—line and stanza—my craft was able to withstand my content. I left his office feeling the weird joy of both being validated and misunderstood. But that's the Master's game—he never gives you everything. You have to figure things out yourself. If you look at my academic history, you might say that all of that hard work as a young poet helped me write this novel—my undergraduate work in classical Chinese introduced me to ancient Chinese tales. My lifelong work as a poet helped bring all the tools of the craft to the task.

A good writer must always negotiate form and content. We can say that this entire novel is a sampling of ideas and methods. Sometimes, just putting a Chinese girl in the picture is the perfect gesture, nothing more needed. For centuries, the Zen patriarch hits his young monk with a stick to break him from "conventional" thinking and to help him become instantly enlightened; it's fun for me to have Mei Ling do it by kicking up her pink Southern Californian flip-flops in church. She accomplishes in one absurd gesture what the boy acolytes have tried for ages.

In each piece, small or large, I calibrated the symmetrical or asymmetrical balance between the form and the content. Some short pieces are jokes with punch lines. And that is a trick I mastered through writing poetry—the reversal or the "ah ha moment" in the last couplet in a sonnet. And in some pieces, I compressed an all-powerful idea into a haiku.

The two longer pieces were definitely conscious formal experiments: "Oh Lord! Here Come the Double Happiness Twins" is a picaresque quest mocking *Don Quixote*; the two girls drive in circles in their restaurant's donkey van and perform vignette after vignette until dawn breaks. The episodic structure is mimetic of their silly day's journey.

I also love punning and planting clusters of recurring images and minor characters: a man dressed like Jesus appears in a longer vignette, and a gardener named Jesus appears in the last tale. A papier-mâché donkey appears in one tale, and a donkey who dresses up as a tigress appears in another. All this morphing, reappearing, and re-appropriating works with the Buddhist idea of reincarnation, the accumulating of past deeds, and the cycle of rewards and punishments. So the circular, nonlinear concept of the book itself is a formal proposition.

“Ten Views of the Flying Matriarch” introduces a lot of minor characters and is a piece with multiple points of view, [like] Akutagawa’s “Rashomon” [1915]—the restaurant sings a sestina, a cockroach scats, and a koi belts out a ballad. It’s a tale about entrenched small-town families and undocumented immigrants passing through. The many-voiced narrative form helps us better see this Piss River community in Oregon in a compassionate manner, which is important, because this segment brings to light how diversity has changed small-town America. “Ten Views of the Flying Matriarch” is about the violent and tender struggle to make a diverse community sustainable. A Californian large metropolis or a small northwestern village—it’s all about struggle and cooperation.

KW: Is your formal experimentation a political vision, to shake things up and ask tough questions about power and authority—including compartmentalization and sentimental (or consumerist) appropriation of literary discourses—perhaps the banality of much of the narrative and literary status quo?

MC: Of course, I believe that as a minority writer in this country, I must be an oppositional force. This is expected of me, no? To shake things up? My work is always classically poised on the basic level (a sound foundation); then, after that, it’s my job to speak out. How many short brown girls in this world get to speak? So, while I have the page, I must rattle some cages.

I am not a literary snob. Although I began as a poet and am trained in the academy, I believe that good art must be appreciated on some public level. I am not interested in writing that linear immigrant novel, nor am I interested in writing a gamey inaccessible book only for a handful of intellectuals. I want the novel to have a splendid, enduring audience, but I also want to squeeze in some aesthetic rigor and political messages. What holds *Revenge of the Mooncake Vixen* together is that it is a recognizable immigrant tale and also a coming-of-age tale about two Chinese American sisters. One thing I learned from poetry is that jazzy variations or riffs must always return to the source and connect with readers with real-life problems.

I want these bad-girl twins to be a giant thorn; I want them to irritate the majority. At the end of the book, Mei Ling peeing into a batch of tomatoes is a political act. It might upset a lot of readers. Is this an irreverent gesture, like flipping the bird? Or saying, *F-you?* Or is Mei Ling just exercising the right to her bodily functions—the right to pee on a rooftop where she doesn’t belong? The vignette echoes the beginning, a quasi rape

scene when the boys pissed on Moon. Have we forgotten that rape scene? Have we forgotten that Mei Ling was chased up to the roof by a violent crew of boys? Does peeing into a patch of tomatoes make up for all of the historical abuse heaped upon Chinese women? The sweetest revenge, of course, is that the writer gets to tell the tale the way she wants to tell it.

KW: Marilyn, at times this novel is truly funny. Among its many comic achievements is that it is positively Shakespearean in its mastery of the insult. Grandma Wong is without question one of the great insult mavens of American literature, as when Moonie is haunted by Grandma's acid ghost in the parable "The Ghost of Pig-Gas Illusions": "By and by, perhaps her grandmother's mighty cleaver will be re-imagined and re-smithyed into wind chimes, and the sharpness of her grandmother's unsparing tongue will soften into distant poetry" (188). Typical of your tonal approach as a writer, there you take Grandma Wong's boffo insult barrage and pull it back to a lyric wish, to the pathos of poor Moonie haunted by the elder's verbal tirades—ghost as super-ego run amok. Had you considered yourself a humorist before you wrote this novel? Where did you learn to be so funny? And how important is it to you that your humor always leads your reader back to a lyric moment of some clearly defined pathos, irony, or other insight?

MC: I can say that I believe that my sisters and I are very funny. We had to laugh deep from our guts to keep from crying. Our situation at home was unbearable. I had a gambler bigamist father, an overbearing grandmother, a grandfather who didn't recognize girls, and a deeply depressed and oppressed mother all under the same roof. Laughter was the only medicine. And the more bitter and wicked the laughter, the more crude the joking and jibing—the better.

I also learned a lot from watching comedians. The only artists who can talk about race these days are extreme comedians like Margaret Cho, Carlos Mencia, Chris Rock, or Dave Chappelle. They can tell the truth; they are allowed to be in your face. Nobody else can talk about race, injustice, or political issues and get away with it now. I observe these extreme comics, and I think they are brilliant.

Poetry isn't very funny: with a few exceptions. I love Kenneth Koch; he's hilarious. Ginsberg is very funny. I learned a lot from his outrageousness. But in my youth, I loved reading Twain—his journalism, his short pieces. He was a true American eccentric with his big moustache. He wrote about important subjects such as racism and slavery, but he was able to be serious and funny and silly. His use of dialect was brilliant and

hilarious. Huck Finn is an American original. Of course, you caught my love of Chaucer, Shakespeare, Catullus, and Horace and their wild gifts of invective. Growing up, I was used to my grandmother and the chefs of the family restaurant spewing nasty double entendres and epithets. My grandmother had a filthy mouth (but of course, her girls were not allowed to misspeak). I grew up on Chinese multiple punning, Cantonese tongue-twisters, humor à la Zhuangzi—sometimes you can miss the punch line by being “tone” deaf.

I suspect that many serious American writers don’t care to be funny. Perhaps they believe that humor will lower their currency in the literary world, which leaves some of us to have fun with pioneering spaces, a vast canvas to play on.

Comedy by classical definition comes to a happy ending. I learn from writing lyric to bring all the mischief to a point or a moment of contemplation. There must be a point to all this silliness—for all the postmodern brainwashing (unless perhaps you’re waiting for Godot, then even pointlessness itself has a cosmic point). I still love writing closure—it’s a moment for the poet to tell the reader that it’s all going to be okay after all, or not: Granny Wong’s ghost won’t drive Moonie to suicide, invective becomes song, and a plague becomes a field of singing insects. The beauty of the last couplet of a sonnet is that one could make transformational magic in the last breath (whether poised for reversal or enlightenment), and the writer has some control of her message. I am first and foremost a poet, and I hope to bring the brilliance of this beloved genre into fiction. The last piece of *Revenge of the Mooncake Vixen* offers “Three Endings” [the title of the piece], giving the reader the power to choose.

KW: Are you continuing to write both poetry and prose in your latest efforts, or does your constant exploration of cross-cultural and hybrid forms render such a question crass—in other words, of course you will continue now to explore and write across boundaries and write both prose and poetry?

MC: As Maxine Hong Kingston so generously said in her blurb—I do feel that I am this “Marilyn Chin in new, top form.” I am revving up in my middle years. I feel excited about writing both poetry and fiction and exploring all the fine and thrilling variations betwixt and between. Watch out, there might be more wild girl ninjas tumbling, rhyming, dancing, cursing, and sexing your way.

KW: Thank you, Marilyn, for your time and for your work, including this

remarkable novel, *Revenge of the Mooncake Vixen*. Good luck with this one and all your future endeavors.

Note

1. This interview was first published in a shorter form in *Red Wheelbarrow Magazine*, 2009 National Edition, and is reprinted here courtesy of Ken Weisner.

Work Cited

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