

Patricia Kirkpatrick and Rita Moe

AN INTERVIEW WITH MARILYN CHIN

Marilyn Chin is a Chinese-American poet who was born in Hong Kong, raised in Portland, Oregon, and lives currently in San Diego where she teaches in the M.F.A. program at San Diego State. Her work, she says, laments and celebrates her hyphenated identity: “I’m thoroughly bi-cultural and bi-lingual, and I see myself as a Pacific-rim person. I have family in China, in Hong Kong, in Hawaii, and all over the west coast, so assimilation is a very important issue for me.”

In her forward to the anthology Making More Waves, Jessica Hagedorn describes Chin’s poem “A Portrait of the Self as a Nation, 1990-1991” as “an ironic manifesto” which portrays the self as “battleground and as defiant nation, the self as illuminating poem and story, the self as dark song of memory and resistance.” For Chin, identity is constantly being produced; it shifts upon entry into the “new country” as much as it shifts with the dying and birthing of old and new customs.

Marilyn Chin is the author of Dwarf Bamboo; The Phoenix Gone, The Terrace Empty, which won the PEN Josephine Miles Award; and her latest book, Rhapsody in Plain Yellow, which was just published by W. W. Norton. She also co-edited Dissident Song: A Contemporary Asian American Anthology (with David Wong Louie) and co-translated The Selected Poems of Ai Qing. Her awards include a Stegner Fellowship, two NEA fellowships, two Fulbright fellowships, four Pushcart Prizes, and the Mary Roberts Rinehart Award.

This public dialogue with Marilyn Chin was held in front of a live audience during her visit to the Graduate Liberal Studies Program at Hamline University on March 19, 2002. The two interviewers were Patricia Kirkpatrick, a member of the faculty, and Rita Moe, a recent graduate of the M.F.A. program at Hamline. Questions at the end were from members of the audience.

Moe: You attended the University of Massachusetts at **Amherst** where you majored in ancient Chinese literature, and you received an M.F.A. in poetry from the Iowa Writers’ Workshop in 1981. Given your background as an immigrant and a child of working-class parents – your family ran a Chinese restaurant in Oregon – it seems an unexpected path. Can you talk about your pathway from working class, immigrant kid to scholar, teacher, and poet?

Chin: That’s a long story. I learned poetry from my grandmother. She was illiterate, and we used to joke that she was illiterate in two languages. But she had the 300 poems of the Tang dynasty committed to memory. Not to mention the Confucian Analects and the Shih Ching, the book of songs and an encyclopedia of verse and philosophical tracts that may or may not have been altered by her utilitarian mind. She used to spew out anecdotes and parallel phrases to instruct us on how to behave in this world. So I grew up hearing poetry, anecdotes, cautionary tales, ghost stories, and philosophical tracts in the Toisan dialect. The muse started singing when I was very, very young.

On the surface, my grandmother was very gruff. She was a tough peasant woman but a great matriarch. The older she got, the tougher she became. She was one of the first “feminist”

role models in my life. (Of course, she wouldn't have known what that term was all about). She needed to assert herself in everything she did. For instance, she used to draw an invisible line down the bed between herself and my grandfather. She was set against our dating white boys and used to run after our boyfriends with brooms and cleavers. She was NOT a demure Chinese woman. My mother, on the other side of the spectrum, was a perfect, Buddhist woman. She was very, very shy, complacent, and, one would say, very passive. I was raised by these two polar opposites. Going back to my grandmother and poetry: very young, I learned that the recitation of poetry and song is tied to a moral and responsible life.

Another important and ominous character in my family saga was my father. My grandmother purchased my father from his biological mother for a sack of rice. His biological mother was involved in a scam in which she used to sell him to rich people in other villages. In the middle of the night, my father would escape and run back home. She sold him several times, so that she could make money to feed the rest of her children. She would sell him; he would run away and come back home; she would sell him again. My grandmother, a neighbor, was tired of watching this terrible ritual. It was heartbreaking for her. She finally purchased him to save his life. They escaped Guang Zhou and went to Hong Kong in the late 40s. Then she purchased papers for him to come to the United States. He was a "paper son."

Moe: What does that mean?

Chin: She bought identity papers from a man named Chin who had ten children, but whose second son had died of illness. My father assumed his identity. This was, and, I believe, still is a common practice among the immigrant population. Sometimes the only way a person could get to the promised land is to assume another person's identity.

Moe: So the papers refers to the identity papers, making him the son.

Chin: Yes, that familial history is filled with secrets, deceptions, sham, impersonations. For my grandmother, it was all about survival tactics. She, herself, was a picture-bride. That is to say, my grandfather married my grandmother without having met her beforehand. He only had a faded tintype of her. She married my grandfather because his mother made him marry somebody from the old country. He was already living in the U.S. and was a part of that "bachelor society." He didn't want to get married. My grandmother married a stranger to get out of China, to come to the promised land.

Now back to my father. My father and mother were "matched" to marry. He didn't love my mother. He went back to Hong Kong and married her anyway. He already had a taste for "the other." My Chinese name is Mei Ling, which he transliterated into Marilyn, after Marilyn Monroe. My sister's name is Mei Jun, which he transliterated into Jane, after Jayne Mansfield. He was in love with blonde bombshells and was deep into his American identity and couldn't relate to my mother and despised her for the rest of her life. The reason why there's so much humor in my work is that once in awhile I have to stop and look at the world and see how absurd it really is. Look at all the pain that comes from one's familial history. I mean, how can one absorb all that pain? One can only laugh about it. This absurdity, this pain leads to the gift of poetry. The path from "working class, immigrant kid to scholar, teacher and poet" – I believe is a necessary path. Somebody must tell the story.

Moe: Did you have high school teachers who talked to you about going to college? How did it happen that you got to college?

Chin: There was one high school teacher named Mr. Schwerin who made me write poetry when I was very young. There were others – Mrs. Carpenter, my film teacher; Mrs. Tivey, my art teacher – who gave me confidence and permission to go on. They mentored me during a tumultuous period in my family life. They recognized the spark in me when I was very young. I want to give back – that’s why I’m a teacher now. I think that it’s a noble profession.

Moe: In the late 1970's you were a translator for the International Writing Program at the University of Iowa, and you co-translated *The Selected Poems of Ai Qing* with Eugene Ouyang and Peng Wenlan. How did that project come about, and how did you get involved with it?

Chin: I was a graduate student in the M.F.A. program, and I worked for the International Writing Program as a translator-editor. During the later 70s and early 80s, China was trying to come out of the ghastly cultural revolution. When Deng Xiao Ping became Premiere, he “rehabilitated” a lot of the artists and writers who were silenced and sent to the Gulag. Ai Qing and Ding Ling were two writers whom the Communist Party “rehabilitated” and sent to Iowa to be guests there as a gesture of Deng’s openness.

Ding Ling was a pioneer feminist and perhaps China’s most famous dissident at that time. Ai Qing was the father of modern Chinese poetry. He was one of the first to write poetry in the vernacular, and he imitated Whitman, Neruda, and other international poets. He brought their work into the Chinese consciousness. I was so privileged to have a chance to work with these great writers. They were of Nobel Prize stature. And they were already carved deeply into Chinese literary history.

Moe: What does translation bring to your writing?

Chin: Translation is a wonderful skill. I would not be the poet I am today had it not been for my translation training. This includes my bilingual skills as a kid – I had to negotiate for my grandmother and mother in the world, because they couldn’t speak English. Very young I had to translate every Classical phrase that my grandmother hurdled at me. I majored in Chinese literature as an undergraduate and I tried to translate Tang poetry and learned a lot about how Chinese imagery was constructed and carried that knowledge into my own work. Even today, I carry a book of Tang poetry with me at all times. I tell my students that it’s important to read poetry in a second language. It makes you understand language in a very intense and focused way. It’s good training.

Moe: What would you like American poets to know about Chinese poetry?

Chin: Concreteness, precision, clarity. I let the concrete detail work for me. The concrete object – the stone, the flower, a lover’s face – can speak for the abstract, the spiritual, the eternal. I learned to focus on the individual image, to respect it, never to deny its power, no matter how small that image might be. And it doesn’t matter what is going on in the dominant poetry world, what present trend or whim – I stay true to my initial love of concrete details that I learned from Chinese poetry. Look at this first line from a very famous Tang Dynasty poem:

e e e

The characters look like three geese in a row. Sonically, they sound like three geese honking. The reduplication is also enumeration. There are three geese honking across the sky, representing the possibility that there may be more coming, a sky full of geese. The characters evoke sight, imagery, sound, and enumeration and give a beautiful entry into the rest of the poem.

To translate the line as “goose goose goose” gives some suggestions of the beauty of the original, but not quite.

From Chinese poetry, I also learned about the power of the fragment, the phrase, the line. Each line is a complete thought or image or idea. Therefore, when the postmodernists talk about fragmentation, it’s almost antithetical to the Chinese phrase. There’s always a satisfying completeness to a Chinese “fragment” or phrase.

Look at these lines: shoot man first shoot horse

heart hates don’t know who

Both five character phrases. Dense with meaning and sentiment. The first, from an anti-war poem by Tu Fu; the second from the voice of a woman in her boudoir, written by LiPo.

When I work with my own lines, I hope they will be as dense and as powerful as these. We tend to be prosy and prosaic in our editorializing. I let the concrete image work for me and have complete confidence that each line will be rich with meaning and associative magic.

Moe: In each of your books you’ve mentioned **Kuan Yin, the Goddess of Mercy**. Is she right there (points to a pendant Chin is wearing)?

Chin: I always wear her around my neck. She’s my Kuan Yin, my Goddess of Mercy.

Moe: I hadn’t ever heard of her, but I guess on the West Coast everybody knows who **Kuan Yin** is. I just wondered what she meant to you and why she’s in your poems.

Chin: She’s the female manifestation of Buddha. She has always protected me. I want to give you a piece of my present history. My boyfriend of eight years was killed in an airplane accident in the year 2000. We had a beautiful vacation together in Bali. On the way home, the plane dropped passengers off in Taiwan. I was on a Fulbright then, and I was to go back to Taiwan for a few weeks to finish the semester with my poetry students. I kissed my boyfriend goodbye; his plane was supposed to refuel, change crew, and fly to Los Angeles. The pilot veered into the wrong runway and the plane hit some structures and blew up. Half the passengers perished. I was wearing my Kuan Yin, my Goddess of Mercy necklace. I truly felt that she protected me from this disaster. She’s my protector, my personal amulet against disaster. I also believe that my mother was Kuan Yin and the manifestation of Buddha. She was all goodness, forbearance, and grace. Superstitious stuff, no?

Kirkpatrick: You identify yourself as a lyric poet and an autobiographical poet. How do you see those two qualities?.

Chin: Lyric and autobiographical? Hmmm. Aren't they the same? (Laughter.)

Kirkpatrick: Do you think they are? Do you see yourself using those terms interchangeably?

Chin: Let me discuss this issue in an oblique way. Some of my students think it's hip to tangle with the abstract and begin their poetry career by writing about God. Let me quote Cheng Chou-yu, a Taiwanese poet from Yale. Once he said to me that a poet has three stages in her career. The first stage, she writes about herself. The second stage, she writes about the world. The third stage, she writes about God. Now, how can we know about God if we don't know about ourselves? This hierarchy suggests that there is a progression from self – to world – to God. That knowledge is cumulative.

Kirkpatrick: The self is under a lot of fire these days and sometimes for good reason. Historically, of course, in poetry a certain kind of self has presumed it could speak for everyone, when not everyone had access to that self. And sometimes, too, the self just gets too small. But I wonder at this point if when one doesn't have a tribe that's as – I hesitate to say *easily* but perhaps *readily* – identifiable as being Chinese-American, if that makes the self more suspect. You've said, "The self must represent a struggle that is larger than the self" – which I think many of us would agree with. "When I talk about myself, the 'I' is always personal and also representative of other Chinese-Americans." What about Americans who don't know who that second **community** is for them? Is it our responsibility to figure that out?

Chin: We must begin with the self. We go back to the idea of knowing the concrete thing – the self is that tangible, "knowable," "viewable," "touchable" thing. Why would the self be suspect? Where else would we begin our journey? With the other? I don't think so. The fallacy is that because I come from two cultures the self must be more interesting, because I embody two histories. But we all have histories and a sense of how our histories shaped us and how they dictate the ways in which we exist in the world. I think to avoid autobiography completely in one's work would be a mistake. The I is an eye, a lens from which we absorb the world. Autobiography anchors the poem. Even with this interview, you began by asking first about my personal history. You wanted to ground the interview with specific details of my past. That information is important in terms of understanding my work and my process.

At this moment, the critic wants to declare the author dead. It is no longer cool to assert ourselves, to have an identifiable personal style or sensibility. Now, how convenient to declare the poet dead, just when she's no longer a white, male monumental artist, "erecting" giant busts of himself. My role model for a living artist would be the sculptor Louise Bourgeois, who is erecting giant marble sculptures that look like vulvas. We have to consider what is poetic *genius*. The words *genius* and *authenticity* are suspect now and are taken away from the artist's vocabulary. I shall continue to write lyric and autobiographical poetry because my muse is compelled to do so. I believe that I am working toward a personal, authentic vision that includes a mixture of autobiography, experimentation with the poetry of two cultures, the clash of the ancient and the contemporary, Buddhist, vulva-driven, imagistic, performative, political, etc. I am aspiring toward great heights in my work. Whether or not this will all play out in the final evaluation, I don't know. But, I can't deny my muse her ambition and I can't follow the trends in a cattle-call way, because I know that these trends are dictated by the white ivory tower.

Kirkpatrick: Is poetry different from fiction? Or is lyric poetry different from fiction? Does a lyric poet have the right to create a first-person singular that is completely a persona and doesn't come out of his or her own experience? I love the way Sharon Olds answers this question when she is asked, "Did this really happen?" She says, "I never said it happened, I never said it didn't happen." I don't feel like you would be so concerned with that issue – whether or not something really happened. Autobiography and mythology seem blended through your imagination. But what about the poet who says, "I did this," and he didn't do it? Do we get to expect a poet to use the "I" in poetry differently than the "I" in fiction?

Chin: Of course, poetry is different from fiction. The differences have been discussed thoroughly and have been codified throughout the ages. However, I tend to meld the two worlds. I write both poetry and fiction and I am a good liar in both realms. I construct characters in my poems, and the characters in my fiction always are borne out of people in real life. I started as a lyric poet; therefore, it is natural for me to begin with personal truth in a piece of fiction as well.

My tale, "Moon," began with personal truth. When I was a kid growing up in Portland, Oregon, there were two blonde boys who used to beat me up before I went to school. They'd push me down in the mud and mess up my dress. I would run home crying. My grandmother would make me change my clothes and she would say, "Well, go two blocks south and avoid them." That was her way to treat this problem (the Buddhist way was always through pacifism and self-denial). I changed my clothes, then avoided those boys. But they would find me and beat me up again. Finally, one of those boys pulled out his penis and pissed on me. To be "pissed on" in this society is the ultimate insult on many levels. In my "fiction" rendering, the tale became a revenge fantasy inspired by Tang dynasty revenge tales and the Goddess Kali. The protagonist, a little fat Chinese girl, becomes a goddess/homicidal maniac and kills those boys. I could not have written this tale without having suffered those beatings. The piece is informed by racism, oppression, and the rampant violence I experienced in childhood.

Kirkpatrick: "Tell all the truth but tell it slant," as Emily Dickinson wrote?

Chin: Yes, to tell the truth; yes to tell it slant, to tell it oblique, to tell it Baroque, Rococo, to layer it with interesting possibilities. Play out the virtues of this postmodern period by framing the truth in a variety of ways: it's a feminist revisionist tale, it's a post-colonial tale, it's driven by minority discourse, it's a neoclassical Chinese tale, it's an extended metaphor, it's a lovely pastiche, yet it's original in the way it's been "cross-fertilized."

Yesterday, I was talking to my class about making choices in one's work. Formally, first one makes the word choice, then the choice of the length of the line, then the shape of the stanza – will it be a quatrain, a cinquain? Hopefully, form and content will marry beautifully. Is this the right form for the content? Or, does one want to make the content work against the form? We make aesthetic choices all the time.

I know that writers often say that the content is given to us, that we are compelled to write about certain things. This is true in many respects. But I also want to add that we make choices as to what kind of writer we want to be. I choose to be a political poet. I choose to align myself with Adrienne Rich, June Jordan, Pablo Neruda, Ai Qing, Akhmatova, Cezaire, and a host of others who openly consider themselves political writers. I choose to be an autobiographical poet, because I believe that I can draw universal truths and lessons from my

personal life.

Kirkpatrick: You said yesterday in class that poets should know what their weaknesses are. What are your weaknesses as a poet? What do you do with them once you know them? Do you ignore them, exaggerate them, or work around them?

Chin: Well, you know, our weaknesses are often our strengths. I mean, why did Whitman write those long catalogues, those long lines? Because he couldn't write a short line poem. Have you seen his short line poems? The short line cannot contain his "multitudes;" it's just not his sensibility.

Kirkpatrick: What can you not do?

Chin: What can I not do? (Laughter.) That's a nice compliment. I can't write a novel. I can write a short story, but not a novel. I'm too focused on the line. I measure the words with breath and not sentence units. It would be excruciating for me to write a whole novel in this focused pace. I don't know if I want to write an epic poem. It's my belief that some poets have "fiction envy" and will eventually write an epic poem as a kind of mid-life crisis – you know, "hey man, I think I need to write longer; the bigger the better." It's common for poets to yearn for a larger audience.

Right now, I can't see myself writing an epic; I think it might bore me. But I love writing long poems. I always have two or three long poems in each of my books. I love having different types of poems in my book: sonnets, haiku, quatrains, formal and free-verse, short imagist moments, long meditative tracts. Going back to "choice." There is so much in the banquet of poetry. I'm very excited about poetry still. There is so much to explore. I love the genre.

Kirkpatrick: How do you know when your poems go bad? What excesses do you try to avoid?

Chin: Well, I have a habit of editing myself to death. Once I wasted a whole year obsessing on the haiku and on distilling images to spare perfection. And I started editing my poems to nothing. I learned a lot from the process, but I stopped writing for awhile. Yesterday, in my workshop, I turned on my overhead projector and talked about editing one's poems. My impulse is to edit, to craft. I blame this partially on my classical training and partially on Donald Justice, my teacher at Iowa. He was a true master, who knew a lot about poetry, who wrote a very spare line. His is the first voice in my ear during the editing process. I will look at a connective for a long time and say "there is something wrong with that." I will consider it and reconsider it for hours, days, months, even years. I'm exaggerating, of course. It takes me 6-7 years to complete a book of poems, because I just won't let the book or poems go. I'm rather anal-retentive, don't you think?

We write poetry because we are in the quest for excellence. It's a quest for perfection that we can't have in our real lives. I demand so much from my poems. Of course, I begin with the wild fire of inspiration, but spend most of my time dealing with craft. Once in awhile, when I'm on an airplane going to a reading gig, I will take out an issue of *The American Poetry Review* and peruse the poems and edit them. I look to the guy on my right, and he's doing a crossword puzzle. The woman on my left is knitting, and there I am rewriting other people's

poems. That says something about my obsession with craft and about my social life, right? (Laughter.)

Kirkpatrick: Where does a poem start for you? Does it start on the page in the composition process? Or do you walk around with an image, a phrase, a piece of language, or an experience?

Chin: It starts in many ways. Sometimes I have a specific idea that I want to work out in a poem. In my book, *Rhapsody in Plain Yellow*, I was playing with quatrains. First, I studied the ballad in English: folk songs, Scottish border ballads, American railroad ballads, etc. Side by side, I studied the Chinese ballad in the Shih Ching and in the Yueh Fu. For some reason, the muse wanted to sing. I deliberately tried to cross-fertilize eastern and western ballads to get a new “sound.” Meanwhile, I wrote a bunch of sonnets and I didn’t like them, so I took a pair of nail scissors and I cut them up. I threw the fragments up in the air and reconstructed them. So, there’s a series in this book called “Shattered Sonnets.” There were twelve in that series and I kept only three. You see, I am always experimenting with form, with content, with the idea of melding east and west.

I always carry a pen and paper with me. Even if I’m soaking in the tub I have that pad next to me. Sometimes, I jot down just a word or a line. Everything can be used later.

When I’m teaching I don’t write. I can’t write. During the semester I sketch ideas or just contemplate things. I go to artist colonies in the summer where I write very well. I often take leaves without pay, so that I can “catch up with myself.”

When I’m off from teaching, I try to read a book a day. It’s important to feed the muse. When I write, I turn off the phone; I don’t see anybody. I continue to read Chinese poetry in the original, because I know it gives me an edge. This knowledge gives my voice “authenticity” and a specialness that others can’t duplicate. It’s important to keep myself informed. We are poets of our times. I go to the contemporary poetry shelves in the bookstores to see what other people are doing. I thumb through one book and say, “this is not so great.” (Laughter.) Or, “this is good.” I read everything – theory, *Vogue*, history, biography. There are a lot of one-dimensional poets, a lot of dumbing down out there.

I stayed at my friend’s country house in Sydney and all he had was classical music, European music. I said, “How can you live life without black music?” He didn’t even have the Beatles. I listen to everything. I listen to Snoop Doggy Dog because the rapsters are our latter day rhymesters. You can’t just rhyme crime with dime these days. Rhyme jack-off with Nabokov. I think it’s easy for poets to get lazy. They do one tried thing over and over, because it works for them, and their audience yearns for consistency. I want my muse to be versatile, because I know I’m going to live to be one hundred. I’m going to make art for a long time. I want a rich palette to work with.

Kirkpatrick: We’ll now open it up to questions from the audience.

Audience: You mentioned haiku earlier, related to editing down too small, and I think there’s a sense, at least in the poetry community, that forms like haiku, tonka, limerick are too small to be more than whimsical or pretty. Do you think there’s a certain point at which a poem becomes too small to be significant?

Chin: You didn't hear my bad girl haiku. (Laughter). I love the limerick. The secret to some of my quasi-Chinese quatrains is that I inserted limerick music into them. That was the secret spice that made some of those quatrains sassy. People say, "the limerick, how stupid, how silly." Never look at a form or a convention and spit on it. Never. Because you never know when the muse may need to use it. When I was in my twenties, I said I would never write in rhyme and meter. Hell, no. Only fascists write in rhyme and meter. And look at me now – sometimes I write in rhyme and meter and I just love it.

Audience: In order to be a political poet, or write with the voice of a self that's larger than just you, you must have a strong sense of community. A lot of what you write about is the difficulty in assimilating into a dominant community. As a writer, how do you know when you've reached that moment when you speak for a larger community? And justifiably?

Chin: The truth is, you can't. How can I speak for all Asian Americans? I can't. I mean, I have a cousin who's a stockbroker. I have a cousin who probably thinks I'm crazy. My brother has a Ph.D. in computer science, and he doesn't read poetry. Most of my Asian American contemporaries are doctors, lawyers, and computer geniuses, and they are making money. How many Chinese-American poets do you know? I am an outsider on many levels. So the truth is, we can't represent the tribe. I'm fooling myself to think that I can. Yes, I do fear assimilation. I fear losing the Chinese aspects of myself. I can barely read Chinese now. Every year I lose a hundred characters. Pretty soon, I won't be able to comprehend a fifth grade reader. That's scary. This is why I keep going back to Taiwan and Hong Kong – I need to keep up with my Chinese.

The reason why I want to speak for the larger community is that I want to hang on to that Chinese past. It's an impossible task because the vector only goes in one direction and that direction is towards assimilation. For better or worse, we're not going to be black, white, yellow, brown, but gray...(laughter). A beautiful gray, I hope.

Frankly, I don't think China wants me to speak for them. I hang out in Taiwan sometimes and the locals can tell that I'm a Chinese-American by the way I walk, my attitude, my boisterousness, my strange behavior. I can't go back to China – they won't have me. I am a spoiled American. As I've said before, especially for my generation of Asian American poets, we've needed to explain ourselves to the majority. Going back to the question of autobiography – in order to explain my personal history, I need to explain the history of Chinese immigration. I am an immigrant poet. By accident, I became the spokesperson for other immigrant poets; they are my tribe. It's all part of the telling of the self, of one's history.

If you write about living in Minnesota, you're speaking for Minnesotans. The self has to represent a larger tribe, a larger struggle. Otherwise, we might as well go home and masturbate. If you write about your lover, the self represents the couple. And that is not a small matter. The couple is a very, very important tribe. The nucleus of the American family. The he and the she. A large, important tribe.

Writing poetry is an important task, and we're not alone in the world.