

Thomas and Znaniecki saw disorganization among Polish-Americans and, as Wrobel suggests, possibly overemphasized it. However, they also saw that the Polish language press and Polish Catholic parishes, instead of retarding assimilation as some nativists claimed, integrated the Polish-American community and prevented further disorganization. That Wrobel quotes Thomas and Znaniecki's observations on the importance of the Polish-American parish (p. 34) indicates that, despite his criticism, he found material of value in their work.

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LOUIS CHU. *EAT A BOWL OF TEA*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1979. 250 pp. \$6.95 paper.

Louis Chu's *Eat a Bowl of Tea* is the most recent addition (and a most welcome one) to the series of Asian-American classics that the University of Washington Press is reprinting in paperback format. Other titles in this series that come to mind are the uncompromisingly naturalistic memoirs of the Filipino-American Carlos Bulosan, *America is in the Heart*, and the gripping novel about a Japanese-American who resists the World War II draft, John Okada's *No-No Boy*. Louis Chu's novel, which had first appeared in 1961 to unappreciative and uncomprehending notices, is every bit as essential to the canon of Asian America as the works of Okada or Bulosan.

Like Bulosan and Okada, Chu portrays an Asian America that is not merely a dainty morsel in America's white dominated melting pot; rather, it is a hard communal tile of distinctive character and color within the total mosaic of American society. There is no attempt at facile assimilation here, no effort to fudge away ethnic distinctions and idiosyncracies.

Perhaps this ethnic identity emerges most startlingly in the very medium of the novel, its language. Its dialogue, for instance, is a realistic and aggressive Chinese which has been rendered with skill and originality into a stylized kind of English. There is no bleaching away of Chinese linguistic patterns, and through Chu's dialogue we know that the characters are speaking, cheating, and hating in Chinese. The authenticity of voice and inflection here is worlds away from the coy exoticism of Earl Biggers' Charlie Chan. For the initiated reader, the pleasure and shock of recognition in Chu's dialogue are similar to the effects wrought by Hemingway's rendered Spanish. Here, for example, is an exchange between the male gossip mongers of the Wah Que Barber Shop who act as a comic chorus for the book:

Ah Mow continued rather casually, "Uncle Loo, what is the latest news?"

"Wow your mother," said Chong Loo curtly. "What do you think I am? A newspaper reporter? Why are you always asking me for the latest news?"

"I just thought. . . ."

"Go sell your ass, what do you think I am?" (p. 110)

The rhythms of easygoing banter and loose-mouthed insult are naturalistically captured, even to the point of the abbreviated imprecation, "your mother." For Chinese villification, like its Spanish counterpart, often attains a point where it becomes unnecessary to spell out the niceties of a curse: Chong Loo's "your mother" invites Ah Mow's imagination to fill in the blanks with the various traditional atrocities. Although Chu's dialogue is earthily mimetic of the proletarian circumstances of his speakers, his descriptive prose can be a well-honed instrument to record the actualities of Chinatown, and his narrative is a supple medium capable of finely wrought evocations of mood. In the following passage, for instance, the stress in the protagonist's mind combines with the storm of the elements to transform metaphorically the Catherine Street of New York into Sunwei Village in China:

A strong breeze lifted and dropped the front and side pieces of the rolled-up awnings of some of the stores. It began to rain.

Suddenly the surroundings took on an unfamiliar appearance. He was a stranger in a strange town. The black hand of darkness seemed ready to swoop down from the clouds to grab him. His emotions gave way to a vision. The winds began to howl around him. He began to walk faster and faster. . . . But he could not shake off this darkness. Neither could he shake off the clouds. Nor the lightning. He began to run but it was no use, for he could not distinguish the roads and the causeways between rice paddies from the mass of blackness that surrounded him. Many times he lost his footing and stumbled onto the submerged fields. . . . Another roar of lightning struck the skies, and there was no end to the downpour, like a cascade rushing down a valley of Five-Fingered Mountain. In a moment he was drenched. There was no place to escape. All the doors in the villages were locked and barred. (p. 207)

*Eat a Bowl of Tea*, unlike the sombre works of Bulosan and Okada, is a comedy of manners, a comedy that pirouettes satirically around the situations of impotence and cuckoldry. Set in New York's Chinatown during post-World War II, its protagonist is Ben Loy, who is

a waiter and therefore the most apparent representative of the Chinese for most Americans. But Louis Chu takes us beyond the scullery doors into the life of thoughts and feelings behind the waiter's persona of ingratiating and efficiency. Ben Loy, whose father owns a successful gambling establishment, has recently been sent to his ancestral village of Sunwei to acquire a bride. There, his mother (separated from her husband by anti-Chinese Immigration laws) soon matches him up with the naive and comely Mei Oi. Although the marriage is consummated in China to the couple's mutual delectation, Ben Loy finds himself impotent when they settle into New York. Perhaps his past bouts of venereal disease (contracted from New York's nightingales) bring this on; perhaps it is his proximity to his stern and convention-bound father. Mei Oi finds herself in a delicate dilemma, for she must prove her worth as a Chinese bride by becoming a mother. A brash seducer presents himself; she makes a "green cap" (i.e., a pair of horns) for her husband and becomes pregnant. Although he finds himself the butt of humorous gossip, Ben Loy accepts the situation; his father, however, slashes off the ear of the gallant interloper in a fit of fury. This precipitates the denouement, breaking up the old family and forming a new one, in the classic pattern of comedy. In the end, Ben Loy relocates to San Francisco with his wife and her child. There, "for the first time Ben Loy knew and enjoyed emancipation. New frontiers, new people, new times, new ideas unfolded" (p. 246). In this newly found *locus amoenus*, Ben Loy undergoes the ancient herbalist therapy of regularly "eating a bowl of tea," and *mirabile dictu* regains his virility. Thus the new country combines symbolically with the old way to gestate a renewed and vital generation of Asian America.

Louis Chu, then, has written a classically patterned comic *roman du moeurs* playing ironically with the themes of marital appearances and realities, familial expectations and actualities. Chu's adroit handling of plot, situation, and character is equalled by his intimate knowledge and finely attuned sensibility as a long-time observer and dweller of Chinatown. For, although born in China in 1915, Louis Chu graduated from a New Jersey high school and attended Upsala College, the New School, and N.Y.U.; he also owned a record store, hosted a Chinese radio show, and remained a prominent resident of Chinatown until his death in 1970.

This edition of *Eat a Bowl of Tea* comes with an introduction by the writer-scholar Jeffrey Chan that is expertly informative and elegantly suggestive. The University of Washington Press might have done a more conscientious job of editing obvious typographical errors like "the ding of many voices" (p. 59) or "the president began in his native. . . *dialogue*" (p. 218, where *dialect* is patently intended). But, on the whole, the publishers have performed a signal service in making this quintessentially important novel readily available again to readers of and about Asian America.

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