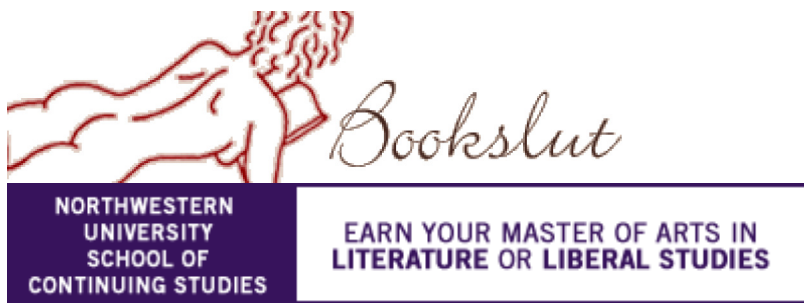


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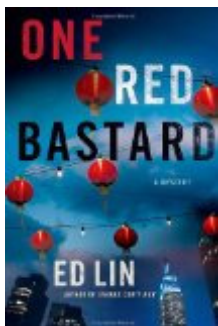
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May 2012

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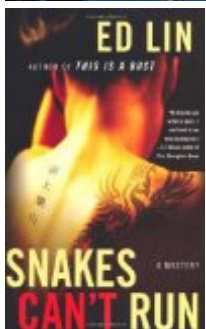
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An Interview with Ed Lin



Ed Lin is *not* Robert Chow, his fictional alter ego who has starred in three of Lin's four books. If nothing else, Lin is just too young, too happy, and too funny to resemble the Vietnam War veteran-turned Chinatown, New York City cop. The other major difference? Lin got the girl -- charmer that he is -- while Chow is probably going to remain single for a good long time.

This month, Chow faces his third grisly Chinatown mystery in [One Red Bastard](#). Introduced in Lin's second novel, [This Is a Bust](#), Chow is the lone Chinese American policeman in 1976 New York Chinatown. Having returned from Vietnam with secrets too horrific for words, Chow can only face the inhumane aftermath of war by drowning himself in booze. While his higher-ups think he's fit only for ribbon-cutting ceremonies and other such photo ops, Chow manages to solve his first Chinatown murder solo -- it helps to speak the language! -- and picks up a few true friends along the way.



Personal demons aside, the sobered-up Chow is settling well into his tough-guy-on-the-outside-caring-citizen-on-the-inside leading man role in his second title, [Snakes Can't Run](#). Still the token Chinese American cop in New York, Chow has finally graduated to full-time detective. When two corpses turn up under the Brooklyn Bridge, Chow's investigation eventually leads him to chasing down immigrant smugglers -- otherwise known as snakeheads -- who traffic in human flesh.



Now in *One Red Bastard*, Chow is finally hoping to earn his gold badge, regardless of the endless



obstacles some of his superiors throw his way. Chairman Mao is dead, his fourth wife and widow's in jail, and their only daughter wants to seek asylum in the good 'ol U.S.A. Mao's grown-up baby girl (who hardly knew big Daddy) sends an official representative to check out her immigration prospects. Meanwhile, Chinatown is divided on what Li Na's defection might mean to the already politically factionalized Chinese American community -- especially between the Mao-supporting Communists and the Taiwan-bolstering Kuomintang.

Chow's girlfriend, who's working hard to establish her career as a journalist, scores the one interview with the Chinese official. Of course, he wants to meet over dinner, in his swanky Plaza Hotel room -- but he swears they won't be alone, as he has bodyguards galore. But in the wee hours, his bludgeoned body ends up dumped in Chinatown, and -- surprise, surprise! -- the police insist Chow's girlfriend was the last person to see the foreign official alive...

Okay, so spill it... Which side are you on? KMT? Commies?

I never pick sides! Well, shoot, let's remember that the KMT and Commies have been really good friends and terrible enemies at times over the years. It was a coalition of Chinese nationalists, Republicans, and Socialists that brought down the last "Chinese" dynasty, the Qing, in 1912. I put that in quotations because it was a foreign dynasty founded and run by the evil Jurchens [an ethnic group who inhabited present-day Northeast China, who adopted the name "Manchu" in the seventeenth century] who colonized China and treated ethnic Chinese people like second-class citizens over the 250 years-plus of their reign. Members of my family have been a part of the Commies, the KMT, and the native Taiwanese movements. It always helps to have more than one membership card in your wallet. Even better to belong to a few secret societies, too. You never know when the wind's gonna change. Look at what great buddies the KMT and Commies are right now, agreeing about how Taiwan is an inalienable part of China. Phooey!

And how did you choose Mao's youngest daughter -- and only child with his infamous fourth wife, Jiang Qing, Ms. One-Quarter-of-the-Gang-of-Four -- as your focal point for *Red*?

People always talk about how cunning Mao was, but what about that Jiang Qing? She was an actress early on, and you can never trust them. They lie. Like Mao, Jiang changed names and traded up with partners and spouses when it was expedient. I wondered what life has been like for Li Na, the daughter of Mao and Jiang, who spent her early life hidden away with distant relatives. (She is seventy-one or -two now.) She has lived a quiet life, and only a handful of old photographs exist, which is a little strange for the sole offspring of two of the most infamous people in modern Chinese history. I'll bet that Li wanted to get away from it all at some point. She would have wanted to give America a shot since it was the most fascinating country to Chinese people after Nixon's visit.

Does this upcoming trip to Taiwan have anything to do with your affiliations?

Sorta. I haven't been to the island in years and I want to see what's up. I'm going hardcore Taipei, since I've never really been to that city. My father's family is from central Taiwan, a real *benshengren* stronghold. They are Taiwanese who originally came over from China centuries ago, as opposed to the Johnnies-come-lately *waishengren* who washed up on Taiwan at the end of the Chinese civil war in 1949. There have been all kinds of tensions over the years between the *benshenren* and *waishengren*, not to mention the Hakka people and indigenous Taiwanese. My trip is a vacation in the guise of research for another book. On a different note, I discovered that there is a university in Beijing that has an Asian American literary department. I'm going there in June to deliver the keynote address for their conference.

I don't want to allow any spoilers, but who's the "one red bastard"? Uhh... lots and lots of "red" bad guys, but you're sort of leading your readers astray on purpose, aren't you? 'Fess up!

It's a mix of "red" herrings with the literal and figurative meanings of "bastard." I love to trick people. It makes me feel

smart.

So Mr. Smarty-Pants, you got some explaining to do: how did Robert Chow land on the page? What made you choose the mystery genre?

I really love the old hard-boiled stuff, pulps like [Black Mask](#) and [Dime Detective](#). One horrible thing about them, though, is the depiction of people of color in general. The few Asians mentioned get the shaft or are silenced. Worse, the Chinatown locales always functioned as a lifeless backdrop for the foreign devils to run and gun through. I have always seen Chinatowns as places of extremely heightened political power plays and natural outgrowths of the struggle of immigration and flat-out racism. I wanted to use Chinatown in the same way that Chester Himes [[Cotton Comes to Harlem](#), [A Rage in Harlem](#)] used his Harlem setting in his mystery books to talk about issues in the African-American community. Sure, we both lied about what Chinatown and Harlem are really like, but we both lied in order to tell the greater truths about our communities and America.

How did you end up choosing a time period when you were barely out of diapers (maybe you weren't even born yet!)? Three-quarters of your oeuvre is set in the 1970s!

Pfft. I'm older than I look -- I'm Asian! 1976 is an amazing year in Chinese America and the Chinese diaspora. The heads of the two sides of the Chinese civil war are dead and dying (Mao, Zhou Enlai, Chiang Kai-shek). The People's Republic of China is surging in diplomatic importance and will soon supplant the Republic of China (now relegated to Taiwan and a few small islands). It seems the status quo of old political systems in Chinatowns around the world could change and radically. It's also an interesting year for America. It's the bicentennial year and yet the country may be at a breaking point in the wake of diverging viewpoints of the Vietnam War.

Since you didn't live the 1970s Chinatown beat, how do you do your research decades later? And do you find yourself spending a lot of time in today's ever-changing Chinatown when you're writing?

I lived in Chinatown twice, once on the right-wing side and once on the left-wing side. I remember in the 1990s, a Chinese American woman was running for city council and her poster in the right-wing side of Chinatown was defaced with crossed hammers and sickles -- see, Democrats equals Commies to the hardliners. They never forgave Carter for changing U.S. diplomatic recognition to the People's Republic.

For my research, I immersed myself in the '70s. I bought old newspapers and bound magazines from eBay and restricted myself to films, television shows, and music of those times. I also extensively interviewed people active in Chinatown during that time and even found two retired Chinese American detectives who served there in the '70s. I'm in Chinatown very often anyway -- they know how to cut Asian hair! Also, I can't stay away from the food, the events, the people.

Are you working on Robert Chow number four? How many more can we expect? And geez, are he and Lonnie ever gonna settle down? (Do I sound like somebody's mother? Not Robert's, I realize -- she's not so thrilled about the potential daughter-in-law...)

I am sort of working on another Robert Chow. I have no idea how many there are in me. Maybe we'll reach the year 1980 one day! I don't think Robert and Lonnie are ever going to settle down because she can do so much better than him. Hell, he could even do better than him!

Let's back up a little further to your pre-Chow days. Your first book, [Waylaid](#), is certainly your darkest work: tough times for such a young kid, growing up witnessing the underbelly of society. The Chow mysteries definitely have some dark moments, but nothing quite as disturbing as in *Waylaid*, maybe because the protagonist is still so young. How did that first work come about? And how autobiographical is the story,

dare I ask?

Darkest work? I think the book is really funny, though I hope it also punches above its weight in terms of the serious things it wants to say. Anybody's first novel is a thinly disguised autobiography. A writer's first novel doesn't always find a publisher, but mine did. I grew up living and working at my parents' hotel in Jersey. A lot of Asian Pacific American kids grew up working at the family business. I didn't necessarily want to write about myself but every time I tried to punch out a novel, no matter what it was about, the story always swung around to that kid growing up at the crummy hotel. *Waylaid* is "somewhat" autobiographical. I actually had to dial down the range of insane happenings to make a more believable world. But contrary to the narrator's actions, I have never masturbated. Ever.

Uh... uhmm... because you were the model minority kid who spent all his time studying, right? Yup... that's how you earned double degrees in applied engineering and literature from Columbia! So how did you end up a novelist? And did you have to fight the parents?

I have a BS in mining engineering but fell short of one class for the BA in literature writing. I just couldn't get it done. Asian Americans usually double-major or major in something for their parents and concentrate in something else for themselves. It's like high school round two; they're still on our case: "Why do you need to take that poetry class?"

In reality, though, I believe that true Chinese culture holds arts in high esteem. There's no real Chinese home that doesn't have paintings or scrolls. Even that right wing conservative fuck Confucius said that someone who didn't know poetry wasn't fit to converse with. Chinese people are programmed to love and cultivate art. It's just that the immigrant mentality perverts the narrative in the short term. Did I have to fight the parents? I am still fighting them!

You came up as a writer during the 1990s, a pivotal period of growing visibility in Asian Pacific American literary history; the Asian American Writers Workshop was founded (you amongst the originals), the APA-focused Kaya Press was just starting out, APA writers were getting serious contracts with major publishing houses. Two decades have passed... how do you think you've changed as a writer? How do you think Asian American literature/publishing has changed?

I'm not really one of the originals of the AAWW; I didn't join until 1992, a year after they were formed. I've changed a whole lot and also not much at all. I still love the same books I always have but I recently reread my old work and I can see what I was trying to do; I can spot [all the places] I tried to paint over my mistakes. True confession: I don't enjoy reading my own books. I only see the problems with them. I remember seeing an interview with Roger Daltrey and he said he couldn't listen to Who songs because he hated hearing his voice. I knew exactly what he meant.

APA lit and publishing have become so diverse and huge now. Even waifish Kaya (which will always be a home to me) is now cranking out multiple books per year! I used to be able to read every APA book published but now there are way too many. The best thing is that "Asian" doesn't only mean "Chinese, Japanese, and Filipino" anymore. Koreans have been kicking ass and I was especially enlivened to see multiple published works from Hmong and Afghan Americans. Yes, we can!

Final question: are you really planning on running for president someday?

Oh, no. My website is www.edlinforpresident.com because edlin.com was taken (by someone whose last name is my entire name!) and my wife wouldn't let me register killedlin.com. It's all good because it's perennial and upbeat!

Terry Hong writes [BookDragon](#), a book review blog for the Smithsonian Asian Pacific American Program.