

program. Only about 55 percent of the students who started actually graduated. My engineering friends and I hardly had time to do anything but study to just keep afloat." It was a grueling program, but one that taught Chiao some valuable lessons. "We learned to look things up for ourselves and to discover things on our own. This ability has become crucial to me in my career." In 1985 Chiao earned a master of science degree from the University of California at Santa Barbara, where he also received his doctorate in 1987.

Chiao's first job upon graduation was with Hexcel, a medium-sized material supplier to the aerospace industry. Here he was given the opportunity to work on a project in conjunction with NASA—bringing him a step closer to fulfilling his dream of becoming an astronaut—and the Jet Propulsion Laboratory developing materials for future space telescopes. From here Chiao moved to the Lawrence Livermore Laboratory, a government-funded research institution administered by the University of California and located on the Berkeley campus. He continued working in materials science and applied to the astronaut training program at NASA.

Soaring to New Heights

In an interview with Jim Henry, Chiao described the application process for the astronaut program. Of the many thousands of applications NASA receives over the course of two to three years, a final 2,500 are reviewed as worthy of serious consideration. Of these, 100 are interviewed, and 23 chosen. In other words, 1 percent of the serious applicants are chosen for the program. Chiao was selected and began training in 1990, becoming an astronaut in 1991.

As a mission specialist on the July 1994 Columbia launch, Chiao conducted life and material sciences experiments in the International Microgravity Laboratory II, or the Space Lab, as it is commonly known. This lab is a pressurized module within the cargo bay of the shuttle that offers the astronauts extra room in which to conduct their experiments. He was trained as one of two mission specialists who will go on any space walks outside the shuttle should some minor problems develop.

Chiao said his training for space flight was intensive, yet fun and very exciting. To practice weightlessness, he and his fellow astronauts were taken up in an Air Force KC135, a converted passenger airliner, where they replicated zero gravity by going into 20,000-foot free-falls. These typically lasted twenty to thirty seconds, during which time the astronauts floated freely in the specially designed cargo bay, just as if they were in outer space.

Chiao was able to fulfill his dream of becoming an astronaut through perseverance and, most importantly, through education. His parents' examples were not lost on the young man.

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—Sketch by Jim Henry

Frank Chin

(1940-)

Writer

Frank Chin describes himself first and foremost as "a writer." In the biographical profile he provided after declining to be interviewed, he wrote, "I have written short fiction, plays, nonfiction, reviews, essays, and research pieces on Chinese and Japanese America. I have also written the backs of bubble gum cards, 'stupid' radio contests, documentary films on fishing and boxing, and hacked." His writing career is marked with milestones, including the distinction of being the first Asian American playwright produced on a New York stage—*The Chicken-coop Chinaman* at American Place Theatre in 1972. A year later, Chin founded San Francisco's Asian American Theatre Workshop which evolved into the Asian American Theatre Company, one of the nation's foremost Asian American theatres. Together with Jeffery Paul Chan, Lawson Fusao Inada, and Shawn Wong, Chin also was responsible for creating what is widely considered the seminal text of Asian American literature, *Aiiieeeee! An Anthology of Asian American Writers*, published in 1974. Its follow-up companion, *The Big Aiiieeeee! An Anthology of Chinese American and Japanese American Literature*, was published in 1991.

In addition to his status as an established and respected writer, Chin is equally well known as a critic of Asian American literature. He and his three *Aiiieeeee!* editors have been dubbed "the gang of four," fighting in an Asian American literary war between what they describe in an introductory essay as "the real," with its "sources in the Asian fairy tale and the Confucian heroic tradition," and "the fake," with its "sources in Christian dogma and in

Western philosophy, history and literature," as represented by such Asian American writers as Maxine Hong Kingston, David Henry Hwang, and Amy Tan.

History of a Chinaman

Frank Chin was born in Berkeley, California, in 1940. In his biographical profile he described himself as a "fifth-generation Chinaman." In the past, particularly early in his career, Chin made a clear distinction between the use of "Chinaman" and the term "Chinese American" which for him was inscribed with a sense of complicit assimilation into the controlling white society. Chin wrote that he is "the son of a Chinese immigrant father and fourth-generation Chinatown mother whose father worked in the steward service of the Southern Pacific Railroad." Chin followed his grandfather's career on the railroad, first working "clerk jobs" around the Western Pacific Railway's Oakland Yard between 1962 and 1965. "Between tracks of standing and moving boxcars I did everything but get hurt, get lost and get scared," Chin recalled. He left the railroad for the University of California at Berkeley from which he graduated in 1966 with a degree in English. After a brief stint at the Iowa Writer's Workshop, Chin returned again to the tracks, becoming "the first Chinese-American brakeman on the Southern Pacific since Chinese built the Central Pacific over the Sierras."

In 1966 Chin moved to Seattle, Washington, working first for television station KING-TV where he filmed documentaries on the Seattle Repertory Theatre and the history of Seattle's Chinese New Year's celebration, and a film biography of former light heavyweight champion Archie Moore. Chin moved on to King Screen Productions, the film company owned by King Broadcasting Company, where he worked as a story editor and scriptwriter for "Sesame Street."

In 1972, Chin made theatre history as the first Asian American playwright to have work produced on a mainstream stage in New York. *The Chickencoop Chinaman* was mounted off-Broadway at The American Place Theatre. In this irreverent work, Chin introduces three unpredictable, often comic characters who defy generalizations of any kind and who challenge and satirize existing media stereotypes of Asian Americans. A hip and raunchy piece, a new generation of questioning Asian Americans found in Tam Lum an unlikely hero who, according to Chin in the play's cast list, has "a gift of gab and an open mouth, [a] multi-tongued word magician losing his way to the spell who trips to Pittsburgh to conjure with his childhood friend and research a figure in his documentary." After the play's opening to glowing reviews from such publications as the *New Yorker* and *Newsweek*, Chin wrote in "Backtalk," an article in The American Place Theatre's newsletter, "That this play is the first play by an Asian American to, in any sense, make it, that people should be surprised at our existence, is proof of the great success white racism has had with us. American might love us. But America's love is not good. It's racist love. I don't want it."



Frank Chin

Chin's next play, *The Year of the Dragon*, was mounted in 1974, again at The American Place Theatre. The play's theme is the disintegration of the Chinese American family: Pa Eng, the respected mayor of Chinatown, is dying; Ma Eng sings about Chinese slave girls; first son Fred Eng, head of Eng's Chinatown Tour 'n Travel hates himself for having built a business whose success demands that he assume a demeaning persona not unlike the humble, passive Charlie Chan; daughter Mattie chooses Boston and escapes Chinatown with a white husband; and young Johnny is little more than a hoodlum. On the whole, the play received generally good notices and went on to be filmed as a PBS production in 1975. Chin's other works for the theatre, though lesser known, include *Gee, Pop!*, *Chinatown Mortuary*, and *Oofy Goofy*.

A Writer's Legacy

An established playwright, Chin was encouraged by the American Conservatory Theatre (ACT), the San Francisco Bay Area's oldest and largest regional repertory theatre, to found the Asian American Theatre Workshop (AATW). With financial support and donated space from ACT, AATW began in 1973 as Chin's personal vision: "I founded the workshop as the only Asian American theatre that was conceived as a playwright's lab and not a showcase for yellows yearning to sell out to Hollywood. I failed. I was director of the workshop until 1977," wrote Chin in his biographical profile.

While Chin might be quick to dismiss his involvement with AATW, his achievement is undeniably long-lasting. According to Frank Abe, one of the original workshop members who is currently communications director for Seattle politician Gary Locke, AATW provided "both a theatrical and cultural experience." Abe explained, "Many of us did not have an Asian American consciousness at the time. Mine was strictly suburban Californian. Through the workshop, I came to understand and embrace the fact that Asian American was a unique sensibility with a unique history. Through the written word, the goal was to recover our history, that which had been lost, falsified and suppressed."

As AATW grew and evolved, the focus shifted from the writers to the actors until, as Abe described it, "the inmates took over the asylum." In frustration and disgust, Chin left AATW in mid-1977. After his departure, AATW continued as a theatre group, renaming itself a "Company." As an expanded group, the Asian American Theatre Company (AATC) flourished, attracting numerous Asian American writers, actors, directors, and designers. More than twenty years later, AATC is a stalwart part of the Asian American community.

In 1978, Chin's "theatrical sense combined with [his] scholarly nature and need to make things right" led to "Day of Remembrance," which he described as "ceremonial events that restored history and civility inside Japanese America, and between the Japanese Americans and Seattle and Portland." The events publicized the campaign to redress the constitutional grievances suffered by Americans of Japanese ancestry during World War II: "I put together groups of Japanese American leaders and activists to lead a return to the county fairgrounds outside of Seattle and Portland that had been converted into concentration camps for the Nikkei in 1942. The Day of Remembrance included participation by the National Guard, local politicians, a display of art and artifacts from the concentration camps, a huge potluck dinner and a couple thousand Japanese Americans in both cities," explained Chin.

Out of Theatre

Chin eventually abandoned all of the theatre world. He wrote with finality, "I am out of theatre. I will not work with any theatre, producer, writer, director, or actor who plays and lives the stereotype. So I write fiction, essays, and articles." Chin has "written extensively on Chinese and Japanese history, culture and literature, and presence in popular local news magazines, TV documentaries, and literary journals." His fiction includes *The Chinaman Pacific & Frisco R.R. Co.*, a collection of short stories published in 1988, and two novels, *Donald Duk*, published in 1991, and *Gunga Din Highway*, published in 1994.

In addition to writing, Chin has "taught Asian American history and ideas using storytelling, theatre and writing games, in four to five-week long workshops" at Washington

State University, Michigan State University, and in five Portland high schools.

In both his writing and teaching, Chin's goal is to expose and correct "the white racist characterization of Chinese fairy tales and childhood literature as teaching misogynistic ethics and despicable morals as fact." Chin's harshest criticisms are directed at best-selling authors Maxine Hong Kingston and Amy Tan and renowned playwright David Henry Hwang. As he explained in "Come All Ye Asian American Writers of the Real and the Fake" in *The Big Aiiieeeee*: "What seems to hold Asian American literature together is the popularity among whites of ... Kingston's *Woman Warrior* ... Hwang's *F.O.B.* ... and M. Butterfly ... and Tan's *Joy Luck Club*. These works are held up before us as icons of our pride, symbols of our freedom from the icky-gooey evil of a Chinese culture where the written word for 'woman' and 'slave' are the same word (Kingston) and Chinese brutally tattoo messages on the back of women (Kingston and Hwang). ... Kingston, Hwang, and Tan are the first writers of any race, and certainly the first writers of Asian ancestry, to so boldly fake the best-known works from the most universally known body of Asian literature and lore in history. And, to legitimize their faking, they have to fake all of Asian American history and literature, and argue that the immigrants who settled and established Chinese America lost touch with Chinese culture, and that a faulty memory combined with new experience produced new versions of these traditional stories. This version of history is their contribution to the stereotype." Chin and others argue that readers who know little about Chinese culture are being constantly misled about Chinese and Chinese Americans, which in turn feeds the stereotypes of a white racist America.

In answer, Chin has, "like the Cantonese and Chinese before me, wherever Chinese literature and language have been banned, taken to storytelling and the comic book as a tactic for making the real accessible in a hostile literary and learning atmosphere." One of his current ongoing projects is to condense and retell "the most popular stories and operas from the Chinese fairy tale and heroic tradition to fit sets of drawings from old Chinese comic books." Chin remains a crusader of "the real," acting as the voice of conscientiousness, welcomed or not, in the growing realm of Asian American literature.

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—Sketch by Terry Hong

Margaret Cho

(1968–)

Comedian

A second-generation comedian as well as a second-generation Korean American, Margaret Cho was barely into her twenties when she became known as the reigning Asian American funny woman. A child of the eighties, she's broken barriers and stereotypes by performing on such television shows as the "Bob Hope Special," "Evening at the Improv," "Arsenio Hall," and "Star Search." In 1994, Cho was the first Asian American to star in her own television show, "All-American Girl," a sitcom about a Korean American family. The comedy was designed by Cho with co-producer Gary Jacobs, a veteran writer and producer. Members of the cast agree that this is a period of expanding opportunity for Asian Americans in the performing arts.

Drive to Perform

Margaret Cho was born December 5, 1968, and raised in San Francisco. She derives much of her material from her upbringing in a liberal yet religious Korean American family. "My father writes Korean books like *1,001 Jokes for Public Speakers*, real corny stuff," said Cho in a press release. As a child, her parents encouraged her to learn voice, dance, and piano, but stopped short of endorsing her venture into acting at age thirteen. Undaunted, Cho pursued her dream of becoming an actor, gaining admission to San Francisco's prestigious High School of Performing Arts and later enrolling in San Francisco State University's theatre department. She had hoped to continue her acting studies at Juilliard or Yale, but became frustrated by the limited roles available to Asian women. It was then that she turned to stand-up comedy at the suggestion of a friend.



Margaret Cho

"I wasn't sure I could make it as an actor because I didn't see any successful Asians," she told the *Daily Bruin*. "Stand-up is a way to acting but it's also its own art form. I've grown to love and respect comedy." Cho developed her comedy act at a club built, coincidentally, on top of her parents' bookstore, where she worked part time. On her breaks she would go upstairs and perform a set. Her parents were initially less than pleased that she quit college to perform in nightclubs. "Stand-up goes against any typical Asian aesthetic," she told the *Daily Bruin*. "It's too personal. You have to reveal yourself. It's not what a woman should do." But since Cho has gained broad popularity—as well as support from the Asian American community, her parents relented. "Now my mom says, 'That's my baby on TV!'"

Generational Humor

Cho's comedy routine pokes fun at her own generation. "Slacking off is the main art form of my generation, the only pleasure we have left," said Cho in a press release highlighting some of her work. "We have so many restrictions—no sex, no drugs—the only vice left was greed, but where did that take us? 'Just Say No' has become the 'Keep on Truckin' of my generation." The press release reveals that Cho's ethnicity and gender are fair game as well. "Men look at me and think I'm going to walk on their backs or something. I tell them the only time I'll walk on your back is if there's something on the other