

The Tall Tale as Historical Reckoning: Ah Bing, Johnny Appleseed, and the Politics of American Folk Memory in *Bing's Cherries*

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This paper examines Livia Blackburne and Julia Kuo's 2026 picture book *Bing's Cherries* as an intervention in American folklore. Through a comparative analysis of Ah Bing—the Chinese immigrant who cultivated the Bing cherry—and Johnny Appleseed—the iconic American pioneer—the paper argues that the book challenges the racial logic that historically determined who could become an American folk hero. By taking the tall tale genre, a form traditionally reserved for white pioneer figures, the book recovers a marginalized figure and asserts Asian Americans' claim to folk-hero status.

Keywords: *Bing's Cherries*, tall tale genre, American folk hero

Introduction

In a 2026 picture book, a father tells his daughter that the cherries they are eating were named after Ah Bing, a Chinese immigrant who cultivated them. That night, the child's imagination transforms this seldom heard fact into a towering legend: "A giant man who sang trees into growth, whose homesickness gave rise to the cherries that bear his name" (Blackburne & Kuo, 2026). This is the premise of *Bing's Cherries*, a work that explicitly positions itself within the tall tale genre—A narrative mode historically reserved for figures like Johnny Appleseed, Paul Bunyan, and Davy Crockett.

The tall tale is a distinctively American folk narrative form characterized by exuberant exaggeration, larger-than-life protagonists, and a playful relationship with plausibility. Rooted in the oral traditions of 19th-century frontier communities, these stories typically feature heroes who perform feats of impossible strength, cunning, or endurance, often with a deadpan humor that blurs the line between fact and fancy (Dorson, 1959). While tall tales are told for entertainment, they also serve a deeper cultural function: They transform ordinary individuals into symbolic embodiments of national values—self-reliance, resilience, and mastery over nature. The form has historically been dominated by white, male, and pioneer figures, making its appropriation for an Asian American subject a significant intervention.

The cultural intervention of *Bing's Cherries* has been met with significant institutional recognition. It received a starred review from Publishers Weekly and was selected as a Junior Library Guild Gold Standard Selection. Such recognition matters because it demonstrates that a work addressing Asian American historical

recovery through genre appropriation can achieve both critical acclaim and broad accessibility—A combination essential for reshaping cultural memory at scale.

The creators have explicitly framed their project in relation to the Johnny Appleseed tradition. Illustrator Julia Kuo has described encountering Ah Bing's story and immediately questioning whether figures like him might have existed alongside the Johnny Appleseeds of American cultural memory (Blackburne & Kuo, 2026). She has further expressed the hope that the book would occupy a space between Chinese myths and American folktales, explicitly aligning Ah Bing with the same folkloric lineage as white pioneer heroes (Blackburne & Kuo, 2026). These statements indicate that the comparison with Johnny Appleseed originates with the creators themselves rather than being imposed by external criticism.

The book's reception has consistently recognized this comparative dimension. Multiple reviewers have positioned the work as a response to the predominance of white figures in American school folklore, with several outlets recommending it alongside stories about Johnny Appleseed and Paul Bunyan (Kirkus Reviews, 2025; Publishers Weekly, 2026). This critical consensus confirms that the comparison is central to how the book is understood.

The two historical figures at the core of this comparison experienced profoundly different fates. Ah Bing worked as a horticulturalist in Oregon from the 1850s until 1889, developing the cherry variety that still bears his name and now dominates U.S. sweet cherry production (Blackburne & Kuo, 2026). When he visited China in 1889, the Chinese Exclusion Act and subsequent legislation barred his reentry, effectively breaking his connection to the country he had contributed to. John Chapman, known as Johnny Appleseed, traveled freely across the 19th-century frontier, establishing nurseries and selling seedlings to settlers (Kerrigan, 2012). His transformation into a folk hero was accomplished through a deliberate act of cultural construction in the 1870s, which presented his eccentricities as virtues (Haley, 1871). Unlike Ah Bing, who was excluded from the nation he helped cultivate, Chapman was canonized as one of America's most enduring folk figures.

Despite these divergent outcomes and the creators' own invocation of the Johnny Appleseed comparison, existing scholarship has not systematically examined how the book intervenes in the racial politics of American folk memory through its appropriation of the tall tale genre.

This paper aims to address this gap by analyzing the book's genre choices, narrative strategies, and visual design, thereby contributing to scholarship on Asian American cultural production and the politics of national memory.

Comparative Analysis: Inclusion, Exclusion, and the Politics of Memory

The contrasting fates of Ah Bing and Johnny Appleseed reveal a structural logic governing American folk memory. Both figures were made accessible to public consciousness through processes of selection and representation, but the agents and purposes of that representation differed profoundly.

For Chapman, the path to legend was paved by William D. Haley's 1871 Harper's Monthly profile, which served the political interests of the Grange Movement by celebrating agricultural life against industrialization (Haley, 1871). Chapman's unconventional behavior—his ragged dress, his celibacy, and his dietary habits—was reinterpreted as evidence of piety and purpose rather than oddity (Kerrigan, 2011). The legend also suppressed the commercial dimensions of his nursery business and its role in satisfying land-claim requirements, presenting him instead as a disinterested servant of nature and nation.

For Ah Bing, No Comparable Cultural Apparatus Existed

The Chinese Exclusion Act functioned not only as a legal barrier, but also as a symbolic framework that categorized Chinese immigrants as temporary laborers rather than permanent settlers (Lee, 2003). This categorization precluded them from the folk-hero status that required identification with the nation's future. Where Chapman's eccentricities could be celebrated as markers of individuality, similar qualities in Ah Bing—his unusual height, and his singing—would likely have been interpreted as evidence of racial difference, marking him as foreign rather than folkloric. The institutions that transformed Chapman into Appleseed—national magazines, political movements, and a reading public invested in white pioneer narratives—were unavailable to Chinese immigrant communities.

The Tall Tale Genre Itself Embodies This Exclusionary Logic

American tall tales celebrate figures who subdue wilderness and personify a rugged national character. They function as narratives of belonging, asserting a figure's legitimate place in the national story. Ah Bing's experience defied the conventions of the genre: His contributions were collective rather than individual, his status subordinate rather than autonomous, and his life trajectory defined by exclusion rather than expansion. Kuo has observed that Ah Bing might have occupied a place alongside Johnny Appleseed and Paul Bunyan in American cultural memory (Blackburne & Kuo, 2026). But the genre's formal conventions, underwritten by racial assumptions, foreclosed that possibility. The tall tale, thus, operated as a gatekeeping mechanism, determining which lives could be remembered as authentically American.

This comparison demonstrates that the differential treatment of the two figures was not accidental but systematic, reflecting a broader pattern in which white subjects are individualized and commemorated while non-white subjects are collectivized and forgotten.

Writing Strategies and Cultural Significance of *Bing's Cherries*

Bing's Cherries intervenes in this exclusionary tradition through several interrelated strategies that collectively constitute an act of cultural recovery.

Genre Appropriation

The book's central strategy is its appropriation of the tall tale form. By depicting Ah Bing as a giant who sings trees into growth and whose homesickness produces cherries, the book claims the genre's conventions for an Asian American subject. This choice answers Kuo's own question about whether an Ah Bing could have existed alongside the Johnny Appleseeds: The book demonstrates that the folkloric mode is not racially proprietary, but can be adapted to serve any community's memory work. The tall tale, in this reading, becomes not a celebration of white pioneer exceptionalism but a flexible form capable of expressing loss, belonging, and resilience.

Narrative Framing

The book's frame narrative—A child imagining Ah Bing's story after her father mentions him—serves multiple functions. Blackburne has described this choice as a way of respecting Ah Bing's historical reality while allowing imaginative play (Blackburne & Kuo, 2026). The frame also acknowledges the scarcity of documentary evidence about Ah Bing without diminishing his significance. More importantly, it presents the tall tale as an act of communal memory transmission, a practice of passing down stories with reverence and selective exaggeration (Blackburne & Kuo, 2026). This reframes the tall tale from a genre of individual heroism to one of collective

remembrance, positioning memory as an active, intergenerational practice rather than a passive record of facts.

Dual Structure

The book pairs its legendary narrative with extensive backmatter including historical notes and a recipe (Blackburne & Kuo, 2026). This structure ensures that readers encounter Ah Bing both as a mythic figure and as a documented historical person. The legend provides emotional engagement; the backmatter supplies factual grounding. This dual approach distinguishes *Bing's Cherries* from traditional tall tales like the Johnny Appleseed story, which typically present legend without historical correction. The backmatter reinforces the book's comparative logic by explicitly invoking the Johnny Appleseed tradition and positioning Ah Bing within a broader folkloric landscape.

Visual Design

Julia Kuo's illustrations employ a restrained palette of blues, reds, browns, and black, with a style evoking woodblock prints (Kirkus Reviews, 2025). This aesthetic choice carries dual significance: It references East Asian artistic traditions while also conveying a timeless, folkloric quality appropriate to the tall tale genre. The illustrations, thus, perform the same dual work as the narrative, grounding Ah Bing in his cultural heritage while integrating him into American folk tradition.

The cultural significance of these strategies extends beyond recovering one figure. By demonstrating that the tall tale can serve Asian American history, the book challenges the assumption that American folklore is exclusively rooted in white pioneer experience. It suggests that folk memory can be a site of contestation and revision, open to communities historically excluded from its production. The book's intervention aligns with formal acknowledgments of exclusionary policies, such as the 2012 House Resolution expressing regret for the Chinese Exclusion Act. It extends such legal regret into the cultural sphere, arguing that acknowledgment must be accompanied by recovery.

Conclusion

Bing's Cherries reclaims a narrative form historically used to exclude and redeploys it as an instrument of recovery. Through genre appropriation, narrative framing, dual structure, and visual design, the book intervenes in American folklore, asserting that Asian American lives are as deserving of folkloric treatment as white pioneer lives. The creators' own framing of the project in relation to Johnny Appleseed establishes the comparative logic as foundational rather than imposed.

By positioning Ah Bing alongside Johnny Appleseed, the book exposes the racial logic that has governed American folk memory. That logic, rooted in legal exclusion and cultural categorization, determined who could become a folk hero. *Bing's Cherries* challenges those criteria, arguing for a more inclusive understanding of who belongs in the national story. As has been observed about the enduring power of tall tales, compelling legends often outlast factual accounts (Kerrigan, 2012). *Bing's Cherries* offers both, demonstrating that the tall tale is not the exclusive property of any single group and that its capacity for reinvention remains one of its most vital features.

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