

Another “Oath of the Peach Garden” in *Gunga Din Highway* From the Post-colonial Perspective

Zhao Yingdi^{1,a} and Su Rui^{2,b,*}

¹School of Foreign Languages, Northwest University, Xi’an. China

²School of Foreign Languages, Northwest University, Xi’an. China

^azhaoyingdi@stumail.nwu.edu.cn, ^bsabrina@nwu.edu.cn

*Corresponding author

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Abstract. The “Oath of the Peach Garden” in the novel *Gunga Din Highway* by Chinese American writer Frank Chin originates from the Chinese classical historical novel *Romance of The Three Kingdoms*. This thesis is meant to contrast the “Oath of the Peach Garden” in Chinese and Western cultural contexts to explore their differences and then analyze the three images in the brothers of the oath of the peach garden in *Gunga Din Highway* from the perspective of post-colonialism in order to figure out the underlying reasons of the transformation and explore the meaning of Chinese traditional stories to Chinese American when they are searching their cultural identity in the dilemma among Chinese and American contexts.

1. Introduction

The “Oath of the Peach Garden” originates from the historical novel *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, which was written by Luo Guanzhong, a Chinese author in the Ming dynasty, based on the historical events between three kingdoms from the year of AD169 to AD280 in Chinese history. The first chapter tells the story of Liu Bei, Guan Yu and Zhang Fei who met each other and swore an oath of blood brotherhood. When they came across each other, they found themselves having the same ambition of saving the people from wars and disasters, so they decided to swear an oath in the peach garden and strove to make their dream come true.

This plot, “Oath of the Peach Garden” was evoked by Chinese American writer Frank Chin in his novel *Gunga Din Highway*, where three Chinese American boys announced themselves three brothers in the peach garden after hearing the old Chinese story so as to rebel against the authority of their Chinese teacher. Although Chinese American writers do not live in a colony, they are an ethnic minority in American society, governed and influenced by American mainstream culture. It is, therefore, urgent for them to write their history and construct their own cultural identity. This gives rise to a situation where Chinese American experience is quite similar to that of colonized groups. In this light, the theories of post-colonial criticism can be used to analyze the literature work by Chinese American writer - “Oath of the Peach Garden” in *Gunga Din Highway*.

2. Post-colonial Criticism & Chinese American Literature

Post-colonial theory was pioneered by Frantz Omar Fanon, who argued that the first step for ‘colonialised’ people in finding a voice and an identity is to reclaim their own past, and the second is to begin to erode the colonialist ideology by which the past had been devalued [1]. Meanwhile, *Orientalism* (1978) by Edward Said marks a major shift from the purely literary to “The World, the Text and the Critic” where he discusses how the European representations of the Middle East or orientalism take the place of “scientific objective observations,” and how these orientalist concepts then take on values [2,3]. In this way, the deliberate distortion of American mainstream culture to the images of Chinese American belongs to cultural colonization of the west to the east in “Orientalism”. Later on, the theorist of post-colonialism, Homi Bhabha introduced key terms, such as the third space, hybridity, negotiation, in-betweens and cultural hybrid to post-colonialism. In his

explanation, the third space is an ambiguous region that develops when two or more different cultures interact, which “challenges our sense of the historical identity of culture as a homogenizing, unifying force, authenticated by the originary past, kept alive in the national tradition of the People”[4]. This ambivalent area of discourse, which serves as a site for the discursive conditions of enunciation, “displaces the narrative of the Western written in homogeneous, serial time.”[4].

Located on the margin of mainstream society, suffering from the emergency of disappearance of ethnic history and lack of culture recognition since the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act, Chinese Americans are not accepted and recognized by American mainstream society so that it is necessary to write and disclose the history of Chinese American, which is similar with the colonized people. The oppression and depression of American mainstream society are kind of culture colonization. That is to say, controlled by America-centered context, Chinese Americans are colonized and Americans as a group so form a kind of colony. In other words, like other ethnic minorities in western society, Chinese American are internally colonized [5].

As one of the ethnic minorities in America, under cultural hegemony and cultural imperialism, Chinese American are given stereotypical figures such as Fu Manchu and Charlie Chan by American mainstream society. In American context, as one of the typical Chinese American images, viewed as yellow peril, Fu Manchu is a yellow image, evil and treacherous, a representation of “racist fantasy”. At the same time, Charlie Chan was constructed as the model of the ethnic minority with the character of timidity and obedience to white people, which is another kind of “racist fantasy”, the fine example for ethnic groups. As stereotypes imposed by American mainstream society to ethnic minorities, the two images could be viewed as the manifestation of “Orientalism” of American mainstream culture to Chinese Americans.

Some Chinese American writers try to cater the orientalist imagination of American mainstream society on Chinese by rewriting Chinese stories. While, the writer of *Gunga Din Highway*, Frank Chin sticks to fighting for the heroic identity of Chinese American and opposing to the writers who miswrite Chinese culture and stories and even misrepresent characteristics and history of Chinese American. He adheres to constructing the heroic history of Chinese American and breaking the stereotype of American mainstream society to Chinese American, which could be proved by his work *Gunga Din Highway*, especially the creation of the images of three sworn brothers. In this novel, he tries to absorb heroic history of the Chinese American from the well-known heroic figure Guan Yu by rewriting the traditional story “Oath of the Peach Garden” from the Chinese classical novel *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*. This article will contrast the old version and new version of the “Oath of the Peach Garden”, and analyse the new one from the perspective of post-colonialism.

3. Two versions of Oath of the Peach Garden

Romance of the Three Kingdoms is acclaimed as one of the Four Great Classical Novels of Chinese literature, the first chapter of which is named “Three Heroes Swear Brotherhood In The Peach Garden; One Victory Shatters The Rebels In Battlegrounds” [6]. The first half of this chapter tells how Liu Bei, Zhang Fei and Guan Yu encountered each other when they decided to offer themselves for the army, after knowing that the outbreak of the Yellow Scarves (a revolt in AD184 in China) called for soldiers. With the same intentions, in the peach orchard behind Zhang Fei’s house, they declared that “We three——Liu Bei, Guan Yu, and Zhang Fei——though of different families, swear brotherhood, and promise mutual help until our death. We will rescue each other in difficulty; we will aid each other in danger. We swear to serve the state and save the people. We ask not the same day of birth, but we seek to die together. May Heaven, the all-ruling, and Earth, the all-producing, read our hearts. If we turn aside from righteousness or forget kindness, may Heaven and Human smite us.[6]”

They swore to be brothers because of their similar intentions of serving the state and saving the people. At that time - the last several years of the Eastern Han Dynasty, with the Yellow Scarves and ruffians here and there, the country was full of turmoil and the people led miserable lives. The three brothers witnessed all of that and decided to change the situation, which meets the mental demand

of Chinese people - calling for the saviors, like Liu, Guan, Zhang - especially during wartime. Among the three brothers, Liu Bei, as the descendant of the Imperial Family, is the eldest brother and the leader among them. Zhang Fei is the youngest. And Guan Yu is the middle one, who is the representation of “Yi” (one of the core components in Chinese national spirits, loyal to friends and nation, kind to common people) for what he did in the later stories.

Although originating from the traditional Chinese story, the three brothers in Chinese American novels - *Gunga Din Highway* by Frank Chin is quite different from the original one. In Chinese American context, Chinese American boys usually go to Chinese schools in Chinatown after class. After hearing the Chinese story - the oath of the peach garden, three boys named Ulysses Kwan, Benedict Mo and Diego Chang announced themselves to be the three brothers in order to revolt against the authority of Chinese teacher Mr. Wang. They swore that “one for all, and all for one!” in perfect Cantonese to piss off the Chinese teacher [7], which imitates what Liu, Guan and Zhang did in ancient China. Benedict Mo simulated Liu Bei because the family name of his mother is Han, for which they deem that she must be a descendant of the royal family in Han Dynasty. Ulysses Kwan imitated Guan Yu for their similar family names. And Diego Chang was a parody of Zhang Fei due to their surname.

In *Gunga Din Highway*, the intention of their oath is to revolt against the authority of their Chinese teacher, which is consistent with the independent and rebellious spirit that American mainstream society praises. In the Chinese American version, the hero among the three brothers of the peach garden is Ulysses Kwan. The author intends to get the heroic tradition from the spirit and image of Guan Yu, which comes from traditional Chinese historical novel *Romance of Three Kingdoms*. In Chinese context, Guan Yu is the representation of “Yi” - loyal to his brother Liu Bei and righteous in his heart and daily practice. However, in Chinese American context, the representation of Guan Yu - Ulysses Kwan is quite different from his prototype and becoming the symbol of independent heroic identity with rebellious spirit, the reason of which could be interpreted from the perspective of post-colonialism.

4. Analysis of Another Oath of the Peach Garden

Although with the same intentions of oath, the three brothers in *Gunga Din Highway* finally go ahead in different ways after growing up for their different attitudes towards the rewriting and misreading of traditional Chinese culture and the creating of Chinese American literature. In the fiction, when preparing for the drama *Fu Manchu Playing Flamenco Guitar*, Benedict Mo is the director and scriptwriter and the Ulysses Kwan is the main actor Fu Manchu. During the rehearsal, Benedict Mo and Ulysses Kwan hold different opinions concerning about the role of Fu Manchu.

4.1 The Obedience of Benedict Mo to Orientalism

From the fiction, *Gunga Din Highway*, it could be noticed that Benedict Mo came to America with his mother whose family name was Han, so his name was Benedict Han at the first half of the book. When he found that the family name of his biological father was Mo, he changed his family name from Han to Mo, which could imply his changeable character and mutable image.

It could be realized from the fiction that Benedict Mo photocopied the letters from Ulysses along with one of Sax Rohmer’s *Fu Manchu* novels, and after rewriting and editing, made it as his thesis for his master of arts [7], which shows his hypocrisy and egoism. Therefore, it would not be queer that Benedict Mo believes that “If someone deserves to profit from the white racist fantasy, we Chinese American do ... The only way we can make it in America is to sell ourselves. [7]” and holds the opinion of creating the Chinese culture acceptable to whites, which satisfies the racist values and oriental imagination of American mainstream society to Chinese Americans.

4.2 The Revolt of Ulysses Kwan to Orientalism

In the name of Ulysses Kwan, Ulysses (in Latin “Odysseus”) comes from the ancient Greek mythology *Odyssey*, and Kwan comes from Guan (also Kwan) Yu in the oath of peach garden [7], which shows the in-between situation of the Chinese American between Chinese and American

culture. During the rehearsal of *Fu Manchu Playing Spanish Guitar*, Ulysses intends to make Fu Manchu into a tough guy who is always rude and coarse to the whites so as to satirize to the racist fantasy of the whites and break the oriental imagination that the American mainstream society imposed on the Chinese Americans.

In *Gunga Din Highway*, Longman Kwan, the father of Ulysses Kwan, is an actor in Hollywood. Ulysses Kwan is a journalist and scriptwriter. And Benedict Mo is the director and scriptwriter of *Fu Manchu Playing Spanish Guitar* and a specialist in Asia American research. For their vocations are all concerned with art creation, the novel concerns lots of movies and drama script. To some extent, among these figures in the novel, Ulysses Kwan is an ideal image under the construction of Frank Chin, for it is a perfect Chinese American identity whose writing philosophy and art creation ideology are quite identical with Frank Chin's, who insists creating the Chinese American literature satirize to racial discrimination by reconstructing the heroic image of Chinese American male and using literature writing as a weapon.

4.3 The loss of Diego Chang

Diego Chang is a typical representation of "the beat generation" in America after World War II, who ignores the difference between Ulysses Kwan and Benedict Mo and does not have a clear attitude to the creative idea of Chinese American literature. He just narrates what he sees and hears as a spectator. This figure reflects the common experiences of the second generation immigrants, seeking current enjoyment and absolute freedom. Diego Chang plays a role in Ulysses's theatre and follow Benedict Mo finding a position in Asian American center. Although he dates with lots of different girls, he loses his lover Lucinda and keeps waiting for her. To some extent, he finds a third place between Ulysses Kwan and Benedict Mo by keeping connections with both sides without choosing and showing a clear attitude to the creation ideology of Chinese American literature and trying to blend into the American society as a typical hippie.

From post-colonial perspective, Benedict Mo obeys the orientalism of American mainstream culture - the distortion of west to east and tries to satisfy the racial fantasy of white people. Ulysses Kwan was constructed as a hero who takes practice to satirize and break the racial fantasy and cultural hegemony of white people and reconstructs the heroic history of Chinese American. While, Diego Chang finds a third place between Ulysses Kwan and Benedict Mo.

5. Conclusion

The writer, Frank Chin was born in 1940 and grew up in Chinatown, the edge of the American mainstream society. Being influenced by west and east culture and under the depression of racial discrimination and cultural hegemony, he tried to construct the heroic history of Chinese American male and break the racial fantasy of the white people. The text set itself was under the influence of cultural hegemony, which is quite similar with the social background of writing. The three brothers of the peach garden in *Gunga Din Highway* finally go ahead on different ways due to their various attitudes to Chinese American literature, which reflects the fact that different Chinese American writers have diverse opinions towards the rewriting of Chinese stories. Frank Chin constructs the masculine and brave male images in his fictions in order to reverse the oriental images of Chinese American male, which was aphasia and distorted by American mainstream society for a long time.

This article contrasts two versions of the oath of the peach garden and analyzes the Chinese American version from the post-colonial perspective to explore the construction of male images in *Gunga Din Highway* by Frank Chin, who believed that "we brought heroic tradition with us to America [7]". The rewriting of "the oath of peach garden" shows the importance of Chinese traditional stories to diaspora Chinese Americans, where they could find the origin of their heroic spirit, which is vital to the construction of their unique cultural identity. The Analysis of the Chinese American three sworn brothers in the view of post-colonialism also illustrates the development of traditional Chinese story in exotic context.

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