



A Critical Analysis of 'Fusang': Exploring the Roots of Ethnic Oppression Faced by Chinese Laborers

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Abstract. In this essay, the study aims to introduce a subjective viewpoint on "The Lost Daughter of Happiness" and Fusang, the main character of the novel. Academia and literary circles generally regard Fusang as a lenient and tolerant woman, an "earth mother." However, this essay challenges the popular opinion by presenting evidence from the original book. By examining the character's behavior in the context of the historical background, the essay proposes that Fusang is an insensitive woman. Utilizing feminist theories, the essay will explain why this book is unsuitable for promoting feminist ideals.

Keywords: Yan Geling, Fusang, Chinese laborers, ethnic disparities

1 Introduction

As one of Yan Geling's most representative novels, *Fusang* portrays a series of emblematic characters set against the backdrop of Chinatown in the late nineteenth century. The protagonist, Fusang, a Chinese prostitute, represents a doubly marginalized individual in American society at the time. (As shown in figure 1) Currently, the mainstream assessment of Fusang in academia and literary circles is that of a "benevolent and tolerant earth mother." On one hand, as the author suggests, Fusang embodies a mature, feminine, and somewhat decaying representation of Eastern culture. On the other hand, it is apparent that the Eastern prostitute Fusang possesses both the Western "virginal nature" characteristics and her tolerance extends to the realm of Western fraternity, along with a sense of Western redemption^[1]. The original text repeatedly highlights Fusang's obedience and "forgiveness" when faced with oppression. "Her howling lips and drooping eyelashes gave her face a cow-like warmth," "She hung there, gripping tightly, resembling a hunted rabbit tensing its legs, exposing herself for all to see" (excerpts from "Fusang"). Many scholars believe that Fusang's character embodies "inclusivity and wisdom" (excerpted from). However, the author of this paper argues that Fusang's "inclusion" is not an active acceptance, but rather a forced submission, an inability to adapt, and a resulting numbness. This numbness has innate components, as well as elements from the thought patterns that gradually form after being influenced by traditional flaws, and fear of resistance due to her dual marginal identity while

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abroad. Fusang is described as "stupid" multiple times in the book. Some scholars see this as not criticism but praise. However, the author contends that Fusang's "stupidity" is a lack of sensitivity or intelligence in the true sense. She was deceived by traffickers, didn't pander to tempting clients after entering the red-light district (some see this as a sign of Fusang's purity, but if she were truly pure, she would refuse clients instead of tolerating anyone's aggression). She didn't know how to handle emotions. Considering Fusang's lack of education during her childhood, her "stupidity" is genuinely being unintelligent, facing the world with unsophisticated thoughts. A crucial aspect of the resilience of Fusang and Wang Grape is that they aren't shackled by worldly ideas, but live in the primal state of women, which directly stems from the embodiment and role of the earth mother archetype within them^[2]. Fusang is not only unintelligent, but also insensitive. As stated in the book, she "took a mouthful of black medicine residue and drank no more congee." A woman in the old society who was abducted from her family should defend herself or even preserve her virginity through death. However, Fusang, despite knowing she had been abducted, lacked the determination to go on a hunger strike. Instead, she went with the flow (it may be that the villagers' cries for help didn't make Fusang realize she was trafficked, as per her unintelligent viewpoint discussed earlier). When faced with gang rape, she remained stoic, even when her beloved boy participated in the violence against her. She endured like a puppet, merely biting a button, which was too mild a reaction for someone raped by a loved one. Even "revolt" is insufficient. It is a potent submissive mentality caused by long-term persecution both domestically and abroad, and a numbness that persists regardless of location.



Fig. 1. (Fusang drawn by myself)

2 Does Fusang love Chris and Dayong?

The author claims that she loves Chris, but this kind of love is imperfect. Fusang has an instinctive feeling for the first emotional patron in her nightly "work." They don't know if they love each other. After seeing Chris's true nature and being hurt by him, Fusang remains attached to the white boy, hiding his buttons in her hair. She can't pick them up, let them go, or sever the connection. In terms of emotions, this traditional woman remains passive from beginning to end. Chris is the first one to make a move, but Fusang lacks the courage and ability to pursue love. Chris loves her, and she accepts this love; when Chris stops loving her, she seems unaffected.

As for Dayong, when he was her unknown husband, the author believes Fusang's feelings for him were weak, connected only by a code of ethics. Fusang adhered to traditional beliefs. When she was home, she fulfilled her obligations as a wife in the old society by serving her mother-in-law. She feared that "there would be no child to provide for her." She listened to the abductor and went to the boat to find her husband. However, once in the United States and working in the flesh trade, she forgot the concept of virginity and didn't refuse any guest who violated her. The original text never mentioned her thinking about her husband while in the United States (how numb she must be). When Dayong took her as a pet, Fusang was very obedient. Even though Chris still lived in her heart, she had a slave-like attachment to Dayong. At this point, she didn't know that Dayong was her husband.

Chris, he loved "A matured Chinese prostitute" rather than "Fusang", and she knew about this. For Dayong, Fusang is a cash cow and the replacement of his wife. When he wanted to kill her, Fusang was clam, thought nothing, even didn't thought about Chris. Fusang's relationships with both men are abnormal and passive. She accepts unequal feelings with a heart that won't refuse. For This submissive attitude leaves no room for dignity.

Yan Geling frequently refers to the Oriental image in her works. "Yan Geling expresses her nostalgia for her hometown both within and outside of her works, and also engages in a rational exploration of Oriental culture from the perspective of foreign culture. She is undoubtedly a bridge between Eastern and Western cultures." [3] As an overseas Chinese, she vividly portrays her pursuit of "roots," which is one of the core elements of the Oriental spirit.

3 The roots of ethnic oppression faced by Chinese laborers

In Yan Geling's writing, history serves as the backdrop for personal epics. It merely provides a background or stage that can be diminished to reveal human nature and the infliction of individual trauma. While Yan Geling focuses on the "human" aspect^[4], which is undoubtedly important, humans are also products of their historical contexts. From the late nineteenth to the early twentieth century, overseas Chinese, regardless of gender, experienced greater national oppression and cultural impact compared to most other immigrant groups. Chinese laborers and prostitutes shouldered the burden of hard

labor at the lowest rungs of society, demanded by the rapid economic and industrial development of the United States. (As shown in figure 2) Despite this, they faced widespread discrimination and suppression.

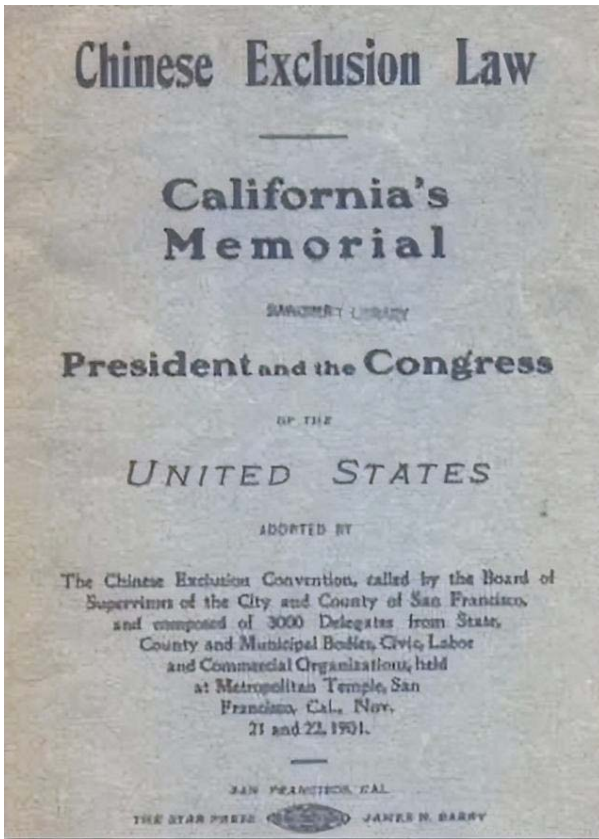


Fig. 2. (The Chinese exclusion act set in 1882)

One reason for this treatment was that Chinese workers, with their lower employment costs, occupied jobs that American local workers sought. Additionally, deep-rooted racism among Americans directly contributed to the rejection of Chinese workers. The theory of ethnic oppression and discrimination was masked by a veneer of "science," making it highly deceptive. The pseudoscientific theory of racial discrimination originated from a series of statements by Chase Caldwell, arguing that "races are born different" – for instance, that Native Americans could never be as capable as white people [5].

4 Conclusion

The Chinese civilization is primarily rooted in an agricultural tradition, while Western civilization has been shaped by nomadic and maritime influences. These differences between the two civilizations result in distinct perspectives on life. Descendants of agricultural civilizations tend to be more hard-working, as farming demands significant labor and manpower. In contrast, navigating and commercial civilizations require more intellectual effort and good fortune, with lower emphasis on hard work. This has led to Chinese people, as a whole, being more hard-working than those from non-agricultural civilizations and having simpler expectations for life. Furthermore, the agricultural civilization has fostered a strong attachment to local communities among the Chinese population. As a result, Chinese workers often send their earnings back to their families for spending. This practice has been met with disapproval by Americans, further driving a wedge between the two ethnic groups.

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