



Deconstruction of the Images of Fu Manchu in American Popular Culture in the First Half of the Twentieth Century

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Abstract. This paper will focus on the fictional literary images of Dr. Fu Manchu in American popular culture in the first half of the twentieth century. The images of Fu Manchu were first created by British writer Sax Rohmer in his *Dr. Fu Manchu* series of short stories. Fu Manchu was characterized by the duality of evil and justice, terror and intelligence. Rohmer has his subjective prejudice and discrimination against Asian people, especially Chinese migration when shaping the images with Oriental mystery and bias of yellow peril. The writers of this paper combine the historical background, character analysis, frame, and cultural industry theory to illustrate the relationship between the images of Fu Manchu and the yellow peril theory in American mass media in the first half of the twentieth century.

Keywords: Fu Manchu, American Popular Culture, Mass Media, Culture Industry

1 Introduction

Everything *Everywhere All at Once* won seven Academy Awards and three consecutive Screen Actors Guild Awards in 2023, again arousing Western society's attention to the yellow race group and Asian culture in film, television, and mass media (Whipp, 2023)^[6]. The film tells the story of an Asian mother who comes to terms with the sexual orientation of her Westernized daughter. What makes the film special is that the director weakens the Western stereotype of the yellow race group and finds a balance between Chinese and Western cultures. The film combines the concept of a multiverse world, allowing the audience to gain a new understanding and identification of Asian culture through a universal perspective. Before Everything Everywhere, the West had created

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many impressive Asian films, novels, and typical characters. Meanwhile, in February 2021, *Shang-Chi* was released as the first Chinese superhero in the Marvel Universe in North America. Hong Kong actor Tony Leung plays “Fu Manchu”, the father of the protagonist in the film. This is the first time in 41 years that images of Fu Manchu have appeared in American movies again (Yang, 2020, p.110)^[7]. However, the film was not shown in mainland China, and it also caused heated discussions. Netizens questioned whether mentioning Fu Manchu again insults China (2020)^[7]. Why is Fu Manchu a symbol of insult to China in the public’s hearts?

Since the first Fu Manchu novel was born, the images of it have been spread for more than one hundred years in the mass media. In the nineteenth century, one entrepreneur owned a large tract of land in Coloma, California. To build a waterwheel, he hired a carpenter on his property. In 1848, a carpenter found a gold leaf in the river. Although the two men tried to keep the secret, they soon failed. The California Gold Rush began in earnest. So did the surge in demand for young workers, and the signing of the Sino-us Wangxia Treaty brought large numbers of Chinese from South China to the United States. From then, the historical background for the emergence of Fu Manchu slowly unfolded. It was also during this period that the steam and electric revolution became widespread in European countries in the 18th and 19th centuries. The Western industry has been well developed. These are the backward traditional handicraft industry in the East at that time cannot compete. Since then, based on large-scale industrial production, Western countries have opened up a large number of colonies of the Qing Dynasty and other Eastern countries, making these places their dumping goods and free plunder of raw materials. Meanwhile, material affluence has given Westerners more time to ponder the meaning of human existence: Marked by the Enlightenment, Europeans achieved the final goal of self-knowledge, that is, they concluded that their self-made systems, such as the Renaissance, the Industrial Revolution, and political democracy and other processes were progressive processes, while other peoples were backward and outside the historical process. It is undeniable that the situation of the Qing Court in this period is not optimistic. For example, Of the large number of captives brought about by the armed fight between the natives and the Hakka people caused by the Taiping Rebellion in 1850, wealthy families would pay money to redeem some. And the other captives who were not redeemed would be sold to plantations in South America, bird dung digging sites in Peru, plantations, and construction sites in the United States. And those who successfully found gold or made money in the United States would be catapulted into the local upper class, so more people wanted to borrow money to go to Hong Kong to take a ship to the United States, trying to get rich. Then, the background of the birth of Orientalism began. After crossing the ocean to the United States, Chinese workers have become a threat to the local employment of other workers. However, the Chinese workers and immigrants sacrificed themselves against the background of racism and job competition. In 1871, the Chinese people in Los Angeles, part of them were killed and Chinatown was looted, but the white people were not punished by the law. Racial discrimination and violent conflicts against Chinese people seemed to be legal. In 1882, the US passed the Chinese Exclusion Act, which prohibited Chinese from immigrating to the US. It was the first act of discrimination against a specific ethnic group by law. It was not until 1943 when the United States and China became

Allies in World War II, American Congress repealed the Chinese Exclusion Act. In 2012, the United States officially apologized for the Chinese Exclusion Act. Orientalism essentially is a belief system, which lacks empirical and scientific shreds of evidence and makes irresponsible and crude assertions based on some rumors that have been altered and some simple experiences. This absurd belief system was established by varied colonialists. Immediately after, this period also saw a large influx of new white immigrants, unfortunately. According to Yang, there are not only Chinese laborers who have arrived but also their spirit of tolerance and hard work behind them (Yang, 2022) [8]. In addition, employers often hired cheap and hardworking Chinese workers to resist white strikes, further leading to white hatred of Chinese workers. Since then, violence against Chinese workers began to appear, tragedies continued, and Chinese exclusion gradually became the mainstream trend. The so-called Yellow Peril Theory has also begun to take root. The image of Fu Manchu was born at the beginning of the hot “yellow curse” period. It is a racist fear based on the paranoia of the non-White other than depicting the West being overrun by millions of East Asians. The fear first came to the surface during Western colonial imperialism, an extreme form of xenophobia that legitimated the subjugation and enslavement of Asians as a less-than-human menace. The racist paranoia traded on cultural stereotypes that characterized Chinese workers, especially those who often migrated to the US, Australia, Canada, and New Zealand to work in the gold mines (Peters, 2021)[3]. In fact, from the description of Fu Manchu in the original text, it is not difficult to see that many places have deep-rooted prejudice against Eastern Asia culture, especially Chinese culture. Then here have to mention a famous theory which is called frame theory. It refers to the thought process by which people form a specific concept of an issue or reorient their thinking about an issue. According to research, an individual’s frame of mind can significantly affect their overall views (Chong & Druckman, 2007)[2]. Therefore, what influences the frame of mind of American white people leads to their prejudice against the yellow race, which is so beloved and insisted on for nearly two hundred years.

Fu Manchu is characterized by the duality of evil and justice, terror and intelligence. Therefore, American society takes advantage of the image to solidify the social ideology and shapes a new discourse that meets the expectations of the white dominant society. This paper will utilize the theories of cultural industry and yellow peril to discuss the images of Fu Manchu in American twenty-first-century mass media through the perspective of historical background, character analysis, and theoretical frame theory. As one of the few Chinese images in American popular culture in the twenty-first century, the role of Fu Manchu is passive. The images with the “China” label appear in American popular culture, satisfying the sales demand for cultural goods and benefiting the white dominant society from discourse power. The Mainland China government’s refusal to screen Shang-Chi seems justified because the insistence of the American cultural industry on reinterpreting the character has an intentional purpose. Meanwhile, Fu Manchu’s images are still strongly insulting considered by the Chinese public in contemporary times and the criticism of the movie from the Mainland China government is also on commanding elevation to safeguard the interests of the Chinese people.

2 Frame Theory and Fu Manchu

During the mid-nineteenth century, the Gold Rush in California attracted many Chinese immigrants across the sea to support their families. At first, the local government in California did not exclude them because their arrival brought in more taxes for authorities. However, when the competition in the gold rush began to intensify, and the American Civil War brought an economic downturn, residents slowly turned against the Chinese workers. Being expelled from the gold mines, most Chinese can only earn meagre salaries in restaurants and laundries. The conflict between Native Americans and the Chinese is becoming more public. In 1871, a massacre of local Chinese took place in Los Angeles. More than five hundred white people rushed into Chinatown to attack, rob and kill local Chinese.

As a result, eighteen poor Chinese people lost their lives, and these rioters escaped the punishment of the legal system. This growing animosity and violence towards the Chinese community was further fueled by the perception that they were taking away job opportunities from American workers. The economic hardships faced by the residents led to scapegoating, with Chinese immigrants becoming convenient targets for their frustrations. The Chinese workers, who were willing to accept lower wages and endure harsh conditions, were seen as threats to the livelihoods of the local population. This hostile environment forced many Chinese individuals into segregated communities, such as China towns, where they could find some semblance of safety and support within their own community. Those Chinese who came abroad might not be different from people in China. In the eyes of Chinese people, they are hard-working, diligent, and courageous and want to come to America only to earn some income and support their families. However, why the images in American mass media are so different? The U.S. Congress even came out with the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882, the only section in the Code of Laws of the United States of America that goes towards a specific nationality or ethnic group. This article will apply the frame theory to determine the answer to the above-mentioned situations.

According to frame theory, citizens are more likely to be framed in the early stages of exposure to an issue because they know nothing about the consequences of the issue itself (Altheide, 1997)^[1]. Therefore, public opinion should be plastic at this stage, showing that people are open to arguments and information. In the early period, residents might feel uncomfortable with Chinese workers and not going to take action to hurt them. They know little about the background of Chinese immigrants and the conditions in China during that period. However, according to historical records, the earliest contact between the Chinese and the West can be traced back to the fifth century AD, during the Southern and Northern dynasties. To a greater or lesser extent, they had heard of the several military expansions of the Chinese Empire throughout history that had caused lasting nightmares for Westerners. The Boxer Movement was prevalent in China. The reports of how the Boxer burned down churches and massacred missionaries were spread in the illustrated newspapers of Western countries, which also made them feel scared thousands of miles away.

Meanwhile, China had a low national capability and could not influence the media field then. The Qing emperor was also in favour of Chinese exclusion in America due

to the fear of the emigration of Qing people to the United States, which would lead to the loss of the Chinese labour force. In this context, Fu Manchu's image of vilifying Chinese was naturally integrated into American culture. Drawing upon excerpts from Sax Rohmer's writings, the exaggerated portrayal of Fu Manchu as a sinister criminal mastermind further reinforced negative stereotypes and biases against the Chinese community. These literary works played a significant role in shaping public opinion and perpetuating discriminatory attitudes towards Chinese immigrants in the United States. Here are excerpts from Rohmer's writing:

The mere recollection that somewhere at our journeys and Fu Manchu awaited us was sufficient to sober my reflections, Fu Manchu, who, with all the powers represented by Nayland Smith pitted against him, pursued his dark schemes triumphantly, and lurked in hiding within this very area which was so sedulously patrolled Fu Manchu, whom I had never seen, but whose name stood for horrors indefinable (Rohmer, 2005, p.34)^[4].

That is an expression of the British police's extreme fear, difficulty and cunning of Fu Manchu, so they had to use all their strength to confront him. Here is another inner monologue of another character in the novel.

"I have only the vaguest idea, Inspector, but he is no ordinary criminal. He is the greatest genius which the powers of evil have put on earth for centuries. He has the backing of a political group whose wealth is enormous, and his mission in Europe is to pave the way" (Rohmer, 2005, p.44)^[4].

The author uses a highly exaggerated narrative to present the reader with his imagined image of a giant crime syndicate leader who amplifies his hidden prejudices against the Chinese. With Rohmer's other publications, these images above profoundly influenced the American people and finally shaped people's attitudes towards Chinese people. Therefore, stereotypes came into existence and dug into people's bottom hearts. Also, combined with what happened, people pushed the government to take more action against Chinese immigrants in their country until the 1940s, when China and the U.S. became allies in World War II that situation had changed.

3 Cultural Industry and Fu Manchu

At the beginning of the twentieth century, Sax Rohmer created a character in some detective fictions named Dr. Fu Manchu, while at that time Fu Manchu's series of stories started to be in active demand among west world and culture. In the following half a century, the images were adapted into countless movies and appeared in front of the American public. Fu Manchu is a symbol of evil, as a complete excerpt from Rohmer's original works shows:

-a person, tall, lean, and feline, high-shouldered, with a brow like Shakespeare and a face like Satan, a close-shaven skull, and long, magnetic eyes of the true cat-green. Invest him with all the cruel cunning of an entire Eastern race, accumulated in one giant intellect, with all the resources of science past and present, with all the resources, if you will, of a wealthy government--which, however, already has denied all knowledge of his existence (Rohmer, 2005, p.17)^[4].

Based on the description of Dr. Fu Manchu above, we can infer that the white people are, to some extent, full of a sense of crisis and fear, which is suggested by some images like cats or death, where Rohmer used the depictions of unlucky or insecure mind from a traditional western perspective in a horror and instructive story. Fu Manchu gathers all the oriental species, like cruel and cunning identity in body. He sets ancient and modern Chinese and foreign knowledge of the great achievement. The resources he controls are comparable to those of a rich country's government, although the latter has refused to acknowledge any evidence of his existence, because of a so-called long-standing plot by the east to overthrow western civilization. When the readers want to think of this terrible being, at the same time, all the images of Dr. Fu Manchu would come to your mind.

The characteristic of Dr. Fu Manchu is an emblematic of the concept known as the "Yellow Peril", which symbolizes the perceived threat posed by East Asian immigrants in a predominantly white society. When seeking to deconstruct the character of Fu Manchu, while also examining the intersection with the "class identity" of yellow immigrants within white societies. The portrayal of Dr. Fu Manchu in mass media and popular culture is consciously molded by the dominant white people to influence the audience's perception of the impact of yellow immigration. By applying Theodor Adorno's theories on the culture industry to analyze the genesis and evolution of the Fu Manchu archetype, we can discern how the notion of "class" becomes entwined with racial and cultural distinctions. The negative portrayal of Fu Manchu associates the character with malevolence, relegating it to the role of a maleficent backdrop in Western narratives. Simultaneously, it accentuates enigmatic and inscrutable traits, adding to the allure of the character for readers. In this context, the depiction of Dr. Fu Manchu perpetuates and reinforces harmful stereotypes of East Asian individuals, constructing them as a menacing and exotic "other" in contrast to the white society. These stereotypes or bias not only underscore the prevalent racial prejudices of the time but also contribute to shaping and perpetuating social hierarchies in a racially diverse environment in the first half of twentieth century among west society.

Furthermore, the amalgamation of Fu Manchu's character with notions of class and race elucidates the complexity of cultural representations in the context of immigration and intercultural interactions. The reception and acceptance of such portrayals in pop culture underscore the influence of the dominant white society in shaping the narratives surrounding yellow immigrants, further reinforcing the notion of the "Yellow Peril" and perpetuating a divisive racial discourse.

In a novel's narrating and plot structure, characters are often needed to provide constant pressure to keep the plot moving toward a dilemma for the audience. The characters who drive the plot have two sides which are positive and negative characters, the function of which is that they bring different needs to the story itself—for example, the use of different ages and physical features to rationalize the story's progression. The villain Fu Manchu represents is an apparent symbolic element created to foil the profound character of the positive character. He led the criminal group in London's Chinatown at the beginning of the twentieth century. Rohmer expresses that he is the concretization of the "yellow peril", characterized by many dualistic images: bright and evil, old and aggressive, etc. First, as a member of the yellow immigrants, he should

have been a degenerate opium-sucking role with low intelligence in the eyes of the white. However, he has become a contradiction with high wisdom and three doctoral degrees.

Meanwhile, the horror images of Fu Manchu are added to reflect the fact that Westerners are not familiar with the yellow race, like “Dr. Fu Manchu there rested an atmosphere of horror, peculiar, unique” (Rohmer, 2005)^[4]. Second, Fu Manchu has a completely opposed ethnic and cultural identity. He is of mixed race. His learning experience in Western countries made him proficient in the civilized Western world. Moreover, the author adds plenty of Chinese cultural elements to him. Such unclear racial identity is the author’s suggestion that the reader Fu Manchu has the possibility of challenging white society and rationality. When explaining the characteristics of these dualities, we have to inter-understand the yellow immigrants and native whites.

The yellow immigration seems incompatible with the local white society, which is also caught in a state of duality. In fact, since the middle of the nineteenth century, the number of immigrants from China has reached half a million. They spread all over the megacities of Western countries such as London, Paris, and New York, where they formed settlements. Many immigrants are slightly disturbing to the local white people because: “a Chinaman could seem so much like an American, maybe even be a citizen” (Shih, 2009, p.314)^[5]. First, the Chinese are trying to integrate into white society. If analyzing the competitiveness of these immigrants in detail, we can find that they are far ahead in number, and their labour costs are relatively low. This kind of competitiveness has made Westerners realize that their living space has been squeezed. The sense of crisis appeared for the first time among whites whom themselves used to play the role of the working class. The second is that the employer class has discovered the changes in the employment structure and patterns formed since the Industrial Revolution. The cheap-cost immigrants continue to impact the industrial production market.

Another intuitive impact is: “British appreciation of the Chinese mind cannot have to call wrong in the years following the boxer rebellion” (2009)^[5]. In the eyes of white people, the Boxer movement is undoubtedly seen as savage and violent, primarily because they associate the Boxers with religious fanaticism. White society fears that these immigrants from China will bring such barbarism to their country, threatening the modern civilization established by the entire white world with violent acts.

The dread that he inspired in all with whom he came in contact, the terrors which he controlled and hurled at whomsoever cumbered his path, rendered him an object supremely sinister (Rohmer, 2005)^[4].

The reason such a crisis is difficult to resolve is the integration of a white society into a group that is difficult to distinguish from the operation of the white society itself. The immigrants quickly integrated into the most common class (the working class). They became an indispensable front-line nut for the white social and industrial system.

Faced with the threat posed by the immigration of the yellow race, white society has also made a particular response. The images of Fu Manchu are constantly changing in the practice of specific social ideology and being reshaped in the changing social discourse. In short, Fu Manchu is a product of reconstruction. First, media commercialization is possible in the “cultural industry”. Some novels about China will be overstated to satisfy sales. A character like Fu Manchu has changed from a creative novel character

to a popular character which becomes a “fact” accepted by the public. Second, the white society chooses to use the propaganda tools in the state apparatus to reshape Fu Manchu’s images and use them to guide popular culture. In other words, the white society is regaining the discourse which belongs to the yellow immigrants. “Talk to assassinate the authorized to discuss safely define the east” (Shih, 2009, p.312)^[5]. The role of Fu Manchu is like a tool, as shown in the plot. He often assassinates those expensive white people (Rohmer, 2005, p.2)^[4]. Behind this behaviour, the meaning is that the yellow immigrants try to erase those who misunderstand their discourse system to fight for the right to speak.

4 Conclusion

As one of the few Chinese images in American popular culture in the twentieth century, Fu Manchu was not a positive role. For this reason, he was re-used by white society to solidify the ideological field to clarify a new discourse that fits the expectation of white society. In conclusion, these images with the “China” label appeared in Western popular culture which in addition to satisfying the sales demand for cultural goods, they are also tools for white society to dominate the right to speak. Returning to the question at the beginning, the Mainland government rejected *Shang-Chi* and *Everything Everywhere All at Once*, which seems equally understandable. There is an ulterior motive for the Western cultural industry to insist on reinterpreting this character today, as Fu Manchu’s images are still considered to have strong insulting connotations among the Chinese public in contemporary times. Mainland official criticism of the film is also on high ground during the battle of culture in the public.

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