

A Study on the Cultural Trauma Writing of Ulysses and Guiding Figures in the Novel Gunga Din Highway

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Abstract: In the novel *Gunga Din Highway*, Frank Chin deconstructs the traditional stereotypical image of Chinese Americans and reshapes a new type of Chinese American Ulysses. The novel focuses on the contrasting attitudes of two generations of the Kwan family towards the portrayal of the character Charlie Chen, providing a profound critique of the white depiction of Chinese American stereotypes. This article aims to analyze the protagonist Ulysses' dual traumas in his coming-of-age journey and examine how he establishes a new racial ideology and constructs a hybrid identity under the guidance of Longman Kwan's reverse leadership. Furthermore, it seeks to elucidate the author's viewpoint, which vehemently criticizes conforming to mainstream American culture, breaking stereotypes of Chinese people and inspiring cultural consciousness among ethnic minorities.

1. Introduction

Frank Chin, also known as the “father of modern Asian American Literature”^[1], has made significant contributions in literary theory, comedy and creative writing. His works have consistently aimed to promote Chinese orthodoxy and challenge the inherent racial discrimination and stereotypes prevalent in mainstream American culture. The novel *Gunga Din Highway* derives its title from the renowned poem *Gunga Din* by the British writer Rudyard Kipling. This poem glorifies Gunga Din, an Indian water-bearer who, despite being captured by the British, serves them faithfully. The poem later inspired an adaptation into a film of the same name, becoming Longman Kwan's favorite movie during his lifetime. Through fragmented narration and various character perspectives, Frank Chin portrays the lives and worldviews of two generations of the Kwan family, Chinese immigrants in the United States. Additionally, he depicts the experiences of Jewish and African American communities within American society. These portrayals aim to shape a new type of Ulysses who navigates and challenges the conventions of mainstream American culture.

Overall, the novel has a loose plot structure, consisting of four parts: The Creation, The World, The Underworld and Home. Each part presents the same or different events from various character perspectives. The first part primarily focuses on the immigrant experience of Longman Kwan, the first-generation immigrant, in Hollywood. He aspires to portray the fictional Chinese detective

Charlie Chin, a character played by a white actor, overweight, cowardly, speaking broken English and submissive to white people. The second part depicts Ulysses' coming-of-age journey, including his life in Chinatown, the conflicts with his father Longman Kwan and his observations of the Chinese American community around him. The third part extensively describes the escalating civil rights movement and the creation of various literary works and scripts as the Beat Generation ages. It also introduces an important character, Fu Manchu, who represents the "Yellow Peril" in the point of white people. The fourth part reveals the resolution of the bond between the three sworn brothers and provides a detailed account of Ulysses, family situation. The novel concludes with the death of Longman Kwan, Ulysses escorting Diego's pregnant housekeeper to the hospital, and a smooth journey with green traffic lights. The transformation of Ulysses, who was once cynical and at odds with traditional Chinese culture, into a "steadfast and indomitable guardian of Chinese American culture"^[2] is not only attributed to his aging and the rising civil rights movement but also inseparable from the reverse guidance of his father, Longman Kwan.

2. Racial Trauma Writing and Guiding Narratives

Regarding racial trauma theory, one of the most significant contributions comes from Frantz Fanon^[3] in his book *Peau Noire, Masques Blancs*. Fanon points out that all colonized people, that is, all people who have become folded up in their local culture, who have assumed its characteristics and been contaminated by its corrosive influence, suffer from a sense of self-abasement in the face of the enlightened race, which refers to the cultural hegemony of the colonizing nation. He further notes that the more the colonized individual rejects their own blackness and local culture, the more they aspire to be white.

While this theory specifically addresses the racial conflicts between black and white individuals, it holds relevance for Chinese Americans as well, who find themselves in mainstream American society. In the narrative of Ulysses' racial trauma, it can be divided into inter and intraspecific categories based on ethnic distinctions. Interethnic racial trauma explores the experiences of Ulysses as a Chinese American navigating a predominantly white society, facing racism, discrimination, and the pressure to assimilate into the dominant culture. It encompasses the challenges, microaggressions, and systemic barriers Ulysses encounters due to his racial identity. Intraspecific racial trauma focuses on the experiences of Ulysses within the Chinese American community, examining issues of cultural identity, internalized racism, and the tensions between assimilation and preservation of cultural heritage. This aspect delves into the complexities of being part of a diasporic community and the inter-generational effects of trauma stemming from historical experiences, such as Chinese exclusion and the model minority myth. Both inter and intraspecific narratives contribute to a comprehensive understanding of the racial trauma experienced by Ulysses as a Chinese American in the broader context of American society.

In terms of interethnic racial trauma, the novel primarily focuses on the narratives of racial trauma between white people and Chinese Americans, white people and Black people, and white people, Chinese Americans, and Black people. From the beginning of the novel, through the voice of Longman Kwan, it directly addresses the stereotypes and prejudices that mainstream American society holds against Chinese Americans: "The younger generations don't remember when Americans thought all Chinese were sex perverts, opium smugglers, and torturers of women"^[4]. Longman Kwan, as a first-generation Chinese immigrant, becomes famous for playing the role of the Chinese detective Charlie Chan's fourth son and the doomed "Chinaman". His lifelong aspiration is to portray Charlie Chan, a character that embodies racial discrimination and stereotypes. Hyacinth, in front of Ulysses, bluntly states that "they'll get a white woman to play the Chinese detective before they star a Chinese man. They'll star a Chinese woman before they star a

Chinese man as a Chinese man! They'll star a Chinese queer boy before they star a Chinese man" [4]. As Ulysses grows up, he brings Fu Manchu to the stage in the theater he establishes. However, this move receives negative reviews from the American media. They even use Pandora Toy's words in the book that "Chinese men don't get angry"^[4] to prevent Ulysses from defending themselves. They ridicule Ulysses' attempt to establish Asian American theater because mainstream American culture only appreciates the stereotypical image of characters like Charlie Chan. Fu Manchu's appearance instills fear in Westerners, as they are afraid that Eastern civilization will subvert Western civilization. These narratives highlight the racial trauma experienced by Chinese Americans in the face of racial stereotypes, discrimination and the limited roles and representations available to them in mainstream American culture. It explores the challenges of challenging and subverting these stereotypes and the resistance encountered when trying to establish a more diverse and authentic representation of Chinese American experiences.

As regard to the attitude of Chinese Americans towards white people, even in the face of such suppressed national self-esteem, Longman Kwan still wants to play the role of Charlie Chan. Furthermore, the novel mentions that Chinese restaurants do not have Chinese signs, only menus provided to Americans. This indicates that most Chinese people in America, like Longman Kwan, lack backbone and only want to cater to Americans. Moreover, when the group has a dispute over the script, Benedict Han/Mao says, "The only way we can make it in America is to sell ourselves"^[4]. This shows that the writers at that time were more concerned with how to adapt the script to have a larger market in America, rather than focusing on accurately representing their own culture. Despite the oppression and discrimination Chinese Americans face from white people, the Chinese Americans around Ulysses, represented by Longman Kwan, tend to lack ambition, blindly conform, and become numb products of mainstream American social conditioning.

Looking at the dynamics between white people and Black people, on one hand, white society engages in extreme racial discrimination against Black people, exhibiting preferences for hiring individuals of Asian descent over Black people. Throughout Ulysses' upbringing, he continually realizes that "blacks are Negroes"^[4], highlighting the racial bias and discrimination faced by Black individuals. On the other hand, the attitude of Black people towards white people, similar to that of Chinese people towards white people, can be characterized by a tendency to accommodate and gain acceptance. Some Black individuals may even engage in self-discrimination and align themselves with white people in order to obtain political positions. This mirrors the willingness to conform and the lack of self-esteem that results from the social conditioning imposed by mainstream white American society.

Indeed, there are subtle relationships between white people, Chinese people, and Black people. When Ulysses wants to play with his Black friend Sylvia, he faces opposition from his family, which leads to him becoming a stranger in his own home. Sylvia's family also sees him as a stranger, and he becomes a stranger in the city as well. As Ulysses grows up, he visits his Black friend Milton's house, where Milton asks him, "Your mother didn't discourage you forming any friendships with Negroes?" and "She didn't tell you not to wear green, because it makes you look more yellow?"^[4]. These events indicate that in order to survive in white society, marginalized groups not only have to directly cater to white people but also engage in mutual exclusion and alienation, making themselves look as American as possible.

In terms of intraethnic dynamics, the novel primarily focuses on the narratives and descriptions of interactions between Chinese Americans and African Americans. Within the Chinese American community, Ulysses perceives a sense of arrogance among his fellow Chinese individuals: "All Chinamen think no other Chinaman has seen a Chinaman like them. Each of them are dead certain, that they, and only they, are so much more deeply and tangibly but inexplicably American than any other Chinaman who has ever lived that all other Chinamen who meet them will run hot and cold

with jealousy and terror”^[4]. Within the African American community, individuals often feel the need to distance themselves from their own race and even their own cultural traits in order to better navigate white society. For example, Milton, an African American character, mentions that his mother warned him not to play with other Black children, to wear a jacket and tie to school, and not to make friends with Black people because they would leave a scent on the couch.

Longman Kwan’s relentless pursuit of playing the role of Charlie Chan, his desire to escape his skin color and his humble background, creates a strong appeal to Ulysses, causing him to become more aware of the racial issues constantly present in his surroundings. This shift in focus allows Ulysses to view race from a collective standpoint, enhancing his racial consciousness. This is exemplified by Ulysses’ extreme disgust towards everything related to Charlie Chan. He becomes unwilling to continue working on the railroad when his coworkers discuss movies featuring Charlie Chan. In his personal life, Kwan constantly pressures Ulysses to watch Chinese films in which he portrays characters who are usually depicted as “The Chinaman Who Dies”^[4]. As a result of these conflicts, Ulysses argues with Kwan numerous times. Ulysses also joins the Chinatown Black Tigers, showcasing the cohesion within ethnic communities. Moreover, in the subsequent scriptwriting process, Ulysses boldly breaks away from the traditional portrayal of Chinese characters. In *About My Movie*, he fully embraces the subversion of traditional Chinese images, practicing a new concept of racial integration that promotes “equality, harmony and fusion”^[5]. This signifies his commitment to challenging and transforming the stereotypes of Chinese Americans, and it reflects the embodiment of a new racial ideology.

3. Cultural Trauma Writing and Guiding Narratives

Culture trauma is a concept that refers to the profound harm inflicted on collective identity. It occurs when members of a collective believe they have experienced a terrible event that leaves an indelible mark on their collective consciousness and fundamentally alters their future identity. According to Alexander et al.^[6], for an event to be portrayed as a culture trauma, it must be collectively classified as a core narrative that constructs their collective identity. Additionally, Smelser^[7] points out that for an event to be considered a culture trauma, its memory must be perceived as erasing and destructive within the culture and public, posing a threat to personal identity and recognition. In the novel, the environment in which Ulysses finds himself requires Chinese Americans to forget their cultural identity. This signifies the pressure on Chinese individuals to adapt and relinquish their culture in a white-dominated society. Ulysses also experiences the impact of this culture trauma. He faces pressure to feel disgusted by his Chinese identity and attempts to shed his skin color, background, and culture in order to gain acceptance and a sense of security in a white-dominated world. This portrayal of culture trauma in such an environment demonstrates the violation and threat to the individual and collective identity of Chinese Americans.

As a second-generation Chinese immigrant, Ulysses had a unique upbringing. He lived in a white household and was immersed in an English-speaking environment until the age of six, when he returned to life in Chinatown. Initially, he felt unfamiliar with and resistant to the Chinese culture in Chinatown. He refused to speak compliments to his grandmother and continuously challenged the authority of his Chinese language teacher at the Chinese school in Oakland. He disliked learning Chinese and primarily wrote his stories in English. When confronted with the ancient Chinese culture, he experienced a sense of discomfort and confusion, a reaction to the cultural shock. Ulysses “was out of place in Chinatown”^[4] and “He spoke English like an American. There was nothing Chinese in Ulysses’ voice. When his Chinese sounded American, the Chinese teacher laughed at him. But Ulysses was American, all-American and unafraid”^[4]. When faced with

conflicts within Chinatown, Ulysses initially considered following the path of Longman Kwan, attempting to counter the assimilation and discrimination from Chinatown by embracing white assimilation. However, the issue remained unresolved, and he still grappled with an identity crisis. He couldn't understand whether he was American or Chinese, further adding to his confusion.

As a first-generation Chinese immigrant, Longman Kwan arrived in the United States with dreams of becoming an actor in Hollywood. However, the social reality forced him into insignificant roles, turning him into a laughingstock in Hollywood's Chinese films. Longman Kwan became the "Other" in American society, unable to escape or change his circumstances. Instead, he immersed himself in this environment, gradually losing his sense of direction and forgetting his Chinese pride. Initially, Ulysses also hesitated when faced with questions about his identity, adopting a similar approach to Kwan. However, witnessing his father repeatedly portrayed as the inevitably doomed Chinaman in movies, coupled with the rising civil rights movement, deepened Ulysses' understanding of his ancestral culture's core elements found within Chinese traditional culture. He realized that in mainstream American culture, they would never cast a Chinese man to play Charlie Chan's role, and the constant portrayal of Chinese characters in movies exported by American mainstream culture made him aware of the manipulative nature of mainstream culture on ethnic cultural identities. This realization prompted Ulysses to start contemplating and practicing the concept of multiculturalism.

As the hippie generation grew older, Ulysses brought *Fu Manchu Plays Flamenco Guitar* to the stage, playing a Fu Manchu character that was vastly different from previous Chinese portrayals. He became the "Yellow Peril" in the eyes of white audiences. Despite facing criticism from the media and mainstream society, he remained steadfast in his ethnic identity, confidently waving the flag of Chinese traditional culture. Even in the face of adversity, Ulysses did not retreat. He continued creating works like *Night of the Living Third World Dead*. This signifies his clear understanding of his cultural identity and a fundamental shift from his initial desire to conform. Longman Kwan's influence on Ulysses guided him towards a stronger awareness of his dynamic self-identity. Ulysses identifies with his Chinese heritage in terms of his ethnic identity, and with America in terms of his national identity. He realizes that "No guilt. We were pure self-invention" ^[4], indicating that Ulysses is capable of embracing a hybrid identity within the realm of spatial identity.

4. Author's Social Concern in the Trauma Perspective

From Frank Chin's perspective, embracing Charlie Chan and seeking assimilation is equivalent to hating oneself. Assimilation means erasing racial differences, and it is unethical to come to America and force your own ethnicity to disappear^[8]. In the novel, Frank Chin, through the voice of Ulysses, not only criticizes the creators of stereotypes but also openly expresses disgust towards Chinese-American writers who have lost their ethnic self-esteem in order to cater to white people. These writers, such as Benedict Han/Mao and Pandora Toy, are also Frank Chin's response to cultural debates in reality, including figures like Jade Snow Wong and Maxine Hong Kingston. In the view of Ulysses and Frank Chin, Chinese-American writers should maintain their ethnic identity and believe that the Chinese-American community should continue to fight and "shatter the various stereotypes imposed on them by white people and strive for freedom and equality for all"^[9].

Furthermore, Goshert^[10] points out that Ethnic identity is not static or limited, but always in process. Under Longman Kwan's reverse guidance, Ulysses goes through a journey from identity confusion to identity exploration and ultimately constructs his identity, growing into a "pure self-creation" with Asian sensibilities and vitality, rather than a Chinese image that is completely opposed to America or completely assimilated. Similarly, Frank Chin also expresses a hopeful desire to have equal participation in American social life. He mentions, "America is my birthplace,

my mother, her mother, her mother's mother, and her mother's mother's mother's birthplace”^[11]. It is evident that Frank Chin identifies with America as his birthplace and homeland, and his struggle has always been for equal ethnic rights for Chinese-Americans in Western society, rather than shaping a concept of Chinese political groups that are opposed to the American collective^[12].

Longman Kwan wants to assimilate into the white culture, but his Chinese characteristics are preserved in superficial and peculiar details, which Ulysses, who witnesses these details, finds abhorrent. Eventually, Ulysses learns about his own heritage, finds his family lineage, and further strengthens his racial consciousness. Longman Kwan dies, and they head towards the road with green lights all the way. “And the eyes of Chinatown look up from the all-night TV, watch me slip into town, and watch me leave”^[4]. It is evident that in the midst of various obstacles and ideological isolation, the new generation of Chinese-Americans, represented by Ulysses, has awakened and firmly set foot on the path towards the future. This reflects the author’s intention, on one hand, to hope that Chinese-American literary creators can uphold their Chinese identity and not fall into the trap of whitewashing in their works. On the other hand, it anticipates that there will inevitably be changes among future generations of Chinese-Americans, and emerging purely Chinese individuals will arise, relying on their Eastern heritage and ethnic traits to construct their own identities.

In general, the author demonstrates his concern for cultural trauma and ethnic identity in his works and explores these issues in a complex and profound manner. Through the stories and perspectives of the characters, he provides readers with an opportunity to ponder and understand cultural identity, and calls for respect and acceptance of different cultures and identities. The author sheds light on the complexity and diversity of cultural identity by portraying the characters’ inner struggles, quests for their origins, and reflections on societal pressures and stereotypes. His works serve as a reminder that cultural trauma and ethnic identity are issues that need to be taken seriously, discussed, and understood. They encourage people to strive for an inclusive and diverse society. Through this approach, the author demonstrates his sincere concern for societal issues and his emphasis on the topic of cultural identity.

5. Conclusions

In his novel *Gunga Din Highway*, Frank Chin portrays both traditional Chinese characters, such as Longman Kwan, who exemplifies subservience and emotional detachment, and new generation Chinese-Americans like Ulysses, who embody passionate sentiments and emotions. Through these portrayals, he depicts the various oppressions faced by Chinese-Americans in American society. The novel concludes with Longman Kwan’s death and Ulysses driving through a road with green lights, conveying the author’s hope that Chinese-Americans who lack ethnic consciousness can break free from their constraints. This signifies a desire for the healthy development of Asian American literature and reflects Frank Chin’s determination, akin to Ulysses, to move forward collectively. Additionally, after experiencing trauma, Ulysses, guided by Kwan’s reverse influence, remains steadfast in asserting his pure Chinese-American ethnic identity. Frank Chin’s deconstructs stereotypes, portraying Ulysses as a disillusioned figure representing the Chinese-American community’s collapse. Ulysses becomes a renegade and challenger to mainstream society, serving as a profound critique of contemporary Asian/Chinese-Americans who are lost in their ethnic characteristics and blindly pursue assimilation. Simultaneously, it provides a practical method for shaping the image of Chinese-Americans and constructing their Chinese-American identity.

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