

The “Yellow Peril” and the Precariousness of White Dominance at the End of the 19th Century

Yunxin Chen

(Sichuan International Studies University, Chongqing, China)

Abstract: Yellow Peril fears emerged from the very precariousness of white dominance, and the myriad forms of resistance to it. As a result, domestic repression and geopolitical aggression shaped both domestic and global Yellow Peril fears. These internal and external imperial contests represent very real conflict, but also perpetuate a paranoid worldview that structures mainstream understandings of future crisis. This article will discuss how “Yellow Peril” represents the precariousness of white dominance from three aspects. Firstly, Chinese in America, racialized and emasculated as “peril”, became the scapegoats for the failures of the nineteenth-century white Anglo American Protestant promise. Secondly, Americans regarded Chinese as “peril” and expelled them to maintain racial and cultural purity, which represented the crisis of white dominance. And lastly, in the name of spreading civilization, the U.S. implemented colonialism in east Asia to expand living space and earn their dominance, which reflected Americans’ sense of crisis. In conclusion, at the end of the 19th century, “Yellow Peril” embodied the very precariousness of white dominance.

Keywords: yellow peril; white dominance; Chinese; precariousness

Date of Submission: 25-03-2019

Date of acceptance: 09-04-2019

American history, as told by the founding fathers, was a progressive account of triumph over the perils of the forests and its beasts, of change from a lesser to a greater good, of growth from the simple to the complex, of evolution from savagism to civilization. However, the emergence of “Yellow Peril” thoroughly exposed the very precariousness of white dominance in the U.S. at the end of the 19th century. Such anxieties, fears, and paranoia have been powerfully captured and conveyed in the development of the colonialist Enlightenment culture of Europe and the U.S. --in its various patrician, expressive, intellectual, commercial, and political forms.

“Yellow”, as a racial signifier in the Western imagination, has come to represent those now classified as “East Asian.” Yet, its first noted usage was applied to South Asians. In the 1684 publication “New Division of the Earth, According to the Different Species or Races of Man that Inhabit it, Sent by a Famous Voyager,” cultural and historical difference was reduced to “the exterior form of their bodies...principally in their faces.” “Peril” to whom? Peril is a potential “at your own risk” danger of injury or death. In thirteenth-century Middle English “peril” and “danger” were used interchangeably. It is a future possibility especially frequent when the world of security appears now vulnerable to a larger world of new and unknown dangers.

This article will analyse some publications from American writers and Chinese who have lived in America and been regarded as “peril”. Then we can find Chinese racialized as “perils” being scapegoats for the failures of American promise, Americans expelling Chinese for maintaining white dominance, and America’s colonialism in east Asia for expanding living space and earning dominance, which can conclude that Yellow Peril fears emerged from the very precariousness of white dominance, and the myriad forms of resistance to it.

1. Chinese as “perils” being scapegoats for America’s failures

How can America deliver on its promise of the liberal individualist dream? Placing American traditions into a broader analysis of yellow perilism helps us connect discordant strands of U.S. history together, shedding light on how fears about internal and external enemies reinforce each other and serve as a driving, but repressive, force in U.S. history.

Nineteenth-century white Americans inherited a colonial Enlightenment liberal tradition that defined manly individuality against internal and external hordes, U.S. expansion westward, and Americanized and whitened generations of “pioneers.” Political elites promises these migrants that the frontier would offer them a new beginning. But in the face of brutal working conditions, political corruption, and a destabilizing “boom and bust” economy, European American and European immigrant men sought to attain their aspiration against railroad monopolists and against Chinese laborers. “Down With Monopolies! The Chinese Must Go!”

Michael Rogin has argued that fractious tensions between fantasies of republican political equality and the rigid social hierarchy of a society rooted in liberal individualism have haunted white American cultural and political citizenship. Rather than confront these divisive and destabilizing contradictions from within, many proponents of liberal democracy projected these desires and fears outside the imagined fraternity of whitened man.¹ In this Manifest Destiny journey, even the Irish, that lowly, racialized other of the British Empire, became whitened. Chinese in America, racialized and emasculated, became the scapegoats for the failures of the nineteenth-century white Anglo American Protestant promise.

Thus, there were some descriptions of demonizing Chinese in literary works, which ascribed problems of the U.S. to Chinese implicitly. This fanciful future-history by journalist William Ward Crane is representative of numerous stories from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries depicting the unification of colonized peoples under a Fu Manchu-like Asian leader. Crane wrote this story before the Japanese invasion of China or the U.S. invasions of Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the Philippines, and yet he clearly illustrates the fears and fantasies attending these imperialisms.

“A white refugee from Jamaica wrote to a New Orleans paper that in passing by night near one of the Chinese hamlets he had seen a band of negroes going through a strange ceremony, while the Asiatics sat and looked on, showing their teeth like rats...”

*In February 1899, the government was notified by Colonel Mays, the head-chief of the Cherokees in Indian Territory, that two Chinese strangers had tried to induce him to join a league of Chinamen, negroes, and Indians against the whites of the United States...”*²

The late nineteenth-century anti-Chinese movement sought to define who and what was “American” and established the traditions and regulations of national identity boundary control that has impacted national demographics and national “character” ever since. Historian Alexander Saxton understood Chinese migrants as “the indispensable enemy.”³ But the exclusion and segregation of the Chinese in the U.S. did little to quell the fears of an Anglo American Protestant political culture.

Americans have come up with many explanations for the perpetual deferments of their dreams. If only a rational, informed citizenry would prevail...If only the tyranny of the mob could be broken...If only the immigrants weren’t so degraded...If only the world would let the promise break free. Even after politicians moved to block the peril of Chinese labor competition by closing the door to immigrants, Americans looked to the opening of Chinese markets as a form of salvation.

2. Americans expelling “perils” for maintaining white dominance

Fu Manchu is the typical “peril” image of Chinese fabricated by Americans in nineteenth-century. From the American point of view, Chinamen like him would destroy White Puritan culture and the purity of the white race. So, Americans expelled Chinese to maintain domestic white dominance. Conversely, American internal environment was too vulnerable to undergo external influence.

Sax Rohmer took this bundle of anxieties, investments, and archetypes and combined them with the urban legends of vice, crime, and opium addiction in the London slums to fabricate the fantastic world of Fu Manchu. Fu Manchu desires neither white women, nor fame. He is bizarre, “queer,” nonheteronormative. *Horrors! He cannot be bought off!* Instead, the inscrutable Dr. Fu Manchu uses his Western intellect and Eastern cunning to try to destroy Western Civilization and beat it at its own game of world conquest. He organizes the colonized against the British, and picks off colonial administrators who catch on to his plot. This sublimated revenge fantasy helps make sense of why the Devil Doctor seems to take so much pleasure in his ability to outwit and terrify the British. The messy details of Western violence need not complicate the story of Western purity and innocence. In a paranoid political culture, seemingly random disruptions of London’s peace can be explained simply and elegantly: the East wants to annihilate the West.

Dr. Fu Manchu himself becomes the “juggernaut” of modernity: his complete control over time, space, technology, language, and social systems makes him a monstrous reflection of the very Western civilization he threatens to subsume, and his racial alterity makes literal the alienating, unknowable character of modern urban life. Despite frequent textual insistences that modern England is a white-dominated nation whose whiteness must be preserved, Fu Manchu’s access to seminal cultural discourse and technologies keeps the relationship between racial identity and modernity unstable.

Each episode in which the Chinese doctor outwits his British pursuers lays bare the conflict that haunts canonical modernist authors and theorists of modernity alike: that state-sponsored democratic and humanistic

¹ Michael Rogin, *Ronald Reagan: the Movie; and Other Episodes in Political Demonology* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1987).

² William Ward Crane, “The Year 1899,” *Overland Monthly*, June 1893, 579-81.

³ Alexander Saxton, *The Indispensable Enemy: Labor and the Anti-Chinese Movement in California* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1971).

institutions, and the culture that worships them, can breed indescribable brutality, corruption, and violence. Three decades before the Second World War and the Holocaust, Sax Rohmer’s Fu Manchu novels warned readers that the hallmark virtues of the modern era--access to information, individual agency, respect for scientific progress--might produce a killing machine, a brilliant and efficient path to mass death.

Americans have always defended themselves against foreign perils. But the function of The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 is far from what Americans expected, which also indicates the crisis of white dominance itself at the end of nineteenth-century.

3. America colonizing in East Asia for offsetting domestic precariousness of white dominance

Americans like to believe they are exceptional and exist outside the historical trajectory of the Old World. But just how outside can America be, and what is lost in this exceptionalist narrative?

The Bard of British Imperialism himself, Rudyard Kipling spent half a decade living in Brattleboro, Vermont. He wrote the *Jungle Book* there. Edmund Wilson has argued that Kipling’s time in the U.S. pushed him to embrace imperialism in ways he never had before as a young man in British India. According to Wilson, Kipling--having been raised in a rigidly status-conscious colonial setting--could not stand the lack of deference and social hierarchy he encountered in America, and found solace in imperial order upon his return to England in 1896.⁴

But America played versions of the Great Game, far more than acknowledged. U.S. presidents Thomas Jefferson and James Monroe sought to extend an “empire of liberty” across the continent, which could extend the promise of propertied freedom farther than ever before. They boldly declared that the newly independent Republics of the Americas would assume the mantle of civilization for themselves over their Old World imperial rivals in the region. However, for all their political differences, the geopolitical results of what Americans came to call their Manifest Destiny were quite similar to the machinations of their European forebears and competitors. As the U.S. pushed south into Cherokee, Chickasaw, Seminole, and Spanish territory, and west into Mexico, the British in India pushed east from their base in Bengal to China, and west to Afghanistan and Persia. The U.S. played its own games with the Caribbean and Latin America, but also played the Great Game proper in the Far East. The U.S. Navy “opened” Japan in 1852, and helped the British reopen China in the Second Opium War. At the turn of the century, the U.S. Army occupied parts of China following the Boxer Rebellion and as much of the Philippines as they could. America supported Japan’s imperial claims to Korea that is, until the United States followed the British in backing the Russians over the Japanese in 1907.⁵

Kipling famously implored the U.S. to colonize the Philippines in 1899 with a poem dedicated to President Theodore Roosevelt entitled “The White Man’s Burden.” The poem opens and closes with the stanza:
*Oh, East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet,
Till Earth and Sky stand presently at God’s great Judgment Seat;
But there is neither East nor West, Border, nor Breed, nor Birth,
When two strong men stand face to face, though they come from the ends of the earth.*

For Kipling and Roosevelt, the savage warfare of expansion prevented civilized societies from becoming decadent and effete. Instead of celebrating this culture of imperialism. I want to point out the true intentions of the United States--expand living space and earn their dominance--to conceal and offset the very precariousness of white dominance.

As folk wisdom would have it, the only sufferers of colonialism are the subject communities. Colonialism, according to this view, is the name of a political economy which ensures a one-way flow of benefits, the subjects being the perpetual losers in a zero-sum game and the rulers the beneficiaries. This is a view of human mind and history promoted by colonialism itself. This view has a vested interest, in denying that the colonizers are at least as much affected by the ideology of colonialism, that their degradation, too, can sometimes be terrifying. Behind all the rhetoric of the European intelligentsia on the evils of colonialism lay their unstated faith that the gains from colonialism to Europe, to the extent that they primarily involved social relations and psychological states, false.

As America invested more and more cultural and psychic resources justifying their own rightful and benevolent rule across the globe, they were troubled by their own past actions. Unable to admit past wrongs, and increasingly afraid such a past might literally come back to bite them, imperialists bound the world into a powder keg. This is the logic of protective reaction and the preemptive strike. The point is not to figure out who the real “good guys” or “bad guys” are--often, there are none. The point is, instead, to decolonize our understanding of history and the yellow perilism shot through it, so as not to be lured into the same vicious

⁴ Edmund Wilson, “The Kipling That Nobody Read” in *Kipling’s Mind and Art*, ed. Andrew Rutherford (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1964), 17-69.

⁵ Thomas R. Hietala, *Manifest Design: Anxious Aggrandizement in Late Jacksonian America* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985); Bruce Cumings, *Dominion From Sea to Sea: Pacific Ascendancy and American Power* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009).

cycles again and again.

Contrary to most of the literature on anti-Asianism, I do not believe that racism or the idea of the yellow peril is irrational or fantastic; instead, I hold that they are constructed with a purpose in mind and function to sustain the social order. Historian Richard Austin Thompson observed that “the common denominator among yellow perilists was a fear of change,” change within the relationship between America and Asia, which was becoming increasingly more intimate and equal.⁶ The idea of the yellow peril, as we have seen, helped to define that challenge posed by Asia to America’s dominance and was inscribed within the colonialist discourse as a justification for the imposition of white over nonwhites, of civilization/Christianity over barbarism/paganism. Like Orientalism, however, yellow peril discourse was hegemonic but not all-powerful, breaking down or changing when confronted with Asian resistance. The fear, whether real or imagined, arose from the fact of the rise of nonwhite peoples and their defiance of white supremacy. And while serving to contain the Other, the idea of the yellow peril also helped to define the white identity, within both a nationalist and an internationalist frame.

⁶ Richard Austin Thompson, *The Yellow Peril, 1890-1924* (New York: Arno Press, 1978), 4, 37.