

Disaster and Blessing: Alternative Writings on Yellow Peril Narratives in Late Qing China

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Abstract

The Yellow Peril, with anti-Asian racism, has long been criticized. Some scholars noticed the Chinese reproduction of this discourse, but they tend to agree that Chinese intellectuals in the late Qing only emphasized China would threaten the West, thus ignoring the role of Chinese in the cultural translation. As Lydia H. Liu suggests, when a concept passes from the guest language to the host language, its legitimated new meaning is more invented within the local environment of the host language rather than just transformed. *Huanghuo*, literally meaning the yellow disaster, is believed to be the equivalence to the Yellow Peril. In the traditional vein of *yin* and *yang*, disaster and blessing are interchangeable. Therefore, *Huanghuo* is an unpleasant object that should be transformed into its opposite: *Fu*, namely fortunate and happiness. Drawing on the political commentaries of Chinese intellectuals and popular fiction in the late Qing, this paper will explore the process of cultural translation from the Yellow Peril to *Huanghuo* and point out that *Huanghuo* represented the slave nature and the ideal citizens of the Chinese at the same time. In vernacular literature, *Huanghuo* retained its local meaning as a disaster and was used to accuse Chinese nationals of servility. Meanwhile, *Huangfu* took up the positive place of the Yellow Peril. To conclude, both represented the intention of Chinese intellectuals to enlighten the Chinese people and reform late Qing China under the belief in the positive causal relationship between nationals and their nation as suggested by Liang Qichao.

Keywords: Yellow Peril, Translingual Practices, Late Qing China

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Introduction

European natural historians first attributed the color of yellow to Asian populations in the eighteenth century. Perceiving Asians as “yellow” was not just a color-based taxonomy, it indicated the comparison between “us” and “them”. Yellow Peril narratives began to be prevalent in Euro-American discourses when racial theories and nationalism were developed from the mid-nineteenth century onwards (Urbansky, 2018). The arrival of Chinese immigrant workers in North America and the military potential demonstrated by the Japanese in the Russo-Japanese War and the Boxer Uprising led to the belief that Asiatics were the economic competitors of the natives and would conquer Western civilization with diseases and moral degradation (Lyman, 2000). It is within this context that the supervillain Dr. Fu Manchu in Western popular culture was created. He represents the stereotypical image of Asians as intelligent, cruel, and determined to world domination.

The Yellow Peril has long been associated with anti-Asian racism in which Asians are depicted as violent, diseased, and mysterious. The rapid economic growth of China in the twenty-first century and the COVID-19 pandemic have given it a new lease on life. Scholars pay considerable attention to criticizing the Western knowledge production of the Yellow Peril in political, cultural, and social realms. However, post-colonial studies’ efforts to debunk the Yellow Peril myth essentialize this notion in Euro-American terms. As Franck Billé points out, the Yellow Peril is not a linguistically and culturally stable racist term (Billé, 2018). Its discourse varies in different places and has changed over time.

In the past decade, the Yellow Peril narratives and their political function in China started to be noticed by scholars. They tend to agree that Chinese intellectuals in the late Qing defended China and established national identity via Yellow Peril narratives, which they believed pointed to the threatening advantages of Chinese civilization over the West (Yang, 2010; Tsu, 2006). These scholars notice the same ethnocentric patterns of Yellow Peril discourse in China as in the West. In other words, the original Yellow Peril discourse didn’t change in the cross-cultural interpretation, and Chinese intellectuals just chose another side of the same coin. This idea ignores the civil crisis sparked by foreign pressure at the historical moment and the role of the host language, Chinese, in the cultural translation. As Lydia H. Liu suggests, when a concept passes from the guest language to the host language in translingual practices, its legitimated new meaning is more as invented within the local environment of the host language rather than just transformed (Liu, 1995). *Huanghuo*, which literally means the yellow disaster, is believed to be the equivalence to the Yellow Peril. In the vein of yin and yang, disaster and blessing are interconnected and interchangeable. Therefore, *huanghuo* is an unpleasant object that should be transformed into its opposite: Fu, namely fortunate and happiness.

When Chinese intellectuals translated the “Yellow Peril”, they encountered the Western and Chinese contexts at the same time. How did they build and maintain the equivalence between the Yellow Peril and *huanghuo*? In order to examine this translingual practice, situating cross-cultural interpretation in the actual historical environment is in order. In what follows, drawing on the political commentaries of Chinese intellectuals and political fiction in the late Qing, this essay will explore the process of cultural translation from the Yellow Peril to *huanghuo* in the late Qing in order to understand the Yellow Peril discourse in China.

Huanghuo: A Threat to the West or a Disaster for Itself?

The notion of the Yellow Peril was first introduced to China from the translations of Japanese texts. The Yellow Peril was translated as *huangse huan* (yellow disaster) (European Countries and Humanitarian, 1900) or *huangse weixia* (yellow danger) (The Westerners and Humanitarian, 1900). Japanese authors avoided becoming the major target of Yellow Peril accusations and thus distinguished themselves from “uncivilized” China. The Chinese translation from Japanese articles didn’t convey the complexity of the Yellow Peril discourses. Instead, Chinese intellectuals focused on the aspect of “the awakening of China” after the Boxer Uprising and didn’t continue to discuss the translations mentioned above.

Mai Menghua is an advocate of the Hundred Days’ Reform. He used “*huangren huohai*” to refer to the Yellow Peril in his two articles about the Boxer Uprising, which were written during the time of peace negotiation between the Eight-Nation Alliance and China. Mai believed that in response to the Boxer Uprising, most Europeans could neither reach a consensus to invade China in order to prevent Europe from being destroyed nor lift the repression although some thought that without Western repression the “threatening China” would not be the case. In the end, he concluded that the West would find a middle way to support the Qing government and use it as a tool to control China (Mai, 1990).

In Mai’s opinion, *huangren huohai* denoted a “powerful and intelligent” nation, as many scholars have pointed out (Yang, 2010). They ignore an important fact, however, that this appreciation had conditions. In the article “On China after the Peace Negotiations” (Mai, 1991), Mai noted that Euro-Americans regarded the Chinese as “powerful” and “intelligent” because the Chinese refused to be slaves in comparison to Africans and Indians. In fact, Mai thought that the Chinese were “slaves”, “prisoners”, “submissive”, and the “Sick Man of Asia”. Instead of considering the Yellow Peril as a recognition of the advantages of China, Mai criticized the “national character” of the Chinese populace with the Yellow Peril narratives. He believed that China was unable to become a threat in that it had the severe sickness of servility. In the words of Mai, the Qing government was a “puppet” controlled by the West and the Chinese became the “prisoners” after the Peace Negotiations. It can be seen that the early translation practice happened in the civil crisis sparked by foreign pressure. China had been constrained to sign unequal treaties with foreign powers and was struggling to retain full sovereignty. The Yellow Peril discourse here denoted an unfinished power of China. Its potential could not be achieved until the Chinese grew out of slaves and became *guomin* (meaning the citizens of the nation-state) and Liang Qichao put this idea forward.

Liang is the first Chinese intellectual who translated the Yellow Peril as *huanghuo*. In the article “The New Methods to Destroy a Nation” (Liang, 1901), he invoked the view of Sir Robert Hart (1835–1911), the Inspector-General of the Chinese Maritime Customs Service, and noted that on the one hand, the West had a deep fear of China and they warned each other the danger of China in the term of *huanghuo*; on the other hand, it was the *huanghuo* that invited the repression of the West on China. *Huanghuo* had two meanings here: the threatening power of China and the disaster that the Chinese brought for themselves.

In the article “THE PEKING LEGATIONS: A NATIONAL UPRISING AND INTERNATIONAL EPISODE” published in August 1900, Hart discussed the Western policies towards China after the Boxer Uprising (Hart, 1901). The main purpose of Hart’s article, in Liang’s view, was to suggest that foreign powers should help the Qing government prevent uprisings and benefit from economic exploitation. Hart described the Chinese as an

“intelligent, cultivated, sober, and industrious race,” (p. 51) who “had slept long but was awake now” (p. 51–52). He believed that the Boxer Uprising was “a purely patriotic volunteer movement” (p. 52) with an aim to exclude foreigners. To prevent the patriots from invading Europe with “Mauser rifles and Krupp guns”, Hart thought that the easiest solution was to support the Qing government as they shared the same purpose to repress the patriotic movements.

Liang provided two explanations for Hart’s ideas. First, he believed that Westerners knew the power of civil rights and autonomy, so they decided to support the Qing government in order to prevent the birth of a strong nation-state. How did the West achieve it? In what followed, Liang stressed that the West realized the property of servility among the Chinese and would make use of it during the Peace Negotiation to keep the potential threat under control. Liang thus argued that it was the slave nature of Chinese nationals that brought “*huo* (the disaster)” of being invaded and repressed.

In Liang’s perspective, “*huo*” mainly came from the servility of the Chinese. Rather than attribute the disaster to Western exploitation, he emphasized that Chinese nationals were seeking *huo* themselves by being the slaves of the government, who had borrowed national debts from foreign powers. Liang indicated that the Chinese were content with the Boxer Protocol, showing a special quality of obedience as slaves which was easy to be taken advantage of in politics. The solution is self-education which he distinguished the education of *guomin* from the education of slaves and the education of slaves of the slave. The education of *guomin* could save China from servility and prevent any *huo* in the future.

Liang claimed that all 400 million Chinese were “real slaves” who were unable to be independent of others. However, as Mai Menghua showed, the Chinese were regarded as “powerful” by the West because they refused to be slaves. The label of “real slaves” meant that for Chinese intellectuals, a strong China that might pose a threat to Western civilization hadn’t existed. In this case, how should we understand the Yellow Peril discourse in China?

Tracing the process of translation of the Yellow Peril by Liang Qichao, *huo* first appeared in the article “A Warning of the Danger of Partition” to discuss the possible invasion of foreign powers in 1899 (Liang, 1899); influenced by the Japanese discussion of national character, Liang attributed *huo* to the servility of Chinese nationals in his letter to Kang Youwei, where he noted that the decline of China had now reached its peak, and “its corruption and sickness were rooted in the slave nature of Chinese and could only be cured by the medicine of liberty”(Liang, 1999, p. 5931); and Liang translated the Yellow Peril as *huanghuo* in his commentary on Hart’s articles, which didn’t just denote the threatening power of China. The Yellow Peril discourse in the West interacted with the national imagination of Chinese intellectuals in a more complicated way. When the Yellow Peril was translated into another language as *huanghuo*, it maintained its local meaning in the host language—disaster. In other words, after the “Yellow Peril” was introduced to China, this term departed from its original discourse and the indigenous implication developed. In the opinion of Liang Qichao, *huanghuo* had two meanings. One was the Chinese threat to the West, and another was the disaster that the Chinese brought to themselves.

It seems that Chinese intellectuals didn’t always identify China as a threatening power, instead, they tended to focus on criticizing the Chinese character of servility when translating Yellow Peril narratives. In the end, *huanghuo* only retained the connotation of the disaster, while the positive meaning of the Yellow Peril was taken by *huangfu* (yellow blessing). In

ancient Chinese philosophy, the duality of *huo* and *fu* is an indivisible whole and they are able to transform towards each other. The next section will discuss the relation between *huanghuo* and *huangfu*, and how it reflects the Yellow Peril discourse in late Qing China.

Huangfu: An Educated Huanghuo and the Promise of Modernity

The popular political fiction at the time illustrated the interconnection between *huanghuo* and *huangfu* in the minds of Chinese intellectuals. Tang Baorong, a friend of Liang Qichao, published the novel *Huang Xiu Qiu (Yellow Embroided Earth)* with his penname Yi Suo in *New Fictions* in 1905 (Tang, 1985). This story is set in Liberty Village in which most villagers share the surname “Huang”. It means the color, yellow. The Liberty Village inhabited by the Huang (yellow) family has no liberty at all due to external oppression. Huang Xiuqiu is the name of the heroine, literally referring to “sewing a globe”. Her husband is Huang Tongli, which means the universal principle. Huang Xiuqiu causes a sensation in the village when she releases her bound feet. Huang Huo, a relative of Xiuqiu, reports it to the officials in the hope of getting money from the confiscation of Xiuqiu and Tongli’s property. Here, Huang Huo is the incarnation of the (negative) Yellow Peril. He serves the bureaucrats and takes advantage of the old institutions to satisfy his own interests. Everything will turn into a disaster with him. He has a son named Huang Fu, who receives an education from Tongli and gets on well with the enlightened woman Huang Xiuqiu. In the end, it is Huang Fu who establishes a new independent, liberated, and autonomous village.

The father-son metaphor of *huanghuo* and *huangfu* represents the way in which Chinese intellectuals thought about the Yellow Peril. Huang Huo personifies the sickness of China, and Huang Fu reflects the promising future of China in the imagination of Chinese intellectuals. How does *huanghuo* transform into *huangfu*? What kind of education does Huang Fu receive?

Tongli is the representative of contemporary intellectuals who were determined to reform China. In the first chapter, Huang Xiuqiu asks her husband to repair or reconstruct their damaged house. Huang Tongli stresses that there is no point to repair a house in a village which has been deprived of freedom. He has been pondering how to restore the liberty of the village and finds that the way to achieve liberation is to educate the villagers. Huang Tongli establishes a modern school with Western knowledge and *guomin* education, which emphasizes the subjectivity of each individual in the national political process (Shen & Hsiao, 2006). In Xiuqiu’s dream, the French Madam Roland who appreciates equality and liberty comes to enlighten her. Huang Xiuqiu thus becomes a “modern” woman urging women to refuse to be slaves to men. She calls it “female education”, which she believes is the first step of *guomin* education. Tongli considers the knowledge passed on by Madam Roland as *fu*.

This story conveys two important ideas: First, *huanghuo* and *huangfu* were integrated into the binary of *guomin* and slaves. *Guomin (huangfu)* as the ideal nationals could empower China, while slaves (*huanghuo*) would only bring disasters to China. Many Chinese intellectuals in the late Qing intended to build a strong nation-state. In their opinion, the slave nature of the Chinese was the reason for their oppression in political, economic, and military spheres. By invoking *huanghuo*, Chinese intellectuals criticized that the unmodernized populace impeded the potential for China to become a strong nation-state. They believed that *guomin* education, enlightenment and modernization would transform Chinese from slaves to *guomin* (such as Huang Fu). The latter is regarded as the foundation of a new China. As the novel *Huang Xiu Qiu* shows, Huang Huo represents the notorious, unmodernized feudal bureaucrats who have

brought disasters to China; and Huang Fu is in fact a metaphor for the powerful China that has achieved modernity with Western knowledge, autonomy and liberty.

Second, the narratives of *huangfu* and *huanghuo* rationalized the exclusion of modern Western principles and internalized colonial knowledge. For example, this novel acknowledged China's inferiority in the hierarchy of races. In Xiuqiu's dream, the French Madam Roland gives her a book on geology. Tongli explains to Xiuqiu that geology also means that human beings on earth can be classified into five races, with the white race having the best civilization and the yellow race lagging behind in everything. *Huangfu* promised a progressive modern China, but it still placed China under racial hierarchies. At the end of Xiuqiu's dream, after they have achieved autonomy for the village, she still seeks recognition from Madam Roland. In comparison to it, another political fiction *The Predict of Huang Huo* also imagines a powerful Chinese nation-state in the future. It shows that China has conquered Europe. The Chinese no longer seek the approval of the West, but still live in a European way. As Ashis Nandy notes, when non-Western intellectuals encourage their people to defeat the West by imitating it, they are in effect allies of the West (Ashis Nandy, 1983). These novels reveal that *huangfu* and *huanghuo* were created in the colonial discourse; such narratives reproduced the modernity of the West and legitimized Western ideas in China.

In the novel *Huang Xiu Qiu*, Huang Fu is the modernized *guomin* who is liberating the village, and Huang Huo is a slave of the old institutions and only corrupts the village. *Huanghuo* is deemed as the translation of the Yellow Peril in Chinese, but it has clearly deviated from the original meaning of the Yellow Peril in the process of cultural translation. This section argues that *huanghuo* and *huangfu* constituted together the Yellow Peril discourse in late Qing China, which was profoundly shaped by the colonial context.

Conclusion

It is hard to understand the Yellow Peril discourse in late Qing China without considering the way in which Chinese intellectuals translated and used the term "Yellow Peril". This essay has discussed the early translations of the Yellow Peril and located them in the historical context. The "otherness" of Asians cannot be attributed to merely the beliefs about racial superiority and inferiority. Yellow Peril narratives emerged at a period when the economic and political inequalities between China and the West began to develop. The pursuit of a strong nation-state in response to a civil crisis provoked by foreign pressure generated the Yellow Peril discourse in China. The new meaning of the Yellow Peril was formed in the process of translation and specific historical conditions.

This essay argues that the "Yellow Peril" in late Qing China has two meanings: It can be a powerful threat to Western civilization, but it also refers to a weak and sick state that had brought oppression upon itself. *Huanghuo* has long been identified as the translation of the Yellow Peril. However, it is not a strict equivalence to the Yellow Peril. Their difference and relation can be well illustrated in the structure of *guomin* and slaves. As Liang Qichao wrote in his "Four Songs of Loving Nation" published in *New Fictions*: "Every time *huanghuo* is mentioned with the feelings of horror and terror, and it is a nightmare that has haunted the Western barbarians for a hundred years...Lovely, *Guomin*! Lovely, *Guomin*!" (Liang, 1902, pp.206–207). On the one hand, *huanghuo* referred to a threatening China, which was formed by *guomin*. On the other hand, it was a consensus among Chinese intellectuals to consider the national character of China as servility, and they associated this character with disaster,

which is the original meaning of *huo*. Thus, *huanghuo* represented the ideal citizens and the slave nature of the Chinese at the same time. In vernacular literature, *huanghuo* retained its local meaning as a disaster and was used to accuse Chinese nationals of servility. *Huanghuo*'s interconnected notion *huangfu* took up the positive place of the Yellow Peril. It represented the intention of Chinese intellectuals to enlighten the Chinese people and reform China in order to make it free from oppression and become a great power.

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