

Kwan Longman's Identification with the Camera-A Reading of *Gunga Din Highway* from the Perspective of Metz

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Abstract: *Gunga Din Highway* portrays Kwan Longman through the transcription of Charlie Chan film footage and the psychological montage in his imaginative conversation with the film character Spencer. When watching movies, Kwan Longman stays in the filmic state and identifies himself with Charlie Chan, a stereotyped Chinese image for assimilation. And the exposure of his family's ethnic tragedy metaphorizes the possible doom of Chinese American's identity confusion.

Keywords: Kwan Longman; *Gunga Din Highway*; Identification; Charlie Chan films

Fund Project:

This study is funded by the "Innovation Star" Project(A Study on the Transmediality in Frank Chin's Novels) (2023CXZX-312) for outstanding graduate students in Gansu Province in 2023.

Frank Chin is a milestone in Asian American literature by editing an anthology of Asian American writers and various fiction. *Gunga Din Highway*, a novel of post-modernism published in 1994, is his recent fiction coping with his persistent theme of identity politics, especially the gender issues of Chinese American males. One of the most conspicuous characteristics of this book is Chin's integration of novel narration with descriptions of film cuts, film reviews, and theatre performances. These make *Gunga Din Highway* a "fiction film", which is rooted in the image of Chinese American males. Therefore, this article studies the transmedial references in *Gunga Din Highway* according to the relationship between audience and film proposed by theorist Christian Metz.

Christian Metz is a famous theorist who specializes in analyzing the psychology of film spectators and their identification with the camera, which makes him different from previous psychoanalysis of film scripts and directors. The theory of Metz is greatly influenced by Freud and Lacan. By adopting the method of psychoanalysis, Metz proposed that the filmic state, a middle state between awake and dreaming, is similar to daydreaming. Also, the vision of spectators coincides with the mirror stage theory put forward by Lacan that the infant identifies himself or herself in a mirror, which brings the notion of self. Metz points out that spectators' identification with the camera, going beyond his existing notion of self opposite to others, is the secondary identification in cinemas. The identification with the camera shows the projection of spectators' desire into the screen, as Metz remarks that "there are two cones in the auditorium: one ending on the screen and starting both in the projection box and in the spectator's vision..."(Metz, 1983, 51). So, what the spectators watch on camera is the reflection of their unconscious desire.

1. Charlie Chan Films and Chinese American Stereotype

Gunga Din Highway has lots of film references, which are scattered everywhere. However, the plot and narration of chapter one are closely connected with Charlie Chan and Hollywood movies.

Charlie Chan is the stereotyped character representing the ideal Chinese in white men's eyes. Since their migration to America, the Chinese had a long history of being legitimately excluded and discriminated against, so they were eager to be accepted by the mainstream of America. Because of different ethnicities and cultures, the Chinese were seen as pagans who could not be converted,

which incurred heavy psychological and physical isolation. Charlie Chan, created by a white detective novelist, becomes a docile and feminized model minority who flatters the whites and pursues the identity of Americans in Hollywood movies. And Charlie Chan is in line with the Western discourse of stereotypes on Chinese males: a fat and small bachelor without masculinity. But at that time, lots of Chinese were excited to have a well-known Chinese character in Hollywood movies and they regarded him as a successful Chinese actor. Kwan Longman is the representative of Chinese Americans who cater to the distorted Chinese-American image shown in the film Charlie Chan. Through Kwan's blind admiration of Charlie Chan, Chin points out that Chinese Americans at that time were not aware of these racist films. Kwan represents the general perception, as "in fifty years, since Charlie Chan movies, only one person(-Frank Chin himself) have come out in print against Charlie Chan"(Davis, 1998, 97).

Kwan Longman, as the representative of American flatters, becomes the opposite of the real hero of Chinese Americans, represented by Ulysses in Chin's view. The character Kwan Longman is completed by the transmedial description in Chapter One. The plot narration is mixed with Kwan Longman's description of film cuts and acting experiences. By his psychological process, Kwan Longman becomes the spectator of his films and his unconscious overflowing of affection indicates his identification with Charlie Chan. Kwan Longman's flattering of Charlie Chan provides the historical background of Ulysses's deconstruction of Chinese stereotypes in films and dramas.

The inclusion of Charlie Chan movies in the first chapter is not an exception. Frank Chin is well aware of the ideology hidden in movies, plays, and TV programs, so he remarks through the voice of Henry Hornbrook that TV programs are the collective unconsciousness of a place. Just as the whites' assimilation attempts in Charlie Chan movies, what films present is filtered by humans. And Frank Chin himself is deeply influenced by films and drama from his literary themes to the narration techniques. Before being a fiction writer, Chin once worked at KING-TV in Seattle and wrote some plays. Also, he has an objective of establishing the tradition of Chinese American theatre just as "what the Abbey Playhouse was to Irish culture"(Davis, 1988, 85). Besides, born in the 1960s when the film industry and film studies boomed, Chin was in a time of new art form. He said that he reads "a lot of Eisenstein's film theory"(ibid, 81), who is one of the founders of modern montage. The fiction narrations in *Gunga Din Highway* are also entangled with film techniques such as psychological montage and filmic intertextuality, which are the witnesses of Chin's life experiences but also his literary themes.

2. Kwan Longman's Identification with Charlie Chan Films

Kwan Longman does not too much description in this novel. The first chapter of *Gunga Din Highway* is filled with Kwan Longman's frequent descriptions of film footage and his conversations with characters in films, but the obscure narration of the first chapter, Kwan's most stories in this novel, often scares readers away. However, those seemingly divergent descriptions of films reveal the indirect definition of the character Kwan Longman and its profound connection with the theme.

In the first chapter, Kwan Longman is not only the narrator but also the character. As the narrator, he presents his relationships with family members and other sons of Charlie Chan, as well as his previous experiences of acting Asian characters who will die immediately after they appear in Hollywood movies. The narrator Kwan has several imaginative conversations with Spencer Tracy, who is also a Hollywood star:

"I sit in the front row and talk to him when he comes on in close-up. The people in the audience at the Bijou I go to when I want to talk to Spencer Tracy usually sleep through the movies, which run all night."(Chin, 1994, 24)

Their conversations happen in a half-awake and half-dreaming state when Kwan Longman is watching Spencer's movies in the cinema, which reminds Metz's idea of filmic state. But Chin's stream-of-consciousness language in the first chapter is a mixture of reality as well as Kwan Longman's memories and fantasy, which makes it weak in the plot. So it is difficult to find that Kwan's conversation with Spencer is actually an unrealistic fantasy. If films were used to present their dialogue, this shot would be a psychological montage, through which the juxtaposition of Spencer and Longman becomes the white's cinematic assimilation of Chinese. And here fictional narration is more like a film transcript because this psychological montage is deeply connected with the theme of reconstructing Chinese American masculinity and image.

The psychological montage of Kwan's conversations with Spencer shows his identification with Charlie Chan movies. Contrary to Ulysses's criticism of Charlie Chan, Kwan Longman is proud of him and enthusiastic to act on various Chinese characters in Hollywood movies. He shows great honor to be the fourth son of Charlie Chan, a Chinese man played by the whites in films and the stereotype of Chinese Americans without masculinity. And Kwan Longman puts himself in the role of Charlie Chan's son and even calls Anlauf Lorane "Pop", the last player of Charlie Chan.

And his conversation with Spencer is also evidence of his identification. Kwan Longman regards Spencer as his career mentor

to play dead Chinese or Asians, and Spencer persuades him that his frequent deaths in movies symbolize the gradual assimilation of Chinese in America and America's reception of Chinese. According to Metz, when Kwan is watching a film, there is "a unique mixture of two contrary currents: the film is what I receive, and it is also what I release"(Metz, 51). Therefore, Spencer, who is supposed to be a stranger, talks to Kwan Longman, and the image of Spencer he sees is actually a projection of Guan Longman's desires. Kwan Longman projects his desire to be accepted by the whites into Spencer, which becomes the representative of Kwan's desire.

3. The Metaphor of Kwan's Identification in His Family's Ethics

The second and third chapters are narrated mainly from the perspective of Ulysses, but Kwan Longman reappears at the end of this story. His appearance and the exposure of his family secret reveal the theme of the novel.

Through Ulysses, the ethnic tragedy of Kwan's family is unfolded in the exposure of the family secret. Ulysses's elder brother is the outcome of his father Kwan Longman and his grandmother, and his mother is actually the nephew of Kwan Longman, which makes Ulysses himself the outcome of incest. The ethical disorder indicates the Chinese path of Gunga Din in assimilating into Americans. Having been confused with his identity because of living with the whites as a Chinese since young, Ulysses now slides into a deeper confusion about his identity.

The ethical tragedy of Kwan's family is also a metaphor for Kwan Longman's assimilation to be an American, which may finally lead to the Chinese's absence of identity. The identity confusion of Ulysses, attributed to the family's ethnic tragedy, symbolizes the outcome of leading a path of Gunga Din. Gunga Din is an Indian character in Rudyard Kipling's poem who pursues the imperial British identity regardless of its colonialization in India. The title "Gunga Din Highway", metaphorized by Kwan Longman's identification with Charlie Chan movies, is not only the life experience of Kwan Longman but also the indication and caution to Chinese Americans. As Chin remarks, "and so white men in Hollywood gave up a son in the image of the perfect China Man, to lead the yellows to acceptance and assimilation, and Charlie Chan was his name. And we all the sons of Charlie Chan."(Chin, 1994, 311)

So with the leading of Charlie Chan, and its players and sons such as Kwan Longman, the Chinese Americans will be doomed to become Americans without their Chinese ancestry. In the novel, the only goal of Kwan is to become the next player Charlie Chan, which gradually deprives him of his own identity because he follows the assimilation path of Western discourse. So the incest of his family, which leads to the confusion of all his family members, bears metaphorical meaning of the fate of all Chinese Americans.

Therefore, the descriptions of film footage, memories, and unrealistic conversations in chapter one provide a historical background of the racist Charlie Chan movie and Hollywood's assimilation of the Chinese. By borrowing the psychological montage in the juxtaposition of Kwan's conversation with Spencer in cinema, the author exposes Kwan's identification with Charlie Chan movies that both the films narrated by Kwan and Spencer are representative of his desire to be assimilated. Besides, the ethical tragedy of Kwan's family metaphorizes Charlie Chan's leading the Chinese to assimilation, with the final outcome of identity confusion.

References:

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