

## **CHAPTER 7**

### **COMPLEXITIES OF WRITING A CHINESE BASED HISTORICAL NOVEL IN ENGLISH**

*Peter Scottney-Turbill and Wally Woods*

#### **Abstract**

A paucity of authentic historical works on ancient China may present difficulties for writers of Chinese based novels in English amid claims that many of these novels do not or rarely include reconstruction of, for example, manners, speech, customs and atmosphere, thereby failing to effectively bring the reader into the period concerned. While the novelist faces other problems in addressing the many complexities of attempting to recreate aspects of the historical period, such as language and mood, these may be overcome by incorporating actual settings, events and characters with the fictional – a fusion of elements of historical romance with realism. From a review of the relevant literature, this chapter will identify and address the main complexities in researching and writing an original historical romance novel about ancient China, and will suggest a methodology and recommendations for further research and experimentation in capturing the atmosphere, mood and imagery of the dynastic setting while simplifying the contemporary language and its nuances. The fact that such a novel may be infected to some degree by Western “Orientalism” is acknowledged and addressed.

#### **INTRODUCTION**

Fiction stimulates the imagination, and historical fiction, including novels with central themes such as patriotism, can furnish us with images of and empathy for people of the past (Allan 2005, p. 14). Connecting with the past may be accomplished through a fusion of the historical with imaginative reconstruction of past events and even elements of fantasy, and this seems to be an acceptable modality of writing, for “the boundaries between fiction and nonfiction, between literature and nonliterature are constantly changing.” (Bakhtin n.d., as cited in Hoffman & Murphy 1996, p. 54).

Research into the fusion of the historical with elements of fantasy in writing a Chinese based historical romance novel in English informs this chapter. By fantasy, we mean, in the first instance, the type of fiction that features imaginary characters and places but beyond this, the possible inclusion of

supernatural or magical events.

Rosemary Jackson (1993), however, suggests that defining fantasy is a difficult enterprise given that, in a general sense, “all imaginary activity is fantastic, all literary works are fantasy” (1993, p.13) and, as such, the development of an adequate definition has proved elusive:

It could be suggested that fantasy is a literary *mode* [emphasis added] from which a number of related genres emerge. Fantasy provides a range of possibilities out of which various combinations produce different kinds of fiction in different historical situations. Borrowing linguistic terms, the basic model of fantasy could be seen as language...from which its various forms...derive. Out of this model develops romance literature or ‘the marvellous’,...fantastic literature...and related tales of abnormal psychic states, delusion [and] hallucination (1993, p.7).

Jackson describes the clustering of fantasy’s themes into several related areas such as invisibility, transformation, dualism and good versus evil, as a generator of a number of motifs, for example monsters, beasts, vampires, shadows and ghosts (1993, p.49), all of which could constitute elements of fantasy: “Like dreams, with which they have many similarities, literary fantasies are made up of many elements re-combined, and are inevitably determined by the range of those constitutive elements available to the author/dreamer.” (1993, p. 8).

Edward Said strongly argued that it is virtually impossible for a Westerner seeking to imaginatively recreate the East to avoid the trap of Orientalism. In his work, *Orientalism*, Said (1978) argues that Western writings on and Eurocentric perceptions of the East are suspect and cannot be taken at face value. He adds that Western scholars have taken the interpretation of the Orient’s culture, languages and history for themselves, writing Asia’s past and constructing its modern identities from the perspective that Europe is the norm from which the Orient deviates (see Prakash 1995, p. 208; Hayot 1999, p. 513; Said, in Rivkin & Ryan 2004, p. 874).

I readily acknowledge that my novel, *General Yueh Fei*, a story about China’s legendary Sung Dynasty military General (1103-1141), will be thus “tainted” but at the same time would draw attention to the effects of globalisation that, at least in the area of contemporary Asian film, has meant that a considerable body of Asian entertainment has already directed itself to Western ideologies and tastes. However, at the same time, in *General Yueh Fei*, I will be avoiding the “othering” or demonisation of the East that is evident in some Western critics’ readings of the traditional Chinese novel.

In engaging with such issues as just outlined above, this chapter seeks to make a contribution to both the theory and practice of contemporary fiction writing, which traverses national, historical, and linguistic boundaries, and to the humanities generally.

To create an original historical romance novel about Yueh Fei, the use of anchor points on a skeletal historical framework, fleshed out with fictional creations around a central theme of patriotism, will be a key strategy. General Yueh Fei won many battles against the invading northern barbarians and is, even today, revered by the Chinese as the epitome of loyalty and patriotism. Kaplan (1970) based his dissertation on Yueh Fei on a biography written by Yueh Fei's grandson, Yueh K'o (1970, p. 1), making the point that "It is from Yueh K'o that posterity's chief source of documentation on Yueh Fei derives." (1970, p. 1). But contemporaneous written works related to Yueh Fei were altered, went missing or were destroyed following his murder in 1141 when he was thirty-eight, so the question arises as to how old Yueh K'o would have been when listening to stories told to him by his father, Yueh Lin, Yueh Fei's third son (Kaplan 1970, p. 1). Indeed, Kaplan, himself, raises the question of documentary authenticity (1970, p. 2), and from this, it becomes apparent that a new creative work about the life and times of Yueh Fei, with actual and fictitious characters and events, could also effectively draw on a number of other sources. For example, Sung China and Imperialism are described in Hibbert (1981) and Xu (2003), and the fall of the Northern Sung capital, Kaifeng, and the founding of the Southern Sung in Kaplan (1970) and Liu (1972). Ma (1975) talks about the *Shuo Yueh ch'uan-chuan* (*The Life of Yueh Fei*), a saga of unknown origin, but details of this text are sketchy and so difficult to draw on for this project (1975, p. 281).

With respect to questions of form and structure, should the projected novel be structured after the traditional forms used in Chinese historical fiction such as *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* that was written in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, or should more contemporary global fictional approaches be deployed? In the context of determining an effective way of fusing the historical with fantasy, allusions to parallel themes such as horror and ghosts, and their placement in the external world or within the minds of characters as hallucinations or dreams, invite consideration. As Weldon (2007) suggests: "Caution is the death of creativity," (2007, p. 3), so perhaps the aim should be to take whatever creative risks may be deemed to work within the parameters of the historical romance, while avoiding the more obvious traps of "Orientalism" such as the blatant othering or demonisation of Asian characters.

Primarily, though, a novel is a story, and while historical fiction can and should tell us something about the past, its fundamental purpose is to [imaginatively] transport the reader to another time and place (Goodman 2005, p. 15). As Priest (2007) writes: "The central experience in reading is of immersion, of entering so completely into the world of the story that everything

else fades.” (2007, p. 9). Fusing the historical with fantasy is one method of achieving such an effect. Goodman reminds us that “all novels must have conflict and tension...they must have characters we like and can root for” (2007, p. 15), so while researching background information enables the setting of scenes and plots, the nature of the historical novel as an individual genre, in particular its negotiation of character and the tensions created by historical events, should also be explored as part of the planning process in creating an original Chinese based fiction written in English.

This introduction has provided a broad overview of the nature of historical fiction and a brief discussion on the construction of *General Yueh Fei*. In the following two sections, a comparison is made between Western and Chinese novels of this genre, and an examination of the debates about fictionalising the historical presented. This is followed by a brief exploration on the use of the supernatural (Ma; Yu; Allan), and then an outline of the debate on fusing the historical with fantasy. Patriotism and heroism, as the central themes in the Chinese historical novel, are then discussed with an emphasis on how they circulate around the heroic figure who is the protagonist in *General Yueh Fei*. The section after deals with some basic linguistic considerations for the new novel, including a brief discussion on the simplification of spelling and pronouncing Chinese names and the importance of character emotion at the time of speech, while acknowledging that this may be a particular Western expectation of fictional characters. Basic characteristics of the novel are then considered, including narrative mode (James), setting and action (Manzoni), the use of flashback, and plot (Fleishman). The final section argues for the borrowing from other creative sources (Shakespeare; Chinese films) to write an historical romance novel.

## **THE HISTORICAL NOVEL IN CONTEXT/S**

The historical novel is not just about history. The grand theme of Western historical fiction from Scott down is the relationship of personal loyalty, values, and passion to the historical forces that surround and condition them (Fleishman 1971, p. 233). The historical novel is an imaginative portrayal of history, that is, of states of affairs affecting human experience and the novel conveys the feeling of what it was like to live in another age. To do this, the novelist describes and interprets the state of affairs that elicited personal responses of the kind s/he wishes to portray (Fleishman 1971, p. 4; and see Ma 1975, pp. 287-288).

Hargraves (2005, p. 2) puts the contrast between the historian and the novelist as one of “constraint”. Historians are constrained by what Hargraves refers to as “rules of evidence and form” while the novelist has the freedom to “play with the materials and to infuse them with a personal voice”. Like Fleishman, he suggests that the historical novel is a novel of human

relationships and that the conflicts and preoccupations of that time are the driving force for the novel (2005, p. 3). As Fleishman puts it, "The historical novel...must be more than its past, passing freely into new possibilities..." (1971, p. 255). Manzoni (1984) goes further by suggesting that in order to describe the historical events to which the author has tied his/her plot, s/he will have to combine real circumstances, drawn from history or other sources, and invented verisimilar circumstances. The novelist will have historical characters say and do what they apparently said and did as flesh and blood, as well as what "the author has imagined them saying or doing as befits their character and those parts of the plot in which [s/he] has given them a role" (1984, pp. 67-68). This is supported by, for example, Yu (1988) when he asserts a fundamental problem of historical discourse as being a combination of data or information and interpretation or explanation of that data, but that the explanatory act might begin with an "interpretation of plausible utterance and the attribution of motive in the case of an individual." Here, for example, he speculates on the question of what Confucius might plausibly have said when he faced famine in Chen (1988, p. 5; and see Manzoni 1984 p. 68). In *General Yueh Fei*, I will likewise pose the question of what Yueh Fei might have said or thought when faced with the Imperial order to abandon the war against the barbarians, and imaginatively recreate such thoughts or words.

There are characteristic traits that commonly traverse historical novels across different countries and languages with themes such as "national security", "national survival" and "nationhood" (Ma 1975, p. 283; p. 286), and one of those shared traits is the use of military campaigns. Ma, who is called upon in the composition of *General Yueh Fei* because he is one of the few reputable writers in this area, suggests that this approach may be self contradictory, as it depends on documentary data on the one extreme and "permitting fantasy to soar unbounded" on the other, with the effect that excessive emphasis on fantasy may take the work out of the category of historical fiction (1975, p. 286). Perhaps the salient point here is that the historical novelist, in the end, produces an imaginative work of the historical merged with fiction, and may use military campaigns simply as a literary device, exploring such themes as nationhood or even patriotism.

## **THE CHINESE HISTORICAL NOVEL: SOME CHARACTERISTIC ELEMENTS AND SEMINAL TEXTS**

Ma argues further that many Chinese novels show a preference for a mix of actual and fictitious characters, and this appears to be the case particularly when "a proliferated tradition extends its story cycle beyond the first generation of the original heroes, historical or otherwise" (1975, p. 292). These may be valid points, and one of the aims in the writing of a new historical novel could be to attempt to successfully marry fantasy with the historical, that is, create fiction

around historical anchor points with some fantasy scenes, perhaps in the minds of one or more of the characters (both actual and fictitious), or simply as dreams. In this regard, the use of fantasy can be effectively deployed to highlight emotional aspects of the story; a strategy that I will be adopting in *General Yueh Fei*.

The general message in traditional Chinese “nationhood” novels, according to Ma, is that villains were seemingly responsible for devastating the country or corrupting the emperor, or both. He further points out that the writers of such novels expose the evils done by eunuchs and other villains, who are described as “selfish, greedy, and short-sighted”. In Ma’s estimation, this “biased and pretentious treatment” leaves the reader with the impression that the villains are not given a fair go (1975, p. 283). Such an evaluation needs to be treated cautiously, as it appears to be grounded in Western literary taste and values. The same caution applies when Ma directly compares British and European novels such as those of Scott, Thackeray, Dickens and Tolstoy to Chinese historical fiction in which, he claims, careful reconstruction of manners, customs and atmosphere, attempting to bring the reader back to the period concerned, are rare or non-existent (1975, p. 289). While in my novel, I will be attempting some reconstruction of manners, customs and atmosphere pertinent to the times of General Yueh Fei, I make no claims for the superiority of this approach over the traditional Chinese historical novel, merely an accession to more contemporary Western tastes as is observable in the work of Vidal (1966) and Yutang (1962), two modern writers who wrote historically based novels set in China and whose works will be discussed in more detail below.

One further notable propensity of the traditional Chinese novel that may be challenging to the European reader is the heterogeneous and episodic quality of plot, for example *San-kuo chih yen-i* [*Romance of the Three Kingdoms*]. The structure of the plot is marked by episodic variety that should make the reading interesting, but, at least according to one critic, it is bound by an unconvincing unity of historical and pseudo-historical theme (Bishop, 1956, p. 242). Another possible criticism of this novel, arising out of Western literary tastes and critical assumptions, might be that the stories and characters in the one hundred and twenty chapters are so complex as to make reading difficult.

*Chin p’ing mei* [*The Golden Lotus*], a novel written some time during China’s Ming Dynasty, could also be problematic to readers unfamiliar with its particular form. According to Bishop, its unknown author has taken a narrative form common among traditional Chinese short stories, “the exemplary tale in which the ultimate penalties of a life of dissipation are presented by graphic illustration.” (1956, p. 243). He adds that the writer expanded this theme by tracing the spread of moral laxity within a large family unit during the Sung Dynasty, and ultimately among more distant family connections. This should make a good story, but in Bishop’s opinion: “*Chin p’ing mei* employs most of the inept narrative conventions of earlier fiction” except for “obvious intrusions

by the narrator” (1956, p. 243). Such evaluations are, again, tainted by Eurocentric literary prejudices. This attitude is further evident in Bishop’s comment that the mental life of fictional characters was an area to be entered only briefly by the Chinese novelist when necessary and with timidity. The ability to exploit one of the main concerns of realistic fiction, the discrepancy between appearance and reality, was, according to Bishop, severely limited since the novelist rarely showed the sharp variance between what is said and what is thought (1956, p. 245). Although Western readers may respond this way, what Bishop fails to acknowledge is that the suppression of emotion is a notable cultural behaviour in Eastern cultures that is foreign to the West.

Two examples of Westernised versions of the Chinese historical romance that avoid the practices of traditional Chinese fiction are the novels of Lin Yutang and Nicole Vidal alluded to above. In *The Red Peony* (Yutang 1962), set in 1890s China and comprising two main settings--Hangchow, Peony’s hometown, and Peking, the capital--Yutang, a Chinese scholar and writer living in the United States, utilizes simple language and simplified names of people and places, and a balance between mimesis and diegesis to good effect in creating this love story and to present the descriptive contemporary settings in the travels of the protagonist, Red Peony. *Ring of Jade* (Vidal 1966) is set in China’s Tang Dynasty, which immediately preceded the Sung, and is sprinkled throughout with theatrical humour that drives the story forward. Vidal, a European novelist: “captures the atmosphere of imperial court life in eighth-century China to perfection, and makes dramatic use of the turns in her heroine’s fortunes and the way in which political intrigue affected her career” (Preface, in Vidal 1966, p. 7).

Vidal’s novel adeptly fuses the historical with the fictional, mainly in relation to the customs, attitudes, dress and daily life in Tang Dynasty China and to making these more palatable to Western fictional tastes. One purpose, therefore, in an imaginative creation of a Chinese based historical novel in English for a predominantly Western readership, would be to draw the reader into the mind of its protagonist, for as Priest (2007) writes, largely in connection with Western literary practice, it is through reading that the mind is stimulated “to discover what other people’s lives are to them.” (2007, p. 9). One effective way to achieve this is for the writer to use first person narrative by the protagonist, as will be discussed later in this chapter.

## THE USE OF THE SUPERNATURAL

Yet another characteristic of traditional Chinese fiction which Bishop suggests is “disturbing to the Western reader” is “the mingling of naturalism and supernaturalism” within the story. He argues that if a novel is to be a fantasy, the Western reader “demands to know this from the start” and to have consistency in the maintenance of the tone of fantasy (1956, pp. 243-244). But

he adds that it could be argued that, to the Chinese for whom these fictions were written, there was “no incongruity in the mingling of flesh and blood with ghosts and gods” and therefore no violation of plausibility (1956, p. 244). One may readily call to mind, in this connection, recent Chinese movies such as *House of Flying Daggers* (2004). While this is one strategy for potential consideration in the planning of a novel about an ancient Chinese folk hero about whom little authenticated information is available, the focus of my work is to create a fiction merging elements of fantasy with the historical, around real characters, places and events. Fantasy, in this context, could be constituted by one or more *elements* of the fantastic within the minds of characters in an historical romance genre.

Bishop refers also to the common social tradition of the marketplace storyteller in the two capital cities of Sung China, pointing out that the storytellers were guided by at least one common criterion: “sensationalism” (1956, p. 240), but it is unclear from what cultural angle Bishop’s comment is made. While there does not appear to be any verbatim recordings of such storytelling, “[its] characteristics ... have been drawn from later written versions of the storytellers’ stories which appeared in printed collections in Sung times.” (1956, p. 241). The matter of “sensationalism” is relevant to what is written in extant novels and biographies about, for example, Chinese national heroes such as Yueh Fei (see Kaplan 1970, pp. 1-4). Sensationalism, in the non-pejorative sense as just discussed, will be called on in *General Yueh Fei* to dramatize the more lurid events in the lives of the main characters and their emotional responses to such, and as a strategy to heighten reader enjoyment.

## **FUSING THE HISTORICAL WITH ELEMENTS OF FANTASY**

Fusion of the factual and the imaginary constitutes a significant vantage point to examine the affinity between historical and fictional stories (see Yu 1988, p. 2) because, to the Chinese, as already discussed above, there are similarities that connect the two. Fantasy can take a number of forms including dreams, visions, imagination and supernatural forces, or fantasy, per se, may be interpreted by the reader as simply the supernatural. As Ma asserts, the central question of the use of fantasy in an historical novel should not apply to the mere presence of, for example, the supernatural, but rather focus on “the manner in which it appears and the functions it fulfills.” (1975, p. 290). Ma also poses a fundamental question: “Does the supernatural account for the artistic unity of the work?” and he suggests that if the supernatural in a story is central to the plot, fulfilling a “functional rather than decorative role”, then the question is rather about the thematic and contextual purposes to be served by incorporating such material (1975, p. 290). He suggests, “such a judgment should be made in terms of its verisimilitude and the relevancy of the supernatural itself”, and



should not be “exclusively on the pure historicity and surface rationality of its context.” (1975, p. 291).

Ma argues that because a number of mass uprisings and revolutions narrated in the past had “heavy religious and supernatural color”, these elements are “legitimately called for” in some historical novels (1975, p. 291). In this way, the effects of the supernatural may therefore create “a rhetorical balance in making the use of both facts and fantasy all the more harmonious.” (1975, p. 291). A balanced or harmonious presentation of fantasy with the historical, as in an historical romance novel, is then a legitimate mode of writing about China’s ancient history, but Allan (2005) questions whether readers want or are simply not used to historical fantasy. If the answer to this question is in the negative, then, as Allan suggests, “historical fiction authors have a tremendous responsibility...[and]...a tremendous opportunity” (2005, p. 14), implying that a novel created by fusing the historical with fantasy is both a valid and a timely genre. This is a challenge that I am keen to take up in *General Yueh Fei*.

## **PATRIOTISM AND HEROISM AS KEY ASPECTS OF THE TRADITIONAL CHINESE HISTORICAL NOVEL**

Ma observes that national crises caused by external aggression in dynastic China often generated a strong sense of patriotism and loyalty. One illustration provided by Ma is described in the *Shuo Yueh ch’uan-chuan* (*The Life of Yueh Fei*) mentioned earlier, and concerns the use of the general’s exploits to convey the strains and sufferings in those bitter days when the Chinese were pushed southward by the sweeping military actions of the Jurchen barbarians. The militarily feeble Sung China [960-1279], subjected to external menace, provides an ideal background for novels of this theme (1975, p. 281). National heroes are not only popular idols of physical prowess or military tactics, but are symbols of virtue projected in epic proportions (1975, pp. 281-282). While this appears to be true in the case of Yueh Fei, it follows that parallel themes such as war and peace and life and death, could also effectively be incorporated into the writing of an original historical novel about Yueh Fei, as they provide support and depth to the central theme of patriotism. Ma makes the point that in heroic novels of the “national security” theme:

Factionalism is very much an innate element, with the hero of unflinching loyalty, often a brave and theatrical general who is highly romanticized or drawn on a scale larger than life, and his subordinates as one group, versus a treacherous but towering minister, usually allied with influential eunuchs and other powerful court followers, and his associates in different levels of the government as a distinct clique. (1975, p. 284).

There is merit in Ma’s view as it relates to traditional Chinese fiction, but should the writer of a Chinese based historical romance novel in English go

further by examining the psychology of the protagonist/s and antagonist/s, revealing the motives for the actions that each took to heighten appeal to contemporary readers? This is certainly a strategy that I will be adopting.

For Ma, other characteristics of novels of “nationhood” or patriotism included the generation of conflicts, both in personal ambitions and in moral obligations, which are irreconcilably at odds (1975, p. 285); the depiction of nationalism and patriotism running high when native Chinese dynasties were threatened by outside rulers (1975, p. 286, footnote 26), and the representation of many of the main characters as destined to be heroes and as both makers and products of historical forces (1975, p. 292). One of the few points on which critics of both the Chinese and Western historical novel appear to agree is the unfeasibility of having “world-historical individuals play major roles” (Ma 1975, p. 292; and see Lukacs 1962, p. 149). While this is perhaps a valid point in relation to Chinese novels that bring emperors and other leaders to the forefront of the story, for they are seen (at least from outside perspectives generally) to be merely the controllers, my story about Yueh Fei will place the emperor and other main characters equally alongside the General. As Callick (2007) writes, in reference to past and recent Chinese epics: “They usually portray their central figure of the emperor as a flawed character, a tyrant even, but as a unifying force for the nation.” (2007, p. 12), which suggests a mode of character depiction more familiar to Western readers.

## **SOME BASIC LINGUISTIC CONSIDERATIONS**

In writing a romance novel that calls on the linguistic traditions of another culture, it is necessary to engage with some of the key issues of “translating” those traditions into English.

In contrast to English grammar, Chinese has virtually no common words or language constructs; spelling is phonetic; there are no complex verb declensions; there are no complex plurals and no gender to nouns as in French (Society for Anglo-Chinese Understanding 2004; Mou 1999, p. 49). Words are written as characters--miniature drawings or pictographs--and not as spelt letters. Etymologically, the pictograph depicts the “common characteristic shape or feature of those *separate* individuals in a collection rather than of an inseparable stuff-whole” (Mou 1999, p. 54). According to Mou, the Chinese people have been using the same pictographs in essentially the same way throughout the past two and a half thousand years (1999, p. 61). Under the Pinyin system for transliterating written Chinese characters into the Roman alphabet, spelling differences are noted in the literature. For example, Yueh Fei is also spelt as Ngoh Fei, Ngok Fei, Yo Fei or Yue Fei; the philosophical term Dao is also spelt as Tao; Sung may be spelt as Song; and there are various differences in the spelling of the Chin barbarian empire such as Jin or Gin, and

the barbarian tribes under this regime, for example, Jurchen or Jurchen, or even the Tartars in a generic sense. The above could be simplified as Yueh Fei, Tao, and the Jurchen barbarians respectively. In my proposed historical novel about China written in English, names will be shortened from the Pinyin transliterated Chinese—often hyphenated words--enabling an easier read and identification of the story's characters and places, and without losing the characteristic phonetics of the language. Ma alludes to this when he suggests that "short titles are given in preference to the full long titles, which are usually very clumsy" (1975, p. 279, footnote 7; and see Hsia 1988, p.139).

The presentation of language is a key to revealing the emotion in a character's speech. In English, a statement such as 'I am going' is often given emotional color by the verb that follows it, for example, "I am going,' she grumbled,' or "I am going!' she screamed.' In contrast, a Chinese narrator gives no hint of the emotion implicit in each speech beyond that which the speech itself suggests (Bishop 1956, p. 246). This may be true of older, traditional Chinese novels (for example *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*) but more recent Chinese based romance novelists such as Vidal (1966) and Yutang (1962) apply some degree of emotion to their characters' speech. The way language is presented in an historical novel could therefore be a significant cue for the reader in the revelation of the more rounded characters' emotions at the time of speech.

## **BASIC CHARACTERISTICS OF NOVEL WRITING**

At this point in the discussion, it is timely to present some of the basic elements of novel writing generally.

### ***Point of view***

According to Hoffman and Murphy (1996), Henry James "codified the concept of point of view by insisting that the narrative voice be purified of the kind of authorial commentary that he claimed interfered with the narrative flow." They further note that James argues that moral judgments should be implicit rather than explicit, and that a solitary narrative perspective should be carried through the story, either that of a character in the tale or that of a narrator whose voice becomes an instrument that sustains a distance between the writer and the fictional substance of the story (1996, p. 7). There is strength in these comments in relation to the writing of historical romance and using a Western voice in, for example a Chinese based story, but perhaps novels of this genre work even more effectively when they invite the reader to enter the story from the more intimate point of view afforded by first person narration as, for example, in novels such as Robert Graves' (1971) *I, Claudius*. It is for this reason that I will be writing *General Yueh Fei* as a first person narrative.

## ***Flashback***

An example of the very effective use of flashback in the historical romance genre is the Chinese story, *Passing Under Heaven* (Hill 2004). Here, the flashback occurs from 903 AD, when an elderly despot is dying and remembering his past, to the mid-850s AD, where a child is being brought up by her deserted, concubine mother. Hill's novel is based on the actual life and times of Yu Xuanji, a leading female poet of the Tang Dynasty, who was executed at the age of twenty-six for the murder of her maid (The Historical Novel Society 2004, pp. 14-15). This story stimulates the imagination on what might have been the thoughts of Yu at the time of her demise. I will, for this reason, be deploying flashback in *General Yueh Fei*, and the first chapter will open with Yueh Fei returning from the northern battlefields to the southern capital, Hangchow, where he is arrested and imprisoned. A flashback then occurs as he ponders his arrest. Yueh Fei also remembers his time in the military fighting the invading barbarians until he receives an Imperial order to abandon the war and return home.

## ***Plot***

It has been suggested that there is an “unspoken assumption” that the plot in historical fiction must include a number of “historical events”, for example war and politics, “mingled with and affecting the personal fortunes of the various characters” (Fleishman 1971, p. 3). These issues have already been discussed in some detail earlier in the discussion, and this is certainly the approach that I will be adopting in constructing *General Yueh Fei*.

## **BORROWING FROM OTHER CREATIVE SOURCES**

Interpretations of Shakespeare's history plays are not new in Asian media productions. For example, Japanese film director, Akira Kurosawa, based the movie, *Ran* (1985, Orion Pictures), on his interpretation of Shakespeare's tragic play, *King Lear*, which he set in 16<sup>th</sup> century feudal Japan. *Ran* features epic battles and fortress assaults, and the movie takes its title from the Japanese word for “chaos” or “turmoil” – appropriately descriptive terms for *King Lear*. If one were to look for other useful models in Shakespeare's work, the court scene in *The Merchant of Venice* is a masterpiece of creative skill that incorporates passionate declamations, sound maxims of jurisprudence, wit and irony, and fluctuations of hope and fear in the different characters (Hazlitt 1817, cited in Fletcher 1969, p. 157). Even more important, perhaps, are Shakespeare's construction of plots, his improvising, heightening, and intensifying action, sharpening contrasts, motivating characters and accommodating mood, tone, and pace to character and action (Taylor 1941, pp. 480-481). The use of Shakespeare, then, is particularly appropriate in creating

a Chinese based historical romance in English, as it is well known that in his history plays: “Shakespeare succeeds in endowing the dead skeletons of history with flesh and blood, and also in creating, with or without suggestions from history, new characters that are more real than living men.” (Sen Gupta 1964, p. 7).

Such a strategy is supported by Ma, in that the nearest Western approximations of Chinese historical novels should not be sought in the novels of Scott and his followers but in the history plays of Shakespeare, as there are ample similarities between them in terms of characterization, point of view, and the treatment of history (1975, p. 292). The use of Shakespeare’s mode of writing in, for example, Act IV Scene 1, set in the Court of Justice in *The Merchant of Venice*, may then be a very useful consideration in the planning of *General Yueh Fei*. The powerful dialogue between Shakespeare’s Shylock and Portia may evoke within the reader an extraordinary mental scene, and borrowing various elements from this scene could be reasonably applied to a Sung Imperial Court scene imaginatively written into my proposed original historical romance novel in which the central protagonist, Yueh Fei, and his antagonists, Emperor Kao Tsung and Chief Minister, Chin Kuei, engage in a verbal battle of wits.

Much can be gleaned, also, from reviewing films about China, including ideas that incorporate visuals such as scenes, body language, facial expressions, colors, attire, and settings. Asian films such as *The Last Emperor* (1987), *The Emperor and the Assassin* (1998), *Hero* (2002), *House of Flying Daggers* (2004), *Crouching Tiger Hidden Dragon* (2006) and *The Road Home* (2006), may be viewed to study images in a Chinese setting and to examine plot structures. Western fantasy films, such as the *Harry Potter* series and some of the Walt Disney movies, and others, can be examined in relation to the potential strengthening of proposed visuals written into an historical romance novel about ancient China. Images, in the context of *General Yueh Fei*, such as shadows creeping in the night, skeletons of long-dead heroes coming alive, and ghosts, could be considered for a potential imaginative enhancement of character and mood.

## CONCLUSION

“There’s nothing more powerful or satisfying than inventing your own imaginary world.” (Nahrung 2006, p. 40).

This chapter has explored how, in creating an imaginative historical romance novel about an ancient Chinese folk hero, the contemporary fiction writer may be confronted by significant complexities. A number of these have been delineated in this chapter, including the recreation/reconstruction of the customs, manners, speech, atmosphere and mood; the simplification of Chinese words, for example, the names of characters and places without losing the

characteristic flavour of the language; the use of first person narration for emotional effect in character speech; the use of major flashback and borrowing from other creative sources.

Overall, I am setting out in my novel, in accordance with the principles garnered from my research into the writing of the historical romance novel, to establish historical anchor points that are salient to the story of Yueh Fei and then to flesh these out with fiction infused with some elements of fantasy. While this chapter has acknowledged the importance of Said's "Orientalism" to any such fictional enterprise, it also suggests that the writer of an original Chinese based historical romance novel should be encouraged to engage in imaginative experimentation in the spirit both of a freely admitted Western literary tradition and of a new ethos bred by globalization, which sees a very productive marriage between Eastern and Western traditions. Such a discussion seeks to make a distinctive contribution to the practice of contemporary historical novel writing in another national setting specifically, and to the humanities more generally.

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