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A Study on the Appropriation and Alienation of Exotic Narratives Under the Literary Yellowface Phenomenon in *Yellowface*

Meilin Liu
College of English, Beijing International Studies University, Beijing, China

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Abstract

This study takesR.F.Kuang's novel Yellowface as its core text. Drawing on theories from comparative literature image studies, critical race theory, and Orientalism, and employing methods such as close reading and discourse analysis, it conducts a systematic investigation into the appropriation and alienation of foreign narratives under the phenomenon of literary yellowface. The study first traces the origins and development of the yellowface concept and defines the meaning and essence of literary yellowface. It argues that literary yellowface is an extension of traditional yellowface from film and theater into contemporary literature, and that its core lies in the appropriation of minority narrative agency and the alienation of minority images. Then, taking the novel's narrative of Chinese laborers in World War Ⅰ as a key thread, the study unpacks the entire process through which the white protagonist alters the manuscript and turns it into a cultural commodity. Finally, it reveals the racial power logic embedded behind this phenomenon. The research shows that literary yellowface id a concrete manifestation of Orientalist discourse and systemic racial power within literary production. The satirical narrative of Yellowface serves to deconstruct the "performative diversity" discourse of the publishing industry. In doing so, it offers an important reference for reflecting on the predicament of minority literary expression and for building more equal cross-cultural literary dialogue.

Keywords

Yellowface; Literary Yellowface; Comparative Literature Image Studies; Critical Race Theory; Orientalism

1. Introduction

This chapter is the first part of the study. It covers the research background and significance, a literature review, the core research questions, and the research approach and methods.

1.1. Research Background and Significance

With the rise of globalization and multiculturalism, minority narratives in English

and American literature have gradually broken through their long term marginal position. Asian American literature, in particular, has gained unprecedented market attention and scholarly discussion, thanks to its unique cultural perspective and historical memory. However, the deep structures of unequal cultural power have not completely disappeared. Instead, they have taken on more subtle ways and have become embedded in every aspect of literary production.

The “yellowface” practice, which is from European and American theater and film, involved white actors putting on makeup to play Asian characters and portraying them through stereotypical images of the East. It became a typical representation of racial hegemony in visual culture. In contemporary literature, however, this phenomenon has not disappeared. Instead, it has taken a new form literary yellowface. This refers to the practice in which non-Asian authors appropriate Asian historical memory, mimic minority identities, and consume the historical experiences of Others in order to gain cultural capital and market benefits. Compared with the more visible yellowface in film and theater, the narrative appropriation in literature is much more subtle. Yet at its core, it remains an act of Western subjects occupying, rewriting, and alienating Eastern narratives, a new manifestation of Orientalist discourse in contemporary literary production. The novel Yellowface, published in 2023 Chinese American writer R.F.Kuang, uses satire to expose the sore spots of this industry. On this basis, this study takes Yellowface as its core text, drawing in comparative literature image studies and critical race theory, to analyze the appropriation and alienation of foreign narratives under the phenomenon of literary yellowface, and to analyze the racial power logic and collective cultural psychology behind it, in order to fill the relevant gaps in existing research.

In terms of theoretical significance, first, this study can expand the boundaries of yellowface research. Most existing studies focus on theater and film, while the same phenomenon in literature lacks systematic conceptual clarification and textual analysis. This study, by combing specific textual analysis with theory, aims to define the concept and essence of literary yellowface in a systematic way. Second, it deepens the study of the construction of foreign images. By combing the “image of the Other” theory from comparative literature image studies with the “racial contract” perspective from critical race theory, this study moves beyond the limitations of a single Orientalist framework. It analyzes the appropriation of foreign narratives and the alienation of images at multiple levels, from textual representation and individual psychology to institutional structures, offering a new research path for the contemporary application of comparative literature image studies.

In terms of practical significance, this study shows the hidden racial power in contemporary literary production. The novel Yellowface presents a compete chain of literary production and exposes the white-centered structure behind the

discourse of the Anglo-American publishing industry. According to the text, this study clarifies how cultural appropriation, under the cover of market packaging, becomes a form of racial exploitation, providing concrete textual evidence for understanding racial inequality in contemporary Western cultural spheres. Second, it offers insights for building equal cross-cultural literary exchange. By critiquing the cultural hegemony behind the literary yellowface phenomenon, this study further reflects on how to eliminate Orientalist narrative appropriation and avoid self-Orientalism, promoting a literary exchange that is equal, respectful between different cultures. This has a certain practical reference value.

1.2. Literature Review

The following section will review relevant studies from both China and abroad.

1.2.1. Foreign Studies

In terms of the literary yellowface phenomenon and the cultural appropriation of foreign narratives on which this study focuses, there are few foreign monographs that directly use this term as a keyword. However, rich scholarship has been developed around issues of race, cultural appropriation, and the critique of power, which lays a solid theoretical foundation for this study. These can be summarized in three main points:

First, the critique of the logic of appropriation. Yellowface practices still exist today, especially in film and television. Felicia Chan (41) moves beyond the traditional paradigm of stereotype critique and introduces the analytical framework of "banal cosmopolitanism" and consumerist pleasures. She points out that contemporary Western appropriation of Eastern cultural elements has become into a cultural consumption practice that hollows out subjectivity. Foreign cultures are reduced to interchangeable commodities that serves Western aesthetic curiosity and self-affirmation. Under this logic, white subjects not only dissolve the narrative sovereignty of Eastern people by playing or replacing Eastern roles, but also emphasize existing power hierarchies. Debra Kates (6) takes a more radical approach, focusing on the hegemonic ideology of white supremacy. She argues that Hollywood's yellowface and whitewashing practices are contemporary forms of racial hierarchy. According to Kates, the West takes Asian people of their subjectivity in resistance and self-expression at the narrative level by describing them as obedient model, thus completing the construction of alienation.

Second, the dynamic changes of racial images in cross-cultural contexts. Some scholars have noticed that Eastern images are not fixed, but are adjusted dynamically with the shifting international political and economic landscape. Lang Wenjuan and Liu Meiyan (36) applied Speech Accommodation Theory to conduct a diachronic analysis of exchange in Western films. They found that the screen image of Chinese people changes in a mirror-like way, corresponding to the changing power balance and diplomatic relations between China and the United States. When

China's national power was weak or when bilateral relations were tense, the West reinforced the image of evil and savagery. When China's power grew or cooperation deepened, the image was beautified. However, the deep values still ultimately serve Western-centrism.

In summary, foreign scholarship has revealed the power motivations behind the Western portrayal of Eastern images from multiple perspectives, including cultural consumption politics and dynamic power struggles. However, the collective cultural psychology of the West as reflected in the yellowface phenomenon within the literary field remains insufficiently explored.

1.2.2. Domestic Studies

In domestic scholarship, there is also very little research that uses “literary yellowface” as a key term. However, some relevant results have been produced around issues such as the construction of foreign images from the perspective of Orientalism, the transcultural writing of Chinese American literature, and the discursive critique of cultural appropriation.

First, studies on the gaze mechanism and the construction of foreign images from the perspective of Orientalism. In his analysis of postcolonial literature, Luo Shiping (5) creatively introduces Lacan’s theory of the gaze and Descartes’ theory of visual refraction into the critique of Orientalism. He points out that the representation of the East in Western literature is not an objective mirror image, but rather a product of the Western subject's gaze being refracted. He argues that the distortion of Eastern images exists not only at the level of discursive practice, but is deeply rooted in the visual and psychological mechanisms filled with Western moral prejudices. This explains why, when white writers appropriate foreign materials, their narrative perspective already carries a tendency toward distortion, because the gazer’s look is naturally influenced by their own cultural unconscious. Li Ying (160-163), from a macro perspective, traces the transformation of the Chinese image in American films from Orientalism to a more diverse representation. She points out that behind this transformation is not a deepening of Western cultural understanding, but rather the influence of China’s growing comprehensive national power and the expansion of its film market. For example, in 2012, China is presented as a “savior”, but the decision-making power still remains in Western hands, and China is only a tool maker. She further argues that the Chinese elements in American films are essentially cultural symbols that have been “otherized”, conveying Western values that cater to the mainstream Western cultural model. Ye Dong and Deng Jingwen (57), using the American science fiction novel The Years of Rice and Salt as their text, further reveal the hidden mechanisms of Orientalist discourse in Western narratives. They find that even when China is superficially made the subject of history, it is still constrained at three levels, knowledge sources, modes of thinking, and discursive mechanisms, by the Western-centric tradition, remaining essentially a product under Western values.

Second, studies on cross-cultural writing based on cultural memory and Chinese American subjectivity. Wang Xiaodan (86) introduces the cultural memory theories of Jan Assmann and Astrid Erll, and takes the works of Maxine Hong Kingston and Amy Tan as objects of study. She systematically examines how Chinese American literature reconstructs the writing of China through five types of literary recollection, which are experiential, commemorative, historicizing, antagonistic, and reflective. Wang points out that Chinese American writers use strategies such as autobiographical family narratives, rewriting of myths and legends, and magical realism to transform the collective memory of Chinese immigrants into literary texts. Through the non-traditional narrative device of fiction, they reveal experiences that have been obscured by mainstream history, achieving a kind of "poetic truth". This research path, from the internal perspective of Chinese Americans, addresses the question of "how to break free from the Western-dominated narrative of the foreign".

Third, a review of Western writings on China from the reader's perspective in imagology. Guo Yingjie (101), from the reader's perspective of imagology, systematically reviews five major categories of representative studies on writings about China in Western cultural contexts. He points out that Western scholars cannot escape their Western-centric stance, and that the image of China they construct is a product of othering. China, as a potential reader, should critically deconstruct this Western image building from a local perspective. This reveals that the alienating construction of literary yellowface is not only a matter of the author's narrative strategy, but also a product of the reader's psychology of reception.

Fourth, a critical reflection on the concept of "cultural appropriation". Zhang Jia'ao and Mei Junjie (117-119), from the dual perspectives of linguistic philosophy and postcolonial critique, conduct a meta-critique of 'cultural appropriation" as a critical tool. They argue that accusing others of "cultural appropriation" itself can cause discursive harm. Moreover, cultural appropriation essentially sets up the victim as an absolute Other, which, while appearing to oppose Orientalism, actually reproduces it. This study suggests that in criticizing white narrative appropriation, we should also be aware of whether we are unconsciously falling into the trap of self-Orientalism—that is, confining Chinese American writers to a position where they can only tell stories about their own ethnic group.

In summary, domestic studies have mostly focused on the critique of Orientalism and the construction of Chinese American subjectivity in film, science fiction, and autobiographical literature. There is a lack of analysis of the "yellowface" phenomenon in specific literary works, and the psychological motivations of white subjects behind it remain lacking explored. This is the research question that this study aims to address.

1.3. Core Research Question

The core research question of this study id that in the literary yellowface phenomenon as presented in Yellowface, how do white subjects appropriate foreign narratives to construct an alienated image of the Eastern Other, and what racial power logic and collective cultural psychology of the West does this phenomenon reflect?

1.4. Research Approach and Methods

This study proceeds along a logical path that moves through four stages, literature review, textual analysis, theoretical interpretation, and concluding synthesis. First, it reviews the current research landscape both in China and abroad, identifies research gaps, and clarifies the core research question. Second, taking Yellowface as the object of analysis, it examines the differences between Athena's original manuscript and June's revised published version, as well as June's psychological cognition during the revision process, in order to identify the strategies of narrative appropriation and the characteristics of image alienation. Third, it connects the textual phenomena with core theoretical frameworks to analyze the generative mechanism of the literary yellowface phenomenon and to address the core research question. Finally, it draws conclusions.

The main research methods employed are close reading, discourse analysis, and content analysis.

2. Core Concepts and Theoretical Framework

This chapter aims to systematically define the core concepts involved in this study and to outline the theoretical foundations that support the analysis throughout the paper. It builds a clear analytical framework for the subsequent examination of the strategies of foreign narrative appropriation in Yellowface, the characteristics of image alienation, and the underlying logic of their formation.

2.1. Defining Core Concepts

This section will explain several core concepts.

2.1.1. The Origin and Meaning of Traditional Yellowface

Yellowface is a culturally and racially controversial phenomenon in Western cultural history. It originated on European and American theater stages in the nineteenth century and reached its peak in the Hollywood film industry in the twentieth century. It mainly refers to the practice in which white actors played Asian characters and, based on the Western stereotypical understanding of the East, created flat and one-dimensional Asian roles—such as cunning, ignorant, mysterious, or submissive figures (Lang Wenjuan and Liu Meiyan 32). In essence, traditional yellowface is not an objective representation of Asian images, but rather an imaginative construction of the Eastern Other by Western subjects from their

own cultural standpoint. It functions as a form of racial hegemony, continuously reinforcing the ideology of white cultural superiority.

2.1.2. The Definition and Characteristics of "Literary Yellowface"

As the field of cultural production has expanded, the yellowface phenomenon has not disappeared but has extended into the literary domain, taking on a more subtle and concealed form, literary yellowface. In this study, literary yellowface is defined as a form of literary production in which non-Asian authors appropriate, rewrite, and alienate Eastern foreign narratives by appropriating Asian historical memory, fabricating racial identities, and consuming the trauma and suffering of Others, in order to gain cultural capital and market benefits.

Compared with traditional visual yellowface, literary yellowface has the following characteristics:

First, performativeness. Authors disguise their Asian identity through pseudonyms and biographical packaging, replacing the visual performance of makeup with a textual performance of identity.

Second, appropriation. It involves the seizure of Asian historical narratives and the right to cultural expression, rather than merely the external imitation of appearance.

Third, alienation. The Eastern images that are written are always constructed within the cognitive framework of Western subjects, resulting in stereotyped, symbolic, and distorted representations.

Fourth, profit-driven motivation. In the context of a multicultural market, passing oneself off as a minority identity can be directly converted into commercial capital and cultural prestige.

In essence, literary yellowface is a new manifestation of Orientalist discourse in contemporary literary production, but its core remains the Western subject's monopoly and domination over the narrative rights of the East.

2.2. Comparative Literature Image Studies

Comparative literature image studies is an important branch of comparative literature. It examines the generative mechanisms and cultural meanings of foreign images in cross-cultural contexts, and provides a core textual analytical tool for this study's analysis of the alienating process in the text. This theory encompasses the following three dimensions:

First, the imaginative nature of the image of the Other. French scholar Daniel-Henri Pageaux (118) argues that the image of the Other is the sum of views on a foreign country produced through a process that is both literary and social. It is an "Other" constructed by the viewing subject based on their own cultural and psychological needs. The truth or falsity of the image is not the core concern of the research; rather, the underlying cultural psychology and power relations behind it are what matter.

Second, the constraining influence of the social collective imaginary. Image construction is not purely an individual act of creation, but is shaped by the collective cultural psychology and cognitive frameworks of a given society. The writing of Eastern images is always embedded within the long-term established Western cognitive framework of the East. Therefore, individual creative work can hardly escape the deep constraints of the collective imaginary.

2.3. Critical Race Theory

Critical Race Theory (CRT) originated in the field of American law and later expanded into various disciplines including cultural studies and literary criticism. Its core purpose, as Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic (3) put it, is that "it not only tries to understand our social situation, but to change it; it sets out not only to ascertain how society organizes itself along racial lines and hierarchies, but to transform it for the better". This theory provides both individual and institutional level theoretical support for this study's analysis of the generative mechanisms behind the literary yellowface phenomenon.

Charles Mills (93-97), in The Racial Contract, argues that there exists an implicit trans-racial contract in modern Western societies. Through this contract, white groups form a community of shared interests, designating non-whites as "subpersons" and depriving them of the right to cultural expression and historical discourse. The theory contains three core propositions. First, the racial contract grants whites a natural cognitive authority, while the self-expression of non-whites is regarded as marginal. Second, there is an "epistemology of ignorance". Whites do not passively fail to understand the histories of other races; rather, they actively obscure, distort, and dissolve non-white historical narratives. Third, there is institutionalized racial exploitation. Racial inequality is not merely a matter of individual prejudice, but is embedded in the functioning of all areas of society. Colonial plunder and cultural appropriation are, in essence, institutionalized forms of exploitation under the framework of the racial contract.

2.4. Orientalism and Cultural Appropriation

Edward Said's theory of Orientalism is a cornerstone of postcolonial cultural studies. It provides the fundamental basis for this study to locate the essence of the literary yellowface phenomenon at the macro-cultural level. Said argues that the Orient does not refer to the actual geographical East, but rather a knowledge system constructed by the West through academic research, literary writing, artistic expression, and other forms of discourse. By shaping the East into an irrational, backward, mysterious, and suffering Other, the West sets off its own rationality, civilization, and superiority, ultimately achieving an imaginative possession of and power dominance over the East.

Cultural appropriation is a core concept closely related to Orientalism. It refers to

the practice in which members of one culture adopt the cultural elements or creations of members of another culture across cultural boundaries. In short, it is the usage of items pertaining to a certain culture (insiders) by non-members of that culture (outsiders) (Bicskei 233). This is not simply cultural borrowing; in essence, it is a form of narrative plunder under unequal power relations. The appropriator holds the discursive power, while the appropriated culture loses its subjectivity and is reduced to a consumed symbol.

3. The Pathways of Literary Yellowface in Yellowface

Literary yellowface is not a single act of identity fraud, but rather a complete process of narrative plunder and transformation. In Yellowface, the white protagonist June Hayward appropriates Chinese American writer Athena Liu's narrative of Chinese laborers in World War I, undergoing a complete process of alienation, from the original historical text to the alienated published work. Taking the novel's full chain of literary production as its thread, this chapter unpacks the specific strategies of foreign narrative appropriation under the literary yellowface phenomenon from four perspectives, the original narrative text, the alteration of textual content, the legitimization of identity disguise, and the adaptation to market logic. Through this analysis, it explains step by step how the white subject completes the occupation and rewriting of Eastern narratives.

3.1. The Content of Athena Liu's Original Narrative

Athena Liu's manuscript of the novel about Chinese laborers in World War I is the original text of the entire appropriation. The essence of her writing is a self-recovery and multi-dimensional presentation of a suppressed history by an Asian American subject, forming a sharp contrast with the alienated text that is later rewritten by the white protagonist. In terms of creative intention, Athena's writing has a clear historical recovery purpose. "The novel is about the unsung contributions and experiences of the Chinese Labour Corps, the 140,000 Chinese workers who were recruited by the British Army and sent to the Allied Front during World War I". Yet these workers were a group that had been ignored by mainstream Western narratives. As a Chinese American descendant, Athena spent years consulting primary historical materials in European and American archives and interviewing oral memories of relevant individuals, attempting to fill this marginalized historical gap through her work. In terms of narrative stance, Athena explicitly portrays the reality of Western racial oppression. The manuscript not only depicts the brutality of war, but also focuses on depicting the discrimination and unfair treatment that Western powers inflicted upon the Chinese workers. For example:

"Many were killed by bombs, accidents, and diseases. Most were mistreated upon arrival in France, cheated out of their wages, assigned to dirty and cramped living quarters, denied interpreters, and attacked by other laborers. Many never made it

back home." (pp.20)

"We take out all references to 'Chinks' and 'Coolies'" (pp.31)

This kind of writing puts the sufferings of the Chinese laborers within the power structures of race and colonialism, rather than reducing them to a mere incidental tragedy of war. Athena's manuscript seeks to reclaim the right to interpret Eastern history. Yet this original text, which possesses its own subjectivity, becomes precisely the object of plunder for the white subject's act of literary yellowface.

3.2. Narrative Alteration

After stealing Athena's manuscript, the white protagonist June does not publish the original text directly. Instead, she makes extensive alterations according to her own cognitive framework and writing habits. As can be seen from the detailed descriptions in the novel, this alteration is not simply a matter of polishing the language. It is a comprehensive transformation that covers narrative perspective, historical details, and value positions. In essence, it is a discursive reconstruction of the foreign narrative by the white subject.

On the one hand, there is the selective deletion of Eastern characteristics and historical details. June deletes all the various terms used in Chinese for addressing family members, believing they "made no sense at all". She also knows nothing about Chinese surnames. The original text reads:

"It took me hours of fiddling with an OCR to search them online, and even then I had to strike out about half of them. She refers to family members in Chinese terms instead of English, so you're left wondering if a given character is an uncle or a second cousin. (I've read dozens of guides to the Chinese kinship nomenclature system by now. It makes no goddamn sense.)" (pp.30)

"We change almost a dozen names to reduce confusion. Two different characters have the last name Zhang, and our have the last name Li. Athena differentiates them by giving them different first names, which she only occasionally uses, and other names that I assume are nicknames." (pp.30)

On the other hand, there is a softening and beautification of value positions. The critique and satire of Western racism in Athena's original manuscript are toned down in June's rewrite. She adds positive white characters and deletes or downplays the parts that carry racial discrimination. For example:

"We also soften some of the white characters. No, it's not as bad as you think. Athena's original text is almost embarrassingly biased; the French and British soldiers are cartoonishly racist. I get she's trying to make a point about discrimination within the Allied front, but these scenes are so hackneyed that they defy belief. It throws the reader out of the story. Instead we switch one of the white bullies to a Chinese character, and one of the more vocal Chinese laborers to a sympathetic white farmer. This adds the complexity, the humanistic nuance that perhaps Athena was too close to the project to see." (pp.31)

Later, she even directly deletes authentic historical materials, such as the unequal treaties China was forced to sign after World War I, and changes the novel's ending, concluding the story with an inauthentic warmth. Through this series of alterations, the original Asian American autonomous narrative is reconstructed into a text that fits white cognitive habits. The foreign history is stripped of its subjectivity and critical edge, and is made to serve the white subject.

3.3. Identity Disguise

Following the publisher's suggestion, June Hayward chooses to publish the work under the pseudonym Juniper Song, a name with distinctly Asian characteristics. Through this invented racial identity, she performs a kind of "yellowface" act in the literary field, enabling the appropriated Eastern narrative to gain market and reader acceptance.

This identity performance is highly covert and strategic. Unlike the visual makeup performance of traditional yellowface in film and theater, identity disguise in the literary field is accomplished merely through a pseudonym, vague or ambiguous author biographies, and suggestive guidance in media promotion. Throughout the publication and promotional process, June never actively claims to be Asian American, but she also never clearly clarifies her white identity. She keeps a low profile in public, takes advantage of the publisher's marketing rhetoric that frames her as a "new multicultural voice", and allows readers and the media to assume she is an Asian American female author. This ambiguous identity strategy avoids the moral risk of outright fraud while successfully capitalizing on the cultural dividends of minority identity. The original text reads:

"I never lied. That's important. I never pretended to be Chinese, or made up life experiences that I didn't have. It's not fraud, what we're doing. We're just suggesting the right credentials, so that readers take me and my story seriously, so that nobody refuses to pick up my work because of some outdated preconceptions about who can write what." (pp.45)

If we probe deeper into this identity performance, it is itself a manifestation of racial privilege. White subjects can freely borrow the identity labels of minority groups to gain benefits, without having to bear the cost of racial oppression that comes with that identity. Yet authentic Asian American authors must repeatedly prove their own identity before their writing can be accepted. This unequal power of identity is precisely a concrete manifestation of the racial contract in the literary field.

3.4. Market Accommodation

The final completion of the literary yellowface act also requires the choosing and promotion of the publishing industry. During the rewriting process, June has an editor named Danella who offers suggestions and advice based on the market's preference for Asian narratives, transforming the Eastern narrative into marketable

cultural capital. The publisher's operations further consolidate this narrative. For example, in the novel, the publisher places June's work on a multicultural book list for promotion, which attracts many Asian American readers, and June gains fame and profit as a result. At this point, the entire chain of narrative appropriation, from the original text to the commodified literary yellowface, is completed.

4. The Deeper Logic Behind the Appropriation of Foreign Narratives and the alienation of Images

The previous chapter has analyzed the complete chain of literary production based on the text of Yellowface. However, it should be pointed out that the emergence of the literary yellowface phenomenon is not an isolated incident of individual moral failure, but rather the result of three factors working together, individual psychology, industry institutions, and cultural traditions. This chapter will combine theoretical frameworks to analyze the deeper logic behind the appropriation of foreign narratives and the alienation of images, revealing the systemic racial power structures and collective cultural psychology that underlie literary yellowface.

4.1. Individual Level

The protagonist June is able to appropriate Asian historical narratives and claim them as her own without any psychological burden. The micro-level psychological root of this lies in the white cognitive privilege endowed by the racial contract. Mills (16) points out that the racial contract constructs a hierarchical binary order at the cognitive level, which is whites are naturally endowed with the right to interpret and define everything in the world, while the historical experiences and self-expression of non-whites are relegated to the status of the marginal, the partial, and the lacking in universal value. In the novel, June's psychological portrayal during her appropriation of Athena's work never defines herself as a thief; instead, she constantly rationalizes her actions. In the end, June even comes to believe that she is more qualified than Asian authors to tell Eastern stories. For example:

"I can't let Athena's greatest work go to print in its shoddy, first draft state. I can't. What kind of friend would I be?" (pp.22)

"I'll just say it: taking Athena's manuscript felt like reparations, payback for the things that Athena took from me." (pp.28)

"It's not lying. I swear, it was never as psychopathic as it sounds. It's all ust stretching reality a bit, putting the right spin on the picture so that the lurking social media outrage mob doesn't get the wrong idea." (pp.34)

This cognitive perspective is accompanied by an epistemology of ignorance. Mills (1997) emphasizes that the disregard of white people for the histories of other races is not a passive lack of understanding, but rather an active cognitive avoidance. They do not care about the actual truth, and they dissolve the subjectivity of the Other while distorting their historical narratives. During the process of appropriation,

June engages in selective cognitive filtering. Before the publication of the work, the publisher's assistant Candice suggests that June hire a sensitivity reader to go through the manuscript and check whether there is any racist content. However, June, in her arrogance, refuses and says:"I don't see why, I write back. I'm pretty comfortable with the research I did." This reflects the white subject's sense of centrality and superiority.

4.2. Industry Level

If individual cognitive privilege provides the psychological motivation for narrative appropriation, then the white-centered structure of the Anglo-American publishing industry provides the institutional space and fertile ground for the phenomenon of literary yellowface. As the core hub of literary production, the publishing industry is not a neutral platform for content dissemination. Rather, it operates within racial power structures as well, by filtering, modifying, and promoting foreign narratives that align with the white-centered order.

From the perspective of industry structure, the Anglo-American publishing industry has long been in a white-dominated power structure. Between the years 1950 and 2018, the authors found, 95 percent of books published with major firms like Penguin Random House and Simon and Schuster were written by white people (Richard Jean So 3). This has created a stable community of interests and shared aesthetic consensus among white publishers and editors. As a result, stereotypical narratives appropriated by whites are more likely to achieve market success than those written by minority authors. In the novel, the publishing company has a dedicated team to package the protagonist June precisely, which is one of the important reasons for the novel's great commercial success. The publishing industry's validation of her authorship further demonstrates how institutional endorsement transforms contested ownership into legitimacy. In this sense, whiteness operates not only as identity but as a structural condition that enables mobility across representational boundaries (Livia Traesar, 2026).

4.3. Cultural Level

Behind individual psychology and industry institutions lies a deeper root, which is the accumulated Orientalist collective imaginary in Western society for a long time. According to the perspective of comparative literature image studies discussed earlier, the construction of foreign images is never purely individual creation, but is shaped by the collective imaginary of a given society. Said's theory of Orientalism also points out that the Western understanding of the East is a complete discursive system, constructed on the basis of colonial power, which shapes the East as a backward and mysterious Other, thereby highlighting the superiority and dominant position of Western civilization.

The reason why the literary yellowface phenomenon can emerge and be widely

accepted is essentially the continuation and transformation of the Orientalist collective imaginary in the contemporary cultural field. This Orientalist collective imaginary provides a natural psychological foundation for narrative appropriation among the audience. The reason why June's rewritten stereotypical narrative in the novel gains recognition from a large number of readers is not because it is closer to historical truth, but because it perfectly aligns with Western readers' perceptions of the East, allowing them to experience a sense of natural superiority while reading. For example, in the novel, when June and her editor Daniella are revising the manuscript, June's changes to the ending surprise and satisfy the editor, who says: "It's not all about pandering to authority. I do think we've made the book better, more accessible, more streamlined. The original draft made you feel dumb, alienated at times, and frustrated with the self righteousness of it all. It stank of all the most annoying things about Athena. The new version is a universally relatable story, a story that anyone can see themselves in". Although June denies pandering, she is precisely pandering to this very imaginary.

5. The Critical Value of Yellowface and Its Implications for Cross-Cultural Communication

R.F.Kuang's 2023 novel Yellowface does more than merely expose the hidden underside of literary production. More importantly, it uses satire to disenchant and critique the phenomenon of literary yellowface, offering important real reference points for reflecting on the difficulty of minority literature and for building more equal cross-cultural literary exchange. This chapter starts from the critical value of the text itself and explores its implications from two angles, minority literary creation and cross-cultural communication.

5.1. Textual Value

The novel adopts a satirical narrative from the first person perspective of a white writer, pushing the complete operation of literary yellowface from behind the scenes into public view. It critically disenchants the phenomenon in three aspects.

First, it de-sacralizes the performative diversity discourse of the Anglo-American publishing industry. On the surface, the publishing industry claims to support minority creative work and advocate for cultural diversity, but in practice it still filters content through stereotypical narrative models. Second, it reveals the legitimacy claims of white narration. The novel depicts in detail June's complete psychological process from stealing the manuscript to disguising her Asian identity, revealing that white people do not actually know how to tell Eastern stories well, but rather use minority identity to seize cultural capital. This tears apart June's pretense of kindly spreading Eastern stories. The white subject's possession of Eastern narratives is not cultural exchange, but power domination. Third, it alters the collective consciousness of the audience. The novel does not place readers and

the critical establishment outside of its critique. Rather, it shows that the formation of literary yellowface cannot be separated from the complicity of the entire cultural field. Literary yellowface is not the bad action of a single subject, but the result of the whole society's participation under the Orientalist collective imaginary. Throughout the novel, several characters keep questioning June, constantly attacking her through social media. This actually aims to evoke readers' reflection on their own reading positions.

5.2. Implications for Minority Literature

The narrative difficulty presented in Yellowface also offers profound implications for the development of contemporary minority literature. To break through literary yellowface, the most important point is to firmly uphold cultural subjectivity and maintain control over the right to express one's own history and narratives. It is essential to insist on writing history from an autonomous perspective, to stay true to one's own vision, and not to cater to the stereotypical expectations of the mainstream market. Minority writers should strive to present the diverse and multi-dimensional life experiences of their communities. While historical trauma exists, they should not be confined by it. They should refuse to reduce their cultural identity to a consumption symbol that caters to the market, and instead broaden their scope to include a wider range of historical experiences and social life, breaking free from the constraints of a single, fixed image.

5.3. Implications for Cross-Cultural Communication

The essence of the literary yellowface phenomenon is a one-way power dominance relationship in cross-cultural communication. To dissolve cultural appropriation and promote healthier cross-cultural literary exchange, the core task is to break down the discursive hegemony of the Western center and to build an order of cross-cultural exchange that is equal and mutually respectful.

First, it is necessary to establish the principle of subjectivity in cross-cultural exchange and to distinguish clearly between cultural borrowing and cultural appropriation. Correct cross-cultural borrowing is built on the basis of equal respect between both parties. It requires recognizing the subjectivity and discursive rights of other cultures, with understanding as its premise.

Second, it is necessary to break the pattern of the West speaking and to promote two-way cultural exchange. For a long time, cross-cultural literary exchange has been a one-way from the West. The East has occupied the position of being consumed and written about, while Eastern expression has found it difficult to enter the Western mainstream. Therefore, to achieve truly equal cross-cultural exchange, the East must express itself and speak out, while the Western mainstream must step out of the Orientalist collective imaginary, stop exoticizing and consuming, and learn to listen and understand.

6. Conclusion

This study takes Yellowface as its core text and, on the basis of comparative literature image studies, critical race theory, and the perspective of Orientalism, conducts a systematic examination of the appropriation and alienation of foreign narratives under the phenomenon of literary yellowface. The main conclusions are as follows:

First, literary yellowface is an extended form of the yellowface phenomenon in the contemporary literary field. It centers on the occupation of narrative rights and employs covert tactics such as textual alteration, identity disguise, and market packaging to plunder the historical narrative rights of minority groups. In essence, it is the continuation of Orientalist discourse and racial power structures within literary production.

Second, the novel fully presents the complete process of foreign narrative appropriation, which is the white subject takes an Asian American's autonomous writing as the original text, deletes historical details, dissolves the subjectivity and critical edge of the Eastern narrative, adopts an Asian pseudonym to legitimize the act of appropriation, and ultimately transforms Eastern history into a cultural commodity that fits Western market consumption expectations.

Third, the emergence of this phenomenon results from the interaction of three factors, individual cognitive privilege, the white-centered structure of the publishing industry, and the Orientalist collective imaginary. Together, these form a stable mechanism.

Fourth, the satirical narrative of Yellowface achieves a cultural disenchantment of the publishing industry's performative diversity discourse and white narrative hegemony, carrying significant critical value for contemporary realities.

This study still has limitations. It focuses on the Chinese laborer narrative in a single work, which limits the generality of its conclusions. Its analysis of the publishing industry lacks first hand empirical data, so the industrial dimension requires further in-depth exploration. Future research could expand to include comparative studies of multiple texts and incorporate empirical analysis from the perspective of the sociology of publishing to further enrich this topic.

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