



Trauma Writing in *The Gold Fields* by Ouyang Yu

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Abstract

The Gold Fields presents a world of suffering for the Chinese gold miners in Australia in the 19th century and reveals the evil of racial discrimination. In writing the suffering of Chinese gold miners, the author Ouyang Yu also presents their group image in both positive and negative light, praising the early Chinese settlers' hard work, courage and endurance, criticizing their ignorance, selfishness and internal strife. The trauma writing in this novel attempts to represent the missing history about early Chinese immigrants and their economic contribution in Australia which is long neglected in official history.

Subject Areas

Literature

Keywords

The Gold Fields, Ouyang Yu, Trauma, Group Image

1. Introduction to Ouyang Yu and *The Gold Fields*

Ouyang Yu, a native of Huangzhou, Hubei province, a writer living in Australia, has a master of Arts in English and Australian literature from Shanghai East China Normal University, a PhD in Australian literature from La Trobe University of Melbourne. He is a bilingual writer, poet, translator and editor of the literary magazine *Otherland*. He has published 97 original and translated Chinese works, which include *Loose: a Wild History* (2011), *Self Translation* (2013), *Fainting with Freedom* (2015), *Permanently Resident in a Strange Country* (2016). *The Eastern Slope Chronicle*, his English debut, won the 2004 Adelaide Literature Festival Literary Innovation Award. The second English novel, *The*

English Class won 2011 New South Wales Governor General Award. In the same year he was listed as Top 100 Melbournians of 2011. In 2012, he was named as the top 10 most influential overseas Chinese writers by New York Chinese magazine *Der Spiegel Monthly*.

The Gold Fields was published in 2014 with the 19th-century gold rush in Australia as the historic background when over 17,000 Chinese miners (only one female) went to Australia to seek their fortune. To escape the heavy taxes per capita on landing from the Australian local government (taxes exceeding all shipping cost from China to Australia), they landed on a city from south Australia and travelled over 800 kilometers on land to the gold rush sites. *The Gold Fields* records the harsh journey and their miserable experience in Australia. The narrative is presented in an unusual form, composing of 76 monologues with shifting narrators.

The earliest Chinese works about gold rush in the literary history of overseas Chinese can be traced back to the poetry of Angel Island in San Francisco in the 19th century. Ouyang Yu's *The Gold Fields* is the first novel about Chinese gold miners in Australia [1] (p. 4). In 1848, gold was discovered in North America, the Chinese gold miners joined the gold rush and immigrated there. Around the same time, gold was discovered in Victoria, Australia in the southern hemisphere, Chinese labor along China's coast flocked to Australia by boat, but they were discriminated against by the Australian government and the local whites. Ouyang Yu is the first one to present their suffering history in *The Gold Fields*. Trauma writing refers to works with strong sense of suffering, presenting physical, emotional, historical or cultural traumas suffered by individuals or a group of people. In 76 monologues by different voices relating their miseries in their memory, *The Gold Fields* attempts to present the individual and collective traumas in the historical migration of Chinese labor. The following part will explore the traumas and their causes in the novel.

2. The Traumas of Chinese Gold Miners in Australia

The Gold Fields is a trauma writing about Chinese gold miners' difficulty and pain of making a living in Australia. The 76 monologues by different narrators give voice to their sufferings. These poor workers from China attempted to seek gold in Australia in the temptation of the gold dream, and the first major difficulty they encountered is the long journey across the sea. Over one hundred years ago, when transportation was underdeveloped, it was so difficult to sail from poor and backward China to distant Australia. The following is a description about the long desperate voyage in the monologue "I am Not Me":

All the passengers on our boat are from Taishan. I am the most pathetic, and in order to pay for the boat trip, my house and land were sold. Along the way had it not been for the hope of gold to support me, I could have died. Several died on the voyage, rolled over in bedding and put into the water, just a slide from the side of the boat, a big splash. [...] The sea is a

ready grave. Every wave in my eyes, is like a tombstone, collecting and smashing instantaneously. [2] (p. 6)

After the perilous voyage and they finally landed, then more disasters ensued since they had to land on South Australia to avoid the heavy taxes, which forced them to embark on an odyssey to get to the gold fields. One narrator describes, “some died on the journey before seeing the gold. Along the way, as everyone rushed to the gold mine, the dead were buried by digging a pit by the roadside. Our tears were crying dry” [2] (p. 168).

The above description shows the great miseries of Chinese workers on their way to Australia, which is the cry of despair in the plight of poverty. Compared with the perilous voyage, harsh environment and difficult living conditions, ethnic discrimination they suffered on the foreign land is even more distressing. Their gold dream is disillusioned, as one laments, “life is but a bitter sea of sorrows, but we try to get to the other side of the sea. The other side is also a bitter sea too, though it is supposed to be sweet by the people across the sea at the opposite side” [2] (p. 212).

The spiritual trauma of Chinese workers over racial discrimination is revealed in the novel. In the gold fields, they were disdained and bullied by the whites. They sighed, “our Chinese workers have bad luck, we are bullied everywhere we go. Only mine tailings are allowed, where only gold sands can be picked. Because our hometown is poor, even gold sands from overseas are valuable and fine gold sand grains are stronger than copper coins” [2] (p. 167). The Chinese camps were often looted by white men, their gold was robbed and some Chinese were killed, but the law did not punish the looters [2] (pp. 201-202). Local Australian newspapers call the Chinese to rush for gold in Australia a “peaceful invasion” [2] (p. 74). They called the Chinese were inferior people and the white authorities drove away more than 2000 Chinese workers in the Buckland River gold field, killing three Chinese miners. When one Chinese worker was admitted to a mental hospital, the white doctor believed that he was possessed by demon and needed to be chained because he once read a newspaper report about the Chinese: his yellow skin fully proved that he had carried the color of disease since birth, and if such a race was allowed to spread in Australia, the clean continent would be polluted.

Deemed as inferior race, they suffered from legal discrimination. The local government levied heavy taxes on them with the purpose to stop the large flooding in of Chinese immigrants. The worse and more insidious law is that no Chinese was allowed to take his wife to Australia, and Chinese women were not allowed entry into Australia because the government was afraid of Chinese women giving birth to children, and if many Chinese were born in Australia, the color of Australia would be changed. Under such barbaric law, the spiritual pain of the Chinese gold miners is revealed in the novel. The early gold miners experienced great loneliness, separated from their family, no hope to reunite with their family in Australia and yet unable to return home with their broken gold

dream. Since gold miners who came to Australia could not take their wives and were discriminated to marry local women, they suffered from sexual repression. Besides, they came to an alien country with food, living habits and cultural customs very different from China. Due to language and cultural barriers, unable to communicate with the local people, they suffered from cultural and psychological loneliness in a heterogeneous cultural context. In the nineteenth century, the Chinese in the foreign world were like a lonely boat in the sea.

3. Group Images of Chinese Gold Miners

Besides the traumas of overseas Chinese in Australia, the novel also draws complex group image of Chinese workers. The novel can be regarded as a polyphonic narrative, composing of 76 monologues in the first-person narrative voice by characters of different ages and backgrounds, relating their miseries and survival stories, and thus a vivid group image is presented: tenacity, wisdom, diligence and persistent pursuit of a better life. More than a hundred years ago, in the age of underdeveloped transportation, many Chinese risked their lives and travelled thousands of miles to the southern hemisphere to try their fortune. Poor and humble, they were fighting hard to improve their life. Though the local whites regard the Chinese as inferior nation, one Chinese miner said: “You may disdain me and laugh at me, and take me looking strange and ugly, dressing ugly, but you know, I can shoulder very heavy burden, I can grow vegetables which you foreigners have never seen and never eaten. I never felt that being poor is contemptible. I am poor, but I am a person, I have a pair of hands and I could make a living with my own hands” [2] (p. 53). This is a Chinese voice demanding equality and respect. The survival stories from so many narrative voices are admirable, showing the toughness of Chinese people. *The Gold Fields* also presents the ugliness of the Chinese miners: their selfish ignorance and internal strife over interest. For example, Chinese miners did not follow the customary practice in gold mining, not buying gold license, not properly occupying a place by erecting a flag to announce as their territory but sneaking in such matter. Chinese miners were often in conflicts and even killed each other. There is a section of the novel with the dead man saying, “I was killed by my compatriot, and that’s the matter. What else to say? We people killing each other, this is the sorrow of our people. It’s like a suicide in a national sense.” In the group image of Chinese gold miners, Ouyang Yu explores the reason for their traumas, their suffering not only coming from the evils of racial discrimination, but from their own selfishness, ignorance and numbness [3] (p. 100).

4. Conclusion

The Gold Fields is the first Chinese Australian novel about the neglected history of early overseas Chinese gold miners in Australia. The novel is written in an unusual form, 76 monologues relating their miseries and spiritual pains in an alien and racist cultural context. It could be regarded as Ouyang Yu’s trauma

studies of early overseas Chinese in Australia, and it also presents a rich study of the group image of Chinese people, praising their toughness to survive on a foreign land and exploring the inner reason for the cause of traumas. Current studies of *The Gold Fields* are rare and mainly focus on the narratological studies and postcolonial studies, and there is not yet trauma studies of the novel. It is hoped that the interpretation of trauma writing in the novel will contribute to the disclosure of the historic sufferings of early Chinese labor in Australia in the 19th century and facilitate a better understanding of this novel.

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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