

# Reimagining China's Colonial Encounters: Hybridity in Stephen Fung's *Tai Chi Zero* and R.F. Kuang's *The Poppy War* Trilogy

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## Abstract:

This essay considers the unique potential of speculative generic conventions to reimagine China's late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century colonial encounters in fiction and film. It explores how Stephen Fung's film *Tai Chi Zero* (2012) and R.F. Kuang's *The Poppy War* novels (2018-2020) investigate the possibilities and limitations of hybridity, in both form and culture, to reimagine history. These works mobilize formal hybridity to address themes of transculturation under colonialism. The texts reinterpret generic tropes and draw on alternate technologies to explore the ambivalences of colonial mimicry, decolonization, and hybridity, connecting longstanding debates within Chinese intellectual history about modernization and development with broader postcolonial discourse. By bringing Chinese-language and English-language speculative traditions into dialogue, this essay highlights the ways creators are reevaluating modern Chinese history and the role technology has played in China's development.

**Keywords:** postcolonial, hybridity, mimicry, *shanzhai*, *wuxia*, steampunk, silkpunk, grimdark, alternate history, speculative fiction

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Even as contemporary China has become a world power, accounts of nineteenth and early twentieth century colonial incursions remain significant to narratives of modern Chinese history. Confronted with threats of colonization from the West and Japan, China faced a dilemma: how could the nation incorporate foreign ideas and technologies without losing its own cultural identity? Chinese intellectuals

debated conservative nativism, total Westernization, and everything in between.<sup>1</sup> Explorations of this traumatic period and its aftermath pervade modern Chinese literature and film, sparking extensive scholarly analysis on the relationship between history, literature, trauma, and memory.<sup>2</sup> Expanding on these themes, this essay considers the unique potential of speculative generic conventions to reimagine China's late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century colonial encounters in fiction and film.<sup>3</sup>

Speculative fiction provides fertile ground for meditation on empire and its aftermath. Here I use Marek Oziewicz's definition of "speculative fiction", referring to "a super category for all genres that deliberately depart from imitating 'consensus reality' of everyday experience," including "fantasy, science fiction, and horror, but also their derivatives, hybrids, and cognate genres." Departure from "consensus reality" allow these genres expanded discursive possibilities. Seo-young Chu, for example, describes science fiction as a form of "high intensity mimesis" with the "capacity to perform the massively complex representational and epistemological work necessary to render cognitively estranging referents available both for representation and for understanding" (7). Recent scholarship has demonstrated that imperialism and colonialism were key to science fiction's emergence as a genre and remain thematically significant to the genre today.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, the subversive possibilities of speculative genres as tools of postcolonial critique have become more apparent as contemporary Anglophone speculative literary communities grow more ethnically and generically diverse, drawing inspiration from the histories and mythologies of non-Western or marginalized societies.<sup>5</sup> This contradictory relationship between speculative fiction and colonialism holds true within Chinese literary tradition, as demonstrated by Nathaniel Isaacson and Lorenzo Andolfatto's arguments that late-Qing science fiction and utopian fiction (respectively) can be understood as consequence of and proving ground for China's turn-of-the-

1 For detailed discussion of Qing and Republican China's ambivalent relationship with Westernization, see Hutters.

2 See, for example, Berry; Wang.

3 Portions of this essay were presented at conferences hosted by the American Comparative Literature Association (2021), Duke University (2020), the Historical Society for Twentieth-Century China (2020), the Society for Cinema and Media Studies (2017), and Wabash College (2017), and I am grateful to the organizers, panelists, and audience members for their support and suggestions. I am also grateful to Jeffrey Gower, Guangyi Li, Lorraine Krall McCrary, Karen Quandt, Adriel Trott, and the anonymous reviewer for their feedback on written drafts of this essay and to R.F. Kuang and Harper Collins UK for providing access to an advanced reader copy of *The Burning God*.

4 See Csicsery-Ronay; Kerslake; Rieder, *Colonialism*.

5 See Attebery; Langer; Okorafor.

century colonial modernity. Isaacson's observation that late-Qing science fiction writers attempted to turn "the discursive knives of genres associated with empire [...] against their wielders" (2-3) illuminates a precursor to the transgressive, postcolonial, and anti-colonial explorations of speculative fiction today.

A comparative review of scholarship on postcolonial Anglophone speculative fiction points to hybridity as a common theme. Such hybridity includes not only the authors' identities and the cultural traditions they incorporate, but also the stylistic elements and generic conventions that these works deploy and the cognitive outlooks they depict. Attebery conceptualizes such hybridity vis-a-vis the verbal techniques of the cultural "contact zone," which, quoting historian Mary Louise Pratt, include "[a]utoethnography, transculturation, critique, collaboration, bilingualism, mediation, parody, denunciation, imaginary dialogue, vernacular expression" (Pratt 4, quoted in Attebery 175). These forms of literary engagement all open new avenues for political commentary and new possibilities for speculative fiction:

Each of these strategies of indirection and redirection allows the writer to bridge a cultural divide while still maintaining a degree of autonomy. Each involves appropriating the forms of the dominant society in order to critique its structures of power and meaning. In a sense, genre itself becomes a meeting place, a contact zone." (Attebery 175)

Scholars of postcolonial Anglophone speculative fiction have noted the creative power of this hybridity. Betsy Huang, for example, highlights how incorporating speculative elements as part of a larger "generic troubling" allows Asian American authors to expand "a representational vocabulary that is still very much limited by a set of conventionalized clichés and stereotypes" (3). Jessica Langer similarly concludes that postcolonial science fiction, through incorporating "narrative and formal elements specific to each writer's cultural heritage" successfully subverts the generic conventions and colonial tropes of science fiction, "hybridizes them, parodies them and/or mimics them against the grain in play of Bhabhian masquerade" (4). In addition to new artistic possibilities, the above-mentioned techniques of hybridity also expand speculative fiction's cognitive outlook, reconceptualizing the relationship between the hegemonic Western technoscientific outlook and what Grace L. Dillon describes as "Indigenous scientific literacies," namely "those practices used by indigenous native people to manipulate the natural environment in order to improve existence in areas including medicine, agriculture,

and sustainability” (25). Though Dillon refers specifically to the Indigenous societies of North America, her larger point about speculative fiction’s ability to reimagine dominant historical narratives and discourses of progress can be applied to colonized and marginalized societies more broadly. Taken together, these studies demonstrate that Anglophone speculative fiction (like Late-Qing science fiction) increasingly weaponizes multiple layers of hybridity to turn the genre against itself, highlighting increasingly diverse subjectivities, cognitive outlooks, and political concerns. Thus, speculative fiction has proven an effective mechanism and example of decolonization.

Given this legacy, speculative generic conventions provide a useful lens for reconsidering China’s colonial encounters. In this article I consider how Stephen Fung’s film *Tai Chi Zero* (*Taiji zhi ling kaishi* 太极之零开始, 2012) and R.F. Kuang’s *The Poppy War* (2018-2020) novels investigate the powers and limitations of hybridity, in both form and culture, to reimagine history. Echoing Caroline Levine’s strategic formalist approach, which brings attention to “collisions” between aesthetic and social forms (16), I show how these works mobilize formal hybridity to address themes of transculturation under colonialism. I argue that the texts reinterpret generic tropes and draw on alternate technologies to explore the ambivalences of colonial mimicry, decolonization, and hybridity, connecting longstanding debates within Chinese intellectual history about modernization and development with broader postcolonial discourse. I situate the various alternatives outlined by each text in the context of both late-Qing discourse on reform and contemporary postcolonial scholarship, concluding that both texts articulate a tentative hybridity. By bringing Chinese-language and English-language speculative traditions into dialogue, this essay highlights the ways creators are reevaluating modern Chinese history and the role technology has played in China’s development.

### **Colonial Mimicry and Shanzhai Hybridity in *Tai Chi Zero***

Hong Kong director Stephen Fung’s film *Tai Chi Zero* reimagines China’s encounter with the West at the turn of the twentieth century. The film’s protagonist, Luchan (Jayden Yuan), is loosely based on Yang Luchan (1779-1872), founder of Yang-style Tai Chi, although the film takes substantial liberties with historical fact. In the film, Luchan, a martial arts prodigy, fights in the Boxer Rebellion (1899-1901) nearly thirty years after the historical Yang Luchan’s death. In *Tai Chi Zero*, Luchan’s martial arts abilities come at the expense of his life force, so he must master Chen-style Tai Chi to avoid an early death. In Chen Village he is met with hostility, exacerbated by the village’s own colonial crisis. Zijing (Eddie Peng Yu-

Yen), a young man fostered in the village and educated in England, has recently returned as the British East India Company's representative. When the villagers resist the Company's plan to build a railroad,<sup>6</sup> Zijing and his British accomplices attack with a monstrous steam-powered weapon. Luchan, in his quest to learn Tai Chi, helps the villagers battle the British forces, destroying the weapon and saving the day. The saga repeats to similar effect in the sequel, *Tai Chi Hero* (*Taiji yingxiong jieqi* 太极英雄崛起, 2012), also directed by Fung.

The main conflict of *Tai Chi Zero* is not only between tradition and modernity, as Kenneth Chan convincingly argues (25), but also between mimicry and hybridity as responses to colonial incursion. This conflict plays out on the levels of both plot and style. The film critiques what Homi K. Bhabha describes as colonial mimicry, "the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as a subject of a difference that is *almost the same, but not quite*" (126, italics in original). Although Bhabha describes such mimicry as "at once resemblance and menace" (127) that "articulates those disturbances of cultural, racial, and historical difference that menace the narcissistic demand of colonial authority" (129), the film remains skeptical of mimicry's subversive potential, advocating instead for *shanzhai* 山寨 (copycat) hybridity.

*Tai Chi Zero's* critique of colonial mimicry centers on Zijing, whose dress, speech, goals, and relationship with technology are all characteristic of Bhabha's colonial mimic man, the "*almost the same, but not quite*" Anglicized colonial Other. In ridiculous contrast to his neighbors, Zijing dresses like an English dandy, complete with breeches and a cravat. He speaks English whenever possible and brings a variety of Western contraptions in hope of convincing the conservative villagers that he holds the way to the future. A plan to dazzle the village elders with a display of electric lights literally backfires when the wires catch fire, leaving the villagers even more skeptical of the planned railroad.

Zijing's attempt to convince his fiancée, Yuniang (Angelababy), daughter of the village Tai Chi master, further highlight the film's critique of mimicry. Zijing initially seems successful: Yuniang wears a Western-style gown and slippers, listens to Zijing's phonograph, ballroom dances, and even tries introducing her friends to coffee. However, the friends remain unimpressed. One spits out the drink, declaring it "more bitter than medicine." Attempting to defend Zijing's project of Westernization, Yuniang informs her friend that where coffee is concerned, the bitterer the taste, the higher the quality, but even she cannot swallow the offending

6 In *Tai Chi Zero*, the railroad is the embodiment of colonial threat. For discussion of how the train's symbolic significance has transformed over time in Chinese literature and film, see the articles in this issue by Isaacson, Li, and Sun.



beverage without a slight grimace. Yuniang's imperfect mimicry of Zijing (who himself attempts to mimic the British) leaves her one step further from almost-but-not-quite Anglicization, pointing to the ridiculousness of such a goal.

At Zijing's failure to convince the villagers to accept the railroad, the British respond with force, further emphasizing Zijing's status as colonial subject and mimicry's limitation as a viable strategy for mitigating colonialism. The Company sends in Zijing's former lover, Clare Heathrow, to replace him. The film codes Clare (played, ironically, by multi-racial Malaysian-American model Mandy Lieu) as British by her fluency in English, her Western-style men's clothing, and especially her pale skin and curly light brown hair. She marches into town accompanied by a regiment of soldiers. When the villagers attempt to defend themselves with martial arts, Clare reveals her secret weapon, a steam-belching behemoth that lays down rails, flattening any obstacle in its path. The contraption is named Troy, an unsubtle nod to the threat of foreign technology. Ultimately Clare, not Zijing, is granted the weaponry necessary to advance the colonial project. Despite Zijing's best efforts to mimic his British employers, he will always remain Chinese. In fact, the British colonial project depends on Zijing's transition remaining partial, "the effect of a flawed colonial mimesis, in which to be Anglicized is emphatically not to be English" (Bhabha 128). This "flawed mimesis" is emphasized by the bare torsos of the hairy, muscular, white men shoveling coal in the bowels of Troy, contrasting with Zijing's foppish imitation of a British gentleman, and playing into Orientalist tropes of emasculated Chinese men.

While the film critiques Zijing's attempted mimicry of the British, it also questions a strictly isolationist approach. As a foundling child lacking the Chen surname, Zijing was bullied and banned from learning Chen-style Tai Chi, revealing the homogenous and isolationist bent of the village. Alienated, Zijing studied engineering in England, and his stubborn insistence on mimicking English behavior even after returning to China is presented as an attempt to prove himself to his former neighbors. This portrayal of Western learning as a consolation prize for those denied a traditional Chinese education mirrors the plight of late-Qing intellectuals marginalized by China's civil service examination system.<sup>7</sup> In the film,

7 For example, Yan Fu (1854-1921), who became "the key mediator between Chinese and Western ideas in the period immediately after 1895" (Huters 45), studied English and navigation as a teen rather than pursuing a traditional Chinese education, likely due to financial difficulties. He then continued his technical training in England. Although it was precisely this training that allowed him to translate influential foreign texts into Chinese and call for more extensive reform following China's 1895 defeat in the first Sino-Japanese War, Yan Fu expressed feelings of inadequacy at his lack of traditional Chinese learning and four-time failure to pass the imperial exam. See Huters 47.

Tai Chi, rather than Confucian classics, stands in for traditional Chinese learning, and thus the local alternative to Western technoscience. Just as Chinese intellectuals eventually questioned the exclusionary nature of the civil service exam, the film condemns Chen Village's stagnation and protection of local knowledge (Tai Chi) against all outsiders, even a helpless orphan child. The tragedy of Zijing's misguided attempts to navigate an exclusionary knowledge tradition raises the question of how society can safely incorporate the alien and evolve without compromising local identity, touching on the very debates that puzzled late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century Chinese intellectuals.

The film continues to probe the nuances of incorporating the alien through Luchan's character arc; in contrast to Zijing's earnest colonial mimicry, Luchan engages in playful, subversive *shanzhai* hybridity. While *shanzhai* (literally "mountain fortress") historically referred to the realm of Song dynasty bandits, since the early 2000s its meaning has expanded to encompass "all Chinese counterfeit products and to the attitude of their producers towards authority" (Landsberger 217). Chinese author Yu Hua has noted the term's subversive potential, remarking that it "has given the word 'imitation' a new meaning, and at the same time the limits to the original sense of 'imitation' have been eroded, allowing room for it to acquire different shades of meaning: counterfeiting, infringement, deviations from the standard, mischief, and caricature" (181). Zhou Zhiqiang and Andrew Chubb have observed the resonances between *shanzhai* and *nalaizhuyi* 拿来主义 (grabism), a neologism coined by author Lu Xun in a 1934 essay that called for a "discerning and pragmatic approach to the 'grabbing' of foreign things" (Chubb 263), which Chubb, in turn, relates to postcolonial understandings of hybridity, "the blurred boundaries between purportedly separate cultures" (262).

Even as *Tai Chi Zero* critiques colonial mimicry, I argue that it advocates for the playfulness and practicality of *shanzhai* through both plot and form. The film draws a clear distinction between Zijing's affected mimicry of the British and Luchan's preternatural talent for imitating martial arts moves. Luchan's arrival to Chen Village is met by the villagers' refusal to teach Chen-style Tai Chi to an outsider. One by one, the villagers beat up Luchan, until he is even defeated by a preteen girl half his size. Luchan persists, encouraged by a nameless "laborer" (Tony Ka Fai Leung), who suggests that Luchan use his talent for imitation to turn the villagers' own moves against them. The laborer turns out to be the village Tai Chi master in disguise, loosely based on the historical martial arts practitioner Chen Changxing (1771–1853). Through this strategy of imitation, technically forbidden but unofficially encouraged, Luchan finally wins a fight. His eventual triumph after

a series of humiliating defeats can be viewed allegorically as a reframing of China's "Century of Humiliation" from the vantage point of China's current prosperity and strength.

This allegorical reading becomes more obvious when Luchan turns his talent for imitation against the British. He teams up with Changxing and Yuniang to steal Troy's schematics and reverse engineer its destruction. In true *shanzhai* spirit, the attack relies on the heroes' stolen, incomplete knowledge of the British machine and their own martial arts training, as they fight the British operators, dodging clanking gears and hot steam vents. By using a crude copy of the machine's plans to destroy it, Luchan and Yuniang literalize the menace that Bhabha finds inherent in colonial mimicry (which Zijing, in his attempted Anglicization, fails to grasp), embodying the playful ingenuity of the *shanzhai* ideal. Troy's destruction spurs further attack by British soldiers armed with heavy artillery, and this time the whole village must rally, using martial arts to combat their technologically superior foe. In a moment of fantastic comedic spectacle, the villagers use Tai Chi to animate fruits and vegetables into deadly projectiles. Through special effects, these everyday objects visually mimic the British bullets. Once again, irreverent imitation of foreign technology combined with traditional knowledge saves the day.

*Tai Chi Zero* gestures at and then sidesteps the ethical ambiguity of *shanzhai*, which has alternately been decried as intellectual property theft and celebrated as a form of Chinese creativity and resistance to foreign economic domination (Kloet et. al 23-28). In the film's denouement, the village council condemns Luchan's "theft" of the Chen-style Tai Chi, nodding to international critiques of *shanzhai*. Changxing comes to Luchan's defense, noting that the supposed "theft" not only saved the village from the British, but also took place in broad daylight, with the villagers themselves demonstrating the moves in their bouts with Luchan. This defense highlights both the pragmatism and creativity inherent in *shanzhai* and alludes to its ability to "disrupt taken-for-granted understandings of 'original/authentic' and 'copy/ fake' [...] by revealing their roots in a global legal-economic system of exclusion and inequality" (Kloet et. al 26). Though the council remains unconvinced by Changxing's argument, Luchan is nevertheless spared punishment when Yuniang agrees to marry him, thereby transforming him from outsider to insider. By relying on this technicality, the film glosses over Luchan's "crime" (and thus any condemnation of *shanzhai*) with a wink and a nod, ultimately celebrating *shanzhai's* subversive, anticolonial potential. Luchan is begrudgingly accepted into Chen Village in a way that Zijing never was, and *shanzhai* thus emerges as a middle road between total isolationism on the one hand and uncritical colonial mimicry on



the other. The film reveals *shanzhai* as a solution to Qing China's colonial dilemma and a celebration of contemporary China's ingenuity and role as a major world player.

### Generic Hybridity

This reading of *Tai Chi Zero* as a vehicle for articulating a China-specific *shanzhai* hybridity is further supported by the way the film playfully engages in generic hybridity, pointing to the way “aesthetic and political forms,” in the words of Levine, “emerge as comparable patterns that operate on a common plane” (16). *Tai Chi Zero* is what Wei Yang describes as an “sf-themed” [science fiction themed] film, “in which sf elements coexist with elements of other genres and are invariably used to support the purposes of these other genres” (133). By combining, reinterpreting, and subverting elements of other speculative genres, namely *wuxia* 武侠 and steampunk, *Tai Chi Zero* compounds each genre's transgressive potential for exploring colonialism's legacies. This generic hybridity reinforces the film's presentation of *shanzhai* as a mechanism of anticolonial resistance.

*Wuxia* and steampunk both fall under Oziewicz's “speculative fiction” umbrella through their departure from “consensus reality.” *Wuxia* is a genre of Chinese literature and film that “portrays the warrior *xia* and his or her style of sword fighting action as well as the themes and principles of *xia* (chivalry or knight-errantry)” (Teo 4). *Wuxia* is speculative in that it often incorporates supernatural elements traditionally found in *chuanqi* 传奇 (tales of the marvelous), its premodern literary antecedent (Hamm 15). Steampunk, meanwhile, is a subgenre of science fiction originating in William Gibson's and Bruce Sterling's alternate history novel, *The Difference Engine* (1990), which imagines “Babbage's calculating machine start[ing] an information technology revolution in Victorian England” (Rusch 91). Both genres, as participants in what John Rieder terms the “mass cultural genre system,” enjoy extensive commercial popularity while remaining somewhat marginalized within prestigious literary circles. Like other speculative genres, both open discursive possibilities beyond realism. *Wuxia's* transgressive potential centers on the genre's typical *jianghu* 江湖 (literally “rivers and lakes”) setting “at the geographic and moral margins of settled society” (Hamm 17), its frequent depiction of “scenarios of national crisis and themes of cultural identity” (25), and its mediation of “China's encounter with modernity and its emergence as a nation” (Sarkar 166). Steampunk, which features visual markers such as a Victorian context, “a nostalgic interpretation of imagined history,” and technofantasy (Perschon 127-128), has the potential to reevaluate Victorian-era imperialism and rewrite science

fiction's colonialist past, even as it sometimes reproduces the same Orientalism from which it seeks to distance itself (Pho 127-128). Both *wuxia* and steampunk are imbued with the subversive potential to wrestle with and challenge themes of empire, and the interactions between the two sets of generic conventions in *Tai Chi Zero* only compound this potential.

Kenneth Chan notes that steampunk is an apt choice for *Tai Chi Zero* due to the film's temporal setting (late-Qing/Victorian), its articulation of alternate history (particularly one resistant to imperialism), and its retrofuturist outlook (21-23). Building on Chan's observations, I emphasize that *Tai Chi Zero* playfully and self-consciously blends conventions of *wuxia* and steampunk, animating the inherent resonances between the two genres and reinforcing the film's *shanzhai* vision. Take, for example, the "historicism" that typically marks *wuxia* (Teo 6), which overlaps with steampunk's "nostalgic interpretation of imagined history" (Perschon 127). The beginning of *Tai Chi Zero* highlights and parodies this historicism. The film opens with an eight-minute stylized black-and-white flashback sequence that could itself be a *wuxia* film in miniature, tracking beat for beat with exemplars of the genre like Chang Cheh's *One Armed Swordsman* (*Du bi dao* 独臂刀, 1967). In the flashback sequence, Luchan witnesses his mother's violent murder, pledges himself to a martial arts master, and becomes a model student, practicing diligently in his mother's memory. This tableau alerts the viewer that they are, without a doubt, watching a *wuxia* film. Moreover, the sequence's black-and-white aesthetic, exaggerated acting, and use of inter-titles instead of spoken dialogue remind the viewer that they are watching an imagined history steeped in nostalgia, paving the way for the film's later steampunk-inflected intervention.

The film further engages the resonances between *wuxia* and steampunk by playing with the genres' propensity to create visual spectacle with technology. *Wuxia* films increasingly incorporate "special effects, montage editing, and an abundance of wirework," leading to what some fans criticize as obsession with technology (S. Yu 40). Steampunk, meanwhile, relies on aestheticized technofantasy for its genre coding (Perschon 127-128), and *Tai Chi Zero* delivers through extreme closeups of gadgets, especially Troy's intricate gears and steam vents. The film's fight scenes draw parallels between each genre's use of technology. In one battle, as I have previously discussed, Tai-Chi-animated vegetable projectiles mirror British bullets through similar use of special effects. Another example is a comedic "fight scene" in which the spunky village girl who beat up Luchan (Wei Ai Xuan) challenges Troy to single combat. Her cries of "stinky monster" anthropomorphize the machine, and it appears to rise to her taunts. In fact, her challenge coincides

with the precise moment that Luchan and Yuniang gain control of the weapon. Unbeknownst to the infiltrators, their experimental attempts to steer Troy make it appear from the outside to be waking up to the girl's shouts, its limbs mirroring her fighting stance. Thus, in one visually stunning long shot of girl and machine, the film illustrates Chen Village's conflict between tradition and modernity and between East and West, playing on both *wuxia* and steampunk's stylized technofantasy.

*Tai Chi Zero* is delightfully self-aware of its appropriation of *wuxia* generic conventions. As each character is introduced, titles appear on the screen identifying not only the character's identity, but also the actor's name and real-world accomplishments in martial arts cinema or athletic competition. The cast is filled with cameos of directors, actors, athletes, and martial artists from across the Sinophone world, including a descendent of the real-life Chen Village. Comic-book-like animations are occasionally used to highlight these self-aware meta-textual moments. When Luchan collapses in the final battle, a status bar hovers over him, video-game-style, illustrating his waning life force. These self-reflective moments of parody bring the *wuxia* coding of the film into focus, forcing viewers to remember that they are watching a martial arts film, which in turn makes the departures into the steampunk genre more noticeable. This playful approach to genre echoes the film's thematic focus on *shanzhai* creativity. *Tai Chi Zero's* combination of *wuxia* and steampunk is thus a metatextual exemplar of the film's *shanzhai* ideal.

Ultimately *Tai Chi Zero* embodies *shanzhai's* pragmatism and playfulness in both plot and generic coding. Luchan's *shanzhai* hybridity rather than Zijing's colonial mimicry triumphs. Appropriating and adapting the foreign to local needs proves superior to pure mimicry, which must always fail. The film may be read allegorically in light of present-day China's national project engaging with "foreign" ideologies such as socialism or capitalism "with Chinese characteristics." *Tai Chi Zero's* juxtaposition of *wuxia* and steampunk proves key to the film's reimagining of modern Chinese history. This juxtaposition presents Chinese martial arts as an alternative to Western technology, both engaging with and subverting tropes of "techno-orientalism" that have plagued steampunk (Ho). Moreover, on an extra-textual level, *Tai Chi Zero* embodies a local *shanzhai* alternative to Hollywood science fiction film, echoing Yang's argument that "sf-themed" films "represent a particular phase in the development of Chinese sf cinema, one in which local filmmakers borrow directly from Hollywood sf but also deviate from it in significant ways, through parody, genre mixing, and other intertextual strategies" (134). By articulating a *shanzhai* ideal, both thematically and aesthetically, form

and function align in *Tai Chi Zero*, illustrating how the Chinese film industry can incorporate the visual spectacle of science fiction in ways that resonate with local audiences.

### **Critiquing Colonial Mimicry in *The Poppy War* Trilogy**

Through its hybrid aesthetic and exploration of mimicry and *shanzhai*, *Tai Chi Zero*, like many works of postcolonial science fiction, highlights the divergent ways colonized subjects can respond to colonizers' incursions. One option is to play by the colonizers' rules, engaging in the type of colonial mimicry we see in Zijing's attempt to become Anglicized. The film ultimately rejects this approach in favor of Luchan's *shanzhai* hybridity, which, as is typical of postcolonial science fiction, shows how colonized subjects can "subvert those rules and attempt to chip away at the power of the powerful" (Langer 62). However, such a neat solution relies on an oversimplified narrative of a monolithic China with a continuous history positioned against the threat of Western technoscientific modernity, neglecting the complexity of Chinese history.

In contrast, R.F. Kuang's *The Poppy War* trilogy, comprised of *The Poppy War* (2018), *The Dragon Republic* (2019), and *The Burning God* (2020), offers a more nuanced look at China's multifaceted relationship with empire. Kuang has rapidly emerged as one of the rising stars of English-language science fiction and fantasy, winning the prestigious Astounding Award for Best New Writer in 2020. *The Poppy War* trilogy is inspired by modern Chinese history, though Kuang notes that the novels' fantasy setting (an alternate-China known as Nikan) allows her to present historical trauma through a "distorted mirror" (Kuang, "Distortions" 29). The trilogy centers on protagonist Rin, an orphan raised in Nikan's impoverished south, who tests into the capital's top military academy. Partway through her training, Mugen (alternate-Japan) attacks, and war breaks out. Rin, who possesses shamanic abilities, channels the rage and fire of the Phoenix God to incinerate the Mugenese homeland in one genocidal swoop. In the aftermath, civil war and the arrival of the Hesperians (an amalgamation of Western colonial powers) present new threats. Rin is drawn into a cycle of violence and trauma. As Kuang writes:

The question the trilogy tries to answer is: how does somebody go from being an irrelevant, backwater, peasant nobody to being a megalomaniac dictator capable of killing millions of people? I've always been interested in how people become murderers or perpetrators of genocide [...] suppose this person is actually deeply empathetic and cares deeply about her friends

and the people close to her, genuinely wants to do the right thing and save people, what do you do with a character like that? How do *they* get from point A to point B of genocide? (quoted in Sondheimer, italics in original)

Sprawling over fifteen hundred pages, the trilogy is naturally able to address questions about identity, power, empire, and national development in a more nuanced way than a film like *Tai Chi Zero*, which clocks in at an hour and forty minutes. However, despite operating on a broader scale, Kuang's trilogy similarly invokes, reinterprets, and subverts speculative generic tropes to explore a tentative hybridity in the face of colonial threat, reimagining China's relationship with technology and modernization.

Kuang's trilogy makes a similar case against colonial mimicry. Just as *Tai Chi Zero* juxtaposes Zijing and Luchan to embody two possible responses to colonial threat, Kuang's trilogy sets up a similar foil between Rin and her former classmate Nezha. Whereas Rin is positioned at the margins of Nikan society – a dark-skinned, ethnic-minority, orphaned, peasant girl from the impoverished south – Nezha is the son of a wealthy, powerful northern warlord. Nezha's family attempts to overthrow Nikan's empress, ostensibly to establish a modernized, unified Republic based on the Hesperian model. Rin is initially attracted by the possibility of a new, stronger Nikan, free from the old imperial system and Mugenese invasion alike, but she grows increasingly skeptical as Nezha and his family bend over backwards to court the Hesperians as allies. In the end, their attempts to mimic and impress the foreigners remain futile, only facilitating the Hesperians' goal of conquest, just as Zijing's attempted Anglicization must always fail.

The trilogy underscores its rejection of colonial mimicry by subverting eucatastrophe, a term coined by J.R.R. Tolkien to describe what would become a trope of epic fantasy:

The eucatastrophic tale is the true form of fairy-tale, and its highest function. The consolation of fairy-stories, the joy of the happy ending: or more correctly of the good catastrophe, the sudden joyous "turn" [...] In its fairy-tale —or otherworld— setting, it is a sudden and miraculous grace: never to be counted on to recur. (384)

The climactic battle at the end of *The Dragon Republic* encourages readers familiar with epic fantasy generic conventions to expect a eucatastrophic turn. The outcome looks grim as the Empress's forces threaten to overwhelm Republican troops,



but apparent salvation arrives in the nick of time, in the form of the long-awaited Hesperian navy:

There on the seam of the horizon sailed a fleet, waves and waves of warships. Some glided over the water; some floated through the air. There were so many that they almost seemed like a mirage, endless doubles of the same row of white sails and blue flags against a brilliant sun. (Kuang, *Dragon Republic* 571)

At this “sudden joyous ‘turn’” Rin and her friends are saved from certain death, the battle is won, and it appears the nascent Republic will be allowed to flourish. However, in the next scene, the Empress reveals that she had been working all along to save Nikan from Hesperian colonizers. She insists:

“The Mugenese weren’t the real enemy.” [...] They never were. They were just poor puppets serving a mad emperor who started a war he shouldn’t have. But who gave them those ideas? Who told them they could conquer the continent?”

Blue eyes. White sails.

“I warned you about everything. I told you from the beginning. Those devils are going to destroy our world. The Hesperians have a singular vision for the future, and we’re not in it.” (Kuang, *Dragon Republic* 583)

The repetition of “white sails” and the parallelism between “blue flags” and “blue eyes” act as synecdoche for colonial violence, turning the previous scene’s apparent eucatastrophe on its head. The fleet’s arrival is not a “fleeting glimpse of joy,” but rather a promise of horrors to come, a new wave of colonial subjugation and violence. Hesperian aid comes at too high a cost: military occupation, predatory trade rights, missionary presence, and the final say in domestic decisions – in short, the types of coercion that comprised China’s “Century of Humiliation.”

*The Poppy War* trilogy not only captures many of the same debates about reform and Westernization faced by late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century Chinese intellectuals, but also adopts rhetorical and generic strategies of defamiliarization similar to those used by late-Qing science fiction writers. Isaacson elucidates such techniques in his reading of Wu Jianren’s *The New Story of the Stone* (*Xin Shitou ji* 新石头记, 1905). Wu’s sequel to Cao Xueqin’s canonical *Dream of the Red Chamber* (*Hong lou meng* 红楼梦, 1791) imagines protagonist

Jia Baoyu travelling forward in time, first to treaty-port Shanghai at the turn of the twentieth century (Wu's present) and then to an imagined, technologically advanced future China. Isaacson highlights that both halves of the novel are marked by the "defamiliarization" of science fiction, noting that everyday markers of modernity in the first half are presented as just as estranging as the fantastic utopia of the second: "From matchbooks and newspapers to the rules governing commercial insurance and boat captains, Baoyu regards much of what he encounters with a sense of wonder, skepticism, and anxiety" (Isaacson 61). Rin has a similar encounter in *The Burning God* when she infiltrates New City, a former Nikara garrison turned Hesperian military encampment. Rin experiences New City as "a punch in the face" (237), since it "felt as if a piece of Hesperia had simply been carved out and dropped whole into Nikan" (238). Like Baoyu, what Rin finds most estranging are everyday markers of Westernized modernity: architecture (glass windows and "new installations that imposed a blockish sense of order" (238)), technology (electric lights, steam-powered trams, and dirigibles), sounds ("new strains of music, awful and discordant," "too many voices speaking Hesperian, or some accented attempt at Hesperian," and "an ever-present mechanical heartbeat, its thousand machines whirring, humming, and whining without end" (244)), clothing (a woman in skirts that "arced out from her waist in the unnatural shape of an overturned tea cup" (247)), and condescending ordinances promoting propriety, righteousness, modesty, and frugality (evoking Republican China's New Life Movement). Rin describes her visceral response in science fictional terms: "She felt dizzy, disoriented, like she had been plucked off the earth and tossed adrift into an entirely different universe. She'd spent much of her life feeling like she didn't belong, but this was the first time she'd felt truly *foreign*. (239, italics in original). Rin's comparison of her experience to extraterrestrial travel echoes Chu's conceptualization of science fiction as "high intensity mimesis." In another passage, Rin uses the language of fantasy. As she breaks out in sweat, she wonders, "What was wrong with her? She had never felt a panic like this before – this low, crescendoing distress of gradual suffocation. She felt like she'd been dropped blindfolded into a fairy realm. She did not want to be here" (244-245). Here, Rin not only invokes the fantastic, but also the metaphor of suffocation, which Isaacson shows was a familiar theme in Late Qing science fiction (including *The New Story of the Stone*) even before Lu Xun's metaphorical iron house became a staple of modern Chinese literature (4).

Rin's anxiety springs not only from her sense of alienation at the foreign elements, but also from the ease with which Nikara culture had been replaced. Rin realizes that this erasure might be an even greater threat to Nikan than the

Hesperian's military might: "What if the Nikara *wanted* this future? The New City was full of Nikara residents - they had to outnumber the Hesperians five to one - and they seemed completely fine with their new arrangement. Happy, even" (245, italics in original). Even worse than the speed of the erasure is the complicity of her fellow Nikara, particularly the upper class, who seem to benefit enough from the occupation that they are willing to engage in mimicry:

The Nikara in the New City seemed to adore their new neighbors. They nodded, smiled, and saluted Hesperian soldiers as they passed. Sold Hesperian food. They – the upper class, at least – had begun to imitate Hesperian dress. Merchants, bureaucrats, and officers walked down the streets garbed in tight trousers, thick white socks pulled up to their knees, and strange coats that buttoned over their waists but draped in the back past their buttocks like duck tails. (246)

Nevertheless, Bhabha's observation that to be Anglicized is not the same as being English remains true, a fact that Rin recognizes all too well:

But despite all their pretensions and efforts, they were not the Hesperians' equals. They couldn't be, by virtue of their race. This Rin noticed soon enough - it was clear from the way the Nikara bowed and scraped, nodding obsequiously while the Hesperians ordered them about. This wasn't a surprise. This was the Hesperians' idea of a natural social order. (246)

In other words:

They want to erase us. It's their divine mandate. They want to make us better to *improve* us, by turning us into a mirror of themselves. The Hesperians understand culture as a straight line [...], One starting point, one destination. They are at the end of the line. They loved the Mugenese because they came close, but any culture or state that diverges is necessarily inferior. *We* are inferior, until we speak, dress, act, and worship just like them. (245)

Thus, it becomes clear to Rin that attempts to achieve national salvation through mimicking the colonizer will fail not only due to loss of local identity, but even more fundamentally, due to the impossibility of convincing the Hesperians to view

the Nikara as equals.

The *Poppy War* trilogy goes a step further than *Tai Chi Zero*, refracting its critique of colonial mimicry through a social Darwinist lens, echoing discourse common not only among colonizers, but also deeply internalized by prominent Qing thinkers.<sup>8</sup> Rin's interactions with a Hesperian missionary scientist, Sister Petra, reveal this mindset, laying bare what Jessica Langer describes as "the inherent contradiction" of the "colonialist worldview," which "lionized the scientific method and its results [...] at the same time as it imposed on indigenous peoples its own patently unscientific system of spirituality" (127). Sister Petra "scientifically" studies Rin to determine the source of her shamanic powers, which the Hesperians see as a flaw. Sister Petra explains to Rin "It's no fault of you own. The Nikara haven't evolved to our level yet. This is simple science; the proof is in your physiognomy" (Kuang, *Dragon Republic* 275). Sister Petra then offers a litany of Orientalist, social Darwinist stereotypes:

Since your eyes are smaller, you see within a smaller periphery than we do." Petra pointed to the diagrams as she explained. "Your skin has a yellowish tint that indicates malnutrition or an unbalanced diet. Now see your skull shapes. Your brains, which we know to be an indicator of your rational capacity, are by nature smaller. [...] The Nikara are a particularly herdlike nation. You listen well, but independent thought is difficult for you. You reach scientific conclusions centuries after we discover them. [...] But worry not. In time, all civilizations will become perfect in the eyes of the Maker. That is [my] task." (276)

Sister Petra's racist monologue interprets social Darwinism through the lens of divine purpose, dressed up as objective science, mirroring the Orientalist discourse that in fact circulated among both late-Qing intellectuals and foreign colonizers. Under such dehumanizing rhetoric, Kuang's novels demonstrate, colonial mimicry cannot pave the way to autonomy or liberation.

### **Grimdark Ambivalence and Silkpunk Hybridity**

With its larger scale, *The Poppy War* trilogy pushes past simplistic understandings of the relationship between colonizer and colonized, recognizing China's own imperialist history and the challenges of decolonization. I argue that the trilogy

8 For a discussion of the history of Darwinian ideas in China, see Jin.

achieves this degree of nuance through anachronistic juxtaposition and generic hybridity, drawing especially on new Anglophone fantasy subgenres like grimdark and silkpunk to explore the ambivalences of anticolonial resistance.

The *Poppy War* trilogy operates within the larger trend of “gritty” fantasy, sometimes known as “grimdark.” The grimdark aesthetic, popularized by authors such as George R.R. Martin and Joe Abercrombie, is characterized by “The dirt physical and moral. The attention to unpleasant detail. The greyness of the characters. The cynicism of the outlook” (Abercrombie). Some consider the genre “excessively and unnecessarily dark, cynical, violent, brutal without purpose and beyond the point of ridiculousness,” but Abercrombie defends it as a response to generic conventions of high fantasy (in the vein of J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis):

Gritty fantasy is a reaction to and a counterbalancing of a style of fantasy in which life is clean, meaningful, and straightforward, and the coming of the promised king really does solve all social problems, and there are often magical solutions to the horrors – like death, illness, and crippling wounds – that plague us in the real world.

Kuang similarly notes that “going dark was a logical plot choice, not an attempt to shock the reader” (“Distortions” 52) and that the trilogy “doesn't employ violence for the sake of aesthetic, but historical accuracy” (“R.F. Kuang”). Of note are the chapters based on the 1937 Nanjing Massacre and the brutal human experiments conducted by the Japanese Imperial Army's Unit 731 in northeastern China during the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945). These extensively researched, graphic scenes of colonial violence offer a sobering critique of idealized high fantasy novels that glosses over the brutality of war and empire in the name of chivalric ideals, attempting to rectify what Kuang describes as “the ongoing erasure of sexual violence against women who aren't white across military history” (quoted in Sondheimer).

Moreover, Kuang's trilogy uses the moral ambivalences inherent to grimdark to complicate oversimplified historical narratives. Through a condensed timeline and fantasy setting, Kuang's historical reimagining juxtaposes events and ideologies that, in reality, developed over decades, forcing readers to draw parallels among colonial traumas and cycles of violence. For example, in Kuang's imagined chronology Rin encounters in quick succession two foreign scientists intent on studying her shamanic abilities. One is Sister Petra, described above. The other is a Mugenese medic, Dr. Shiro, based on Shirō Ishii, commander of Japan's Unit 731.



Rin begins conflating the two traumatic encounters:

Petra's touch [...] felt like a dark stain, like insects burrowing their way under Rin's skin no matter how hard she tried to claw them out. Her memories mixed together; confusing, indistinguishable. Petra's hands became Shiro's hands. Petra's room became Shiro's laboratory" (*Dragon Republic* 238).

Rin experiences both encounters as equally violating, emphasizing that Petra's social Darwinist rhetoric and Shiro's brutality exist on the same continuum of epistemic violence. The novels similarly draw comparisons to Nikan's own history of imperialist violence, particularly toward peoples indigenous to the neighboring steppe and island regions. Rin, addressing a Nikara compatriot, makes the analogy explicit:

If the Hesperians are so *innately better*, then the next rung on the ladder is pale-skinned northerners like you, and the Speerlies [the island ethnic minority group from which Rin is descended] are sitting on the bottom [...] And then, by your logic, it's fine that the Empire turned us into slaves. It's fine that they wiped us off the map, and that the official histories mention us only in footnotes. It's only natural (*Burning God* 271, italics in original).

This juxtaposition, underscored by Rin's own position at the margins of Nikara society, complicates the binary between colonizer and colonized, challenging the myth of a unified, monolithic Nikan.

The trilogy draws on the moral ambiguity of the grimdark aesthetic to explore the complexities of decolonization, critiquing not only uncritical colonial mimicry, but also Rin's pursuit of revenge and violent resistance at all costs. Rin's transformation from helpless peasant to all-powerful shaman mirrors a pattern of "critical ambivalence" that literary scholar Stephen Hong Sohn detects across Asian American speculative fiction. In this pattern:

One must find a way to act when faced with disparate choices; to dominate or protect, to damage or repair. For the Asian American subject who attains newfound skills or abilities through becoming something "else," whether she is now a ghost, cyborg, or vampire, the question becomes: How does one wield influence when one has been subjected to the damaging and

horrifying regimes of power?” (4)

In such situations, the superhuman protagonist is given a choice, either to “employ astounding skills and enhancements for the express protection of others, ones deemed to be in danger of being exploited, wounded, or even killed” (4) or to “amplify oppressive dynamics” (3). In Rin’s case, she uses her shamanic abilities to protect civilians, particularly the southern peasants who are too poor and uneducated for anyone else with power to care about. However, as Kuang notes, “[the] whole trilogy has been about cycles of violence, abuse, and responses to trauma” (Liptak), and Rin embodies the full range of moral ambivalence that Sohn describes. Though she uses her shamanic powers to defend the oppressed from their oppressors, she also replicates many of those same oppressive acts of violence against civilians. In order to live with herself after perpetrating a genocidal shamanic attack on Mugen (echoing atomic bomb imagery), she compartmentalizes and dehumanizes her enemy, repeating the same philosophy the Mugenese used to justify their invasion of Nikara:

She burned away the part of her that would have felt remorse for those deaths, because if she felt them, if she felt each and every single one of them, it would have torn her apart. The lives were so many that she ceased to acknowledge them for what they were. Those weren’t lives (*Poppy War* 504).

Trauma begets more trauma, and violence more violence. In the course of a lengthy civil war, Rin leads an army of southern peasants against her growing list of enemies (renegade Mugenese soldiers, the elitist northern warlord controlling the Republic, and Hesperian colonizers). Despite her best intentions, she finds herself applying the same bloody calculus against her own people, knowing that she can only win with “thousands of bodies”:

And if a thousand fell, she would throw another thousand at [them], and then another. No matter what the power asymmetry, war on this scale was a numbers game, and she had lives to spare. That was the single advantage that the south had against the Hesperians - that there were so, so many of them (*Dragon Republic* 653).

Rin concludes that the only way to save her country is to “burn down [the] world”

(654), both literally (using her shamanic powers) and figuratively (by uplifting the peasant masses over both foreign invaders and the country's own privileged aristocracy). However, as Rin gains victory over her enemies, she leaves a trail of destruction and starvation in her wake, turning from her people's savior to their butcher.

It is only at the trilogy's climax that Rin fully recognizes the need to break this cycle. Poised to wield "unprecedented power, unimaginable and unmatched power capable of rewriting the script of history," she realizes that exerting such force would only reproduce "patterns of cruelty and dehumanization and oppression and trauma" (612). Ultimately, she decides to "write herself out of history" (612), sacrificing herself to allow Nezha and the new Republic the opportunity to rebuild the country from the ground up. On the one hand, Rin's decision seems like complete, hopeless capitulation to the Hesperian colonizers:

They [Rin and Nezha] both knew that Nikan's only path forward was through Hesperia - through a cruel, supercilious, exploitative entity that would certainly try to remold and reshape them, until the only vestiges of Nikara culture that remained lay buried in the past. (617)

However, despite this grim outlook, the novel also allows a third possibility, a hybrid path threading the needle between total capitulation on the one hand and pyrrhic resistance on the other. "Nikan had survived occupation before. If Nezha played his cards right - if he bent where he needed to, if he lashed back at just the right time - then they might survive occupation again" (617). Nezha reaches this climactic realization on the trilogy's final page, and the details of this compromise remains frustratingly beyond the novels' scope. As Kuang freely admits, "*The Burning God* ends by asking whether an alternate future was possible for China. But that's all I can offer—questions. There are no easy answers to be found in counterfactuals" (quoted in Liptak).

Nevertheless, by considering the trilogy's generic hybridity along with its portrayals of technology, the reader can detect clues as to what that imagined future might entail. Kuang's trilogy incorporates aspects of "silkpunk," a term author Ken Liu invented to describe the hybrid aesthetic of his ongoing *Dandelion Dynasty* quartet. Liu writes:

Like steampunk, silkpunk is a blend of science fiction and fantasy. But while steampunk takes as its inspiration the chrome-brass-glass technology

aesthetic of the Victorian era, silkpunk draws inspiration from classical East Asian antiquity. [...]The silkpunk technology vocabulary is based on organic materials historically important to East Asia (bamboo, paper, silk) and seafaring cultures of the Pacific (coconut, feathers, coral), and the technology grammar follows biomechanical principles like the inventions in [pre-modern Chinese novel] *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*. The overall aesthetic is one of suppleness and flexibility (quoted in Misra).

Liu notes that he was inspired by writer W. Brian Arthur, “who articulates a vision of technology as a language. The task of the engineer is much like that of a poet in that the engineer must creatively combine existing elements of technology to solve novel problems, thereby devising artifacts that are new expressions in the technical language” (Brady). Liu’s approach “challenge[s] the assumption that engineering was a quintessentially modern and Western practice” (Liang), echoing works of postcolonial speculative fiction from across the world that foreground “the conflict between Western scientific methods and discourse of scientific progress and indigenous methods of knowledge production and understanding of the world” (Langer 9).

*The Poppy War* trilogy incorporates a silkpunk aesthetic to similar effect.<sup>9</sup> Over the course of the novels, Rin and her former classmates devise increasingly clever inventions and military strategies to foil their enemies. The inventors often cite Sunzi’s *Art of War* (*Sunzi bingfa* 孙子兵法, c. 5th century B.C.E.) or adopt military schemes borrowed from Luo Guanzhong’s *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* (*Sanguo yanyi* 三国演义, c. 1321), and the contraptions incorporate the types of organic materials that Liu specifies. Moreover, they echo Arthur’s vision of “technology as language” in that the inventions often recombine building blocks from a number of different technologies. An illustrative example is the technique one strategist uses to poison her enemy’s water source. She uses the sewage pipe of an old Hesperian mission to inundate the river with pigs’ bladders filled with toxic gas leftover from the Mugenese invasion. The acid-resistant quality of the bladders along with the efficient distribution system allow the poison to be deposited on a mass scale without becoming too diluted by the time it reaches its target miles downstream (*Dragon Republic* 254-257). Other examples include floating lanterns filled with

9 There is a reductive tendency among some readers to label any fantasy novel by an Asian or Asian American author as silkpunk, regardless of whether it bears any similarity to Liu’s definition. I want to be clear that I am using the term to refer specifically to the aesthetic and vision that Liu describes, which I find applicable to some elements of Kuang’s trilogy.

small bombs (336-337), slow-burning underwater mines coated in animal intestines (350), and a flying kite made from leather wings and thin rods that allows Rin to “levitate herself using the same principle that lifts a lantern” (537). These blends of foreign and local technologies, like the *shanzhai* playfulness and practicality celebrated by *Tai Chi Zero*, hint at the type of creativity that the trilogy’s ending posits will be necessary for Nikan to survive the coming Hesperian occupation.

### **Conclusion: Possibilities and Limitations of Speculation**

*Tai Chi Zero* and *The Poppy War* trilogy blend and reinterpret speculative generic conventions to reevaluate late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century China’s encounters with foreign ideas and technologies, grappling with questions that have dominated Chinese intellectual discourse for more than a century. The texts each explore several alternatives, echoing and reframing late-Qing and Republican debates in terms that resonate with recent comparative approaches to postcolonialism.

Both texts condemn uncritical colonial mimicry, despite the potential for ambivalence that Bhabha suggests. *Tai Chi Zero* and *The Poppy War* trilogy demonstrate that uncritical mimicry is bound to fail because of power imbalances and racism. Zijiang will never be accepted as fully English, and the Hesperian’s social Darwinist outlook means they will never accept the Nikara as fully human. In addition, both texts point to the estrangement that comes from abandoning one’s own culture wholesale, whether through the threat of Chen-style Tai Chi being replaced by steam technology or through the alienation Rin experiences in New City. Kuang’s trilogy adds a degree of nuance, echoing postcolonial thinker Frantz Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth* (59-68) in showing how mimicry may allow the local elite to maintain some of their historical power or gain financially (though never as much as the colonizer) at the expense of the masses.

Both works recognize what Fanon sees as the inherent violence of decolonization, which, as Fanon puts it, “will only come to pass after a murderous and decisive struggle” (37), though *Tai Chi Zero* mostly glosses over this eventuality, preferring to depict physical confrontation in a campy, stylized way, invoking humor rather than gore. *The Poppy War* trilogy, on the other hand, explores this violence in detail through the grimdark ambivalence of Rin’s character arc. In her pursuit of violent revolution, Rin convinces herself that the ends justify the means, but as she becomes more powerful, the means become the ends. While violent resistance does indeed allow her to gain power over those who have oppressed her and her nation, in the end it causes more harm than good, as the cost



in human lives proves too high. In this way, the trilogy explores the differences between projects of decolonization and postcolonial nation building, demonstrating that violent resistance is not enough to build a stable society.

Both works ultimately articulate hybridity as a middle road. In *Tai Chi Zero* this takes the form of *shanzhai*, blending what Luchan has gleaned of Chen-style Tai Chi with knowledge stolen from and playfully turned against the British, while *The Poppy War* illustrates hybridity through a silkpunk aesthetic that blends foreign and domestic technologies and military strategies. Both approaches decenter the West as the singular source of scientific knowledge and technology, a move that resonates both with broader postcolonial discourse and with China's growing global recognition as a hub of development, technology, and scientific innovation. In some ways, these models of hybridity echo the types of mental gymnastics late-Qing intellectuals attempted to work through, such as the *ti yong* 体用 (essence-use) debate's attempts at reconciling western technology with traditional Chinese values or the *yangwu* 洋务 (western affairs) movement's attempts at detecting Chinese origins for Western technologies. Parallels may be found in late-Qing science fiction, in which Isaacson detects examples of what Dillon might describe as "Indigenous scientific literacies."<sup>10</sup> However, *Tai Chi Zero* and *The Poppy War* trilogy are less concerned with tracing origins or authenticity, favoring instead a more pragmatic, utilitarian approach.

Both *Tai Chi Zero* and *The Poppy War* trilogy end with a degree of ambiguity, from the continuing threat of the invaders' return at the end of *Tai Chi Zero* (and again at the end of the sequel, *Tai Chi Hero*) to the long road ahead of Nezha at the end of *The Burning God*. While both texts advocate for a degree of hybridity, they ultimately fall short in fully imagining what such hybridity might entail, repeating many of the limitations of late-Qing science fiction. As both Isaacson (92) and Andolfatto (132) point out, such works were often characterized by textual ellipses, whether in the form of unfinished texts or narrative jumps that elide process in favor of result, leaving the reader to do the work of filling in the gaps. The same critiques could be leveled at *Tai Chi Zero*, which, as the first of an incomplete cinematic trilogy, leaves open the possibility of multiple sequels, or *The Poppy War* trilogy, which stops short of imagining the consequences of Rin's decision to write herself out of history. Andolfatto describes an eventual "carnivalization" of late-Qing utopian fiction, in which the genre becomes a parody of itself, pointing to the

10 For example, Xu Nianci's *New Tales of Mr. Braggadocio* (*Xin Faluo xiansheng tan* 新法螺先生谭, 1904) "offers up a number of potential points of resistance to Western epistemology, attempting to fit scientific knowledge within the ken of Daoist cosmology" (Isaacson 25).

impossibility of reconciling utopian spectacle with reality and revealing the genre to be an unsustainable approach to working out the nation's problems (188-198). *Tai Chi Zero* and *The Poppy War* trilogy both share this parodic relationship to generic conventions, transgressing and blending genre norms in a way that only further highlights their message about hybridity. Nevertheless, it is precisely this generic hybridity, the texts' playful and at times subversive engagement with various tropes of fantasy, science fiction, and *wuxia*, that allows the texts to embrace postcolonial ambiguities. It is through these tropes that the texts engage in the forms of "high intensity mimesis" that Chu describes as characteristic of science fiction and other speculative genres. Moreover, such generic transgressions open up the subversive potential of genres initially rooted in deeply colonialist assumptions, following in the traditions of both late-Qing and contemporary postcolonial speculative fiction.

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