Fact and Fiction: Chinese History and Fantasy in R.F. Kuang's The Poppy War Trilogy

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Abstract

This thesis investigates the relationship between history and fantasy in *The Poppy War* trilogy written by R.F. Kuang, which draws inspiration from twentieth century Chinese history. It examines how fantasy literature can incorporate, discuss, and reimagine historical elements with the purpose to uncover new perspectives concerning Asian history. Through a series of three case studies, this thesis analyses how Kuang engages with Chinese history in her trilogy, in particular the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945) and the Chinese Civil War (1927-1936, 1946-1949). The study finds that parallels between history and fiction in *The Poppy War* trilogy can be drawn in the following three ways. Firstly, they can be identified analysing a single chapter as a whole, thus taking a narrow scope. Secondly, a more subtle relationship between inspiration taken from history and fiction can be determined when investigating the plot of one of the books in the series, or the entire trilogy at large. Lastly, parallels can be drawn between certain characters in the books and historical figures which inspired them. This thesis finally concludes three of Kuang's intentions for writing *The Poppy War* trilogy. Including invoking a general interest in Chinese history in her readers, a personal reason relating to processing the traumatic history of her family members, and lastly the intention to stimulate dialogue and critical thinking about Chinese history for members of the Chinese diaspora by reimagining history in a thought-provoking way.

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Introduction

In recent years, English-language fantasy literature as a genre has shifted towards more inclusivity by increasingly incorporating authors of diverse backgrounds, taking inspiration from non-Western cultures and implementing these aspects into their writing. In this sense, the genre "Asian fantasy" has been gaining attention. The genre often includes Asian main characters, and the story taking place in Asia or an Asian inspired setting. Asian fantasy typically incorporates historical aspects into its narrative. For example, Xiran Jay Zhao's *Iron Widow* (2021) is inspired by ancient Chinese empress Wu Zetian (624-705) and includes themes of misogyny, politics, and war, combining Chinese history with fantasy and science-fiction elements (Houle 2021). Zhao writes in the foreword that she does not imagine her work as historical fantasy, but rather a futuristic, fantasy story which incorporates the reimagination of elements of Chinese history and historical figures (Zhao 2021). Additionally, M.L. Wang's *The Sword of Kaigen* (2018), influenced by the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945), follows a Japanese-inspired nation which is the victim rather than the perpetrator of warfare, thus flipping the reality of the Second Sino-Japanese war around. Wang herself is Chinese American, her father coming from Jiangsu, China, the province where the Nanjing Massacre (1937-1938) occurred (Wang 2019). In an interview she states that she had a complicated relationship with Japan, coping with the fondness she felt for modern Japanese culture as juxtapositioned against previous generations of her family being affected by Japanese mass murder (Wang 2019). Writing *The Sword of Kaigen* and reimagining history in a provocative way opened up new perspectives, and for Wang fiction became a way to process reality (Wang 2019).

Although there are many (Asian) fantasy books implementing historical events and figures, ranging from Fonda Lee's *The Green Bone Saga* trilogy (2017-2021) to Ken Liu's *The Dandelion Dynasty* series (2015-2022), this thesis is concerned with *The Poppy War* trilogy by R.F. Kuang (2018-2020), a grimdark fantasy series incorporating elements of Chinese history into the narrative. As such *The Poppy War* trilogy is advertised, for example on Amazon it is called: "(…) award-winning epic fantasy trilogy that combines the history of China with a gripping world of gods and monsters" (Amazon 2025). Therefore, even a reader unfamiliar with Chinese history is prepared to expect the narrative to be influenced by Chinese historical events.

The first part of the trilogy is based on the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945) focusing on the fictional nations *Nikara, the Federation of Mugen,* and *Speer*, China, Japan, and Taiwan, respectively. This becomes evident from the geographical location of the fictious countries as presented on the map in the front of the book, which is included on the next page.

With the biggest country Nikara (China) to the left, Mugen (Japan) to the right, separated from Nikara by a vast sea, and Speer (Taiwan) a small island next to Nikara. Kuang uses the term "longbow island" to refer to Mugen, and the shape of the island on the fictious map is reminiscent of Japan (Kuang 2018, 206). In various interviews Kuang is asked to explain the relation between fiction and history in her work and what inspired her to write *The Poppy War* (Kuang and Siegel 2019). Kuang gives the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945), the Chinese Civil War (1927-1936, 1946-1949), and the Nanjing Massacre (1937-1938) as important historical events she tried to reinterpret in her writing (Kuang and Adeniyi 2021, 125). As the historical events referenced concern China, Japan, and Taiwan, the connection between them and the fictional countries in the book becomes increasingly clear.

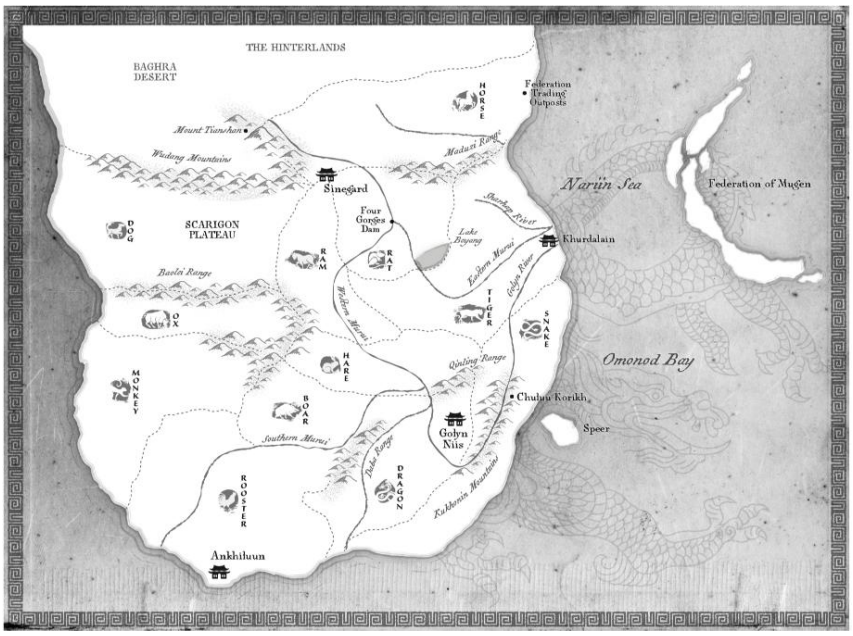

Image: Kuang 2018, *The Poppy War.*

The trilogy is filled with parallels to modern Chinese history, including themes of militarism, imperialism, colonialism and religion. The author R.F. Kuang is currently pursuing a PhD at Yale's department for East Asian languages and literatures, she has a MPhil in Chinese Studies from Cambridge University, and a MSc in Contemporary Chinese Studies from Oxford University (Yale 2025). After she talked to her grandparents about their experiences regarding Chinese historical events in the twentieth century, she wrote the first book in *The Poppy War* series (Kuang and Yu 2020). Furthermore, she wrote her undergraduate thesis about the commemoration of the Rape of Nanjing. In an interview she states that the academic research she conducts and study topics she finds interesting go well with the kind of fiction she writes (Kuang and Siegel 2019). Kuang expressed her displeasure with "forgotten" or ignored parts of Chinese history, as something that was not being talked about, not in American schools, nor by members of the Chinese diaspora themselves, prompting her to write *The Poppy War* (Forsen 2022). She decided to write fantasy rather than nonfiction firstly because she herself enjoyed reading fantasy, and found that a story which introduces historical and political arguments is more universally appealing than a history book (Kuang and Sondheimer 2018). Secondly, she

calls fantasy a tool of "radical empathy", in which metaphors and fictional parallels challenge the reader to project themselves back in time to gain a better understanding of a situation or historical event (Kuang and Sondheimer 2018).

The research question central to this thesis is: How does R.F. Kuang engage with Chinese history in *The Poppy War* trilogy? This thesis is structured as follows: First, the connection between history and fantasy, and the subgenre *historical fantasy* is explored based on the relevant available literature on the topic. Next, the methodology section is outlined, detailing the methodological approach. Subsequently, this thesis explores three concrete case studies linking *The Poppy War* trilogy to historical events and inspirations. The case studies include the Nanjing Massacre, the legacy of the Opium Wars and the Northern Expedition, and the Chinese Civil War and the Long March. The case studies also connect important historical figures such as Chiang Kai-shek and Mao Zedong to their fictional counterparts in the series. Finally, this thesis concludes the analysis of the relationship between history and fantasy in *The Poppy War* trilogy.

Literature Review

Literary genres exist as institutions for reading and writing, they function as "horizons of expectations" for readers, and "models of writing" for writers (Todorov and Berrong 1976, 163). Authors have to adhere to a certain framework or "genre expectation" when composing their manuscript (Todorov and Berrong 1976, 163). Similarly, readers utilize genres as navigators and standards for their expectations. A genre sets a clear standard for what to expect in terms of theme, tropes, settings, style, and tone. For instance, a romance novel must always include a story of romantic love between the main characters, which is the expectation of the reader which the writer should adhere to. Dozens of genres across the literary realm can be identified, but this thesis is concerned with the "fantasy" genre. Fantasy threads between the realms of possibilities and impossibilities, the familiar and the strange, the real and the imaginary (Tally 2022, ix). The word "fantasy" refers to the strange, the peculiar, the supernatural, and the bizarre, which hold no basis in everyday real-life experiences and invites the reader to a process of imagination (Stableford 2009, xxxv).

The objective of this thesis is to investigate the relationship between history and fantasy in the work of R.F. Kuang, *The Poppy War* trilogy. There is to date, to my knowledge no scholarly research conducted about *The Poppy War* trilogy as a whole. However, the connection between history and fantasy in fantasy literature has been thoroughly researched in academia,

especially considering the genre *historical fantasy*. As one of fantasy literature's many subgenres, *historical fantasy* appears as a combination of two conflicting terms: fantasy as rejecting reality by inviting the fantastic into the narrative, and historical fiction which is grounded in realism and historical accuracy (Schanoes 2012, 236). By combining the clashing genres of fantasy and historical literature, there is a move beyond realism by incorporating real-world events into a fantasy narrative, offering new perspectives (Baker 2012, 437). *Historical fantasy* opens up new, different ways of understanding history (Schanoes 2012, 246). Although historical fiction and fantasy at face value might seem like opposites, reality against fantasy, writers of both genres must engage in the construction of world-building, whether it is history or fantasy, the author is introducing the reader to a world foreign to their own (Schanoes 2012, 236). The fantastic poses a creative resource for writing history, advancing beyond literal and factual material, it provides a more dynamic way of thinking about and exploring history (Kaplan 2006, 192).

One of the most popular and influential works of *historical fantasy* and considered a "classic" within the fantasy genre is J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit* (1937). Although *The Hobbit* does not refer to specific historical events like *The Poppy War* does, *The Hobbit* provides a "realization" of history and guides the reader to an understanding that history is shaped by everyday people (Beronio 2022, 258). Fantasy can be seen as a form of escapism in which the reader is separated from the "real world" including its history, instead, the narration of *The Hobbit* provides the reader with knowledge about the world, constructing a historical consciousness (Beronio 2022, 256). In a similar vein, readers of *The Poppy War* gain an understanding of Rin's -the main character- world through her experiences and knowledge, and especially her anger. However, *The Poppy War* trilogy is generally not considered *historical fantasy*, but rather as *grimdark fantasy* incorporating historical allegories or parallels. *Grimdark fantasy* is another subgenre of fantasy used to "describe the tone, style, and setting of fiction, which is typically dystopian, amoral, and/or includes graphic depictions of violence" (Frohock 2015). Popular examples of *grimdark fantasy* include George R.R. Martin's A *Song of Ice and Fire* (1996), Joe Abercrombie's *The First Law* trilogy (2006-2008), and more recently: *The Poppy War* trilogy.

Other than escapism, fantasy has other purposes. Brian Attebery (1991) discusses the function of *creative anachronism* in fantasy literature: the placement of people or things associated with a particular historical period in the wrong period of time, by bringing the past to the present, or the present to the past. The contrast of this displacement has a transformative effect on the present (Attebery 1991, 16). This is the "progressive potential" of fantasy literature,

which incites critical thinking, social change, and new perspectives by exploring temporal dislocations that interrupt history and reimagine reality (Baker 2012, 440). Reimagining historical aspects and time periods, rewriting and recovering history, can alter the way the reader understands the past, present and future (Baker 2012, 440). Fantasy is a response to context. It does not exist in a creative vacuum but rather is shaped by the reality and experiences of the author (Baker 2012, 445). In this way, dissatisfaction often forms a motive for incorporating the fantastical in historical narratives: to open up, uncover, or reimagine the ignored and repressed (Baker 2012, 441). Fantasy narratives do not simply "borrow" history for inspiration, but have the ability to reimagine and critique history.

Following this, R.F. Kuang's dissatisfaction with forgotten and ignored parts of Chinese history, her interest in Chinese history through her studies, and conversations with relatives about their past are what inspired her to write *The Poppy War* trilogy. For Kuang, the fantasy reinterpretation of historical events relating to Japanese wartime atrocities acts as a protective shield between the trauma of her family and the narrative (Kuang and Siegel 2019). Fantasy allows Kuang the space to speak about ignored or repressed parts of Chinese history such as the Nanjing Massacre whilst sparing her family members or other possible interviewees from rekindling painful and traumatic memories necessary to write a nonfiction autobiography (Kuand and Sondheimer 2018). Parallels to the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945) and the Chinese Civil War (1927-1936; 1945-1949) in *The Poppy War* trilogy offer a dramatization and more dynamic interpretation of historical events, inviting new perspectives (Kaplan 2006, 192). The uniqueness of fantasy allows aspects of mid-twentieth century China to be taken and to be distorted as to explore historical narratives (Baker 2012, 441; Kuang and Sondheimer 2018). By altering reality, incorporating fantasy elements, and reimagining history in her fiction, Kuang thus invites the reader to question the status quo.

Methodology

This thesis is concerned with the relationship between history and fantasy in *The Poppy War* trilogy by R.F. Kuang. The research question central to this thesis is: How does R.F. Kuang engage with Chinese history in *The Poppy War* trilogy? Sub questions to the research objective include: How are historical aspects implemented and reimagined in *The Poppy War* trilogy? What kind of historical events are referenced? For what purpose does Kuang incorporate historical events in her fiction?

The primary source central to this thesis is the work of R.F. Kuang, *The Poppy War* trilogy, consisting of: *The Poppy War* (2018), *The Dragon Republic* (2019), and *The Burning*

God (2020). The trilogy altogether encompasses 1872 pages, amounting to more than 500.000 words. To answer the research question this thesis adopts a close-reading approach of the primary sources to critically analyse the available content and connect fantasy to fact. This method was chosen because close reading allows for an in-depth and detailed examination of the source material. By close reading, the explicit and implicit objectives of the material can be identified as it analyses what the text says, what is implied, and how the text is connected to a broader context (Harvard University 2025). In the case of this thesis, how passages in Kuang's fantasy books are connected to historical facts.

The limitation in this method lies in the subjectivity of interpretation. Although the author of this thesis is educated in (East) Asian history, it is possible that certain connections between fantasy and history might have been overlooked or misinterpreted. However, by engaging Kuang's work with academic sources relating to historical events and including available interviews with Kuang, this study attempts to minimalize the misunderstanding of Kuang's text and her intentions.

Furthermore, as the events referenced to in the books are historical occurrences, this thesis will also include and examine academic sources relating to historical events (ex. Nanjing Massacre, Chinese Civil War) to gain an understanding and to be able to draw parallels between fantasy and reality. Building on that, this thesis will analyse available interviews with R.F. Kuang in which she speaks about her work and provides insights on creative decisions she made. As preparation in search of the case studies, interviews with Kuang in which she gave insights to her thought processes during the writing of The *Poppy War* trilogy and her sources of inspiration were consulted. From analysing various online interviews, it became clear that Kuang consciously intended to incorporate elements of Chinese history in her work. After having identified Kuang's main sources of inspiration, preliminary research about referenced historical events in order to be able to extract them from the trilogy was conducted. The author of this thesis read the trilogy in 2020, but in preparation for this thesis the entire trilogy was reread, keeping these sources in mind which enabled the identification of several passages in the books which were able to be linked to their respective historical counterparts. As not every page, not even every chapter, was able to be directly linked to historical events, the books in their entirety were read. Useful passages were either highlighted while reading the physical books or identified using search words such as character or place names in the digital copies of the books.

Chapter 1: National Trauma: Reimagining the Nanjing Massacre

Introduction

The Poppy War trilogy is a fantasy retelling of mid-twentieth century China, with the first book having a focus on the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945). This first case study analyses chapter 21 of *The Poppy War* (2018) and identifies the historical inspiration for this chapter. Parallels between history and fiction in this first case study are drawn by close reading one chapter, thus taking a narrow scope.

The first book in *The Poppy War* series follows the main character Fang Runin, or Rin for short, a war orphan and peasant who manages to enter Sinegard, Nikara's (China) most prestigious military academy. While she trains to become a military elite, Rin discovers she has an aptitude for the art of shamanism and develops the power to summon a god -the Phoenix- and the ability to channel its fire powers. At the same time, the Federation of Mugen (Japan) is preparing for another war against Nikara. After an attack on Sinegard, Rin and her classmates are all sent to serve in different divisions and cities to counter the Federation. Rin and her division of shamans -people who can channel the power of the gods- travel to Khurdalain (fictional equivalent of Shanghai), a port city besieged by the Federation army. However, the siege on Khurdalain is only a distraction for the Federation's real purpose: conquering Golyn Niis, the fictional counterpart to Nanjing.

The Nanjing Massacre

Chapter 21 of *The Poppy War* (2018) describes a fictional version of the Nanjing Massacre (1937-1938) -otherwise known as the Rape of Nanjing. The Nanjing Massacre occurred after the Japanese forces conquered Nanjing, at the time the capital of the Republic of China (Eykholt 2000, 11). From August 15, 1937, the city was bombed and raided until it was captured on December 13 the same year. Consequently, Japanese soldiers entered Nanjing and committed numerous atrocities including killing, raping, looting, and burning the city and its people (Eykholt 2000, 11). The city of Nanjing was chosen by the Japanese as an objective because they believed it to be the centre of Chinese resistance, which had to be suppressed before it could take further root (Zhang 2021, 5). In order to destroy the will and ability of the Chinese people to resist, the Japanese army in Nanjing adopted extreme measures of violence and terror as tactical behaviour (Zhang 2021, 9).

Scholarship on the Nanjing Massacre is inconclusive about the total death toll. Concrete numbers and estimates did not appear until after the war, and amounted to approximately

200.000 victims (Eykholt 2000, 13). The number of deaths heavily depends on who is asked - some Japanese sources estimate between 38.000 and 42.000 people were killed, others claiming the number was as low as 3.000 (Chang 1997, 100). The International Military Tribunal for the Far East estimated that approximately 260.000 noncombatants were killed by the Japanese during the Nanjing Massacre (IMTFE 1946, page 1, box 7). Yet, other sources provide compelling evidence that the death toll ranged between the 300.000 and 400.000 people (Chang 1997, 103). The Tokyo Trial (1946-1948) concluded that an exact number was impossible, but the judges approved that more than 200.000 Chinese were killed, thereby formally acknowledging the Nanjing Massacre (Eykholt 2000, 22).

This "number game", the lack of international awareness and historical neglect about the Nanjing Massacre and the atrocities committed by the Japanese during the Second Sino-Japanese War, and the erasure of the Massacre from public consciousness form problems with the commemoration of the Nanjing Massacre (Chang 1997, 14). Especially the denial or downplaying of the Nanjing Massacre by certain Japanese or the Chinese government themselves angers many members of the Chinese diaspora (Fogel 2000, 2). The Chinese diaspora encompasses a multitude of voices, including Chinese living in Taiwan, other Asian countries, the United States, Europe, and many other places (Fogel 2000, 3). In search of their own distinct identity, the Chinese diaspora especially uncovers issues which have been concealed, such as the Nanjing Massacre (Fogel 2000, 3). Iris Chang, author of *The Rape of Nanking* (1997) as well as R.F. Kuang state that they learned about the Nanjing Massacre through family, parents or grandparents in conversation about their experiences in twentieth century China (Chang 1997, 7; Kuang and Yu 2000). Chang decided to conduct her own research and comprise that in a nonfiction book dedicated to the Nanjing Massacre. Whereas Kuang incorporated the Nanjing Massacre in her fantasy novel *The Poppy War*, as a way to try to make sense of such a traumatic history (Kuang and Adeniyi 2021, 125). She called writing *The Poppy War* her "very public attempt to understand, personally, this indescribable atrocity" (Kuang and Adeniyi 2021, 125).

> "I was writing from a place of rage and anger because I thought it was just astonishing and really tragic that something like this was not really talked about in the West and also not really ... acknowledged or apologized for, on the part of Japan." - Kuang in Kuang and Yu, 2020.

Kuang chose to write fantasy rather than nonfiction because of its accessibility to an audience that normally would not be interested in reading history books (Kuang and Sondheimer 2018).

The second reason for writing fantasy was that she felt like autobiographies were difficult to produce due to painful and traumatic memories of interviewees, something she did not want to put her family through (Kuang and Sondheimer 2018). Not only the difficulty played a role, but Kuang also felt that she -at the time of writing *The Poppy War*, as an undergraduate student without any proper training in history- was unqualified for such an undertaking (Kuang and Winchester 2021, 3). In Kuang's books, fantasy acts as a protective shield between the memory of trauma and the narrative (Kuang and Siegel 2019). Here, the purpose of fantasy is not only escapism or reinterpretation but also acts as protection.

Kuang elaborates that in *The Poppy War* the government is inspired by the Song Dynasty (960-1279), and that for the worldbuilding, including political, economic, and technological questions she would consult sources about this Dynasty (Kuang and Duspiva 2018). For this reason, the leader of the Nikara Empire at the time of the Golyn Niis Massacre is Empress Su Daji. Despite the difference in leadership between fiction (the Empress) and fact (Kuomintang leader Chiang Kai-shek), a parallel during the Nanjing/Golyn Niis Massacre can still be identified. In the book, the Empress had fled and abandoned Golyn Niis the moment it became clear the battle could not be won, taking a group of trusted guards with her (Kuang 2018, 420).

> But the Empress was not the only one who had abandoned Golyn Niis. The entire army had surrendered the city. Within a week Golyn Niis had more or less been delivered to the Federation on the platter, and the entirety of its half million people subjected to the whims of the invading forces (Kuang 2018, 421).

Likewise, Chiang Kai-shek (1887-1975) -head of the Kuomintang (KMT), the Chinese Nationalist Party from 1928 to 1949- left Nanjing on December 7, days before Nanjing was conquered by the Japanese (Zheng 2021, 40). Additionally, his advisors, government officials, and the Chinese air force departed the city (Chang 1997, 71). Only a few days later, on December 12, the Chinese military was ordered to retreat, resulting in numerous officers and soldiers trying to escape through the northwest city gate, to the harbour and crossing the Yangtze River (Chang 1997, 75). A day later, Nanjing was conquered by the Japanese. Although *The Poppy War* does not form a complete analogy between Empress Su Daji and Chiang Kai-shek, Kuang does address this moment of a leader and the military retreating. Suggesting that at least in this regard the Empress is a fictional parallel to Chiang Kai-shek.

In 1937 Nanjing during the six weeks of terror, the Japanese forces killed Chinese soldiers and civilians alike in a number of horrifying ways, including torture, mutilation, as bayonet practice, live burials, death by fire, death by ice, death by dogs, and many other

methods (Chang 1997, 87). Additionally, Japanese soldiers competed in killing contests: a competition with the objective to kill as many Chinese captives as possible in the shortest amount of time, often beheading them as to keep count (Chang 1997, 85).

Throughout *The Poppy War* trilogy, the main character Rin is the narrator of the story, therefore the reader experiences the fictional counterpart of the Nanjing Massacre through her eyes. Rin and the thirteenth division hastily make their way from Khurdalain to Golyn Niis after a Federation prisoner confesses their objective had always been to conquer Golyn Niis (Kuang 2018, 404). They travel along the Golyn River (Yangtze River) for a week, before their boat is stopped, the river running red with blood, surrounded by corpses that have been dumped in the river (Kuang 2018, 412). In *The Poppy War,* Kuang vividly describes numerous horrors committed by the Federation of Mugen -similar to those committed by the Japanese forces- as Rin enters the city:

> …the Federation had arrayed the corpses in states of incredible desecration, grotesque positions that defied human imagination. Corpses nailed to boards. Corpses hung by their tongues from hooks. Corpses dismembered in every possible way; headless, limbless, displaying mutilations that must have been performed while the victim was still alive (Kuang 2018, 414).

The reader experiences the Golyn Niis Massacre in three ways: firstly, through the eyes of Rin, who only encounters the aftermath of the slaughter as she herself was defending the city of Khurdalain at the time of the Massacre. Second and thirdly, through the experiences of two of Rin's classmates who were in Golyn Niis at the time of the Massacre, Kitay and Venka, in conversation with Rin. Both characters are soldiers but provide different perspectives on the Massacre: Kitay as strategist, and Venka as a woman. Firstly, Rin enters the city as the Federation has already moved on, the city is not only conquered but completely decimated and survivors are few. In May 1937, Nanjing had a population of about one million people, including both rural and urban areas (Zhang 2021, 18). Before the Japanese occupation, about half a million people fled from the city, yet approximately 600.000 people, including 90.000 Chinese soldiers remained in the city as it was conquered (Chang 1997, 100). Kuang provides a different imagination: the city of Golyn Niis once held half a million people, and after the Massacre fewer than a thousand survivors are found (Kuang 2018, 430).

During the Nanjing Massacre, one way to dispose of corpses was to bury them in mass graves, however, body disposal became a problem as it was time consuming, labour intensive, and it was difficult to find ditches that were large enough to hold a couple of thousand bodies

(Chang 1997, 46). Alternatively, bodies were piled together and cremated, but as the Japanese lacked fuel, rather than ashes, charred corpses were left (Chang 1997, 46). Other methods utilized in Nanjing, rather than being buried or cremated, included throwing bodies into the Yangtze River (Chang 1997, 46). In chapter 21 of *The Poppy War,* Kuang addresses the issue of body disposal. She firstly describes the burning of corpses in a similar vein as what happened in Nanjing. In a later paragraph she returns to this issue, two characters with the power to channel fire -Rin and Altan- light several pyres to burn the corpses (Kuang 2018, 423).

> (…) the Federation had tried to ignite several corpse pyramids. (…) The bodies were grotesque, half charred spectacles; hair had turned to ash, and the top layers of skin had turned a crinkling black, but the worst part was that there was something beneath the ashes that looked identifiably human. (Kuang 2018, 414).

As the men in Nanjing were killed in multiple cruel manners, an estimated 20.000-80.000 women were the victim of rape (Chang 1997, 6). Gang rape was especially prevalent under the Japanese forces during both day- and nighttime, with the victims ranging from under the age of ten to in their eighties (Zhang 2021, 275). During the occupation, many women were raped as much as ten times a day. A Chinese woman on the Nanjing Theological Seminary grounds was raped by seventeen Japanese soldiers in quick succession (Zhang 2021, 276; Chang 1997, 90-91). After being raped, women were often killed, bayoneted, disembowelled or succumbed to their injuries, interfering family members protecting their daughters, sisters, and mothers from rape were also killed by Japanese soldiers (Chang 1997, 92).

In *The Poppy War,* Kuang elaborates on the issue of rape through Venka, a female soldier defending Golyn Niis at the time. Venka became a victim of Federation aggression and was repeatedly raped. Rin notes that the only reason Venka survived was by "having the body of a woman" (Kuang 2018, 424). Yet this is not so self-evident, as during the Nanjing Massacre many women were simply killed and disposed of after being raped. Venka's story is one of a survivor. However, although she survived, the injuries Venka suffered from Federation soldiers resulted in a permanent disability: the loss of proper movement in her arms. Venka -as soldier and archer- is faced with the reality that her trauma is not only mental, but also physical, as her broken arms that did not heal right act as a constant reminder of the Massacre. Venka's experiences are comparable to the reality of Li Xouying as described by Iris Chang in her non-fiction book, a woman who was brutally injured by the Japanese after she fought them, resisting rape (Chang 1997, 98). She survived, but the scars on her face function as a permanent reminder of a painful past.

Rin talks to Venka when she is found in a "relaxation house," reminiscent of the "comfort houses" that were opened in Nanjing, in which women were forcibly held, raped, and murdered (Chang 1997, 53). Venka tells Rin "Did you know they called us public toilets?" which is a parallel directly to Chang's book (Kuang 2018, 424; Chang 1997, 53). Venka recalls many horrible stories of rape, either her own or those of others she witnessed. This was the reality of countless women during the Nanjing Massacre, their bodies violated by multiple Japanese soldiers a day, but also witnessing the rape of other women, including family members. Many victims were killed either during, or after the rape (Zhang 2021, 275).

> "I saw women disemboweled. I saw the soldiers slice off their breasts. I saw them nail women alive to walls. I saw them mutilate young girls, when they had tired of their mothers." (Kuang 2018, 424).

Furthermore, Kuang describes one of Venka's experiences which again has been inspired by Chang's book and the memory of a survivor of the Nanjing Massacre. Chang writes about Tang Shunsan, a man who was the lone survivor of a Japanese killing contest in Nanjing whom she interviewed in 1995. He recalls how a pregnant woman resisted soldiers trying to rape her, after a futile struggle, she was bayoneted to the stomach and her intestines and foetus were ripped out (Chang 1997, 86). In chapter 21 of *The Poppy War*, Venka recalls a similar story in which the belly of a pregnant woman is torn open, killing both her and the foetus.

Conclusion

In summary, chapter 21 of *The Poppy War* brutally portrays the reality of the Nanjing Massacre. Many of the instances Kuang describes, the mutilation of corpses, the disposal of bodies, and the rape of women are taken straight from history, changed only to fit into the narrative. With Chang's *The Rape of Nanking* as main inspiration, Kuang attempts to represent the Nanjing Massacre in fiction by acknowledging historical facts and context, and the experiences of survivors. Kuang engages with history by incorporating the brutal reality of history in her text.

Chapter 2: Foreign Imperialism and Internal Power Struggles

Introduction

The second part of *The Poppy War* trilogy, *The Dragon Republic* (2019) builds on the events occurring in the first part, expanding the reader's understanding of the First and Second Poppy Wars (fictional counterparts to the First and Second Opium Wars) and introduces the complex political situation the main character finds herself in. This case study takes a broader scope of material in consideration as the goal is to draw parallels between history and fiction on a larger scale. It investigates how historical events in *The Poppy War* trilogy relate to one another and how they influence the overall plot, in similarity to history, in which one event is the catalyst for another.

In this case study the following historical events are analysed and linked to their fictional parallels: the legacy of the Opium Wars, foreign occupation of China in the twentieth century, and the Northern Expedition. Lastly, this case study also provides insights into the parallel between Chiang Kai-shek and Yin Vaisra, a character in *The Poppy War* trilogy.

The Legacy of the Opium Wars

The Poppy War trilogy is named as such because of the Opium Wars that China's Qing Dynasty (1644-1912) fought against the British Empire (First Opium War 1839-42), and the British Empire, the United States, France, and Russia (Second Opium War 1856-60). Kuang herself describes that poppies and opium have strong ties to the Century of Humiliation (1839-1949) in Chinese national imagination and are consequently seen as symbols of weakness (Kuang and Adeniyi 2021, 121). Therefore, Kuang purposely based the magic system in the book on poppies, as to see the poppy as source of power, rather than a weakness and humiliation (Kuang and Winchester 2021, 5). The reality of the role of opium in nineteenth century China was different however.

The First Opium War was the result of the British Empire looking for a market for their East India Company products, which included the opium poppy (Mitter 2014, 29). As such, they started the largescale selling of the opium poppy in China, which was not appreciated by the Chinese imperial court, Qing official Lin Zexu was tasked to destroy the British stocks of opium in port of Guangzhou (Mitter 2014, 29). Subsequently, the British thought this an insult to the British Crown and the use of force was authorized to punish the Chinese, starting the First Opium War (Mitter 2014, 29). In 1842, after suffering a number of military defeats at the hands of the British, the Qing Dynasty had little choice but to accept the Treaty of Nanjing,

otherwise known as the "unequal treaties", making an end to the First Opium War (Mitter 2014, 29). This treaty forced Chinese ports to open up to Western traders and missionaries, ceded Hong Kong to the British Empire, included the surrender of all legal jurisdiction involving foreigners to their respective embassies, and Western management of Chinese customs collections, providing foreigners with unprecedented rights and privileges (Taylor 2009, 14-15; Mitter 2014, 29). The unequal demands of the treaty were the start of what is now known as the "Century of Humiliation" in Chinese history.

Interestingly enough, in the trilogy, the First Poppy War (fictional counterpart to the First Opium War) was not fought between Nikara (China) and a fictional parallel to the British Empire, but between Nikara (China) and Mugen (Japan), the war reflecting the militarily superior Mugen's desire to invade and colonize Nikara rather than a connection to foreign opium trade (Kuang 2018, 167). In the second book, Kuang introduces another country: the "western" country Hesperia, the fictional equivalent to the United States and the British Empire. The Hesperians offered military and economic aid to the Mugenese, financing the invasion of Nikara (Kuang 2019, 152). At the end of the First Poppy War, the Hesperians were involved in signing a peace treaty -much like the Nanjing Treaty- administering two neutral zones on the coastline in which the Hesperians settled with missionaries and soldiers alike (Kuang 2019, 44). The Hesperians turned out to have used the Mugenese to weaken the Empire of Nikara and make use of the vulnerable and politically unstable environment to expand their own influence and power, most importantly the spread of their religion. Although opium plays an important role in the trilogy, it is unclear where the characters in the book get their opium from. Opium was one of the most lucrative businesses for the British Empire, yet in *The Poppy War* trilogy there is only talk of "black markets" and opium trade, but does specify which country was responsible for this trade (Kuang 2018, 77).

The Nanjing Treaty of 1942 included trading rights for Western powers to Shanghai, which would become a centre for trade and modernity, and the rights for Christian missionaries to travel into China (Mitter 2014, 30-31). American missionaries in China visited villages, funded modern institutions such as colleges and hospitals, and operated under the belief that they were training the Chinese people to become like the American, in terms of government, education, and above all else, religion (Mitter 2014, 52).

> A positive view took hold that China was indeed a fledgling America, a Christian nation in the making, and a potential liberal democracy (Mitter 2014, 52).

Likewise, following the fictional counterpart to the Nanjing Treaty of 1942, the Hesperians were allowed into the port city Khurdalain, which parallels to a fictional form of Shanghai. Additionally, the expansion of religion and missionary work plays a significant role in *The Dragon Republic*. Hesperians -unlike the Nikara- believe in a singular deity the "Holy Maker" and abide by an institution called the "Church of the Divine Architect," their theology closely resembles Christianity practiced in twentieth century Europe (Kuang 2018, 186).

> The Hesperians had only one church. They believed in one divine entity: a Holy Maker, separate from and above all mortal affairs, wrought in the image of a man (…) The priests of the Order of the Holy Maker held no political office but exerted more cultural control than the Hesperian central government did (Kuang 2019, 186-187).

Although the Hesperians are introduced in the first part of the trilogy, the reader does not get to know Hesperian characters or the country's historical importance until the second book. Unlike Nikara and Mugen, which are based on one single country, Hesperia is a combination of Western countries, in particular the British Empire and the United States. Rather than Kuang explicitly stating the Hesperians parallel the Americans/British, the reader has to deduct this from the story. For example, in *The Dragon Republic* Kuang refers to the Hesperians as being "pale-skinned" and having "blue eyes" and "yellow hair," hailing from the "Western continent" (Kuang 2019, 582). Additionally, Hesperians -unlike the Nikara- believe in a singular deity "the Holy Maker," resembling Christianity (Kuang 2018, 186).

Like Yin Vaisra resembles Chiang Kai-shek -which will be elaborated on in the next section- his wife Lady Saikhara parallels Chiang Kai-shek's wife Song Mayling. Chiang Kai-shek and Song Mayling married in December 1927 (Taylor 2009, 74). Mayling was fluent in English, having been educated in the United States, she functioned as Chiang's confidante and interpreted English and Western customs for him (Taylor 2009, 76). Additionally, Mayling was also Christian, even conducting Bible-reading sessions with her missionary friends (Taylor 2009, 91). A condition for Chiang to adhere to before being allowed to marry her included studying the Bible and consider converting to Christianity, he regularly read the Bible Mayling had given him (Taylor 2009, 91; Mitter 2014, 59). Similarly, in *The Dragon Republic,* Saikhara grew up in Hesperia, having converted to Makerism, the Hesperian religion (Kuang 2019, 197). She has strong ties to the West, being in charge of lobbying for Hesperian military support (Kuang 2019, 225).

Like the Americans in China, the Hesperians in Nikara are extremely involved and concerned with creating the other nation to be in their image. The fantasy of stimulating

modernity and democracy based on an American model, which the American and Hesperian military and missionaries had, clashes with reality, a twentieth century China and fictional Nikara which are generally unconcerned with notions of democratization, or Christianity/Makerism, but rather with internal power struggles.

The Northern Expedition

The historical inspiration for a large part of the plot of *The Dragon Republic,* the second book in the series, is the Northern Expedition of July 1926 to December 1928. At the end of book one, Rin is confronted with the knowledge that her Empress has sold her and her entire unit out to the Mugenese, resulting in the death of her commander whom she loved. For this reason, she seeks revenge against the Empress. Following the Third Poppy War in book one (the Second Sino-Japanese War), the Empire of Nikara is weakened and political dissent rules throughout the twelve provinces, each ruled by a warlord under the Empress' command. The leader of the richest and most powerful Dragon province, Yin Vaisra, sees the weakened position of the Empress as cause for a revolution and tries to rally the scattered warlords together to build a democratic republic.

The Northern Expedition (1926-1928) was a military campaign of the Kuomintang's (KMT) National Revolutionary Army (NRA) under leadership of Chiang Kai-shek, with the goal to restore China's unity and strength, and make an end to warlordism (Taylor 2009, 50). Materializing from the First and Second Opium Wars, as a result of the Nanjing Treaty and the interfering of foreign powers, Chinese nationalism began to spread beyond elites and into the countryside (Jordan 1976, 3). Similarly, Chiang Kai-shek's political views were formed by the loss of Chinese sovereignty, territory, and self-respect in the past sixty years (Taylor 2009, 14). Only through reunification would China find the strength to oppose foreign powers and take control of its own destiny (Jordan 1976, xi). As warlordism formed an obstacle to the goal of reunification, the system would have to be removed through military means (Jordan 1976, xi). The Northern Expedition and its attempt at mobilizing the Chinese society into a revolution, which would manifest a new nation, was however severely complicated by internal divisions and issues with the mobilization of troops (Van de Ven 2003, 129). Having rallied together seven separate armies, the NRA launched the Northern Expedition in July 1926 with a total of 100.000 men (Van de Ven 2003, 105). As the army consisted of Nationalists, Communists, and the Soviets, the NRA was far from unified and was at best a loose alliance of military groups seeking to defeat a common enemy, and each group did not hesitate to improve their own position at the expense of their allies (Van de Ven 2003, 105). The NRA thus consisted of a

multitude of different factions and armies, complicating general command. Yet, the desire of all parties involved was to replace the current warlord system with a more integrated, modernized form of governance to unite the people of China, and were above all else anti-imperialistic (Jordan 1976, x). From 1923 until 1927, the KMT and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) would join forces in the NRA, referred to as the United Front (Jordan 1976, x). The NRA absorbed local militia as they moved along through the countryside (Taylor 2009, 61). Chiang Kai-shek with the NRA had conquered large parts of the Guangxi, Sichuan, and Fujian provinces by late 1926 (Taylor 2009, 62).

In *The Dragon Republic*, Dragon Warlord Vaisra attempts to rally the southern Warlords together to march against the Empress up north, take control of the country, and establish a democratic republic. As Empress Su Daji paralleled Chiang Kai-shek at the end of the first book, Yin Vaisra resembles him in the second. There are many passages in the book which discuss military strategy, or Vaisra's alliance with the Hesperians (Americans). At the beginning of this fictional "Expedition" the Warlords of the Southern Coalition address the issue of their joint army. The problem being that they are separate armies, rather than a cohesive alliance, as the soldiers are used and loyal to their own provinces, instead of the Republican Army (Kuang 2019, 202).

> "I'm not putting my men under the command of soldiers I've never met," said the Boar Warlord. (…) "And those squads won't function. You're asking men who have never met to fight together. They don't know the same command signals, they don't use the same codes, and they don't have time to learn." (Kuang 2019, 202-203).

Chiang Kai-shek's Northern Expedition also struggled with wavering alliances. However, in *The Dragon Republic*, the issue is that the men do not know or trust each other. They are fighting to accomplish the same goal: replace the Nikara Empire with the Nikara Republic. There is no distinction between Nationalists and Communists, rather the books distinguish between those in favour of a republic or the continuation of the existing empire. As for foreign influences, the trilogy does not mention any reference to a fictional parallel to the Soviet Union, or communism in general. The only foreigners to be mentioned in the series are the Hesperians, which are based on the British Empire and the United States. Whereas Chiang Kai-shek needed Soviet support in terms of military aid and advice to make the Northern Expedition a success, Vaisra needs the Hesperians (Van de Ven 2003, 103). The Hesperians offer Vaisra and his resistance aid -weapons, ships, and food- on one condition: the Nikara must prove that they are ready for civilization, refusing to make investments until they are assured of Vaisra's victory. Instead, the Hesperians

send a small unit of soldiers and priests along Vaisra's campaign to assess whether the Nikara are capable of establishing a republic and governing their own country (Kuang 2019, 247). Reflecting the desire of the Americans at the time of the Northern Expedition: "a fully sovereign China, its self-respect and dignity restored, welcoming foreigners who wanted to help" (Taylor 2009, 58).

In *The Dragon Republic,* throughout the entire campaign, the characters are anxiously trying to prove to the Hesperian emissaries that they are worthy of their support, knowing they cannot win against the Empress without Hesperian ships and weapons. Finally, during the conclusive battle between the Empress and the Republican Army, the Hesperians arrive with thousands of troops, Vaisra has won. However, just before this battle, Rin is cornered by the southern Warlords, who want to abandon the alliance, and defect from the Republic. The Warlords try to reason with Rin, and make her join them by telling her the truth of Vaisra's intentions:

> "This war has been orchestrated by Vaisra and the Hesperians to put him in a prime position to consolidate control of this country. They didn't come during the third war because they wanted to see the Empire bleed. They won't come now until Vaisra's challengers are dead. Vaisra is no true democrat, nor a champion of the people. He's an opportunist building his throne with Nikara blood." (Kuang 2019, 507-508).

Rin and her comrades come up with a plan to leave the Republic and flee to the south, however before the plan can come into action, Rin is captured by Vaisra's son Nezha. She is held captive while two of her friends are tortured to death. When Rin escapes, she learns that Vaisra is eliminating his old allies, those who oppose him now, the southern Warlords.

> "Vaisra's going after the southern Warlords," Kitay explained. "He's won his Empire. Now he's consolidating his power. He started with you, and now he's just cleaning up the others. I tried to give them some warning, but couldn't reach them in time." (Kuang, 2019, 545).

This situation parallels to Chiang Kai-shek's purge of the Communists during the Shanghai Massacre (1927). The Nationalists and the Communists had previously allied themselves to accomplish the goals of national unification, and independence by eliminating the threats posed by both warlordism and foreign imperialism (Meisner 1999, 21). On March 21-22, 1927, the Communist-led working class succeeded in taking control over parts of Shanghai, and as they expected the Nationalist Army to be their allies, the Nationalists were allowed into the city

(Meisner 1999, 27). However, on April 12, the KMT turned on the CCP, and the military supremacy of the Nationalist Army destroyed countless Communist organizations, including workers unions, trade unions, and student organizations, in Shanghai, but also in the countryside (Meisner 1999, 27). The CCP was reduced from 58.000 members in the beginning of 1927, to under 10.000 at the end of the year (Meisner 1999, 28). The slaughter marked the end of the alliance between the Nationalists and the Communists and forced the remaining members of the CCP to flee.

The Shanghai Massacre and the purge of the Communists is similar to Vaisra's purge of the southern Warlords. He turned on those who were first his allies because he had no need for them anymore once he won the battle against the Empress, and consolidated his own power as president of the Republic. Vaisra dealt with the threat the southern Warlords posed before they could formally oppose him and challenge his newfound position.

Conclusion

This chapter investigated the legacy of the Opium Wars and the Northern Expedition and their fictionalised forms in *The Poppy War* trilogy. The historical inspiration becomes increasingly clear when reading the book, as they form the foundation of a large part of the plot. Identifying parallels to history is however less straightforward than with the previous case study of the Nanjing Massacre as the referenced material spans over the entirety of the narrative, rather than one single chapter.

The analysis concludes some similarities and differences between fact and fiction. Although in the books, the First and Second Poppy Wars (First and Second Opium Wars) are only described as having occurred in the past, thus the main character not directly experiencing them, the legacy of the Poppy Wars has a huge influence on the plot of the series, especially considering geopolitical and international relations. Losing the First Poppy War and signing its treaty (Nanjing Treaty) resulted in Hesperian influence all over Nikara, particularly through missionaries. The Hesperians, like the Americans, try to recreate Nikara (China) in their image by introducing the concepts of democracy and Makerism (Christianity).

At the time of the events in *The Dragon Republic*, the Hesperians are desired allies for Vaisra and his Republic, in fact they are necessary for him to win Nikara from the Empress. The campaign against the Empress and opposing Warlords raised by Vaisra and his allies reflects the Northern Expedition of 1926-1928. Both in reality and in fiction was the Northern Expedition complicated by the lack of a cohesive alliance that is familiar with one another. The mixed interests of the Nationalists and Communists prevented the army from becoming one.

Although they were interested in the same goal, the two groups did not hesitate to complicate the situation for the other. Mirroring the conflict between the Republic and the southern Warlords. The trilogy makes no distinction between Nationalists and Communists, but rather between the Empire and the Republic, and later the Southern Coalition. Whereas the Northern Expedition in reality was aided by the Soviet Union, the fictional counterpart was backed by a promise of Hesperian (American) aid.

Chapter 3: The Lives of Rin and Mao: From Peasant to Dictator

> "Rin's life is meant to parallel the trajectory of Mao Zedong from obscurity in Hunan to a genocidal dictator leading millions." – Kuang 2018, in Kuang and Kang *R. F. Kuang Interview – The Poppy War.*

Introduction

The final case study investigates the parallel between *The Poppy War's* main character Rin and Mao Zedong (1893-1976), founder of the People's Republic of China (PRC) and chairman of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Kuang explains that she intended Rin's life and development to parallel Mao Zedong, following a similar trajectory from peasant villages to becoming "genocidal dictators leading millions" (Kuang and Kang, 2018). The question that Kuang asks which *The Poppy War* trilogy attempts 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?" (Kuang and Sondheimer 2018).

Rin's life, the decisions that she makes, and the actions she undergoes are similar in nature to Mao's and follow a general similar trajectory as Mao's life. The similarities start at their hometowns, both Mao and Rin calling poor, rural villages in the obscurity of the country their home. Mao was born in the Shaoshan valley, in China's Hunan province. At a young age, Mao received Confucian education at a tutor's home, studying Chinese classics, Chinese language and history, calligraphy, and poetry (Chang and Halliday 2005, 26). Aged fourteen, Mao's father had arranged for him to be married, which Mao was opposed to (Chang and Halliday 2005, 26). When his wife died just a year into their marriage, he demanded to leave his hometown Shaoshan and resume his education at a modern school outside the village (Chang and Halliday 2005, 26). Similarly, in *The Poppy War,* Rin lives in the south of Nikara, in the peasant village Tikany. To escape her destiny of being forced into an arranged marriage, Rin, under the guidance of a tutor, starts to study Nikara classics, history, mathematics, and logics, to prepare herself for the "Keju", the entrance exam to the military Sinegard Academy. Thus, the similarities between Mao and Rin start from their unknown, peasant hometowns, their aversion to arranged marriages, and using education as an opportunity to escape the life of a peasant.

The Burning God (2020) is the last instalment of *The Poppy War* trilogy, and builds on the events described in the first and second book. After Rin decides to leave Vaisra and his Republic, she and the southern Warlords establish the "Southern Coalition". The whole country is divided, with the Republic, rogue warlords, factions of the surviving Mugenese army, and

the Southern Coalition all battling each other for power. Kuang asks the question: who has power, and what is done with that power? Which faction is best fit for government? (Kuang 2021). Next to the general parallel between Rin and Mao, this case study examines how the Southern Coalition in *The Burning God* resembles the CCP, and draws parallels between the Long March of 1934 and its fictional counterpart. Lastly, this case study discusses how history and fantasy diverge at the end of *The Burning God.*

The Chinese Communist Party

In October 1927, after Chiang Kai-shek's purge of the Communists, Mao Zedong led the remainder of the CCP's military force to the remote mountain region Jinggangshan, bordering Hunan and Jiangxi, where he started a military base and recruited allies and soldiers for his "Red Army" (Meisner 1999, 31). However, Mao was not the only power amongst the Chinese Communists trying to consolidate a proletarian base for their army and revolution, Chinese Communist leaders supported by the Comintern continuously battled the Maoist faction for control over the CCP and the Red Army (Meisner 1999, 32). The Comintern (Communist International) founded by Lenin in 1919, was a Soviet political instrument advocating for communism, in which Moscow was able to control the activities of foreign communist parties (Short 1999, 2). In the early 1930s, the person in control of the CCP varied from time to time. Strategically, Moscow surrounded Mao with men loyal to Soviet orders, including Bo Gu, Zhou Enlai, and Otto Braun, otherwise known as the "three-man group" or "troika" (Short 1999, 2). All three members of the troika and their positions were supported by the Comintern, Bo Gu as Party leader, Zhou Enlai as General Political Commissar of the Red Army, and Otto Braun as Comintern military adviser (Short 1999, 2).

A parallel to this situation can be drawn between history and fiction, in *The Burning God*, where Rin (Mao) struggles to take hold over the army and get anything done without the Southern Coalition (Comintern-supported Chinese Communists) preventing her from consolidating any real power. Although the trilogy does not provide a clear comparison between these historical figures and characters in the book other than Rin and Mao, an overall comparison between Mao and other factions of the CCP opposing him can be drawn in relation to the Southern Coalition in *The Burning God*. However, the Southern Coalition is not supported by a fictional version of the Soviet Union or foreign Communist influence, as the communist ideology is not mentioned in the trilogy. The Southern Coalition parallels the position of the Communists, but not the ideology.

Much like the real Northern Expedition where Chiang Kai-shek and the Nationalists managed to take hold of power in China, the fictional version of the Expedition placed Vaisra -and by extension his son Nezha- at the head of his Republic. Rin and the Southern Coalition -which parallels to the Communists- retreat to the peasant villages in the South of Nikara. The Coalition's base camp is in Ruijin, the fictional counterpart to the Chinese city Ruijin in the Jiangxi province. The government of the Chinese Soviet Republic -also called the Jiangxi Soviet- formed in 1931 established their capital in Ruijin and would remain there for three years (Meisner 1999, 32). Until ultimately in 1934, the Nationalist Army destroyed the Jiangxi Soviet and forced the Communists to flee (Walder 2015, 15).

A similar situation occurs in *The Burning God.* Rin wants to march out of Ruijin, she feels like the Southern Coalition is on borrowed time (Kuang 2020, 58). As soon as Vaisra and the Republic are done dealing with other insurgencies, she fears they will pursue her and the Coalition, Rin wants to fight rather than hide in the mountains (Kuang 2020, 58). More importantly, Rin wants to march south to liberate the southern provinces from any remaining Mugenese forces, while gathering supplies and recruiting soldiers for her own army. She attempts to convince the Coalition of her plan:

> "If we win the south, we get warm bodies. Food stores. Access to river routes, armories, and who knows what else we've been relinquishing to the Mugenese. Our armies will swell by thousands, and we'll have the supply lines to support them." (Kuang 2020, 64).

However, Rin is unable to simply do what she wants, she was promised the position of commander in the Southern Coalition, but as the other Warlords deem her too young and inexperienced, she cannot hold on to any executive power. Even when she manages to get herself a commander's position by eliminating one of the other commanders, the Coalition hardly takes her serious and sends her off with a small force of two thousand soldiers (Kuang 2020, 67).

During the years of the Jiangxi Soviet, the CCP experienced an ongoing internal conflict between Comintern-supported Chinese Communist leaders and the Maoist faction about who was and who should be in control of the Party and the Red Army (Meisner 1999, 32). Mao's faction of the Red Army, which he commanded together with senior military commander Zhu De, was colloquially called the "Zhu-Mao Army" (Karl 2010, 38). The Army was famous for its use of guerrilla warfare tactics and operated according to the maxim "luring the enemy deep" (Karl 2010, 40). The Army ensured growth and mobility by absorbing the local peasants into the Army, rallying them for the Communist cause (Meisner 1999, 31). Another influential

Maoist expression is “political power comes out of the barrel of a gun”, underlining the importance of not just rallying the peasants, but that to ensure the success of the revolution, the Communists should focus on building their own army and consolidate military power (Meisner 1999, 28). Similarly, in *The Burning God*, Rin understands the importance of the masses. Whereas the Republic has Hesperian technology, the south has numbers. Although the passage below shows Rin’s understanding of the importance of military power, it also shows her desensitization to the loss of human life. The southerners are many, making them replaceable.

> They would take back the south with sheer numbers. The Mugenese and the Republic were strong, but the south was many. And if southerners were dirt like all the legends said, then they would crush their enemies with the overwhelming force of the earth until they could only dream of breathing. They would bury them with their bodies. They would drown them in their blood (Kuang 2020, 109).

Rin leaves Ruijin and marches towards other places in southern Nikara to liberate them from lingering Mugenese forces, she is joined by Souji, the commander of the “Iron Wolves” unit, who Rin forced into submission. Souji teaches Rin all about guerrilla warfare tactics, and although they only have a small military force, they manage to get rid of the Mugenese. Similar to the guerrilla tactics employed by the Zhu-Mao Army, Rin’s division of the Southern Army utilizes comparable tactics for its liberation endeavour, especially regarding the use of local people for their operations.

After Rin liberates her hometown Tikany, the leader of the Southern Coalition, the warlord Gurubai reveals that Nezha, and the Republic have offered to grant clemency to the Coalition if they turn in Rin (Kuang 2020, 187). Rin is betrayed by both Gurubai and Souji, and they prepare to ship her off to the Republic. However, Rin manages to escape and return to her Army, which in the meantime has been fighting the Republic. Vaisra is killed during this battle, leaving the Republic in the hands of his son Nezha. When the battle is won, Rin has to deal with the insubordinate Gurubai and Souji, who are continuously defying her rule. She cannot let them live or she will face another uprising.

This is similar to Mao in 1930, when the Jiangxi Communist base was rumoured to have been infiltrated by the Nationalists. Reacting to this, Mao ordered the arrest of thousands of Red Army officers and soldiers, suspecting them of betrayal (Karl 2010, 42). The arrested Jiangxi Communists “confessed” their guilt, and were subsequently executed, any additional mutineers were suppressed by Mao’s loyal troops (Karl 2010, 42). Mao organized public executions, rallying people into a crowd and making the execution compulsory to watch as a

way of performative violence instigating fear into those in attendance (Chang and Halliday 2005, 80). In a similar vein, Rin executes the leaders who opposed her, Gurubai is killed quickly, but she makes a public spectacle of Souji. She insinuates that he has betrayed not only her, but the Southern Army at large. She forces him to confess, and as she calls him a traitor she lets Souji be torn apart by the crowd.

> This was violence, but it wasn't chaos. This anger was utterly controlled, fine-tuned, directed, a massive swell of power that only she could control.
>
> And it wasn't just fueled by resentment toward Souji. In a sense, this massacre wasn't about Souji at all. This was about demonstrating a change in loyalty, a gruesome apology by anyone who had ever spoken against her before. This was a blood sacrifice to a new figurehead.
>
> And if anyone still doubted her leadership, then the screaming would at least strike fear deep into their hearts. Anyone on the fringes now understood the cost of opposition. Through love or hate, adoration or fear, she would have them one way or another (Kuang 2020, 307).

The difference between Rin and Mao however, is that Rin is less ruthless to the soldiers in her Army, leaving the men in Gurubai and Souij's factions unharmed, whereas Mao was notorious for his purges of alleged traitors in the Red Army, forced to confess under torture (Short 1999, 268-269). Like Mao, for Rin, the execution of Souji is performative in nature. She has to show the Army she is in control, and that anyone going against her will face the consequences.

The Long March

In 1934, Chiang Kai-shek mobilized his armies against the CCP in the Jiangxi province, the overwhelming forces of the Nationalists forced the Communists to abandon the base and embark on what became known as the "Long March" (Mitter 2014, 69). Approximately 80.000 men commenced on the year-long journey from Jiangxi to the Shaanxi province in the north of China, fewer than 10.000 survived the 6000-mile journey and made it to their destination in Yan'an (Meisner 1999, 33). Reality was that the Long March formed a desperate retreat after a staggering political and military defeat (Karl 2010, 47). In 1935 after arriving in Zunyi, Mao managed to consolidate himself a dominant position in the Party leadership and declared the CCP independent from the Comintern, calling out the failed strategies of the other leaders, the Troika in particular, which had forced the Communists into retreating (Short 1999, 321; Karl 2010, 47).

In *The Burning God,* after the battle against the Republic and the execution of her former allies, Rin becomes the general of the Southern Coalition, and the Southern Army. Like Mao, she is able to consolidate her position as leader during the March. Rin takes her Army to the north, to Dog Province (Shaanxi province), in a fictional equivalent to the Long March. Although Rin managed to defeat the Republic in the previous battle, reinforcements are on the way to ultimately annihilate the Southern Army. The march is severely complicated by the mountainous terrain, the altitude, the weather, the threat of pursuing Republican forces, and a lack of food.

> Exhausting weeks stretched into grueling, monotonous months and somehow, when the march had gone on for so long it seemed there had never been a time when they weren't climbing, the daily horrors they faced became routine (Kuang 2020, 327).

As no more than 10.000 people out of the 80.000 that embarked on the Long March in 1934 survived, in its fictional parallel in *The Burning God* likewise only a fragment of Rin's original Army survives the March. Finally at their destination, Rin convinces the Dog warlord to fight with her against the Republic and the Hesperians aiding them. With her Army rested and recovered from the Long March, Rin decides to move south again, this time to confront Nezha who inherited command over the Republic from his father, and make an end to the Republic. The Southern Army conquers the city of Arlong, the capital of the Republic, and defeats the last of the Hesperians, forcing them to flee Nikara. Nezha escapes and flees to Speer (Taiwan), paralleling Chiang Kai-shek's retreat to Taiwan at the end of the Chinese Civil War in 1949.

In hindsight, the Long March became part of the foundation myth of the CCP, celebrated for its heroism, and the epic survival and resilience of the Red Army (Mitter 2014, 70). The legacy of the Long March – also called the "Yan'an" spirit- includes the belief that the people hold the power to shape reality, to conquer all obstacles, by adhering to strength and willpower, a sense of revolutionary purpose, and above all else to be able to hold onto hope, the hope that their actions would realize their ideals (Meisner 1999, 34). It was Mao who had faith in this, and who inspired it in others. "Maoist" values such as courage, sacrifice, and diligence, amongst others, were carried out by all veterans of the Long March, essential to their survival and with that, the survival of the Communist revolution (Meisner 1999, 35). The Long March was celebrated despite the amount of people who did not survive, and the survivors of the Long March had an almost religious sense of dedication to the revolution (Meisner 1999, 35). For Mao, the Long March contributed to his self-perception as "man of destiny", and the leader of

the revolution that he would see to completion (Meisner 1999, 35). In *The Burning God,* Rin holds a similar belief:

> She needed her soldiers to believe that they mattered. That their blood and sweat were the only things that could turn the wheels of history. (…) For that she needed them to believe that they wrote the script of the universe. Not the gods (Kuang 2020, 310).
>
> That was what kept Rin going (…) —the idea that survival was promised, victory was foreordained, because the truth of the universe was on their side (Kuang 2020, 342).

As Mao believed himself to be a "man of destiny", so did Rin believe that the Gods of her religion were on her side. For Mao and the Communists, the Long March was a dedication to their mission, in this way the sacrifices made could be justified as an absolute commitment to the Communist revolution (Meisner 1999, 35). The Mao Zedong "cult" was born out of the Long March, as it were the policies and wisdom of the leader that had led the survivors to the "promised land" in Shaanxi and proved the righteousness of the revolution (Meisner 1999, 35). For Rin, surviving the fictious Long March and reaching their destination against all odds meant the superiority of her religion over those of the Hesperians. Furthermore, it proves that she and her Southern Army were on the right path, not Nezha and his Republic, not the Hesperians, there is only she and her victory.

Alternative Ending: Divergence between History and Fiction

Nearing the end of *The Burning God,* Rin and her Southern Army have won, the Civil War is over. Kuang states in an interview that she is frustrated with juvenile or naïve attitudes to revolution and wars in fantasy, in a way that the final battle is won and suddenly everyone lives happily ever after (Kuang 2021, 9:55). Because -she argues- this is not how reality and history work (Kuang 2021, 11:00). When the CCP won the Chinese Civil War in 1949, China did not miraculously change overnight for the better. Reality was that the country had fought the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945), followed by the second part of the Chinese Civil War (1946-1949), which had left Chinese cities ruined, displaced millions of people, and impoverished even more. The book shows a Nikara which is suffering from mass starvation after years of war, paralleling to the Great Chinese Famine of 1959-1961, in which an estimated 15.000.000 to 30.000.000 people died famine related deaths (Meisner 1999, 237).

The ending of *The Burning God* thus shows a different approach than the typical "happily ever-after" ending. Rin and the remaining leadership consisting of her friends are concerned with governance. How can they restore Nikara from years of war and internal

conflict, how do they rule a country? Rin is in charge of civil administration, law enforcement, relocating refugees, dealing with bandits, ensuring food supplies, rebuilding the economy, when she would much rather focus on military remobilization as she is not convinced the Hesperians will stay gone (Kuang 2020, 558). During this period, Rin becomes incredibly paranoid and distrustful, even of those closest to her, suspecting them of spying on her for Nezha, and by extension the Hesperians. Ultimately, Rin has no choice but to negotiate with Nezha and the Hesperians for aid, her people are starving, and she has no way of providing food. The book ends with Rin realizing she cannot live peacefully alongside the Hesperians, that the only way forward for Nikara is by bending the knee. As long as she is at the helm, the country will descend into another war. Therefore, the last chapter ends with Rin killing herself, leaving the country to Nezha, in the hope that the Republic can create the peace that she cannot. The trilogy ends by imagining a situation in which Mao Zedong died at the end of the Chinese Civil War, and Chiang Kai-shek and the KMT came to power instead.

Thus, history and fiction diverge at the end of *The Burning God,* Kuang offers a reimagination of the conclusion of the Chinese Civil War. How the Chinese Civil War ended is already known, what happened to and in China afterwards as well. The question posed by the alternative ending of the trilogy follows: what could have happened to China if 1949 had gone differently (Kuang 2021, 5:48)? What if the KMT rather than the CCP emerged victorious after years of conflict? This is a question which is left open by the ending, inviting the reader to come up with their own answers.

Conclusion

This chapter examined parallels between the lives of the main character of *The Poppy War* trilogy Rin and Chairman of the CCP Mao Zedong, as Mao formed the main inspiration for Rin's character. Firstly, this case study assessed similarities in their backgrounds, both Rin and Mao coming from peasant villages, and using education to escape the life of a peasant. Furthermore, parallels between the Chinese Communist Party and the Southern Coalition were examined in this chapter. As the CCP and KMT were in conflict in history, so were the Southern Coalition and the Republic in fiction. *The Burning God* also shows the internal conflict of the Southern Coalition, with Rin trying to consolidate her own position despite the other members causing complications, which mirrors Mao's position during the years of the Jiangxi Soviet.

There are also parallels between Rin and Mao in terms of behaviour. Both continuously attempt to improve their own position, and do not hesitate to eliminate those they called allies. The Long March, both in history and fiction, forms an important moment for both Mao and Rin

in which they were able to consolidate their own position and gain significant power. The Communists in 1934 and the Southern Army in *The Burning God* followed their respective leader through arduous circumstances, dangerous terrain, and imminent threats. Despite the enormous amount of casualties, from 80.000 to 10.000 in history, and from a large army to only a fragment in fiction, in both cases the Long March became something that was celebrated as a "founding myth". For Mao, surviving the Long March contributed to the idea that he was a "man of destiny" (Meisner 1999, 35). For Rin, surviving meant an affirmation of the correctness of her position and mission. Lastly, this case study concludes that *The Poppy War* trilogy ends its parallels in the final chapter. Here, reality and fantasy diverge. The historical fact of Mao's victory over Chiang Kai-shek and the Nationalists is altered to a fictional interpretation in which the Nationalists emerged victorious instead. Leaving the reader –especially a reader familiar with Chinese history- to consider this alternative reality.

Conclusion

This thesis explored the relationship between history and fantasy in *The Poppy War* trilogy by R.F. Kuang, and how Kuang incorporates historical elements into her fiction. To formulate an answer to the research question "how does Kuang engage with Chinese history in *The Poppy War* trilogy?" three case studies were examined in which historical elements found in the trilogy were analysed. The case studies illustrate different means of interaction between history and fantasy. The first case study about the Nanjing Massacre exemplified how national trauma can be addressed in a fictional setting, and how fantasy can function as a protective shield between traumatic history and fiction. The second chapter involved the legacy of the Opium Wars, foreign occupation, and the Northern Expedition, illustrating how historical events and inspiration influence the overall plot of *The Poppy War* trilogy. This case study also analysed similarities between the Hesperians in the trilogy, and the Americans in twentieth century China, as well as parallels between the Kuomintang and the Republic, and the Southern Coalition and the Chinese Communist Party. It also drew parallels between Chiang Kai-shek and his wife Song Mayling, and Yin Vaisra and his wife Saikhara in the story. The final case study analysed similarities between the Chinese Communist Party and the Southern Coalition, as well as a fictional version of the Long March. The last chapter also concerned the parallel between Mao Zedong and Rin, and demonstrated how a reimagination of a historical figure and their life can open up an interesting new perspective.

Not only the reimagination of Mao offers a new point of view, the ending of *The Poppy War* trilogy also includes such a unique perspective in which the Nationalists rather than the Communists won the Chinese Civil War. The reader is challenged to consider the question: how would China be different today, if the course of history had taken another path? This question relates to Kuang's intentions for writing *The Poppy War* trilogy, which were threefold. Firstly, on a surface level she wished to get more people interested in Chinese history. Secondly, on a more personal level she wrote *The Poppy War* trilogy -especially the first book- to try and make sense of traumatic history, the Nanjing Massacre in particular. Thirdly, for a particular audience, namely the Chinese diaspora, she intended the trilogy to stimulate dialogue and open up questions about the horrors of Asian history.

> "What do we (Chinese diaspora) do with the PRC (People's Republic of China)? What do you do with your pride in a country that perhaps your parents left because they were fleeing political oppression?" – Kuang 2021, 49:30, in an interview with @twirlingpages and @readbytiffany.

Kuang is concerned with reinterpretation of themes and events in Chinese history in a fantasy setting, rather than a direct retelling of history. *The Poppy War* trilogy does not attempt to explain Chinese history, Sino-Japanese international relations, or Western imperialism in China, as it is not a history book. Instead, the trilogy offers fictional interpretation of these events. Such a reimagination of history invokes the reader with questions, challenging them to reflect critically not only upon the past, but also with an eye towards the future. Kuang thus does not use fantasy aspects solely as a form of escapism, but rather as a tool to explore history and as encouragement for further contemplation.

Future research could further examine the relationship between history and fiction in fantasy novels, especially in regard to non-Western histories. *The Poppy War* trilogy is a successful and popular example of fantasy implementing Chinese history. Scholarship on historical fantasy centres on Western-European history, especially medieval history, and neglects non-Western histories and cultures. Therefore, future research could explore non-Western fantasy works, for example those that implement Asian, Middle Eastern, African, and Indigenous histories, in order to open up new perspectives. Another interesting angle includes a cross comparison between multiple works of (Asian) historical fantasy to examine differences and similarities in the way which authors interact with history in their fiction.

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