

Reimagining Chinese Diaspora in Jamaica: Identity, Politics, and Rebellion in Kerry Young's *Pao*

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ABSTRACT:

This paper explores the dynamics of the Chinese diaspora in Jamaica through an analysis of Kerry Young's novel *Pao*. The influx of Chinese immigrants to Jamaica in the mid-nineteenth century, primarily from the Hakka ethnic group, shaped their evolving relationship with both Jamaica and China. As each generation emerged, the concept of a "homeland" became less relevant, giving way to a shared sense of connection and affinity as diasporic Chinese and Jamaican Chinese. The novel's protagonist, Yang Pao, embodies the challenges faced by the Chinese diaspora in Jamaica during a time of historical and political change.

KEYWORDS: Chinese Diaspora, Caribbean Literature, Kerry Young, *Pao*, Identity, Political Consciousness, Rebellion, Chinese

The influx of Chinese immigrants to Jamaica gained momentum in the mid-nineteenth century, coinciding with the abolition of slavery and the need for a new labor force. The majority of these immigrants belonged to the Hakka ethnic group, hailing from the Guangdong region in southeastern China. The Hakka people¹, often referred to as "guest people," were recognised for their migratory traditions and strong group cohesion. However, as each wave of immigrants arrived and subsequent generations emerged, their relationship with both Jamaica and China evolved. The concept of a "homeland" as a viable or desirable place of return became less relevant for the Chinese diaspora in Jamaica. Instead, the distinctions between different waves of immigrants and generations gradually diminished, giving way to a sense of connection and affinity based on their shared experiences as diasporic Chinese and, eventually, as Jamaican Chinese. In the early history of Jamaica, the Chinese community purposefully remained at the fringes of economic life and colonial consciousness. However, in the years preceding and following Independence, those who chose to stay in Jamaica became progressively more involved in the country's political, social, and economic spheres.² Kerry Young's *Pao*³ effectively bridges seemingly different political and economical entities, prompting us to reconsider our understanding of the Chinese diaspora in Caribbean history.

¹ Easton Lee, Chinese Jamaican poet, writer, actor, and retired Anglican minister writes that the Hakka are "known for their hard work, industry, adaptability and for their nomadic tendencies," but "when things don't suit them, they move on." He notes that with Independence, and later Michael Manley's turn to explicitly socialist politics, the "fear of Socialism and rumours of Communism" frightened many and "true to their Hakka heritage, they moved on" (2008).

² In 1938 China's political and economic landscape was marked with a convergence of: an exponential increase in population; conflicts with Japan (Sino-Japanese War, The Rape of Nanking 1937-1938); continued domestic struggles with Western powers for sovereignty; and natural disasters in the form of floods (The China Floods of 1931 which claimed 4,000,000 lives, the flooding of the Yangtze River in 1911 and 1935, claiming 245,000 and the 1938 flooding of the Yellow River, resulting in the loss of 700,000 more lives). For more see Ping-Ti Ho's *Studies in the Population of China, 1368-1953*.

³ Young, Kerry. *Pao*. New York: Bloomsbury, 2011. Print.

Following Jamaica's independence from British colonial rule in 1962, a significant number of the upper classes and petite bourgeoisie, which included the Chinese community that had established itself through small-scale entrepreneurial ventures, were motivated by self-interest to emigrate. As a result, by 1972, the Chinese population in Jamaica, previously second in size only to Cuba, had been reduced by half (Look Lai's "Asian Diaspora" 46-47).⁴ However, it is important to note that not all Chinese immigrants and Jamaican-born Chinese chose to leave after Independence. In Kerry Young's novel *Pao*, a fictionalised narrative explores the experiences of one individual who decided to remain in Jamaica.

In the face of social and political changes following Jamaica's independence, the central protagonist of the novel, Yang Pao, makes the decision to embrace Jamaica as his home instead of leaving. Pao's family, including his older brother Xiuquan and his mother, emigrates from Guangdong, China to Jamaica in 1938. This time period was marked by violence and turmoil both in China and Jamaica. Pao's father, who had fought for liberation alongside his close friend Zhang, tragically lost his life in the struggle to free China from foreign control. The family leaves behind a China that is grappling with political chaos, poverty, and natural disasters, in search of economic and political stability. As the story unfolds, we learn that Zhang, utilising the fighting skills he had originally employed to help liberate Chinese peasants from the "tyranny of warlords and foreigners" (Young 34) establishes himself in the underworld of Jamaica, engaging in the business of protection and enforcement. By highlighting Pao's journey and his family's experiences, the novel sheds light on the challenges and complexities faced by the Chinese diaspora in Jamaica during a time of significant historical and political change.

The novel portrays the central protagonist's journey of political awakening, which is shaped by the guidance of his surrogate father, Uncle Zhang, and his romantic relationships with Fay Wong and Gloria Campbell. Fay Wong, a respectable black Chinese woman and the daughter of a successful grocery store owner, represents a path towards upward mobility and social acceptance. Pao envisions a future with her, where they can have children who carry on his name. On the other hand, Gloria Campbell is an unconventional black prostitute and madam with whom Pao has a child born out of wedlock. At the beginning of the story, Pao is positioned as the heir to Uncle Zhang's criminal empire, utilising both legal and illegal connections to address injustices and protect vulnerable individuals, particularly young women who have suffered abuse at the hands of exploitative Americans and Britishers.

As readers, we are given insight into Pao's internal struggle as he seeks to define himself within the framework of patriarchal systems and the complexities of familial legacies that require constant negotiation. Through Pao's perspective, the novel explores his evolving political consciousness and his role in the larger context of nation-building. We witness his growth as he grapples with personal identity, societal expectations, and the need for social justice. Pao becomes a lens through which readers can observe the development of both an individual's political awareness and the nation's transformation.

The novel encompasses elements of a bildungsroman, an anti-heroic narrative, and a romance. Within the context of heroic narratives, the heteronormative romance symbolically represents a stage in the

⁴ Lai, Walton Look. "Asian Diasporas and Tropical Migration in the Age of Empire: A Comparative Overview." *The Chinese in Latin American and the Caribbean*. Boston: Koninklijke Brill NV, 2010. 35-64. Print

protagonist's personal development. Pao, the central character, is portrayed as the offspring of two men: his deceased father and his father's comrade, Zhang, as his mother remains a peripheral figure in the story. As a 'fixer,' Pao assists young girls and women who have been victims of sexual and physical abuse, providing support for their education and their illegitimate children. However, Pao's actions do not make him a candidate for sainthood. Later in the novel, during a negotiation with Sergeant Clifton Brown, Pao attempts to exploit Brown's homosexuality against him. Brown responds with silence, leading Pao to realise the hardships and dangers that someone like Brown faces in a society like Jamaica. Pao understands that Brown simply wants to be accepted by people who understand him, without fear of violence. Both men, connected through their shared experiences of being insiders and outsiders, form a friendship and collaborate to protect their dubious business interests. Additionally, they protect individuals from sexual minorities, such as Marguerite Lopez, who becomes involved with a white girl involved in murder. Pao and Brown assist Margy in escaping legal and social persecution, shielding her from condemnation for engaging in what is perceived as 'deviant' behavior by white people.

Pao is aware that the judicial system would punish Margy while overlooking the white girl who committed the crimes. He understands that the 'judge and jury' desire to uphold an image of Jamaica as a morally upright, racially mixed, and heterosexual nation, intolerant of 'immoral' conduct from Jamaican individuals. Despite Pao and Sergeant Brown benefiting from certain aspects of patriarchal and heteronormative power structures, their privileges are constrained. While Pao may conform to certain heteropatriarchal norms through his marriage, mistress, and inheritance from Zhang, he remains an outsider in Jamaican 'middlebrow' sensibilities and politics due to his Chinese heritage and questionable business practices. Sergeant Brown, responsible for enforcing the boundaries of law and respectability, finds himself at odds with the law and norms due to his own sexual desires and practices.

In the chapter titled "Doctrine," Pao excitedly recounts to his uncle Zhang the story of his triumph over an arrogant American. However, Zhang does not allow Pao to indulge in fantasies of individual heroism. He reminds Pao that the responsibility lies with the masses, not with individual men, to liberate themselves from the yoke of oppression, the tyranny of warlords, and the domination of foreigners. As part of his pedagogical approach, Zhang regularly shares stories of revolution with a young Pao, emphasizing that it is a struggle between an army of workers and peasants determined to overthrow feudal warlords and foreign powers, and the imperialists and counter-revolutionaries seeking to suppress them. Zhang's revolutionary discourse serves as a global and historical reference point for the dockyard struggles and provides counter-narratives to Pao's street battles. Unconsciously, Pao adopts this pedagogical practice and passes it on to his own children. Zhang's rhetoric of revolution becomes even more intricate due to his relationship with the local and national economies. It is revealed that Zhang gained power by resolving conflicts and earned a reputation for being both tough and compassionate through displays of simultaneous brutality and humanity. For instance, upon arriving in Kingston, Zhang establishes his authority by hanging a black man upside down for burning down a Chinese shop. However, upon discovering that the arson was a result of a complicated romantic relationship between the man and the shopkeeper's daughter, Zhang rescues the man, nurses him back to health, and they become best friends. These actions solidify Zhang's status as "Uncle Zhang," and his authority as "Uncle Law" takes effect.

The presence of "Uncle Law" gangsterism highlights the use of brute force against the diasporic subject. This notion of "Uncle Law" relies on the constant display of violence and the threat thereof. It serves as both a direct response to larger social structures of power and a counter-capital formation. Zhang embodies the tangible involvement of the Chinese community in the underworld of Kingston, where freemason societies (known as Tongs) held control over numerous illicit gambling establishments, nightclubs, and played a significant role in Jamaica's music industry (as noted by Lowe and Thomson).⁵

The evolution of Pao's political consciousness is influenced by multiple factors, including the teachings of Zhang, the women in his life, and his own observations and reflections. Pao's family occupies a dual position, belonging to both the petite bourgeoisie and the lumpenproletariat⁶. They engage in legitimate business ventures but also participate in illicit activities such as the protection business and black-market trade. Gangsterism, in the context of the novel, challenges Orientalist representations of Asian men as passive and effeminate, offering a mode of operation that defies such stereotypes. Pao's understanding of his own identity and the social landscape of Jamaica is shaped through his interactions with various characters. Zhang imparts revolutionary narratives to Pao, emphasizing the collective struggle against oppression.

The women in Pao's life, such as his wife Fay and Gloria, provide different perspectives on political change, exposing him to the complexities of Jamaican political life. Pao's evolving comprehension encompasses the nuances of Independence, realising that it is not a simple black-and-white matter but involves individuals who do not fit neatly into racial categories. As Pao's political and social consciousness develops, he becomes critical of foreign business interests and questions nationalist amnesia that ignores Jamaica's commercial origins. The novel concludes with Pao's granddaughter, Sunita, symbolising the multiethnic and multicultural identity of Jamaica. However, the resolution is tentative, acknowledging the challenges and complexities of nation-building and the superficiality of political doctrine. The closing chapter reflects on the production of identity and the search for something to believe in, reminiscent of Zhang's influence on Pao's worldview. Despite some resolutions in Pao's personal life, the ending remains bittersweet, contemplating the ongoing journey of self-discovery and the complexities of Jamaican society.

Pao reflects on the challenges of forging a national identity and dignity in the face of a violent capitalist regime. He contemplates Michael Manley's call for Jamaicans to shape their own destiny, acknowledging the difficulty of maintaining such ideals. Pao acknowledges Gloria's viewpoint that not everyone is focused on nation-building, prompting him to confront his own complicity in capitalist self-interest.

Some people just wanted to put food on the table. And I suppose that was me as well because even though I talk Zhang's high ideals I was still busy just making money and fixing any problem that anybody wanted to bring to me. I try hard to believe that out of many we could be one people, but when the shooting start I couldn't make up my mind to go get myself killed over it. Not like my father did in China. (Young 269)

⁵ Lowe, Keith. "Reflections on Chinese Settlement in Jamaica". *Essays on the Chinese Diaspora in the Caribbean*. Walton Look Lai Ed., Trinidad and Tobago: Walton Look Lai, 2006. 85-104. Print.

⁶ Although mentioned in *The German Ideology*, Marx refers to this dangerous class as "scum" in *The Communist Manifesto* (27) and in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon* (1852), where he describes the lumpenproletariat as irredeemable: "with dubious means of subsistence and of dubious origin, alongside ruined and adventurous offshoots of the bourgeoisie, were vagabonds, discharged soldiers, discharged jailbirds, escaped galley slaves, swindlers, mountebanks, lazzaroni, pickpockets, tricksters, gamblers, maquereaux [pimps], brothel keepers, porters, literati, organ grinders, ragpickers, knife grinders, tinkers, beggars — in short, the whole indefinite, disintegrated mass, thrown hither and thither, which the French call *la bohème*" (2).

Pao's struggle to establish his identity is further complicated by his Chinese heritage in the Jamaican context. Unlike Zhang, who draws on a revolutionary genealogy rooted in modern China's founding, Pao grapples with the mediation of his identity as a Chinese diaspora in Jamaica. The naming of his brother and son as "Xiuquan" reflects a tension between national fantasy, rebellion, violence, and betrayal. Pao's brother represents a collapse of leaders, embodying conflicting ideologies and historical events. Pao acknowledges their betrayals—the brother's abandonment of their family to pursue a different life in the United States, and his son's departure for England and rejection of his Chinese heritage.

Through Gloria's influence, Pao begins to understand himself within an alternative genealogy of rebellion and revolution, where Independence serves as a starting point rather than a fully realised goal. Despite this awareness, Pao recognises both hope and the potential for failure in Jamaica. As readers, we gain a deeper understanding of the chaotic forces at play in the Caribbean, as well as the role of history as a mechanism of colonialism, neo-colonialism, and imperialism. Young's novel challenges historical narratives by giving voice to marginalised perspectives and questioning the actions of those in power.

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