

# Western Images of Asia: Fu Manchu and the Yellow Peril

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## Introduction

In the first half of the twentieth century Sax Rohmer was one of the most widely read and highly successful authors of popular fiction in the world. Rohmer, an Englishman whose real name was Arthur Sarsfield Ward, lived from 1883 to 1959. During a writing career that spanned almost fifty years, Rohmer proved very productive, for he published forty-one novels, eleven collections of short stories, two works of non-fiction, and several dozen short stories scattered around various magazines.<sup>1</sup> What he is most remembered for, however, is his series of books featuring Fu Manchu, the most infamous Oriental arch-villain in modern literary history. The books enjoyed wide popularity throughout the English-speaking world; moreover, a number of them have been translated into almost two dozen languages, ranging from Burmese to Ukrainian.<sup>2</sup> With their mysterious plots and exotic settings, the Fu Manchu stories provided ample material for many radio and TV programs, as well as comic strips and full-length movies, particularly during the three decades from 1930-1960. Even today people show enough interest in his fiction to justify a reprinting of the thirteen novels and four stories that make up the series.<sup>3</sup> In addition, there is an active and comprehensive Fu Manchu website on the Internet which provides extremely detailed coverage of all aspects of the author and the memorable character he created.<sup>4</sup>

To most readers, Fu Manchu personifies evil: to be precise, the evil of the "Yellow Peril."<sup>5</sup> What exactly is the Yellow Peril? One standard dictionary defines it as "the power or alleged power of Asiatic peoples, esp. the Chinese, to threaten or destroy the supremacy of White or Western civilization."<sup>6</sup> In that it emphasizes racial superiority, this concept can be traced back to the philosophers Kant and Montesquieu in the eighteenth century, both of whom posited the existence of a separate and distinct yellow race.<sup>7</sup> From the mid-1800s on, as more and more Chinese (and later Japanese) immigrated to Western countries in search of work, they became the target of fear and discrimination by whites. The anti-Oriental sentiment was especially strong in the western part of the United States, where many Chinese and

Japanese had settled. But it was not until 1895 that the term “Yellow Peril” was actually coined, presumably by Kaiser Wilhelm III of Germany.<sup>8</sup> It seems that he sent a drawing entitled “The Yellow Peril” to his cousin Tsar Nicholas II. The drawing, which depicts thunderous clouds above an image of a Buddha surrounded by fire, was meant to represent the mystical and dangerous threat emanating from the East.<sup>9</sup> After warning of the threat, Wilhelm then conveniently used it to justify Germany’s grab for concessions in China. The three events that helped convince Westerners that they had much to fear from countries such as Japan and China were the Sino-Japanese War (1894–1895), the Russo-Japanese War (1904–1905), and the Boxer Uprising (1898–1901). As a result of Japan’s victories over China and Russia, Japan became the first Asian country to achieve the status of a world power, and for the first time she began to appear forbidding to the Western imagination. However, what most convinced people in the West that Oriental countries posed a threat was the Boxer Uprising, which, they believed, proved beyond a doubt that the Chinese (and, by association, other Asians) were fanatical, cruel, and duplicitous.<sup>10</sup> And the image got worse as time went on.

It was in this context that Sax Rohmer began writing and publishing his Fu Manchu books. Before becoming a successful author, he worked at a number of odd jobs, including writing articles for newspapers and magazines, but none turned out to be very lucrative. Early on he developed an interest in the mysterious, accumulating a large library on Egyptology and occult literature.<sup>11</sup> His personal connection with China was tenuous, to say the least. Throughout his life he never visited the country; in fact, the closest he came to anything Chinese was when he made several trips to Limehouse, an area of high crime in London at the turn of the century. It was the place where most Chinese immigrants settled, in other words the Chinatown of London. His only reason for going there was to do research for a magazine article that he had been asked to write. It was to be about a Chinese named Mr. King who was reputed to be the big boss of a crime syndicate in Limehouse connected with gambling and opium. It is thought that the character of Fu Manchu was loosely based on King. Except for what he had observed in Limehouse, Rohmer had no special knowledge about China—be it the country or the people or the language. In a candid interview with his biographer, he readily admitted as much: “I made my name on Fu Manchu because I know nothing about the Chinese ... I know something about Chinatown. But that is a different matter.”<sup>12</sup> As a result, Rohmer was forced to rely almost entirely on his imagination in portraying Fu Manchu, China, and things Chinese. A good example of this is the villain’s name itself, which makes no sense as a name in the Chinese language. Nevertheless, Rohmer had one thing going for him: a good sense of timing. Here is how he described it: “Conditions for launching a Chinese villain on the market were ideal. I wondered why it had never before

occurred to me. The Boxer Rebellion had started off rumors of a Yellow Peril which had not yet died down.”<sup>13</sup> In 1913 he published *The Mystery of Fu Manchu*, his first novel featuring the Chinese villain.<sup>14</sup> In 1959, thirteen novels and forty-six years later, he published *The Emperor Fu Manchu*, which turned out to be the last book in the series. He died that year, ironically enough, of the Asian flu.

In this paper, I shall describe and analyze the images of Fu Manchu, China, and the Orient in general, as presented in the various novels. I will try to show how they developed and changed over the years, both for better and worse. To better organize a large body of material, I divide Rohmer’s books into three periods: The Early Period (1913–1917), The Prolific Decade (1931–1941), and The Late Period (1948–1959).

### **The Early Period (1913–1917)**

Three works are included in this period: *The Mystery of Fu Manchu* (1913), *The Devil Doctor* (1916), and *The Si-Fan Mysteries* (1917). It was these early novels that made the author famous and Fu Manchu a household name. They contain much in the way of plot and character that was reworked and reused in all the subsequent Fu Manchu books. Especially important is the fact that they provided the public with clear-cut images of the supposed threat from Asia. And in the character of Fu Manchu, Rohmer gave life and a definite form to many of the anti-Oriental prejudices commonly held by Westerners at that time.

Here is how Fu Manchu is described early in the first of the three books, *The Mystery of Fu Manchu*:

Image a person, tall, lean and feline, high-shouldered, with a brow like Shakespeare and a face like Satan, a close-shaven skull, and long, magnetic eyes of the true cat-green. Invest him with all the cruel cunning of an entire Eastern race, accumulated in one giant intellect, with all the resources of science past and present, with all the resources, if you will, of a wealthy government – which, however, already has denied all knowledge of his existence. Image that awful being, and you have a mental picture of Dr. Fu Manchu, the yellow peril incarnate in one man.<sup>15</sup>

He is frightening and cruel as well as impressive and brilliant. As the story progresses, the author fills in more details about the doctor. With his inanimate and inhuman eyes and discolored teeth, Fu Manchu is seen as physically repulsive. It should be noted that everyone who comes into contact with him is mesmerized by the abnormal intensity of his stare, for his eyes have a hypnotic power unknown to other human beings. Dressed in his signature long, yellow robe, he appears to be a figure from “the realms of delirium” who exudes an “intense force of malignancy.”<sup>16</sup>

Fu Manchu stands out not only because of his foreboding appearance but also because of his incomparable intellect. Trained as a scientist in the great universities of Europe, he is adept in all the arts and sciences, and he is continually exploring the secrets of nature. He is a great linguist who has mastered most of the major languages of the world and speaks them with little or no accent. There seems to be no field of inquiry with which he is not intimately familiar. He is judged to have the brains of three men of genius; however, he uses his vast talents in the pursuit of evil. In short, he is “most formidable creature in the known world” and “the sinister genius of the Yellow movement”

What is Fu Manchu’s goal? Simply put, it is to overthrow the Western nations and place America and Europe under Eastern rule; his desire is for boundless empire. Of course, he cannot achieve this by himself, so he is backed by a wealthy political movement originating somewhere in Asia. He is the advance-agent for this new force and his job is to “pave the way” for the others. As we expect, he encounters opposition in England, where most of the action in the first three novels takes place. The man in charge of thwarting this menace to the civilized world is a British Colonial officer named Nayland Smith. And throughout all of the Fu Manchu stories, it is the rivalry between these two men that gives the series a sense of continuity. In spite of his resourcefulness, Smith is never able to completely defeat his enemy; on the other hand, Fu Manchu can never quite get the better of this tenacious British official. Much of the excitement generated in these stories originates in the cat-and-mouse game played by the two men. Since the villain has so much power, however, it is an impossible battle for only one man. So in each volume of the series, at least one other Westerner helps Smith in his never-ending attempt to bring the criminals to justice and save the Western world at the same time.

Readers are never in doubt that it is an epic struggle between East and West, between the yellow race and the white race, between heathens and Christians. That it is basically a racial confrontation is quite obvious from the very beginning of the first book; and the theme continues, with some modification, to the end of the final volume.

The evil nature of Fu Manchu is unavoidably intertwined with the fact that he is at once Chinese, Oriental, Asian, and Yellow. His mere existence is considered a danger to the entire white race. The East is awakening from a long sleep and, in its newly found aggressiveness, poses a real threat to the West. And this threat is symbolized by Fu Manchu, the enemy of the white race who is “writing his name over England in characters of blood.” We are told that if he is victorious it means the victory of the yellow races over the white.

Everything about the East conjures up images of cunning and danger and mystery and treachery. In order to carry out his plans, Fu Manchu employs a gang of assassins, stranglers, bodyguards, thieves and helpers, all of whom come from

various countries in the East—from India all the way to Japan. Many scenes take place in Limehouse, an area infamous for its underworld connections and opium dens. Incidentally, opium plays an important role in the stories because Fu Manchu smokes the drug to relax and clear his mind; his addiction, of course, makes him seem even more sinister.

Rohmer makes numerous generalizations, almost entirely negative, about the East. In his descriptions, the author employs various terms, all of which are used interchangeably: Chinese, Oriental, Asiatic, Easterner, Far Easterner, and Asian. Everyone from that part of the world is lumped together as one entity. Here is a representative selection of what Rohmer says about Asia. First and foremost, China, which can be equated with Asia in general, is a land of mystery, and the people there are the most inscrutable on earth. In addition, Chinese are endowed with an emotional cruelty which white men cannot understand. For example, they practice infanticide on a large scale, especially with female babies. Therefore, it is only natural that Fu Manchu, with his unique combination of subtlety and intelligence, is easily transformed into a cunning killer. Orientals, we are told, place little value on life; and their attitude is one that is unacceptable in cultured Europe. The gap which separates East and West is very wide and difficult to bridge, for the simple reason that each has its own code of behavior. And the author makes it clear that the Western code is superior. Since Orientals are reconciled to their fate, it is difficult for them to change, even if they desire to do so. This contrast pits the fatalistic and unchanging East against the rational and civilized West.

Asia has an advantage over the West in at least one area of expertise: that is, the development of mysterious drugs and insects and occult practices. Being an evil scientist of genius, Fu Manchu expends much time and effort attempting to create new and more threatening weapons to use in his quest for power. He successfully develops various lethal fungi, which should not surprise us since he is “the greatest fungologist the world has ever known.” His fungi are so potent that people exposed to them die like flies. Claiming that he is “the god of destruction,” Fu Manchu creates poisons that can turn men into maniacs; he creates potions that can cause people to die temporarily and then come back to life—a very useful technique for kidnapping; and he creates strange fluids that can erase a person’s memory. But that is not all: he also keeps a menagerie of deadly pets, including marmosets, scorpions, pythons, spiders, and, perhaps the weirdest of all, hamadryads. These are the gruesome creatures he utilizes to kill whoever opposes the establishment of his “Yellow Empire.” That Fu Manchu is ruthless in his quest cannot be denied, which is the reason Nayland Smith and the other Westerners who do battle with him consider him a “homicidal maniac.”

Yet Rohmer imbues Fu Manchu with several honorable qualities. First of all, he

shows great bravery. After several confrontations, Smith, somewhat begrudgingly, admits: “Fiend thought he was, I admired his courage.” Also Fu Manchu always keeps his word, regardless of the consequences. And, as we would expect from someone in the employ of the British government, Smith keeps his word as well. At one point, he has a chance to kill Fu Manchu, but he cannot because it would require him to go back on his word. With clenched teeth, he proclaims: “A servant of the Crown in the East makes his motto: ‘Keep your word though it breaks your neck!’” This is one theme that surfaces in all the books: on many occasions both sides in the conflict suffer setbacks as a consequence of the promises they make—promises that they are honor bound to keep.

The second novel, *The Devil Doctor*, offers more of the same, but with a few new twists. The time is two years later, and Fu Manchu continues to engage in nefarious plots to undermine the West. Once it is clear that Fu Manchu is again operating in England, Nayland Smith returns from Burma to do battle with his enemy. He is aided throughout the adventure by his good friend Dr. Petrie. The plot centers on Fu Manchu’s attempt to eliminate certain people who stand in his way. They are people who possess secret information that threatens to expose his plans and thus delay their implementation; therefore, it is imperative that they be kidnapped or killed. The action of the book moves from one murder plot to the next. And the more Smith and Petrie interfere, the more they find themselves in life-threatening situations. As always the good guys seem to be just one step behind the brilliant criminal—close enough to upset his schedule but not close enough to capture him. That pattern remains a constant throughout the series.

Fu Manchu’s character becomes more and more ominous. He is described as “the ‘Yellow Peril’ incarnate in one man.” Because of his wanton disregard for human (meaning here of course Western) values, he appears both abnormal and supernormal. In the words of Dr. Petrie, Fu Manchu is a “mighty Chinaman who represented things unutterable, whose potentialities for evil were boundless as his genius, who personified a secret danger, the extent and nature of which none of us truly understood.”<sup>17</sup> His voice comes in for special criticism: it is a “high pitched grating voice, in which guttural tones alternated with a serpent-like hissing.” And in times of crisis, the calm, outer veneer breaks down and he is known to emit animal-like screams. Petrie diagnoses these hysterical outbursts as symptomatic of a dangerous mania. The facial features of Fu Manchu continue to repel his pursuers. As before, it is the green, piercing eyes, in particular, that do the most damage. They resemble those of “a cat in darkness” and burn like “witch lamps.” Overall, the face conjures up an image of someone from hell, someone who is not human. When calm, however, Fu Manchu possesses a tremendous intellectual force and the qualities of a born leader. In this book, we learn several new facts about him. The

first is that he received great honor in China by being admitted to the Sacred Order of the White Peacock, and the second is that he is a member of a secret and powerful criminal organization founded in Honan and now based somewhere else in Asia.<sup>18</sup> And the adversaries of Fu Manchu once again admit on several occasions that, regardless of the consequences, he never breaks his word. This, it seems, is his major redeeming quality, for everything else was like a gift from the devil.

Generalizations about China and the Chinese continue unabated. Fu Manchu is not the only person from China unfriendly to the West: the entire Chinese race is the enemy of whites. It is obvious that they are cruel, for they kill thousands of unwanted baby girls by throwing them down wells specially designated for that purpose. In addition, the Chinese are naturally childish; and since they are a race of ancestor worshippers, they are capable of anything. That is to say, they are not to be trusted. Part of Fu Manchu's problem is that he was born Chinese, for he is the "weird product of a weird people who are as old in evil as the Pyramids are old in mystery."

As for other Asians, the author always presents them in less than flattering terms. For example, one of Fu Manchu's "Yellow ruffians" is a pockmarked Burman with an evil expression and a habitual leer; most other Orientals receive similar treatment. Interestingly enough, the Japanese are spared any kind of severe ridicule. Fu Manchu praises the courage displayed by Japanese, saying, "No braver race has ever honored the world." Moreover, some of his best scientists are Japanese—men who are serious as well as reliable. It is true, however, that he forces his enemies to commit *seppuku* when he wishes to inflict maximum pain and suffering.

Although Rohmer borrowed *seppuku* from the Japanese, he relied on his fertile imagination to think up increasingly grotesque forms of torture, all of which are Oriental in origin. One is named the "Chinese wire jacket." That refers to a sort of tourniquet of wire netting that is screwed so tightly that the victim's flesh swells out in knobs through the mesh. Another is the "Chinese torture chamber." Cantonese rats are inserted into the enclosure containing the prisoner and proceed to eat him alive. Then there is the black cat with poisonous claws. Its victims die a lingering death, their faces covered with hideous scratches. Finally, there is the creature called the Sacred Baboon. Originally found in Abyssinia, it easily tracks its prey by following a scent, and then, since it has the strength of four men, strangles its victims to death with its iron-like grip. The author even gives the creature's technical name: *Cynocephalus hamadryas*. In this way, he tries to add plausibility by clothing his fantastic ideas in scientific garb. This is a technique that he frequently employs.

*The Devil Doctor* introduces a new element to the storyline: the romance between the beautiful and mysterious Oriental woman and the Western man. It is an interracial romance with exotic and (slightly) erotic nuances. Although the

previous novel only touches on this subject in a very minor way, *The Devil Doctors* assigns a major role to a woman named Karamaneh who falls for Dr. Petrie, and he, in turn, falls for her. According to Smith, it is understandable that she would find herself attracted to Petrie, for that is characteristic of Oriental women. There is, however, one serious problem with her: she is a slave of the monstrous Dr. Fu Manchu. Several times, when Smith and Petrie find themselves in a seemingly impossible situation, she appears, almost out of nowhere, and saves them. But she cannot be trusted, for she betrays them almost as often as she helps them. No matter what she feels for Petrie, she does not have the power to break the bonds of loyalty that tightly bind her to Fu Manchu. Realizing that Petrie is enchanted by this woman, Smith warns him not to get too deeply involved. If Petrie continues to be taken in by her female charms, it "might mean a yellow emperor of the world." In the end, everything revolves around the struggle between the yellow race and the white race. In spite of the fact that he is white and she is Oriental, he cannot get her out of his mind. This volume ends with his sailing to Egypt in search of the woman he loves.

The final novel in the "Early Period" is entitled *The Si-Fan Mysteries*. What Rohmer adds to the story with this book is the idea of a massive Oriental conspiracy. Unable to take over the world by himself, Fu Manchu needs the support of an organization. And that support comes from the Si-Fan—a group based in Tibet, whose goal is to establish a Chinese empress as ruler of the world. A sort of Eleusinian mystery, the Si-Fan is a secret society with branches and members throughout the Orient. Having already gained control of the "Eastern Mind," it then proceeds to set its sights on the West. With its seemingly unlimited resources, the group is able to commit and get away with almost any kind of crime, from kidnapping to murder. As a high-ranking agent of the Si-Fan, Fu Manchu goes to England to carry out secret missions and thereby pave the way for the expanded "Yellow Empire." Because of this desire for a "Yellow Empire," people in the West fear Orientals, and that, we are told, is where the concept of the "Yellow Peril" came from.

At the beginning of the book, Nayland Smith is suddenly called back to London from his post in Burma, in order to investigate the disappearance and death of Sir Gregory Hale, a China expert who formerly worked in the British Embassy in Peking. Hale, it seems, has found out about the Si-Fan's plan for world domination. As a result, he is targeted for elimination. Before he dies, however, he leaves a cryptic message containing just three words: Tibet, Yellow, and Si-Fan. With this information, Smith and his friend Petrie set out to unravel the mystery, which is, as we expect, closely connected with Dr. Fu Manchu. The Si-Fan dispatches Fu Manchu to London to get rid of anyone standing in its way. At first, Smith is mystified by the mere existence of Fu Manchu, for he thought the evil doctor was dead. That Fu



Manchu is alive and active again adds to his reputation as a man of many lives. To Smith, it proves that Fu Manchu is “immune from natural laws” and is a “deathless incarnation of evil.” A superhuman, indeed! In spite of his inestimable powers, Fu Manchu is not, in this novel at least, the supreme leader of the Si-Fan. It is a cruel and barbarous man named Ki-Ming, who possesses a kind of “animal magnetism.” Though hard to imagine, he seems to be more of a villain than Fu Manchu. This is partly explained by the fact that he is a master of the unholy arts of the Lamas of Rache-Churan located deep in the interior of Tibet. By using his knowledge of the occult, Ki-Ming can cause people to commit murders without their ever remembering what happened. For a short time in this book he is pursued by Smith and the forces of good, but he quickly disappears and never again figures prominently in the stories.

It is Fu Manchu that receives the most attention from the authorities. Before long he assumes the leadership of the Si-Fan and makes plans to topple the West with the help of this all-powerful international conspiracy. The Si-Fan is merely another weapon in his personal arsenal. What is special about Fu Manchu is that he is shrewd enough to engage in “nefarious plots” right in the middle of London, the center of Western civilization at that period in history. There is no crime too outlandish for him to consider. He fears no superior force, and no one can outwit him except Nayland Smith (and his various helpers). Petrie recognizes Smith’s contribution: He is the “barrier between the White races and the devouring tide of the Yellow.” What makes Fu Manchu doubly dangerous is his talent for perfecting weapons of the past and creating weapons of the future. One new but chilling technique he frequently employs in *The Si-Fan Mysteries* is “artificially induced catalepsy”; that is to say, he can make a person appear dead and then bring him back to life by administering an antidote of his own making—one that he and only he possesses. Since he has little or no regard for human suffering or human life or the law, Fu Manchu enjoys a distinct advantage in his struggles with the police. It is a contest with high stakes; it is a contest between the barbarians and civilized man; it is a contest for control of the world.

The romance between Petrie and Karamaneh continues as a sub-theme in the story. He tries to win her over, and she tries to escape the clutches of Fu Manchu. For Petrie, it is more important to find her than it is to pursue the enemy. As a result, Fu Manchu is on more than one occasion able to escape from certain capture or death, thanks to Petrie’s infatuation with this Oriental beauty. Here Petrie describes her in very florid terms:

The beauty of Karamaneh was not of the type which is enhanced by artificial lighting: it was the beauty of the palm and the pomegranate blossom, the beauty which flowers beneath merciless suns, which expands, like the lotus,

under the skies of the East. But there, in the dusk, as she came towards me, she looked exquisitely lovely, and graceful with the grace of the desert gazelles which I had seen earlier in the evening.<sup>19</sup>

In portraying Oriental women, Rohmer piles one favorable superlative upon another; in portraying Oriental men, however, he goes to the opposite extreme.

Taken together, these three early novels provide the essentials of the Fu Manchu story and create the images that come to define Fu Manchu. As the saga of “Fu Manchu vs. the West” grew in popularity, the reading public wanted more of this classic confrontation, but it would be almost seventeen years before Rohmer published the next installment in the series.

### **The Prolific Decade (1931–1941)**

During the ten years from 1931 to 1941 Sax Rohmer wrote seven novels in the Fu Manchu series. While the three first works take place in or near London and feature Smith and Petrie and Fu Manchu, five of the next seven move from one foreign location to the next, thus enhancing the exoticness of the tales. Also in these books Smith works with a number of different partners in order to track down Fu Manchu. Here is a chronological list of the novels and the places where most of the action occurs:

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1931:	<i>The Daughter of Fu Manchu</i>	(Egypt)
1932:	<i>The Mask of Fu Manchu</i>	(Persia)
1933:	<i>Fu Manchu's Bride</i>	(France)
1934:	<i>The Trail of Fu Manchu</i>	(Britain)
1936:	<i>President Fu Manchu</i>	(USA)
1939:	<i>The Drums of Fu Manchu</i>	(Britain)
1941:	<i>The Island of Fu Manchu</i>	(Haiti)

In discussing this group of novels, I will attempt mainly to point out new and changing images as well as fascinating and unusual situations peculiar to the various countries.

*The Daughter of Fu Manchu* differs from the previous novels in that it includes fewer incidents but more plot development and a tighter structure. Nayland Smith has been knighted and is now known as Sir Denis Nayland Smith. Having permanently returned to England, he now works for Scotland Yard. We also learn that he is an Anglo-Indian, the child of a mixed marriage. This seems paradoxical in light of the fact that much of his life is spent struggling against the threat of Fu Manchu and the Yellow Peril. The term “Orient” comes more and more to mean both the Far East and the Near East and all points in between. Fu Manchu allies

himself with such Near Eastern gangs as the murderous Hashishin led by one Sheikh al-Jebal. Included in his Oriental army are Dacoits from Burma, Thugs from India, Lamas from Tibet, and Phansigars from Afghanistan. As usual, the author emphasizes the genius, however evil, of Fu Manchu, who is now heralded as the greatest physician the world has known. Unfortunately he only uses his brilliance in the medical arts to destroy people, not to heal them.

In one scene, when Smith is captured, Fu Manchu attempts to justify himself by explaining his goals and methods to the prisoner:

My methods are not your methods. Perhaps I have laughed at your British scruples. Perhaps a day will come, Sir Denis, when you will join in my laughter. But, as much as I have hated you, I have always admired your clarity of mind and your tenacity. You were instrumental in defeating me, when I had planned to readjust the center of world power. No doubt you thought me mad—a megalomaniac. You were wrong....I worked for my country. I saw China misruled, falling into decay; with all her vast resources, becoming prey for carrion. I hoped to give China that place in the world to which her intellect, industry, and her ideals entitle her. I hoped to awaken China. My methods, Sir Denis, were bad. My motive was good.<sup>20</sup>

He goes on to stress the value of his word: “No Mandarin of my order has ever willingly broken his promise.” In addition, he claims to be remorseless but honorable in war. Viewed this way, the sinister Doctor from China seems to be not quite as devilish a person as we imagined, for he clearly has a human side after all.

As the title indicates, Fu Manchu has a daughter. Her name is Fah Lo Suee, and she is the result of an affair he had with a Russian woman. Following in the footsteps of her illustrious father, Fah Lo Suee hatches a scheme to bring about the fall of the West—a cataclysmic change she believes to be ordained and inevitable. Before that, however, she intends to conquer Russia, unite China, and subjugate Japan and Turkey. In this endeavor, she teams up with certain renegade elements in the Si-Fan secret society. Overly ambitious, she is soon seen as a threat not only to Smith and the West but also to her father Fu Manchu. He fears that her actions will lead to a catastrophic war, so he comes out of retirement to check his daughter’s madness. Nayland Smith flatly states that she is the “most dangerous beast of prey which this century has known.” For the first time, Fu Manchu and Nayland Smith share the same goal: stop Fah Lo Suee and her group from precipitating a war. There is, however, a chink in her armor which offers a natural check on her ambitions: that is

her attraction to the narrator of the story, a scientist named Shan Greville. Fah Lo Suee, who resembles an ivory statue of an Indian Goddess, shows a weakness for the scientist and proceeds to save him when he is in danger. What we see here, of course, is another example of the *Oriental woman falling for the Occidental man*. This kind of sudden infatuation is explained as typical of women in the Orient.

In *The Mask of Fu Manchu* Persia provides the setting for the next adventure. The plot centers on a religious revival which begins in Afghanistan and spreads south. It is based on the belief that the so-called "Masked Prophet" will be reborn and, brandishing the "Sword of God," will spread the "New Creed" throughout the East. All that the movement needs is a leader. This is where Fu Manchu comes in, for he hopes to make use of the turmoil (behind the scenes, of course) and create havoc in that part of the world. He certainly has no interest in the religious movement per se. Along the way, his daughter also gets involved in the complicated plot. And, as before, she still has a lingering attachment for Greville, who also serves as the narrator of this tale. Upset with this relationship, Fu Manchu wants to kill the object of his daughter's affection, but he cannot do so. That is simply because he promised her that Greville would come to no harm, and we know that the word of Fu Manchu is ironclad. However, that does not keep him from administering such strong drugs to Greville that he becomes the pawn of Fu Manchu. The drugs are so successful that Greville comes to believe that Fu Manchu is omnipotent and that his plan is for the good of all mankind. When he finally recovers from the drugs, he cannot remember anything that took place during the interim. That shows without a doubt the extraordinary advances made by Fu Manchu in the field of pharmacology.

Fu Manchu introduces for the first time a few other scientific tricks to confuse and thwart the powers opposing him. One is an anesthesia that goes by the name "mimosa pudica." It has a sweet smell and is often mistaken for the scent of a flower; unfortunately, it also emits a deadly vapor. Fu Manchu has also developed the strongest thread known to man from the flocculent secretion of the Theridion spider. This thread, which cannot be broken, proves useful for binding and strangling people. Another of his discoveries is "elixir vitae," a secret drug made from orchids found only in Burma. This elixir prolongs human life. It is the reason that Fu Manchu still looks and acts youthful, though he is already over seventy-years old. In order to make the fantastic elements in his stories sound as authentic as possible, the author goes to great lengths to attach realistically sounding scientific names and explanations to them.

*Fu Manchu's Bride*, Rohmer's third novel of the 1930s, takes place in the south of France. Since Rohmer had become extremely popular in the US, it was only natural that he at some point include an American character in his books. This is the first work in which the British agent Nayland Smith teams up with an American, an

amateur biologist named Alan Sterling. In his search for new species of orchids, Sterling visits the Riviera, where he stays with Dr. Petrie. At the request of the French government, Petrie has gone to France to investigate a new and unknown pestilence that has killed several people in the area. After conducting a few experiments, Petrie realizes, to his horror, that he has discovered an anomaly of nature: a combination of *trypanosomes* (the parasites that cause sleeping sickness) and the *plague bacillus*—both working in perfect harmony. This “super plague” is deadly enough to threaten the whole of France, or for that matter even the entire world. The question is: Who is responsible for the sudden appearance of this malignant form of disease? At first it is thought perhaps to be the work of some mad scientist. Some suggest that it might be a Red plot to decimate unfriendly nations. (Incidentally, this is the first mention of Reds and communists in this series; however, in Rohmer’s last three books communism becomes a powerful force to be reckoned with, both by Smith and by Fu Manchu.) Of course, before long, it is obvious that Dr. Fu Manchu is behind this dastardly plot. Not only does he create this lethal strain, but he also develops a special fly called a “genus-hybrid” to carry the disease far and wide. With his army of deadly flies, he intends to depopulate the white world. The only people who can stop him are Dr. Petrie and two other scientists who have the expertise needed to manufacture an antidote. Fu Manchu has no choice but to get rid of them.

The image of Fu Manchu becomes clearer as the author fills in a few more facts about his background. When he lived in China, Fu Manchu was a Prince and administered the Province of Honan under the Empress. His pedigree is similar to that of the former rulers of China. It seems that he now holds degrees from four major universities, including a PhD and an MD. In spite of his awesome brain, he is still judged to be the super-enemy of all that is clean and wholesome; in short, he is hell’s chosen emissary. The fact that he is an opium addict tarnishes his image even more. As we have seen, Fu Manchu has one goal, and that is to rule the world. But first he must cause confusion and havoc, in order to make it easier for him to complete this task. This he begins to do by disturbing the major currencies around the world. His method is disturbingly simple but revolutionary: flood the market with the synthetic gold that he and his scientists have learned how to make. In spite of occasional setbacks, Fu Manchu has complete confidence that his war on the world will eventually succeed. He boasts that he can be checked but never stopped. The “New World” will be revitalized by the “Soul of the East.” While the West expends many resources on building machines, the East continues to grow in spirit. And it is that spirit, along with his genius, which will make the difference in the final battle. The spiritual East can and will overcome the materialistic West.

In the realm of new and deadly weapons, Fu Manchu surprises and scares his

enemies by utilizing a “worm-man.” That refers to a kind of monster bred in an incubator—a programmed assassin with “moist glistening limbs.” Needless to say, this is bizarre, to put it mildly, even by Sax Rohmer standards.

Fu Manchu deplors the Western attitude toward women. “Your Western progress,” he tells Sterling, “has resulted in the folly of women finding a place in the councils of state. That myth you call ‘chivalry’ has tied your hands and stricken you mute. In the China to which I belong—a China which is not dead but only sleeping—we use older simpler, methods... We have *whips*...”<sup>21</sup> To his mind, a woman is good for one thing: bearing children, preferably sons. From the previous works we know that he has a daughter named Fah Lo Suee. What he wants most, however, is a son. To produce the best son possible, Fu Manchu carefully chooses a woman who he hopes will give him an heir. Her name is Fleurette and she is half-Arab. She was taken from her family at a young age and was raised and educated according to very exacting standards, for the express purpose of marrying Fu Manchu and bearing his children. (Hence, the title of this novel.) As expected, she is uncommonly beautiful; moreover, she speaks seven languages without a trace of an accent. But she does have one weakness: she prefers Western men, and in this case she falls in love with Alan Sterling. Since she has been brainwashed and hypnotized by Fu Manchu, she finds it difficult to betray him; however, in the end she breaks loose from his psychological grip and helps Sterling, Petrie, and Smith in their fight against Fu Manchu and his gang from the East. As so often happens in these novels, the Western man proves irresistible to the Oriental woman.

In *The Trail Of Fu Manchu*, the evil doctor returns to England after a long absence. There his nefarious deeds capture the attention of Smith, Sterling, Petrie, and others, as the battle between East and West rages on. What stands out in this volume of the series is Fu Manchu’s ability to project a force strong enough to change a person’s way of thinking. Also he can put people in a trance or hypnotize them so deeply that they willingly and wholeheartedly follow his commands. Fleurette, whom we met in the previous story, has fallen back into the hands of Fu Manchu. His mental control over her is now complete. She forgets her past and comes to believe that a world dominated by him will be a world with no misunderstanding, no strife, and no ugliness. As soon as Sterling learns she is under the spell of Fu Manchu, he immediately rushes to her rescue, only to be taken prisoner himself. Although he does not undergo hypnotism, he succumbs to Fu Manchu’s charms. When he is summoned for interrogation, he cannot fail to be impressed with what he sees:

The brow was even finer than the traditional portraits of Shakespeare, crowned with scanty, neutral coloured hair. The face of the white-clad man was a wonderful face, and

might once have been beautiful. It was that of a man of indeterminable age, heavily lined, but lighted by a pair of such long, narrow, brilliant green eyes that one's thoughts flashed to Satan—Lucifer, Son of the Morning: an angel, but a fallen angel.<sup>22</sup>

Even Dr. Petrie, who has been struggling against Fu Manchu for more than a decade, finds himself questioning his own ideals and the standards which he has long held. "Definitely, the world was awry," he says to himself. "Perhaps it was possible that this amazing man—for that he was an outstanding genius, none could deny—had a plan to adjust the scheme of things 'nearer to the heart's desire.'"<sup>23</sup> Fu Manchu's mental powers can convert the strongest of men.

Once the spell is broken, by drugs or other means, the reality of Fu Manchu and the evil he represents returns as strong as ever. Again he is the "Devil's agent on earth"; he is the "greatest menace to the peace of the world who has come on earth since the days of Attila the Hun"; and he is a superman with a "great mind unbound by laws of man." But, quite clearly, he is "*not* a normal man." With the European police chasing him wherever he goes, he feels like a "cornered rat" and is showing signs of desperation. This is a situation that is unusual for him to be caught in. Some of his enemies are even predicting that "the reign of Mandarin Fu Manchu is drawing to a close." Of course, things are not quite that simple. For the time being, he is forced to return to his old riverside haunts in London's Chinatown, in order to find a safe place to hide. And, to make matters worse, he and his group are beset with financial problems, for he is finding it much more difficult than in the past to raise sufficient amounts of money to fund his various operations. Being resourceful, he uses his scientific know-how to turn out synthetic gold. However, there is one problem: how to convert large amounts of gold into cash. For that, he needs the assistance of a powerful banker. His daughter, Fah Lo Suee, helps him in this endeavor by using her sexual charms to convince one of the most prominent bankers in Britain to join them in this illegal scheme. Although Fu Manchu is temporarily down and out, it is inevitable that he will bounce back and resume his efforts to topple the West.

We have seen Fu Manchu described as a kind of maniac because of the grandiose dreams he has of ruling the world. And in most situations, he never loses his composure; instead, he remains calm and assured in traditional Oriental fashion. In this novel, however, we see the other, darker side of Fu Manchu—the side that is as revolting as it is terrifying. When Smith and his comrades escape and thus ruin one of Fu Manchu's most carefully laid plots, the evil doctor literally goes mad:

[He] stood upon the stairs, his clenched fists raised above his head, his face that of one possessed of devils. A wave

of madness, blood lust, the ecstasy of sweeping his enemies  
from his path, ruled him. That great brain rocked upon its  
aged throne.<sup>24</sup>

Here is an example of the “crazed Oriental,” which contrasts with the rational and unflappable Nayland Smith. In fact, Smith is so levelheaded that he can easily deflect the romantic enticements of Fah Lo Suee. In one of the most ironic developments in the story, Fu Manchu’s daughter falls in love with his mortal enemy, but the love is never reciprocated. The ever-cautious Smith is too smart to fall into that trap. No matter how strongly she proclaims her love for him, he knows from experience that the women working for Fu Manchu can never be fully trusted or understood.

*President Fu Manchu* differs from most of the other novels in that it shows Fu Manchu pursuing a definite goal: the Presidency of the United States. It is the mid-1930s and America, still in the midst of the Depression, is gearing up for a Presidential election. The two candidates are Orwin Prescott and Harvey Bragg, the former representing liberalism and the latter fascism. If elected, Bragg promises to provide jobs for everyone and install a dictatorship. In spite of his demagoguery, his campaign is doing well, thanks in large part to the enormous financial resources he has at his disposal. The source of this money is Fu Manchu. One of his agents, an Italian immigrant named Paul Salvaletti, has managed to work his way into the Bragg camp and become the candidate’s indispensable secretary. Fu Manchu has devised a deceptively simple plan: discredit Prescott, kill Bragg, and install Salvaletti as the next President. In order to prevent such a disaster from occurring, Nayland Smith goes to the US, where he is given the title “Federal Agent 56” and granted almost unlimited powers. Along with his American partner, Secret Service Agent James Richet, Smith is able to expose and bring the conspiracy to an end.

To carry out such a bold attempt requires masterful preparation on the part of Fu Manchu. Of course, he can call on the services and resources of the Si-Fan. This group, of which Fu Manchu is by now the undisputed leader, controls or is involved in the affairs of almost all the colored races of the world. Even the dreaded “Black Dragon Society of Japan” is nothing more than a minor offshoot of the Si-Fan.<sup>25</sup> To ensure success, Fu enlists the help of an organization that is the “most highly efficient underworld which civilization has yet produced.” Though the organization remains unnamed, it would seem to be referring to the Mafia. In the past Fu Manchu never had to rely on such an outside group, but he decides to play it safe this time, because the stakes are so high—control of the United States. As for money, Fu Manchu has lots of it, although much of it is counterfeit. Now that he can make synthetic gold, he is using his almost unlimited wealth to buy control of the US. And it is that fake gold that is responsible for the world’s economic difficulties. In other words, Fu Manchu caused the Depression!



What is Fu Manchu's key to success in crime on a global scale? First, he has the experience of an unimaginably long life. (Remember that he possesses an elixir that can prolong life indefinitely.) Second, he maintains an arsenal of lethal weapons unique in the world. And third, he has at his disposal forces no one else has ever had. His grand strategy is so bold and so unique that it leads some to view Fu Manchu as a person who exists on a level ordinary people cannot understand; moreover, they see him as above good or evil. With such an ethereal existence, he becomes many times more dangerous to the world. In some of his declarations, he sounds quite rational:

Always I have dreamed of a sane world, yet men have called me mad; of a world in which war should be impossible, disease eliminated, overpopulation checked, labor found for all willing hands—a world of peace.<sup>26</sup>

For the most part, the plot of this novel deals with Americans and American society. But the mysterious East still receives some attention, although it is toned down somewhat when compared with earlier works. The Yellow Peril, both the term and the concept, appears only infrequently in the story. Perhaps because of world politics at the time, the Chinese are not the targets of invective; on the contrary, they seem fairly normal. "The Chinaman is a law-abiding citizen. His laws may be different from those of the Western world, but to his own codes he conforms religiously."<sup>27</sup> We are told that Chinamen, and other Asiatics as well, are stoical by nature, accepting things as they are. That they are cunning is also pointed out. But generally they mind their own business and do not get involved in matters that do not concern them. This makes it difficult for the police to conduct any kind of effective investigation in New York's Chinatown, which is where Fu Manchu's American headquarters are located. Early on, the Western agents pursuing Fu Manchu realize that it is not at all easy for them to understand the motives and methods of Asians, and they conclude that the only way a Westerner can fully comprehend what an Asian is thinking or doing is to develop a special sense—one that can only be gained after living and working for long periods in the East.

There are two other images in *President Fu Manchu* that are interesting enough to be pointed out. One is the scholarly persona of Fu Manchu. We already know that he is brilliant, received degrees from top universities, holds world-class qualifications in a number of fields, and speaks all the major languages. In addition, no matter where he sets up his headquarters, he always surrounds himself with shelves and shelves of books written in a variety of languages. He is always accumulating more knowledge, for his is an inquiring mind. The second image is related to Nayland Smith—a man with sufficient insight and experience to compete, more or less successfully, with Fu Manchu. In evaluating his nemesis, Fu Manchu

admits that Smith has remarkable intuition and can call on his powers of pure reasoning. He goes as far as to claim that Smith is one of the seven first-class brains of the white race. In Fu Manchu's opinion, their association has never been dishonorable. What makes Smith particularly effective against Fu Manchu is the fact that he is one of the few men who can look Fu in the eyes and not be hypnotized. This is a direct result of his character, which is one of self-abnegation.

In one of the most bizarre endings imaginable, Fu Manchu escapes from Smith and the police by going over Niagara Falls. Although almost any other person would die from such a jump, we cannot be certain that the same thing holds true for Fu Manchu, for he is able to extricate himself from the most impossible predicaments. As mentioned earlier, he is not normal by any stretch of the imagination.

*The Drums of Fu Manchu* was published right before the start of the Second World War. Although obviously a work of fiction, the story does touch indirectly on the actual political situation in Europe at the time. There are, we are told, men, fifteen in number, who could and would start a war. And, in an interesting reversal of roles, Fu Manchu, who is now back in London, devises a plan to insure peace by assassinating this entire group of potential warmongers. He wants to prevent useless wars, like those raging in China and Spain; furthermore, he wants Nayland Smith to join him in his crusade. Such an alliance proves impossible, for Smith cannot agree to participate in vigilante acts and thus break the law. So Fu Manchu and his secret society, the Si-Fan, begin to carry out the murders themselves—a mission for which they are imminently qualified. Since our last encounter with the Si-Fan, it has grown in power and influence under the leadership of Fu Manchu. It is now stronger and more formidable than even the Catholic Church. The main cast of characters includes: Fu Manchu and the Si-Fan; Smith and his partner, a free-lance writer named Bart Karrigan; and several attractive women of exotic origin who inevitably fall for the young and charming Karrigan.

In this book, Fu Manchu's new weapons and scientific breakthroughs are even more fantastic (and unbelievable) than usual. Among the weapons he employs is one called the "Green Death," which is a poison that can be attached to a telephone handset. He has also devised a way of contacting people by sending secret transmissions through the TV. Equally invasive is his ability to read another person's mind and thus know in advance what he or she is thinking. Then things really get bizarre. In his search for more effective assassins, Fu Manchu creates the smallest and most malignant human being ever: a fifteen-inch black dwarf whose eyes resemble those of a rabid dog. For a deranged genius like Fu Manchu, nothing seems to be beyond the realm of possibility. He knows how to reincarnate people; he can help them cross the bridge between death and life. When people who were once dead reappear, it is as if "a corpse is moving among the living." One of the zombies

he brings back to life is none other than his daughter Fah Lo Suee, who was thought to have died years before. With these and other devices, this greatest of scientists continues toiling for the destruction of his many enemies.

In spite of an unsatisfying plot filled with various elements from science fiction, *The Drums of Fu Manchu* does offer a few kernels of enlightenment. For example, Fu Manchu assures Smith that the West has too high a regard for itself. It is nonsense to believe, as the West does, that older civilizations can benefit from Western culture. For all its achievements, Western technology has only increased the destructiveness of wars. Furthermore, Fu Manchu makes it clear that the “danger to China lies not within her borders, but outside.” But he insists that China can take care of herself and she will “absorb the fools who intrude upon her surface as the pitcher plant absorbs flies.” China will arise again, and he intends to contribute to that goal. With such remarks, he adopts the guise of a Chinese patriot. Of course, this stands to reason when we consider the critical situation China found itself in after being invaded by Japan in the 1930s. In this work, at least, the image of China receives a positive boost.

In *The Island of Fu Manchu*, the last volume of the middle period, Sax Rohmer portrays Fu Manchu in much harsher terms than in the several preceding works. Nayland Smith and Bart Karrigan are again on the trail of Fu Manchu—a trail that leads them from London to New York and then on to the Panama Canal Zone and Haiti. The year is 1941. Although war is raging in Europe, the United States has not yet joined the Western allies in their battle against the fascist powers. On the American side of the Atlantic, things are still peaceful for the time being. Fu Manchu has built a secret submarine base on the coast of Haiti in the Caribbean. His goal is to bottle up the entire US naval fleet and thus make it ineffective as a fighting force, should the Americans ever decide to participate in the war. However, through a series of clever maneuvers, Smith and Karrigan succeed in spoiling Fu Manchu’s grandiose plan to weaken the US militarily.

The image of Fu Manchu reverts back to its original form. First of all, the issue of race is emphasized again. As for the yellow race, we are warned that in the person of Fu Manchu “an ever greater menace, one which threatens the entire white race, is closing around the American continent.” While the countries in the West fight among themselves, Fu Manchu merely bides his time, waiting until the West destroys itself. Then he will act to restore the lost grandeur of China, for he holds the keys that unlock the heart of the East. To borrow his poetic expression: “The red dusk of the West will have fallen, and the golden dawn of the East will come.” With such ambitions, Fu Manchu is seen as a “Chinese devil” who represents a greater threat than Hitler. What sets Fu Manchu apart from other evil beings is his fearsome arsenal. Furthermore, to aid his work in Haiti, he assembles an army of zombies and

pygmies to help destroy his enemies. And since he is in Haiti, it is inevitable that he make use of voodoo to frighten the local people into submission. In this story, as in the others, Fu Manchu utilizes beautiful female agents who are Oriental or who at least look Oriental. Since they are his slaves, they fear him, but at the same time respect him. What causes their fall from grace is their inevitable attraction to Western men. It is this image of Oriental women as forbidden fruit that permeates all the books in the series.

### **The Late Period (1948–1959)**

During the final ten years or so of his life, Sax Rohmer wrote three novels and four short stories that feature Fu Manchu and his English opponent Nayland Smith. I do not intend to touch on the short stories, for they are little more than footnotes to the original series and present nothing new in the way of images. The three novels are: *Shadow of Fu Manchu* (1948), *Re-Enter Dr. Fu Manchu* (1957), and *Emperor Fu Manchu* (1959). Written in a period when communism was perceived as the major threat to the West, the stories could not ignore the existence of this new ideology and political force on the world scene. As a result, the confrontation is no longer just between East and West; now it is between East and West and communism. As a result of this new focus, the classic battle between Fu Manchu and Smith loses some of its original punch. On the other hand, by adding this new element, the stories more fully depict the atmosphere of the times.

The basic plot of *Shadow of Fu Manchu* is similar to that found in many popular spy novels of the 1940s and 1950s dealing with the US-USSR and their rivalry in weapon development. In 1948, when this story takes place, high officials in Britain and the US learn, to their great dismay, that the Huston Research Institute in New York City has almost completed work on a new invention that can protect a country from any kind of aerial attack. This revolutionary device, which is actually a “transmuter,” taps the great belt of ultraviolet rays that envelops the earth a hundred miles above the ionosphere. With this technology, a country could stop projectiles of any kind from entering the earth’s atmosphere over a certain area. That is to say, it could foil an atomic attack—a major fear during the Cold War years.<sup>28</sup> In addition, the “transmuter” generates an inexhaustible supply of energy far superior to that available in atomic reactions. It generates enough power, in fact, to blow the world to bits. New York City becomes a hotbed of spies and counterspies, as the US and the Soviet Union compete to take possession of the weapon. But Nayland Smith, after receiving a disturbing report that Fu Manchu also has his sights on it, heads for America to assist the FBI in preventing such a thing from happening.

In spite of his best efforts, Smith fails in his mission. And, for the first time, Fu Manchu defeats his persistent pursuer. But things are not what they seem, for Fu

Manchu wants the “transmuter” only in order to destroy it. In the end, he terminates development of the weapon by setting fire to the laboratory and stealing all copies of the blueprints. His seemingly incomprehensible behavior has its reasons. He explains his motives to Smith:

My mission is to save the world from the leprosy of Communism. Only I can do this. And I do it, not because of any love I have for the American people, but because if the United States fall, the whole world falls. In this task, Sir Denis, I shall brook no interference.<sup>29</sup>

From one of his sources, Fu Manchu learns that the Huston Research Institute is being secretly funded by Soviet money and is heavily infiltrated by Soviet agents. He has to act. By keeping the device out of the hands of the Communists, Fu Manchu, in a strange twist of fate, saves the West—the same West that he has been struggling for decades to destroy—and gives the world a few more years of uneasy peace. With this episode we see a complete transformation of the image of Fu Manchu from villain to savior. While he is still considered an evil genius, he is now one who from time to time does some good. As a result, the story contains little racial slander.

Although this book is based on the politics of the period, the author does not forget to include those “Fu Manchuesque” touches that his readers come to expect. For example, there is a new creature called “M’goyna,” which Fu Manchu created in his Cairo laboratory. It resembles a “dreadful looking man,” but in reality it is not a man but a zombie that can climb like an ape and carry out difficult assignments, particularly in the tall buildings of New York. Also introduced is a crystal that Fu Manchu uses to communicate with his collaborators. Rohmer also weaves a romance into the plot. However, there is one difference this time: the woman does not have an Oriental background; instead, she is a Caucasian from Britain who also happens to be a spy. While useful (and perhaps necessary) for plot development, the romance itself does not have the forbidden exotic tinge of those mentioned in the other novels.

It was about ten years later, in 1957, that *Re-Enter Fu Manchu* was published. Like the previous novel, this one centers on the military competition during the Cold War between America and the Soviet Union. The plot itself is quite complicated, due mainly to the confusing cast of characters: there are spies, counterspies, traitors, and assorted others, several of whom even have doubles. It is almost as if the author felt he had to keep coming up with more tricks in order to sustain the reader’s interest. In brief, what happens is as follows: with the help of a famous Russian scientist, Fu Manchu has devised a system to intercept incoming missiles by blanketing the earth with a special kind of “sound zone.” (Needless to say, this device is similar to the one mentioned in *Shadow of Fu Manchu*.) The balance of world power will shift

dramatically should either of the superpowers get hold of it. As always, Fu Manchu has put together a many-layer plan to further his own agenda. While appearing to conspire with the Russian communists to cause the accidental death of the American President, he is secretly planning to turn over the “sound zone” system to the US. Since the US will then enjoy complete immunity from retaliation, Fu Manchu assumes that the Reds will soon be blasted into submission or unconditional surrender. At that point, the vast underground movement in the East that he has so skillfully put together will seize power. As a result, he and the Si-Fan will be in absolute control of the Near and Far East. Through the timely intervention of Smith and the FBI, the plot falls apart; Fu Manchu escapes, and the new weapon system is accidentally destroyed.

As one would expect in the anti-communist days of the late 1950s, Fu Manchu considers the Communists, both Soviet and Chinese, to be his number one enemy. No longer is he obsessed only with subverting the West. Yet he continues to build up the Si-Fan until its strength is second only to that of the Communists. For reasons of expediency, he temporarily allies himself with the Communists; however, he intends at some point to turn against them, challenge their dominance, and then topple them. Here in his own words is how he exhorts his followers to expel the Communists from his native land of China: “Lull the enemy [the Communists] into a state of false security. Wait! Wait for my word! Then—but not until then—strike, all my millions together. And at last China, our China, will lie like a choice pearl in my hand!”<sup>30</sup> His ambition seems to know no limits. In carrying out his goals, Fu Manchu will do whatever is necessary, regardless of the ethics involved. Nayland Smith goes as far as to say that Hitler and Stalin were babes and sucklings compared to Fu Manchu.

To add a touch of exoticism, the author uses Cairo as the location for the first half of the book and he includes a romantic relationship between an Oriental woman and an Occidental man. As she is a slave of Fu Manchu, she is by nature seductive and mysterious and treacherous. On the other hand, the man is innocent and trusting and vulnerable. Although such romances tend to end successfully, the contrast between the two people could not be clearer: Easterners are that way and Westerners are this way.

*Emperor Fu Manchu*, the final volume in the series, is unique in that the author sets the story in China—the one and only adventure of the evil Chinese doctor to actually take place in his own country. The story itself is a combination of spy-thriller and science fiction. As described in this novel, China in 1959 is languishing under Communist rule. It is a police state with no personal freedoms, a place where the people are continuously injected with Communist poison; moreover, the doctrines of the ruling party seem to turn ordinary men into sadists. The government shows how

wicked it is by cultivating opium on a large scale and by beheading certain kinds of criminals. According to Fu Manchu, the Communists are “unclean creatures” who will not be able to hold on to China, and their belief in Marx and Lenin is nothing but “childish nonsense.” Now that Fu Manchu is back in China, he is working and plotting against “the gang of impudent imposters who seek to create a communist world.” He does this while ostensibly cooperating with them. To those who know him, his goal is clear: to crush the vulgar Communists and restore China to its former glory, led by none other than “Emperor Fu Manchu.” By rooting out the communist malignancy, he feels that he will be saving civilization and doing a good deed for the entire world.

Fu Manchu is living in his fortress base deep in Szechuan Province, from where he and his Si-Fan organization carry out their operations. When he discovers a germ warfare plant in a remote area, he mobilizes his forces in order to take control of it, for the place is secretly being run by the Soviets for their own purposes. Nayland Smith is also in China to investigate reports of the dangerous plant and at the same time to hunt for Fu Manchu, whom he suspects of fomenting trouble there. What is most bizarre is the fact that Smith travels around the country, trying to pass himself off as a Chinese monk. Of course, the image presented is that of a man who can fit in anywhere, thanks in large part to his quick wits and superior intelligence. In a certain sense, he is the Western version of Fu Manchu but without the evil elements.

Both Smith and Fu Manchu have their sights set on the germ warfare plant. Since they seem to be pursuing the same objective, Fu Manchu suggests that they work together, destroy the plant, and then go on to bring down the Communists. Here is part of their conversation:

“I hope,” Fu said, “to make you understand that it is my methods and not my ideals against which you have fought, without notable success, for many years. In England, I agree, those methods were unusual. In consequence, your Scotland Yard branded me as a common criminal. My political aims were described as ‘The Yellow Peril!’”

....

“Was Scotland Yard wrong?” Nayland Smith asked, coolly.

....

“Sometimes your persistent and insufferable misunderstanding rouses my anger,” he replied. “This is bad—for both. You are perfectly aware that the Si-Fan is international. Ridding China of Communism is one of its

objectives—yes. But ridding *the world* of this Russian pestilence is its main purpose. In this purpose do we, or do we not, stand on common ground?”<sup>31</sup>

Fu Manchu insists that he is just acting like a patriot. Nevertheless, such an alliance, even on a temporary basis, Smith cannot agree to. In this quotation we see Fu Manchu denying he is the “Yellow Peril,” while Smith refuses to show him any sympathy. After numerous twists and turns, the story ends, rather unsatisfactorily I must admit, when Smith and his several collaborators demolish the plant. Fu Manchu, however, fails to overthrow the Communists, although he does manage to escape capture.

Friend and foe alike are impressed by the genius of Fu Manchu, even though it is used more frequently for bad rather than for good. What is the secret of his success? It is not because he is a great politician or a brave soldier; nor is it because he has lived a long life. It is because he has discovered many secrets of nature, most of which are too outrageous for ordinary human beings to comprehend. In *Emperor Fu Manchu*, he comes up with perhaps his weirdest creation of all, which is also said to be his supreme achievement: necropolites or “cold men.” These are dead men who are brought back to life and preserved by keeping their bodies at a very low temperature. They then serve as fearless fighters under the direction of Fu Manchu. It is generally agreed that his is a wasted talent—a talent that he used not to benefit humanity but to advance his evil designs. And that perhaps is one of the main images readers are left with.

### Conclusion

If there was one person who was responsible for popularizing the idea of the “Yellow Peril” in the first half of 20<sup>th</sup> century, it was Sax Rohmer. When he invented Fu Manchu, he invented a character who would become the first universally recognized Oriental and the most famous Chinese to appear in fiction. That the Fu Manchu novels became so popular in the West is not all that surprising, once we consider the historical circumstances of the period. Anti-Asian sentiment was rampant, especially in Europe and the United States. The Yellow Peril, which up to that time lacked a definite form, was given a face and a body in the person of Fu Manchu—the archetype of villainy. To those in the West, he appeared forbidding because he had mastered Western technology as well as mysterious Oriental practices and because he had mobilized the yellow race in his fight against whites. He aroused the deepest fears of Westerners concerning the supposed threat from the East. And what made the threat particularly subversive was its racial underpinnings. It was obvious from the Fu Manchu stories that the yellow race wanted to overrun white civilization and gain control of the world. It is indicative of the times that such blatant



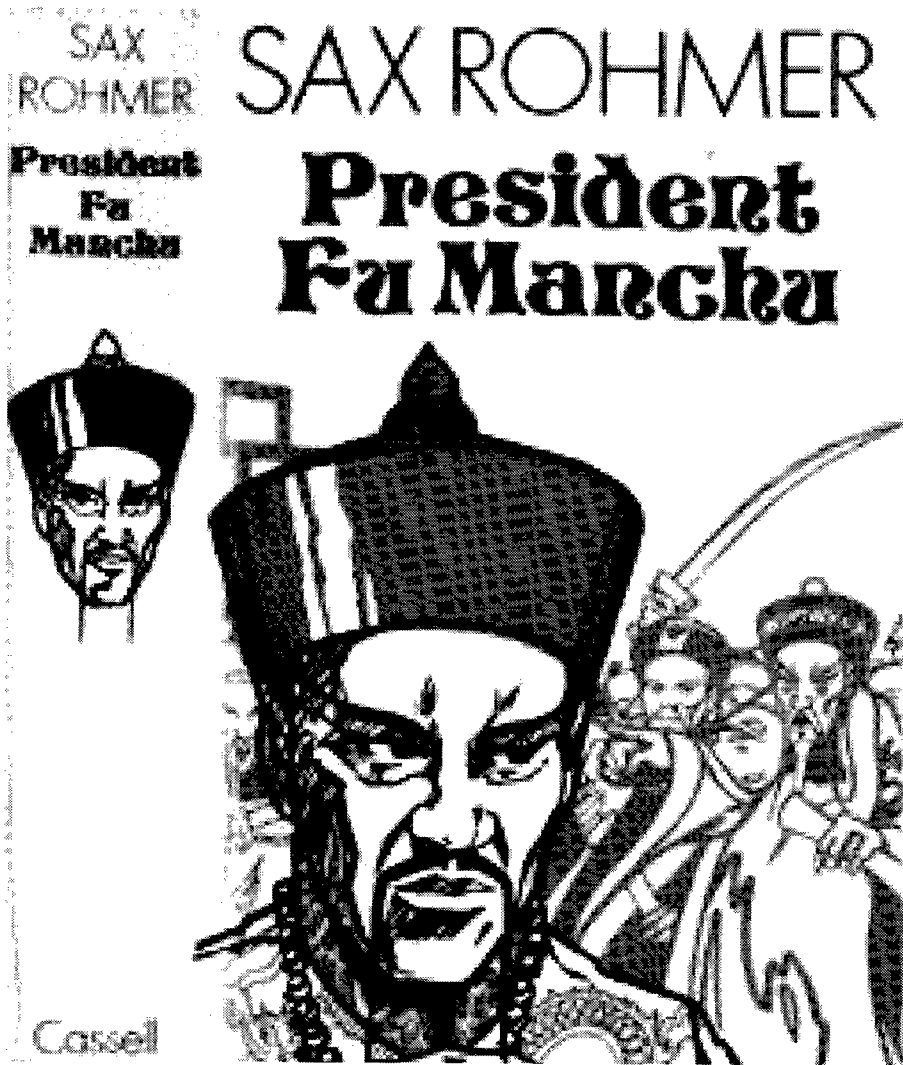
racist sentiment was able to gain literary acceptance and popular support.

Although the Yellow Peril theme was the main attraction, it was not the only reason for the books' popularity. Many armchair adventurers were (and to a slight degree still are) attracted by the large portions of pure fantasy that the author included in all the novels. While much is completely unbelievable, some of the dramatic scientific inventions almost seem within the realm of possibility. It is true that Rohmer did not deal with Asia and Asians in a realistic way, however, he did a fair amount of research into poisons and deadly plants and animals, which helped give a certain authenticity to the stories. I think it is fair to say that from the standpoint of technique Rohmer was a good storyteller. His special talent was in constructing impossible situations for his heroes—life and death situations guaranteed to keep readers on the edge of their chairs. Of all the novels, the three earliest ones were the most readable, for they were filled with wonder and charm and surprise; in the latter novels, the quality dropped considerably. Thanks to radio and TV, the Fu Manchu stories were given a second life that extended their popularity for ten or fifteen years. Later, however, interest faded, mainly due to the simple fact that his books were for the most part a product of his day and age. Once the Yellow Peril threat lost its immediacy, the Fu Manchu stories lost their timeliness. Now read mainly as period pieces, they still offer some insight into a movement that for several decades influenced the way Westerners thought about Asia. For that reason, they do possess historical value.

#### Notes

1. Cay Van Ash and Elizabeth Sax Rohmer, *The Master of Villainy: A Biography of Sax Rohmer* (Bowling Green: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1972) 291. It is interesting to note that Van Ash (1918–1994), who was a close personal friend of Sax Rohmer, lived for thirty years in Japan and for several of those years taught part-time in the Department of Literature at Waseda University. In fact, this book was apparently published while he was working at the university.
2. There are Japanese translations for about ten Fu Manchu works: five were made before WWII and five after the war; none of the works have been translated into Chinese.
3. Between 1995 and 2001, Allison & Busby, a British company specializing in mystery fiction, published a five volume set entitled *The Fu Manchu Omnibus*, which contains all of Rohmer's Fu Manchu books and stories. The entire set is still readily available. Here is a list of the contents followed by the original dates of publication:
  - (1995) Volume 1: *The Mystery of Fu Manchu* (1913)  
*The Devil Doctor* (1916)  
*The Si-Fan Mysteries* (1917)
  - (1997) Volume 2: *The Daughter of Fu Manchu* (1931)  
*The Mask of Fu Manchu* (1932)  
*Fu Manchu's Bride* (1933)
  - (1998) Volume 3: *The Trail of Fu Manchu* (1934)  
*President Fu Manchu* (1936)

- Re-Enter Dr. Fu Manchu* (1957)
- (1999) Volume 4: *The Drums of Fu Manchu* (1939)  
*Emperor Fu Manchu* (1959)  
*Shadow of Fu Manchu* (1948)
- (2001) Volume 5: *The Island of Fu Manchu* (1941)  
 Short Stories  
*The Wrath of Fu Manchu* (1952)  
*The Eyes of Fu Manchu* (1957)  
*The Word of Fu Manchu* (1958)  
*The Mind of Fu Manchu* (1959)
- The 5<sup>th</sup> Volume also contains several other stories that are unrelated to the main series.
4. The address is <http://njedge.net/~knapp/FuManchu.htm>, and it is maintained by Professor Lawrence J. Knapp. I am indebted to this site for information that is otherwise hard to locate.
  5. I capitalize the term, for that is the way it often appears in Rohmer's novels and other works of the period.
  6. "Yellow peril." *Collins English Dictionary*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. 1998.
  7. D. E. Mungello, *The Encounter of China and the West, 1500-1800* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1999) 94.
  8. The English term is a direct translation of the German phrase "die jelbe Gefahr."
  9. Ian Littlewood, *The Idea of Japan: Western Images, Western Myths* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1996) 27-28.
  10. Robert Bickers, *Britain in China: Community, Culture and Colonialism, 1900-1949* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1999) 44. For a brief but informative account of the Boxer Uprising, see Jonathan D. Spence, *The Search for Modern China*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1999) 230-233.
  11. In 1912 he changed his name from the common Arthur Ward to the more exotic sounding Sax Rohmer, which in Anglo-Saxon means "blade roamer."
  12. Van Ash, *The Master of Villainy* 72.
  13. Van Ash, *The Master of Villainy* 75.
  14. The American title was *The Insidious Dr. Fu Manchu*, which sounds much more sinister.
  15. Sax Rohmer, *The Fu Manchu Omnibus*, vol. 1 (London: Allyson & Busby, 1995) 15.
  16. Throughout this paper, the words and phrases given in quotation marks are taken directly from the various novels.
  17. *The Fu Manchu Omnibus*, vol. 1, 269.
  18. This group is the Si-Fan, which figures prominently in the next novel, *The Si-Fan Mysteries*.
  19. *The Fu Manchu Omnibus*, vol. 1, 611.
  20. *The Fu Manchu Omnibus*, vol. 2, 184.
  21. *The Fu Manchu Omnibus*, vol. 2, 570.
  22. *The Fu Manchu Omnibus*, vol. 3, 103.
  23. *The Fu Manchu Omnibus*, vol. 3, 238.
  24. *The Fu Manchu Omnibus*, vol. 3, 164.
  25. Rohmer probably included this reference to a Japanese right-wing group because in the 1930s many Westerners saw Japan as the major threat to the peace of Asia.
  26. *The Fu Manchu Omnibus*, vol. 3, 330.
  27. *The Fu Manchu Omnibus*, vol. 3, 280.
  28. Although we might question Rohmer's scientific credibility, we cannot but be surprised at the eerie similarity between his idea and the one that was proposed thirty years later by the American military during the Reagan years—the anti-ballistic system known as "Star Wars."
  29. *The Fu Manchu Omnibus*, vol. 4, 663.
  30. *The Fu Manchu Omnibus*, vol. 3, 570.
  31. *The Fu Manchu Omnibus*, vol. 4, 517.



**The Face of Fu Manchu**  
(From the cover of an early edition)

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