Barcelona

Port

Fondo – Santa Coloma Gramanet

TERCAT, port

Bon Pastor industrial area

Chinese District

Badalona

Pekin shantytown

Filmset of El Embrujo Shanghai – Trueba film
The Yellow Peril

"In 1904 came the direct clash between Japan and Russia (the Russo–Japanese war), and the final defeat of Russia. This was the first time in which European forces had been defeated by forces considered to be “barbarians”, “backward” and “ignorant”. Japan, after having been militarily defeated in 1853 and forced to accept a number of conditions designed to reduce its isolation, began in the middle of the 19th century a modernization process that was partly inspired by Western models and proved to be very successful especially in military terms.

Nevertheless, the feeling of there being a peril spread through the political elites which had colonial interests. It should be remembered that this phenomenon is connected with late 19th and early 20th century geopolitics in Asia, known as “the great game” and involving the confrontation of the Russian and British Empires. While the Russian Empire ran to the shores of the Pacific, the British Empire extended south, taking in Afghanistan, India and Tibet, in the latter case so as not to disturb Russia.

Actually, the strategic movements of the British Empire weren't in response to the Chinese threat, which was militarily very weak, but rather to the position of Russia. The idea of the "yellow peril" came out of these two Empires. In reality, what lay behind it was the British Empire's need to promote and boost spying in the region.

In the second stage, the idea started to appear in the media and was expressed in popular culture through novels starring exotic Oriental characters, normally Chinese, who have great powers with which they try to subjugate and inflict all kinds of cruelties on Westerners.

The first novel to feature the topic was "The Yellow Peril" (1898) written by Matthew Phipps Shiel. Though it had little impact, it does contain an incipient attitude towards the Chinese which was to be developed, this time with great success, by Sax Rohmer, a British journalist who was writing an article about the Chinese in London. After this article was finished he started to write novels and created a character which has been the focal point of the yellow peril imaginary for a long time: Fu Manchu.

Fu Manchu is the wicked Oriental par excellence: a man with magic powers who can hypnotise people and has a secret potion with which he can control your will. He can be in the centre of London and then appear at his headquarters in Tibet. He is Western-educated with a doctorate in chemistry and has extensive knowledge of Western technology, while he is also familiar with a disturbing and mysterious esoteric traditional Chinese culture.

Fu Manchu engendered so many novels that Sax Rohmer became a millionaire from writing them. This success also led to numerous films being made about the character from the 1920s to the 1970s. What the yellow peril and Fu Manchu reflect is the terror of being invaded, of being subjugated.

Fear of the Chinese was experienced by the Spanish Empire in the Philippines. In this respect, the Spanish were in a way the pioneers in adopting measures against the Chinese that emigrated to this part of the Spanish Empire. The Philippines were founded in 1575 but the real construction of the city of Manila occurred around 1603, mostly due to the Chinese living there. They were employed as a colony for a long time thanks to its trade with China. When the Spanish came to Manila there was a small colony of Chinese traders that controlled most of the regional trade. In fact, the trade between China and all South-East Asia was in Chinese traders' hands, meaning that their presence was very important. In the Philippines, on the other hand, the Spanish presence was very small. At one time, the Spanish planned to conquer China with an army of 1000 men (which in any case they never managed to gather). Remembering what had happened in South America, they thought that if they could raise an army of 1000 soldiers they were bound to be able to take control of the Chinese Empire.

Manila was constructed thanks to Chinese labour, skilled as well as unskilled and including carpenters, blacksmiths and other craftsmen from China. They built the buildings of Manila and economically supported the city thanks to trade. At this time the Spanish were becoming increasingly worried about being forced out by the Chinese. In 1603, 20,000 Chinese were murdered by the Spanish in Manila. The Philippines completely collapsed. Shortly afterwards, in 1639, Manila was once again home to around 20,000 Chinese and, once again, the Spanish slaughtered them all. This was the first and extremely violent contact between Spain and China; two massa-cres which gave a foretaste of what Russia was to do at the end of the 19th century. The Spanish Empire in the Philippines was a pioneer in creating apartheid policies, that is to say, in implementing segregation by ethnic origin. The Chinese could not live just anywhere in the city but only in a specific district called the Parian. Hence it might be said that the world's first Chinatown was the Parian in Manila, the area where the Chinese were forced to live. Leaving the Parian was only possible if you renounced Confucianism and converted to Catholicism. However, what happened was that the Catholic Church ended up living in the same districts as the Chinese, and it was called Binóhu, and while at first they received the support of the Church, in the 1750s all the Chinese were expelled from the Philippines by law. This is also what happened in the USA in 1882.

Most of the first Chinese immigrants to the USA went to prospect for gold in California. When the gold rush finished they looked for other kind of jobs, and many went into railway construction. The last, most difficult and hardest was the Philippine railway in the Rocky Mountains was built by Chinese labour. When the railway was finished, and after many Chinese had died, the survivors looked for new jobs again. What could they do? They went to work in agriculture in California, and in 1880 they turned California into an orchard. At that time California had no irrigation systems. The infrastructure was built by the Chinese. Once the land became tillable, it was then leased out. At that point a law was passed which made it illegal to lease out land if you were Chinese. Finally, they had no other choice than to go to cities like San Francisco, where they ended up living in the same districts. Why was this? Because legislation that banned them from certain professions was being systematically passed. In the 1870s anti-Chinese movements emerged, labour union movements of white workers coming from different places in Europe that were against Chinese wage labour. Why? Because the Chinese were accused of working more for less money. That meant, in the eyes of European workers, going against the workers movement, and they took up a stance against the presence of Chinese workers.

Finally, the Chinese gathered in places like San Francisco where they set up the city's famous Chinatown. This phenomenon was very much due to the segregationist and exclusionary measures to which they had been subjected. In the end they had no other choice than to live together and to try to survive by working in industry, in shoe making, etc. The only work that they were allowed to do in a regular way in the US was laundry service, but this brought them into conflict with white women. They started out as washermen in the gold mines when someone was needed to wash the miners' clothes and few women were available.

In the US, as in the United Kingdom, the Chinese community has spread throughout the country by taking charge of laundries. The workers' union lobbyied to prevent the Chinese from working and tried to have them expelled. The result was the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882.

In different places around the world, legislation to prevent Chinese immigration was enacted. In the United Kingdom (where the Fu Manchu novels were written) and in the US, the predominant view of the Chinese was that they were opium smokers, sexual obsessives who sought out prostitutes, people who are wicked, liars, cruel, inferior and dirty. At the same time, the image of Chinatown, of the Chinese quarter, became one of a place where criminals thrived and which was dirty and dangerous, just as it has been portrayed in films about the Chinese mafia and films from Hong Kong about the triads.

Rotterdam

Katendrecht

Port

West-Kruiskade

ECT Terminal, port

West-Kruiskade

ECT Terminal, port