



Retracing the Past through Historical Fantasy Novel: *The Poppy War*

Andini Marizka S*

Winda Setia Sari

English Applied Linguistics Postgraduate Program Universitas Negeri Medan, Indonesia

* andinnnsirxx@gmail.com

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Abstract

Historical genre and fantasy genre each have its own ups and downs in their recognition and acceptance in the field of literature. This research explored the mixture of both of the genres, the historical fantasy genre. This research aimed to examine the historical representations and its authenticity in *The Poppy War* novel. The research was conducted by using the approach from McArthur (2008) related to the method on how to represent the past as a historical fantasy novel, as well as how authentic the historical representation by using the approach from Groce & Groce (2005). This research was done using qualitative research design in the form of textual analysis. The result showed that the novel used historical details and referred to historical figures and events as the ways of representing the history. The authenticity of the historical reference can be confirmed by the similarity of the data found in the novel with the secondary and tertiary sources. This research concluded that this novel can be used as a media to learn about historical events that happened during the Second Sino-Japanese War. However, readers needed to remember that the novel is historical fantasy novel that contains fantastical elements that helped the story progressed.

INTRODUCTION

Historical fiction as a genre has a fluctuating state of public acceptance and critical reputation for over the last century. Historical genre has remained to be characterized mainly by literary realism, genuineness, and historical accuracy. However, as the genre is broad and flexible, it grew alongside the other genres that contrast to its realism (Sheffer, 2020).

In the same manner, fantasy literature has received more recognition in critical studies and respect in the literary world as a whole in recent years. In spite of this matter, there is still a lack of recognition of the various kinds of modern fantasy novels and how the genre has developed over the past century and a half (Ordway, 2001). With many fictional novel genres regarded as something groundbreaking for their detailed storylines and psychologically

fascinating characters, not much emphasis has been placed on how fantasy as a fictional genre may be in the same regards as well (Smit, 2020).

Fantasy is a rather broad genre, including a wide range of works. There are numerous sub-genres of fantasy fiction, one of which is historical fantasy. Historical fantasy is similar to historical fiction. It is a cross between two seemingly opposing genres: fantasy, which explicitly rejects accepted reality, and historical fiction, which is based on realism and historically accurate events (Schanoes, 2012). Historical fantasy is a hybrid genre of the historical accounts and fiction. However, there is unevenness in how it is reviewed or considered, where checking on the historical accuracy was considered a priority and little attention paid to the purpose of the fictional elements that the author has chosen to include (Addey, 2021). Saldivar (2011) stated that historical fantasy can be used as a way of describing 'something more' in connecting fantasy, history, and the imaginary in the mode of speculative reality in order to remain true to the ideal faith of cultural literatures to social justice.

The current research aimed to conduct an analysis of how the novel represents the past as a historical fantasy novel from its historical sources and how does the authenticity of the historical representation in *The Poppy War* novel. *The Poppy War* novel written by R. F. Kuang is one of the examples of the historical fantasy genre. *The Poppy War* novel drew inspiration and placed its plot and politics from mid-20th-century China and its aesthetic from Song Dynasty China, mirroring heavily on the Second Sino-Japanese War during the World War II (Pickens, 2018). The researchers considered this novel fitted to be the data of the research as the popularity of this novel might raise readers' interest in the historical fantasy genre.

METHODOLOGY

This research was conducted by using a qualitative research design to answer the questions of the study as proposed in the first chapter. The qualitative research design in this study was in the form of textual analysis. Textual analysis is the process of analyzing a text and making inferences about some of the most plausible interpretation about the text (McKee, 2001). Textual analysis was used to describe how the novel represents the past as a historical fantasy novel and to explain the authenticity of the historical representation in the novel.

The primary data of this study was the sentences, both narratives and dialogues that represented the actual history. The data was the sentences that contain what the characters do and

say and the description about the characters from the author of the novel. The source of the data was *The Poppy War* novel. The secondary data of this research were books, articles, journals, and the historical sources that are represented in the novel. *The Poppy War* novel is the first novel of *The Poppy War* trilogy novel written by R. F. Kuang. *The Poppy War* novel consisted of 2 parts, 26 chapters, and 527 pages. The novel was first published by the HarperCollins Publisher in 2018.

The collected data was analyzed based on the theories of historical representation as classified by McArthur (2008), which are; (a) Data that is using historical detail and (b) Data that is referencing to historical figure and events. The collected data of historical representation was also analyzed and authenticated based on the theories of authenticity of historical representation proposed by Groce & Groce (2005). The result of analysis was organized and discussed and the conclusion was drawn based on the result and discussion of the study.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

After conducting a thorough analysis of the historical representation in *The Poppy War* novel and authenticating the historical representation, the findings of this study are presented in the following section below.

1. Historical Representation in The Poppy War Novel

Tabel 1 Historical Representation in The Poppy War Novel

No	Reference in The Poppy War Novel	Category	Primary Data	Secondary Data	Tertiary Data
1	World Map	Historical details; physical details	The Poppy War novel's world map		

2	Wudang Mountains	Historical details; physical details	The Poppy War novel: chapter 2, page 30	Wu, X. (2015). Wild Edible Plants and Pilgrimage on Wudang Mountain. <i>Journal of Ethnobiology</i> , 35(3), 606-627	UNESCO World Heritage Centre: Ancient Building Complex in the Wudang Mountains.
3	Mencius/Mengzi	Historical figures	The Poppy War novel: chapter 1, page 10	Yao, X. (2017). Reconceptualizing Confucian Philosophy in the 21st Century. Springer	Norden, B. V. (2019). Mencius. Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy
4	Sun Tzu/Sunzi	Historical figures	The Poppy War novel: chapter 4, page 63	Tzu, S. (2004). The Art of War (L. Giles, Trans.). Barnes & Noble Classics	Mark, J. J. (2020). Sun Tzu. World History Encyclopedia
5	Opium Wars	Historical events	The Poppy War novel: chapter 1, page 17	Vassilev, R. (2010). China's Opium Wars: Britain as the World's First Narco-State. <i>New Politics</i> , 13(1): 75-80.	Drug Enforcement Administration, U.S. Department of Justice. (2020). Drug of Abuse

6	Nanjing Massacre/The Rape of Nanjing	Historical events	The Poppy War novel: chapter 21	Chang, I. (1991). The Rape of Nanking: The Forgotten Holocaust of World War II. BasicBooks

a. The Use of Historical Detail

The writers of historical fantasy who set their works in the past are aware of the necessity to do research on the physical environment from the referred time period. In spite of that, writers tend to be inclined to prioritize the internal cohesion of the narrative priority over accurate historical detail.

• Wudang Mountain

After securing her acceptance in *Sinegard* Academy, Rin and Tutor Feyrik headed to *Sinegard*. Rin and Tutor Feyrik traveled north to the Capital, mentioning Wudang Mountain as the peaks of northernmost during their talks on their way there.

Tutor Feyrik : The capital is nestled at the base of the Wudang range. The palace and the academy are both built into the mountainside, but the rest of the city lies in the valley below. Sometimes, on misty days, you'll look over the edge and it'll seem like you're standing higher than the clouds themselves.

(The Poppy War novel: chapter 2, page 30)

Sinegard Academy is located in *Sinegard*, the capital of *Nikan Empire*, which geographically located in the northernmost part of the Empire. The city center and the settlements are mainly in the mountain valley, but the Empire's palace and the academy's building are in the mountainside.

In reference to the real life location, the Wudang Mountain is mountain range located in the northwestern part of Hubei province, China. UNESCO listed Wudang Mountain in World Heritage Sites in 1994 for its ancient Daoist temple complexes (Wu, 2015). Wudang Mountain is also famous for pilgrimage, martial arts such as *Taijiquan* or Taiyi boxing, and as a place of refuge for hermits (Yang, 2008, in Wu, 2015). This reference is an interesting addition along

with the fact that later on Rin will also learn about Daoism during her study in the academy. These details gave narrative cohesion between the novel and the real life.

b. Reference to Historical Figures and Events

Historical fantasy may refer to known characters or events, either as part of the plot or as background.

1) Reference to historical figures

- Sun Tzu/Sunzi

In the novel, Sunzi was known as a great strategist. Rin and the other students have to take 5 classes during their first year at *Sinegard* Academy; Combat, Medicine, History, Strategy, and Lore class. Sunzi was mentioned several times in the book, especially during the Combat and Strategy classes that Rin took. Master Irjah, the Strategy's teacher, once assigned the class to memorize Sunzi's book *Principle of War* as their first learning material.

Later in Combat class, Master Jun –the teacher, taught the class combats movements and principles that is said to be Sunzi's *Principle of War* as well.

Master Jun : I'm going to tell you a story about the great strategist Sunzi. When Sunzi finished writing his great treatise, Principles of War, he submitted the chapters to the Red Emperor. The Emperor decided to test Sunzi's wisdom by having him train a group of people with no military experience: the Emperor's concubines.

Master Jun : Sunzi told the Emperor, 'If words of command are not clear, then the general is to blame. But if words of command are clear, but orders are not executed, then the troop leaders are to blame.'

(The Poppy War novel: chapter 4, page 63)

During this class, they had to follow Master Jun's movement demonstration based on the command signal he given. Master Jun told the class about Sunzi's story where Sunzi was tested by the Emperor to train the Emperor's concubine to prove his treatise. In the story, Sunzi said that orders that were not executed from a clear word of command are considered as the troop leader's fault and had the two most senior concubines beheaded. Master Jun told this story as a warning to the class to follow his movement flawlessly.

In the real life, World History Encyclopedia noted Sun Tzu (Sūnzǐ, in Pinyin

romanization) as a Chinese military strategist and general. He was also recognized as the author of a treatise on military strategy entitled *The Art of War* (Mark, 2020). Sun Tzu was supposedly composed *The Art of War* by in ancient China's and is now well known throughout China and the rest of the world (Lo, 2012). In the book *The Art of War*, translated by Giles (2004), Sun Tzu's treatise was noticed by Ho Lu (Hélú, in Pinyin romanization), the King of Wu. The King requested Sun Tzu to test his theory on the King's concubine.

Sun Tzu : If words of command are not clear and distinct, if orders are not thoroughly understood, the general is to blame. But if his orders are clear, and the soldiers nevertheless disobey, then it is the fault of their officers.

(Giles, 2004: 5)

This book is the reference of the story told by Master Jun during the combat class in the novel. Both in the novel and in the real world, Sun Tzu/Sunzi is known as military strategist. His treatise, *The Art of War*, was also referenced in The Poppy War novel

2) Reference to historical events

- Nanjing Massacre/The Rape of Nanjing

Upon receiving the information that the soldiers of the *Federation of Mugen* had already occupied *Golyn Niis*, Rin and her division –the *Cike*, sailed down through the *Golyn* River to reach *Golyn Niis*. On their way there, their boat jolted from something in the water. Rin looked to the side of the boat and squinted her eyes at the river, noticing that the water was the same muddy brown. When the boat reached a strange spot of colored water, Rin touched the edge of the boat and realized that it had already turned into a river of blood.

They were riding through a river of blood. then the bodies began to float toward them. Their boat stopped moving completely. They were surrounded by corpses. Soldiers. Civilians. Men. Women. Children. They were uniformly bloated and discolored. Some of their faces were disfigured, slashed apart. Others were simply blank, resigned, bobbing listlessly in the crimson water as if they had never been living, breathing bodies.

(The Poppy War novel: chapter 21, page 411-412).

The Federation of Mugen had already attacked and left *Golyn Niis* in a devastating

state. The soldiers of the federation thrown the dead bodies of the *Nikan* citizens, not only the soldiers but also civilians to the *Golyn* River to the point it changed the color of the water to red blood-colored. The lines ‘they were surrounded by corpses’ implied how the massacre had happened in *Golyn Niis*.

Iris Chang (1991) in the book *The Rape of Nanking* jolted down the heartbreaking tragedy happened in Nanjing, China in the year 1937-1938.

Using machine guns, revolvers, and rifles, the Japanese fired at the crowds of wounded soldiers, elderly women, and children who gathered in the North Chungshan and Central roads and nearby alleys. They also killed Chinese civilians in every section of the city: tiny lanes, major boulevards, mud dugouts, government buildings, city squares. As victims toppled to the ground, moaning and screaming, the streets, alleys, and ditches of the fallen capital ran rivers of blood, much of it coming from people barely alive, with no strength left to run away.

They also massacred the Chinese in the nearby suburbs and countryside. Corpses piled up outside the city walls, along the river (which had literally turned red with blood), by ponds and lakes, and on hills and mountains.

(Chang, 1991: page 81-82).

Chang wrote how the soldiers of Japan murdered the Chinese civilians in various ways of cruelty and various kinds of frightening weapons in the actual event happened in real life. The dead bodies of the murdered people were either thrown into the river, ponds, or lakes, or stacked up outside the city walls, on hills and mountains by the soldiers of Japan. The massacre was strongly implied in the line saying ‘as victims toppled to the ground, moaning and screaming, the streets, alleys, and ditches of the fallen capital ran rivers of blood, much of it coming from people barely alive, with no strength left to run away’.

Further in the novel, Rin met Venka, a fellow student at *Sinegard*, who was at the *Golyn Niis* when the massacre happened.

Venka : They made me watch. I saw women disemboweled. I saw the soldiers slice off their breasts. I saw them nail women alive to walls. I saw them mutilate young girls, when they had tired of their mothers. If their vaginas were too small, they cut them open to make it easier to rape them.

(The Poppy War novel: chapter 21, page 424).

Venka told Rin what happened to her and other woman who was at *Golyn Niis* when the soldiers of the *Federation of Mugen* attacked. Venka witnessed on how the other woman was persecuted to be killed or raped. Young girls and their mother became the victim of the cruelty done by the soldiers, including Venka herself.

In the same book, Chang (1991) featured a former soldier of the Japanese army who was placed in Nanking, Takokoro Kozo. He stated that the one who suffered the most are women that the fate of being raped is inescapable.

Takokoro : No matter how young or old, they all could not escape tha fate of being raped. We sent out coal trucks from Hsiakwan to the city streets and villages to seize a lot of woman. And then each of them was allocated to 15 to 20 soldiers for sexual intercourse and abuse.

(Chang, 1991: 91).

The culture and belief of Japanese military are regrettably inseparable with rape that none of the soldiers took the outlaw of raping enemy woman seriously. This rule became the one that encourage the soldiers to murder their victims afterwards.

Both the novel and the book similarly explained what happened during the The Rape of Nanjing or Nanjing Massacre in detailed. Kuang adopted the story and leaving the similarities in the method of action done by the soldiers of the *Federation of Mugen*, including on how they treated the dead bodies, assaulted the women of *Golyn Niis* physically and sexually, and throwing dead bodies to the *Golyn* River.

1. Authenticity of Historical Representation in The Poppy War Novel

Tabel 2 Authenticity of Historical Representation in The Poppy War Novel

Romanticized Accounts	Viewpoint	Stereotypical Descriptions	Notable Omissions or Expansions	Anachronistic Details
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Exaggeration in the extinction of the <i>Speerlies</i> to add sentimental tone and nostalgia to the story	Author's background influenced the result of the story as it is written from a Perspective of one of the parties involved in the events	Stereotypical descriptions of the physical appearance of the <i>Speerlies</i>	Expansions in Characters' language and way of thinking of the novel
	Date of publication was not based on certain events and attitudes that occurred around the time the historical fiction literature was published	Stereotypical descriptions of common behavior and intelligence level of the <i>Speerlies</i> seen by other <i>Nikan</i> people	

a. Romanticized Accounts of the Historical Event/Time Period

Exaggerating the positive or negative aspects of the time might lead to sensational or sentimental tone in historical fiction (Lukens, 2003).

Speer in the novel is located in the same position of Taiwan in real world. This means that the *Speerlies* in the novel are Taiwanese people in the real life. *Nikan Empire* had gone through a number of warfare, including the previous one with the *Federeraton of Mugen* where the Empire lost the *Speer*.

But how could that be? Rin would have been an infant when Speer was attacked, and there was no way she would have survived if no one else had.

Rin : But the Federation massacred the Speerlies. They left no survivors.

Kitay : Altan survived. You survived.

(The Poppy War novel: chapter 12, page 258-259)

Rin discovered that she is actually a *Speerly* after she was able to use the *fire* for the first time. She was in disbelief because it should have been impossible for her, who was an infant when the *Speerlies* were massacred by the Federation, to survive. The fact that it was only two people known to have survived the *Speer* massacre and that it was discovered later regarding Rin's identity as a *Speerly*, is an exaggeration that gave a sentimental feeling for both her and Altan as the only survivors coming from the same place.

b. Viewpoint: Authors Background

Berkhofer (1993) stated that it is possible for historical writings to be reliant on the political, intellectual, and philosophical background or experiences, as well as the moral of the author.

Rebecca F Kuang, the author of The Poppy War novel, was born in Guangzhou, China, in 1996. In 2000, Kuang and her family immigrated to the United States. Kuang studied Chinese Studies at Cambridge University and Contemporary Chinese Studies at Oxford University, giving her the degrees of MPhil and MSc. She is currently studying East Asian Languages and Literatures at Yale University to pursue her PhD degree (Rebecca F. Kuang, n.d.).

Kuang first wrote The Poppy War novel when she took off from Georgetown University to stay in Beijing. She learned about the Chinese history from her grandparents, who lived through the Second Sino-Japanese war, to complete a project and ended up writing an entire novel to process what she was learning (Liu, 2023). Kuang's initial in writing the novel was triggered from this occasion.

c. Date of Publication

The authors' viewpoints may be influenced by the events and attitudes that occurred around the time the historical fiction literature was published (Taxel, 1984, in Groce and Groce, 2005). The Poppy War novel was first published on May 1st, 2018. There was no specific event, especially historical-related event occurred around the time of the first publication.

d. Stereotypical Descriptions

Stereotypes separate the readers because they highlight harmful perceptions of a particular group of people. However, books that were written properly are able to depict cultural minorities as separate people who remained open for the individual differences, while

developing characters from a range of cultural backgrounds (Jacobs and Tunnell, 2001).

There are some stereotypical descriptions that can be found in novel. The students of *Sinegard* paid much attention to Altan as he was the only *Speerly* known alive. Most of them recognize Altan's strength in fighting; but they still perceived the *Speerlies* in general in a negative viewpoint.

Nezha: You know how the Speerlies were. Wild and Bloodthirsty. Hardly knew what to do with themselves unless they'd been given orders.

Nezha: They were primitive. Scarcely more intelligent than children.

(The Poppy War novel: chapter 4, page 76)

The *Speerlies* were seen as if they were beasts because of their immense strength. They were also considered as imbecile, as Nezha mentioned they know less than children. These stereotypes in behavior and intelligence might be not completely mirrored from the real-life stereotypes but triggered from the tense relationship between the Taiwanese people and the mainland China people.

e. Notable Omissions or Expansions

In improving the narrative's flow, authors may also decide to add embellishments to narratives or reorder the historical occurrences. Since it requires creativity to combine narrative with history into a distinguished piece of historical fiction, straying from the factual account is not considered problematic.

The use of magic served as notable expansions in the story. Kuang's creativity allowed her to attach the ability to borrow the magical power of Gods and to communicate with them through the Pantheon.

When the *Federation Armed Forces* attacked *Sinegard*, *Nikan's* warriors was outnumbered and outmatched. Rin was in despair as she realized that they might lose and considered to force call *Phoenix* and borrowed the power of fire. When she witnessed Nezha, her friend, was stabbed to the verge of death, Rin took the decision to see the Gods by drugging herself to be able to access the *Pantheon*.

She rose slowly, flames streaming from her hands, rivulets that ensconced them, gave no escape. The general howled in pain as the fire licked at his open wounds, the gaping holes on his faces, all across his body.

(The Poppy War novel: chapter 11, page 252)

This narrative showed that Rin was able to take the fire from Phoenix. Rin used the fire from her body to fight the General who was trying to kill her and Nezha. Kuang added the ability to use this magic power as a fantasy element to improve the narrative's flow of the story. This addition expanded the story of the historical occurrence into a piece of historical fantasy story.

f. Anachronistic Details

An anachronism means something that was placed incorrectly in the inaccurate period of time, which might raise issue regarding the accuracy of a historical fiction selection because this genre is characterized based on its historical accuracy. There are other factors to take into consideration in analyzing literature for anachronistic traits, including the settings of the story, the language used and the thoughts of the characters (Levstik and Barton, 2001).

The anachronistic details in The Poppy War novel can be seen in the language used by the characters and their way of thinking. One of the examples of the anachronistic details was when Rin experienced her first menstruation. She was suffering from a great pain for several days.

Rin grabbed the cup and guzzled it down. Immediately her head began to swim. The room became delightfully fuzzy. The stabbing in her abdomen disappeared. Then something rose up in the back of her throat. Rin lunged to the side of the bed and vomited into the basin she had set there. Blood splattered the porcelain.

She glanced down at the basin with a deranged satisfaction. Better to get the blood out this way, she thought, all at once, rather than slowly, every month, for years.

(The Poppy War novel: chapter 5, page 92)

Rin decided to drink the sedative to perform the womb cut. She was sweating and feeling fuzzy. The pain stopped for a while until she vomited blood from her mouth. Rin felt that she was rather do this than to have period each month and hindered her study in the academy. This consideration of Rin to not experiencing period was one of the examples of anachronistic details in her way of thinking, where performing womb cut was not practicable in the actual time period.

CONCLUSION

The conclusions were drawn in accordance to the formulation of the problem of the study, based on the result and discussion of the research.

The *Poppy War* novel as a historical fantasy novel was written with historical representation. The historical representation in the novel was presented by using historical details and reference to historical figures and events. The historical details found in the novel were in the form of physical details in the location or place settings of the story. Historical figures found in the novel were referred as influential historical characters in the universe inside the novel. Meanwhile the historical events referred in the novel served both as additional background of the story happening inside the novel as well as part of major plot of the story.

The authenticity of the historical reference can be confirmed by the similarity of the data found in the novel with the secondary and tertiary sources. The authentication issues of the historical representation concerned about six categories; romanticized accounts of the historical event/time period, viewpoint: author's background, date of publication, stereotypical description, notable omissions and expansions, and anachronistic details.

The Poppy War novel as historical fantasy sub-genre of historical fiction gave us a window into the past and allows us to reflect upon the present through the past; that it can more easily incorporate elements belonging to shared cultural heritage as it is different from realistic historical fiction (McArthur, 2008). In conclusion, this novel can be used as a media to learn about historical events that happened during the Second Sino-Japanese War. However, readers needed to remember that the novel is historical fantasy novel that contains fantastical elements that helped the story progressed.

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