

Gunpowder Man

Author's Notes

& Class Discussion Questions

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Gunpowder Man is a piece of fiction. Little Tiger and her family are the products of my imagination aided by my collaborator and performer, Trisha Dong. The only historical Chinese person to appear in the play is Yang Fuqing who, according to one Chinese account, did come to San Francisco after the destruction of the Taiping rebellion. He is reported to have sold his jewels for \$100,000, to have helped many former Taipings to establish themselves in the U.S. and to have attempted to further the Taiping ideals. As far as I have been able to discover he then dropped out of history, though there may be further Chinese accounts of his fate which are unknown to me.

Gunpowder Man is fiction, but a piece of fiction that grows out of a deep historical frustration, which will be described below. Its genesis has caused me not to reproduce a standard sort of study guide that would accompany a production such as this. Rather, I want to present a more personal account of my engagement with the material behind this play and to describe the approaches and projects that I would like to have been assigned when I was a student.

I. The author's journey with the material behind this play.

In researching *Gunpowder Man* I sought out accounts written in English in the last century about the Chinese in the U.S.

These include:

- ! tributes to the Chinese qualities of patience, hard work, and ingenuity,
- ! the most hateful attacks upon the Chinese that one could imagine: their "heathen" character, their "stealing" of jobs from white workers, their "native criminality," even one account of their design to conquer the US by military invasion,
- ! essays that deplore the ways in which white bosses exploited the Chinese but yet conclude that Chinese people should never be allowed to settle here,
- ! pieces meant to be humorous, stereotyping the "quaint" ways of the Chinese,
- ! and impassioned defenses of the Chinese, mostly written by broad-minded clergymen.

After spending dozens of hours scanning these old documents I came across a strange little volume in the Sacramento State University Library. Someone had taken the trouble to photocopy three articles from journals printed in the 1880s. They are bound rather clumsily. These articles, all by one Stuart Cullin, investigated the secret benevolent societies formed

by the Chinese in America.

This was before there was such a profession as anthropology funded by departments at universities. Mr. Cullin seems to have financed his research himself and written for a very small audience. I know nothing about the man except what is revealed incidentally in these articles. But that's enough to make him a hero in my eyes. For these articles are the only writings of the period that ask any of the interesting questions about how the Chinese in America actually lived, how they organized themselves, what they thought about. They are the only writings that approached the Chinese people themselves in order to find out what they thought.

In one of his pieces, Cullin laments how little he is able to discover. It seems that he had no white colleagues with whom to share his results and observations. If the Chinese people of the time were recording anything about their lives, nothing was written in English or has yet been translated. It seems that almost no one was curious! The Chinese themselves were guarded about what they revealed, both because of their persecution by the dominant culture and because of rivalries between different groups and classes within their larger community.

We know now how secretive the Chinese families became about the circumstances of their migration. The two great books by Maxine Hong Kingston (*Woman Warrior*, and *China Men*) document the monumental efforts a young Chinese American had to go in order to discover her family history in the 1950s and 1960s.

Contemplating this blank space in the historical record, I feel

a great sense of loss. There are tens of thousands of marvelous stories that can not be told any more. There are also surely many lessons which we could study to our advantage if only the interesting questions had been asked at the time. For example, consider the following:

In 1856, in Chinese Camp in Tuolumne County, there was an event which was called the "Tong War." We know that there were two groups, members of separate secret societies (Tongs), that had mutual grievances. One report has it that members of one group rolled a rock from their mining claim onto a claim controlled by the other group and things escalated from there. Where they escalated to was a mutual decision for the two groups to have an armed conflict on October 25, 1856, on the level field across La Grange Road from the Crimea House. For days before the event, the participants were commissioning the local blacksmiths to create crude weapons and armor. At the appointed time thousands of white settlers gathered to watch the "war" which took place with very little injury to the combatants. And that was the end of the conflict. There was no residual retaliation as in the Hatfield-McCoy feuds in the American South.

One of the accounts of this "war" mentions the names of the two societies. From other documents I've read, I recognized that one of these was the society of the Hakka people and one was from a district near Canton whose members were Punti. The Hakka and the Punti had a long history of political and cultural antagonism in Kwangtung (the province of Canton). In itself this is a fascinating epic story, but I must save space here and forbear to tell it. It is exactly analogous to the situation in Bosnia today. In the 1850s the two groups were in open conflict in Kwangtung with whole villages destroyed, tens of thousands (or more) killed, an even larger number dispossessed and made homeless. This

strife was one of the forces behind the emigration of Chinese to California.

So the "war" in Tuolumne county must have been something much more complicated than the rather childish picture we are given of two groups escalating conflict from a trivial insult at adjacent mining claims. What astonishes me is that people whose families are annihilating one another in China are able to put a lid on their grievances by the enactment of the rather operatic "battle" whose description has come down to us. The "war" was a unique and marvelously undestructive form of conflict resolution.

The accounts leave me longing to know the answers to many questions: Did the leaders of the two groups plan for the mock battle to put an end to the strife? Were most of the individual combatants satisfied that there was no clear winner or loser to the battle? Did the battle change the attitudes of men toward members of the opposite group? For those who returned to China, did their experience here lead to greater tolerance for other groups at home? Etc. Each question suggests several others. But so far as I can tell, no one writing English even began to ask any of these questions in 1856.

When I reflected on my feeling of loss that these questions are forever unanswerable, an uncomfortable thought occurred: there are just as many unanswered questions about the classmates with whom I grew up in Santa Cruz in the 1940s and 1950s. I spent every school day with small cross-section of the minorities of the era: Irene Takei (a Japanese American), Allen Liu (a Chinese American), Lem Daniels (an African American), Bob Aguilar (a Mexican American). There were larger numbers of Italian and Portuguese Americans who still retained strong ethnic identities. Nothing in our school work at the time helped any of us to learn

the stories of the others' family odysseys. I don't know if Irene's family was interned or if they were located away from the Pacific Coast. I don't know how long Allen's family had been in the US and how the women were able to reside here during the periods of exclusion. I don't know the course that brought Lem's family to a town that had no African-American infrastructure at that time. I don't know how (if at all) Bob's family related to the illegals that we knew worked the fields in the Salinas Valley nearby.

So a feeling of personal shortcoming is added to my disappointment over the historical record. I could have asked my classmates those questions and my life would have been the richer. Now I appreciate that the great vitality of our state's culture derives from the multiplicity of cultural backgrounds that clash and fuse here. Now I believe that the great opportunity and hope for our future is to create something never-before-seen by recombining these wonderful materials. But when I was growing up these thoughts never occurred to me and my first opportunities to learn from my friends were wasted.

II. Suggested projects.

A: Oral history type projects.

Here are two of the sorts of projects that I wish had been assigned me:

1. Divide the class up into pairs or small groups. Each student will tell the other members of the group how her/his family came to California and what the most

significant events of the family history are. Generate a list of specific questions such as:

! Did your people come and go several times? ! What caused them to leave their prior home? ! What are the family stories of the old country? (For African Americans and Caucasians who have been in the US for many generations the questions can revolve around why and how they came to California; for Mexican Americans they can explore continuing relations with people in Mexico; for Native Americans they can explore any family stories that define their identities.)

Most will have to question parents and other relatives to get the answers. After two or three meetings between the groups, have each group tell the stories of its members to the class at large (probably not have each person tell her/his own story but tell each other's story).

2. Assign students to create a report (written or oral) on someone else's culture. They would first look up the place in encyclopedia or other source book to determine the large events of that locality. Then they would interview classmates who descend from that place to see if any family remembrances are shared at home.

B: Comparative history projects expanding on events of the play.

1. The Opium Wars.

The Opium Wars of the 1839-42 and 1856-60, though not mentioned in the play, were devastating events to China and lay behind the migration. The western powers (chiefly Britain but also the U.S. and France) were eager to redress their balance of payments problem with China by forcing her to legalize the importation of drugs grown in India. As a result, opium had at least as detrimental an effect on Chinese society of the 1840s and beyond as cocaine has on our society today.

2. The Taiping rebellion.

The immense civil war that shook China between 1850 and 1864 (sometimes spelled T'ai P'ing) bears many striking resemblances to our own Revolutionary War, and to struggles against the Old Order that have been such a feature of world history since 1789. The military tactics of the rebels were also the text book from which the Chinese communists learned when overthrowing the Kuomintang. The spectacular rise and tragic self-destruction of the Taipings (which forms the background of *Gunpowder Man* and shaped Little Tiger's entire outlook on life) is an epic of world proportions. It deserves to be studied both for its intrinsic fascination and for the light it sheds on the universals of human aspiration and the pitfalls of greed and ambition.

3. The construction of the Central Pacific Railroad.

The first trans-continental railroad was constructed between 1863 and 1869. The portion crossing the Sierra Nevada mountains was one of the greatest engineering feats of the century and was largely the work of Chinese labor. This has been described in many non-fictional books and also in the recent novel for young adults by Bay Area writer Laurence Yep (*Dragon's Gate*, Harper Collins, New York, 1993).