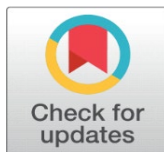
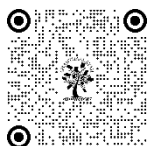


ALTERNATE HISTORY IN KAZUO ISHIGURO'S WHEN WE WERE ORPHANS

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ABSTRACT

Kazuo Ishiguro, the Japanese born British author's fifth novel, *When We Were Orphans* is set mostly against the historical events such as the International Settlement in Shanghai, China, the Second Sino - Japanese War, Opium Trade in China, the Civil War between the Communists and the Nationalists in China and Japan's invasion of China. These historical contexts furnish Ishiguro a platform to fabricate untold events. The past and the present events jump back and forth. The first-person narrator and the other characters heavily rely on their memory to describe the past. This article tries to discover how far the subjective perspective of history has been used by Ishiguro in reconstructing the historical events by mingling public history with personal history of the protagonist, Christopher Banks, a remarkable private detective

Keywords: International Settlement, Opium Trade, Personal History

1. INTRODUCTION

Opium poppy was introduced into China during the Tang dynasty by the Arabian merchants. Initially introduced as a herbal medicine, opium became popular among the Chinese people because of their consumption method. They smoked tobacco mixed opium. Opium trafficking gained momentum amidst the banning of the import of foreign opium in 1780 by the Qing Court. Lin Zexu, the Imperial Commissioner, empowered by Emperor Daoguang to supervise opium suppression ended up in the destruction of 20,000 chests of opium in 1838. Jardine Matheson, a British firm that led opium trading in China furiously objected to this destruction, thus spurring the First Opium War between Britain and China.

Christopher Banks, now a reputed English detective returns to Shanghai's International Settlement, once his home village, in 1937 to investigate the case of his parents' disappearance. He lost his parents at the age of 9, thus orphaned. The disappearance of his parents is linked to the opium business in China. In the early twentieth century, Banks's father was an employee of Morgan Brook and Byatt Company that trafficked opium into China from India and paid the local warlords to help distribution. In fact, Ishiguro has roped in a fictitious company in the name of Morgan Brook and Byatt for his treatment of history.

The Banks's family resides in one of the houses provided by the company. When Mrs Banks comes to understand the nature of the company's business, she joined the anti-opium campaign. Christopher remembers how his father was humiliated by his mother for working in such a company. Christopher remembers his father saying, "We can't do it, Diana. It'll be the ruin of us. I've looked at everything. We'll never get back to England. We can't raise enough. Without the firm, we're simply stranded" (52).

In yet another incident, when a health inspector from the firm visited their house for a regular checkup, he demanded Mrs Banks to dismiss their servant maid Mei Li only because she hailed from Shantung. "Opium addiction in Shantung has now advanced to such deplorable levels that entire villages are to be found enslaved to the pipe. ... those who come from Shantung to work in Shanghai, even if essentially of an honest disposition, tend sooner or later to resort to thieving," (36). Mrs Banks, on hearing this comment, becomes furious and points out that the evil business they were performing and says, "Are you not ashamed sir? As a Christian, as an Englishman, as a man with scruples? ... Tell me, how is your conscience able to rest while you owe your existence to such ungodly wealth?" (37)

Kung, former Chinese Inspector who was once in charge of handling the case of Banks's missing parents too has become an addict to opium in the later stages. Banks is taken by surprise to see Mr Kung, once a heroic figure, has been marred because of opium. "Former Inspector Kung looked to be little more than bones. The skin on his face and neck was shrivelled and spotted; his mouth hung open slackly" (120). Kung has become such an addict that he depends upon the pipe to recollect his memory. He says, "Mr Banks. Sometimes, you know, when I indulge in a pipe, it helps me remember. Many things I have long forgotten drift before my eyes" (130).

Mrs Banks, in fact, arranged secret meetings in her house along with Mr Philip, Banks's 'uncle' as part of anti - opium campaign. She tried her best to see a change in her husband's attitude in working for the company. Immediately after the sudden disappearance of Mr Banks, Mrs Banks comforted young Banks that he should be proud of what his father had done. Banks had come to the conclusion that his father might have been kidnapped for his involvement in the anti - opium campaign.

Young Banks continued his detective games along with his Japanese friend Akira, as if they were going to resume the kidnapped father. Things changed when all of a sudden, his mother too disappeared. Orphaned, he was sent back to England under the care of his aunt. Graduated from Oxford, his aim to detect his missing parents prompted Christopher to become a detective. After cracking some cases, he attains the status of an excellent detective. Meanwhile, he gathers some data regarding his parents' whereabouts. Convinced that he can rescue his parents, he returns to Shanghai in September 1937, when fierce fighting was going on between the invading Japanese army and the Chinese army as part of the Second Sino-Japanese War.

China was engulfed in a Civil War between Chiang Kai-shek's ruling Chinese Nationalist Party and Mao Zedong's Communist forces in the early 1930s. By this time, the Imperial Japanese Army had invaded Manchuria in northeast China. Japan pushed its territorial expansion to Beijing in 1937. The Marco Polo Bridge incident on 7th July officially marked the beginning of the full-scale war between Japan and China. The Battle of Shanghai lasted for three months from 13th August to 26th November, resulting in heavy destruction to the 'Paris of the East' and Japanese capture of the city.

History says that the nationalists (Kuomintang) and the Communists had decided, at least for the time being, to join hands to fight against the invading Japanese. But the grudge against each other was running so high that their priority is not to fight the Japanese out but in fact they were fighting against each other. Sarah Hemmings says, "Oh yes. Well, anyway, it's so ghastly. What are the Chinese doing, tearing at each other's throats at a time like this? You'd think the Reds and the government might put up a united front against the Japanese just for a little while at least" (100). Banks replies, "I suppose hatred between communists and nationalists runs pretty deep" (100).

Amid this severe fighting, Christopher comes to find out his missing parents in an uninvestigated house within the French Concession, aided by a clue provided by the former Chinese Inspector Kung. The fight between Japan and China was so intense that ghastly scenes could be found within the International Settlement. After finding his boyhood Japanese friend Akira amidst the injured soldiers, both of them head towards the house where the missing parents are supposed to be. On their way, they could find that "The damage was so extensive, we would frequently have to halt, unable to find a way through the debris.... Amidst the wreckage, we could see blood - sometimes fresh, sometimes weeks old - on the ground, on the walls, splashed across broken furniture. Worse still - and our noses would warn us of their presence long before our eyes... piles of human intestines in various stages of decay" (161).

The society expects some great dignitaries like Banks to be present in the International Settlement at a time of crisis like this. As such, Banks and Sir Cecil Medhurst, one of the architects of The League of Nations, have come to China on a peacemaking trip. This is evident from Sarah Hemmings's speech. "Mr Banks", she was saying, "do you have any idea at all how relieved we all feel now that you're finally with us? Of course, we didn't like to show it, but we were getting extremely concerned about, well...when the news of your impending arrival reached us, that was the first good news we'd had here in months" (94).

On another occasion, Mr Grayson, the official from the Municipal Council, says, "Mr Banks, we're all so pleased to see you back and safe" (173). But Bank's priority is to detect the crime and find out his missing parents, whom he believes are still alive. He also anticipates that the officials of the Settlement shall provide him with the needs, even amidst their engagement in resisting the Japanese invasion. After these hardships, when the boyhood friends reach the mysterious house, there seems to be no trace of the parents.

Banks had heard about the Yellow Snake Killings, and he wants to trace out who this Yellow Snake Chap is, probably the Communist informer, because he doubts that he might have played a role in his parents' disappearance. To his shock, the yellow snake is Uncle Philip, who has played the role of double informer for the Communists and the Nationalists. Uncle Philip then explains the whereabouts of Bank's parents. His father was not kidnapped but eloped with his lover. Philips and Mr Banks had kept it a secret from the knowledge of young Banks. Mrs Banks was made a concubine to the Chinese War Lord Wang Ku on an agreement that he will take care of his bringing up through financial support. Banks now realizes that all these years, he had been living with the money of Wang Ku.

Ishiguro makes history recede into the background, while his characters struggle against the odds of life come to the forefront.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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