

The Fiction of Henrique de Senna Fernandes and Leung Ping-Kwan Urban Space and Social Change in Macao and Hong Kong

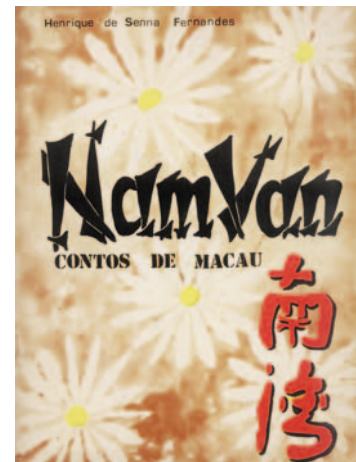
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Urban literature often contains as one of its most abiding themes a nostalgia for a city or, occasionally, particular areas of a city that seem to incarnate for the author a more personalised environment, in which traditional rural values of collectivity and community still survive over and against the growing impersonality of the modern city. In this sense, literature emerging from Hong Kong and Macao over the last two decades is probably not radically different from literature from other Chinese urban environments over a similar period, nor indeed literature from western cities. What is perhaps unique in these two special administrative regions of China is that it is impossible to divorce attitudes on the part of authors towards their cities from the more general context of the major political changes that those regions have undergone. By this, I mean that in depictions of Hong Kong and Macao, authors have been more conscious of a need to evoke a specifically regional identity based on their particular histories, and their status as both cosmopolitan points of cultural encounter but also peripheral cities,

whether as colonial territories or as special administrative regions of China.

The two writers I will be considering are both intricately linked to the lives of their cities, and this is reflected in their work. At the same time, they are from different cultural backgrounds and different generations.

Henrique de Senna Fernandes was born in Macao in 1923 into an old Macanese family with deep roots in the city. He is considered the doyen of Macanese literature in Portuguese, being the author of two novels, both of which were made into films, and two collections of short stories. One of his novels, *The Bewitching Braid*, appeared in English translation in 2004 (1992), and two of his stories, 'Candy' and 'Tea with Essence of Cherry', both of which were originally published in Portuguese in the collection *Nam Van* (1978), appeared in English in an anthology in 2002.¹ Some of his work was translated into Chinese during the transition years in Macao, and although Fernandes himself is to all intents and purposes a lusophone author who claims to have been



Nam Van Contos de Macau (1978)

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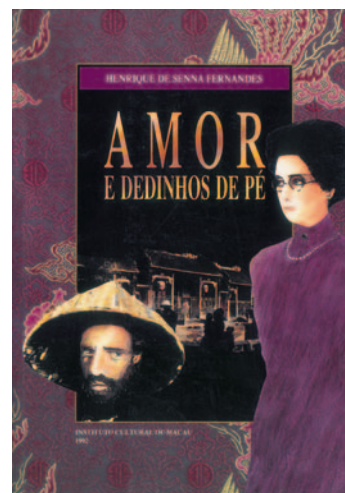
brought up culturally and educationally in Portuguese (he attended the Portuguese school and went to study law in Portugal after the War of the Pacific), he is fluent in spoken Cantonese and versed in the popular Chinese culture of his city, which, after all, is part of his own heritage. From a purely literary point of view, his major influences are 19th-century realism, and its 20th-century variant, neo-realism, but with strong romantic sentiments that are reminiscent of Brazil's 19th-century novelist, Bernardo Guimarães, and the more recent Jorge Amado.² Indeed, Fernandes is inextricably linked with his native city, much as Amado is with Bahia, and the strongly moral purpose of his work and harmonious endings are also redolent of both the Brazilian writers mentioned, as they are of the stories of the North American writer O. Henry, an acknowledged source of inspiration³.

Leung Ping-Kwan, or P. K. Leung as he is sometimes known, is of a very different background. Born in 1948 into a family that had its roots in mainland China, he studied French, and is a professor of comparative literature at Lingnan University in Hong Kong. He is essentially a Chinese-language writer, although he has also written through the medium of English. He is largely a poet (some of his poems have been translated into English), but has also published fiction, including the short stories and novellas first translated into French under the title *Îles et continents et autres nouvelles* (2001).⁴ Like Macao for Fernandes, Hong Kong is the centre of Leung Ping-Kwan's world. That said, a number of the stories in the above-cited collection are set in other places the author has

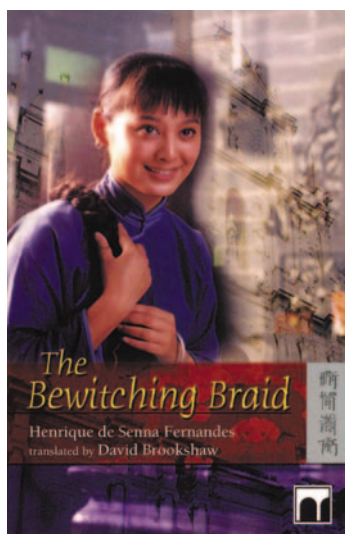
visited—the United States, Europe, and continental China—although there is always a reference back to Hong Kong, often through an addressed 'you' whose identity is vague. It may well be that these two writers' differing narrative strategies

– Fernandes's conventional realism, with a strong current of romanticism, and Leung's rather looser, less traditional narrative structures, deriving from the French 'nouveau roman' – belie differing attitudes towards their respective visions of their home cities, in spite of the nostalgia both convey for an older world.

Fernandes's stories, especially his two novels, both of which were published in the 1980s and early 90s (therefore in the period closely corresponding with the Sino-Portuguese declaration setting the agenda for the return of Macao to Chinese administration), are situated in a more or less distant past: *Amor e Dedinhos de Pé*, his first novel, takes place at the beginning of the 20th century, while *The Bewitching Braid* is set during the 1930s. Apart from being a period that corresponded to the author's youth, these were also years in which Macanese identity is recalled as still unthreatened by the social and cultural changes that were to occur, firstly as a result of the War of the Pacific (during which the population of the city more than doubled with refugees), and later as a result of the political changes in mainland China after 1949, which once again saw widespread migration into the territory. While in more recent, unfinished novels, the author has managed to focus on Macao in the 1960s, it is significant that his attraction is for a type of pre-modern city and the relations that existed between what some have termed the 'Chinese city'—that is, the part corresponding to the Inner Harbour, where many of the incoming migrants from rural China traditionally settled, and where the fishing port was situated—and the 'Christian city,' the part stretching along the spine of the peninsula and the so-called Outer Harbour, facing out into the Pearl River estuary, where the Portuguese administrators and the Macanese elite resided. The ethnic or 'colonial' distinctions between these two quarters have, of



Amor e Dedinhos de Pé (1992)



The Bewitching Braid

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course, long been eroded, especially with the emergence of a new Chinese bourgeoisie since the 1950s, which transformed the socio-economic characteristics of the territory long before it was formally returned to China. But in Fernandes's childhood and youth, the so-called Chinese quarter of Cheok Chai Un, where some of the most dramatic scenes of his novel *The Bewitching Braid* are set, exerted a certain fascination upon him, for it was where, to him as a middle-class Macanese, rural China existed within the borders of the city, contrasting with the sheltered and often constraining world of the Christian city in which he had been born and raised:

"My contact with Cheok Chai Un began when I was at secondary school. I lived on the Estrada de S. Francisco, which was then lined with trees and paved in the Portuguese style, and I had a choice of two routes to school. I either skirted the Boca do Inferno and crossed the Estrada dos Parses and then descended the Calçada do Paiol, or I turned into the Rua Nova à Guia. I would get to the top of the Rua Tomaz da Rosa and rush stumbling down the steps into the heart of Cheok Chai Un. I would pass the well and the old Tou Tei Temple and come out in the Rua do Campo. From there, I would turn right and in five minutes I would reach the entrance to the secondary school at Tap-Seac. My preference was for this second route."⁵

Perhaps the roots of Fernandes's nostalgia are for a Macao which was paradoxically both more traditionally Chinese and more traditionally Portuguese, before the onslaught of modernisation that swept away what was in effect the Chinese village of Cheok Chai Un just as it was, more recently, to sweep away the tree-lined waterside boulevard of the Praia Grande, hemming it in with land reclamation:

"That was what Cheok Chai Un was like and how it remained, more or less, up until the end of the 1950s. When the old city began to be knocked down indiscriminately, Cheok Chai Un didn't escape either. The construction of multi-storey buildings from reinforced concrete deprived it of its own characteristic features, just as happened, of course, with other neighbourhoods in Macao, and it blended into the rest of the city in an irksome move towards monotonous and unsightly uniformity."⁶

For Leung, too, there is an older, more time-honoured Hong Kong, one that he has somehow grown away from, forgotten, and is only reminded of again when he wanders into certain areas. In his story 'Eléphants,' in which some elephants from Thailand somehow get stuck in transit in Hong Kong and are kept on a patch of waste ground in the city, where one of them dies, Leung seems to be resorting to an ironically incongruous image to contrast nature's greatest animal achievement – the dignified, mighty, but ultimately vulnerable elephant – and man's greatest achievement – the mighty and depersonalised city. As the narrator and photographer wanders through the city, looking for somewhere to have dinner, he enters older streets:

"As a result of my wanderings, I had arrived in those old streets behind Central District. An older, simpler world had been left there, that contrasted with the modern bustling one further away. These streets had the air of being closer together, more real, they seemed to depend less on the epoch, they had existed no doubt since the depths of time, and would always be the same. Shops selling fish, seafood, were aligned north to south, stationers, pharmacies selling traditional medicine of every description, bazaars with large pairs of scissors over the door. I don't know how long it was since I had last walked past these shops. Yet they had remained there, behind the tawdriness of the city. I had merely distanced myself from them, that was all. For I had grown up in simple streets like these."⁷

Yet there is a difference between these two writers. Leung's stories are set largely in the Hong Kong that most of us have come to know, the city of skyscrapers of the last three or four decades. His work is more self-reflective, more existential and ultimately more prone to use the modern, cosmopolitan city as a metaphor for a type of frontier identity, demonstrated in the wandering characters in the aptly entitled stories such as 'Frontières' and 'Îles et continents.' Leung's Hong Kong may be an island on the edge of Mother China (or on the edge of the British colonial world), but it is a world too, while the continents that his characters wander through (North America, Europe) are also islands of isolated individual and groups. At the same time, the fragmented structure of Leung's stories incarnates the fragmented lives led by isolated, alienated individuals in the modern, impersonal metropolis. It

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is this implied lack of harmony, coupled with Leung's self-reflective, ironic tone, that differentiates the Hong Kong author's work from that of Fernandes, whose fiction is more concerned to evoke the identity of an ethnic community within a fast-changing world, while also, during the transition years, to reconcile that group with its Chinese roots, as well as with its traditionally upheld Portuguese identity. That said, both writers seek to evoke a particular type of regional or local identity that has to be forged out of the respective histories of these two cities.

Both these writers express a nostalgia that in many ways is remarkably similar. It reflects not

only their concern at the depersonalisation of their respective cityscapes, but also a yearning for apparently long-forgotten foods prepared and eaten when their communities were, perhaps, more cohesive. Yet it is worth recalling here the words of Michael Pickering and Emily Keightley: 'Nostalgia can (...) be seen as not only a search for ontological security in the past, but also a means of taking one's bearings for the road ahead in the uncertainties of the present'.⁸ **RC**

Author's note: Originally read as a paper at the conference of the Association of Chinese and Comparative Literature, Chengdu, 6-7 August 2007.

NOTES

- 1 These two stories were included in the anthology *Visions of China, Stories from Macau* (ed. David Brookshaw), Providence RI/Hong Kong, Gávea-Brown and Hong Kong University Press, 2002.
- 2 Guimarães (1825-1884) was the author of one of the best known novels about slavery, *A Escrava Isaura* (1875), 'The Slave Girl Isaura,' which was made into Brazil's first internationally famous television soap opera. Amado (1912-2001) is one of his country's most widely acknowledged social realist novelists of the 20th century.
- 3 O. Henry (1862-1910) was a popular short story writer in the United States, whose work was widely published in magazines.
- 4 Leung Ping-Kwan, *Îles et continents et autres nouvelles*, Paris, Ed. Gallimard, 2001. Since reading the fiction of Leung in French, I have discovered that the collection has been published more recently

in English, as *Islands and Continents* (Hong Kong, Hong Kong University Press, 2007).

- 5 Henrique de Senna Fernandes, *The Bewitching Braid*, Hong Kong, Hong Kong University Press, 2004, p. 3.
- 6 *Ibidem*, pp. 2-3.
- 7 Leung Ping-Kwan, *Îles et continents et autres nouvelles*, pp.13-14. My translation from the French.
- 8 Michael Pickering, and Emily Keightley, 'The modalities of nostalgia', *Current Sociology*, 2006, 54, pp. 921. Leung's poem, 'Secret Family Recipes' is, for example, very 'Macanese' in its nostalgia for certain foods, similar in its elegiac tone to some of the descriptions of Macanese dishes and family meals in the writing of Senna Fernandes.