

A Colonial Diaspora Between Empires The Macanese and the Fiction of Henrique de Senna Fernandes

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The European colonial empires that emerged, spearheaded by Portugal and Spain in the 16th century, sparked the first widespread transoceanic migrations of officials, traders, soldiers and adventurers. In the New World, these migrations were such that, with some exceptions, the demographic and ethnic balance shifted away from the indigenous populations towards the new settlers, and depending on the particular local environment, the new mixed populations that emerged through inter-cultural contact. Elsewhere, in parts of Africa and in Asia, shortage of settlers meant that Portuguese political influence was to some extent legitimised by the creole communities that emerged as a result of lone Portuguese men setting up home with local women. Nowhere was this more so than in Macao, where the local Eurasian population (originating not only in the mixture between Portuguese and Chinese, but also incoming Goans, Malaccans, Timorese among others) identified themselves, for the most part, as Portuguese, even though most of them never visited the country whose cultural identity they claimed to buy into. Like most buffer groups, they were a frontier

ethnicity, notionally loyal to the political status quo, from which they derived their own social status in the colony, identifying themselves as Portuguese speaking and Roman Catholic. Yet, they were also recipients of other cultural influences, chiefly of course, those emanating from Southern China: they were usually fluent in spoken Cantonese, and had also absorbed popular Chinese cultural habits into their domestic life, including a wide range of culinary influences, which blended with others originating in Portugal, India and Southeast Asia, to produce what has come to be known as Macanese cuisine.

Over recent years, a debate has occurred over the essential features of Macanese identity. The magistrate and writer, Rodrigo Leal de Carvalho, who spent four decades in the city until 1999, suggested that the Macanese were peculiarly cosmopolitan in their outlook, while displaying traditional Portuguese qualities of hospitality, qualities that perhaps accorded with his own self-perception as an Azorean, therefore a mid-Atlantic Portuguese from the far western periphery of the empire, but where similar cosmopolitan influences abounded largely because of emigration and links with America:

“The Macanese community, predominantly Portuguese in culture enriched with oriental elements – Chinese, Malay, Indian –, combined a genuine tradition of hospitality, a capacity for living life to the full inherited from better days, and a cosmopolitan air that came from centuries of international trade.”¹

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Frederic A. Silva, for his part, claimed that being Macanese was largely a state of mind, and did not depend so much on descent as on a willingness to belong to the group and to identify with the tiny homeland of Macao. Silva therefore seemed to suggest a willingness to accommodate outsiders into some sort of a Macanese identity. His position may be explained by the fact that he had been born in Hong Kong and spent many years in the United States, and therefore had to adopt the most liberal interpretation possible of this particular ethnicity:

“A son of Macao is not so much a description of a racial type as a frame of mind. One belongs to the community because one wants to belong, and in turn the community accepts, with no barriers other than a willingness to belong.”²

For his part, the anthropologist, João de Pina-Cabral, focused on the changing relationship between the Macanese and their Portuguese and Chinese heritages during the course of the 20th century, demonstrating an ability on the part of the group to survive in a fast changing world. As a result of a series of crises during the course of the century, which seemed to signal the inevitable end of Portuguese rule, the Macanese gradually adapted to the flow of history, accommodating themselves to the Chinese side of their heritage, which they had hitherto underplayed or even formally ignored, preferring instead to invest in what Cabral terms their “Portuguese capital”.³

There are, however, two important factors to remember about the Macanese, which could be said to apply to other diasporic groups. The first relates to social class. The Eurasian population of Macao of course had its own social hierarchy, and therefore it is important to consider to what extent ethnic and cultural cohesion transcended sometimes profound social differences. In his study of the Cape Verdean diaspora in Lisbon, Luís Batalha found that the old creole elite, whose members opted to move to Portugal when Cape Verde became independent, had little if any contact with Cape Verdean economic migrants in Portugal, who had moved and continued to move to the old mother country after independence, in search of work. These two groups have different meeting places, different social aspirations, and these social differences are usually underpinned by skin colour (the old elite tends to be less distinguishable phenotypically from the Portuguese themselves), while the poor economic

migrants are darker skinned. What do unite these two broad groups are an affection for the creole language that all Cape Verdeans speak when in the islands, and an attachment to certain aspects of Cape Verdean culture such as food. This identification with an ancestral culture tends to fade away when middle-class Cape Verdeans (or Portuguese of Cape Verdean parentage), marry into the Portuguese middle class, while a younger generation of Black Portuguese (the offspring of Cape Verdean economic migrants) gravitate towards more militant cultural models than those of their parents, in the face of discrimination.⁴ It would therefore be more exact to see this diaspora, not as a cohesive unit, but as a continuum between Africa and Portugal, or Europe. The same could be said of the Macanese, as depicted in the fiction of a writer who is considered the doyen of Macanese writing in Portuguese, and who affords us a glimpse into the world of Macao and the Macanese during the first decades of the 20th century: Henrique de Senna Fernandes.

Fernandes was born in 1923, into a family whose roots in Macao went back centuries. The onset of the War of the Pacific meant that he and his family lived through the hardships of the years between 1941 and 1945, and it was only after the end of the conflict that he was able to leave for Europe, where he would take a law degree at Coimbra University. Upon returning to Macao in the early 1950s, he opened a lawyer's office, but also taught at the local secondary school. He belonged to a generation of Macanese intellectuals, which included the slightly older journalist and writer, Deolinda da Conceição, who began to gain an awareness of Macao's regional culture and place in the world.⁵ Fernandes himself began to write short stories, which were eventually published as a collection in 1978, under the title *Nam Van*.⁶ While the impetus of that generation of Macanese intellectuals could not be sustained for political reasons within Salazar's increasingly defensive empire (and within which Macao's position was distinctly ambiguous), a concern with Macanese identity would re-emerge in the late 1980s and 1990s, precisely between the signing of the Luso-Chinese joint declaration setting the agenda for Macao's return to China, and the handover in December 1999. It was then that Fernandes re-emerged, with the publication of two novels, both of which were adapted for the cinema or television. It is probably true to say that the most iconic of these two novels is *A Trança*

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Feiticeira (*The Bewitching Braid*), first published in 1992, and turned into a film in 1996.⁷ What is unique about Fernandes is the focus he places, in his novels and stories, upon the inner world of the Macanese, their values and situation within the wider world of Macao, and in particular their positioning in relation to both their Chinese and Portuguese cultural heritages.

The settings for Fernandes's fiction are almost always Macao during the first three or four decades of the 20th century – that is, when Macao was a tiny outpost of a still relatively secure Portuguese empire, and yet before the territory became more isolated from the Chinese mainland between the onset of the Chinese revolution in 1949, and the Portuguese revolution of 1974. Fernandes's Macao is a world where the Macanese sail across the harbour for picnics in China, where men go hunting in the adjacent countryside of Guangdong, and where others go off to seek their fortune in the treaty ports of China or in the international concession of Shanghai. Sometimes they disappear into the wider world of China, such as Vidal, the outcast of an old patriarchal Macanese family in the novel, *Amor e Dedinhos de Pé*, who begins his economic and social redemption in Shanghai. Sometimes they fail miserably, such as Chico Frontaria's father in the same novel, who dies a miserable death in a back lane of Foochow. Sometimes, like Santerra in *The Bewitching Braid*, they return from the mainland to Macao, having made their fortune. Sometimes, they are poor Macanese like the streetwise Maurício, in the short story, "Tea with Essence of Cherry", who makes his fortune by smuggling goods from neutral Macao into Free China during the War of the Pacific, running the gauntlet of the occupying Japanese. And then, there is the enigmatic Hong Kong Portuguese, Candy, from the short story of the same name, who marries into the British colonial elite. The rest of this paper will look at the dynamics of inter-Macanese relations in one of Fernandes's novels, *The Bewitching Braid*, and the two short stories mentioned above.

BECOMING MACANESE

The Bewitching Braid is a love story, in which the hero, Adozindo, is a young Macanese gadabout from a traditional family with its roots in the Saint Anthony parish – well within the heart of the so-called Christian City, an old area that speaks of blue-bloodedness rather

than new wealth. In physiognomy, he represents the various minglings of Macanese history: "He was a light-skinned child, with green eyes, maybe inherited from his Dutch great-grandmother; and with his brown hair, he was the picture of a grandfather from the North of Portugal"⁸. As a young dandy he was "proud of the silkiness of his curly, wavy hair, of his straight nose, of the roundness of his cheekbones that came from his Chinese side" (10) (although significantly, this Chinese side is unattributed to any particular senior relative or ancestor). Adozindo is drawn to a poor young water seller from the Chinese quarter, Ah Leng. At first, he thinks of her as just another beauty to seduce, but his attraction to her grows stronger as she rejects him, and this attraction is directed towards her long, luxuriant braid, plaited elaborately in the traditional Chinese style. Eventually, she succumbs and they embark on an affair. Ah Leng represents true love and natural attraction (not to mention attractiveness), in contrast to Lucrécia, the young Macanese widow, whose elderly husband, Santerra (who had made his fortune in mainland China and Shanghai), left her a rich marriage prospect. She lives in a mansion on the side of Monte Hill, unlike her unknown rival, Ah Leng, who lives in a hovel in the notorious area of Cheok Chai Un. And yet what does Lucrécia seek in Adozindo? It transpires that she was an orphan, the daughter of a "tropa" (a low-ranking metropolitan soldier) and a Chinese peasant woman from the lowlands abutting the border with China. Lucrécia had been saved from a youth of poverty and violence by Santerra. Adozindo, for her, represents the prestige of the old Macanese elite. For Adozindo's family, in spite of her condition as a widow, she represents an injection of much needed capital.

When the community of Cheok Chai Un discover that Ah Leng is having an affair with an outsider, a foreigner to the Chinese quarter, she is expelled from the area. When Adozindo's father discovers that he is sexually involved with a lowly Chinese girl, he gives him the stark choice of either giving her up or leaving the family home. Out of pride, he chooses the latter. The second half of the book therefore centres on the abandoned couple's efforts to make a living, raise a family, and become re-integrated into their respective communities. But it also focuses on their efforts to adjust to each other's cultural traditions and tastes, in particular in the area of cuisine, religion and language, the cornerstones of Macanese identity.

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Cuisine, as mentioned above, is a cornerstone of Macanese identity, and forms an important reference point in the work of Fernandes. Adozindo, while looked upon as a foreigner initially by Ah Leng, is, nevertheless more Chinese than either she or he is aware. Even before their meeting, he thinks nothing of taking an early morning snack of tofu custard at a downtown kiosk. He enjoys, of course, even more the dish of crabs (an aphrodisiac in Chinese cooking) washed down with special tea that Ah Leng cooks up for him on the evening that finally marks the consummation of their mutually felt attraction. He enjoys it far more than the European dishes and fine French wines of Lucrécia's dinner, at which the widow expects Adozindo to commit himself to her. Yet when he and Ah Leng are forced to strike out on their own, he begins to yearn for the food that Ah Leng cannot cook, and when she briefly abandons the home, it is significant that he spends his last few savings on dinner in a Portuguese restaurant, a happy choice in part as there he runs into Valdemero, a poor Macanese from his school days, who helps him to get his first job for a Chinese trader.

Once the couple marry and settle down to family life, Fernandes's evocation of their domestic adjustments and social relationships offers a sensitive glimpse into the life of a mixed family. Removed from the Chinese quarter, but not yet integrated back into the Macanese bourgeoisie, their social entourage consists mainly of low-class Macanese, whose knowledge of the old dishes of Macao cuisine is limited (given that these have been perfected over the years in the kitchens of the old patriarchal families). But they regularly assemble at Adozindo's house to play mah jong. Nevertheless, Ah Leng does develop skills to mingle Chinese with Portuguese/Macanese dishes, demonstrating her ability to adjust to his tastes. So while he becomes used to the light soups of Chinese tradition, she adapts, with some difficulty to coffee and bread. She also learns to use a knife and fork when eating Portuguese food, but he never adapts to chopsticks when eating Chinese. On the whole, and in spite of the author's statement that "these were habits and customs from two cultures that blended together without imposition on either side",⁹ there is little doubt that Ah Leng has to undergo greater adjustments in her cultural habits than Adozindo, and this is also evident in religion and language.

When Ah Leng lived in Cheok Chai Un, she frequented the Tou Tei Temple. But her affair with

a foreigner meant that she could never go back there, partly because it would involve her having to go through the old area from which she had been banished. However, at Adozindo's insistence, she must get baptised before they can marry, and because the old parish of St Anthony is closed to them, they do so at St Lazarus, traditionally the church of the so-called New Christians, that is, those Chinese who have adopted Catholicism. However, while Ah Leng assumes her husband's religion, her assumption of Catholicism is essentially a mark of her social rise into the fringes of society in the "Christian City". Underneath, she continues to observe her old beliefs, and to reconcile these with certain aspects of popular Catholicism. Towards the end of the novel, during the final stages of the family's re-integration into Macanese society, Ah Leng prays to St Anthony to deliver her wish for a further child, while using the rationale of traditional Chinese geomancy to persuade the Macanese matriarch, D. Capitolina, a pillar of the community and of the parish of St Anthony, to allow Adozindo to lease her property on the Monte Hill.

Significantly, she first approaches D. Capitolina in "a peculiar speech mingling Portuguese and Chinese that only true Macanese could understand" (166). When Adozindo first met Ah Leng, she spoke no Portuguese, but as occurred with her religious practices, she has made an adjustment, picking up his language sufficiently to be able to communicate in a Macanese way. Undoubtedly, then, it is Ah Leng who has undertaken the greater transformation in this marriage of opposites. The changes in her are of course necessitated by her social ascent. By leaving behind the Chinese quarter, rooted in the traditions and values of the rural China with which its inhabitants still maintain close links, she has entered the world of the Macanese, and in a very real sense has become Macanese. Adozindo's changes are minimal, and involve a greater appreciation of Chinese cultural values that he would have been brought up to despise, even though many of his cultural habits, as we have seen, were informally Chinese.

MACANESE BETWEEN EMPIRES

The social mobility of native Chinese in colonial Macao, and their partial assimilation of Portuguese cultural practices, was only one way of bridging cultures

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that were otherwise in conflict. There was also the physical mobility of native Macanese to other imperial spaces, in particular the nearby British colony of Hong Kong.¹⁰ Opportunities for employment in the tiny territory of Macao were severely limited, which meant that from the middle of the 19th century onwards, many Macanese migrated to Hong Kong, where they found clerical jobs in the newly created banks and trading companies, and in the various branches of the civil service. They formed a ready-made buffer group of the type that proved useful to the British colonial administration. On the other hand, as Portuguese Eurasians, they were caught between an emotional link with their ancestral past and a desire or need to integrate into the British colonial system. This, in part, is the theme of Fernandes's short story, "Candy", which is set over a day in 1970, when a Macanese migrant returning to Brazil after a first visit to his homeland in twenty-five years, runs into an old flame, Candy, while in transit in Hong Kong. Together, they recall their youth and catch up on each other's news. The story therefore consists of a series of flashbacks to Macao during the war years, when Candy, an orphaned Hong Kong Portuguese had fled the Japanese occupation of the British colony and taken refuge in Macao, where she had become the lover of a young local civil servant and future migrant to Brazil. Her ambitions, recalled as being the product of poverty, had then led her to abandon him. But what is interesting about Candy is that she seems to incarnate the predicament of a colonial diaspora living between two contrasting empires. She is clearly more at home speaking the crisp English that she had picked up at convent school in Hong Kong, and although she can understand Macanese *patois* – the Portuguese creole language of Macao – she refuses to speak it because she is unfamiliar with the standard Portuguese that most middle-class Macanese are familiar with. So the enigmatic Candy, whose flirtatious charm had attracted the youthful Macanese during the war years, also reveals a vulnerability based on the cultures in conflict within her: she is not Portuguese enough to belong to the higher strata of the Macanese bourgeoisie, for which she feels a certain shame, and not British enough because of her Portuguese Eurasian background. In Hong Kong, she is "Portuguese", in Macao, she is "British".

After the war, however, we learn that Candy had seduced and married her British boss, Mr Morris-White, and become the model wife in a partnership that

had seen her husband reach the peak of colonial society, symbolised by the large home she now inhabits near the summit of the Victoria Peak. In order to fulfil this function, she had been obliged to cut all links with her family and with the Portuguese community in Hong Kong. Like Ah Leng, who had been obliged to become a Catholic in order to marry Adozindo, the price Candy had to pay to marry Morris-White, was to abandon her Catholicism, to adopt her husband's Anglicanism. This led to her being ostracised by her own community, in what was still a highly stratified, colonial society. Now, a quarter of a century on, her ambitions achieved, she feels this loss of roots: her children look like the father and have no trace of their mother's physical features, a detail that seems to emphasise the eradication of Candy's cultural heritage from this British colonial family. It is at this point that the final twist in her drama unfolds, as she confesses to her former lover that she had given birth to his child, a daughter, whom she had given away for adoption in Canton and lost all trace of. This is her punishment, and to some extent that of her one-time lover, as she admits: "If I'd married you, I would never have felt this remorse that seems to get worse the older I grow. Our children would be ours, with our face, and they would share their parents' faith..."¹¹

For Fernandes, the realization of material ambition comes at the cost of loss of roots and true love. In this sense, the Hong Kong Portuguese orphan, Candy, is little different from the Macanese orphan, Lucrécia. Both rise to the dizzy heights of the Governor's circle in their respective social and political environments, but their success is not reflected in their conjugal happiness. Can the pursuit of wealth be achieved without loss of roots, for Fernandes? His answer may lie in the figure of Maurício, a young Macanese orphan and main character in the story "Tea with Essence of Cherry".

ROOTED ROOTLESSNESS

Like so many of Fernandes's stories, the main part of "Tea with Essence of Cherry" is set during the War of the Pacific, when Macao, because of Portugal's neutrality, was the only part of the East Asian mainland not occupied by the Japanese. Once again, it takes the form of a recollection by a narrator of his friendship with a poor orphan, Maurício, who had dropped out

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of school early and devoted his life to accumulating material wealth. As a result, we see the subtle differences between middle-class and poor Macanese in relation to their Chinese heritage. It may well be that this difference in class and culture is also based upon descent. We know, for example, that the narrator is from an old family, while Maurício is the son of a Portuguese soldier and a “bambina” – that is, a Chinese orphan girl brought up by a Catholic order. So, as with Lucrecia, the mixture is recent and without social pedigree on either side. Maurício’s absence of social constraints and ease within the Chinese milieu, contrasts with the narrator’s initial unease when surrounded by Chinese in a situation in which his lack of fluency in the language is demonstrated. Nowhere is this illustrated with more clarity than at Maurício’s banquet in a Chinese restaurant to celebrate his winning of a virgin bride, Yao Man, an orphan who has been brought up to be a “sing-song girl”, in effect a prostitute, and has now come of age to embark on the profession for which she has been prepared. Maurício is totally at home with the Chinese customs of the occasion, while the narrator adopts the position of an outsider, an onlooker. Maurício is therefore the Macanese intermediary between the narrator and the Chinese world of Macao. His winning of the bride is a type of reward in advance for his daring and courage in penetrating the Japanese lines and doing business with Free China.

After the war, the narrator loses track of Maurício, knowing only that he left for Hong Kong (Macao was too limited for his ambitions), and was conducting his business activities in various war zones in Southeast Asia. Yao Man had entered the profession destined for her, but had later been taken on as the concubine of a rich old Chinese man. But when the narrator chances upon Maurício again in Tokyo, he discovers that he and Yao Man have finally been reunited, have married and are raising a family, thus producing one of Fernandes’s trademark happy endings.

A gendered view of Candy’s and Lucrecia’s ambition alongside that of Maurício, might well conclude that Fernandes’s relative indulgence with regard to his male hero reveals a degree of preconceived assumptions with regard to the roles of men and women: ambition in men, as family providers, is justified; in women ambition should be directed towards homemaking. But what is deeply important to Fernandes is somehow a return to roots, which in

this case takes the form of a return to the primacy of true love, a theme which, of course, is the basis of his novel, *The Bewitching Braid*. Maurício experiences a close brush with death during the Vietnam War, which induces in him a desire to make amends with Yao Man. He then returns to seek her out, discovers that her “husband” has died and that her children have been taken by the husband’s first wife, and marries her. In this sense, the cosmopolitan Macanese, Maurício, does not forget his origins.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Although so much of Fernandes’s work is set during the first half of the 20th century, many of the author’s concerns reflect very closely the need for Macanese to identify more closely with the indigenous Chinese culture that surrounded them, at a time when it was becoming more apparent that the days of Portuguese rule in Macao were coming to an end. If the inhabitants of Macao had not begun to feel the winds of change already, the 1974 coup in Portugal, which brought down the right-wing dictatorship, was certainly a tangible development on the road to a possible handover. The reassumption of diplomatic relations with China that ensued, the rise to power of Deng Xiao Ping, the pursuit of modernization and then the emerging concept of one country two systems that led to the accord with the United Kingdom for the return of Hong Kong, and finally the equivalent agreement with Portugal over Macao, all caused the Macanese to reflect upon their own future in the territory they called home. Fernandes’s answer was to reconcile the Macanese with their Chinese cultural roots, while also seeking to provide a literary evocation of Macanese cultural identity and Macanese cultural history during the 20th century for posterity.

What this author’s fiction also illustrates are the degrees of “Macanese-ness” that exist among the Eurasian population of this former Portuguese territory and its diasporas. Maurício, the poor boy made good, displays the Macanese qualities of bonhomie and cosmopolitanism mentioned by Carvalho at the beginning of this paper, but is also at home in an essentially Chinese world. Candy is a captive subject of the British Empire, a kind of lost soul, whose recalled links with family and ethnic origin are only articulated later in her life, when they have been irretrievably

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lost. It may well be that Adozindo is Fernandes's "doppelganger": a man who never leaves the tiny world of Macao, is enabled to overcome the centuries of prejudice among the Macanese towards their Chinese

heritage, but who at the same time helps assimilate his Chinese wife into his own hybrid, frontier culture, suggesting that Macanese cultural values may survive into the years beyond Portuguese colonial rule. **RC**

NOTES

- 1 Carvalho, 1996: 25.
- 2 Pittis & Henders, 1997: 222.
- 3 Pina-Cabral, 2002.
- 4 Batalha, 2004.
- 5 I use the term generation in its loosest form, but among Fernandes's contemporaries were Luís Gonzaga Gomes, who wrote about traditional Chinese cultural influences in Macao, José dos Santos Ferreira (Adé), the major exponent of a literature in *patois*, and a number of journalists or newspaper editors, such as Hermman Monteiro, António da Conceição, Raúl Rosa Duque of the *Notícias de Macau*, not to mention the magazine, *Mosaico*, linked to the "Círculo Cultural de Macau".
- 6 His first short story, "A-Chan, a Tancareira" (Ah Chan, the tanka woman) won a prize in 1950, when Fernandes was studying in Portugal. It featured in an anthology of overseas Portuguese writing, published in Angola in 1961. But when *Nam Van* was first published in Macao in 1978, it contained this and five other stories written up until that point. The timing of the publication is revealing: four years after the 1974 revolution in Portugal, which had brought down the old dictatorship and ushered in independence for the Portuguese colonies in Africa. In the intervening years, African literature in Portuguese began to flourish, and Fernandes almost certainly felt a desire that Macao should be represented among these new literatures in Portuguese.
- 7 The film was directed by Cai Yuanyuan, and starred Ning Jing and Ricardo Carriço.
- 8 Fernandes, 2004: 9.
- 9 Fernandes, 2004: 141.
- 10 Hong Kong island was occupied by the British in 1842, some three hundred years after the Portuguese had established their trading post on the Macao peninsula, forty miles south west, on the other side of the Pearl River estuary. Hong Kong rapidly supplanted Macao as a trading emporium, and many Macanese migrated to the new colony, especially after the assassination of the Portuguese Governor of Macao, Ferreira do Amaral, in 1849. For an account of this migration, see Luís Andrade de Sá, *The Boys from Macau. Portugueses em Hong Kong* (Macao, Fundação Oriente/Instituto Cultural de Macau, 1999).
- 11 Brookshaw, 2002: 152.

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