

# Dark Writ: Marginal and Magical Macao

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That which is marginal turns magical in human imagination in good time. The liminal state lying at the fringes of culture threatens and thrills at once, as evidenced in the pun of one Batman movie: the dark night of evil and *The Dark Knight* (2008). Or perhaps the duality resides in Batman and his shadow: the Joker in a jovial death mask and the Saviour in a black shroud of mourning. The bad bat of Western imaginary transforms, via Marvel comics and Hollywood, into a good bat in Gotham's hero, a high-stake gamble Everyman fantasizes wagering for all or nothing. This is the chancy, two-faced nature of Casino Capitalism, as Susan Strange puts it in her 1986 classic. Erstwhile Monte Carlo of the Orient, today's Sin City of the New China, Macao occupies that ambiguous margin between 'Wynn' and lose throughout its 'sightings' in Western and Hong Kong narratives, both literature and film.

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Josef von Sternberg's *Macao* (1952) based on Bernard C. Schoenfeld and Stanley Rubin's screenplay tries to resuscitate his Orientalist corpus of *Morocco* (1930), *Shanghai Express* (1932), and *The Shanghai Gesture* (1941) in the vein of film noir, mixing Chinatown-style hatchet men with musical numbers and detective mystery.<sup>1</sup> The Anglo-Hong Kong, mixed-race novelist Timothy Mo launches his career as a satirist with Wallace Nolasco, a Portuguese Chinese hailing from Macao in *The Monkey King* (1980). Contrary to Wu Cheng'en's 16<sup>th</sup>-century classic *Monkey*, Mo's Macanese monkey king who looks thoroughly Chinese has neither body hair ('mo' in Cantonese) for self-splitting metamorphoses nor power. While critic Elaine Ho describes Mo's *An Insular Possession* (1986) as 'epical' on 'the Opium War and the establishment of Hong Kong,' the novel has as much to do with Macao and its famous Western inhabitants as with the as yet unborn British colony (*Timothy Mo*: 69). The filmmaker Johnnie To in *Exiled* (2006) intensifies traditional *yi* (camaraderie, brotherhood) amidst a lawless Macao, which in effect rehashes Hong Kong action cinema's senseless gun fetish. *Exiled* resembles To's *Triad Election* (2006) of the Hong Kong underworld, except guns turn into knives in the latter. Other writers and artists follow this exact pattern in their Macao imaginary. Whether set specifically or tangentially in Macao, Macao remains largely 'off-frame,' even the on-screen sampan dwellers of the black and white *Macao* or the Rococo, brightly coloured Iberian architecture of *Exiled* serving as mere backdrops for heroes and villains. In terms of narrative, Macao has never ceased to be extraterritorial; its space and people are chips in a game of capital circulation and image sharing. As such, Western and Hong Kong narratives manage to repress the quotidian Macao in favour of

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a paradox—Macao plays a ‘make or break’ role yet is totally negligible. Macao recurs in this dream-state, a glittering diamond of casinos in the dead of night, where high society and lowlifes, gold and Freudian faecal ‘stick’ flip back and forth, like a roll of the dice.

All such Macao dreaming comprises Dark Writ, writing in the dark, with the invisible ink of shadows, the mirror image and millennial update of Holy Writ. What the Portuguese Crown conferred upon the collection of peninsula and islands, ‘Cidade do Nome de Deus’ (City of the Name of God), in 1586 is the 21<sup>st</sup> century’s Las Vegas for big-time winners and second-chance seekers from the Wild Wild West of communist capitalism and elsewhere, who flock to the only place in China where gambling is legal. A repetition compulsion, gamblers continue their winning or losing streak, lives’ vagaries transcribed into a deck of poker cards or the bouncing ball of a roulette table. Macao’s casinos winking in the sultry tropical night are humanity writ large. Filmmakers and writers see in Macao a metaphor shifting between pregnant opaqueness and blinding flashes, void and awakenings. This is precisely the problem with Dark Writ, the apocrypha of apocalypse, a projection onto the Other of one’s own wish-fulfilment and disillusionment, whereas Macao and the Macanese manifest these extremes as well as the wide range of humanity in between. The true mystery of Macao’s mundaneness—its Bright Writ, so to speak—is only unveiled by the Macanese themselves, not by a Hollywood director from Vienna, a British novelist from Hong Kong, or any other without a deep attachment to the place and its people.

When Oxford University Press put out *Macao: Mysterious Decay and Romance*, edited by Donald Pittis and Susan J. Henders in 1997, the timing was exquisite, poised on the eve of Hong Kong’s return to China and Macao’s imminent return in 1999. The publication also came with considerable fanfare as the book looked as glossy as any chic magazine or coffee table book. The subtitle highlights Macao’s alleged polarities of ‘decay and romance,’ the twin silhouetting and intensifying each other, for what can be more romantic than ravished beauty and doomed love! The first selection, W. H. Auden’s ‘Macao,’ reprises the contrast of marginality and magic: ‘A weed from Catholic Europe / ... Rococo images of Saint and Saviour / Promise her gamblers fortunes when they die; Churches beside the brothels.’ (p. 2). Catholicism coexists with gambling and prostitution,

perhaps a reflection of Anglo-American bias against putative Latin indulgence in religiosity or hedonistic, sinful pleasures. The latter is absorbed into and absolved by Catholicism by means of the confessional within any church and by the properly named indulgences during the Dark Ages. The poet manifests a repetition compulsion shared by the likes of Ian Fleming, who opens the second chapter on Macao in his *Thrilling Cities* (1963) with gold and opium: ‘Gold, hand in hand with opium, plays an extraordinary secret role through the Far East’ (p. 29). A fellow Orientalist, Henrik De Leeuw, expands similar observation in his travelogue *Cities of Sin* (1945):

Its [Macao’s] evil is of itself. Its perversions, its strange lusts, its fever of gaming, all those deeds that slay and break thousands of girls in those shadowy dens—all these rise out the soul of a bastard people, a lascivious creature that runs riot with all the bloods of the East and the West (p. 146).

De Leeuw proceeds to narrate a travelogue of opium, prostitution, sadism, and child prostitution. The ‘Asiatic’ sins are accentuated by the passing glory: ‘the strange fate that may befall a city, how it may pass, as Macao has passed, from a high place in the immense Asiatic world to this nothingness: the last remains of Portugal’s former greatness. There are, perhaps, 160,000 people there, of which 4,000 are Portuguese, and the remainder, except for 500 of other foreign nationality, are Chinese’ (p. 147). Such statistics on a Chinese majority is often repeated to underline Macao’s Oriental essence, with the Western presence as a mere foothold, a peephole into the Other’s vast unfathomability.

Even the long-time resident, Macao’s Jesuit historian Manuel Teixeira follows in the heels of Auden with a piece not on local quotidian life but on a most titillating episode, ‘The Bonnie and Clyde of Macao,’ on the opium-smuggling outlaws during the Japanese occupation. The Acknowledgements notes that Teixeira’s vignette is excerpted from *Macao Durante a Guerra* (Macao During the War), but Pittis and Henders seem to favour the exception with a kinship to Hollywood gangster movie over the rule of human deprivations Father Teixeira no doubt chronicles. There is little doubt that Macao comes across to visitors as a land of extremes, but writers and artists from the outside world take tremendous liberty in selective representations in their Dark Writ. Another Western sojourner in the

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Pearl River Delta, Austin Coates (1922-1997), likewise stresses in *A Macao Narrative* (1978) Macao's historical factuality and its chimeric nature, no different from De Leeuw's dry statistics and fanciful reveries. Coates writes that Macao's governor Captain Isidoro Francisco Guimarães (1851-1863) introduced 'licensed gambling' 'to support Timor [another Portuguese colony], and to assure Macao a measure of internal financial stability.' But incontrovertible facts soon yield to Coates' muddled thinking in that the governor's 'innovation was markedly successful from the outset, financially as well as in terms of public order' (p. 98). The latter claim is counter-intuitive and based on the flimsy justification that criminals can be easily apprehended in gambling houses. Andrew Stone et al. in *Hong Kong and Macau* (2010), for example, describe the casino business as having a 'corrupting influence on the city' (p. 310). Nonetheless, Coates sees fit to render Macao schizophrenic:

the nocturnal reputation of being an oriental Monte Carlo, in curious contrast to its daytime appearance, which was predominantly that of a religious centre and quiet country port (pp. 98-99).

If a dialectical pattern governs Coates' history of Macao, then his novel of Macao proves even more so by applying the all or nothing logic in gambling to business and trade as well as to love and romance. *City of Broken Promises* (1967) on the 19<sup>th</sup>-century Macao revolves around the relationship between Thomas Kuyck van Mierop, representative of a British trading company, and Martha, the 'pensioner' mistress he inherits from his deceased predecessor. Although without major casino scenes, Mierop and other characters' business transactions, legal or clandestine opium trafficking, resemble high stake gambles. Business and love are represented in their most naked form, winning or losing, casino-style. Revealingly, this novel and similar texts set in Macao are never contained within Macanese borders, for the size of the place; their textualities invariably traverse into Hong Kong, Canton and China, and the West, much like the body of mixed-race Martha, the miscegenation imaginary across races, and gaming that reshuffles capital. Coates brings alive a chapter in history on the verge of vanishing, including the erstwhile compradors, key to colonialism in general and China's subcolonialism in particular:

The comprador was a small-wizened man with greying hair beginning to go thin. He had

cadaverous cheeks, a few teeth missing, and wore a dark brown Chinese long coat, with the same cloth slippers as the servants. He looked more like an ancient sage than a purveyor of fruit and vegetables. He bowed and grinned. (p. 18)

The first of the comprador's many cameo appearances, this nondescript stereotype belies the pivotal role he plays in perpetuating drug trafficking and other trade. Given Coates' deep understanding of Macao's history, he is not immune to banal Orientalism in centring the white man Mierop as the saviour, one of the 'humanitarians' (5) whose strong sense of Puritan ethics forbids him to partake in the lucrative opium trade and propels him to bequeath, on his deathbed via a proxy, upon Martha his surname to legitimize her identity. Given Coates' deep understanding of Macao's history, he is also not immune to a bit of Orientalist extravagance and exaggeration. 'Sycee,' or 'thin silk' in Cantonese, is Macao's preferred currency of silver. Sycee is said to pile around the house: 'In Macao houses sycee lay about everywhere. There was a great deal of it, and nowhere else to put it. Theft was unknown.' Rather than the absurd notion that Macanese servants or anybody for that matter would not be tempted to make off with it, as preposterous as Coates' claim that gambling guarantees law and order in *A Macao Narrative*, the reader feels compelled to read it metaphorically, namely, Macao itself is a storeroom for colonial plunder, sycee or otherwise, fattening not the locals but the West and its hangers-on.

While Coates is more of a writer than a scholar, his excesses may be chalked up as artistic impulses. However, even academics are prone to yoking marginality and magic with respect to Macao. Christina Miu Bing Cheng's *Macao: A Cultural Janus* (1999) is her revised doctoral dissertation published by Hong Kong University Press, which is responsible for a large number of recent publications as well as reprints on the region. Amidst global economic recession and China's boom, Hong Kong sees an opportunity to expand its market and perpetuate regional/global culture, including a dissertation written at the University of Hong Kong and published there. The subtitle's controlling metaphor of Janus-faced duality is long familiar. Cheng betrays doubleness in her methodology as well: she relies heavily on a select number of Western scholars to debunk Western colonialism; she parses Macao's local conditions with the angle of Euro-American scholarship. Cheng opens

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her book positivistically as in social sciences or history: 'Macau is China's "gate" to the outside world and has two faces: the face of Chinese civilization and the face of Portuguese legacies' (p. 4). The Portuguese rule from 1557 to 1999 is described as a strange combination of colonial extraction since Portugal never developed into an advanced industrial country and of benign neglect, allowing interracial marriage and a certain amount of messiness.<sup>2</sup> Historically, Cheng argues,

After the success of maritime exploration and overseas domination in the early sixteenth century, Portugal was basically an underdeveloped country maintaining a pre-industrial infrastructure that was heavily dependent on agriculture. This metropolitan complex subsequently determined the specific characteristics of Portuguese imperialism and colonialism in Asia (Diu, Goa, Malacca, Timor, Colombo), South America (Brazil), and Africa (Angola, Mozambique), which constituted a pattern of 'ultra-colonialism.' (p. 200)

Defined by Parry Anderson as 'at once the most *primitive* and the most *extreme* modality of colonialism' (qtd. in Cheng 200), ultra-colonialism befits what Cheng sees as 'a schizophrenic place' with the monikers of 'City of the Holy Name of God' and 'The Wickedest City,' where 'contrasting stereotypes and clichés mingling churches and brothels, convent schools and opium houses, Jesuit missionaries and prostitutes' (p. 138).

While Cheng *in situ* may lack distance and critical detachment, American historian Jonathan Porter gives vent to similar paradigmatic dialectics as eagerly as any insider. *Macau, the Imaginary City: Culture and Society, 1557 to the Present* (1996) deals primarily with Macao's history, but the title gives it away that the book stems as much from historical writing as from personal pursuit, even obsession. Tantamount to an exorcism, Porter's conclusion goes:

In the darkness, another city emerges, defined by these sensations—a city of illusion and fantasy, more in company with the glittering world of the casinos than with the mundane life of the streets, markets, temples, and churches of the daylight world. Like the lights and sounds from the ships passing through the channel, this is a disembodied, phantom city. (p. 188)

Subsequently, Porter diagnoses Macao's in-between status: 'Macau's function as a cultural threshold between

two worlds always depended on its marginality—a threshold by definition exists on the margins of adjoining spaces' (p. 190). The history of a forgotten corner of the world ends with a poetic bang on this 'disembodied, phantom city' divorced from history.

Auden and his company are motivated by more than keen observations of Macao's ambivalence. A subconscious, Freudian duality of gold and waste matter, Girardian sacred and sacrilegious,<sup>3</sup> or, as the expletive goes, 'Holy shit!' might be at work. The psychological counterpoint is crystallized, for example, in the French double entendre 'sacré,' which means both 'sacred' and 'damned.' Freud in 'On the Transformation of Instincts with Special Reference to Anal Erotism' (1916) and elsewhere sees faeces as the first detachable part from a child's body and becomes a 'gift' to please the caregivers in potty-training or as a weapon to defy them. From a gift, faeces evolve to become 'gold—money' (p. 168). Because faeces are detachable, the child also associates it with penis and castration in the hands of the father. From the association with penis, Freud posits that

The relationship between the penis and the passage lined with mucous membrane which it fills and excites has already its prototype in the pregenital, anal-sadistic phase. The faecal mass, or as one patient called it, the faecal 'stick', represents as it were the first penis, and the simulated mucous membrane of the rectum represents that of the vagina. (p. 169)

According to Freudian theory, the gift of gold blends in subconsciousness with human excrement, and, in the case of Macao, exotic adventurousness with transgressive, abhorrent eroticism—put simply, the marginal and magical Macao.

This Freudian perspective is surely familiar to Timothy Mo, who has himself deployed the controversial coprophiliac opening of a Filipina prostitute defecating on a German client in *Brownout on Breadfruit Boulevard* (1995). As such, the second epigraph from Mo's *An Insular Possession*, along with the other colourful figure of speech therein—'In shape Macao resembles a dog's tongue, with a few carbuncles on it' (p. 48), demonstrates that the satirist has gotten it wrong in casting Macao as the front end, either the dog's tongue or the pin-head. Mo should have likened Macao, subliminally, to the rear end, the tail end dangling from China, the 'faecal stick' from a squatting

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China, straining to lay golden eggs. This subconscious complex of transcendence and self-abjection is the essence of romanticism, a longing to reach beyond the self for the larger mystery. Such rapture is attended by, alas, doubt and melancholia for having possibly failed to do so. Orientalism as a construct serves as the Other to which the West takes flight in ecstasy or in horror or both, zooming in from the very wide shot on the Orient to the wide shot on Macao, to the medium shot on one of its casinos, to the close-up of the roulette spinning, and to the extreme close-up of a diamond glittering in von Sternberg's *Macao*.

A series of shrinking synecdoches, Westerners as well as Chinese themselves project their dream of miraculous transformation onto Macao, the obscurity of which abets Dark Writ. Although von Sternberg in his memoirs *Fun in a Chinese Laundry* (1965) tries to distance himself from *Macao*, said to be a mediocre collaboration of several filmmakers, it undeniably bears the stamp of his Orientalist films. The opening on Macao's boat dwellers, for instance, resembles the establishing shot of *The Shanghai Gesture* (1941) on a misty Shanghai street with Chinese in skull caps. Both 'establish' the exotic and phantasmagoric Orient about to be entered into via its harbour or street, a dreamland or a nightmare. In film noir conventions, Robert Mitchum and Jane Russell play stock characters of a gambler and nightclub singer with hearts of gold in search of gold in Macao. Schoenfeld and Rubin's script is snappy and slangy, cool on the verge of insolence and petulance. The nonchalant, witty repartees lapse at times into wisecracks displaying teenage bravado. Von Sternberg deploys film noir's signature shadow and chiaroscuro throughout, including a blind Chinese beggar's silhouette on the wall. Needless to say, this boat dweller is played by a white actor, with a stereotypical goatee and peasant hat. This beggar acts as the 'witness' to Robert Mitchum's abduction and brings Jane Russell to the triad lair where her lover is incarcerated. Oriental evil of hatchet men, one of whom played by Korean American Philip Ahn with his 'slant' eyes casting sidelong glances, meets Oriental guiding light, despite or because of sightlessness. The binary opposition of Macanese, one Asian American and the other yellowface, follows the Orientalist formula of Fu Manchu and Charlie Chan, hence having little to do with Macao. Macao is almost beside the point, except as a diminutive Orient. That Orient is ultimately a

mere shadow play for the West itself; the Other enacts the repressed Self. The doppelgangers of Ahn's evil eyes and the beggar's eyelessness displace the rivalry between Robert Mitchum and the American casino owner murderer. By extension, that symmetry reflects the hooligan/slut façade of the lead characters and their inner kindness.

Half a century later, from Hong Kong filmmaker Johnnie To, comes the gun-slinging *Exiled*. The English title gives the passive voice to a Chinese title that could be active or passive, having been exiled or self-exile. Indeed, Macao with its connotation of outside the law attracts Hollywood and Hong Kong to 'outsource' their filmic escapades for exoticism further afield from the British colony and to the lesser known Portuguese enclave. In To's tragically kitschy rendition of Chinese camaraderie (*yi*), this escapism borders on hypermasculine, narcissistic self-exile. Despite his banishment enforced by the crime syndicate, the impoverished Wo returns to Macao to make money for his wife and month-old son. Four friends and foes from the past converge around him, eventually joining hands for robbery and revenge. How assassins dispatched to bump Wo off turn into his comrades-in-arm and avengers defies logic, but logic and textual coherence have never been Hong Kong action thrillers' strong suit. What distinguishes the genre is non-stop, ever-escalating bloodbath in the name of the old-fashioned adage 'A ton of gold does not outweigh *yi*,' where traditional sacrifice justifies John Woo-style aesthetics of violence. Pitted against this brotherhood are ruthless crime bosses and a caricature of Macao authorities, embodied by a retiring police officer chancing upon gangsters again and again, always quietly scurrying away. Ever sensitive to balance and harmony, perhaps a self-Orientalizing trait, To softens continuous clashes with sentimentality and silly locker-room horseplay. The opening three-way gunfight is prefaced by an embarrassingly extended loading and unloading of three pistols, one by one, all in extreme close-ups, the stasis supposedly accentuating the dynamic explosion later on. The soundtrack is eerily reminiscent of a Spaghetti Western's electric guitars with prolonged, suspenseful vibratos, akin to heartstrings being plucked and set atremble. The gunfight itself is interspersed with the feminine touch of Wo's praying wife, with a Catholic rosary to boot, and breastfeeding the infant. Finally, the violence is followed by the five male characters working

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together to fix the bullet-ridden apartment off Largo de Lilau for a sit-down meal together. The line between destruction and slapstick child play is blurred, ending with the melodramatic tinkling of the baby's ankle bells, a recurring tear-jerking leitmotif to accompany Wo's death halfway through the film.

From this location shot off the tourist spot of Largo de Lilau, with its distinct kiosk, street lamps, and the two 'grand and venerable [banyan] trees' (Guillén-Núñez's *Macao Streets*, p. 78),<sup>4</sup> To offers viewers a slew of Macao's heritage architecture, including Guanyin Mountain with its gigantic Guanyin or Goddess of Mercy statue, where a ton of gold is to be transported and the heist is to be executed. Between gold and blood, bullets and Buddha, Wo's brothers risk their lives to extract funds for Wo's widow and son. An implicit blood debt motivates self-sacrifice as much as mercenary pursuit: Wo gives up his life to provide for his family, to whom he owes a debt; his sworn brothers launch into a series of suicide attempts for a similar debt to Wo and his family. The colour of gold turns out to be red, as blood is Wo's gift of life to his son, both genetic and monetary, and blood is the brotherhood's gift to Wo's survivors. Male camaraderie veils the father's and the other four friends' concerted effort to continue life by means of the young son's future, while sidelining, even excluding, females, either the mother escorted to safety or the prostitute making off with gold bars after the bloodbath. The final showdown takes place at the hotel where the mother is detained by the crime boss and where the prostitute plies her trade. Well-choreographed is the dance of bullets and bodies at close quarters, in the hotel lobby, on the stairwell, and in the upper level corridor, all unfolding in slow motion amidst heavy gun smoke for the duration of a can of beer tossed in the air. When the can lands, all the shooters sprawl about in blood, with the picture of the four brothers, taken in the lobby sticker photo booth shortly before, drifting down to settle near the pool of blood. This is yet another of To's timekeeping devices: all the blazing guns fall silent at the end of the brief wait for a sticker photo to be spewed out. Consistent with the film's nostalgic, sentimental streak, the picture shows the four scrambling to position themselves, one last clowning before assured deaths.

Where the site of Macao is almost irrelevant to its two namesakes, celluloid fantasies set largely in

studios, mirroring an imaginary world,<sup>5</sup> Timothy Mo is perhaps the only major writer whose novels relate to Macao, if tangentially. There exists, of course, *Visions of China: Stories from Macau* (2002), a collection of Portuguese-language stories translated by David Brookshaw and published by, once again, Hong Kong University Press. Although some are moving stories, especially those by Henrique de Senna Fernandes, most selections are decidedly minor, resembling journalistic snippets. Given Mo's connection to Macao, most reviewers and critics tend to downplay, or even entirely ignore, it. This tie begins with Mo's debut, *The Monkey King* (1980), where the protagonist Wallace Nolasco identifies himself as Portuguese, despite his Chinese physical appearance. Wallace marries into Hong Kong businessman Poon's family. Notwithstanding some early mishaps when he defies the patriarch Poon à la his namesake rebel Monkey from Wu Cheng'en's classic, Wallace evolves to take over the Poon enterprise. Christina Cheng in *Macau: A Cultural Janus* maintains that Wallace comes to be devoured by Poon in that Wallace's son is to be named Poon and looks exactly like Mr. Poon: 'If anything, [the infant boy] looked like Mr Poon, reincarnated' (p. 210, qtd. in Cheng, p. 155). The foil of Portuguese perspective initially provides an alterity that does not belong to the fictitious universe, but grows to assimilate or, as Cheng contends, be assimilated by the host. That otherness and eventual conquest of the mainstream reflects a pattern in Mo's creative imagination. Of mixed-race descent and keenly aware of a misfit identity, Mo continues to dwell in subsequent novels on the theme of marginality, seeking to rise amongst contemporary English-language writers by portraying non-mainstream locales and characters. But when the ascent in the world is thwarted, Mo the Monkey King lashes out vehemently. As the advance of *Brownout on Breadfruit Boulevard*, with an iconoclastic scatophiliac prologue, was rejected by Chatto and Windus, Mo began publishing this and the subsequent novel with a press he founded, Paddleless Press.<sup>6</sup> The falling-out is perhaps not unexpected, given personality clashes between a writer with such a vitriolic tongue and uncompromising worldview and profit-oriented publishers. Even in his debut, a merciless, venomous satire, every character in *The Monkey King*, Chinese, Portuguese, British, is ridiculed, not only their action, but their mannerism and mangled pidgin.

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From their distorted minds and misshapen bodies—not so much disabilities as Mo's caricature—come butchered English, lacking proper verbs and articles, among other linguistic problems. Mo's intention is far from faithfully representing a Chinglish-speaking community to which he is attached; rather, he relentlessly savages Hong Kong characters from whom he feels alienated.

*An Insular Possession* (1986) contains a frontispiece and back illustration of 'Macao Roads,' an 1810 East India Company map of what has become today's Hong Kong and adjacent islands, with Macao squeezed into the lower left-hand corner. That a map called 'Macao Roads' exiles Macao to the fringes reflects the East India Company's compromise between the only Western anchor in the Far East at the time, namely the Portuguese colony since the 16<sup>th</sup> century, and the British interest in the market of Canton and beyond. This inherent discrepancy plagues Mo's criticism as well, dominated by the postmodernist approach. Elaine Ho's book-length study of Timothy Mo, for instance, never bothers to mention, not even in passing, the historical models for Mo's characters, likely the result of a Hong Kong/cosmopolitan perspective that elides Macao's local conditions. By contrast, John McLeod's 'On the Chase of Gideon Nye' is one of a few archival, historicist exceptions. Mo positions *An Insular Possession* in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, leading up to the Opium War and the founding of Hong Kong as a treaty port, one that clearly replaces Macao's historical role. As such, Hong Kong per se is not in existence until two hundred pages or so into the narrative; 'Canton and Macao' are how the region is described. Within this larger context, Mo unabashedly, without any acknowledgement, borrows from historical figures and writings from that era: one of the protagonists Alice Barclay Remington is based on *Lights and Shadows of a Macao Life: The Journal of Harriett Low, Traveling Spinster* (2002), the diary of Harriet Low, one of the few Western women in Macao's bachelor community where women were not allowed by the Qing dynasty;<sup>7</sup> her love interest, Walter Eastman, is based on the journalist and painter W. W. Wood, whose duel with a rival newspaper editor also graces *An Insular Possession*; and the ugly Western painter Harry O'Rourke is based on George Chinnery, whose portraits and landscapes of Macao are a rare record of that bygone era.<sup>8</sup> McLeod further

adds that the American trade representative Gideon Nye is the model for the character Gideon Chase. Neither Timothy Mo nor Elaine Ho credits sources from Macao's past, albeit the tiny Western elite amidst the faceless indigenous masses.

Unlike its 1980s predecessors, *The Redundancy of Courage* (1991) is a political thriller, action-packed on Danu islanders' independence struggle against the neighbouring *Malai* invaders, inspired by East Timor's guerrilla warfare against Indonesian invasion in 1975. The intense jungle and urban conflict is interwoven with a testimonial, elegiac tenor right from the outset: 'I don't want them forgotten: Rosa, Osvaldo, Raoul, Maria, Martinho, Arsenio' (p. 3). The narrator is Adolph Ng, a gay Chinese Danuese educated in Macao and Toronto, several removes from an 'authentic' Danuese identity, the typical outsider in Mo's corpus. Macao is considered the 'home country' (p. 401) where Ng seeks temporary shelter after bribing his way out of Danu, a way station before embarking upon Brazil and a new identity. Evidently, Ng's exodus follows the old Portuguese Empire of the 16<sup>th</sup> century—Macao, East Timor, Brazil. Moreover, the litany of names of his fallen comrades are all Portuguese, reflecting the underlying differences between Danuese and their *Malai* colonizers. Macao and Portugueseness never fail to be tropes of otherness in Mo, a British novelist from Hong Kong, an Englishman with Cantonese blood.

In a strange communist-cum-capitalist redistribution of wealth after repatriation, Macao's liberalization of casino licenses was enacted in 2001, which in effect broke Macanese tycoon Stanley Ho's monopoly of gambling. 'In 2006, Macao supplanted Las Vegas as the world's gambling capital,' write Andrew Stone and two other editors of the popular Lonely Planet tour book (p. 309). As of mid-2009, they assert, 'Macao had 31 casinos' (p. 341). By 2010, 'gambling concessions contribute some 75% of government revenue through betting tax' (p. 311). This is the backdrop to the Hong Kong film *Poker King* (2009) and more will surely follow with the lens trained on gaming of all sorts, where Macao has been and continues to be enshrined in the gloom that is Dark Writ. Nonetheless, one awaits imminent, immanent Macanese light from the jewel itself. Sin City is, after all, Think City, for to sin is to think, and to think is to sin. **RC**

## MACAU: ARTES &amp; LETRAS - I

## NOTES

- 1 Josef von Sternberg's cavalier attitude toward the Orient is most explicit in his memoirs *Fun in a Chinese Laundry* (1965), a title taken from Thomas A. Edison's early silent film and has absolutely nothing to do with the filmmaker's autobiography.
- 2 Frank Viviano's 'The Bones of Saint Francis' focuses on Portuguese traces in Macao, starting with the Jesuit priest Manuel Teixeira. Macao's Portuguese became 'history's great enthusiastic miscegenators, going native with . . . alacrity' (86).
- 3 See René Girard's *Violence and the Sacred* for 'sacred violence' or the intimate relationship between the sacred and the sacrilegious.
- 4 In addition to Largo de Lilau, many sites photographed in *Macao Streets* find their way into Johnnie To's film. Due to the size of Macao, repetition seems inevitable.
- 5 These two are by no means the only films set in Macao. Hong Kong filmmaker Ho-Cheung Pang's *Isabella* (2006) also offers location shots of Macao.
- 6 See Elaine Ho, *Timothy Mo*, pp. 108-112.
- 7 See Nan P. Hodges and Arthur W. Hummel, *Lights and Shadows of a Macao Life*.
- 8 See Patrick Connor, *George Chinnery*.

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