



Christopher Kelen, Macao-scape 1.

Dredging up Silt – Reclaiming the River

Poetic Representations of Macao for the English-language Reader

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Contemporary Macao poetry should by no means be seen as the beginning of an east-west conversation; we can take it for granted that Macao poets today are the inheritors of varied traditions, as likely to be influenced by Auden or Pessoa, or Camoens or Shakespeare, as by Li Bai or Wang Wei. Indeed, one might wish to claim that it is the mix of influences which gives the poetry its life.

Macao is a place of impressive continuities, as eloquently expressed in its 2005 World Heritage listing and as more eloquently expressed in its poetry. Macao is a place where history is quite tangible and poetry written in Macao is composed with a consciousness of historical continuities and breaks; in short with a consciousness that the Macao-ness of place has to do with a tangible sense of the past.

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This essay surveys the manner in which Macao is represented in recent (mainly post-1980s) poetry from and about Macao, as published for the English-language reader. A key aim is to consider how the contemporary poetry reflects Macao's world-historical significance (as east-west portal and site of hybrid cultural activity, as notorious colonial backwater) and present situation (as part of the People's Republic of China, as East Asia's gambling-hub, as boom-and-bust town). In this essay, attention is paid to the poetic representation of Macao as symbolic entity (orientalist or otherwise) and likewise to a poetry of witness as revealed through the direct observation of Macao today and over recent decades.

Casinos, luck, chance; beggars and gamblers and prostitutes; development and reclamation; border business, dreams, poetry, art: contemporary Macao poetry negotiates a range of related themes and images and has had an important investment in understanding Macao's symbolic place between east and west and in understanding the nature of encounters across cultures, likewise in accounting for intercultural misunderstandings.

THE DOT ON THE MAP AND THE OTHERWORLD PORTAL

Macao—dot on the map and longstanding east-west portal—serves many symbolic purposes

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and we see the name used for all kinds of connotative purposes and also as a poetic symbol. Macao, the old city in south China, is as well inhabited territory and so a place of poetic witness. Tension between the symbolic and the witnessed conception of place is evidenced in contemporary Macao poetry. It is with such tensions that this paper is concerned.

The 'mountains' around Macao—the high hills seen from almost everywhere in Macao—are all in fact across the border. To get to them one must cross the border into China proper. These ranges are like the mountain backdrop of a Japanese garden—a convenient theft for aesthetic purposes. Macao's mountains (some now windmill clad) are something borrowed by virtue of a vantage point. And yet surely a view is part of a place? Those high hills are a reminder that—for better and worse (richer and poorer, etc.)—Macao is a part of China.

Those mountains are only one of a number of local spatial illusions. Perhaps illusions of size are necessary to a place on Macao's scale? The illusion of a sea is potent in this Pearl River port. And there is the illusion that Macao is an island, as demonstrated in Wong Man Fai's 2005 poem, 'I'm on an island':

I'm on this island
I use my eyes to write about its stories
of course originally I planned to read it with my
tongue
but now the story is not yet finished
because I can almost see my breath
when passing the alleys
one after another, the lost fear restrains
the songs in my throat
leaving my eyeballs prosthetic
and the net filled with blood
I'm constantly questioning
the island

14 December 2005
(AV & KK¹ (226))

Needless to say, Macao is not an island, or not simply, literally, an island. In geographic terms, it is a peninsula and two islands. It is part of China (PRC). Why then call Macao an island? It's a popular misconception. Of course, in a time prior to the isthmus of the old maps, we're told Macao was an island. We

know that Taipa was two islands until not so long ago. Ilha Verde still lived up to its name at the beginning of the last century.² There is something nostalgic about the idea of islands in this particular part of the world; Macao is a place of islands lost to various kinds of connection.

In Macao we witness the miracle of city space made more through the inexorable reclamation of the land from the shallow silty river; the city's future (and the future of its capital) is not limited to the territory it seems on the ground to be. Returning to the map, we can see in Macao something akin to the figure suggested by Borges and Baudrillard of the map exceeding the territory it might have been meant to describe. The map of what Macao will be—that imagination of Macao, the aerial view of empty space reclaimed (as seen from the old Macao-Taipa Bridge)—today tangibly exceeds the territory through which the population can freely move. It is because of the land reclaimed being earmarked for casino-capitalist development, we can speak of the territory added as being something other than Macao-space. That which is built on reclaimed land is rather what we might think of as anywhere-space.³

The illusions on which Macao depends are not merely confined to someone else's mountains and a river pretending to be a sea. Portugal too is part of Macao. It's all most Chinese people ever see of Portugal and yet the impression—via food, via television, shop signs, announcements in theatres—can be very convincing. This is Portugal run at a distance by a skeleton staff.

In what sense then should we consider Macao to be an island? Note that other poets have employed the same conceit. For instance in Chan Sok Wa 'the moment of waking' we have reference to 'the island kingdom' (362). Is the miniature place (the place of miniatures) able to be set aside? Is Macao metaphorically an island in the sense, John Donne informs us, that 'no man is'? Is Macao exceptional, unique? Do the rules of elsewhere not apply in Macao? Perhaps it's not so much the answers but the questions that are important. To return to Wong Man Fai's poem, I think the key is in the lines, 'I'm constantly questioning/ the island.' This kind of questioning is then of a fundamental kind, it goes to the nature of existence and to the senses of identity that are possible in a place. With what measure of reality should a place be credited? The present day

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world—of postmodernity, of late capitalism—is one full of illusions of scale and pace. Perhaps these are more potent or apparent when they occur in the place which is a dot on the map.

Gambling, for instance, is a most potent of illusions—the idea that the punter can win is of course contradicted by the fact that he (*sic*—typically it is a he) is entering a palace and someone's money had to pay for it. The Wong Man Fai poem, the end of which is presented above, begins:

I'm on an island
tall buildings erect
fences surround the prison
inviting glances
charming nights one after another
staggering steps on the streets
we have a pit here
placing the bets with shabby souls
chaos, confusion – this compensation
like faces patched out of...

So the island is also a prison—like Hamlet's Denmark—one in which gambling is the compensation for shabby souls. In the Wong poem the charm—as advertised—and the drunken stagger of the reveller provide an apt image of ambivalence. In the chaos and confusion, where identity is something patched together, we begin to recognise 'the island' as floating signifier. Is it the case that Macao can be all things to all? Perhaps this is the beauty of the place with no extent.

UNIQUENESS—MACAO STYLE—ALWAYS A GAMBLE

Macao as metaphor is bi-directional, and reversible. In other words, disclosing the metaphor means that there are two distinct questions to be answered: What does Macao represent?/How is Macao represented? There are a number of planes on which these questions and answers can be tilted, confused. For instance, the question of representation has a political as well as a semiotic dimension. And so we can ask, for instance: Who has the right to represent Macao? And to whom? Nor, rhetorically, is it merely metaphor that is at stake here. We need to interrogate the various associations Macao brings to mind for the resident, for

the tourist, for the prospective visitor. Here, marketing meets governance, corporate and otherwise. And there is the question of part/whole relations, the obvious shift in that instance being from participation in a European world empire to being a part of China again to being a part of a world capitalist experiment in the so-called pleasure of gambling. These foregoing are in outline some of the dimensions of connotation carried by the use of the word 'Macao'.

Macao's newfound prosperity is based on gambling and 'the gaming industry' (as it euphemistically declares itself) is a focus and locus for many of the key contradictions. Prior to the financial tsunami of the second half of 2008, it had been apparent to all in Macao that the rich were getting richer and the poor were being marginalised faster than ever before. Widely read as an effort to forestall likely May Day demonstrations in 2008, the government was moved to give its citizens five thousand patacas each, one might disingenuously claim, to make tangible the idea that the new prosperity was being shared. With these circumstances in mind, one may match Wong Man Fai's island metaphor with Debby Vai Keng Sou's image of a house being offered to the citizen:

a big house

I am offered
a big house
the keys to the house
he keeps

I'm just a little woman
need a home
in this smalltown of mine
miraculously expanding by the minute
less and less space to breathe

a big garden in front
roses greeting me in pink and red
to grow
to pick
to smell

priceless furniture
mahogany
style
cool

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a balcony to the sea
 good view for a change
 from there
 to watch the world
 to be watched

o, vanity

I am promised five thousand kisses too
 dry on the cheeks
 no love
 (185)

In Sou's poem, the 'five thousand kisses' are easily recognised. Highlighted here is the contradiction inherent in Macao's style of progress—more territory, less space to breathe. The new opulence is somehow vain and loveless; really it's all about what one might call a local style of voyeurism—a 'see and be seen' ethos.

The subject knows she is hailed; or in Stuart Hall's 'articulation' theory we might say: here is a subject who recognises herself as discovered by an ideological apparatus. She contends with—she contests—her interpellation by reading more into the government's gesture than the innocent sharing of wealth it is intended to demonstrate. An ironic effect is achieved by attributing human affect in the form of a putative love to what's offered. But no—there isn't love; the cheeks are dry – the gesture was rote, was pragmatic.

Macao's sub-national identity entails some forms of identification unique to Macao. Things Macanese—like the patois (*patua*), like certain examples of Macanese cuisine—have the advantage, for the poet wishing to give local flavour, of being unmistakably of a place. In Macao's case, being a territory with integral borders, laws, currency and telecommunications, some of the official aspects of identity usually thought national apply. This too has its poetic uses. Consider Hilda Tam's poem 'tossing the old one pataca' (the *pataca* being uniquely the unit of currency in Macao).

tossing the old one pataca

between sense and nonsense
 pots and pans in the brain –
 that's the speech of the self

because words won't mean
 I pick up a coin from the desk
 two delicate pictures

one I call yes
 and the other side no

so double the meanings
 tire the mind

the lion nods –
 that's the signal

air flows
 while the coin spins in it

it's fate
 falls into the palm

why are there
 just two answers?
 (325)

Mystery is added by the fact that it's the 'old' pataca, not the coin currently in circulation. But there's nothing else in the poem to link it with Macao; it's this one central image—highly specified—that places this meditation on what must be admitted a very Macao conflation of themes—luck, choice, meaning, decision.

The gambling theme is one that has increasingly been given Macao characteristics in recent poetry. In the 'blind' section of Pierre 'Tai Pi' Wong's poem 'midday images', the reader is shown how everyone's field of vision is diminished by focus on the object of luck and the moment of winning or losing.

blind

I see
 busy midday moments
 everyone stuck inside a can
 one taxi driver, sometimes blind
 won't see the residents anymore
 at the slot machine
 I bump into that poor blind man
 his eyes are so bright now
 like Sands neon
 gazing at the iron pearl of the Russian wheel

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mumbling
 ‘18’, ‘18’, ‘18’, ‘18’
 the iron pearl is like the losing gambler
 after some emotional cramps
 it falls on ‘0’
 that poor man
 is just like me –
 he’s completely blind

AV & KK (270-1)

Blindness manifests itself in several related ways in Wong’s poem. The taxi driver is a danger to the pedestrian residents because he sometimes won’t see them crossing the road, and then there’s a real blind man in the poem (with blazing eyes to remind us of Dylan Thomas’ famous villanelle). The brightness of the blind man’s eyes is likened to that of Sands neon (i.e. the neon signs of the Sands Casino, opened in 2003, first of the new generation of casinos). This brings us by association to the object of the gambler’s gaze, which is the roulette ball. We hear the gambler’s prayerful incantation, his mumbled wish that the ball land on his number, which of course it doesn’t. All of this provides an unexpected analogy with the poem’s persona. We learn that s/he too is also blind and that this surprise has the disturbing effect of suggesting that everything we’ve gleaned so far through the poem (images, associations, analogies) has been unreliable. So that we the readers are literally in the position of the blind being led by the blind. Implied here, I think, is that there is no stable point of view available from which the city or anything in it might be viewed. Nor is this merely postmodern effect for its own sake. It is a pattern of metonymic shift—*glissement*—driving through this poem that prevents the reader’s eye from resting on any particular image or any certain analogy. The effect overall is to simulate the infinitely distracted experience of the gambler—of the one obsessed with the win/lose evanescence of luck in the vanishing here and now. In case the reader might be tempted to look for hopeful signs, in the last section of the poem, ‘darkness’, the reader is offered this conclusion:

darkness

darkness
 spreading after noon
 we’ve been searching

hoping to leave the lost
 then you will discover
 we are together
 completely blind –
 this century’s horrible disease

AV & KK (271)

Here we read some of the ethical questions characteristic of the Macao casino poem and its overarching interest in the idea of an economy premised on the voluntary taxation of those who come from far flung places because they are addicted to chance.

PORTALS

Macao’s less than thirty square kilometers of territory can in *toto* be imagined as a gateway enabling passage between China and the West. From the 1550s up until the founding of Hong Kong as a British colony in 1842, Macao was in practical terms the unique door between China and the West. In Macao we find the physical place where eastern and western subjects of culture have for half a millennium attempted not only the journey in space from one world to the other, but also the journey in mind entailed in the effort to understand the apparently inscrutable other.

It is little wonder then that the actual place and physicality of Macao’s border with the mainland—known locally as the ‘border gate’, 關閘, *Portas do Cerco*—should be a key site in the poetic imagination of the city. Over the gate is the Portuguese legend: ‘A Pátria Honrai Que A Pátria Vos Contempla’. In Leung Ping-Kwan’s poem ‘the border’ we glimpse the border’s 1970s incarnation.

the border

bus stops for a rest
 and goes again
 tourists lazily pass through
 the narrow gate
 stop for a while and gaze at
 young girls sat laughing by the stone wall

soft drink bottle
 by antique store

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a foreigner comes by
picks up a Buddha statue
'would you like to buy jade?'
the old lady peddles enthusiastically
'although this is fake jade,
there are others...'

can nobody see
a purer jade
behind these things?
the tricycle driver's finger
points at the row of green trees

eyes gaze
on the empty vehicle
coming from the border
runs over the mud
lines in brown
then turns into another road
on this cloudy day, wind blows
tears the map in the tourist's hands

AV & KK (76)

The crossing with which Leung's poem deals has been rebuilt several times since the poem was written (most recently in 2004) and it is difficult to imagine a stronger contrast than with the sleepy picture painted above and the present state of frenetic activity around Macao's old border with Gongbei. Those passing the border today seem driven, impatient in queues, anxious to get past this line which represents paradoxically both an impediment and an opportunity for business. Macao and its border have been abiding interests of this prominent Hong Kong poet, his latest (2009) bilingual (English/Chinese) volume being titled *Shifting Borders*. I think in Leung's work we can regard the border as representing a radical indeterminacy. What does it mean to be on one side or the other? How does that meaning shift with point of view, with the passage of time? From the point of view of nature (cloudy day, wind blowing) we see the irrelevance of this arbitrary political line. From the point of view of small business, the border in Leung's poem is an opportunity for sales. That's because this is the narrow neck of land through which tourists must pass to get between Macao and China proper. It's the Buddha statue that interests the tourist, but the stall keeper wants the tourist to

buy jade. Between the tourist and vendor a disarming honesty, highlighting—in an implied motion from concrete to abstract—the question of what is real and what is fake. Which, for instance, is the real China? The land where antiques are still valued or the place where the four olds have been outlawed? The trishaw driver points enigmatically at nature, the young girls sit laughing by their stone wall. The engine of the piece—the bus with which we began—needs to take a rest. This anthropomorphism sets the tone; it's not that movement—that passage—is impossible, one merely wonders whether the effort is justified. The overall impression is of the mundane place invested with a symbolic importance it cannot live up to. The weather and humanity in its less self-important guise, get on with and get around the great geopolitical facts as imposed.

There's an interesting contrast between the carefully wrought flatness of Leung's long lost border and the symbolic dimensions of the portal played out in Joey Ho's 'Gate of Memory';

Gate of Memory
What is hidden?

Rays of the afternoon sun on roofs...
What lies hidden among them?

Golden dust flying...
What's hidden in air?

A baby plunged in sleep, in dreams...
And what is hidden there?

The heat of her mother, her fan...
Hides what?

Kisses...
What's hidden in them?

Gate of Memory
What is hidden?
(238)

Emphasis (through repetition) on the gate reminds us of a time when the Macao/mainland portal was a much humbler and narrower affair, though in its own (Portuguese) way grand. The maternal

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relationship and its mysteries suggest both the necessity of dependence and the contrast between vast China and tiny Macao. Although the poem need not be taken as having any specific connection with any political border, still it reminds us that there are things to be remembered. One thinks of how borders entail other borders, for example, between generations, between the future and the past. The repeated question, ‘What is hidden’, suggests both the necessity of interpretation and the possibility of a sinister intention, the kind of intention that might be lost on the innocent party. Again, one asks which would be the innocent and which the experienced party in this relationship. Is the obvious answer the right one? Things may be hidden in the dreams of infants. Though tiny Macao can itself be thought of as a border—a zone—an airlock—between east and west, yet it takes an effort of memory to assert what the meaning of a place might have been, might yet be.

In Macao, in the long-term, much of the ‘hidden-ness’ may be attributed to cultural difference and distance, to east-west mutual inscrutability, to the difficulty of crossing; in short, to what could be described as the abstract idea of a border. Macao has been a laboratory slide for hybridity. Some observers have been amazed at how the organisms on the slide have tended to stick with their own kind over time, but in fact there have been all kinds of crossing, all kinds of cultural, spiritual and physical miscegenation. Again, one recalls Auden’s Macao sonnet,⁴ and the crossings implied in the juxtapositions he mentions.

Rococo images of Saint and Saviour
 Promise her gamblers fortunes when they die;
 Churches beside the brothels testify
 That faith can pardon natural behaviour.

The door of the church, of the brothel, the casino—each presages a transformative passage. The character coming out is not the one who went in. One might say of Macao, it’s the metonymics that make the place. The interesting thing about Macao is how things got to be next to each other, how unexpected contiguities and conflations have generated meaning over time, and how those meanings have differed according to point of view. Which things are of the past and which are of the future?

The border of which P. K. Leung wrote is no longer unique. Now there are two land borders (the second between Cotai and Hengqin Island in Zhuhai) an airport, and two ferry terminals; ways in and out of Macao have proliferated. But the old border gate still bears the greatest symbolic burden because the history is there.

INVESTED SITES OF MACAO IDENTITY

Just as before the second land crossing to the Mainland (opened in 2000) there was only one border, so various other Macao features have lost uniqueness through duplication arising from population pressures and development. Agnes Vong’s poem ‘three’ provides a playful and colloquial take on one of the most visible of Macao’s duplications, highlighting a practical side to the changes have taken place in the most prominent part of Macao’s skyline—the ‘outer harbour’ water between peninsula Macao and Taipa.

three

there used to be only one bridge
 it had a name
 but people simply called it ‘the bridge’

a second bridge was built
 it also had a name
 and in order to distinguish them
 people called them the new bridge and the old
 bridge

now another bridge has been built
 it also needs a name
 and people are puzzled by what to call it

taxi drivers are more puzzled still
 when the customer asks
 ‘ging sankiu, via the new bridge, please.’

it was the same with casinos
 once ‘dou cheung, casino’ meant the Lisboa,
 Pou Geng
 but now you could point in any direction

with bridges even three is too many
 now – whether it’s bridges or casinos
 we have to remember the names

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with only one or two of anything
people can keep their minds clear

but three is a big number to count to

and so finally, people remember
the second bridge
is called 'yao yi, the friendship bridge'

but friendship with whom?
that's even harder to remember

... but we can try

once there was a little country
in Europe
and there was a celestial kingdom
and a little ship set sail
(267-8)

The Taipa-Macao Bridge was once a singular entity, the original (Governor Nobre de Carvalho Bridge) having been built in 1974 (access to the before then sparsely populated island, and outlying Coloane, having been until that time by ferry). The second bridge (the 'Friendship Bridge' referred to in Vong's poem) was built in 1994 and associated with the opening of Macao's International Airport (located on reclaimed land attached to Taipa). The third bridge (the Sai Van Bridge, opened in 2004), constructed to ease traffic congestion, seemed to also serve the aesthetic function of providing some visual balance to the recently constructed Macao Tower, which until that time, felt to many to have an uncomfortably tottering aspect.

Bridges like borders, provide a convenient metaphor for crossing and for distances and of differences to be spanned. In the case of Vong's poem, the proliferation of the metaphoric bridges offers a tongue-in-cheek glimpse at the gap between the symbolic intentions of governments and the practical concerns of people getting on with their everyday lives. Friendship with whom? Is there any bridge to connect the popular consciousness with the symbolic means chosen to represent the people and their place?

The last lines of the poem cast all of the recent confusion into the *longue durée* light of Macao's five hundred year history. Then perhaps it is surprising how

simple a picture is revealed by the concerted effort to remember where we are from and what is connected in our history.

once there was a little country
in Europe
and there was a celestial kingdom
and a little ship set sail

Through the seventies and eighties there was for practical purposes only one casino in Macao, the one in the Hotel Lisboa; since the Vegasisation boom of the early 2000s casinos have sprung up like mushrooms all over the city. Whatever metaphoric or symbolic reading could be placed on the casino, or gambling, must needs now have greater weight. Or one might picture things this way: once Macao might have been considered Hong Kong's casino; Hong Kong and Macao both being tiny dots (useful or annoying aberrations on the coastal skin of communist China). Now Macao is capitalist China's casino, and while the central government may take steps to control the flow of its citizens through the casino, clearly the casino town is seen to have some important and useful function as a release valve. Here is a clear case of the meaning of Macao having shifted in a fundamental way, and beyond any specific intention of, for instance, tourism authorities. Such intentions and such metaphoric shifts are of great interest to poets and no doubt account for the proliferation of casino and gambling related poems in Macao of late.

Apart from borders and bridges and casinos, there are many places and features in this tiny city which have become iconic. The (arguable) main street, San Ma Lou is a particular case. It is a physical focus (and convenient place mnemonic) in part III of Ng Kuok Cheong's 'a young married woman's worries'.

San Ma Lou – Avenida de Almeida Ribeiro
at crossroads tower two giants east and west
one is called the remote vast
great Atlantic ocean
he faces the other who's even higher
comes from the Yangtze and the Yellow rivers
the two obviously stand independent
the divine rule of change is the interplay of *yin*
and *yang*
some people say they see in the morning
some shadow stretching from the big ocean

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happens to knock on this side of the door
 then the shadow on the same side recoils
 swallows the whole ocean
 shadow is the sun's
 distant unreachable play
 but every day taking the purse
 and carrying the basket what I step
 on is always the road
 not the shadow
 (118)

China and the West—yin and yang—sun and shadow: the contrasts here provide a daunting field of play for the persona, a character ultimately concerned with something as mundane and as fundamental as shopping (every day taking the purse/and carrying the basket). Faced with a grand metaphors demanding interpretation (and demanding obeisance) the persona decides in favour of the tangible real – what the young married woman steps on is the road: she goes the way she has to go. The symbolic machinery is political business here and both the symbolism and the politics are highly personal; we see in the next section of the poem that issues as to what Macao is or could be directly affect this persona's life choices. In Part IV:

to have a baby or not?
 to have one more little spoon or not?
 to share this big bowl of sweet
 glistening yellow papaya soup?
 to have ten-month pregnancy or not?
 five-months of big belly
 three-months throwing up
 and one week in the delivery room
 waiting to sweat contractions
 and the baby struggles to come out
 that terrible tearing
 if I'd like to create a baby
 you must create for me
 a considerate husband
 a father who loves his family
 healthy lively kindergartens
 schools that develop balanced lives
 and meet the needs of our next generation
 an all functioning society
 a fair world
 I am not willing
 to take bloody pains

in exchange for a baby
 trodden or
 treading

SZ & KK (119)

Ng's implied demand in the poem is that the social contract be re-negotiated at a fundamental level. Why should the young married woman bring a baby into a predatory society (trodden and/or treading)? Again, the method in bringing such a question to the reader's attention is to cut through the symbolic machinery with which good citizen/subject is meant to conform. Instead we're offered concrete imagery—bloody pains, throwing up, terrible tearing and yes, also the tenderness of the 'big bowl of sweet glistening yellow papaya soup'. The idyllic and the desperate images are connected in the idea of exchange; what is under interrogation here is value. At what price a baby? For whose benefit? Because Macao is the putative sub-national entity for which sacrifices would be made, by which benefits would be bestowed, the questions asked are relevant everywhere in Macao. It's the mention of many familiar places which reminds Macao residents of that.

GAMBLERS, WHORES AND BEGGARS: AN OPEN-AIR MUSEUM OF KITSCH

Macao is among other things perhaps one of the world's largest open-air museums of kitsch, a phenomenon for which the casinos are largely responsible. They have gone to great lengths to outdo each other in bizarre Vegas-style grandiosity, frequently with tacky pseudo-Chinese add-on elements. The Emperor, The Pharaoh's Palace, now the Venetian. There's no shortage of orientalisering (and self-orientalisering) in the concoctions arrived at. Perhaps the most serviceable (and durable) example is in the 'bird-cage' of the old Lisboa Hotel, often thought to vaguely resemble an old-fashioned Chinese peasant's hat. The smoke-filled⁵ desperation of the Lisboa's large circular gaming rooms has been to Macao's cultural heart what the Reading Room of the British Library's is to England's. Apt setting for all kinds of intrigue, material for fiction and for poetry.

There are longstanding images of Macao as a place of decadence and corruption—a place where—as in Wei Fengpan's misted city—bonds and mindsets

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are loosened. Witness Lu Xun's⁶ 1930s poem, 'Song for Macao'.

I shook my fate in the bamboo cup
out came a long string – paper cranes of hope
they shot into the air, broke apart
my soul roamed freely with the pieces falling
I was fooled again by the dice bowl
the bowl upturned, gold all over the floor.
o, from day to night, my heart
galloped back and forth on the table

war tossed me into a wine-glass,
I buried myself in regret, in melancholy
unkempt, slipped into a temple
gnawing slowly at memory

you sat in the middle of the place
phony laughter drowned out your *gravitas*
powder nurtured you all night long
high spirits drew in thousands of travelers

smoke filled the room,
a woman like a snake lay on my bed.
O, suck me! O, let me fall! O, was I thrilled!
to be in this heaven of microbes!

DS, SZ, & KK (27)

Foreshadowed here is one of the major themes of poetry in the present-day casino-fied Macao: luck, for good or for ill, and the moral miasmic reliance it brings. The 'heaven of microbes' furnishes a seamy side for the microcosm conceit. The laughter and the *gravitas* mixed remind us of the famous concluding advice of Auden's famous sonnet of the same epoch—that nothing serious can happen here.

The moralism witnessed in Lu's poem above is characteristic of Macao today—a place where the gambling industry is widely looked down upon as decadent and corrupt. This attitude, measured against the fundamental facts of Macao's economy, points to what I will call the 'casino contradiction'—or the paradox of a town whose inhabitants profit by a single dominating industry of which they wholeheartedly disapprove. More generally, it suggests a broader contradiction in Chinese culture—between superstitious belief or hope in luck and the upright thrifty values

promoted by Confucian and equally by communist teaching. It's in the teeth of this contradiction that Beijing finds it convenient to have a place like Macao in which to isolate the aberration that proves the virtue of not allowing gambling on Chinese soil (or on the soil of China proper). Macao gambling is thus a Barthesian inoculation⁷—the small dose of acknowledged evil that allows the cultural organism as a whole to be healthy. Macao being the point at which such a paradox comes to light, one might read all of Macao's casino poetry as an articulation of contradictions between global capitalism and the state power of the People's Republic of China—two of the present-day world's great cultural juggernauts. Of course longer term east/west mythologies and misrecognitions are at stake in Macao, in its moralism, its casino culture and its poetry.

Concomitant with the gambling interest (remaining with the theme of luck/chance), a fascination with beggars is widespread among Macao poets of recent time, for instance in this collaborative poem by Hilda Tam and Sidney Ung.

pedestrian overpass, Rua do Campo

high over the street
of bosses passing
horns sounding from under

man half naked
and a little limbless
keeps kowtowing
bom bom
the forehead hits
the pavement
which is his platform
stage over the street

bom bom
for the punters
a coin or a note drops
they give or they won't
he's still a professional
nothing can break his calm

this lying around
is never restful
bitter hands around the bowl
hard work got him there

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lunch time
break for the chicken rice box
just like the rest of us
he eats!

and when he goes
back to work
bom bom
you too can be his boss
just one pataca
or a crumpled ten's
all it takes

the same coin
always comes back
attach it to a string
see how long
a man can kowtow
(328-9)

As in Freud's 'fort/da' game we see in outline the symptoms of a repetition compulsion. And this psychological dimension is mapped over the socio-economic conditions, simplified to the form of Hegelian master/slave relations. There are various questions we might ask about roles and reversals here. For instance—who is the worker and who is the workless in this picture? Who is deserving, who is undeserving? And who is kowtowing to whom? Or to what? One of the ironic fantasies the beggar's figure inspires is that—having come still in the rat race chaos—s/he might be the one ahead of the game. In this sense the beggar is a figure of reversal.

Let us turn now to an older example of the beggar portayed, in part of a poem from one of the key Portuguese voices in Macao today, that of Carlos Marreiros. From a 1980 poem, 'An Old Umbrella':

wire's bony frame
hidden by rag
a bit of skin
wind's arms
belly is nothing
...
on the hill
of last night's rubbish
empty hands of the beggar's carcass
surrendered to its own condition

failure, inferior, unjust
after all the attempts
impossible yet

not yet thirty
but centuries past
...
the point where everything begins
and everything ends
the condensation of all and of nothing, and all
at once
where there is no history
neither does age make sense

Macao, 1980
LH & KK (113-4)

I think the beggar is a figure of fascination for Macao poets today because s/he embodies certain contradictions inherent in Macao's new found gambling oriented wealth. The beggar can be seen as the negative figure of luck, the character cast on the street through bad luck, the very type of the aphorism 'there but for the grace of God, go I.' And the beggar is suggestive of alms and so of religious obligation. In Macao the question will always be—Which religion (?)—and so I think we can ask—Which obligations (?). The beggar is also a figure of distrust—(Is s/he genuine? Is s/he part of an organised scam?). So this character is victim of the economy but also somehow an image of corruption or at least of doubt, of dubious morals. The point is that the beggar is a type/figure/character who begs questions about the identity of Macao and its inhabitants more generally. The figure of the beggar embodies questions as to whose place it is, as to who is deserving and who is not, questions as to who is the real thief—of time, of money, of identity.

The gambling-oriented society produces all kinds of losers. In a general sense it has been possible in the past to see the whole of the Mainland's population somewhat in the light of Hans Christian Andersen's little match girl—folk sadly excluded from the warmth and the fun of a capitalist economy. An example of that—no longer viable—thinking is in José Silveira Machado's 'The Rickshaw Man'.

he came
from the other side of the river

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in the tide's flow
held in waters of hope

night without stars
empty pockets

pedalling the hungry lanes
sipping at bowls of rain
sleeping under the cold awning
gone in the wind's wings

lives alone
the rickshaw man

sits in night's shadow
neither would gods comfort him

rot in the heart
of the life without hope
nothing in pockets
with holes

the rickshaw man
lives alone

LH & KK (24)

It would probably be fair to say that most of Macao's population came from the 'other side of the river' at some stage in the last century. Since the opening up of the eighties it has become progressively more difficult to look pityingly *en masse* at the population of China. Perhaps a more nuanced view of the state of play with winners and losers is presented in Hilda Tam's 'my whore at Rua de Cantão'.

I saw a whore
in an ad:
red hair
blue eyes
big tits
fat bum

I gulped
I felt in my pocket
I went into the sauna

and there she stood:
red hair

blue eyes
big tits
fat bum

ashamed
I stepped back
back to gaze at my whore
in the ad
(326)

The winner's prize may be easier to stomach in prospect and in virtual form than in flesh and blood.

POETRY AND MACAO IDENTITY TODAY

These winning and losing characters, and the theme of illusion and reality, are suggestive of questions relating to power, possession and identity in postcolonial Macao, and particularly in the post-

Christopher Kelen, Macao-scape 3.



DIÁLOGO INTER-ARTES E MACAU

bubble Macao of the later noughties. Today a distinct Macao culture is threatened both by national and by international culture. One might say that these threats have been ever-present through Macao's history and that, in some senses, Macao as we know it today is the result of their interaction. But just as the preservation of certain heritage streets by no means guarantees a city's ongoing identity in continuity with its past, so the dangers of swamping Macao's uniqueness are real and need to be taken seriously.

What kind of silt is being dredged up in Macao's poetry today? It might be more pertinent to ask which river (?) or whose river is being reclaimed (?). What does it mean to be a 'Macao person', 'a Macao citizen' or resident, to be from Macao, or of Macao, to be Macanese?

Macao is part of China and though to be 'of Macao' mostly means to participate in a Chinese identity, the contrast with the case of China proper is instructive. I will come to this shortly. For the purposes of this paper I would like to suggest three aspects to Macao identity. Macao identity is firstly to do with place and space. Secondly Macao identity has to do with historical consciousness of place and of space; that is to say it has to do with an awareness of continuities and events making this place different from others, different for instance from Hong Kong or Taiwan or Mainland China. Lastly (and in contradiction with the second form of identification, *as different*), Macao identity has to do with a national identification; to be more precise it has to do with a sub-national identification, i.e. identification as a particular type of Chinese subject/citizen.

In Sigmund Freud's (1930) essay 'Civilisation and its Discontents', in order to provide a metaphor for the workings of the unconscious, the reader is given the image of the city of Rome, not at any particular moment, but with all of its radically different streetscapes and architectural configurations of space overlapping in a synchronous view. This is of course not only an apt metaphor for the unconscious but for civilisation as a material product of human consciousness.

In places like Rome and like Macao one does get a sense of the co-existence of past culture in the present moment. In Wang Wo's poem 'an angel's fossil' the reader is shown how the co-existence of different pasts in one place make possible what we know as contemporary reality.

an angel's fossil
– visit to St Paul's museum

flying, flying
from a three hundred year sky
your wings broken, fallen
at last, with your human sympathies and
no alternative but to have a clear head
laying in this
cold dark showroom

the biggest sorrow
is the pale dried bones
empty, they can't prove
their heavenly blessings
or are the Crusade helmets
more sorrowful?
their might from far away
so much silence
who needs a gospel?
who needs
words at all?

the city is fallen
but then
it has all God's blessings
Portugal's flag
still welcomes the sad wind from far
taking action
is for proving
the setting of the Western Hemisphere
and not the last denial
the firm belief
is piled up by tough granite

then you're immortal even though you've
experienced so much
immortal and immortal and turning into a
fossil
the fossil of good-hearted angels
listening to the alleluia of the history
the deep caves' eyes
can they see
displaying in the glass frames today?
and tomorrow
lowering the cognizance in prayers
how can you break through this transparent cage?
call God again
fallen in the raging waves?

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the foundation stone of the city
 is originally a hot iron
 struck by the passion of the five thousand old
 Hua Xia
 gradually put in the water of the era
 the whole world is boiling straight off
 and it just meets
 the sacred territory, Shen Zhou China
 more sacred than the angels following God

AV & KK (193-4)

What is sacred to the memory of a place? Different cultures might have very different ideas about this question, but five thousand years of Chinese history would seem on the face of things to have a stronger claim than five hundred years of European contact. Still, in some manner, it is the combination of traditions that makes Macao. It will always be difficult to separate the historicised from the mythologised view of the city and its place in the *longue durée* of China's story and of east-west relations. Identity is tied up in our image of the past and how we fit in it.

In Tao Li's poem 'Statue of Ferreira do Amaral Sonnet'⁸ we see how mythologies east and west may be overshadowed by a gloomy present reality.

the bronze horse carries stars on his back
 ready to gallop towards starry night
 showing pedestrians
 a symbol of an old empire fading
 under the shadows of stiff hoofs
 as if it was the seventh of July every night
 cowherd wouldn't cross magpie bridge
 because the girl weaver has slipped
 love has lost its value
 the Hong Kong woman who gambled away her
 ID card
 fell down on the steps
 sold herself to the night devil cheaply
 in dreams, once again it's
 gambling buildings, smoke and lights

AV & KK (46)

There's no blame assigned in the poem—although reference to the Amaral statue certainly situates its events in an antagonistic inter-cultural context. Clearly though the subject is in a precarious

position when her place in a bound series (Hong Kong resident) is gambled away. Demons of the past co-exist with that kind of modernity; things of value are corrupted by the banality of temptations, of folly, of crossings that can no longer be made—because we're stuck with the gambling and the smoke and the lights. It's in these circumstances that an identity can be bought and sold.

Again, in Tao Li's poem, we see the mythologising strain so characteristic of Macao poetry. It's as if the poem is driven by a need to make sense of the place as singular by connecting its multiple aspects (east/west, past/present, mythic/historic). We can say that historicising and mythologising meet and blur in this poetry.

In Loi Chi Pang's 'stories of a small city' the reader witnesses a sustained effort to mythologise history, to glean narrative sense from discordant information. It's interesting that even out of a highly critical picture of present political reality the possibility of a glorious future is presented. It's a future of the kind celebrated more commonly in national devotions; the poem has a certain anthem quality.

stories of a small city

1
 when Sam Pa Mun was decorated with lanterns
 and ribbons
 at the moment when pigeons were let down to
 sing in praise of Holy Mother Maria
 a meteor shower blew in from the east
 four hundred years ago
 an innocent young fish
 had been released from the colourful fins and
 scales of its mother
 flashing its fins, taking a breath
 no one knew
 where she would swim to

2
 a bird with broken wings is – an island
 there's no wonder that the island loves to
 gamble

K, Q, J
 using the gypsy cards to divine the future
 1, 2, 3, that's 6, small
 face readings under the dice cup

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electrical rabbits are dogs' captives
 dogs are tools for the masses of this small city
 so the masses of this small city are...

3
 what kind of sin will 'clean' be?
 when bright eyes remain on a Chinese girl's
 dress lapel
 when at the same time brown hair at every street
 corner stretches in the way of green rattan
 we are a chip
 a lost chip
 we can't find ourselves

4
 under the official hats piled on gold and silver
 how can the bureaucrats in prominent
 positions understand
 the sentiments of little grass blades woven
 together with roots and veins
 the branches and the leaves blossom over a big
 tree
 a peninsula absorbing the water of Xi Jiang, a
 lifeline gathered round a mother's feet,
 unexpectedly weak
 on that day light rain fell
 mist rose in every eye
 when the warship sailed past the fishing boats,
 entering Macao and firing gun salutes
 the noise had already bombed our deep
 nostalgia into shatters
 from then on we didn't need to kowtow
 and 'long live, long live, long long live'
 was commuted
 into a kind of humiliation of our people
 'tak tak... tak tak'
 in the clop of Amaral
 the heavy dignity of this thousand year old
 country
 trodden down by the elegance of the bronze
 an eye was cast over every inch of muscle and
 bone of this small city
 as if the immenseness of the Great Wall
 as if the weak and thin souls from then on
 would flood over the Yellow River
 as if those souls stood
 stood at the highest sentry
 a telescope enough for those who can't bear to
 leave

the sadness zoomed in magnified more than
 ten times
 but broken by the Border Gate
 a bird flew holding in its mouth the legend,
 'Getting across is forbidden'
 I saw it coiling into a silkworm cocoon
 waiting to hatch some day

HT & KK (291-3)

The interest in the past and what it means as
 regards the question of who we are may be taken as
 indicating an interest in the future and in who we are
 and who we and our place may be. In his poem 'damp,
 2005' Rai Mutsu writes:

stepping into the future
 we have become us
 we know ourselves more
 we don't know the future

AV & KK (317)

In this text the 'we' is ambivalent about what has
 come; we face the future with a sense of loss. As Siu Hey
 tells us, 'stars are lost where you and I looked up'. Still in
 some way it's that knowledge of loss that gives us a sense
 of who we are: we're the ones looking up where the stars
 were. In Un Sio San's 'and so I walk in from February',
 we get an impression of a place steeped in history, but
 which has entered a long age of inebriation, in which
 our anthropomorphised environs have to be recognised
 as treacherous. And why? Perhaps the answer's unclear,
 but it's tempting to say that it's because we're there.

oh! tonight, all the conversations
 of this era are a sad glass of vodka
 our Siheyuan becomes the only quiet beast in
 the city
 the rain that finally stops
 lies prone on Chang'an Street
 surrounds the candle lights
 to pray with no idea of who our god is
 the shadow in an alley grows thinner for the
 streetlamps
 the tenderness the corner of his eye is a poisonous
 flower

HT & KK (360)

INTER-ARTS DIALOGUE AND MACAO

Who or what can we trust when tenderness is a poisonous flower associated with a sidelong glance? ‘City of the name of God’ was always an ambiguous claim for Macao; no one could quite be sure who’s god/God was in the picture, or whether the picture

could be shared. The poet works to recover innocence in a place where it is irretrievably lost. So poetry is a question of commitment; yes, and a question of faith. To pray with no idea of who our god is; that’s just one more way of rolling the dice! **RC**

NOTES

- 1 Throughout this paper, translators’ names are given in initial form at the foot of the poem (or other text) where appropriate. Here is a list of the translators with their initials: AK – Athena Kong; A Lam – Agnes Lam; AL – Anita Leong; AV – Agnes Vong; CI – Christine Leong; CW – Carmen Wong; DB – David Brookshaw; DS – Debby Vai Keng Sou; EL – Elisa Lai; HT – Hilda Tam; IF – Iris Fan; JH – Jacque Hoi; JL – Jenny Lao; KK – Kit Kelen; LH – Lily Han; ME – Maria Antónia N. Espadinha; SZ – Song Zijiang
Note that because much of the poetry cited in this paper originated in the anthology *I Roll the Dice: Contemporary Macao Poetry* [published by ASM in Macao in 2008], where only a page number is given in the in-text citation, the reader should assume that the extract is from that source.
- 2 Well after the 1895 construction of a causeway, Ilha Verde was still clearly a separate island, just as Coloane has seemed until recently, despite the building of its causeway link to Taipa in 1969.
- 3 It is important to recognise that there is a persistent contrast in Macao poetry today between two distinct encounters with space. Relating Marc Augé’s conception of ‘non-places’ to Umberto Eco’s notion of open (as opposed to closed) text, one observes that consciousness of place in contemporary Macao poetry appears to be dominated by a contrast between what might be glossed as ‘Macao space’ and what one might call ‘anywhere space’. Macao space is uniquely of an historical moment and place, something culturally positioned; in anywhere space (e.g. inside of a casino or an airport) subjects are
- 4 hailed by consumption-oriented reifications of putative universal value. The contemporary Macao poetry typically values Macao space and sees it as under threat from the ‘non-negotiable’ space of culture that could be anywhere.
- 5 Although the poem underwent revision, the stanza cited remained unchanged.
- 6 Smoking has recently been banned on the lower floor.
- 7 A minor poet who visited Macao in the 1930’s, not the very famous Lu Xun of the early 20th century Chinese letters.
- 8 This is a figure named by Roland Barthes in *Mythologies*. For Barthes ‘the inoculation’ is that figure where ‘one immunises the contents of the collective imagination by means of a small inoculation of acknowledged evil’ (150). In his essay ‘Operation Margarine’ Barthes gives a number of examples of this figure: ‘Take the army; show without disguise its chiefs as martinets, its discipline as narrow-minded and unfair, and into this stupid tyranny immerse an average human being, fallible but likeable, the archetype of the spectator. And then, at the last moment, turn over the magical hat, and pull out of it the image of an army, flags flying, triumphant, bewitching...’ (41)
- 9 The statue, formerly in a roundabout outside the Hotel Lisboa, was shipped back to Portugal in 1991. Amaral—murdered by local residents in 1849—was not deemed a helpful symbol of Portuguese-Chinese relations. The statue had been in place for fifty years when it was removed.

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