



Julian Lees, *The Fan Tan Players*

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It is not often that a novel appears in English that has Macao as its opening and closing setting, but *The Fan Tan Players* by Julian Lees not only has the city and territory as one of its locations. It could be said that Macao stands securely in the centre of this action-packed adventure novel, as a

place from which the heroes depart, and to which they return at the end as their home. For those familiar with Macao literature in Portuguese, Lees's novel bears some similarities with the fiction of Rodrigo Leal de Carvalho in the movement of its characters over wide geographical spaces and time

spans, and in his particular focus on the White Russian refugees in China in the years following the Bolshevik revolution. The novel begins in Macao in 1928 and ends there in 1945, but also has chapters set in Russia, Scotland, and Hong Kong during the Japanese occupation. However, the young heroine, Nadia Shashkova is very different from the sad figure of Irina Ostrakoff in Carvalho's first novel. Similarly, Iain Sutherland, the Scottish hero who becomes Nadia's husband, bears little resemblance to the hapless Archie MacGuire in Carvalho's ironically entitled, *Ao Serviço de Sua Majestade* (On His Majesty's Service). Indeed, the triumph of love over adversity, and its perseverance through difficult circumstances and untold dangers, makes the tone of Lees's novel and his characters more redolent of the creations of that other great lusophone fiction writer of Macao, Henrique de Senna Fernandes. Nadia and Iain are romantic heroes, whose attraction to one another derives partly from their situation as outsiders, he as a Scot educated in England, and to some extent a man between worlds—the Scottish Highlands where he no longer feels he belongs, and a British Empire run by English snobs, which he serves as an agent of the SIS posing as a diplomat, she as a Russian refugee who has been brought up in Macao by her supposedly widowed mother and

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an uncle, a woman with a remote memory of her ancestral homeland, but who has had to adapt to the multicultural land of her exile.

Lees, who was born and brought up in Hong Kong, and now lives in Malaysia, clearly possesses an intimacy with the cultures of East and Southeast Asia, and is no doubt familiar with Macao, a city that he evokes with sympathy, and whose sights, sounds, and mingling of cultures are described in a lively and engaging way. The author has an ear for different accents, and the descriptions and dialogues are littered with Russian and Portuguese words and expressions. There is a large cast of background figures, ranging from Costa, Iain's Macanese assistant, and Nadia's neighbours, the colourful Cantonese, Mrs Lo, and Izabel, the young woman from Portugal who involves Nadia in her campaign to stop the abandonment of orphaned babies, and Senhor Pinto, one of Nadia's admirers, who, as a lawyer, is prevailed upon to help them set up an orphanage. Indeed, the novel's main strength is in the evocation of the friendships and community sense established by these expatriates who learn to consider Macao their home and to identify with its way of life and participate in its cultural habits. There are descriptions of beach parties at Coloane, banquets at restaurants and at home, that are vivid and authentic and attest to the author's knowledge of the terrain. There is, of course, the occasional imprecision, but these are forgotten as the reader is swept along by the action of the novel. In this, the story's fast-moving pace and unlikely thriller ingredients invariably challenge our credulity: a daring rescue in Soviet Russia undertaken by Iain is only surpassed by Nadia's rescue of her husband from the clutches of Takashi, the commandant of a Japanese internment camp in Hong Kong. The fact that Takashi is none other than the former head of an opium smuggling ring that had been uncovered by Iain and Costa before the war, merely stretches our belief to the limits. But this is literature, and the implausible is allowed to mingle with verisimilitude for the sake of a gripping tale. Moreover, Takashi's villainy is so outlandish that it almost turns the novel into pastiche.

All too often, outsiders who are unfamiliar with Macao associate the city with crime, gambling and prostitution. It is true that there is criminal activity

in Lees's novel, and its very title is taken from one of the traditional forms of gambling in the city. But the actual involvement of the characters in 'fan tan' is fleeting, and the game serves more as a metaphor for the chance, luck and coincidence, which characterise the course that the lives of the two heroes takes. More than anything, Macao is portrayed as a homely, well-administered place, where prejudice and discrimination are minimal compared to the more hierarchical British-run colony of Hong Kong. It would, of course, be short sighted to assume that there were no colonial prejudices in Macao, or that the British were somehow more conservative than the Portuguese, but what is important and revealing is the way in which outsiders, such as Lees, have to some extent bought into the idea of Portuguese colonial informality. Inside every truth, there is a myth to be made, and inside every myth, there is a kernel of truth. **RC**

