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LAMENTING THE LOSS OF THE LOCAL

The Treatment of "Anywhere" Space in Contemporary Macao Poetry

Macao is — a city in south China, a Special Administrative Region of the People's Republic, the last of Europe's colonial possessions to be returned in the Far East, the region's only city with casinos, a mere dot on the map. And yet this 28 square kilometers (at the time of writing), current population 600,000,[1] among other things, the world's most crowded territory, has historical and geo-political importance far outstripping the first impression given by this collection of facts. That importance has to do with Macao's various kinds of uniqueness, for instance in intercultural terms, and as the only place in China where gambling is legal. This latter fact has powered Macao's twenty-first century transformation from sleepy backwater into the Vegas of the East — a casino capitalist sponge for some of China's new wealth. One might say that its dot-on-the-map status makes Macao capable of bearing the symbolic burden that goes along with having been for several hundred years the principal portal between China and West, that goes along with being the last of the East Asian colonies[2] returned. It's the dot-on-the-map status as well that makes Macao seem an unthreatening place in which to isolate acknowledged vices (of the kind for which it has long been famous).

From the inhabitants' point of view, Macao has long conceived itself as a place of good fortune: hence the appellation, "city of the name of god."[3] Time and again, regional conflagrations and disasters have swept past, leaving Macao largely unscathed. Or so the local mythology regards the Japanese War, the Great Leap Forward, the Cultural Revolution, and, most recently, (2003) the SARS epidemic which cost hundreds of lives in Hong Kong.[4] Of course a reputation for luck is a helpful attribute for a city whose revenue is predominantly based on gambling. But drastic changes have taken place in the cityscape and society over the years since the liberalisation of casino licensing in Macao (since the end of Stanley Ho's STDM monopoly in 2002).

In these years, Macao's people have sometimes felt themselves the victims of contradictory forms of re-colonisation — by Beijing on the one hand and by Vegas-style casino capitalism on the other. Between these gigantic pincers, what chance of survival has local culture and custom? Remarkably, however, as we see in the case of Macao's contemporary poetry, not only has Macao culture continued to thrive despite these outside pressures on the city's regional position (a part of "one China" with a localised function), but also the need to produce

a critique of these pressures has itself been productive of a politically interested (and interesting) literary culture.

Regional Roles

Regionalism, in the case of Macao, can be taken in several senses. There's South China as region, there's position within the Pearl River Delta (including neighouring cities like Hong Kong, Guangzhou, Zhuhai and Shenzhen), and there's the larger regional construct of East Asia. It's interesting to note that whereas Macao has traditionally been under the shadow of both Hong Kong and Mainland (across-the-border) culture, it's not regional pressure that threatens Macao culture today; rather it's pressure of a national and of a global kind that poses a threat. Macao's uniqueness is easily recognised at the regional level.

Longstanding images portray Macao as a place of decadence and corruption — a place where bonds and mindsets are loosened. Witness Lu Xun's 1930's poem, "song for Macao."[5]

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!

(27)

Foreshadowed here is one of the major themes of poetry in the present-day casino-fed Macao: luck, for good and for ill, and the moral miasma that reliance on it brings. The "heaven of microbes" furnishes a seamy side for the microcosm conceit. The laughter and the gravitas mixed remind us of the 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 inoculation[6] — 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.

Macao stands for many things, and 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 new-found 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

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

May, 2008

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.

Sub-National Identity

Macao's sub-national identity entails some forms of identification unique to Macao. Things Macanese[7] — like the patois (*patua*), and 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)

There's mystery 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
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 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's 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. As a result, we the readers are literally in the position of the blind being led by the blind. Implied here, is that there is no stable point of view available from which the city or anything in it might be viewed. It's 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

(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.

An Open Door

Consciousness of place in contemporary Macao poetry appears to be dominated by two kinds of space; I will gloss these here as "Macao space" and "anywhere space." In his 1995 monograph *Non-places: An Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, Marc Augé describes three "figures of excess...employed to characterize the situation of supermodernity." These three figures are "overabundance of events, spatial overabundance, the individualization of references" (40-41). Augé writes of an "excess of space...correlative with the shrinking of the planet"

> with the distancing from ourselves embodied in the feats of the astronauts and the endless circling of our satellites. In a sense, our first steps in outer space reduce our own space to an infinitesimal point, of which satellite photographsappropriately give us the exact measure. But at the same time, the world is becoming more open to us. We are in an era characterised by changes of scale — of course in the context of space exploration, but also on earth: rapid means of transport have brought any capital within a few hours' travel of any other. And in the privacy of our own homes, finally, images of all sorts, relayed bysatellites and caught by the aerials that bristle on the roofs of our remotesthamlets, can give us instant, sometimes simultaneous vision of an event taking place on the other side of the planet. (31)

Cosmopolitanism, since ancient times, has been the privilege of an elite capable of exercising the knowledges and recognitions required to transcend the ground on which a subject stood as particularly of a place and bound to place. It's in such a sense Macao's poetry today may be regarded as broadly cosmopolitan — i.e. constituted in overlapping universes of recognition, to which the poets in question and their good readers hold the appropriate keys. But today's cosmopolitan elite lacks the defined knowledge and identifications of ages past.

On the macro scale we can read Macao as an open door through which goods, capital, humans and their imaginary references all circulate, sometimes at a dizzying pace. A cinematic sense of the place (discussed a little below) then does perhaps convey an idea of (what Augé names) spatial overabundance. Late noughties' advertising for Macao as a tourist destination (as for instance shown non-stop on the jetfoil from Hong Kong) reveals the dot on the map as making available to its citizens and visitors every conceivable kind of space and concomitant activity — windsurfing, tower-viewing, bungee-jumping,

heritage walks, leafing through ancient tomes in a library, dining in every style imaginable and of course placing bets on the gaming tables. On the ground though, during the boom years now passing, public transport had increasingly become an undesirable way to get anywhere. With no particular brakes on the acquisition of private vehicles by the wealthy citizenry, at peak hours a great proportion of the cars on Macao's roads are there because their drivers are simply trying to park; leading to the maxim that *to go anywhere in Macao one must first go everywhere.*

For Augé, important characteristics of non-places include "an experience — without real historical precedent — of solitary individuality combined with non-human mediation (all it takes is a notice or a screen) between the individual and public authority" (117-118).

> Clearly the word "non-place" designates two complimentary but distinct realities: spaces formed in relation to certain ends (transport, transit, commerce, leisure), and the relations that individuals have with these spaces. Although the two setsof relations overlap to a large extent, and in any case officially (individuals travel, make purchases, relax), they are still not confused with one another; for non-places mediate a whole mass of relations, with the self and with others,which are only indirectly connected with their purposes. As anthropological places create the organically social, so non-places create solitary contractuality. (94)

It's interesting to think of "solitary contractuality" in terms of a slot machine culture: the slow lonely process of making a fortune or losing the lot. And yet the crowdedness of spaces in Macao (in China/East Asia more generally) belies the sparsity and the inhuman aspect Augé associates with "non-place":

> But the real non-places of supermodernity—the ones we inhabit when we are driving down the motorway, wandering through the supermarket or sitting in an airport lounge waiting for the next flight to London or Marseille—have the peculiarity that they are defined partly by the words and texts they offer us: their "instructions for use," which may be prescriptive ("Take right-hand lane"), prohibitive ("No smoking") or informative ("you are now entering the Beaujolais region"). (96)

Macao has such signage, to be sure, and yet (given how little road there is) the average citizen's (or vistor's) experience of it would be brief. In Macao — the particular paradox with regard to the signing of non-place space — is that what makes it particular is the fact of it being exoticised as incomprehensible. The street and shop signs compulsory in Portuguese cannot be read at all by the vast majority of the population; nor can Chinese tourists read the Portuguese; nor in general can western tourists read the Chinese or the Portuguese signage.

Of course a Portuguese name, written in the Roman alphabet, will serve for a name in English or in any other European language. But try telling such a name to a Macao taxi driver and — good luck. The main street of Macao is, to the population at large, San Ma Lo. Ask anyone about Avenida da Almeida da Ribeiro (the Portuguese name) and you'll get a blank stare. The sign in Portuguese is something people simply don't see (the way I don't see the Chinese characters on the keyboard on which I'm typing this — because they are simply not relevant to my semiotic landscape).

To return then to a distinction between "Macao space" and "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 hailed by consumption-oriented reifications of putative universal value. In the terms Umberto Eco elaborates in *The Role of the Reader*, we recognise in anywhere space a "closed text," i.e. a text in which the addressee is not invited to participate actively, but is rather offered a pre-determined role, open neither to interpretation nor negotiation. Macao space, being particular, is contingent. Having a history, it can have a future. Contemporary Macao poetry typically values Macao space and sees it as under threat from the 'non-negotiable' space of culture that could be anywhere.

Reclamation

In Loi Chi Pang's poem, "to Coloane,"[8] we get a picture of anywhere space being added to Macao:

> little city too cramped
> so cramped that there is only space left for muttering
> the many roads not taken knit into a helpless net
> skims from my eyes
> under the net there is such a stunning hope
> a naming for all kinds of new things
> simply
> a word
> 'cold'
>
> the autumn of September here is a book of sorrow more than sadness
> so sad that the egret can't stand any longer under the mangroves
> holding up an oilpaper umbrella to Coloane
> I can't see rain
> but only
> ashes and stones of the cement trucks

flying past
and
the Cotai Strip
still under construction

HT & KK (290)

Here, witnessing the process of "reclamation" shows us that liminal space — green space in this case — cannot become a part of the known place. The egret will be deprived of its mangrove; instead the 'new things' are worthy only of the word "cold." This is anywhere space in the making; and it's made of ashes and cement, of anything.

In Erik Lo Yiu Tung's poem "the city starts to flee with the speed of the stars," we indulge the fantasy of the city escaping a violence of growth even dreams can't conceal.

the city starts to flee with the speed of the stars

grow up rapidly, the city starts
to flee with the speed of the stars
used to chase after each other in the park when young
one year the hand of the clock was sprained
even dreaming can't conceal
the violence of growth

after dark the street becomes the future trenches of the children
they have been asking lots of questions that adults can't answer
when I was young, mother fooled me and said those were just accidents
perhaps there are too many accidents beneath the sky, for example:
on the street in June or July, we might have
met behind the police tape
watching the city continually flee with the speed of the stars
it turns out that there are still lots of unanswerable doubts
within the distance that can't be asked
I have long been used to that

EL & KK (324)

Where is the poetry in this? On which side of the police tape? Clearly accidents are suspicious; some transgression is indicated. Doubts are unanswerable, space

and time as we knew them can no longer be relied on — the clock is sprained, the distance cannot be asked. In these circumstances the idea of the future is reduced to trench warfare.

In Xi Lan's "it's only in death we're not foreigners" we get a skewed picture of the poet's place:

> the view through the mirror
> is the reflection of contorted reality
>
> I suddenly lost all hopes, but am joyful
>
> I lie below the Ruins of St Paul — they're under construction
> drinking a beer once cold, following the whole city working hard
> at being dispirited breathing in the air breathed out by others
> as I understand it, poets have always tried to live well
> in other people's lives
>
> JL & KK (379)

In the touristic city the ruins are under construction. Life is close. We breathe in the air others have breathed. We see that even poetry is a compromised activity; it's essentially parasitic. Poets try to live well in others' lives. Tam Chon Ieng's "a game," by contrast shows us poetry as a kind of resistance to the house becoming unknown:

> the world can almost stop, the rotten sound of the bell
> hasn't submitted to poems
> poets stand one by one next to each other
> thinking with their eyes covered, they finish the game
> in the midst of the singers
>
> too many people enter, more and more stones in the house
> can no longer be known
>
> HT & KK (386)

Cinematic Un/Consciousness of Space

What kind of a space is a city? Is the city in particular? Is any city anywhere? What relationship obtains between the city in particular and any city anywhere? I think there are useful terms of analogy with the relationship we can theorise between nation in general and a nation in particular. Benedict Anderson's

second paradox of the national is that nations are particular instances of identity of which all persons are — at least notionally — possessed (5). That is to say, nation is a kind of universal difference: everyone's nationality is not the same as someone else's. Along these lines, a key paradox of "anthem quality" (the soul stirring evocation of national sentiment felt by those who stand for their national anthem) is a uniformity of differences. Every member of the series 'nation' must have a national anthem; as a consequence, though anthems are notionally intended to express the differences between nations, reflection reveals that they serve also to illustrate the consistency of national investments across international borders. In other words, although people generally feel that expressions of devotion to flag or soil or anthem or any other abstraction of national homeland are particular, and suggest distinction from the devotions of others to other places, in fact dedication to nations in particular is — as evidenced by the machinery-in-common — the shared worldwide "spiritual"commitment of the modern citizen. In this sense we may think of national devotion as essentially devotion to the notion of nation.

Devotion to a city (for instance the artist's or writer's commitment to the representation of his or her city) has a number of similarities with national devotion; and yet it is a less abstract devotion in that the city's citizens are — relative to those of the nation — more likely to have met each other. They are also likely to have more in common: they breathe the same air, experience the same weather. So the connection is more natural, less manufactured.

In her 1995 volume *The Culture of Cities,* Sharon Zukin writes:

> for several hundred years, visual representations of cities have "sold" urban growth... Images, from early maps to picture postcards, have not simply reflected real city spaces; instead, they have been imaginative reconstructions — from specific points of view — of a city's monumentality. (16)

Zukin tells us:

> Cities impose visual coherence in many ways: by using zoning to impose design criteria for office buildings, by making memory visible in historic districts, by interpreting the assimilation of ethnic groups in street festivals, by building walls to contain fear. (77).

From the point of view of the current investigation, the point needing made is that a city's poetry does not represent some kind of objective or independent witness of place. However obscure or difficult it may seem, poetry is not above or outside of the cultural processes by which places and peoples represent or symbolise themselves; rather it is — as other forms of culture are — bound by

what we might think of as a culturally produced aura of the place, for which purpose the whole is always greater than the sum of its parts. So poetry and the points of view it expresses are bound up with more general attitudes and opinions of places, with the everyday loyalties and doubts people have for the places they identify as theirs. And the poetry of a place, produced as it mainly is by a cultural elite, is naturally a vehicle for a critique, both of the culture in general, and of those specific representations — especially the official (for instance the touristic) representations– which impact on "the place in mind" experienced by inhabitants, by visitors and by outside observers.

In *Tourism and the Branded City: Film and Identity on the Pacific Rim* Stephanie Donald works through three case studies (Shanghai, Hong Kong, Sydney) to look *inter alia* at how "the tie-in between enhanced film locations and national tourism campaigns offers a perfect commercial and creative synergy between the digital media, the film industry and the tourism agencies" (2). Donald writes that it is:

> no secret that the global narratives of cinematic affect and urban resonance are rooted in the pre-eminence of American and European cities. This is due in part to the academic and popular publishing power in those regions and also, need it be said, the phenomenal success of American film export over the past century. Everyone who sees films knows, or thinks they do, what a US city looks like. New York, San Francisco, Chicago and LA are embedded in cinematic consciousness, thanks to the many versions of those cities that populate the Hollywood screen. Even specific locations (the easterly view over the Hudson River, the running path by the basketball courts in Central Park) are recognizable to viewers who have never set foot in the United States. Europe also has its cinematic cities: Berlin, London, Paris and Rome. (4)

Embeddedness of cinematic consciousness (and perhaps more importantly of cinematic unconsciousness) clearly prevails in the case of Macao, in a poetry that is written with cinematic ways of seeing space in mind. Take for example Siu Hey's poem "developing a port — repertoire":

prelude, <xylophone concerto>

please switch off mobile phones
for the purposes of historical reflection
messages can't be sent four hundred years back
the church is a light-purple ticket
gets you into Lang Bai Ao the moment the storm stopped

iron strikes against flesh composing a drum rhythm
but the melody is sour
now

you command I order
cruel applause
and weeping

second, <majestic march>

drums and cannons
mate under the statue
of Governor Ferreira do Amaral
waving to you
recruiting you to join the hero who destroyed opium

the lotus stone is for cutting open the belly
so it's redder than Christmas flowers

smiling need not entail frivolity
blood is flowing in the east

heroes' hearts beat slowly

JL & KK (334)

The overt musical structure of the piece belies the filmic — it could almost be read as scenario (plus commentary) for a commercial-length film montage. Yi Ling's 1989 poem, "filming in the residential district" avows the space of the poem as cinematic:

filming in the residential district

night darkens
glance at the middle of the street
a young man in a jumper, trainers and trousers
looks like he's running
looks like he's talking on the phone
looks like he's walking a dog
looks like he's making a deal with someone
his running legs
rely on an automatically extending dog belt
maintaining the link between human and canine
sometimes long sometimes short sometimes broken
the dog is in front
he follows behind
the dog is pulling him

then he runs
middle of the street
stops
his left hand moves the phone nearer his ear
the mouth starts to eject words, sentences
it's like a dog that squeezes its work onto the street
the dog hasn't finished
but the master pulls him away

a Macanese with his office smile
eyes up at the sky
night draining away
the rest of the day

5 September 1989

AV & KK (180)

And in Lou Kit Wa's "inspirations of the chicken," we likewise witness directed space.

of course, having a pair of wings
rather than a pill or a dance floor
makes the ears and eyes wild
angers the hair
and then
you forget your identity
your parents
guilt
forget about its iron cage
their bodies get close to each other
wiggling
falling to the ground
waiting for dark night to enter
directing a film's plot
choking the city with sobs

AV & KK (301)

Who's directing and who's directed here would be somewhat more difficult to establish. As in Lou's poem, one sometimes finds a surreal cartoon quality — an oneiric city of impossible transformations is conjured, as in Erik Lo Yiu Tung's "Sleepwalking":

your world slims down, flowing along the river outside the window
little birds also fly away, you said
as if once you spread your hands you could touch
the edge of the sea

the bottle has been collecting the rain
recording restlessly just like a typewriter
hey! you naughty kid
you throw the bottle on purpose towards
the edge of the sea. you said
to step across time, we even step onto our own heads!

you're a wolf, also a sheep
for example, if a hunter suddenly had to shoot you down
you would flee right across the swamp, the river, go through the forest
flee to the path that leads to the life of sorrow
finding the only entrance

hey! do you really need to pick the poison worm seed from the dream scheme?
that pair of devilish hands which direct fate will soon let
eyes drop into the ocean of lashes
you haven't got over the sleepwalking
it doesn't connect at all

EL & KK (323)

This cinematic un/consciousness of space is, in Macao's case, despite the fact that Macao space — unlike that of New York or Paris or Rome or Hong Kong has not been the object of a long tradition in film; nor would its landmarks be easily recognised by an international film-viewing audience. Macao's space is however cinegenic. The fact that it has not much been depicted in actual cinema provides poets with both opportunity and responsibility. The place is changing so quickly, there is danger at every moment that a particular ambiance will be irretrievably lost.

Macao Mythologies

I hope that these jottings may be suggestive of work that will be timely if it coincides with the development of a Macao cinema — an aesthetic adventure of an ideally poetic nature, and one which should hopefully make maximum use of the poetic talent available in Macao today. But with that optimistic suggestion perhaps it will be wise to ask to what extent the cinematic or the

cinegenic conception of space allows a bearing witness to particularity of place; to what extent does it entail the homogenizing of what was our place as somewhere that could be anywhere? Or reverse the proposition: is there a bearing witness to the becoming general — the becoming anywhere — of our here and now; and is there generalising the anywhere so that it's now ours? This last possibility is, I think, something borne witness to in what I call the mythologising strain of contemporary Macao poetry. Take for example these lines from Li Ying's poem, "Coloane":

> no sparkles dot the rippling waves
> is it to hide
> the shadows of the benign magician
> who rules this Homeric island?
>
> bells and sirens are stories of another sea
> something muffles all voices
> could it be the air
> translucent, sweet jelly on her dinner table?
>
> somewhere in soup euphoric
> mah-jong tiles clack the camphor-framed clock
> are those her eyes talking in silence
> electric candles flicker on the altar?
>
> a traveler strolls out of Lord Stow's Cafe
> he wishes for some serendipity in deep woods
> will he wander into her water mansion
> house of captives and treacherous love?
>
> (247)

Somewhat reminiscent of the high/low, quotidian/classical conflations of T.S. Eliot's "The Waste Land," Li's poem brings the reader/tourist within striking distance of Circe's (or arguably Calypso's) space of enchantment. The mock classical pretensions are there in the flicker of the electric candles, in the ambiguity of sirens and mansions, the appellation "traveler," the idea of captivity. Macao is after all officially the land of the lotus,[9] so it should come as no surprise to learn that Odysseus called in here with his men. Nor should it surprise us that some men might have had trouble departing. As with Circe, there's something treacherous in all of this — a feeling that things are not what they seem. And as was the case with Odysseus, the duplicity can be read as something reversible. Odysseus may have been beset with the problems that come of crossing a powerful god (Poseidon), but he was himself a man of

many tricks (*anthropos polytropos).* In the case of Circe, it was by — following Hermes' instructions and — lunging with his sword our handsome hero won the enchantress over. So Li's poem furnishes the reader with a serendipity of its own — a convenient myth in which to bring the West's millennia-long colonial adventure to the end of the earth the Portuguese found and which their national poet, Camoens, celebrated in an imitative epic style. Interestingly, Li's poem empowers the assumed-to-be Chinese woman with the magic of Greek Mythology.

All this somehow sits aptly with the mythological pretensions we find in Macao's casino cultural today. Since the 2004 renovation, the New Century Hotel (on the other island, Taipa) has been host to the "Greek Mythology Casino" — a frankly bizarre drawcard for Mainland tourists, decorated throughout with pastel Aegean scenes and larger-than-life gods and heroes. In its heyday it featured an occasional wall of flame above a fountain ("Greek fire," no doubt) in the cramped entranceway of the hotel/casino.

The more massive and more recent structure, The Venetian (opened 2007), lends itself to mythologising of the kind we see in Athena Kong's poem "armageddon in Cotai."[10]

armageddon in Cotai

night, starless
sky, inky
against the dark curtain
the winged lion landed on the arch

under his feet
lies the Rome built in days
at the moon's eclipse
the lion bowed to the audience
opening his eyes to his enemy
across the bitumen river

dust, sand
twelve beasts stand on the planted forest
dividing the battlefields
the wordless lion stands confident
guarding his palace in wilderness
his prosperity in the desert

(257)

Almost a parody of Yeats' "The Second Coming," we see here that Macao is becoming a parody of a place with historical pretensions. The whole landscape is parodic — rivers are bitumen, the forest is built. The lion bows to the enemy because we see that — despite the apocalyptic scale — everything entailed in the poem is performance. What kind of a desert is intended here? Surely the cultural kind.

Myth is, in Michel de Certeau's terms, "a discourse relative to the place/nowhere (of origin) of concrete existence, a story jerry-built out of elements taken from 'common sayings, an allusive and fragmentary story whose gaps mesh with the social practices it symbolises'" (102). De Certeau writes of the city as a "suspended symbolic order" of the habitable city "thereby annulled" (106).[11] The question of habitability suggests then a complex of issues, concerning us with place as symbolic, as ordered by symbols, or of order suspended; with place as narrative consequence of all the building, of every footfall, that brought it into being; with space as something seeping from elsewhere, space that could be anyone's and anywhere. As residents, as citizens, do we exist in — partake of — a place that is spatially and temporally contingent? Or have brought — do we bring — space with us? Do we exist atemporally, according to the terms of some categorical imperative?

Sleepy Backwater/Bubble Bursting

Macao is among other things perhaps the world's largest open-air museum 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 some tacky pseudo-Chinese add-on element. The Emperor, The Pharaoh's Palace, now the Venetian, soon the City of Dreams. There's no shortage of Orientalising (and self-Orientalising) in the concoctions arrived at. Perhaps the most serviceable (and durable) example is in the "bird-cage" of the old Lisboa Hotel (early seventies landmark of Stanley Ho's gambling empire), often thought to vaguely resemble an old-fashioned Chinese peasant's hat. The smoke-filled desperation[12] of the Lisboa's large circular gaming rooms has been to Macao's cultural heart what the Reading Room of the British Library is to England's. Apt setting for all kinds of intrigue, material for fiction and for poetry.

From the point of view of poetry, of art, one may well ask — is there any making ourselves at home in all of this? How shall we think of the *heimlich/unheimlich* of places ambiguously ours and not, by virtue of habitation and by virtue of global consciousness, of place de-historicised through commercial interest? Is there any prospect for domestication of the anywhere space of the tacky casino capitalist concoction? I think I have already answered the question. In the old Casino Lisboa gaming rooms we may have seen just such

an appropriation. Though perhaps those rooms were built uniquely as a den with Chinese — Macao — characteristics, I think it will be fair to say that a recent coat of paint, freshen-up and smoking ban have re-absorbed that particular space as part of a global project and so put the icon at risk from the point of view of Macao's heritage. So here's a space we may read as having gone the full circle and perhaps more than the full circle, in terms of alienation and domestication.

I suppose the key point needing to be made here is that, however we classify spaces, in Macao or elsewhere, ambivalence in and towards them will be generated simply by the fact that space inhabited is space in semiotic motion; inhabited space, in other words, is evolving and revolving in terms of any prospect of belonging. Cinegenic space is a nice example of the ambivalence generating ambiguity of space as lived and concomitantly read. The conception of — the recognition of — space as cinegenic could be seen as foreshadowing an advent of the-already-known-from-elsewhere and so, a recognisable place; alternatively, cinegenic space can be read as unique, demanding recognition as such, valued for its particularity. Which kind of space is homely and which uncanny; or how are these combined? Which is the real city and which is the city dreamt? Tourism promotion and poetry, each equally wrestle with problems of identity and representation as invested in these ambivalences.

In the case of Macao — to borrow a line from Neil Young — let's say, everyone knew this was nowhere; and then, but then, the sleepy backwater became a destination, a becoming happening hyped-up place, and then — we live in the now of that bubble bursting. Macao was a place with curious nooks where the spent past persisted (in ruins on various scales); Macao has become a place with landmarks of postmodernity — a tower and since then casinos with notable names and noteworthy as structure — the Sands, the Wynn, the Crown, the Venetian. What magical names and what fairytale anywhere hype all about them. I think it's interesting that the process of making nowhere somewhere entailed the colonisation of that particular place's space with things that could be anywhere, with a phallic monumentalism with Cantonese characteristics (as disclosed in the feng shui reports).

The best thing to do with all of this? Poets and scholars have this capacity in common — to bear witness to what is happening to their city. Witnessing environmental degradation and the sense of nature lost is the flipside of a development and pace-of-change poetics in casino-age Macao. Things gone are witnessed along with the new things that have come. Many poets deal with risks of nostalgia and certainly there is cynicism directed at the past as well as the present. There are persistent critiques of consumer culture. In Macao poetry today, chance and luck loom large as themes, along with their figuration in Macao life through sites such as casinos and temples, through personae such

as those of the gambler, the beggar, the prostitute. Macao as dot-on-the-map is conceived as a site for all kinds of portal semiotics, as paradigm for cultural crossing and cultural shift. Interested in the paradoxes, ironies, and hypocrisies inherent in the present-day culture, politics and international position of Macao, the new Macao poetry reveals a place-based poetics deeply concerned with Macao identity, its evolution, and potentials.

I hope it will not be construed in any form as a defence of the various juggernauts riding over local culture, if I say that the current healthy state of Macao poetry is both — product of a perceived need to defend Macao culture from attack and proof that Macao culture is alive and kicking today.

Endnotes

[1] 95% ethnic Chinese and Chinese speaking.

[2] Though strictly we should not think of Macao as a colony. In 1887 a Luso-Chinese treaty was signed allowing Portugal's perpetual occupation and management of Macao. The Peking government, however, never ceded sovereignty over Macao to Portugal. Because of the separate development on two cultures (the Portuguese in and around the forts they built, the Chinese farming between these), historians have generally agreed to consider Macao under the Portuguese as an"enclave" rather than a colony.

[3] The god in this case being the maritime deity A Ma, after whom some believe the city to have been named.

[4] Macao recorded only one case — that of a Mainland man who took fever-suppressing drugs to cross the border so as to be treated in a Macao hospital.

[5] A minor poet who visited Macao in the 1930s, not the very famous Lu Xun of the early twentieth century Chinese letters.

[6] This is a figure named by Roland Barthes in *Mythologies*. For Barthes "the innoculation" 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)

[7] The Macanese population (properly speaking, those of mixed descent, and from lineages embracing all parts of the former Portuguese Empire) are just a few thousand (around two per cent of the total population).

[8] Coloane is the outermost (and larger) of Macao's two islands (the other being Taipa); Taipa and Coloane are now joined by what is called the Cotai Strip, a Vegas style casino-

row featuring the Venetian (second largest building in the world), a golf course and sundry other casino resorts.

[9] The lotus is the territory's official symbol and a stylised lotus in shown in green on the flag of the Macao Special Administrative Region.

[10] The Cotai Strip is the stretch of reclaimed land between Taipa and Coloane on which the Venetian and a number of other casino resorts have been built or are under construction at the time of writing.

[11] "Thus, as a woman from Rouen put it, no, here 'there isn't any place special, except for my own home, that's all... There isn't anything.' Nothing 'special': nothing that is marked, opened up by a memory or a story, signed by something or someone else. Only the cave of the home remains believable, still open for a certain time to legends, still full of shadows. Except for that, according to another city-dweller, there are only 'places in which one can no longer believe in anything'" (106).

[12] Smoking has recently been banned on the lower floor.

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