

City of Poets Dreaming: Cross-cultural Poetics in the Case of Macao

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Abstract

Poetry of a place is important for making us look again and not merely take for granted the objects and the activities going on around us. The criterion is definitive in the sense that the poem which does not make us look again is not really worth attending to. There's reflexive potential in that process of "re-visioning" because it maximises the chances of our seeing ourselves in the mirror which the poem-of-place naturally is.

Contemporary Macao poetry – written in Chinese, in Portuguese and in English – 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. Indeed, one might wish to claim that it is the mix of influences which gives contemporary Macao poetry its life. But Macao poetry is not merely the result of a hybrid position between traditions; it is a poetry deeply concerned with place and identity. The present paper is interested in how this particular artefact of culture (*a* poetry) represents place through an encounter between cultures. Such an interest conveniently situates the idea of poetry as practice of "place-based aesthetics," along the lines suggested by Raymond Williams' "radical particularity."

Dreams are a major preoccupation in Macao poetry today and this paper works to connect various oneiric encounters offered in the poetry with both the symbolic potential of Macao and with its reality as witnessed, historically and today.

Keywords

Poetry, Macao, cross-cultural poetics, place-based aesthetics, city, identity

"Please, would you tell me what *you* call yourself?" she said timidly. "I think that might help a little."

"I'll tell you, if you'll come a little further on," the Fawn said. "I can't remember here," Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking-Glass*

Poetry of a place is important for making us look again and not merely take for granted the objects and the activities going on around us. The criterion is definitive in the sense that the poem which does not make us look again is not

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really worth attending to. There's reflexive potential in that process of "re-visioning" because it maximises the chances of our seeing ourselves in the mirror which the poem-of-place naturally is.

Zygmunt Bauman writes of a sense of so-called "objective" space, of physical space arising from a "phenomenological reduction of daily experience to pure quantity, during which distance is 'depopulated' and 'extemporized'" (145). The poem anchored in the space from which it arises tells us of a place as subjective experience; it offers the reader eyes to see, a point of view from which to get the sense of a location – so it offers motives for empathy and for identification.

Contemporary Macao poetry – written in Chinese, in Portuguese and in English – 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 contemporary Macao poetry its life. But Macao poetry is not merely the result of a hybrid position between traditions; it is a poetry deeply concerned with place and identity. If each of these abstractions can be, in Macao's case, considered an instance of hybridity, then one should acknowledge that Macao poetry is equally about space as experienced and place as imagined; that while these two threads may be difficult to prise apart, the effort to do so will give us some indications of what Macao is to the poets who live in or pass through it. My interest in this paper is then in how this particular artefact of culture (*a* poetry) represents place through an encounter between cultures.

Such an interest conveniently situates the idea of poetry as practice of "place-based aesthetics," along the lines suggested by Raymond Williams' "radical particularity." Poetry, in this productive sense, can be a paradigm case for Williams' "structures of feeling": in situating our knowledge of this particular poetry, we discover through analysis that things "taken to be private, idiosyncratic and even isolating" are in fact "emergent, connecting and dominant characteristics" (132). What was taken to be personal turns out to be very political, the basis on which a collective identity (for instance that of the dweller in a particular city) is unconsciously determined through views and assumptions in common, and through the common affect these imply.

Macao

Long inhabited by Cantonese speakers when settled by the Portuguese in the mid sixteenth century, Macao is an important and longstanding site of intercultural exchange and a place with impressively hybrid cultural credentials. From the late Ming through to the end of the first Opium War, Macao was the principal portal between China and the West. A dot on the map (totalling less

than thirty square kilometers in area), for many Macao has meant the point of East-West interface.

In geographic terms, Macao is a peninsula and two islands, and since the Handover (of 1999), a part of China (PRC). It was possibly a Portuguese possession for four hundred and fifty years, though not really a colony – historians generally agree to call it an enclave.² And though this tiny territory was arguably never in law properly alienated from China – though it never properly belonged to Europe – still a Hong Kong handover style of treaty was signed between Beijing and Lisbon in 1987 – and as a result the Portuguese and the citizens of Macao found themselves with virtually the same benefits post-handover that London had negotiated for its crown colony across the delta. Those benefits principally include fifty years of guaranteed civic autonomy and protection for Portuguese language and Portuguese law.

Macao is a place and a name with particular cultural and intercultural resonances and has been a long-term focus for – among other things – orientalist fantasies. “Macao” in this general sense has been a subject for poetry that might not have had much to do with Macao in particular, just as Elizabethan love sonnets have remained serviceable because they did not apply to women in particular. Nor is the particularity of a crossing or of the alterity in question so easily disclosed in Macao’s case. In terms of language allegiance, while Portuguese and Chinese remain the official languages of Macao, prior to the British settlement of Hong Kong, Macao was the principal site of English language communication in East Asia. It should also be acknowledged that – of late – more and more Macao poetry is being written by local Chinese people in English, an idiom chosen by them both for the particular qualities of the language, and as a vehicle of worldwide communication. Note also that – since the casino boom of recent years (starting around 2003) – there are many more English speaking *gweilos*³ here than there had been; so it’s natural that some of these (mainly well educated) people would wish to write poems in English about their new place of residence.

City of half a million people, Macao has a remarkable number of practising poets, producing – in the opinion of this author – remarkably good poetry. The poetry dealt with in this essay is extracted from a 2008 anthology (published by the Association of Stories in Macao [ASM]), of which the author was co-editor. That volume – work of a team of seventeen translators – featured more than one hundred poets. The small selection dealt with here will

² 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.

³ The Cantonese word for foreigner, legacy of the early contact era, which would literally be translated as “white ghost.”

reveal to the reader that the collective and the unconscious are often close companions; and that Macao may well be described as a “city of poets dreaming.”

Signing Macao

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 there 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.” I am interested in the idea of Macao, of Macao’s symbolic significance, on the presence and the practice of Macao as a poetic sign. Clearly there are both arbitrary (purely formal/imaginary) and motivated (witness/actuality derived) aspects of this sign. In Wong Man Fai’s poem, we might say, that “island-ness” is the arbitrary side, the staggering and the bets are things witnessed.

Macao is, has been, many things, if not all things, to all. Its present-day transformation into the gambling Mecca of the East, is remarkable and disturbing, something unimaginable even a decade ago. Those who have lived in Macao over that decade have experienced a pace of change unparalleled in human history. Of course the whole eastern seaboard of China can be seen in these terms and one might think of Macao as – in certain respects (not gambling) – merely catching up with her big sister across the Pearl Delta. In a still broader sense the phenomenon witnessed here is worldwide – it’s the physical form of late capitalist postmodernity, as evidenced in territory on the cusp of the majority world or the north or the west (depending on how you would like to look at it).

Macao’s newfound prosperity is based on gambling and “the gaming industry” (as it euphemistically declares itself), as such it 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. The complex of issues here – all fit subjects for poetry – have interested a number of the poets writing in Macao today.

With these circumstances in mind, one reads Debby Vai Keng Sou's dream-like imagery 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 (*I Roll the Dice* 185)

In Sou's poem, the "five thousand kisses" are easily recognised. Highlighted here is the contradiction inherent in Macao's style of progress – physically more

territory (through the process of land reclamation), less space to breathe. The new opulence is somehow vain and loveless; really it's all about what one might call a 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. As Portuguese kisses might more generally seem to the casual Chinese observer.

Cinegenic City

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).

For the purposes of the current investigation, one wishes to note 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 a *gestalt* – 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 at *inter alia* 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
(*I Roll the Dice* 334; trans. Jenny Lao and Kit Kelen)

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
(*I Roll the Dice* 180; trans. Agnes Vong and Kit Kelen)

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

(*I Roll the Dice* 301; trans. Agnes Vong and Kit Kelen)

Though who's directing and who's directed here would be somewhat more difficult to say. 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

(*I Roll the Dice* 323; trans. Elisa Lai and Kit Kelen)

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 cinogenic. The fact that it has not much been depicted in actual cinema provides poets with both opportunity and responsibility. The cinogenic latency of Macao space, coupled with Macao's current rapid pace of transformation, suggests a site of dreamwork, or approximations thereof. The chaos of (what in the Freudian frame we might call) condensations and displacements indicates a text needing to be talked through, requiring interpretation. The place is changing so quickly, there is danger at every moment that a particular ambiance will be irretrievably lost. Poetry has a role in both the ongoing production of the place and its interpretation. The translation of poetry – and its reading across cultures – provides a vehicle for the understanding of the hybrid and metamorphic condition of identity in a place of borders, such as Macao is.

Stephanie Donald writes, “there is a local sense of belonging that is particular to Hong Kong and which makes narrating the city-as-brand a delicate task. When this narrative task is tested against the work of filmmakers, arguably the strongest voices in Hong Kong's cultural worlds, it emerges that the competing patriotisms are not invariably commensurable” (5). The patriotisms to which Donald refers are, in Macao's and Hong Kong's cases, embedded in similar problematics: loyalty to the colonial past or the national future; to the East, to the West; to the local or the larger identity. A key difference is that in Macao's case, filmmakers could not be argued to be strong voices in Macao's cultural worlds. Theirs would be fledgling voices in Macao; there simply aren't enough of them. Instead, poets, architects, visual artists, designers, musicians – these are Macao's strong voices in culture today. And yet the Hong Kong cinematic eye is well at home in Macao and plays a defining role in the way Macao space is perceived. It's their capacity to dream, solo and concertedly, with and without an audience, that determines the imaginative space of the city as work-in-progress and as subject of critique. The strength of local talent in other areas suggests Macao's is a cinema waiting to happen; and at the same time it needs to be conceded that Macao space is seen by its imaginative citizens through a lens of Hong Kong, Hollywood, Mainland and other cinemas.

A Sleepwalker's Macao

Seeing one's own place with other eyes (detached observation) is a characteristically cosmopolitan and modernist malaise, lot of the *flâneur* for instance. Macao is a pedestrian-scale place and, because of what we now call “heritage,” peninsula Macao is one of the world's great city spaces for walking. Walking in Macao's Inner Harbour streets is making one's way through decay, through remnants of past culture. In fact one may read miniature Macao as the

paradigm walking city; it's too small to see any other way. To walk is to observe, to understand and to leave traces of all of these processes. Walking is a kind of writing. Footsteps for de Certeau are like Chinese characters drawn with a finger on a hand: "they are myriad but do not compose a series. They cannot be counted because each unit has a qualitative character: a style of tactile apprehension and of kinesthetic appropriation. Their swarming mass is an innumerable collection of singularities. Their intertwined paths give their shape to spaces" (97). For de Certeau, the "long poem of walking manipulates spatial organizations no matter how panoptic they may be: it is neither foreign to them nor in conformity with them" (101). Noughties Macao does have its panoptic point – the Macao tower and its view and its bungee-jumping spectacularism; things captured on film and offered the tourist.

As has been suggested, the cinematic impression a city makes melds seamlessly into another (and closely related) *mise-en-scène*: that of the dreamer. In Lok Ka I's "homesick on a soundless night," the question of displacement stands ironically at odds with a personal sense of placelessness.

where is my home?
 heaven knows
 homesick thoughts of missing

no reason for a cheerful face
 no footnote for a broken heart
 on a swing
 a dream of the future sways

'can't bear to climb high to look beyond
 my hometown far away
 I shed tears for bygone years
 why does the pain remain?..'

on a bustling street
 who wants to be a lonely walker?
 I keep my own counsel
 see afar
 not going home, just passing

life is tedious
 seeking reasons to set roots
 clouds are stirring in the air
 it's difficult to breathe
 got to find an excuse

to smash a glass plate
a good many times

order a cappuccino
drop in a cube of sugar
together with the bubbles I swallow all that was clear
awake after
the coffee reminds me of the moon of my town
drinking alone on a moonlit night

(I Roll the Dice 368; trans. Debby Sou, Jacque Hoi and Kit Kelen)

“On a bustling street/who wants to be a lonely walker?” “To walk is to lack a place,” de Certeau tells us. In the city of pleasure and potent illusions (i.e. those on which a gambling industry depends) the oneiric and the ambulatory can read as views through the one miasma. For de Certeau: “the similarity between ‘discourse’ and dreams has to do with their use of the same ‘stylistic procedures’; it therefore includes pedestrian practices as well” (102). In the city, as in the dream, things needn’t make sense. The connection is already made in the last line of Erik Lo Yiu Tung’s “sleepwalking”: “it doesn’t connect at all” (323). But things contiguous with no appearance of connection are things which require interpretation; as for the dream, so for the city.

Dreams are a major preoccupation in Macao poetry today. The idea of Macao – the city or territory – as a dreaming entity or a sentience in itself capable of dreams is the subject of the experiment in Fernando Sales Lopes’ poem “Macao”:

Macao

You’re open to the sea
inside
you want to escape
from your fate

Rough toss
and you reach
to conquer
the body
seized
by the earth

You dream...

You dream you are
what you were by chance
But your destiny
is written
in the smoke
that protects men
and appeases gods

The grand mother
holds
your body

And the soul
returns to her

(I Roll the Dice 139; trans. Lili Han and Kit Kelen)

Here Macao, the sleepy outpost, is personified as a character wishing, but unable, to escape fate. This sleepy Macao image – so hard to sustain today – is an important reminder of what Macao has meant – especially to the Portuguese – for most of its modernity. Today’s Macao resembles some heretofore unknown cross between casino, building site, world heritage antique and a place where some hapless folk are just trying to get on with their lives. It’s a place sleep cannot be relied on. And when sleep won’t come? Terence Hun (Ling Gu) gives us the picture:

insomnia

thoughts
are
gangs of wolves
one gang after another

the field belongs to them
the waves in the grass belong to them
what you have is
only their howling
your breath has nothing to do
with wind through the grass or beat of the heart
they are having a race in any direction

if you think of
a starting point and a destination
all the wolves circling
breathing, motionless

mouths opened
biting each other

your life
is like this
hanging in the sky –
a perfect philosophy
(*I Roll the Dice* 251; trans. AV & KK)

Casinos, luck, chance; beggars and gamblers and prostitutes; the water and what lives in it, passes through it; likewise the air; development and reclamation; border business, dreams, poetry, art – contemporary Macao poetry negotiates a range of related themes and images. Investment in the intercultural and its difficulties and possibilities provides a consistent backdrop for the development of these themes.

Local poetry has had an important investment in understanding Macao's symbolic place – between East and West – and in understanding the nature of encounters across cultures here, likewise in accounting for intercultural misunderstandings. These interests are important also in the official culture (touristic and otherwise), and in contemporary Macao poetry we may detect cynicism, critique, annoyance with the official line. Take for instance, Eric Chau's poem "the silent Macao," footnoted with the author's "ps. After Macao's successful inclusion on the world heritage listing, the TV advertisements continuously repeated the slogan, 'a world of difference, the difference is Macau.' It became the voiceover of my nightmare at that time." Chau links this new official image with the handover. A bitter fruit was swallowed for four hundred years, we're told, and now:

a lie that's been spoken a hundred times – truth
(*a world of difference, the difference is Macau*)
why does the same phrase have to be repeated a hundred times?
a truth repeated a thousand times adds a bit more than the truth
just that little bit of absurdity
(*a world of difference, the difference is Macau*)
why does the same slogan have to be repeated a thousand times?
I'm silent

And why? On paper one may be struck by the apparent disingenuousness of the voluble protester claiming to be silent. However, what's written may not be heard and in the case of poetry perhaps it is not unusual for loud claims in ink to go unheeded. In this case, Chau's persona is silent because s/he doesn't:

... know what to say

once hurt now I can only think of the scar, an ignorant violation
 hegemony is not the creature of sin or desire swept along by the
 postcolonial
 insensitively thinking of the past calamity
 but saying that it's for cultural exchange not knowing if there is such a
 thing

The critique is offered in local and international terms; what's revealed is a
 cheapening of culture borne of the servitude expressed in the compulsory smile
 – the smile that is itself a kind of trickery, encouraging the gambler to think of
 himself as a winner.

perhaps
 billions invested mold our firm smiling face
 receiving the neither flesh nor fowl spirit of Morocco or Las Vegas
 splitting up into shining casinos for entertaining spirits in between
 dragon-riding Holy Mary and A Ma on waves
 shouting at 'win them all' supporting our welcoming visitors from
 everywhere and not forgetting to smile

And so silence here is about the fact of being deprived of a voice; the
 theoretical underpinnings are unusually well articulated.

culture somebody sees it thinks that it's a business someone feels a thorn
 in the heart letting the graceful heritage be restored
 our confidence is fake but we have swallowed something bitter that was
 not
 easy
 I'm speechless I'm silent I don't have a standpoint

I laugh
 but I'm not happy
 (*a world of difference, the difference is Macau*)
 (*a world of difference, the difference is Macau*)
 (*I Roll the Dice* 239; trans. Agnes Vong and Kit Kelen)

Baudrillard writes, "The irony of the facts, in their wretched reality, is precisely
 that they are only what they are" (98). It's along these lines Chau captures a
 casino mesmerism, a circular logic and enigmatic logic – of tautology – that
 keeps the wheels of the gambling tourism economy greased.

A City of Poets Dreaming

In dreams we find the most fearless and affirming aspect of the psyche – the
 part of us willing to accept as fact the wildest of hypotheses. However we think

of the mythic predictive power of dreams, one acknowledges both the power for individuation that lies in the dreamwork and its inspirational affinity for fiction, for the cinematic, for the poetic image. The idea of dreaming should be understood in the Macao poetry in several overlapping senses. Let's look first at a direct engagement with dreams and meaning to us in Xi Lan's "night".

night

that's a bottomless hole
let me jump in first
falling, I'll spit out my dream
following the edge of night into the atmosphere
lit up as another dream

before the grinding, I realise everything is going to disappear
I need to smash darkness with my own hands before that
everything shall then be reborn

(I Roll the Dice 383; trans. Jenny Lao and Kit Kelen)

In dreams, the intimation of other dreams, that another order must be destroyed to allow this, that this order must make way for another. What relationship is there between dreaming and poetry or myth or story making?

Dreaming is something like a disappearance *into* the moment. When you are dreaming the distractions of the real world are by and large irrelevant. You may dream about your schedule or a missed appointment but you cannot do much about these in your dream. Nor is that disappearance singular or finite; one may slip further and further into distraction, perhaps by means the waking mind would read as metonymic. A dream may be seen in this way as a chain of distractions. Each distraction has – before it loses – your full attention. The dream's imagery is the outward semblance of where you are when your attention is entirely – and unknowingly – within. There is a striking (and hardly coincidental) affinity of this world within for that of the story or the poem. Both dream and story take elements of the real and the known, of the past and the present, and furnish from these hypothetical situations and events, things not quite – or not yet – possible.

Falling into the dream state is a loss of attention, a kind of failure of the moment, a failure of thought to sustain itself on a path one could call conscious; a failure, that is, to remain with reality. And yet, when dreaming, the dream *is* present as reality – the dreamer has nowhere else – and no one else – to be. In Catarina Fong's "about dreams," wild discordant imagery delivers a kaleidoscopic past and a present of oneiric cause and effect – as certain as it is unreliable. The poem begins as follows:

about dreams

(I)
night is a unicorn of Mesopotamia
every night swallows a beautiful dream

(II)
close the eye of the sun
night opens its lips
kisses my thoughts
I get pregnant
giving birth to a dream

(III)
starless night
I lie in the arms of night
a dream lies in my arms
the dream I hold takes up a string of memory
that I held in the arms of night picks up the line of a poem
(I Roll the Dice 242; trans. Athena Kong and Kit Kelen)

The habit of reversing logical expectations as in Fong Keng Seng's lines "because of dreaming/there is night" is one well established in many poeties. In this case it points to questions bearing on what might be thought Platonist assumptions about the nature of identity. These are questions – whether intended as such or not – pertinent to the postcolonial condition of the Macao citizen/subject. Later in Fong's poem:

I am a point outside your circle
never can I go your way
that's why you are forever perfect
perfect as
the first dew
hatched of dawn

How sincere or cynical these questions might be is hard to say. What remains with the reader is the challenging line of observation concerning the relation of dreams to the creative process:

the dream I hold takes up a string of memory
that I held in the arms of night picks up the line of a poem

A dream is a line, not quite of thought. Still rolling forward, broken, blurring from focus. The line of a dream is like a plot, a vision of motion. Dreaming

unravels the day in its vacuum of action. The day folds it in after. That folding in and out, of self in world and world in self, is a rhythm which makes us, makes us who we are.

Waking sees the logic of its lines as ink on the blank of the unwritten page, the proper writing. What we remember of the dream might be unconnected scribble, voices lost to sense, voices to leave us wondering which of our selves has misunderstood which other. Whatever mutual incomprehension divides and unites these selves of ours, they remain foreign to each other, uncannily so. The rhythm of crossings, the rhythm of this border between selves is a mystery – mystery of daily life, everyone’s. Valéry writes of the similarity of poetic experience and the dream state:

Dream, when we return to it through memory, makes us understand that our consciousness can be awakened or filled, and satisfied, by a whole range of productions that differ noticeably in their laws from ordinary productions of perception. But this emotive world that we can know at times through dream cannot be entered or left at will. *It is enclosed in us and we are enclosed in it*, which means that we have no way of acting on it in order to modify it and that, on the other hand, it cannot co-exist with our great power of action over the external world. (Qtd. in Block and Salinger 24)

For Valéry, although the dream state is one which “appears and disappears capriciously,” poetic experience is a means of recreating and regaining this condition, “of artificially developing these natural products of... sentient being” (qtd. in Block and Salinger 24).

In Yi Ling’s poem, “we lost all of our faces,” the vehicle of dream logic – and its implied duplicity (dream as in sleep, dream as in wish) – suggests an ironic determination to follow arbitrary cultural imperatives even to the point of self-harm, as in the English expression “cutting off your nose to spite your face.”

we lost all of our faces

We lost all of our faces but we fought back to retrieve our eyes, ears,
mouths and noses

in our dreams
we lost all our faces
it just took one night
the world couldn’t see our truth
ours are the hundreds, thousands, millions
or is it billions of faces?
...

in order to save the dignity of a face
 we wrecked the old face
 we made a new one
 sure we can do it
 we can definitely do it
 (*I Roll the Dice* 176) trans. Agnes Vong and Kit Kelen)

Parodied here in this short text is that vacuous public-spiritedness directed towards a future which – though unknown – is projected as a great common good. Implied in the process is a collectivity that is conspicuously carnivorous, in fact cannibal and self-devouring.

Much of the new Macao poetry is dreamlike in its logical progression but without any up-front reflexive business about the poetic/aesthetic process or about the allegorical possibilities of the text. A nice example of this straightforward style is in Lou Kit Wa's "smiling fish."

smiling fish

a swim in your azure heart
 I can't control the temperature
 can't warm you up or glow
 use hands or feet to stir

gentle water cools
 and weakens the extremities
 till all that's left are fins, scales

...

if I could break through this invisible barrier
 frontier of the glass, fish and water
 if I still had consciousness, a next life
 I would get away from everything
 to be with water, to be with you

(*I Roll the Dice* 294; trans. Athena Kong and Kit Kelen)

In Lou Kit Wa's poem the metaphors of the fish-made-conscious provide the Macao subject with apt questions as to who might be swallowing whom – culturally, economically, politically – and whether things might or might not be as they seem on the surface. In a middle section of the poem:

sometimes I wonder if my spirit
 rules over the water,
 or is it the other way about?
 what do I want to free myself from?

Is there a next life, for us, for fish? Who has knowledge of such things? In all these circumstances what should a smile mean? Or is it the arbitrary idea of meaning in a smile that needs to be challenged for fact? In Tao Li's "clam" it's the sea that dreams.

clam

we
like families naked
 colourful bodies filled with
 tempting dreams
exhausted fishermen
casting a faraway net at
misty rain
piling up seagull shadows

a glimpse
water flowing
as if for the time
stars not afraid of loneliness
a lantern shines upon the sea
and the white teeth of waves
shine too
tides in and out, dying stars fallen
on innocent dreams of the sea
on our neighbours
the fossils of the fish

I'm waiting for you
from that other side
where the sea's dreams gather
wild sands pass over the waves –
just one grain
for fecundity

(*I Roll the Dice* 48; trans. Christine Jeong and Kit Kelen)

It is as if the conscious world of land-locked humans were surrounded by the ocean of the unconscious, so the sea/land dualism reflects the alternating mind states of dreaming and of waking. In Fernando Sales Lopes' "Macao" the land/sea dreaming/waking dichotomy is reversed so that the city itself is conceived as a dreaming entity, a dormant corporeal sentience in itself (*I Roll the Dice* 139; trans. Lili Han and Kit Kelen): "You dream you are/ what you were by chance": here the dichotomy between conscious and unconscious states of mind is conflated with the division between the arbitrary and the motivated in

human affairs. The arbitrary world, as reached by chance, is a world as if dreamt; i.e. a world beyond conscious control. And yet apparently this world is subject to motivation, but of a kind beyond human ken: “your destiny/ is written/ in the smoke/ that protects men/ and appeases gods.” In Lopes’ poem the image of fate furnished for the occasion is that of the sleepy Macao; image so hard to sustain today, when Macao resembles a cross between casino, building site, world heritage antique and a place where some hapless folk are just trying to get on with their lives. Today Macao may well be represented as a sleepless place, as in Ling Gu’ “insomnia.”

This is another – and less comfortable – kind of enfolded-ness. And yet out of the fear engendered and the chaos (of a race in any direction), sense is made – there’s a starting point, a destination, life is able to be understood as a perfect philosophy – one (suggesting religion) that hangs in the sky. Revealed here is the flipside of the dream state – waking to witness. Again the analogy with myth and with fiction is strong; woken from the story, one goes equipped with a moral – a kind of epiphany or *satori* that allows one better to understand circumstances of the waking world. This knowledge from the other side of the border – completeness, individuation achieved through that kind of crossing – naturally suggests the bridging of cultures and the concomitant opportunities for misunderstanding, for deception, for duplicity, for orientalising – that are an essential aspect of life in Macao. This is one way to explain the importance of the dream motif in Macao poetry: the crossing implied between waking and dreaming worlds is a helpful analogy for the cultural crossing implied not only by the physical fact of the border to Gongbei,⁴ but by the kinds of cultural crossing entailed in Macao’s everyday life.

... And Waking

The image of the subject waking will also be important to the work of witnessing where I am. Che Sio Peng’s poem “living” illustrates the point through analogies between mind/memory and food/nutrition.

living

my mind in the morning
filled with yesterday’s left overs
a pair of sleepy eyes

woke up last night

⁴ The original, and still the most important, border with the Mainland, at the part of Zhuhai known as the Gongbei district.

such a sweet dream

fast food restaurants bake
fresh subjects for conversation
dishes and wine glasses from dinner
clutter up the table
piling up relics of the days

outside the window
steel girders, cement
constructing life

inside the window
mouths each rattling on and on
differently
life edited

a cup of coffee to wash down the memories
half spoon of sugar mixing the thoughts
teeth chew

characters in the morning post
blend with a cup of milk
that's enough nutrition

(*I Roll the Dice* 234; trans. Athena Kong and Kit Kelen)

Dreaminess, dream logic, persists into the waking day. Yesterday's leftovers are like Freud's daily residue, but it's the next day, not a dream, that's described. Two kinds of sustenance – the informative and the edible – are blended for the subject whose comfort is achieved through simple quotidian activity – the morning coffee with the newspaper. By whom is life edited? The apparent hope is – by means of minimal concentration – to escape from piled up relics, from clutter, from mouths rattling on, perhaps no less threatening and no less dream-like than Lin Gu's wolves.

Merely waking to a certain reality may as well be a way to avoid the difficulties in accounting for the circumstances that brought me. In Xi Lan's poem "it's only in death we're not foreigners," the dream-subject of the poem is a character all over the place – high as the tower, lain under the ruins of St Paul's. It's a sinking world that's inhabited and the dream-logic of the diegesis is only confirmed in the moment of waking, when the persona is – like Dorothy in the film of *Wizard of Oz* – surrounded by faces who will question the authority of the dream and confirm the ambiguity of experience either side of the border.

it's only in death we're not foreigners

it's only in death we're not foreigners

– Andrade

my impression of the city is a harbour marked by vicissitudes
quiet stone roads restraining pain perfectly
travelers consider the bloodstain of history
as a hickie – rough skin so generously revealed
until we forget the lover who has shared our mother
then forget our mother
finally forget ourselves

2 August 2004

3pm

about the long wandering of two picaresque characters and a city

hair tied up, with shirt, and ten fingers blackened from writing the silent
vent
I'm determined to get back my lost last name

set free the paper fan that's been shrunk to a withered branch in the
souvenir shop
observe the freedom of birds flying low, made solid by time

the sky is thinned into the mouth of a well
the kids under the well are patiently fishing
they're after the fish struggling under the earth's crust
this world is sinking...
sunlight has wet their very large eyes, has wet the narrowed day dream
their skins dyed with shadows, or they are blocking the dark
hold up a fishing rod, life flying high
higher than the proprietors, as high as the far away Macao Tower –
attempting to pierce through clouds

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

when people bow their heads we get a glimpse of the sky's eyes' pupils

heavy eyelids that have shut up after drinking up the loneliness of the night
hold heavy dreams, for instance:

when we wake up in the morning,
surrounded by a group of people, questioning the space we've taken up
wondering to whom it belongs

(*I Roll the Dice* 378-79; trans. Jenny Lao & Kit Kelen)

In death as in dreams identity remains a key question. It's the vicariousness of experience rendered poetically that engenders a cycle in which poetic self-consciousness and questions of identity imply and inform each other. Only in death will our place-based sense of belonging (i.e. our identity) finally go unquestioned.

So do dreams foretell the future? There is a good argument that they do. If the future is built from the possibilities of the past then the fictional version of experience we read or see in a dream – in requiring interpretation – directs our attention to choices: the choices we face in deciding how and who to be; in deciding that is, what *can be* ahead of us. Then dreams tell the future in precisely the sense that the *I Ching* can be thought to do so: with regard to decisions needing made, they offer images and advice of a cryptic or coded kind, the kind that require interpretation. To the extent that poetry partakes of this kind of witness (of the unknowable), we come close here to Shelley's claim about the poets being unacknowledged legislators. Through their engagement with dreams we apprehend the Macao poets as hierophants of inspiration for their city.

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