

**hybrid talk in mongrel town –
questions of identity in the cross-cultural space of the new Macao poetry
Christopher Kelen**

*Writing is a struggle between presence and absence.
Wade through the shallows, and if it's deep, swim.*

*The function of literature is to express the nature of nature.¹
– Lu Ji*

Macao is a city in southern China, thought generally until 1999² to be a sleepy Portuguese enclave. Post Hong Kong's 1997 Handover, it was the last arguable European 'possession' in East Asia. Since the 2002 'liberalisation' of casino licensing, Macao's cityscape has taken a turn for the monumental, with towers and tall buildings dominating a rapidly evolving skyline. Today Macao is promoted as a tourist destination that offers ultramodern casinos and hotels alongside World Heritage architecture. Amid all this rapid recent change, local Macao people have sometimes felt 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 hope is there that local culture or that a local identity can survive? In this essay I argue that poetry, written in the city's three principal languages (Chinese, Portuguese and English) provides a potent, subtle and ongoing critique of the way things are and the powers that be in present day Macao.

Macao is a place of plural identities, or it will be more nuanced to say that identity in Macao is dynamic, layered, often paradoxical – for instance, at once cosmopolitan and parochial. As is common in colonial and postcolonial space, there is much 'self' and 'other' business at stake. And in Macao's case – as the earliest and longest lasting European outpost in East Asia – that business has been going on for some time (since about 1550). This is a liminal space of longstanding where, in the terms Homi Bhabha articulated in *The Location of Culture*, we can expect to read anxieties with regard to colonial (and now post-colonial/neo-colonial) power arrangements.³ Those anxieties are perhaps nowhere better inscribed than in the choices poets (and other word workers) make with regard to language and the crossings of language/culture best suited to their purposes or orientations. Hybridity, on some scale, is almost ever-present in Macao poetry today, as is resistance to it (more and less successful).

It is important to remember – and especially within the context of English language poetry (translated or otherwise) – that Macao is a foreign place to many of its inhabitants, and so it is also a place of foreigners for many of its Chinese residents. One scratches around in vain to find anything like a 'core group' for identification

¹ Lu Ji, in Tony Barnstone and Chou Ping, eds. *The Art of Writing: Teachings of the Chinese Masters* (Boston: Shambhala, 1996) 9.

² November 1999 saw the return of Macao to China, the tenth anniversary of which event is approaching at the time of writing.

³ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 2004).

purposes in the population of Macao. The tourist arriving for the first time in the place is delighted to feel that s/he is in something resembling a European city. This is the impression given by Portuguese street signs and shop signs and by colonial architecture here and there flanked with Lisbon-style cobblestones. Macao is, thanks to recent investment in tourism infrastructure, in some superficial senses more Portuguese today than it ever was under Portuguese administration. Certainly it is true that in the ten years since the Handover, Macanese culture has been well supported by the post-colonial government. In a March 2009 article in the culture/lifestyle magazine *Macao Closer*, Nuno Mendonça writes of this decade just passing, suggesting that, 'For the first time in history, the Macanese raised their cultural flag without feeling anxious about the Chinese reaction or awkward towards the metropolitan Portuguese'.⁴

But Macao is a Chinese city of China. Ninety-five per cent of the population is ethnically Chinese. Of Macao's Chinese population, though the vast majority are Cantonese speakers, a proportion are relatively recent arrivals from across the border. The Macanese population (properly speaking, those of mixed descent, and from lineages embracing all parts of the former Portuguese Empire⁵) are just a few thousand (around two per cent of the total population). On the language side of the ledger, the Portuguese-speaking population is in total less than seven per cent,⁶ while Patua, the local Macao creole, is now spoken only in a handful of homes in Macao, and is listed by UNESCO as critically endangered.⁷ Then again, a lot of the Macanese are not in Macao. The Macanese have an impressive worldwide diaspora, Hong Kong and North America being the principal places of Macanese population today. Likewise there are Portuguese people spread around the world for whom Macao is a place with a special meaning. Senses of displacement are common in and out of Macao and – unsurprisingly – in Macao poetry today.

This essay deals with poetry in Macao as a multicultural and as a cross-cultural phenomenon.⁸ As such, it will be worth noting here the importance of translation and of the fostering of a poetry 'of response' in Macao, through organisations such as the local community publisher ASM, the on-line journal *Poetry*

⁴ Nuno Mendonça, 'Portuguese Culture Made in Macau: Resisting and Growing,' *Macao Closer* 24 (March 2009) 18-21.

⁵ Or as Nuno Mendonça defines it in his *Macao Closer* article: 'constituted in a strict sense by Portuguese with Chinese ancestors' (20).

⁶ In a 2008 paper, Andrew Moody compares the status and relative positions of Cantonese, Portuguese and English in Macao, noting 'the ratio of civil servants who speak Portuguese is 18 times greater than within the general population, and there are only about 3,500 Portuguese speakers in Macao (30% of all Portuguese speakers) who are not civil servants'. Andrew Moody, 'Macao English: status, functions and forms: The sociolinguistics of a small community of English users,' *English Today* 24.3 (September 2008): 6. It might be reasonable to expect that, apart from 'homemakers', a reasonable proportion of that thirty per cent must be students, and so able to be considered as civil servants in the making. Moody notes that 'although 8,333 civil servants speak Portuguese, the number who speak English is roughly 36% greater, in spite of the fact that English does not hold any *de jure* official status within Macau's Basic Law' (Moody 7).

⁷ UNESCO, *UNESCO Atlas of the World's Languages In Danger*, 4 November 2009, <http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/index.php?pg=00139>

⁸ The conspicuous absence of Tagalog and other Filipino languages should be noted now that the Filipino population of Macao exceeds the Portuguese. However, this is a very recent (and perhaps temporary) development, so we may expect cultural production to take some time to catch up with the demographics.

Macao and the on-and-offline poetry translation workshop, 1958group.⁹ Translation has been important for the prospects of poetry's community in Macao because it has been a means of overcoming the ghetto-isation of literary effort into language separated coteries. In recent years strong efforts have been made to bridge these divides and a great deal of Macao poetry has been translated from and into the three key languages. An important recent publication was the 2008 English language anthology *I Roll the Dice: Contemporary Macao Poetry*, which included the work of more than one hundred poets, courtesy of the efforts of sixteen translators.¹⁰ All but a few of these translators were local Chinese. With two exceptions, those translators were included in the anthology as poets as well, almost all for works of their own written in English. It is with the efforts of these poets, who typically write in Chinese as well as English, that we can say that poetry's trilingual community in Macao is approaching critical mass.¹¹ This is despite the lack of a strong reading culture, a lack of libraries or book shops on a big city scale, and a lack of institutional leadership in the literary arts. Still, quantum leaps in terms of a multilingual reading scene can soon be expected. This is largely because an infrastructure of publishers and of writers' organisations is in place in Macao. There are a great many individuals keenly interested in the production of literary culture in Chinese and Portuguese and English in Macao; they are well organised and have been able to attract enough support from funding authorities to allow some impressive publishing efforts.

It needs to be acknowledged that the current translation and publishing activity involving the English language would not have been possible without the pioneering anthology and archival work done in Portuguese, but mainly in Chinese, by the editors of *Aomen xinshengdai shichao* (1991), *Antologia de Poetas de Macau* (1999) and *Aomen Xiandai Shixuan* (2007).¹² The publication of poetry in Chinese in newspapers has also been an important and ongoing impetus for local poetry production.

The *I Roll the Dice* anthology and *poetry Macao* are publications of ASM (the Association of Stories in Macao) – a mainly English language literature publisher which has produced twenty five volumes since its inception in 2005, most of these being either first novels or first books of poems by local Macao writers. But ASM is

⁹ Co-mentored by the author and Yao Jingming since 2006.

¹⁰ Kit Kelen and Agnes Vong (eds), *I Roll the Dice: Contemporary Macao Poetry* (Macao: ASM, 2008).

¹¹ Agnes Lam commences her (2000) paper: 'In many former British colonies, English usually continues to prosper because of its many instrumental functions in commerce and international communication'. Agnes Lam, 'Defining Hong Kong Poetry in English: an answer from linguistics,' *World Englishes* 19: 3 (2000) 387. Of course this is so in Hong Kong, but only the second part of the statement applies to Macao, which though arguably a colony, was never a British one. Nevertheless Macao is a cultural space influenced over centuries by the English language and its varieties and its cultures. It is proper to speculate that the increasing use of English as a medium for poetry by Macao poets has to do with the unofficial status of the language. English has no *de jure* status and there is no legal requirement in Macao to include English for official texts of any kind (as there is in Hong Kong), so the use of English is on an entirely practical basis, and as one might expect, on the increase. Likewise it might be observed that English is not resented (for instance by students) as a colonial language, as the language of former domination. Compulsory English is commonly resented in Hong Kong in these terms, as is Portuguese in Macao. So English in Macao is not only seen as the international language, it is also regarded as a liberating medium.

¹² Man Fai, (ed) *Aomen xinshengdai shichao (Macao New Generation Poetry-notes)* (Macao: Aomen wuyue shishe, 1991); Jingming Yao and Jorge Arrima (eds), *Antologia de poetas de Macau* (Macao: Instituto Cultural, 1999); Kun Teng Lei, (ed), *Aomen xiandai shixuan (A Selection of Macao Contemporary Poetry)*, (Macao: Fundação Macau, 2007).

not the only culture and language crossing organ of literature in Macao. *Poesia Sino-Occidental*,¹³ edited by Yao Jingming (Yao Feng), has provided a vehicle for the more traditional Macao crossing, between Chinese and Portuguese.

In terms of balance between production and consumption, it needs to be acknowledged that the Macao poetry scene today is weighed towards the producer. This situation suggests the counter-intuitive hope that a culture of reading will be initiated through the self-creation of a circle of writers. This is happening with English language poetry in Macao, and the translation of poems is one of the key pedagogic/heuristic vehicles for this occurrence. Importantly, the English language is both a source and a destination for Macao poetry today.

questions of identity

Identity for the poet is gleaned from an historicised knowledge of position; this kind of knowledge is both societal and personal.¹⁴ But belonging is a question for many in Macao. Because Macao identity is multi-faceted, hard and soft, and because both bound and unbound seriality are at work,¹⁵ it is entirely possible for residents or citizens to feel that they belong in certain senses and not in others. Well known Macao writer and artist, Fernanda Dias, makes the point in her poem 'Tea'.

Tea

Serve me tea with gestures of an alchemist.
Sitting in front of me in ceased time
your face of an instant reveals
millennial memories burning in you.

Who smiles behind that serious face?
That links us as minerals, like sun and moon,
gold and silver, water, air?
And me, a stranger, which star is calling me here?

¹³ Yao Feng et al (eds), *Poesia Sino-Occidental*, (Macao: Centre for Sino-Western Culture, Macao Polytechnic Institute, 2005 to present).

¹⁴ Macao's poetry in this sense conforms with the more stringent part of Rajeev Patke's definition of postcolonial poetry, which, 'in a more dynamic sense... shows awareness of what it means to write from a place and in a language shaped by colonial history, at a time when that is not yet free from the force of that shaping'. Rajeev S. Patke, *Postcolonial poetry in English* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006) 4.

¹⁵ Anderson contrasts *bound* with *unbound seriality* in order to understand the 'formation of collective subjectivities' (and so to explain the meaning of *nation*). Benedict Anderson, *The Spectre of Comparisons*. (London: Verso, 2000) 29-45. These are categories with radically different impacts in defining identities. For Anderson unbound series consist of open-to-the-world plurals, such as nation or bureaucrat or worker. Unbound seriality is what makes the U.N. possible as an institution. You can add or subtract nations without adding to or subtracting from the idea of nation, or the idea that nations might participate in a collectivity like the U.N. Unbound seriality for Anderson originates in the print market and especially in newspapers and in public performance. It flourished from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Place the rose's darkness on the table
drink your glance and tea. I hope
hope you can tell me who we used to be
what fraternity it is
binds us together as one.

AL & KK¹⁶

So there may be something ineffable in the sense of home; the certainty of belonging in a place may be an open question, may be something unanswerable. The orientalist object of art is commonly inscrutable, anonymous, unreachable. What we know in this case is that the persona's sense of self is deeply invested in this unnamed other, that millennial memories are at stake, that there is something elemental she faces, here, in ceased time, and in the recognition of herself as a stranger.

In these paired poems by Carolina de Jesus we read a similar ambivalence:

I am leaving tomorrow

I'm leaving tomorrow
but part of me stays –
you're not coming

I beg
you to take good care
of what's left
to our small corner.

Part of me
wants not to go
but I go
tomorrow.
Tomorrow
I'm gone.

I beg

¹⁶ Fernanda Dias, "Tea", in Kelen and Vong 70. Throughout this paper, translators' names are given in initial form at the foot of the poem (or other text) where appropriate. Here is a list of the translators with their initials.

AL Anita Leong
AV Agnes Vong
HT Hilda Tam
IF Iris Fan
KK Kit Kelen
LH Lily Han
SZ Song Zijiang

you to box up
the rest of me
so that I
will be complete
in the other
uncertain life.

I deny...

Soul divided
between West and East
I went to meet Rui Medina
to discuss
my origin
on a day
of calmed wind
after the typhoon
with the foreign name
had gone!
With tears still on
my mask of a face
I was tied
to nothing
but everything filled in
that passing hour.

LH & KK¹⁷

Tied to nothing, and yet still tied! Wishing to not be boxed up, so as to be complete in the other life. The motion is cosmopolitan; the notion is Chinese. Yet this is a poem written in Portuguese. Denying that the soul is divided seems almost disingenuous. Or is this subject possessed of an alternating soul? Which name would be the foreign name – the Chinese or the Portuguese? Which is the mask and which is the face? However we read, the hybrid subject position will leave us wondering if we see a mask, or through a mask. The torn-ness felt here is perhaps typical of those many whose love of a foreign place has led them to feel foreign where they should by rights – for instance of language, race and nationality – feel at home.

Contemporary Macao poetry should by no means be seen as the beginning of an East/West conversation; we can take it for granted that Macao poets today are the inheritors of varied traditions, as likely to be influenced by Auden or Pessoa, or Camoens or Shakespeare, as by Li Bai or Wang Wei. When the poet or persona goes on to discuss her ‘origin’, the ambivalence generated is social and cultural in general senses, but concerns poetic origins more particularly. Indeed, one might wish to claim that it is the mix of poetic influences which gives the poetry its life.

Macao is a place of impressive continuities, as eloquently expressed in its (2005) world heritage listing and as more eloquently expressed in its poetry. Macao is

¹⁷ Carolina de Jesus, “I am leaving tomorrow” and “I deny”, in Kelen and Vong 71-2.

a place where history is quite tangible (for instance in the streetscape) and poetry written in Macao is often composed with a consciousness of historical continuities and breaks – in short with a consciousness that the Macao-ness of place has to do with a tangible sense of the past.

Among the key themes of contemporary Macao poetry, chance and luck loom large, 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 likewise conceived as a site for all kinds of portal semiotics, as paradigm for cultural crossing and cultural shift. Relating Marc Augé's conception of 'non-places' to Eco's notion of open (as opposed to closed) text, one observes that consciousness of place in contemporary Macao poetry appears to be dominated by two kinds of space; one might gloss these as 'Macao space' and 'anywhere space'.¹⁸ Macao space is uniquely of an historical moment and place, something culturally positioned; in anywhere space (e.g. the inside of a casino or an airport) subjects are hailed by consumption-oriented reifications of putative universal value. We recognise in anywhere space a 'closed text', that is, 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. The contemporary Macao poetry typically values Macao space and sees it as under threat from the 'non-negotiable' space of culture that could be anywhere.

Will it be wise, beyond this observation, to credit Macao poetry today with unities in approach, in style, in ideology? I would argue that Macao poetry has been an efficient vehicle for the kind of work Raymond Williams prescribes when he writes of 'radical particularity' – in this case the effort to claim a place through the conscious effort of producing its culture. 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'.¹⁹ What was taken to be personal turns out to be 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.

The identity of the poet is also a relevant consideration here and it is worth noting that Macao at this juncture has no full-time professional poets. So it will be fair to say that all Macao poets are something other than poets as well. Nor do they come from 'all walks of life'; rather they are typically professionals and more likely than not to be teachers of some kind. Where does poetry fit in their lives and in the life of Macao society more generally? Poetry, for Macao's makers of poems, all of whom wear other hats, may consciously or unconsciously be what Michel de Certeau calls a *perruque*,²⁰ a resistance which suggests a need to imbue desire with a creative

¹⁸ Umberto Eco, *The Role of the Reader* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984); Marc Augé, *Non-places – introduction to an anthropology of supermodernity* (Trans. John Howe, New York: Verso, 1995).

¹⁹ Raymond Williams, *Resources of Hope* (London: Verso, 1989) 132.

²⁰ "La *perruque* is the worker's own work disguised as work for his employer. It differs from pilfering in that nothing of value is stolen. It differs from absenteeism in that the worker is officially on the job. La *perruque* may be as simple a matter as a secretary's writing a love letter on 'company time' or as

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personality. The immediate effect of the *perruque* as tactic, of the poet's being in an ambiguously un/official position (official day job, unofficial poetry-making) is that the poet and poetry made are in thrall neither to government, nor to big business. To live the poet serves other interests, to a greater or lesser degree, of the alienating kind. In poetry the poet pleases him/herself. In Macao, we can see poetry in operation as resistance, as witness, as *perruque* – in short, a kind of truth telling only possible from makeshift materials – those put to a use for which they were not intended.

With reference to the broader community, reading Macao poetry should I think have the effect of keeping Macao identity open as a question. In Part 6 of Chan Sok Wa's poem 'the moment of waking' (after Akira Kurosawa's *dreams*), we are given some of the dimensions of an ambivalence with regard to questions of identity.

6

knowledge surrendered before death
in the island kingdom the shore nearby makes everyone equal
telling the colours of death's causes
is like the messy question of 'why I am I'
numbers on the ID card laughing at the arrogant fingerprints
why is the exhausted body still waiting?

IF & KK²¹

For an image of the divided self we have the fingerprints at odds with the numbers on the ID card. If Macao is the island in the piece then it is an isle of the dead, of the damned or the blessed. Death makes us all equal because, as in the Greek myth of Lethe, memory is surrendered. Still there is a final judgment, an accounting in terms of identity: the messy question of 'why I am I'. How abstract and ethereal the questions of identity seem until we realise that there is a body involved, an exhausted body. Until that point things had seemed somewhat Platonic; now we realise that people are more than ideas.

the case of the Macanese

complex as a cabinet maker's 'borrowing' a lathe to make a piece of furniture for his living room." See Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Trans. Steven Rendall, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988) 25. De Certeau's *perruque* diverts time 'from the factory for work that is free, creative, and precisely not directed toward profit' (25). Its pleasure is in the cunning creation of gratuitous products, the purpose of which, in signifying the worker's capabilities, is to 'confirm his solidarity with other workers or his family.' 'With the complicity of other workers... he succeeds in "putting one over" on the established order on its home ground' (26). In de Certeau's estimation it is in popular tactics that order is 'tricked by art'. The *perruque* is work which is foreign, homeless, by virtue of having no dwelling but time stolen from official consciousness.

²¹ Chan Sok Wa, "the moment of waking – part 6", in Kelen and Vong 362-3.

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It is in the identity of the Macanese we find conditions emblematic of Macao's situation more generally. Here – however the soul is unified or split – the body is of two places. In Han Mu's 'Macao poems – mixed blood' the putative 'problem' of miscegenation is tackled head on.

Macao poems – mixed blood

who can say his/her blood's pure?
and even it were, then what?
a rainbow's beauty lies in its colours
if all flowers were red
what would you think of them?

this small city has a hometown's flavour
and foreign sentiments
a quaint tradition has come into being
most fixed this land
it's on people's faces in their words
and flowing hair

history demands we remember
yes like to every new-born babe
we smile and we bid welcome

SZ & KK²²

The body is of two places and both of them may be Macao. A rainbow's beauty lies in its colours. Can anyone challenge the innocence of the new-born? History demands we remember, but who will deny the new-born welcome? The point surely is that purity in blood is an illusion and that therefore the future is not determined by destiny in a racial sense; rather it is something the people of the rainbow fashion together. In Leonel Alves' poem, 'Do you know who I am?', the persona spells out some of the key issues of place, belief and allegiance, in the first person Macanese voice.

Do you know who I am?

My father was from Transmontano
My mother a Chinese Taoist
I was born here, therefore, eurasian,
a hundred percent Macanese.

My blood has the bravery
of Portuguese bulls,
temper mixed with the calm
of south China.

²² Han Mu, 'Macao poems – mixed blood', in Kelen and Vong 52.

My chest is Portuguese-Sino,
my wisdom Sino-Portuguese,
and all my loftiness
is modest.

I have something of Camões
and defects of the Portuguese
and on some occasions
Confucian thoughts.

Love red wine and liqueur
made by my grandparents
and ceremonies not drinking
with spirit made from rice.

It is true that when I am annoyed
I act in a Portuguese manner,
but I also know how to be cool
with all that Chinese calm.

My nose is western
and my beard is oriental,
I go to the Sé Cathedral,
as well as to the temple.

I pray to Mother Mary,
and also I 'O mi to fo' .
always dreaming to become
a good Chinese-Portuguese poet.

Always having
curry with rice or bread on my table,
my wife is Chinese
with Pakistani blood.

Also, my descendents will
have international blood
and this seed will spread
in every beautiful place.

I have my charming yard
I never go short of
fruit from Lisbon.

I am who I am, thanks
to China and Portugal,
for the race I just created

will make universal progress.

AL & KK²³

International blood – there is an eloquent answer for the question posed in the first line of Han Mu’s poem. But perhaps the question in Alves’ title should be – *do I know who I am?* And then the answer is clearly given – if in terms a little grandiose – in the last stanza: *I am who I am.*

Marc Augé writes of the identity of the individual as ‘a synthesis, the expression of a culture which is itself regarded as a whole’:²⁴

Cultures ‘work’ like green timber, and (for extrinsic and intrinsic reasons) never constitute finished totalities; while individuals, however simple we imagine them to be, are never quite simple enough to become detached from the order that assigns them a position: they express its totality only from a certain angle.²⁵

In Han’s and in Alves’ poems, prejudice is never mentioned, and yet in both cases we feel its presence. In each case we may say there is a desire not to detach from an order, but to reassign positions, thus to express a new and more beautiful totality.

a confluence of poetics, traditions and breaks

We see in these last poems the poet’s identity as something beyond what is circumscribed in national or local devotions, something likewise beyond what membership of a racial or linguistic group might be felt to impose. If there is a general sense in Macao poetry today of the cosmopolitanism of art and of aesthetic practice, then this is a heritage not merely of western modernism, but of a commitment to art practice as a cross cultural activity – a way of understanding in the world – and as participation in a long conversation in and across cultures.

Within the framework of such a commitment, the poet’s may be heard as a critical voice, a prophetic voice, even a Cassandra-like witness of foreboding. Consider the way in which Yi Ling shows land reclamation as symbolic of a problem for Macao identity.

Macao, Macau

there was an effort to make memories but what we got was a dried corpse

what would have been miracles turned out to be mould
is there enough love to make an equal division?
the long-sighted person won’t see what’s close up
after illness we can’t read distances

²³ Leonel Alves, “Do you know who I am”, in Kelen and Vong 30.

²⁴ Augé 21.

²⁵ Augé, 22.

after reclamation, the sea is narrow, the land more
no home to return to, nowhere to escape

AV & KK²⁶

Given Macao's size and population, it is remarkable how little expression that claustrophobic sentiment finds in the poetry. Still, the claustrophobic circumstances are a part of Macao's uniqueness and fit the character of the most crowded territory on Earth. There is something darkly comic in the idea of getting a dried corpse as a reward for the effort to remember. Here, politically motivated complaint is difficult to disentangle from appeal to human nature or from a human perception of the nature of things. However we read, the feeling of being trapped remains. There is a similar potential for fatality in Gong Gang's consciousness of the power of the word, in his poem 'Rashomon', a comment on Kurosawa's text (which we might in turn call a study of memory).

Rashomon

the world is soaked with rain
a faraway mountain peak
is buried in time

dead wood
stokes the remains of the fire

but there is no wine

plagued by memories
between life and death

flash of cold light
from the edge of a knife

lurking deep in the language

AV & KK²⁷

²⁶ Yi Ling, "Macao, Macau", in Kelen and Vong 177. It would be an oversimplification of the situation to merely note that prior to the Handover, the official spelling was 'Macau', and that post-Handover it is 'Macao'. In fact Macao is the older Portuguese spelling. Although it would be tempting to declare that 'Macau' is the Portuguese and 'Macao' the English spelling, this would also be an oversimplification of the situation. Certainly 'Macau' has more official standing in documents in Portuguese (one can confidently say today that 'Macau' is the spelling in Portuguese); 'Macao' likewise has more standing in English language documents. Various government and private concerns make their own choices of spelling, and tend – on a case by case basis – to use those choices consistently. In terms of the ambiance of each spelling, one might say that 'Macau' feels more Portuguese and therefore more colonial; 'Macao', in English, feels both more historical and more official (the spelling Beijing chose, possibly because it would seem less colonial). The fact of the spelling of the name being (perhaps permanently) undecided in these ways points to some interesting uncertainties as to the foreign ownership of the idea of the place.

A poetic sense of place-based identity, such as is sought in Macao poetry, surely depends in some degree on the poet's reflexive awareness of him/herself as a poet and of the work (and play) of making poetry. It depends, that is to say, on a consciousness of tradition/s and of breaks from tradition/s. Gong Gang's 'Rashomon' evokes the many voiced-ness of experience allowing poetic enactment. Truth in the poetic sense may be something found between voices. As in Kurosawa's text, personal memories and accounts are suspect. In flashbacks, more flashbacks. Memory is what lurks between life and death, distance (perspective) is something time conceals. Memories plague the mind. Can we find any source for that flash of cold light at the crux of things? Its origin is – as poetry's – deep in the language. That knife's edge, that flash – these are things lurking in language. But it is not Kurosawa's language that is in question here. Are the deeps of language universal? Consciousness of the word's fatality calls our attention to the most obvious poly-vocality in Macao poetry – the fact of its different language traditions. Once again the identity of the poet will be a key.

We can point to several clear and related differences from the West in the position of the poet and poetry in China. Firstly, a detailed knowledge of poetry and the ability to produce it has been consistently valued (from the earliest times down to Mao Zedong) as of intrinsic value, and as demonstrating the worthiness of persons; this is why the production of poetry was expected of candidates in imperial examinations. Secondly, in China there has always (or at least until western-influenced modernity) been a respect for poetry as the best available form of expression and so available for communications of the highest order. So the court would avail itself of this generic resource for important purposes (and not merely as a frivolous distraction); thus explaining why an emperor like Li Yu would be more famous as a poet than as a ruler. In ancient China, we do not find a self-styled philosopher king (as Plato's) expelling the poets as shiftless subversives; instead the legend gives us a philosopher/poet (Laozi) trying to escape the kingdom and having a poem demanded of him as a toll at the border.

So it will be fair to claim – relative to the West's self-conscious interest in breaking with the past (especially since Romanticism) – a preponderance of continuities in the Chinese poetic tradition up until the end of the dynastic periods. In China, the early twentieth century is notable for its claims of iconoclast poetics. Hu Shi's (1917) 'A Modest Proposal, for the Reform of Literature' – suggested 'eight cardinal tenets of literary reform' as follows:

1. Do not neglect substance in writing.
2. Do not imitate the ancients.
3. Do not neglect grammar.
4. Do not moan without being sick.
5. Do not use stilted language and outworn poetic diction.
6. Do not use allusions.
7. Do not use parallelism.
8. Do not avoid colloquialism.²⁸

²⁷ Gong Gang, "Rashomon", in Kelen and Vong 205.

²⁸ Hu Shi, 'A Modest Proposal, for the Reform of Literature', in Julia C. Lin, *Modern Chinese Poetry: An Introduction* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1973) 32-34.

Sincerity, optimism, forward facing – not wishing to be burdened with the dead weight of tradition, the ‘renunciation of Confucian classicism’²⁹ – these were the keys to this new poetics. Michelle Yeh writes:

the common people, thus distinguishing it from the refined, allusion-laden diction of classical poetry. Instead of adhering to rigid restrictions on tonal pattern and poetic structure prescribed by tradition, the manifesto advocated free form. In short, the New Literature movement demanded a living language expressed in a free form that would replace the dead language bound by classical poetry and prose.³⁰

Comparing these revolutionary developments in Chinese poetics with the vernacular movements of the European Renaissance, Julia Lin writes, ‘the antitraditionalism in the Chinese movement was partly due to the new consciousness of the nation’s backwardness and to a feeling of inadequacy, even inferiority, on the part of the more radical revolutionaries’.³¹

Much of the Cultural Revolution’s ideology is foreshadowed in these rejections of the past, in the desire for a break with tradition and the burdens it seemed to impose. Between *wen-yen* (the old literary language) and *bai-hua* (the contemporary everyday vernacular), we witness a diglossic struggle among what Bakhtin would call evaluative accents.³² The aim of the new writing was to create a new literary culture from attention to the here-and-now of the world as perceived, as heard, as spoken; to create a literary language that could make sense of and to the common people and their situation. The need for such a break was clear. A literature had to be invented for a Chinese modernity, if that was to be a condition in which there would be widespread literacy and an end to the feudal enslavement of the masses. If one accepted that it was from the outside China had been woken then that invention would need largely to be on the basis of foreign influence/s. These circumstances suggest that what we find in the new Macao poetry – that is, the invention of a literature in a cross-cultural space – is not such an unusual development in terms of the Chinese poetics of the twentieth century. What is unusual in Macao’s case is the continuity in cultural crossing which the city has witnessed over nearly half a millennium. What is unique in Macao’s situation today is the contradictory pressure brought to bear on the subject of local culture by a deep sense of Chinese belonging (call this Beijing-ification) on the one hand, and the style of cosmopolitanism foisted on all by the get-rich-quick ethos of casino capitalism (call this Vegas-isation). This particular postcolonial hybridity, to which Macao’s poetry bears witness, has not been seen before.

²⁹ Lin 32-34.

³⁰ Michelle Yeh, *Modern Chinese Poetry: Theory and Practice Since 1917*. (New Haven: Yale, 1991) 11.

³¹ Lin 32.

³² Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Bakhtin Reader* (ed. Pam Morris, London: Edward Arnold, 1994).

translation and conversation as vehicles for a cross-cultural poetics

As most of the works dealt with in this essay are translations, it will be appropriate to offer a few words here about the process of translation and its relevance to the interlingual aspect of Macao's contemporary poetry. If a reflexive moment may be permitted, it will be apt for the author of this piece to disclose his own participant observer status. Far from presenting as some kind of distant disinterested research, I beg to suggest that this paper by a poet/translator/teacher of poetry is part of the process of building a cross-cultural community for poetry in Macao.

Translation is one of the great apprenticeships for the poet. To take the most common procedural instance, the effort to make a poem in one's own language from foreign materials deserving imitation in some sense guarantees a worthwhile project, whether or not the poem produced in the target language is ultimately deemed a success. Still, the success of that end product – its workability (as expressed in the question 'does the poem work?') – is the ultimate criterion for the translator of poetry. The end product of poetry translation is a poem – a poem that should be worth reading in its own right and not as some pale imitation of, or footnote to, or paraphrase gloss of, an original. So much bad poetry translation results from the attempts of those who have never seriously tried to write a poem in their own language or any other.

The observation of an affinity here demonstrates the interdisciplinary credentials and dependence of both poetry and translation; theirs is an important marriage. Close encounters with poetry will make better translators; engagement with the translation as a process will make better poets. I would like then to propose a purposive conversation as means of becoming intimate with a text (and its originating context) through the collaborative process of creating a new text. Questions of foreignisation/nativisation (the in/visibility of the translator) are largely foregone where there is no one agent/persona responsible, but rather a cooperative process engaging active subjects from either side of a cultural divide.

In the introduction to his Sourcebook on *Translation/History/Culture* André Lefevere makes this bold assumption: 'Let us not forget that translations are made by people who do not need them for people who cannot read the originals'.³³ One might devote some effort to disputing the veracity of the claim, and in fact the most avid readers of literary translations are no doubt those who can indeed read the originals; however I will content myself with taking Lefevere's statement as a challenge. To build a cross-cultural community of poets through the modelling/practice available by virtue of poetry translation does indeed involve the becoming poet in a necessary process (translation being a step on the way) in which, among the respondents, will be those who can read both original and the translation. So, in a cross-cultural community of poetry makers (and Lefevere would have been the first to admit that the translator of a poem is a re-writer and so a maker of a poem) there is a necessary staging of the roles of writer, translator, and reader of the respective language involved – these roles are hats passed around in the process of getting from one language into another, and in the particular process of creating a new poem from an old poem in a different language.

³³ André Lefevere, *Translation/History/Culture: A Sourcebook* (London: Routledge, 1992) 2.

Poetry translation and response practices are a means of building cross-cultural community, and constitute praxis from which to theorise a collaborative poetics in the cosmopolitan community of poetic potential between cultures and languages. Questions of ethics arise in the processes described, and these concern power relations in the present and the disingenuousness of subjects who refuse to historicise the positions they occupy as languaged subjects. To envisage the cosmopolitan community demanded of poetic work between languages, Levinas' criterial ethic³⁴ is invoked – that 'the word is a window; if it forms a screen it must be rejected'.

Meeting between languages has been a difficult necessity for the apprenticeship in poetry I have described immediately above. Why, one might ask, is all this effort, past and projected, worthwhile? Its value lies in the particular nexus at stake; it lies in the challenge set for us by Levinas' assertion that 'the word is a window'. A more modest claim would be that poem and community both entail work with and around *différends* – those apparently unbroachable otherings in world-view to which Lyotard has alerted us.³⁵ Translation – broadly conceived then – is in the nature of the poem and in the nature of community. Both poem and community demand a getting-across, reminiscent of the process of metaphor; both poem and community demand an effort at interpretation in order that they function. Each is thus an instance of the examined life. To return to the aforementioned nexus, we can say in the case of poetry that the getting across and the examination are for the benefit of a wider community, that this is the poet's function broadly conceived – to show the reader/listener a mirror for which an act of understanding is demanded.

Do these circumstances make poetry – as creative activity – a godlike procedure? Certainly there is something magical in the creation (and likewise in the reception) of poetic meaning; perhaps there is something doubly magical about the successful translation of a poem. There is, in either case, a sense of poetry as a point and place of meeting – an indication of an extra-ordinary place or moment, so made out of poetic effort. On the other hand the poem is the everyday place – the place in conversation, for instance of the kind we find in Ling Gu's 'my poetry and your poetry'.

my poetry and your poetry

when my poetry falls in love with
your poetry
my voice sweeter
full of hope
like dew on the autumn leaves
but my heart broken
like weak clouds in the east

³⁴ Translators of the 1611 English Bible had thought of translation in terms of several comparable metaphors: as opening a window to let in the light, breaking a shell so that we might see the kernel, lifting the cover off a well in order to allow access to water. See Levinas quoted in Lefevere 72.

³⁵ Jean-François Lyotard, *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute* (tr. George Van Den Abbeele, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988).

like brewing up tea for you
bitter tea

when my poetry
was written on paper
many years ago
enclosed with
your long distant address
it was raining
or snowing
you said moon shine
would be your hometown

when my poetry
starts to propose to your poetry
I wake to the everyday church bells
our children use their language
praying to God on the balcony

when my poetry
reaches a climax
I will disappear in the dew
running towards the hillside
picking up the petals you left in the dream

your poetry
sat by the window
chin rested on your hand
noble nose
still left with God's
sweet kiss

poetry's leaning
towards the morning light
is a way
God enters into this mortal world

AV & KK³⁶

Conversation between your poetry and my poetry suggests a cultural liminality almost too essential to notice. The borders and the neighbouring entailed in the process of dialogue go unnoticed until the poem on paper – an essentially monologic form – draws our attention to them. One daily necessity brought to view might light the other elephants in the room. Poetry offers the society from which it originates a mirror in which the truth is told equally in terms of divine pretensions and every day practicalities. Here the dream is a context for the meeting in which poetry's conversation is to take place. One is aware of the difficulty of this mind-meeting, of

³⁶ Ling Gu, "my poetry and your poetry", in Kelen and Vong 249-50.

distances and delays entailed; one is aware of the fragility of such encounters, the possibility that love might not be returned, of bitterness. Yet one is aware of the value of poetry, of the creative act through which things immortal impact on the mortal world. However godlike the creative act, the language is – within its borders – everyone’s language; children pray with just the words they have. And poetry too is made from everyone’s words.

If everyone’s words are at stake, then we might ask – how universal and how particular are the pretensions of contemporary Macao poetry? Consider the apparently asocial relation to the world witnessed in the work of one of Macao’s younger practising poets, Chong Tou Wa.

sentiments in the flowers’ languages

bellflowers

when the naughty angel
stealthily knocks the bell
please listen carefully
the message of love is spread
 to heaven
 and to earth below

sunflowers

because of persistence
you boldly move forward
forever
facing the blazing sun
you pour out
the admiration that can’t be repressed

forget-me-nots

in fact what I wish
is just to have
a moment
in which the heart beckons
a moment that stays forever
and will never be forgotten

lilies

raised with hope
of a re-encounter
the persistence coiled in heart
is only
for the very first

unwitting backward glance

cactuses

please don't disguise yourself
let me
carefully attentively read
the heart hidden
under your thorny look
something gentle
sentimental

baby's-breaths

perhaps
it's too lonely to stay in the dark sky
and so
some naïve and naughty little stars
float silently down
and bring infinite happiness to the earth

HT & KK³⁷

A detailed realisation of the old adage about taking time to smell the flowers, Chong's poem crystallises a nexus between sentiment and the connection of humans with vanishing nature. Rhetorically, anthropomorphism (one might say the pathetic fallacy) features. The desire revealed is for that moment out of time, out of change and its pressures, a moment 'in which the heart beckons'. 'Careful attention' is called for – this is the work of witness. Persistence is required of sunflowers in facing the blazing sun and persistence will later be called on with the lilies. Though much of the moment, the past and the future are there in this poem – the 'unwitting backward glance' associated with lilies, that 'perhaps...' foreshadowing possibility with baby's breath (babies themselves connoting potential, an unknown future). This final section of the poem invokes the stars as innocent sentience.

Invoking absence, we see that, despite certain apparently timeless and placeless qualities, Chong's poem is very much of its time and its place, Macao being somewhere with less and less flowers and less and less stars visible of an evening.³⁸ Chong's poem draws our attention to that much celebrated paradox of the universal in art: that what lasts as 'universal' (meaning elsewhere and understood in ages to come) arises from a particularity of feeling, from unique expression.

Like so much Macao poetry today, whatever doubts or cynicism may be apt along the way (stealth and disguise and things hidden), this is a poem of enthusiasm, it invokes 'admiration that can't be repressed'. Like a mantra spoken to protect the creative spirit, Chong's 'sentiments in the flowers' languages' cuts through contradiction in favour of infinite happiness of the kind that can only be cultivated by those who labour naughtily to get to be naïve.

³⁷ Chong Tou Wa, "Sentiments in the flowers' languages", in Kelen and Vong 276-7.

³⁸ At the time of writing, a fine night rarely reveals more than a dozen dim glimmers.

the poet between cultures

Macao poetry today is remarkably rich in musing on the position of the poet and the role of poetry in Macao society. Consider the intense reflexive attentions of Tao Kongle. In Part 3 of ‘an April love poem’ we read:

3
once I lost a key
the memory of pain has been dust-laden for ages
I borrow the shiny lips of April to open a window in my body
every time I wake from slumber there is the pain again
thoughts sprout into two hands a palm flower blossoms
under the window I hold a pose
waiting to switch to another

blood drips off from my fingertips to light up the path for you
palms as the nest of temptation
perhaps by the time you comb your April sentiments out
streetlamps are already moved vision has been slightly cooled
and you are a nightjar with soaked wings

this lukewarm pang of affection
twitters and dims quietly
I’m going to brew nothingness
I won’t make a sound

HT & KK³⁹

Losing a key, holding a pose, combing out sentiments – one reads in these (and much more of the poem’s imagery) an elaborate metaphors of identity, of quest for self. The process of individuation entailed in the quest seems suspect. The path is lit by blood, the streetlamps move; yes – there are pangs of affection, but they are lukewarm.

Much of observation in this essay has been premised on a (common) assumption that a relationship of representation obtains between the poem and its context. This is implicit in the idea of poetry as witness. But that idea and the assumption behind it may be challenged by a poetic practice and even by a particular poem. In Chan Sok Wa’s ‘I like your nihilistic existence’, we realise that the poem is a habitation; we see that, far from representing a world outside, there is the possibility of hiding oneself or others in the poem.

I like your nihilistic existence

I like your nihilistic existence – it touches me – I’m the one

³⁹ Tao Kongle, “an April love poem – part 3”, in Kelen and Vong 65.

who knows nothing of invisibility but I like to hide in the baggage
so – understanding each other again from a secret distance –
orchid scent wakes me

imagine a kind of forever
cowardly hope thinned
the garbage bin always collecting memories
let the gleaner find warmth drifting
you're the one who knows how to recycle
always cherishing my wasted things

don't tell me you already know I'm hiding you in this poem
I only want to
lie down quietly in the tunnel of memory
never known by others
digging down deeper and deeper

IF & KK⁴⁰

How well does a text like this live up to Hu Shi's 'Modest Proposal' of 1917? While the analysis of the Chinese original will be more apt for the purpose of answering that question, from the English translation we can see a persona neither moaning nor sick, rather cherishing a minoritarian's – indeed a scavenger's – ontology. There is a lauding of the recycling ethos, but it is difficult to see much of Chinese poetic tradition recycled in this piece. Still, the ethics and the ontology of the poem would fit just as comfortably in Chinese or Western tradition. What Chan's text demonstrates is the recycling of memory through poetic consciousness. Or perhaps it is more of a demonstration of that possibility. It is an exercise in philosophising in non-space/place – where quests for identity and/or recognition are frustrated by anonymity, invisibility, secret distance. Hence the need to dig deeper and deeper. It is not present reality (the world absent to the dreamstate) that places referential demands on the dreamer. It is the tangible (the orchid's scent) – something able to be placed – that wakes the persona from this dream-like state where reference lacks. Note too that the addressee of the poem is one who cherishes wasted things – things nonetheless. How nihilistic can such an existence be? The point is moot, but we can say that frustration with a lack of reference is met with an equal and opposite force – a failure to elude the things of this world. So a poem is a place where others might be identified as hiding, or trying to hide, or pretending to hide.

Perhaps the poet's ultimate question of identity concerns the metaphysical possibility of defining poetry. That is the task faced in Wei Nam's 'poetry is the beginning of everything, also the end'.

poetry is the beginning of everything, also the end

poetry is the beginning of everything

⁴⁰ Chad Sok Wa, "I like your nihilistic existence", in Kelen and Vong 364.

we are bleeding the blood of poetry like the
flowers holding spring to blossom
at the Genesisian moment God can't help sneezing
something soft green shocked falls down
caught by the breeze begins to dance
falling slowly ah
we breathe the poetic air of genesis – God's sigh

poetry is the end of everything

we sigh across the lines like fishes jumping
in the dry pool
faith in our eyes is the fate can't hold back
you're enjoying the dry flapping
at the moment of declaring love with poetry
in need and in deed

poetry is the tenderness of revolution

we kiss your forehead
with the red meaning love
mix enemies' blood and our own
beautiful red wine
cheers on the battle field

poetry is the evil fruit

we use the rebel magic roots to bind Baudelaire –
a huge tree covering up the sky
fruitful
rotten sincereness and new born hypocrisy
who do you want to pick up?
wicked Baudelaire?

poetry is the (island of) exile

cast out by a love poem to the island of love
lying in the arms of loneliness
imagine the tides are your tender stokes
it's cool, so cool – I'm asleep

poetry is the love shouted out loud

we're called by love at the centre of the world
silent wordless
though the lines carved in the square
in love for a thousand years

poetry is the silent secret love

we act out the lines of Neruda—love is so short,
forgetting is so long
maybe you haven't noticed either
the meteor scratching the matchbox of the sky
line in a poem fire and light
we're lost in the beginning lost at the end
every Lethe like this

IF & KK⁴¹

In Wei Nam's poem, composed in Chinese, reference to Baudelaire and Neruda and to the River Lethe serves to define the activity of poetry as a cultural crossing. Poetry is that kind of motion. It is a motion in which much is at stake – love and the world and God. Fire and light are in the poem, beginnings and ends are there, memory and forgetting. Look into the Pearl River's muddy waters. Every Lethe is like this. We die and we go to the river; come out, innocence recovered. There are no corners of the earth exempt from the process of forgetting. But our work is to remember. That is how the poem would help the reader (and likewise the poet) to work out who s/he is or could be. Poetry is the beginning of everything, also the end. A poem *is* fire and light, and by its means we look up to see the meteor scratching the matchbox sky. Defining poetry as motion in mind is then perhaps key to establishing the poet's identity. If so, then this is the infinite task in which every poet engages when s/he sees herself as participating in a tradition or a community; when s/he acknowledges that is, that words are from somewhere and that words have a destination – that we are lost in the beginning and lost at the end, and that every Lethe is like this.

⁴¹ Wei Nam, "Poetry is the beginning of everything, also the end", in Kelen and Vong 374-5.