

CONNECTING CULTURES: HONG KONG LITERATURE IN ENGLISH, THE 1950s

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As recent studies show, “Hong Kong literature in English” involves complex issues of nomenclature, inclusion and exclusion, and cultural identity. These are not issues that can be resolved by simple definitions or categorizations, and attempts to do so are unavoidably reductive.² In this essay, I wish to move away from the question of nomenclature to look at possible ways of mapping “Hong Kong literature in English” as a field of inquiry. The aim is to explore creative representation in English as a constituent discourse in the multi-disciplinary dialogue about Hong Kong as place, community, an aggregate of individuals, Chinese, international.

This discourse has an internal history, but it is one which does not easily align with the socio-political and socio-cultural history of Hong Kong in the last fifty years. In narrating these social histories, the protocols of linearity necessarily come into play. For instance, causality can be usefully invoked to explain how the local spread of English through education, the increasing movements of writers of diverse nationalities, and events like the 1997 Handover have all contributed to a more visible output of creative writing in English recently. But *within* the discourse of “Hong Kong literature in English”, causality – and its related protocol, “development” – can hardly

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² This issue has been raised and discussed in my earlier article, “‘People Like Us’: The Challenge of a Minor Literature”, *Journal of Asian Pacific Communication*, 9:1&2 (1999): 27-42, and Wong Ho Yin, “Representations of ‘Hong Kong’ in Hong Kong Poetry in English”, M.Phil dissertation (2002), University of Hong Kong, Chapter 1.

explain the cross-references between recent and earlier moments, the transactions between individual works, and diversity. As a first project of mapping, I wish to consider a number of representations, both poetic and fictional, published in the nineteen fifties.³ Before the nineteen fifties, in the first half of the twentieth century, people have written about Hong Kong imaginatively in English – Somerset Maughan’s *On A Chinese Screen* (1922) and *The Painted Veil* (1925), and Auden’s “Hong Kong” (1939) are notable instances that spring to mind. Besides these visitor pieces, there are a few poems by R.K.M. Simpson, for thirty years (1920-1951) Professor of English at the University of Hong Kong. These incidental pieces no doubt have a place in the overall map, but it is not until the fifties that we begin to see work that consciously seeks to represent different facets of “Hong Kong” as place. To put it in another way, it is in this work that “Hong Kong” begins to emerge as an object of representation that co-ordinates divergent points of view on gender, class, and cultural identities.

“Hong Kong” in English inscribes the privilege of English as a colonial language, and therefore the language of educational advantage and elite social status. Within this context, and in the light of Edward Said’s *Orientalism*, it is, of course, possible to read this work in the fifties for its colonialist and orientalist vantages. But there is little to be gained and a lot that would be lost by reducing and ritually castigating the work as such. What we see in this work, as I shall demonstrate in this essay, are attempts at cross-cultural imagination that disrupt the colonialist and orientalist frames. Post *Orientalism*, both in his theoretical studies and his polemical work on the Palestinian cause, Edward Said has repeatedly addressed the crucial issue of how we can know and respect the other.⁴ He observes:

we can say tentatively that knowledge of another culture is possible [...] if two conditions are fulfilled. [...] One, the student must feel that he or she is answerable to and in uncoercive contact with the culture and people being studied. [...] The second condition complements and fulfills the first. Knowledge of the social world, as opposed to knowledge of nature, is at bottom what I have been calling interpretation.⁵

The proposal of a knowledge and a means or process of knowing – or

³ In “‘People Like Us’: The Challenge of a Minor Literature”, I propose the study of Hong Kong Literature in English as a network of criss-crossing and divergent lines that is set in motion by the minoritization of creative writing in English in Hong Kong despite the colonial privilege of the language itself; that such writing attempts the fracturing of the instrumentalization of English as a colonial and more recently, “international” language; and the co-ordination of this minoritization with the question of minority subjects and groups. But the selection of texts discussed does not include any work from the fifties.

⁴ I am referring, for example, to *Culture and Imperialism*, London: Chatto and Windus, 1993, *Covering Islam: How the Media and the Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World*, New York: Pantheon Books, 1981, and *After the Last Sky: Palestinian Lives*, New York: Pantheon Books, 1985.

⁵ Said, *Covering Islam*, 155.

‘interpretation’ – that can challenge the colonialist archive on the colonized is the entry point to the problematic that Said’s inquiry provokes. In exploring relations across the colonial racial and cultural divide, the fifties texts that I have chosen to discuss offer different imaginations of knowledge that disrupt the asymmetrical relations between colonizer and colonized and the binary constructs of self and other on which these relations are familiarly justified. These texts do not yield a cross-cultural hermeneutics that can be labelled “native” or indigenous, but they register the effort to transform “betweenness” as division into the springboard towards a cross-cultural understanding that eludes national boundaries and the colonial divide. In the poetry of Edmund Blunden and Wong Man, and Richard Mason’s *The World of Suzie Wong*, the essay explores the work of three writers of overlapping but also very different provenance for whom colonial cultural relations are a recurrent focus, and whose art actualizes non-coercive forms and processes of knowing the other. If what issues from these practices does not amount to a co-ordinated counter-discourse, the work of the three authors offers points of orientation for the inquiry into Hong Kong Literature in English in its critique of the colonialist language of power and command, and the orientalist subjection of the colonized through tropes of dehumanization and erasure. In locating these points of orientation, and narrating their emergence, this essay also sets up the historical framing of Hong Kong Literature in English as discourse, and identifies some of the crucial tropes of interpreting and representing cross-cultural relations that can be pursued into the more recent decades.

Let us look, as a first example, at Blunden’s “The Sleeping Amah”:

‘The East has all the time, the West has none;’
 But I know not what I say.
 Others must come this way
 To tease this riddle out, if it be one,
 Better or not – yet who
 Will find me what I thought I knew?

There she still sits, unknown to me else, in her chair
 After a long day’s labour, sitting there
 Tired out, her sewing not yet done,
 A child, a mother, the wise face now begun.
 Like me she falls asleep
 Quietly moored upon the warm time-deep.(9)

From 1951-1961, Edmund Blunden held the Chair of English at the University of Hong Kong. “The Sleeping Amah”, together with “An Island Tragedy”, “View From the University of Hong Kong”, “A Hong Kong House”, and “On Lamma Island” are collected in *A Hong Kong House: Poems 1951-1961*.⁶ These poems represent the first substantial example of creative writing

⁶ 1962, rpt. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2001. All quotations followed by page numbers are from the 2001 edition.

in English on Hong Kong sustained over a length of time. Their number and Blunden's established reputation as poet make a study of them the appropriate entry point not only to the fifties but to the emergent discourse of "Hong Kong Literature in English".

In "The Sleeping Amah", the speaker observes a subject whose presence signals a cultural landscape of indigenous tradition and domestic service. The poem begins with a platitude – in quotation marks – about extreme difference between 'East' and 'West', but immediately refuses it as the key to knowledge about the subject herself or the traditional cultural identity she embodies. All the speaker as observer can see are appearances, the phenomenon of the amah in the chair, resting, then falling asleep after a 'long day's labour'. The speaker does not try to project depth from the surface textures he registers, or construe essence from phenomenon; there is no presumption of knowledge or a knowingness that might transform the speaker-observer into an insider. There is also no attempt to construct identity between observer and observed; only in sleep are they alike, and perhaps a suggestion that in dream will they meet, but not in the here and now. The speaker-observer's reticence can be interpreted as orientalist in the sense that he writes about a traditional woman subject only in order to incorporate her into the compass of English, or western, representation. Or colonialist in the sense that she is not allowed a voice, and that he chooses to remain distant and uninvolved, in a class above.

However, without denying the fact of colonial rule and the class and linguistic divisions it engenders, it is possible to develop an entirely different reading. The speaker-observer's reticent self-positioning suggests an acknowledgement of the unbridgeable divide which colonial history, class, and language have inserted between him and the amah. There is the desire to know – otherwise the poem will not be written – but this is restrained by an acute uncertainty about the continuing validity of prior knowledge, and doubt about the possibility of new discovery – 'yet who/ will find me what I thought I knew'. Given this doubt, all the speaker can know is what he can describe, and this he proceeds to do in the first four lines of stanza two. As for her interiority, it remains closed to the gaze of someone outside of her culture, across the colonial divide. The amah is alterity – in class, gender, race and in colonial context – and in this implicit construction, the speaker-observer disorients the processes by which colonialist knowledge of the "native" is produced. But this epistemological disorientation does not result in ontological insecurity. If the speaker's mental home has become the dubious abode of 'what I thought I knew', the poem ends with a sense of companionableness between the speaker and the amah, in a homely scene of domestic peace and quiet. The poem cannot escape its historical and colonial time, but Blunden's speaker is no mere agent or producer of colonial knowledge; in this respect, the poem is colonial but not colonialist.

If the ethical alternative to "othering" is respect for "native" alterity as the realm of the unknowable, the poem does raise doubts about the possibility of cultural translation and intercultural communication. Through an

imaginative and rhetorical sleight of hand which reinstates the homely scene at the end, the poem draws back from concluding that cultures are incommensurable. In this accommodation or transformation of cultural distance into quasi-domestic affiliation, social engagement with the other as alterity becomes once more possible. This is also characteristic of several of Blunden's Hong Kong poems, and poems about his family and friends written in Hong Kong. Of "View from the University of Hong Kong", Douglas Kerr has commented,

the poem manages to contain all this foreign activity [in the harbour], not only in its metrically relaxed couplets, but also through translating it into a domestic scene. There is a pleasant extended fancy in which the ships are described as members of a large family, going about their household business. [...] Imagination transforms the foreign outdoor scene into a reassuring and familiar indoor one, and the economic activity of the 'free' port into a series of natural relationships, ultimately a version (in the Empsonian sense) of pastoral.⁷

What is very noticeable is the childlike delight at the making of this homely gathering. But the extended family, while based on natural relationships as Kerr suggests, is also an interactive social unit, and in figuring the moving ships as dynamic life-forms, Blunden opens up the family to the outsider's view so that his engagement with the harbour scene takes on the significance of a social and very sociable visit.

If Blunden's speakers often acknowledge that colonial experience is the encounter with an unknown and unknowable other, they also imagine how this encounter can be interpreted – or represented from a different vantage – in order to yield social meaning. "An Island Tragedy" shows another instance of this dual process at work:

Among the twinkling tree-tops on our hill –
It was perhaps an afternoon illusion –
Above, I saw poised absolutely still
A wood-god, a giant earth-god, – no confusion
At least to my awakened sight; he stood
Head and shoulders aloft the far-off green,
The steady straw-haired monarch of the wood,
As one defending his disturbed demesne.

What was he if not *he*? I used my eyes.
There that Form stood, as ancient as that hill;
He had no right to strike with such surprise
Me! There he stood, for me he always will,
Poor giant, poor doomed straw-hair, staring down
From his starved rock towards the advancing town. (12)

⁷ *A Hong Kong House*, 103.

Pastorality, which enables the figurative transformation in “View”, is here actualized in a physical setting. In this pastoral scene, the poem focuses on the first-person speaker’s sudden encounter with ‘a giant earth-god’ – a statue, or perhaps a rock formation, a tree or even a spirit – and his surprise and pleasure at meeting this forlorn and residual figure of local tradition. In a move similar to that in “The Sleeping Amah”, the speaker lays no claims to this tradition, and affirms equally that this tradition has ‘no right’ over him; they are alien to each other. And yet a bond is established in this fortuitous encounter, forged rhetorically by the common vantage between statue and speaker as they both direct their gaze downhill towards the ‘advancing town’. This bond does not proceed from an assumption of knowledge about each other but from the speaker’s recognition that he, like the statue, is the relic of a time which, like the pastoral landscape of the tree-covered hill, is fast disappearing. Beyond their cultural distance, in their common displacement and dislocation in modernity, there is identity. The tragedy is that for the speaker, the ‘earth-god’, and by implication, the island itself, there can be no escape. In this respect, colonial time as the time of modernity, afflicts the speaker as much as the indigenous tradition which the ‘earth-god’ symbolizes. By turning away from a culturally disjointed past – one which places them on opposite sides of the colonial divide – and towards a common, if tragic future, the speaker forges a unity in diversity between himself and a native figure of tradition.

These poems show cross-cultural movements that are performed in the course of specific but also ordinary social encounters, and as social events. From one point of view, they are alibi to the accusation that colonialism circumscribes relations across cultures. But the problematic of colonial relations, though grounded in asymmetries of power, is open to imaginative representation and transformation. In the case of Blunden, whose place in the English literary tradition had been pretty well defined before his colonial arrival, a crucial issue is how familiar forms and conventions of English poetry can be mobilised to frame, describe, and translate alien scenes and subjects and the objects of everyday life from the other side of the colonial divide. This involves a dual process of translation: to estrange the familiar while also socializing the strange, but always with a recognition that what lies on the other side will be a mystery that teases, inspires, and captivates the poetic imagination but cannot be captured by the poetic gaze and defined by poetic rhetoric. If there is a “truth” that emerges from the poems, it is the truth of the specific encounter, a personal truth that takes on the force of revelation through the speakers’ recasting of the ordinary details of colonial life in the figurative tropes of English poetry. It is not the truth of what is, but what imagination makes possible in its transgression of everyday boundaries so that the fluid and open spaces of cross-cultural contact can emerge.

In all these poems, Blunden eschews an engagement with indigenous tradition and practices in abstract and philosophical terms. This is consistent with the sociability of the encounters themselves on the one hand, and with the recognition and respect the speakers show for the alterity of the indigenous on the other. Even though the poems are often contemplative in tone, the

speakers do not move their contemplation in the direction of abstraction to which it is beckoned by, for example, the opening line in “The Sleeping Amah” on time in ‘East’ and ‘West’ or the ‘giant earth-god’ as a folk religious symbol. If there are philosophical connections to be drawn, they are left unsaid, an element not of verbal representation but to be construed from the poems’ resonance in silence. This is also evident in “Chinese Paper-Knife” where the romantic legacy as represented by Keats’s “Ode on a Grecian Urn” is both replaced and displaced:

For the first time ever, and only now
 (Long waiting where I should see)
 The tiny carved bird, the bony bough
 Start sharp into life for me.

Why not until now, why suddenly now
 This recognition? Replies
 The bird must know who from that bough
 Holds me with staring eyes:

The owl once more, but this time found
 In foliage strange to me.
 Fantastic branches warp around
 From the scaly uptwisting tree.

A trifle, ah yes: but the carver achieved
 A forest dream where flies
 In and out the boughs so various-leaved
 This bird with the pinhead eyes.

Then praised be this to-day whose light
 Revealed this fabulous tree
 And original owl, which many a night
 Will lead into mystery. (11)

The poem again talks about the sudden apprehension of the familiar in a series of new illuminations. The ‘tiny carved bird’, unrecognised and unnoticed till now, takes definite shape as an owl; the owl, a common enough bird – ‘The owl once more’ – comes alive amidst ‘foliage strange’ revealed for the first time in all its intricate ‘up-twisting’, and the whole animated miniature – a ‘trifle, ah yes’ – the achievement of an unknown fellow artist’s ‘forest dream’. The poem begins with the speaker’s admission that he has never really seen this object, although he should have. What the poem goes on to show is the awakening into life of an indigenous artefact previously unobserved, and an observation well-enjoyed, and what it promises, in the last two lines, is pleasurable anticipation that this night might well be the first in ‘many a night’ of other enjoyable encounters. But in the poem’s representational discourse, seeing the artefact for the first time in new light, and describing what is seen,

do not point to any desire or attempt to penetrate the truth of its origins, essence, or continued existence as art. What re-presentation opens up is a tantalizing future 'into mystery', and not positivist connection between phenomenon and an aesthetics of first causes.

It is also important to note that Blunden's poems eschew the identification of the indigenous as "primitive" or "spiritual", the two tropes of othering most commonly deployed by colonialist discourse in its ideological justifications of the colonizer's supremacy. Equally significant is their ambivalence towards the different topographies of colonial modernity: while the speaker of "An Island Tragedy" aligns himself with the 'earth-god' in face of the 'advancing town', modernity, as represented by the thriving harbour traffic in "View", is not perceived as a threat or a source of cultural anxiety. Blunden's poems neither romanticize the indigenous nor posit a 'radical discontinuity' between 'primitive and modern mentality' which, according to Ernest Gellner, testifies to the dominant power of the rational in modernity.⁸ Instead, the conventional poetic tropes of the domestic and the pastoral perform acts of translation in-between expatriate observation and the indigenous-as-observed, and interweave the residual and emergent in colonial time.

I have discussed Blunden's poems in some detail not only because they represent the first substantial body of work of Hong Kong literature in English, as I noted earlier, but also because they enable us to delineate the issues of cross-cultural representation and translation that are at stake in colonial modernity. As we pursue these issues in other creative work of the fifties, Blunden's "Hong Kong" will take shape as one of the constituent worlds in a discursive space where the actual and symbolic boundaries of expatriate and local, colonizer and colonized are both observed and transgressed. This is the space of integrity, that is to say, of a respect for the mystery of another culture that counters the drives of possession, and disorients the incorporation of other into self by an insistence on distance and separation.

In the rest of this essay, I will be looking at some poems from the collection, *Between Two Worlds* (1956), by Wong Man, and Richard Mason's popular novel, *The World of Suzie Wong* (1957). Their co-presence in the same decade as Blunden's poems signals an internal stratification and diversity of English language creative writing in Hong Kong that argues for the separation of the study of such writing as discursive dialogue from the study of the writers themselves in terms of community formation.⁹ The vantage on stratification reveals that as a colonial language, English is internally marked by class divisions among the colonizers; furthermore, the emergent diversity of

⁸ Ernest Gellner, *Plough, Sword and Book: The Structure of Human History*, London: Collins Harvill, 1998, 42.

⁹ Recent developments have to be the subject of another paper. I intend to pursue the inquiry opened up in this essay in relation to the novels of various resident and visiting writers, the poetry of Louise Ho and the poetry and translations of P.K. Leung, and the cluster of novels, short stories, and poetry collections published in the run-up to 1997.

voices suggests that the imperatives of power and command and colonialist representation are losing their exclusive possession of English.

Wong Man's *Between Two Worlds* (1956) has not attracted any critical attention so far in studies of Hong Kong Literature in English. Wong Man himself is an elusive figure.¹⁰ The twenty nine poems of the collection, in parallel Chinese-English texts, point recurrently to a speaker, born around the turn of the twentieth century, and educated first at school and then as a medical doctor in England, who then spent more than a decade practising in England before returning to mainland China. His work in China was among the rural poor; after the Second World War and the setting up of the People's Republic in 1949, the speaker came to Hong Kong, and from the early nineteen fifties, continued to practise as a doctor in the colony. There is quite a lot of evidence to suggest that the poems may be in part autobiographical. The records of the Medical Council of Hong Kong show that a Dr Wong Man was registered in Hong Kong in the nineteen fifties.¹¹ There is also a Chinese verse elegy of 8 lines, "In Memory of Dr Wong Man", by Chan Kwan-po, Librarian of the Fung Ping Shan Library of Chinese language books at the University of Hong Kong from 1934-1956, who also taught in the Chinese Department at the university.¹² The elegy, dated September 26, 1963, laments Wong's death by leukaemia, and praises his poetic talent. A copy of *Between Two Worlds* in the Fung Ping Shan Library has a dedication in English to Chan Kwan-po by the author dated November 30, 1956. Chan and Wong obviously knew each other as members of the small world of bi-lingual literati or intellectuals in fifties Hong Kong but the extent of their familiarity or of Wong's participation in the activities of the Chinese English Academic Society founded by Chan are not known.¹³

¹⁰ Hong Kong: The Student Book Store, 279pp.

¹¹ This is confirmed in a letter from the Secretary of the Council dated June 2, 2003.

¹² Chan Kwan-po, *Shui Yun Lou Shi Cao* (Poems of the Water and Cloud House), Guangzhou: Guangdong Luyou Chubanshe, 1994, 343. This is a collection of Chinese poems relating to Hong Kong. All English translations in brackets in this note and note 13 are mine.

¹³ On July 10, 1946, the Hong Kong government, in the interest of strengthening cultural exchange between China and Britain, supported the setting up of *Zhongying Xuehui* (The Chinese English Academic Society). On the 24th of the same month, Chan Kwan-po delivered a talk to the Society on *Kongzi zhidao* ("The Way of Confucius"). The Society was very active in the fifties and sixties, and organized talks, drama performances, and essay competitions. See Zheng Shusen, Huang Jichi, Lu Wei luan eds. *Guo Gong Nei Zhan Shi Qi Xianggang Wen Xue Zi Liao Xuan 1945-1949* (Select Materials on Hong Kong Literature during the period of civil war between the Nationalists and Communists 1945-1949), Hong Kong: Cosmos Books, 1999, 309-310. See also *Xianggang Wen Xue Nian Biao 1950-1969*, (Chronology of Hong Kong Literature 1950-1969), Hong Kong: Cosmos Books, 2000. In the short biographical entry to *Shui Yun Lou Shi Cao*, Chan is identified as Founding Editor of the English journal, *Global Digest*. The objective of the journal was to inform and disseminate the aims and policies of the new Chinese government to the world in order to promote better world understanding of China. There is no copy of the journal in any of the libraries in Hong Kong, and a preliminary electronic search of international library networks has not managed to locate the journal abroad.

In the minority world of fifties intellectual life, and through connections with Hong Kong University, it is possible that Wong and Blunden knew of each other, but no evidence has been found so far of an actual meeting or conversation about poetry. Wong is almost the exact contemporary of Blunden; his education and early residence in England, and the Victorian literary influences that mark his poems argue for a continued interest, even investment, in English. But the very fact that the collection was published bilingually points towards a highly conscious and motivated act of cultural translation. *Between Two Worlds* offers fascinating, and often poignant, insight into a world contiguous to Blunden's but with a radically different topography, a world whose emergence for the first time in critical inquiry can help to extend the cross-cultural landscape of creative English in colonial Hong Kong of the fifties. The following poem, "Indulgence", telescopes the first half of the twentieth century in terms of the momentous events that changed the modern course of China and situate them in contiguity and extreme contrast with acts of "Englishness":

The first editions blazoned "Floods in China",
 Details of thousands starved and homeless:
 Result of callous government
 And corrupt officials of course:
 O put off studies till another day
 While the summer sun gleamed warm
 On the green turf at London's Oval,
 Better that he watched Hobbs with leisured grace
 Scoring a century for Surrey county.

Down the theatre queue the newsboys yelled
 "Revolution in China, bloody slaughters":
 One must get rid of those Manchus of course:
 How he admired these patriots
 While he acquired a seat in the Pit
 To enjoy Lily Elsie act and sing
 In the role of Sonia, "The Merry Widow".

The evening news billed "Civil War in China",
 Lurid tales of suffering and dead:
 Rival warlords in quest of loot of course:
 O those important lessons better wait
 While the wintry wind blew cold
 Across the grassy mud at Twickenham,
 As his eyes down the touch-line followed C.N. Lowe
 Streaking for a try for England on the Wing.

Forty years on: the papers trumpeted
 "Completion of two new roads to Lhasa",
 Gigantic deeds by brave and hardy men

For love of human race and native land:
 Good show of course, but for himself,
 Much too old now for service, he half-mused
 Munching buttered toast and drinking Ceylon tea
 With cream and sugar, at
 The Gloucester Lounge in the freedom of Hong Kong. (17,19)

“Indulgence” is structured by the contrast between two locations: China and Britain, including colonial Hong Kong, and focuses on a male subject in his transitions as a student from a very English landscape to old age in the colony. The student knows, or rather, knows of, changes in China from newspaper reports; he is a reader, reading Chinese history as the narrative of trauma and recovery. At the same time, though the English place-names – the ‘Oval’, ‘Surrey’, ‘Twickenham’ – show his geographical location, his relation vis-à-vis the definitively English recreations – cricket, music-hall, rugby – is very much that of someone who enjoys watching on the sidelines. The distances – actual, cultural, symbolic – between China and England are unbridgeable, and the student, as historical subject, is equidistant from them, unable to act in or upon either. Two parallel and polarised worlds, untranslatable into each other, are co-present in the student’s divided consciousness; this is one vantage on the student as a subject between two worlds. The division and the student’s life-long attempts to foreclose on it defines him; his gaze turns serially away from China as epic to England as recreation, and in each turn, which marks the different transitions in his life, he chooses. His choice is far from heroic, and yet quite comprehensible in human terms, and it is in choosing that he seems to gain release from historical subjection into an apparent self-determination. History as accident has placed him between the two national cultures, but it has also offered him the possibility of choice, a possibility he takes up and in so doing, re-enters history as quasi-autonomous. At the end of “Indulgence”, it is in colonial Hong Kong, and as a beneficiary of colonialism, that the choices which define his past can continue to be made.

But the title casts strong doubts on this sanguine reading; “Indulgence” insinuates that the speaker’s freedom is really an inauthentic bad-faith freedom in Satrean terms. If we compare the student in the poem with another in “A Chinese Student’s Love Story”, who did return to China to work among the rural poor in the chaotic decades of the Republic before and after the Second World War, the former’s preference for leisure and pleasure in the colony suggests a subject whose choice signifies the recurrent failure to act as social agent in his preference for spectating rather than acting on history. The notion of social agency is emphasized repeatedly in the collection but it is defined in two different ways. In a cluster of poems where the speaker appears as a subject between England and China, he critiques the condition of England after the Second World War where the ‘prophetic voice or song of serious poet [sic]’ could no longer be heard. ‘Must they write only for delights?’, the speaker of “Relentless Tread” asks, ‘Clutching at shades of promised welfare state.../ With Eliot turned pious, Auden home too late.../ While leaders vainly search for panaceas’ (23, 27). The poem is a demonstration of the poet-

speaker as the voice of social conscience urging England to revive its reformist tradition: ‘Happily the land has never lacked/ Liberal and progressive elements/ Mollifying her unreason/ Cognisant of her faults’ (27). It is this same commitment to social reform that urges the first-person speaker of “A Chinese Student’s Love Story” to turn away from romantic liaison with an English woman, and leave England on ‘Home-return across the ocean waste/ Forlorn heart purged of self-desires’ (65) to China where ‘with steadfastness he pursued/ His resolves../ Long years he tasted naked earth/ Until steel entered also his sinews/ Working with real people, learning/ Anew of human living in satiety/ Utilising knowledge to the utmost/ Doings worthwhile to men of high endeavour/ As any lover his country should.’ (67).

These quotations from different poems offer examples of Wong Man’s poetic craft, which cannot be compared to the subtlety and polish of an established practitioner like Blunden. Most importantly, Wong’s speakers do not share the reticence, in respect of another’s integrity, which Blunden’s speakers display about knowing a different culture through poetic representation. Instead, there is an integrative dynamic at work in Wong’s identification of a common social project for the poet and poetry beyond cultural and national boundaries or the historical conflict that divides England and China. What is at stake for Wong is the prerogative of action to further this project, and as the young student is replaced by the more mature considerations of the doctor in the later poems, social agency is intellectualized so that the integrative dynamic is rechannelled towards precisely those abstract cultural concerns which Blunden’s poems eschew. This is evident in “East Meets West”, a poem that seems almost facile until perhaps, the last line:

East meets West
 Where no line is
 Nor neutral ground
 Nor perceptibility
 Nor levels
 Nor colour
 Nor state
 Nor God;
 Neither superior
 Nor inferior,
 Neither hatred
 Nor malice,
 Neither jealousy
 Nor envy:
 But as air to air,
 Water to water,
 Shade to shade;
 Brother meets sister,
 Right hand meets left hand;
 Part of the whole,
 Eye to eye,

Heart to heart;
 With love,
 At ease:
 The home return. (71, 73)

Unlike Blunden's sudden and illuminating social encounters, the place of meeting and identification between east and west that the poem invokes is 'home'. 'Home' also suggests an ordinary state of reciprocity, and as a universalizing figure, it represents another way in which this poem and others in the collection imagine, if not very creatively, a way out of difference and division. This universalism takes on another form in reflections on the 'poet's endeavour' in the second last poem of the collection, "The Poet", where the traditional association of poetry with prophecy, already seen earlier in the condition of England poem, is relocated in the modern poet and scientist:

Once more the oracle,
 Yet no more proud Olympian from the clouds,
 But one of the people, from farm life,
 Factory, hut and bivouac;
 Within the alchemy of his brain cortex,
 Freeing nerve ends to grope with catalysts
 Into the virgin neuroglia [sic],
 Tentacles sensitive to prophecy,
 Prospecting new thoughts, formulating fresh visions,
 He correlates, conjugates, integrates
 And sublimates experience;...
 How can one brain concoct perfection?
 Perchance the poet also shall be honoured
 Into the company
 Of specialist workers with the brain
 In the great new world? (177, 179)

This extract can be read as an exercise in translating medical-cognitive terms into the language of poetry in order to actualize the integration of the artistic and scientific imaginations that are often construed as oppositional. As intellectual and 'one of the people', as poet and scientist, at this juncture near the end of the collection, the poet has moved away from an 'east-west' concept of division to other forms in which division is commonly – or universally – experienced. At the same time, the poet 'correlates, conjugates, integrates/ And sublimates experience' so that such experience can be liberated from their discursive regimes and phenomenal transience to become the building blocks of a 'great new world'. In the collection's evolutionary teleology, individual growth from youth to maturity co-ordinates with the development from experience to intellectualization, and both are guaranteed by a utopian social project of cross-cultural integration.

There is another intriguing point about the collection which one can speculate on in relation to this universalising and integrative dynamic. Six poems, all in the first half of the collection, are glossed. In the first, "Relentless

Tread”, a poem on the condition of England between the two world wars and after, the footnotes, five in all, are entirely informational and restricted to the Chinese text. They are about important dates in European history; for example, August 4, 1914, the day the First World War began, the Somme, and names of English poets and towns. In “Victory Days”, the poem immediately following “Relentless Tread”, there are both Chinese and English glosses on two place-names: Tai-Che and Kent. In the third poem, “Shameen Bund”, there is also both Chinese and English glossing of names: Shameen and George Robey. The fourth poem, “A Chinese Student’s Love Story”, only has Chinese glosses, all except one for English place-names. “Mesalin” has a single Chinese gloss, for the title, and “Father and Son”, Chinese glosses for Nazareth and Israel. After “Father and Son”, the seventeenth poem and hence more or less half-way in the collection, there are no more footnotes.

The mostly Chinese glosses not only suggest that the Chinese text is designed to be read by those unfamiliar with English, but also assumes that this unfamiliarity means minimal cultural knowledge across the linguistic divide. Many of the glosses are on English place-names or figures specifically identified with English literary or popular culture. In other words, they are framed by an awareness of national location which is also evident in the glosses on Chinese place-names. In contrast, in the second half of the collection, especially the long and ponderous final poem, “Survival”, which runs on for over eighty pages, terms like ‘dialectical materialism’, or the names, “Confucius, Lao Tsu, Buddha/ Mo Tsu, Democritus, Chu Yuan/ Jesus Christ, Mahomet, Copernicus, Ibn Sina./ Rabelais, Galileo, Luther, Fox” (255), and many more, are not glossed. This succession of names conjures a world culture and the de-nationalization of knowledge. If this is the case, then national divisions that also separate into two discrete knowledge domains and therefore require the presence of glossing to become mutually intelligible no longer pertain.

Richard Mason’s *The World of Suzie Wong* (1957) has never been discussed in relation to the poetry of Blunden and Wong.¹⁴ That the novel was published in the fifties, and became an international best-seller and the origin of a film which powerfully mediates the global perception of Hong Kong are good reasons for its inclusion in this discussion. More significantly, it opens up the literary and cultural geography of Hong Kong literature in English to include a work of popular culture and its modes of representation and discourse across the colonial cultural divide. The novel also returns us to the question of nomenclature that I referred to at the beginning of the article, for though Mason did not reside in Hong Kong for as long as Blunden or Wong, the Hong Kong setting of his novel as it moves between the different districts of the territory is described with far greater realistic detail than what can be discerned in Blunden and Wong’s poems. *The World of Suzie Wong* shows clearly how as nomenclature, the terms “Hong Kong writer” and “Hong Kong Literature in English” can point to quite separate entities which resist identification.

¹⁴ 1957, rpt. London and New York: Pegasus Books, 1995, 318pp. All quotations followed by page numbers are from the 1995 paperback edition.

Grounding the traditional separation between the populist novel and the “high” culture of poetry, and the specific mismatch between “Hong Kong writer” and “Hong Kong literature” is the subject matter, or material, of *The World of Suzie Wong* itself. The title identifies not only the woman protagonist and subject but also her ‘world’. At one point in the novel, the narrator tells how Suzie, who is illiterate, has been saving up from her meagre income as a bar-girl prostitute in order to pay for her infant son’s future education at the University of Hong Kong. This is the measure of the gulf between the world of Suzie which Mason narrates, and the world from which Blunden’s poems – and to a lesser extent, Wong’s – emerge. For the working and working class women of Mason’s novel, the ‘university’ is the institutional embodiment of a social imaginary which directs their daily practice; it is also a habitat of desire, the pursuit of which confers meaning on their degradation, and entrance to which guarantees their personal and social transformation. At another point late in the novel, the university reappears in the person of ‘a young man with a beard, a professor of English’ (267) who engages the first-person narrator, the painter Robert Lomax, in party chit-chat about his paintings. Lomax is initially polite but finds himself increasingly alienated not only from his interlocutor but also the party itself in the ‘beautiful hygienic modern flat, amongst the high-fidelity loudspeakers and the martinis and the hygienic theories of art’ (268). The alienation is mutual; the professor soon loses interest in Lomax who cannot, or will not, theorize his art.

By virtue of his race, British provenance, and vocation, Lomax has automatic entrée into a colonial enclave from which Suzie is barred. He is a voluntary exile not only from the group of expatriate professionals at the party, but also from the mainstream expatriate bourgeois habitat of tea and tiffin, trade, and dysfunctional coupling. Although he is kindly and sympathetic to the individual predicaments of his colonial compatriots, as a class, their social snobbery and thinly disguised racism alienate him as much as the rarefied and precious sociality that the university stands for in the novel. The novel is, on one level, about Lomax’s search for a place, a search that begins with his restlessness in London after demobilization in 1945, and which takes him to the colonial periphery, first on a rubber-plantation in Malaya, and then eventually to Hong Kong. It is in Malaya, where the British plantation owner prohibits sexual liaison with native women, that Lomax discovers a talent for painting as a form of sublimation. His subjects are native, especially Malayan women whose images recurrently capture his imagination as the embodiment of the life of the real.

Place is both within and without; in his passage to and through Hong Kong, Lomax fulfills his vocation as an artist, and this is, in its turn, narrated as the passage from sexual denial to fulfilment. If colonial society is white, bourgeois, internally divided, and alternately embarrassed, inhibited, or guilt-ridden about its sexuality, the native milieu which Lomax enters as an outsider and which eventually becomes his place is its binary opposite: the Nam Kok Hotel is the habitat of the indigenous urban proletariat where sex is traded openly but also enjoyed romantically, and also the sign of community and

affective sociality. While the other expatriates make periodic forays across the colonial racial and sexual divide, Lomax moves into the Nam Kok, and distinguishes himself from his compatriots by his self-imposed celibacy, choosing instead the role of confidant to the bar-girls. To Lomax the expatriate artist, the Nam Kok is at first orientalist bohemia: soon after moving in, he implicitly compares himself to Toulouse-Lautrec (32), and describes one of the bar-girls as someone with ‘Rabelaisian vulgarity’ (40). In the course of the narrative, the Hotel also emerges as a ‘contact zone’ where Suzie and Lomax’s romance help to transform a site of colonial and sexual exploitation into where a process of mutual respect and trust become the basis of new gender and cross-cultural partnerships.¹⁵

In the narrative’s binary construct of colonial and native social spaces, Lomax is the subject in-between; he has access to both sides and moves without personal or social inhibition across from one to the other. Both passive and active, he is the observer and narrator of their radically different forms of sociality, and the protagonist with mobility of choice, self-determination, and agency. His artistic talent rescues him from ordinariness, and his romantic pursuit of Suzie elevates his ordinariness to chivalry. In short, Lomax enacts colonial masculinity in its conventional liberal figuration. The embodiment of native place and sexuality and the agent of Lomax’s relocation is, of course, Suzie Wong Mei-Ling. If Lomax’s figuration is bound by convention, Suzie bears the inscription of multiple women predecessors in patriarchal and orientalist-colonial fiction. Before Lomax, in her liaison with Gerald who abandons her after fathering her son, she is a latter-day Madame Butterfly; she is also the lady of the Camelias in love with someone above her class and social station; she falls ill with tuberculosis like Violetta in *La Traviata* and Mimi in *La Boheme*. Suzie’s representation is, in many ways, trapped within conventional discourses of woman’s subjection and the colonial abject.

What is at stake is how the narrative struggles to elude this discursive entrapment, a struggle that co-ordinates with Lomax’s voluntary exile from colonialist expatriation, and a realist investment in native place and subjects. The novel is divided into Books One and Two, but the romance narrative of Lomax and Suzie does not map exactly onto the formal division. Instead, its movement is hesitant and dilatory in the first half before settling down in the second half to a familiar pattern of the lovers’ commitment, sexual consummation, separation, and reconciliation. In the first half, we see Suzie’s relations with various client-lovers and Lomax is the observer-narrator on the sidelines whose sympathy is engaged but who otherwise draws back from the involvement that would transform him from observer to romantic actor. Through her relations with various expatriate client-lovers – Gerald, and then Ben and Rodney – Suzie is figured as the subjected woman and colonized abject, used, exploited and ultimately discarded. The narrative attempts to challenge this figuration in two ways: by refusing its outcome in tragedy and

¹⁵ ‘Contact zone’ is a term coined by Mary Louise Pratt in *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, London: Routledge, 1991.

furthermore, by making Lomax's search for place conditional upon Suzie's acceptance of him.

Despite her desertion by Gerald and sexual exploitation by Ben and Rodney, Suzie is repeatedly shown as the agent of her own recuperation, an agency which Lomax ascribes to an innate sense of right and wrong, and a primal maternal devotion that puts the welfare of her infant son above her own degradation. That is not to say she is faultless. She is emotionally volatile, but her bouts of ill-temper are always explained in the text and in social terms – that she is highly sensitized to the stigma suffered by someone of her profession and so quick to take offense at any perceived slight, a characteristic that Lomax labels 'face' or 'pride'. Her emotional intelligence puts her in a class above her lovers, a natural superiority that only Lomax has the imagination to recognize, and he recurrently shows how this is deployed to resist the socio-cultural disadvantage she suffers. There is a particularly unpleasant scene in the novel when Suzie is discovered in bed with a sailor by Ben, the sexually repressed ex-naval officer with whom she is supposed to have an exclusive arrangement. She launches into a tirade against him:

“What you think I am? Your slave-girl? I'm nobody's slave-girl! You got no right to come into this room – my boy-friend paid for this room all night!”

Ben said, “Shut up.”

“No! You shut up! Get out! Go to hell!”

Ben advanced towards the bed. He made an unhurried grab at her. [...] She looked quite tiny beside Ben's large looming figure. She kicked and lashed about with her arms. [...] He leant over her on his elbow, securing her with his weight under the angle of his arm and, raising his free hand, he began to spank her.

He spanked her long and hard. (113)

Having punished Suzie for indiscipline, Ben acts as if nothing has happened and tells her that their lunch-time assignation will continue as usual:

“Want you tomorrow?” Ben regarded her with an appearance of blank astonishment. (Really frightened the life out of the young puppy! Silly mugwump doesn't realise he's indispensable to the ship!)

“Certainly I want you to-morrow. Why not?” (114)

After he leaves, Suzie is alone with Lomax, and as they make their way through the red-light district of Wanchai, the narrative locates Suzie's humiliation and her acceptance of the sordid treatment meted out by Ben in its social context:

We began to walk along the empty street. The pavement was littered with bits of paper, old cigarette packets, discarded fruit-rind. Between two shops a woman and two children lay asleep on sacking. Round them were stacked all their household possessions: tins, cooking pans, wooden boxes. The woman clutched an old cornflake packet tied with string. We walked on past shuttered shop-fronts, past a cinema, past

more homeless sleepers nursing their little claims of stone pavement from passing feet. We entered the flood of light from a modern shop-window: banked with shoes, it bared its breast to the empty pavement, the silent roadway. We paused, momentarily hypnotised by its unreality, by its absurd refusal to admit that it was night and that everybody had gone to bed. (114-5)

A conversation then ensues in which Suzie reveals what she thinks about Ben's behaviour:

"Yes, he's really strong, that man. Whoosh! Whoosh! Plenty of muscle!"

"Well, you always said so."

"But I made a mistake about him before. I thought he had only a small heart. But I think he must have a big heart – because I cheated him. I did a very nasty thing, but he said, 'That's all right, we just forget it. I forgive you.' He must have a big heart to say that."....

We walked on, out of the light again, back into the shadows, Suzie's arm brushing against mine. But she was walking in another world; a world where I could not follow. I had ceased to exist for her. I could have slipped away down a side-street and she would not have noticed. Or cared.

I felt a dull ache over my heart. (115)

What haunts the image of Suzie is fifties "Hong Kong" itself, described in realistic detail – the dimly lit streets littered with poor and wasted lives, and the figure of the homeless woman with her children clutching onto the edges of survival that cannot but suggest a tragic future image of Suzie herself. Suzie has had to negotiate this destitution as present reality and future threat from a position of total subjection since early childhood: the novel has already told us about her physical abuse by her uncle, the denial of an education, her arrival in Hong Kong where prostitution is the only means of survival for herself and her sickly infant son, and where the only support system is the community of the girls in the Nam Kok. In her exculpation of Ben, she appears both naïve and abject; but in blaming herself for not recognizing his capacity for emotion, she reveals a continued belief in the possibility of love despite a livelihood which repeatedly demonstrates its absence. What we see here is romantic desire and it is this desire which mobilizes Suzie in her continued search for self-fulfilment in love that would break the bond of past and present degradation. She is indeed in her own world, one which Mason as author tries to narrate in its complexity, and which Lomax as character comes to understand and admire as the world he wants to be a part of in voluntary exile from his colonialist compatriots.

In Suzie, we see an emotional intelligence at work that the narrative sets against the affective dysfunction of her lovers. The contrast between her mobile desire that seeks release from the past and Ben's total entrapment in his past is clearly evident. The free indirect speech – '(Really frightened the life out of the young puppy! Silly mugwump doesn't realise he's indispensable to

the ship!)' – in which Lomax mimics Ben's voice is not the only example of how, in his treatment of Suzie, Ben is entirely determined by the disciplinary and chauvinistic conditioning of his naval past. When Ben first tells Lomax about how sex with Suzie has changed his whole life, Lomax observes, '[he] inclined towards me confidentially, as if to tell me about the fantastic performance of the ship's new radar' (100). In Lomax's room at the Nam Kok before confronting Suzie with the sailor in the episode quoted above, Ben appears to be 'perfectly in command of himself. His chin purposefully jutted, as if the enemy had just been sighted and he stood grimly on the bridge giving orders for action stations' (108). And when he announces to Lomax that he has ended his liaison with Suzie, he has 'the look of a skipper on his bridge when he feels the ship under his control and knows himself master of its destiny: the look of a man engaged in a man's job' (148).

The radical difference between Suzie and Ben is a pattern repeated in Suzie's relations with Rodney the American who, in an imitation of Lomax, moves into the Nam Kok Hotel and follows Ben in an exclusive liaison with Suzie. Rodney is shown to suffer from a psychopathology which issues in alternate bouts of rage and self-pity, and an obsessive need for constant approval to the extent that he will tell repeated and contradictory lies in order to present himself in a favourable light to others. A background of privilege growing up in the American east coast and familial dysfunction is hinted at by Lomax. If Suzie has made a mistake about Ben, this mistake is not repeated in Rodney. On an outing with Suzie and Lomax, Rodney suddenly turns on the two of them, 'his face pinched and spiteful, his eyes glinting with hate' (136). He leaves the two of them abruptly, and Suzie and Lomax are at a loss as to what they might have done to offend him. They decide that 'it must have been something quite imaginary, or else simply that his distemper had come round automatically, like a point on a wheel, in the endless cycle of his moods.' Lomax is afraid that Rodney will commit suicide, but Suzie disagrees, 'No, he won't kill himself. Not to-day.' And Lomax comments appreciatively on Suzie's insight, '[t]his sixth sense of [hers], like the sharpened sense of smell that counterbalances blindness, counterbalanced her illiteracy. It often afforded her astonishing flashes of insight [...] and I had come to place in them an implicit trust' (138).

The respect exemplified by this trust ultimately distinguishes Lomax from the two men whose attempted crossing into the native habitat of the Nam Kok and adventures with the woman as the "other" replicate the relations of domination and subjection between colonizer and colonized. Lomax struggles against the determination of these relations, and as his long hesitation before commitment shows, the key to the struggle is how to locate this respect in his everyday relations with Suzie. Suzie, as noted earlier, is highly sensitive about 'face', and Lomax cannot be sure that if he commits himself as his love urges, he can overlook Suzie's past or the likelihood that she will continue to work if he cannot support both of them and her son. For all his respect for her instinctual intelligence and emotional sensibility, Lomax hesitates about the final

step of not just crossing but incorporation into her world. As he dallies, Suzie departs with Rodney.

Characteristic of romance, a fortuitous intervention occurs to break the deadlock: Lomax receives an unexpected letter from a gallery owner in London showing interest in his paintings and when they turn out to be popular with buyers, his improved financial circumstance means release for Suzie from prostitution and the removal of the major obstacle to romantic resolution. The novel ends with their marriage and visit to London where Suzie realises her long ambition to see the Queen, and the last scene sees them back in their old room in the Nam Kok. So much for the populist romantic fantasy with its happy ending in domesticity. If Lomax's artistic vocation is the source of his original inspiration to seek out what is native, the artist also recognizes that Suzie as wife and Suzie as artistic subject is haunted by a difference that emerges from the familiar knowledge of everyday being displaced by the enduring mystery of another. Lomax's favourite painting of Suzie is the result of a random memory of her at the entrance of the Nam Kok:

She had at that moment been parting from a sailor with whom she had just been upstairs. The sailor was not more than a blurred face in the background, with one hand lifted to tilt his hat, and that expression of false jauntiness with which men leaving brothels are wont to hide their disillusionment after the departure of desire. Suzie was half turned away from him, her face pale and a little tired. She had already forgotten the sailor's existence and had just caught sight of me. Her expression showed fleeting embarrassment. [...] But instantly she realized that embarrassment was pointless and only a refusal to face facts; and in a moment the embarrassment had passed and a new expression had taken its place that seemed to say, "There is a whole world behind me, a whole field of experience, that you can never understand. But it is part of me, and I cannot be otherwise, even though it means losing you." And there was hurt in her eyes, and sadness, but there was also pride. And now in memory the expression seemed to me very moving and beautiful, and I knew I must paint it. (268-69)

In a reminder of Blunden's poems, the painting registers the distance between worlds that divide the artist and the subject of his representation. The romantic narrative can speak of mutual incorporation, and the painting can be composed in myriad detail, but there is the alternative recognition by Lomax as artist that his art cannot enforce entry into the rich complex history of the other's world. For Lomax as for Blunden's speaker, this recognition of the integrity of another can be powerfully inspirational as it is illumined at moments that become the very occasion and material of the work of art itself. The work narrates this recognition, its process, and outcome in an unexpected encounter with another as simultaneous presence and absence. Suzie, like Blunden's amah or earth-god, will remain in and as the unknown except as she becomes knowable in the momentary revelation of the artist's encounter which he

renders permanent in his art. If the mobilizing of cultural contiguity towards integration is for Wong Man the pursuit of poetry, Blunden and Mason's respect for another's integrity returns as flashes of memory and insight that inspire and guarantee their creative connection of cultures.