

Timothy Mo's *An Insular Possession*: The Fictionalization of History

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*"History, too, is a montage of images,
Of paper, collectibles, plastic, fibres,
Laser discs, buttons. [...]
Write with a different color for each voice;
OK, but how trivial can you get?
Could a whole history be concocted like this?"*

P.K. Leung, "Images of Hong Kong"

Abstract

An Insular Possession, by Hong Kong-born British novelist Timothy Mo, is the first of a series of novels that question Western attempts to impose a colonial frame of mind across Asia. Characteristically unconventional, Mo employs two genres seemingly opposed to play with a readership that is convinced that his novel is but a historiographical account. His artful mix of formal, rhetorical and semantic devices contrive to create such illusion while challenging Western imperialist rhetorics.

Key words: master narratives versus local histories, historical novel, literary and extraliterary genres, Hong Kong, imperialism

Resumen

La novela *Una posesión insular* del autor británico de origen hongkonés, Timothy Mo, se constituye en la primera de su serie de novelas que cuestionan los intentos de Occidente de imponer una mentalidad colonial en distintos sitios de Asia. El irreverente escritor utiliza dos géneros aparentemente opuestos para jugar con lectores de su novela pensando que es en realidad una historiografía. Hábilmente se vale de recursos formales, retóricos y de contenido para crear esa ilusión y a la vez desafiar retóricas imperialistas occidentales.

Palabras claves: metanarrativas versus historias locales, novela histórica, géneros literarios y extraliterarios, Hong Kong, imperialismo

History or Story?

The notion of history as a teleological *grand récit* is rooted in the fact that, rather than an objective collection of a series of past events that are ultimately accepted as factual, history is the careful selection and ensuing interpretation of past occurrences. This is a view that critics from different disciplines share. Hans Kellner proposes a “crooked reading” of history aimed at making obvious the links among rhetoric, reality, and representation. He contends that it is the cultural form we choose to represent reality that gives the illusion that reality is continuous and that, therefore, history is linear. Critics like Stephen Bann, Roland Barthes, Dominick LaCapra, Paul Ricoeur, and Hayden White agree that by purposefully unfocusing—that is, reading a cultural text distortedly—the constructed, rhetorical, nature of our knowledge of the past is put into the foreground and the purposes of our retrospective creations are brought out into the open (Kellner 7). To illustrate the rhetorical nature of history, Kellner argues that the manner in which historians begin or end a historiography reflects the question of purposeful choices and the ways these choices affect the histories they narrate and reveal how they (re)process historical understanding. Another rhetorical strategy that historians seem to employ is figurative language:

regulative metaphors of history, which generate explanations rather than adorn them: the organic figures of growth, life-cycles, roots, seeds, and so on; the figures of time with their rises and falls, weather catastrophes, seasons, twilights; the figures of movement (flow of events, crossroads, wheels); the technical figures of construction, gears, chains; theatrical figures of stage, actors, contest. Most of all, of course, the figure of History as pedagogue, ever ‘teaching’ ‘lessons.’ (8)

Besides metaphors of history, there is also the question of historical emplotment, the idea that, according to Ricoeur, plot regulates and steers our readings and interpretations of history. Thus, what Kellner ultimately suggests is that historiographies can be read in the same way as fiction.

History is a whimsical genre that never recounts events from a simple objective perspective. Like fiction writers, historians are confronted with a series of choices to chronicle their material. From the focus of a particular historical document to the language and diction to the point of view employed by the chronicler, it all comes down to the purposeful analysis, evaluation, and selection of materials to narrate one possible version of the events at stake. David Cowart asserts that a deconstruction of Aristotle, Hegel, Croce, Collingwood—that is, a deconstruction of texts on the philosophy of history—would disclose the uneasy question of whether to interpret history as science or as art (14). According to Hayden White, “continental European thinkers—from Valéry and Heidegger to Sartre, Levi-Strauss, and Michel Foucault—have cast serious doubts on the value of a specifically ‘historical’ consciousness, stressed the fictive character of

historical reconstructions, and challenged history's claims to a place among the sciences (1-2).

Indeed, this debate is a recent one since in antiquity it was widely accepted that history had a constructed nature. In the introduction to Alessandro Manzoni's *On the Historical Novel*, Sandra Bermann highlighted the link between history and rhetoric that had existed since Cicero described the former as a "particularly demanding opus oratorium," thus recognizing the rhetorical as well as the fictional implications of historical writing (Manzoni 16). When history was subsumed by rhetoric, it was modified so that, instead of merely accumulating descriptive detail, it tended toward mimicking the same unifying principles of rhetoric: "More than ever before, history sorted and construed its documents, generalized from them, even manipulated them in order to please and persuade" (17). She explains that, during the Renaissance, history largely documented "God's greater plan", according to Petrarch, Coluccio, Salutati, and Poggio Bracciolini. Even Manzoni shared this belief but with a slight variation. He did not believe that history was "guided every step of the way by God, but committed as well to the psychology of human choice" (19).

To Robert Young, the history of the Western world is made up of white mythologies. By opening his critique of Western historiography with an account of the Algerian French Jewish academician, Hélène Cixous, Young emphasizes the teleological nature of the writing of history in the West: "I saw that the great, noble, 'advanced' countries established themselves by expelling what was 'strange'; excluding it but not dismissing it; enslaving it. A commonplace gesture of History: there have to be *two* races—the masters and the slaves" (qtd. in Young, *White Mythologies* 1). Young argues that what Cixous criticizes in this passage is Hegelian dialectic and by implication Marxism and their participation in producing and circulating forms of knowledge complicit with forms of oppression. History, says Young, is for Cixous "another forgotten *story* of oppression" [my emphasis]: "Already I know all about the 'reality' that supports History's progress: everything throughout the centuries depends on the distinction between the Selfsame, the oneself . . . and that which limits it: so now what menaces my-own-good . . . is the 'other'" (qtd. in Young 2). However, rather than blaming Hegel for making that dialectic possible, she blames the "Hegelian machinery" for facilitating the operations of a pre-existing system of inclusion/exclusion, namely, Western History.

From Cicero to poststructuralist and postcolonial critics like Cixous and Young, the view on history has been that it has functioned as a narrative meant to persuade the average, unquestioning individual of humanity's progression towards an expected *telos*, be it God's greater plan or the ideological designs of a group in power. Consequently, I find Michel Foucault's distinction between "effective" history and traditional history useful to read and analyze a historical fiction like *An Insular Possession*. While the former "becomes 'effective' to the degree that it introduces discontinuity in our very being," the latter aims at "dissolving the singular event into an ideal continuity—as a teleological movement or as a natural process" (Foucault 88). Effective history dispels the myth of necessary continuity to an event that rather than being "a decision, a treaty,

a reign, or a battle, [is] the reversal of a relationship of forces, the usurpation of power, the appropriation of a vocabulary turned against those who had once used it, a feeble domination that poisons itself as it grows lax, the entry of a 'masked' other" (88). To recapitulate, for Bermann, Cixous, Young, and Foucault, rather than the objective collection of a series of past events, history is the careful selection and ensuing interpretation of past events that are conventionally accepted as factual.

As an Oxford educated History major, writer Timothy Mo addresses history theories and reflections like those of Kellner, Ricoeur, White, Bermann, Cixous, Foucault, and others and proposes yet another twist to Kellner's theory: the possibility of representing fiction as an objective genre like history. A proposal of this kind certainly begs the question on the nature of the historical novel: is it exclusively the type of fiction that made Sir Walter Scott the forefather of all historical novels or is it a hybrid genre shaped by cultural, historical and geographical considerations? As the novel is the only one of the three major literary genres born after the emergence of the written word, its conventions are not as distinctly defined as those of drama and poetry, genres shaped by the use of mnemonic devices and spectatorial conventions. The novel's capacity to mimic the socio-ideological languages of literary and nonliterary genres poses problems of classification and produces disagreements as to whether particular types, such as the epistolary, the confessional, and the picaresque novels, among others, are subtypes or only mutations of the genre. The historical novel is not exempt from this controversy, especially two centuries after Sir Walter Scott allegedly created the genre in the Western world.

According to George Lukács, the historical novel emerges as the indirect result of the French Revolution, the revolutionary wars, and the rise and fall of Napoleon because, for the first time, history became a mass experience when major parts of Europe changed into a war arena (23-24). The mass armies and civilians involved in those events started "to comprehend their own existence as something historically conditioned, for them to see in history something which deeply affect[ed] their daily lives and immediately concern[ed] them" (24). As these "real mass movements" gave people a sense of historicity, especially during a century when processes of nation and identity formation were heavily shaping up Europe, national histories were being forged as teleological narratives: "The appeal to national independence and national character is necessarily connected with a re-awakening of national history, with memories of the past, of past greatness, of moments of national dishonor, whether this results in a progressive or reactionary ideology" (25). This was the socio-historical panorama that made possible the materialization of the first modern historical novel, Sir Walter Scott's *Waverley*, in 1814, and later on, of a long chain of imitators and innovators of the historical fiction. When Manzoni was writing *On the Historical Novel*, between 1828 and 1850, the genre was becoming widely accepted, to a great extent, because of the Industrial Revolution and the rise of the European nation-state, and hence the historical novel became the perfect vehicle to carry revolutionary and nationalist-imperialist (in European standards) messages.

In the next century, historical fiction was evolving to the point that its outgrowth, the new historical novel, also known as postmodern historiographic metafiction, became less interested in understanding history as the ultimate truth and more interested in rewriting it from the multiple perspectives of non-mainstream peoples. Linda Hutcheon asserts that [historiographic metafiction] shows several particular traits:

refutes the natural or common-sense methods of distinguishing between historical fact and fiction. It refutes the view that only history has a truth claim, both by questioning the ground of that claim in historiography and by asserting that both history and fiction are discourses, human constructs, signifying systems, and both derive their main claim to truth from that identity. [It] also refuses the relegation of the extratextual past to the domain of historiography in the name of the autonomy of art. (93)

Following Hutcheon's thread of discursivity, in *Latin America's New Historical Novel* Seymour Menton describes the genre as an ambiguous combination of reality and history, a conscious distortion of historical facts, with recognizable historical figures as protagonists, and the use of metafiction, intertextuality, and the carnivalesque (23-24). Both Hutcheon and Menton agree that, first, there has to be a conscious effort to blur the line between fiction and fact and, second, that structural choices largely define the debunking in this kind of fiction.

In between Scott's *Waverley* and the historiographic metafiction, other critics have proposed theories not just to define, but also to analyze the historical novel. The typologies of Harry E. Shaw in *The Forms of Historical Fiction: Sir Walter Scott and His Successors* (1983) and David Cowart in *History and the Contemporary Novel* (1989), are the most comprehensive ones that serve to critique and understand historical fictions about contemporary Hong Kong. Shaw argues that "works of standard historical fiction" have made use of history in three ways that may coexist in the same work: 1) history as pastoral (history provides "an ideological screen onto which the preoccupations of the present are projected for clarification and solution, or for disguised expression"), 2) history as a source of dramatic energy that vivifies a fictional story and can produce melodramatic effects but also cathartic effects, and 3) history as subject (52). On the other hand, Cowart argues that a discussion of historical fiction can be organized under four rubrics: 1) the way it was—fictions where the authors aspire to historical verisimilitude, 2) the way it will be—fictions where authors reverse history to contemplate the future, 3) the turning point—fictions where authors aim at locating the specific moment when the present became what it is, and 4) the distant mirror—fictions where the present is projected into the past (8-9). An overview of Lukács and Hutcheon, on one hand, and Shaw and Cowart, on the other hand, show the lack of consensus regarding definitions and functions of the historical novel. It is plausible to claim that as an outgrowth of the socio-political context of the nineteenth century, Scott's type of historical fiction served as a vessel of grand narratives then, but in modern times, ludicrous historical

fictions are written to deauthorize the phallogocentric pens that have crafted historiography as the white male mythologies of the West. In other words, the new historical novel is chameleonic and brazen. Mo's *Insular* perfectly exemplifies this nature.

An Insular Possession: novel or historiography?

Anglo-Chinese Timothy Mo's *oeuvre* reflects the same unconventionality, even eccentricity, which characterizes the author. The Eurasian son of a Cantonese lawyer and a British mother, he was born in Hong Kong but educated in England from the age of eight. In an interview entitled "Mo Can Do," Murray Waldren reveals intriguing facts about the personality, beliefs, and professional ethic of Mo. For one thing, Mo seems to have a grudge against the literary canon: "Gabriel García Márquez? 'a pompous, grandiloquent old fart.' Graham Greene? 'A middle-brow entertainer.' Kingsley Amis? 'I am a twenty-five times better novelist'" (qtd. in Waldren 241). To these diatribes, Mo adds:

The English literary establishment is pretty insufferable. I think their books are small-scale and unambitious, mean and inward-looking. The general educated reading public wants the Amis/Iris Murdoch strain, and I detest that. I used to think people like Kazuo Ishiguro, Salman Rushdie and Julian Barnes had stirred that pot up a bit, either with their exoticness or sheer brilliance, but it hasn't done anything to change podgy British taste. (241-42)

His self-righteous remarks could be considered arrogance, but are actually part of a survival strategy that he must have developed, first, as a local student receiving a "Chinese classical education at the Convent of the Precious Blood" where the "ferocious Cantonese nuns" expected inquisitive pupils to keep their lips sealed (qtd. In Vlitos 307) and, second, as a foreign child being snickered at and beaten up in the racist schools of England for having the right answers. After being repressed, ignored, or discriminated, he turned to boxing, and quite a fighter he became as evinced by what some have called petulance, others excess, and by his constant attempts to reinvent his writing and his unwillingness to pander to publishing giants like Random House, Viking, and others.

As the author of other works that deal with individuals in the margins of society—*The Redundancy of Courage* (1991), *Brownout on Breadfruit Boulevard* (1995), and *Renegade or Halo?* (1999)—Mo has strived to depict a wide range of experiences, from colonial resistance to political and corporate corruption to cultural dislocation. Mo had written about a male foreigner married into the household of a traditionally Chinese family in Hong Kong (*The Monkey King*, 1978) and a Chinese family living in England (*Sour Sweet*, 1982) before he wrote *An Insular Possession* (1986), a historical novel about merchants making a living in Canton, Macao, and Hong Kong in the 1830s and 1840s. Mo employs several

strategies to convince his readers that, rather than a fictional account of Hong-kongese history, they are reading a true historical account of the events that led to the first Anglo-Chinese War. In order to accomplish a crooked reading of, not history, but fiction, he employs form, content, and particular tropes in purposeful ways.

Formal Conventions

The first strategy that Mo employs is ludicrously playing with formal conventions to give the illusion that, rather than a fictional account, his is a historiography. He intentionally reconstructs the typical settler/chronicler narrative through language:

The river succours and impedes native and foreigner alike; it limits and it enables, it isolates and it joins. It is the highway of commerce and it is a danger and a nuisance. Children fall off fragile naïve craft; drunken sailors topple from the decks of the Company's chequered ships. Along with the rest of the city's effluvia the river sweeps the victims out to sea. Thus, for centuries it has fulfilled the functions of road and, as rivers will, cloaca. Its appearance changes, if not its uses. (Mo 5)

The opening lines of the novel set the mood as Mo not only mimics an archaic use of the English language—as if to set the novel in a century infamous for imperial and capitalistic practices, but also makes his narrator the chronicler, geographer, and colonizer of his personal version of the events that led to a permanent settlement in Hong Kong. In personifying the river, Mo also alludes to the eponymous river in what is considered the paradigmatic novel on imperialism—*Heart of Darkness* and, in the process, he unleashes the potential of effective histories to turn master narratives upside down. Thus, his novel is not told from the point of view of imperialists exploiting the natural or human resources of the region or from the vindicated voices of the exploited and oppressed natives, but from the relatively neutral position of a third group—in this case, American expatriates like Walter Eastman and Gideon Chase.

Another element that adds authenticity to Mo's account is his use of framing or incorporated genres. "Such genres," says Mikhail Bakhtin, "introduce into the novel their own languages [which] are primarily significant for making available points of view that are generative in a material sense, since they exist outside literary conventionality and thus have the capacity to broaden the horizon of language available to literature" (323). By incorporating the discourses of periodical publications (which may have actually not existed), and of letters (which may only be a figment of Mo's imagination), he playfully makes his readers question, not the authenticity, but the fictionality of the characters and events. First, when he interpolates excerpts from two newspapers, *The Canton Monitor* or *The LinTin Bulletin and River Bee*, and letters written by some of

the major characters, he employs a smaller typeface as if to set apart fictional discourse from journalistic and testimonial discourses. Second, he attaches two appendices that add even more to this jocular “overlap” of factual sources and fabrication. In the first one, he “reproduces” entries from *A Gazetteer of Place Names and Biographies Relative to the Early China Coast*, a sort of “Who’s who?” in the Canton, Macao and Hong Kong of the 1830s and 1840s. The appendix includes the brief biographies of historical figures like Lord Napier, Sir Henry Pottinger, and Captain Charles Elliot, but the bios of fictional characters like Alice Barclay Remington, Harry O’Rourke, and Gideon Chase coexist hand in hand, adding more to the reader’s confusion. The narrator tells us that, while Alice and Gideon left a written legacy behind them—letters and a journal the former and varied publications the latter, nothing but two daguerreotypes of the original works was left from O’Rourke’s paintings, which perished in two fires. The second appendix is constituted by excerpts from Professor Gideon Chase’s autobiography entitled *The Morning of My Days*. If a perspicacious reader was not fooled by either the interpolations of periodicals or epistles or the entries from the *Gazetteer*, then the allusion to Gideon Nye, an American businessman who actually worked in the American *hong* in Canton in the 1830s and to his lecture “The Morning of My Life in China,” could finally persuade him that Gideon Chase may not be as fictitious.

One last consideration in my attempt to prove how Mo’s *Insular* critiques form as a prerequisite for genre is Chase’s article “On the Literary Modes of the Chinese,” published in the third issue of the second volume of the *Lin Tin*. In comparing the Chinese prose romance to the nineteenth-century Western novel (American, British, French, Spanish, German), Mo cleverly employs the language of the explorer/colonizer to describe the latter, which “unfolds itself along a path which to all practical intents and purposes is *linear*, of 180 degrees as the navigator might say, or a reciprocal course. It may ramble, but essentially it proceeds along a course of cause and effects, each contributing to the movement of the whole” (Mo 359). In contrast, the native novel “moves in a path which is altogether *circular*. It is made up of separate episodes [. . .] joined by the loosest of threads. It chooses to emphasize incident, character, and language. It usually contains long passages or extracts of poetry, fable, song, and essays, lists of goods, recipes, formulas for patent medicines, and even spells” (359). Although produced within a Western literary tradition like the English one, *Insular* stands out as a hybrid form of historical fiction, a mix of both the Western gaze and Eastern sensibilities. The novel certainly tries to challenge historiographical discourse by imitating and even mocking it and, therefore, following a linear progression of cause and effect, but that linear progression is at times broken by the insertion of other literary and nonliterary discourses within the narrative. In addition, the conscious act of going back to the past, expressed by the intentional recreation of archaic language, contributes to break the chronological line of events, as Mo writes about the 1830s and 1840s in the 1980s (a crucial decade for processes of nation formation and identity formulation in Hong Kong) and as present and future (the Sino-British negotiations over the territory’s future and

the events that led to the Handover in the 1980s and 1990s) are sometimes projected onto the past, as pastoral. Referring to the Western novel and the Chinese prose romance, Chase concludes: "The former is a mighty river pushing to the sea, swollen by tributaries, diverging into deltas, but ultimately meeting its end in the Ocean. The other is a still lake" (359). The former is a traditional history; the other is made up of effective histories.

Content

Regarding content, in making a couple of Americans the protagonists of his novel, Mo opens up a space for a third nationality or identity to shape up and, in the process, he enhances a reading of fiction as a historiographical text, not of the past *but* of the present. That is, he makes a novel purportedly about the history of the cession of Hong Kong to Britain, not only one more cultural artifact produced after the Sino British Joint Declaration in 1984 and about the particular nation formation and identity formulation processes triggered by the return to China, but also a chronicle of those processes. Therefore, it can be said that the characters and the events in the novel perform an intrafictional function within the text and a metafictional function outside it. Walter Eastman constantly complains about the biased views of *The Canton Monitor*, so it is no surprise that, when the circumstances push Eastman and Chase to run their own periodical, they offer a voice that counteracts the bigoted comments of their competitor. In other words, they represent another space of signification and give voice to a segment of the population that has remained in the margins. Rather than a fabrication of events that favors the British and justifies their unlawful trade, *The Lin Tin Bulletin and River Bee* offers fresh stories about the various peoples who populate the Pearl River delta and criticizes the greed of Western profit-makers. True to their professional integrity, Eastman and, especially Chase, report not only events in the area from the opposite perspective, but also the various effective histories of both Chinese and foreigners instead of a single history that aims at showing progression towards a teleological end. In their second issue, they publish one such effective history: "Both Kwangtung and Kwangsi provinces [. . .] were until recent times—speaking in a historical, rather than an individual's span—almost wholly inhabited by aborigine tribes" later invaded by the northern Chinese (285). The historical accounts of a single Han people who had inhabited the "Kingdom of the Middle"—China—for centuries, is wholly a fabrication that the periodical points out. In the end, Eastman and Chase, in their role as "objective" reporters, and Mo, in his authorial position, appropriate the role of historiographers whose loyalties lie with neither foreigners nor locals, but with and against both.

Gideon Chase, in particular, embodies that third space of signification as he is willing to learn from and about the local people and customs. First, he is not as contemptuous of everything foreign, as the racist Eastman is. Then, Chase learns Chinese calligraphy, an art that is both verbal and visual as opposed to

Eastman's merely visual hobbies: painting and daguerreotypy. Chase learns calligraphy as art form, but also as a gateway to the language and as a means to understand the host culture. Thereby, he becomes a mediator between the East and the West, first as a reporter of local stories about Southern China and concrete practices considered barbaric by Westerners and, later, as a translator between Captain Elliot and the Chinese emissaries and as a compassionate defender of the victims of the Anglo-Chinese war, regardless of their nationality. During the war, he could be seen both carrying wounded British soldiers and saving local women from being raped by Indian Sepoys, collaborating for the British and helping locals to escape. As a correspondent of the *Lin Tin* and an eyewitness of some of the battles between China and Britain, Chase reports what he observes on board of British war crafts and on Chinese territory as well, often contradicting the *Monitor's* biased news stories and revealing the economic and political interests of the merchants. He stands as a linguistic phenomenon to both his fellow expatriates and the Chinese. Chase's acquisition of the Chinese language is beyond Eastman and O'Rourke's comprehension and, to the Chinese that he addresses in their dialect, he is a marvel at times, a freak at other times.

Another example of how Mo uses content to arouse a crooked reading of fiction can be found in the celebration of America's independence by a select group of expatriates in Macao. It gives Eastman an excuse to rant and rave against the British colonizer in the *Lin Tin's* fifteenth issue, dated July 18th 1838:

Whenever Americans gathered together on this day they had a right to be gay, yet there was a serious aspect to their assembly for they celebrated their delivery from despotism. This had not been an iniquitous so much as a galling tyranny, but then the gnat's bite was more irritating than that of the dog, which was not repeated ad infinitum. [. . .] He concluded with a wish to the effect that the present difficulties in the China trade might be soon and peacefully resolved and without recourse to bangs and fusees, louder, uglier, and more injurious than the handsome spectacle they had just witnessed, but that it would not be *their* government which would be first to shed innocent blood. (332-33)

As a former British network of colonial settlements and given the imminent armed conflict between Britain and China, the United States stood as the ideal of freedom and democracy and as a little giant that had fought the Motherland and defeated it. Perhaps it was a slanted allusion to the cession of Hong Kong to Britain and a veiled message on Hong Kong's particular situation when Mo published *Insular* in 1987? The inclusion of two Americans as the protagonists establishes some similarities between the American and Chinese histories: both groups were disdained by the British and considered inferior; both territories were relatively unexplored by the white European man, and the American nationality stands out as a third nationality in the conflict between England and China, just as Hong Kong would develop its own quasi-national identity despite its links to colonizer and motherland. In the celebration of the American

independence there are allusions to a desired decolonization in pre-Handover Hong Kong. By projecting the preoccupations of the present onto the past, that is, by employing the present as a distant mirror, Mo makes use of history as pastoral. The history of the first Anglo-Chinese war, infamously known as the first Opium War, and of the subsequent settlement in the island of Hong Kong, provides “an ideological screen onto which the preoccupations of the present are projected for clarification and solution, or for disguised expression” (Shaw 52). The traumatic events foreshadowed by the Sino British negotiations back in 1982 were projected onto Mo’s recreation of the 1830s and 1840s to criticize the exclusion of the territory from decisions about its fate. The way it was collides with the way it is in 1980 causing past and present to overlap and, therefore, enabling a critique of present events through a satirical work about the historical past of the territory. Eastman and Chase represented cultural producers like Mo himself, who through their cultural artifacts mocked official discourses and unveiled the potential of other spaces of signification to make and narrate stories of the local people.

Tropes

A third way in which Mo achieves a crooked reading of fiction is through the use of tropes. He establishes comparisons between (1) painting and fiction writing and (2) journalism and fiction writing. Regarding the first metaphor, painting as penmanship, Mo contrasts the painters of the novel and their artistry to, sometimes, himself and his mastery of the art of writing, and other times to the ideal writer’s. The painter Harry O’Rourke is depicted as a temperamental old rogue: “Boaster, grand prevaricator, story-teller, wit and conversationalist of mighty reputation” (Mo 11) who believes himself to be a genius. Mo seems to pour a little, if not a lot, of his own personality in this fictional character who like him excels in recreating stories, only that he does it stroke by stroke. While Mo’s pen is O’Rourke’s brush, the former’s blank page is the latter’s canvas. But perhaps the most important similarity between writer and painter is their colonial status: Mo’s as a Hong-Kong-born immigrant and O’Rourke’s as an Irish subject. They are both in the margins of the Empire and that is probably the reason why they have eccentric personalities that repel many around them (and the reason Mo puts O’Rourke, along with former imperial subjects, Eastman and Chase, in a central role in the novel).

One of O’Rourke’s works in the novel is an unfinished painting to be called “On Meridian’s Verandah, Macao”:

In the background will figure in order from left to right: one of Horsburgh’s charts of the Malacca Straits, a globe, a telescope, hookah, fez (yes a fez), a dog called MacQuitty, a fowling-piece, a plate of sugared almonds, a raised-stand dish of Turkish delight, a pomelo, and three decanters which contain respectively port, sherry, and Madeira”. (64)

Mo employs ekphrasis as a rhetorical device to tell the history of colonization in the East. Thus, he makes O'Rourke allude to activities linked to master-subaltern relations like exploration, hunting, and commerce. Through his painting, he invokes James Horsburgh, a Scottish hydrographer who worked for the East India Company during the late eighteenth century and the early nineteenth century. As a chartered joint-stock company, it had legitimated trade in the East Indies, a business that was deplorably linked to imperial practices. Navigational instruments like the charts and the telescope indirectly refer to the first expeditions of Western colonizers in Asia. The dog and the fowling-piece or shotgun represent the use of force to subjugate the natives. While these guns can be used for sportsmanship, they can also be used for military or defensive purposes. In other words, Mo seems to depict the history of colonization as the result of the tedium of the white man and of the belligerence of the West. Thus, the natives must necessarily be orientalized by means of the fez and the hookah, elements that represent the East as exotic and mysterious playthings to be conquered. Still nature elements such as the almonds, the dish of Turkish delight, the pomelo, and decanters complete the picture. As foodstuffs native to the East, the first three are a representation of the riches and knowledge extracted for the profit of the colonizer, whereas the decanters of sherry, port and Madeira refer to Portuguese commercial interests in the East, most specifically to their presence in Macao. Not by accident is the painting entitled "On Meridian's Verandah, Macao": Macao was the gathering place of the expatriate community in Southern China in the 1830s and Meridian being one of those unscrupulous profit-makers. Through the compositional elements of his painting, O'Rourke not only narrates a story, but also becomes a pictorial historiographer of nineteenth-century Asian colonization.

Walter Eastman is another pictorial historiographer. Trained by O'Rourke, he becomes interested in painting and another related visual art popular in the nineteenth century, the daguerreotype. Sublimely inspired by the Macanese landscape, he plays with colors and other compositional tools that allow him to make a painting, similarly to the way that a writer tells a story:

The water he sees as primrose where it is in the sun and chocolate under shade [. . .], then the clouds, the horizon, where all three seem to meet, he fuses in a play of light and shadow. The hawks, as inverted black Ws or figure 3s, squiggled with a single movement of the brush, are the clasps that hold the planes of sky and sea together. He thins the sky with a film of water, darkens a patch of cloud. Stands back and feels excited. (119)

Just as Eastman carefully chooses the thematic elements of his landscape painting, he makes sure to organize them on the canvas, develop the whole concept throughout the space, and add transitions to smooth the passage from one image to the next. However, like historians, he also has to make choices. On looking at this painting, Alice Remington objects to his knack for painting creatively but unobjectively.

'But, Mr. Eastman, there is no tree here.'

'No tree?'

'Yes, the branch which runs along the top of your picture, it does not exist.'
Eastman stares at her.

'Is there something wrong, Mr. Eastman? Pray do not look so.'

Eastman pulls himself together. 'I beg your pardon Miss Remington. Most humbly I do. No, it is but a device, not exactly a convention, perhaps an accepted fiction, by which I may draw your eye in, make the scene complete and . . . somehow more outstanding.' (120)

Like history, Eastman's painting crafts a story, rather than narrates facts objectively. To him, what matters is the effect on the interpreter of the text. Through Eastman's theory about the acceptability of inventive devices like the made-up branch, Mo makes a point on the fictionality of history and the socially-constructed convention of a supposedly objective genre that is, in fact, not always objective but only verisimilitudinous. Telling a crooked version of the facts, contends a ludicrous Mo, makes them more thought-provoking and eye-opening since that act engages the reader in a more active interpretation. Thus the ambiguity in the novel: fiction or fact? history or story? official or unofficial? central or marginal? communism or democracy? HK-SAR or independent nation?

A couple of chapters later, Mo teases his readers once more by making Eastman apparently contradict himself. While in the landscape painting he claims that fiction is what makes a scene complete, in cold-heartedly drawing a *coolie* bitten by a poisonous snake he claims that he does not tell stories.

'The spectators, Walter, where are they?'

'I omit them.'

'Why?'

'Because I choose to do so.'

'But they are part of the story, perhaps the largest part.'

'I do not tell a story.'

'But every picture should tell one.'

'Is that a fact?' (162)

The lack of narrative in a painting does not necessarily mean that the artistic work has to be devoid of fictional elements. Like a historiographer, Eastman makes his own choices. He focuses on the suffering and disfigurement of the man, but erases all traces of the spectators half-horrified and half-fascinated by the slow but convulsive death of the coolie. In omitting the spectators from his painting, he creates a fictional scene from which the eye of the passersby has been obliterated. Whether out of whim or after careful deliberation, he makes a choice, which is, in the case of his paintings, a way to tell (his)story and fictionalize the scenes represented on the canvas. Eastman is first and foremost passionate for painting and it is most appropriate that his second occupation while in China is that of a journalist. He already has the vision of an artist, of a crafter.

The use of perspective and angles of vision, a technique usually associated with painting, is the most fitting device to intensify crooked readings of fiction. When teaching Alice how to paint, Eastman explains the laws of perspective from a Western point of view. He believes that the perspective or lack of it in native paintings makes them appear “flat and unnatural” (112). Coming from Eastman it sounds like bigotry, but Mo implies that the most revealing perspective is always a foreign one, meaning a defamiliarized perspective. Not in vain does Mo put these words in the mouth of Eastman: “One’s point of view is, after all, a matter of perspective. I don’t talk of painting, mark you” (183). Putting matters in a different perspective is precisely the *Lin Tin Bulletin and River Bee’s* purpose. Later on, when Eastman, Chase, and O’Rourke conceive the bulletin, perspective takes on a political meaning understood only through a mathematical metaphor: “Instances of modern triangles might be depicted thus:

	ENGLAND	
INDIA		CHINA

Which is a specimen of political geometry where the *angles* and *inclinations* on all sides are not equal, some being rather more *acute* than others” (291-92). Historiographical accounts have portrayed the triangular relationship between England, India and China in ways that have favored the former. From the point of view of the colonizer, England (or rather “Angland”), the colonized are inferior peoples whose differences give the conquerors the right to tip the balance of power in their favor. Therefore, the widest angle corresponds to England while the acutest angles, while not equal, correspond to the subalterns: India’s angle slightly wider than China’s because of its earlier links with the empire. The result is a political triangle with unequal *sides* and *angles*. During the British invasion of Canton, the British send their Indian troops, the *sepoys*, at the vanguard to avoid casualties. The *sepoys*, however, take advantage of their privileges and indulge themselves in “[r]ape, robbery, arson and murder” (575), as Chase observes and reports in the *Lin Tin*. Shielded by their official status as messengers of the British Empire, the *sepoys* soldiers savagely desolate villages and take plunder. The *Lin Tin* satirically invokes the original act that led to the first Anglo-Chinese War to criticize this political bias: “It seems that when Commissioner Lin seized the 20,000 chests of opium, he violated the rights of property of the owners—but when it came to Chinese goods—why, it’s only looting” (591).

Another comparison that Mo draws to enhance crooked readings is that between journalistic discourse and fictional discourse. Outraged by the biased reporting of *The Canton Monitor*, the English expatriate community’s official organ of mass communication, Eastman and Chase create a new periodical, *The Lin Tin Bulletin and River Bee*. Although Chase argues that written media is “merely an organ of opinion, not a creator of it” (134), the truth is that the written word, especially when framed by the journalistic genre can, more often than not, take sides, distort realities, and manipulate opinions as evinced by the *Monitor* and, ultimately, offer a different side of reality, like the *Lin Tin* does.

The first issue of the latter, dated January 3, 1838, certainly makes a point on the ideological functions of journalistic discourse. Two epigraphs summarize the editors' ideological position and, in turn, Mo's agenda:

Oh printing! What troubles hast thou brought mankind? That lead when molded into bullets is not so mortal as when founded into letters.—Marvell

[. . .]. A man has a voice because he is a man, and not because he is the possessor of money.—Cobbett (273)

The power to utter and spread one's beliefs takes full force in the journalistic medium. Thus, both Eastman and Chase intend to use that power to counter the one-sided and, more often than not, deprecatative reports of the *Monitor*, even when, in the process, they make choices and become fictionalized as well. They claim to be the defenders of the concerns of the public and denounce "those organs for the dissemination of information and views" as "*instruments*" that serve the merchant class's self-interests, "promote partisan views," and view facts and events by means of a "specious and distorting eyeglass of interest" (274). Because Eastman and Chase abhor the filthy opium traffic validated by the merchants and the press, they believe it is their duty to tell the other, often overlooked, version of the facts. While Eastman censures the immoral nature of the business, Chase narrates stories that explain the idiosyncratic ways of the Chinese. In doing so, they offer a different version of reality for the reader to consider. As Eastman proclaimed, one's point of view is a matter of perspective, of positioning. Their eccentric position as Americans and as defenders of the interests of the public give them the power to send ideological bullets flying through their periodical.

They cleverly frame the inauguration of their periodical in the context of Queen Victoria's accession to the English throne, announcing a new stage in the annals of British history. Thus, they announce the age of a new informative organ: "News also reached our little communities of Canton and Macao but a few weeks since of a new era in England. How fortuitous that its inception should so closely coincide with that of our organ. Let both be new brooms, sweeping aside the dust of the old and instituting a new, freer, and better order of things" (275). The new periodical is meant to offer a third space to express views, one not exclusively influenced by British or Chinese ideologies. Consequently, the *Lin Tin* publishes news stories about both East and West. In the process, however, they must fabricate stories to attract an initially elusive readership. As "composer, printer, editor, composer of leading articles, chief correspondent and solicitor of advertising," Eastman performs some of the tasks of a fiction writer. He fabricates and markets his stories in a cohesive, plausible vehicle. The layout of the bulletin is important because it mimics the layout of its competitor. Knowing that they are at a disadvantage in their newcomer position, Eastman decides to use a layout the readership is familiar with in order not to alienate them and because of technology constraints (their press did not allow innovations). In

their second issue, dated January 17, Eastman piques the interest of a supercilious readership by making up the warmest welcome to their periodical: “We expected nothing from our prospective audience but immediate indifference [...]. How warming and heartening, then, to be received with such a degree of interest and show of support” (281). Not only does Eastman fabricate information about the reception and circulation of the *Bulletin*, but he also publishes some fake letters by fictitious correspondents like Stella, Pursuer, and Soloriens, and readers like Senex and Hibernius in an attempt to add variety and attract the readership’s interest. His goal is to make his slants at the merchants and their vehicle of expression, the *Monitor*—later renamed *The Hong Kong Guardian and Gazetteer*—more believable.

Along with these rhetorical devices, Eastman introduces the relatively new technique of the daguerreotype to his news reporting. True to his theories about the fictionality of painting and despite Chase’s strong opposition, he manipulates the corpse of a dead British crew member to capture a moment that never existed. In order to impress his readers with images of the battles between the British and the Chinese fleets, he once again makes choices. His intention is to create a story and sell it to the public. In the twelfth issue of the fourth volume of the *Lin Tin*, he introduces his reflections on the theory of the daguerreotype or heliogravure: “The language of man is at once and at the same time an expression and instrument of his needs and, for those who follow him, relic and evidence of that experience. Words may be fashioned, invented, changed to an end. And the worthiness or otherwise of that end, is to be discerned in . . . the lexicon of that manifestation” (590). In other words, Eastman (and Mo as well) deliberately makes use of different types of language—written and visual—as instruments to express other possible realities, but in the process, produces a fabrication of facts. While he does not offer a misinterpretation or a falsification of major historical facts, as the *Monitor* regularly does, he does narrate a story from a particular angle, his own. About the daguerreotype he contends that it is both an art and a science. Even though it pretends to be real, it is merely a reproduction: “Not two individual operators will ever take the same scene or portrait in quite the same fashion. [. . .] the minutest deviation in angle [. . .], framing [. . .], and moment selected to make the exposure [. . .]—all or severally each contribute to the final result” (591). In that difference lie the science and the objectivity of the technique. Like a fiction writer, the operator of a camera makes choices that include point of view, plot, and setting. Those choices, nevertheless, produce images that are only “segments of the world,” “parts, not wholes; shards, no the mirror; abruptness, not continuity (592).”

It is only fitting that the novel should have, not a grand ending in the fashion of a nineteenth-century master narrative, but an open-ended closure. Towards the end of the novel, a disillusioned Chase and a pragmatic Eastman agree that their days in the news business are numbered. The advent of a new era is marked by the renaming of the *Canton Monitor*, the persisting corruption, the demoting of a fair man like Captain Elliott as the Plenipotentiary of Hong

Kong, and the designation of Sir Henry Pottinger as the first Governor of the territory. While Chase, in his callowness, believes that his ideals have no room in such a depraved place as the new entrepôt, a more seasoned Eastman assures him that there are no ends, but just the present to enjoy and live. Astonished by the latter's decision to abruptly stop the circulation of their periodical, the former asks: "Do you, Walter, mean seriously to say that, without rhyme or obvious reason, explanation, apology, or warning, you shall cease to publish the *Lin Tin Bulletin* and *River Bee*?" (649). Eastman replies that "the world is not like that—it *is* untidy, there are no reasons, the final sum never balances. There is no blank end, only . . . the succession of moments leading on to something else. The line is drawn through the ledger quite rudely" (650). In other words, there are no ends, only continuation; no past, only a continuous present. Death or the end of a brilliant career, he explains, is as arbitrary as the end of a fiction work or the discontinuation of a periodical publication. That the end of the *Lin Tin* era should come exactly at the point when the novel ends physically is certainly illustrative of Mo's notion of historiographical discourse. The historiographer makes choices at all times: the form, particular tropes to convey content, the beginning, even the end. Mo himself chose to be a fiction historiographer in *Insular* and, as such, he chose to use external form, subject matter, and the tropes of painting and journalism as creative modes to expose the fictionality of a nonliterary genre like history.

Even though *An Insular Possession* is not strictly a Hong Kong cultural artifact, it was produced by an overseas Chinese author in a period of intense nation formation and identity formulation. Form, content, and tropes were purposefully crafted to associate fictional characters and happenings to people and historical events. In narrating the stories of a singular group of expatriates in the Southern China of the 1830s and 1840s, Timothy Mo cleverly wrote about present-day key events in Hong Kong. He was not the only one; the period from 1984 to 1997 proved to be significantly traumatic to Hongkongers with a heightened sensitivity to the arts. They began to develop notions of quasi-nation-ness and identity in cultural works that also documented the history of the territory in the last years of British colonialism. Mo's *Insular* obliquely documents the concerns of Hong Kong in that traumatic era and exposes the sham of historiographical discourse. As a graduate in history, Mo was certainly familiar with the theories of Kellner, White, Ricouer, Foucault, Manzoni, Lukács, and Cowart. His mastery of the rhetorical devices employed by historiographers, therefore, should not be surprising.

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