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Feature Article 【專題論文】

Learning to Understand the Other: Timothy Mo's Novel *An Insular Possession*
學習了解他者：毛翔青的小說《島之佔有》

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關鍵詞：《島之佔有》、歐洲的自我、種族優越感、二元對立、殖民主義、他者

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Abstract

In his novel, which appeared in 1986, the author, who himself is of mixed British-Cantonese descent, deals with the historical events leading up to the opium war in the 1830s and the subsequent foundation of the colony of Hong Kong. In addition to being a fascinating historical account of the subjugation of the Chinese Empire at the hands of the British and the mercantile colonial interests motivating it, it is also a kind of *bildungsroman* about Gideon Chase, the young clerk of an American trading company operating in China. After becoming initially interested and finally totally absorbed in Chinese culture, he eventually ends up as a distinguished professor of Chinese Studies in the United States. The analysis of the novel will trace the trajectory from mutual contempt and hostility between Europeans and Chinese plus its underlying binarisms to Chase's going beyond the ethnocentric perception of the Other as an aberration from a norm that is constituted by the European self. In the present case this is a one-sided process because the Chinese are singularly uninterested in the Europeans, but Gideon Chase's penetrating insights into the intricacies of Chinese culture provide a fictionalized instance of how the encounter between Europeans and Chinese could have worked out had there been more intercultural mediators like him with his hermeneutical approach to understanding the Other.

摘要

在這本一九八六年出版的《島之佔有》小說中，中（粵）、英混血的作者描寫了一八三〇年代與鴉片戰爭的諸項歷史事件，以及隨後香港淪為殖民地的相關情節。除了摹繪英國基於貿易的利益征服大清帝國的大時代背景外，此書也可視為主角基甸・卻斯——一位美國貿易公司年輕職員——以中國為背景下的成長小說。從最初的好奇到完全融入中國文化，結局是主角在美國成為了一位從事中國研究的講座教授。

從對歐洲與中國最初相互輕視且充滿敵意的二元對立作為出發點來分析這本小說，觀察到主角逐漸超越內心潛在的種族優越感——一種建構於歐洲自我觀點成見——的改變。由於當時的中國對歐洲並不關注，因此此書內容純粹由歐洲單方面的觀點來描寫。然而主角極具穿透性的洞察力，讓歐洲與中國的文化互動成為小說化一個絕佳的範例與背景，書中人物及詮釋的方式都成為對他者進行理解的絕佳媒介。

1.

The British novelist Timothy Mo was born in 1950 as the son of an English mother and a Cantonese father. It is not surprising, perhaps, given this mixed parentage, that all of his half a dozen or so novels should have as their theme the complexities arising from the East meeting the West and vice versa. Accordingly, his novel *An Insular Possession*, which appeared in 1985 and was short-listed for the Booker Prize, the most prestigious literary prize in Britain, is set in a period when Britain was gaining a foothold on the South Canton Coast for its global trade with China, which eventually led to the establishment of Hong Kong as a British colony in the years between 1835 and 1842.

Mo's text amounts to a massive historical novel whose authorial narrator, by way of setting the scene, provides a lucid analysis of the globalized economy underlying the whole enterprise of British colonialism in the middle of the 19th century, whose world-encompassing mechanism he describes "as two intersecting triangles, perhaps even as a Star of David, whose sides, though invested with discrete identity, when amalgamated add up to a wholly different economic function. We have: The West Indian or Atlantic Triangle. And – the East Indian triangle. The former is the senior [...]." (p. 29)[1]

This intricate system of colonial exchange functions as follows: on the Atlantic triangle English ships sail to the bulge of Africa, there to pick up slaves who are then taken to the Caribbean or America, respectively, where they grow the cotton that, in its turn, is shipped to the North of England where it is processed into cloth by an enslaved industrial proletariat in dark, satanic mills. The second, the Asian triangle, consists of the export of this cloth to India, where it pays for the opium grown there, which is required to pay for the Chinese tea

1 All quotations from Mo's novel will be from the Picador edition published in 1987.

that is transported back to England where it serves a specific purpose: "The tea? Goes to comfort and stimulate the poor white cotton-workers in the main, so that drug of a kind is at work at all corners of the triangle." (p. 32) The entire global trade that colonialism is basically all about is aptly described as "a huge engine of enrichment (for the few) and enslavement and degradation (for the many)." (p. 30)

Getting back to the more narrowly defined chronotopos of Mo's narrative, the South Canton Coast at the time of the Opium War and the events leading up to it, it becomes evident that the British, by the time the action of the novel sets in, through the good offices of the East India Company and the notorious Scottish free-trading firms such as Jardine, Dent and Innes, are doing a roaring trade in opium, the deleterious effects of which, however, were beginning to undermine the health and morale of large sections of the Chinese population. When the Chinese authorities imposed a ban on the import of opium, the British reacted with the usual gun-boat diplomacy resulting in the war of 1839-1842, in the course of which the British, owing to their superior arms technology, inflicted a shattering defeat on the Chinese forces. Through the treaty of Nanking China was finally forced to cede control over Hong Kong to the British and unconditionally to open its home market to foreign trade, including the import of opium.

The contact zone of the meeting between colonizer and colonized is provided by the trading posts situated at the mouth of the Pearl River, whose liminality is emphasized in the opening lines of the novel: "The river succours and impedes native and foreigner alike; it limits and it enables, it isolates and it joins." (p. 5) In other words: Like every frontier it is subject to the dialectics of closure or separation and opening or interaction alike. The type of people encountering each other under such circumstances are not likely to be naturally disposed in favour of cross-cultural curiosity or even tolerance vis-à-vis the other, or as the authorial comment has it: " Remote Emperor, wily mandarin, ruthless British Free Trader, hard-headed Yankee interloper, pompous Company

Official, swaggering secret society smuggler, and opium growing *ryot* are linked by a devious web of dependence and repulsion, necessary cooperation and mutual hostility." (p. 28)

In this context Aimé Césaire's analysis of the motivation behind colonialism springs to mind, whose specific application to Africa can, *mutatis mutandis*, be made to include every colonial encounter in the 19th century: "The great historical tragedy of Africa has not been that it was too late in making contact with the rest of the world, as the manner in which that contact was brought about; that Europe began to propagate at a time when it had fallen into the hands of the most unscrupulous financiers and captains of industry."[2]

In other words, at a time when the sole motivating force is capital gain the European power-knowledge field is brought into play, which has given rise to what has come to be known as colonial discourse and whose objective, according to Homi Bhabha, it is "to construe the colonized as a population of degenerate types on the basis of racial origin in order to justify conquest and to establish systems of administrations and instruction."[3] One should add oppression and material exploitation to this list of objectives for which colonial discourse has to supply the justification.

The entire web of commercial interest and discursive denigration of the Other is incorporated into the novel by means of quotations from a local newssheet, *The Canton Monitor*, whose jingoistic tone towards the Chinese makes it evident that it is the mouthpiece of the trading community in Hong Kong: "The price of progress can never be cheap. Civilisation and Christianity may not always find an unobstructed path and, if such proves the case, the forces of darkness and prejudice must be cut down to make a way for the agents of

2 Aimé Césaires, *Discourse on Colonialism* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1972), p. 23.
3 Homi K. Bhabha, "The Other Question: Difference, Dissemination and the Discourse of Colonialism," in Francis Barker (ed.), *Literature, Politics and Theory*. Papers from the Essex Conference 1976-1986 (Colchester: University of Essex, 1986), pp. 148-172; p. 154.

improvement. It is, we would remind our readers, some of whom may find the analogy unusually pertinent, impossible to make an omelette without first breaking eggs. We, it must be frankly owned, cannot wait to see the great Chinese Humpty Dumpty given a forceful shove off his wall of secrecy and deceit and broken to all pieces. Not all the Emperor's men shall put him together again." (p. 382) Thus 'orientalizing' the Chinese *The Canton Monitor* hails the imminent outbreak of hostilities between China and Britain in June 1839, and throughout the novel lengthy quotations from this egregious journal represent the colonial view of things, whereby the Other is represented as totally negative: To use the typology for categorizing the Other introduced by Tzvetan Todorov, he is bad and detested in axiological terms, on the praxeological level he is kept at arm's length with the aim of subjecting him, and in epistemic terms his identity is of no interest or concern whatsoever.[4] All the positive values are, of course, chalked up on the British side who are represented, as is usual in the colonial dichotomy, as representing the forces of light, of civilization, rationalism and Christianity as against those of darkness, of backwardness, irrationalism and Paganism.

All of this constitutes the historical macro-level with its commonly known and well researched events and constellations. If we assume that history, following the Brothers Goncourt, is nothing but a novel that happened, then by that logic, conversely, history can be made into a novel, especially since, as Hayden White has pointed out, it employs the same techniques of figuration and emplotment as the novel. In other words, the historical macro-level provides the horizon into which the fictional micro-level inscribes itself, a procedure which makes for the usual mix of factual generalia and fictional individua the historical novel since Sir Walter Scott has been noted for and which is constitutive of its identity as a genre.

4 Tzvetan Todorov, *La conquête de l'Amérique: La question de l'autre* (Paris: Seuil, 1982), p. 233.

2.

On the fictional micro-level the novel is largely concerned with the fate of several young Americans working for the Bostonian trading firm of Meridian, Remington, Remington and Company where they are employed as clerks. Being American they are capable of providing, although also trading out of Hong Kong, a slightly more even-handed perspective on the Chinese and their policy over trading with the foreigners. Particularly Walter Eastman, a 24 year-old Virginian, and Gideon Chase, a 17 year-old New Englander, stand out among the Westerners because they do not share in the general contempt in which the Chinese are held, or as young Gideon puts it in a conversation with Walter:

> "Ah, Walter, I am sure if you knew the Chinese, you would not hate them so. Yet you cannot really hate them, else you would not be so warm on the subject of […]"

> "[…] the accursed drug. It is not that I love the Chinese, but that I despise the peddler of the poison. The smug arrant humbugs of the Dents, the Jardines, the Inneses."

> "Well, I don't hate them. I do not hate anybody. And if I did hate them, I would conclude to study to understand them and when I did comprehend them, then I could hate them no more."

> "Surely to understand an enemy clearly is best to have better reason for hating him?"

> "No, for then you could place yourself in his position and imagine what it is like to be him. And if you could become him, then you could no longer hate him."(p. 83)

If we define hermeneutics as the attempt to transgress the barrier separating our own culture from an alien one, or our own belief-system from that of another, our present from the past, the voice from the text and the meaning from the word, then Gideon's advocacy of understanding the Other is a truly hermeneutical project by means of which the colonial binarism and the ethnocentrism of considering European culture as being universal can be overcome.

This exactly is the course on which he embarks, and below the level of the state action of the Anglo-Chinese conflict the novel is largely determined by what can be termed a *plot of character* or *plot of intellect* in the course of which the two young Americans undergo all the stages of a veritable *Bildungsroman* or novel of education. Especially Gideon is intent, as has been shown in his conversation with Walter Eastman, on suspending any kind of facile eurocentrism. An opportunity for this presents itself when because of the confusion of the war he is shipped off to neighbouring Macao, where he begins to study the Chinese language and culture under the guidance of the Portuguese Jesuit Father Joaquim Ribeiro and a disaffected Chinese Mandarin named Ow, who initiates him in the normally arcane wisdom of the Mandarin class. In the course of this process it is interesting to note how the plot of the state action and the *plot of intellect* run counter to each other: The more the colonial conflict becomes intensified to eventually acquire the dimensions of a full-scale war, the more Gideon's understanding of the Chinese position is growing as he recognizes its total alterity which renders it utterly incommensurate with regard to any Western conceptuality. Eastman and Gideon Chase therefore initiate a counter-discourse to the prevailing British one as represented in the form of *The Canton Monitor*, by founding their own small newspaper, *The Lin Tin Bulletin and River Bee*, which in keeping with its name is intent on stinging and irritating the one-

sidedness of colonial discourse. In this fictional journal, whose first number appears on January 3, 1838, the two editors and sole authors empathize with the Chinese side and its course of action which, as shown, is totally negated by the British. Accordingly, they expose the true reasons behind the Anglo-Chinese conflict which had so far been masked by eurocentrism and its civilizing *cum* christianizing mission: "*Tout court*, here are the horns of the dilemma:

> 1. The Chinese government wishes to extirpate a vicious trade which ruins the health of its subjects and drains its treasury of precious specie.
>
> 2. The English government admits the immorality of the trade but cannot afford to lose its vast profits.
>
> By putting the onus for its suppression on the Chinese government, saying piously that one sovereign power may not interfere in the internal affairs of another, Britannia has the best of all worlds: she gets the lucre, yet washes her hands of all moral responsibility.
>
> We do not think this can be continued." (p. 346)

As can only be expected this kind of frankness causes a scandal in the colony, and a good deal of verbal squabbling between the two opposing papers ensues.

The *River Bee* provides the forum for Gideon to impart his ever-growing knowledge of Chinese culture to the small colonial community, all in the interest of evoking some empathy for the Chinese cause. To again use Todorov's categories of Otherness: Gideon's epistemic involvement with the Chinese, i.e.

getting to know them better, causes him to appreciate their worth in axiological terms and induces him, on the praxeological level, to have dealings with them on equal terms. Thereby, whatever previously appeared as bizarre or barbaric behaviour on the part of the Chinese, becomes at least partially understandable. What, in a deconstructivist move, gets dissolved in the process is the unreflected metaphysics of presence of the British side, which hitherto placed the entire burden of negativity on the Chinese side. Instead there now occurs a deferral of meaning whereby both positions are seen as determining each other: The insight into the selfhood of the Other and the otherness of the Self, as seen by the Other, is apt to further the appreciation of the Chinese and their motives. This does not only extend to their policy vis-à-vis an arrogant colonial power but also includes their status as human beings, which the colonial discourse of the Other had so far abrogated.

Gideon's observations on Chinese culture take the form of little *vignettes* that he publishes under the pseudonym of *Pursuer*, and indeed he is in fascinated pursuit of all things Chinese. These become most insightful when it comes to contrasting the different ways in which Chinese and Europeans construct their respective worlds. Some of the more salient examples many suffice to highlight these differences:

In order to qualify as an intellectual or artist in the European tradition, it is of primary importance to be possessed of a high degree of originality, i.e. one has to deviate from what went on before, from the established pattern or norm. In Chinese culture, however, such an aesthetic of poiesis is replaced by an aesthetic of mimesis: "To be the complete classical intellectual in the native tradition is also to be a mediocre artist; that is one bereft of all originality." (p. 190)

In one of the contrastive linguistic analyses between the English and Chinese languages Gideon formulates what comes close to an unhistorically early formulation of what in the middle of the 20th century became known as the Sapir-

Whorfe-theory, whereby the lexicon of a language is relative to its cultural and natural environment and the needs arising therefrom: " The language of man is at one and the same time an expression and instrument of his needs, and for those who follow him, relic and evidence of that experience." (p. 590) What follows this general remark is a learned disquisition on the word "loot" (i.e. a form of plunder) that has found its way into the language of the British colonial troops via the sepoys (i.e. Indian native soldiers serving in the British army), where it designates the rightful requisitioning of the enemy's property. So when the Chinese [Imperial] Commissioner impounded 20,000 chests of opium belonging to the British traders "he violated the rights in property of the owners – but when it came to Chinese goods – why, it's only *looting*." (p. 591) In other words, he who has the military might has the right to change the semantics and thereby the legality of property changing hands: The legal semantics of any conflict are always more benign when designating offences committed by the winner.

Another short essay bears the title "Apparent inhumanity of the Chinese." Before embarking on the cultural relativity of ethics and morals Gideon makes a universalizing statement: "Man everywhere is the same man. Under the different veneers of varying laws, institutions, and civilisations […] which may give an air of different characters, the Old Adam is the same." (p. 293) Having said this he goes on to highlight some seemingly bizarre examples of Chinese indifference to the plight of other human beings: "When I [Gideon] recited the example of the good Samaritan to an intelligent and kindly native, he wiped tears from his eyes – of mirth and disbelief." (p. 294) This is largely due to the Chinese not being bound by any abstract or impersonal ethical norms but by a highly personalized code of loyalty: "Thus a man's bond may only be with his family, who, it may be said with justice, are in a figurative as well as a literal sense in the same boat as he. In such a way are friendships and any sense of commonwealth and solidality subverted, the naturally generous instincts of man […] cramped and deformed by pernicious laws." (p. 294) This is exactly the point where Gideon, who after all is a New England Puritan, parts company with the Chinese by not entirely

relativizing their, as far as he is concerned, questionable ethics but by wondering instead about the multifariousness of the human race: "Truly, life is strange and holds out some perverted instances." (p. 294) This comes very close to Robinson Crusoe's disapproving but resigned acceptance of the customs of the 'savages' visiting his island whereby he is holding all normative judgement in abeyance, a stance which amounts to some kind of ethical agnosticism that is if not neutral but at least not outright condemnatory of behaviour considered to be outlandish. This is the point where even the most well-intentioned attempt at understanding the Other fails. Jean-François Lyotard has coined the term "le différend" for what he designates as the desire to 'know' the Other and its ultimate impossibility.[5] Acknowledging and respecting this irreducible residue of alterity in the Other can justifiably be regarded as the ultimate measure of our humanity.

From a purely literary point of view the most interesting essay of Gideon's is the one comparing the Chinese and the European forms of the novel and their underlying "ideology of form"[6] as the way in which aesthetic and sociohistorical elements combine or work upon each other. The two novelistic traditions are contrasted as being *linear* in the case of the European and *circular* with regard to the Chinese novel. The European narrative "essentially […] proceeds along a course of cause and effects, each contributing to the movement of the whole. The plot is a veritable engine which advances along its rails to a firm destination. The narrative is wound by the wheel of the story into a state of tension and anticipation." (p. 359) So much for Gideon's narratological assessment, which is certainly correct concerning the novelistic tradition that our protagonist who is supposed to be writing this in the 1830s could possibly be familiar with from an historical point of view. Accordingly the names mentioned are Cervantes, Fielding, Richardson, Scott and J. F. Cooper.

5 Jean-François Lyotard, *Le Différend* (Paris: Minuit, 1983).
6 Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (London: Routledge, 1989), p. 76.

The Chinese examples he draws on are the prose romances *Chin Pin May* and *The Dream of the Red Chamber*, which are "made up of separate episodes, pretty generally of chapter length, which may refer only onto themselves and be joined by the loosest of threads. It [the Chinese novel] chooses to emphasise incident, character, and language. It usually contains long passages of goods, recipes, formulas for patent medicine, and even spells." (p. 359) In other words, whereas in the European tradition every narrative incident or description is made subservient to the narrative arc transforming the beginning of the story into the final state reached at the end, no such retrospective causality or necessity is to be found in its Chinese counterpart which almost resembles the modern or postmodern Euro-American experiments that are, of course, yet unknown to Gideon. These differences are largely due to different concepts of time and history: European civilisation is "committed to progress and advance, through the Scientific explanation of phenomena from an analysis of cause and effect." (p. 359) Chinese society, by contradistinction, is "a society which looks in upon itself and has no notion of progress but a spiral decline from a golden age to a brazen one, in letters as well as all else." (p. 359) The former is therefore likened to a mighty river flowing towards its destination, the sea, while the latter is metaphorized as a still lake. Another distinguishing feature of both genres resides in their personnel: The European novel mainly features individuals in conflict with society, from which it draws its narrative force. No such conflict, however, exists in the Chinese novel where the individual is mainly seen as part of a family clan whose fortunes are followed from generation to generation. As an aside it may be remarked in this context that a similar distinction has been made between African and European literature when a critic like Lewis Nkosi argues that the conflictual structure of the English novel does not sit well with African society and its primary concern with social integration.[7]

7 Lewis Nkosi, *Tasks and Masks: Themes and Styles of African Literature* (London: Longman, 1981), pp. 4-6.

3.

On a metafictional level this begs the question of how Timothy Mo situates himself between these two traditions whose differences he has his protagonist expounding in what is by far the longest of his numerous essayistic chapters: "Chinese is uninflected; that is to say, it lacks tenses." (p. 360), Gideon explains, and this feature is replicated by Mo's novel which throughout is written in a present-tense which carefully eschews even coming anywhere close to resembling a historical present by narrowly adhering to the minutiae of the everyday dealings of the main characters. This effect is heightened by an episodic structure where the events related refuse to become integrated into a complete story. Although the history of the British-Chinese war is well documented and cannot be made to be undone because its outcome is an indisputable historical fact, its actual storyline is fragmented by being projected onto the level of isolated incidents. The consistent use of the present tense assists in avoiding what narratologists have designated as "motivation from the end."[8] In an Appendix Mo has an aged Gideon Chase, by now Emeritus Professor of Sinology, state in his memoirs: "an end is that which governs the sense of all that has gone before, which confers significance. Men do love conclusions." (p. 669) It is exactly such a winding-up that Mo's novel withholds from its reader by literally stopping in full flight with Gideon running for his life while under fire from Chinese artillery. This leaves the entire action on the micro-level incomplete, and only in the Appendix is the reader granted the gratification of learning, if only by implication, that Gideon survived his involvement in the Opium War to become an old man.

In a metafictional reflection the author has Gideon therefore rejecting what he refers to as history as melodrama, "a succession of acts and actors, of *dénouements,* namely and above all of climaxes." (p. 664) This is mainly due to

8 Clemens Lugowski, *Die Form der Individualität im Roman* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1976), p. 83.

the human desire to invest what Paul Ricoeur has referred to as "le temps vécu"[9] with some structure, which – because of its fleetingness – human beings wish to endow with causality and meaning, or as Gideon muses retrospectively: "To mark and make sense of such a passage [of time], men look to measure in Anno Domini, to fix by what they believe are endings, signatures on a piece of paper. How deluded is that finality! Treaties, Congresses, Conventions mean nothing, except to the participants – the stuff of history is less tangible, but lies in a popular mood whose ebbs and flows are not measurable by the month or year." (p. 674) This rejection of the history of events and state actions in favour of a *longue-durée*-view of history tends to play down the relevance of the Opium War as a self-contained sequence of events because it is just one single incident in the long-term history of colonial domination which, after all, lasted more than five hundred years and owes its dubious success to the deep-seated European mentality of feeling superior to the supposedly lesser races and cultures they encountered.

The departure from the plot of colonial history is supported and implemented by the narrative discourse of the novel, whose authorial narrator, in spite of his omniscience when commenting on his characters and their possible motivation, is scrupulously adhering to the limited perspective of his two protagonists Gideon Chase and Walter Eastman, for whom the events making up the early history of Hong Kong unfold as lived history, as isolated instances they are witnessing or participating in but that they are incapable of integrating into the sum total of British colonial history, whose claim to factuality is somewhat spurious anyway because it is nothing but a textual representation of whatever counts for real. Especially the fictional elements in the representation of the colonial Other, his 'invention', have become a staple of postcolonial theory by now and are largely due to their textuality: "history is not a text," says Fredric Jameson, "but […], as an absent cause, it is inaccessible to us except in textual form, and […] our

9 Paul Ricoeur, *Temps et Récit*, III, *Le Temps Raconté* (Paris: Seuil, 1985), pp. 153 ff.

approach to it and to the Real itself necessarily passes through its prior textualization."[10]

The numerous quotations from *The Canton Monitor* the novel abounds in are prime examples of how the material aspects of colonialism, as it were its hardware, were implemented by its textual software in the shape of colonial discourse: "Imperial relations may have been established initially by guns, guile and disease, but they were maintained in their interpellative phase largely by textuality."[11] The fascination of Mo's novel, however, is due to the fact that its author, unlike many other postcolonial theorists, does not fall into the textuality trap of "a fatal semiotic confusion between *signified* and *referent*. For the referent […] is the whole socio-economic situation, the interests contained in which are then signified in different ways by politics and ideology, but are simply not identical with them."[12]

As has been shown, the author is very clearsighted about the ways of how and the reasons why the machinery of colonial exploitation and control is set in motion, but at the same time he shows an acute awareness of the textual signifieds masking and justifying this. However, *An Insular Possession* would not be the postmodern novel it undoubtedly is – in spite of all its insistence on the material economic base it analyzes as being the main driving forces behind the discursive and ideological constructs of colonialism – if it did not – in a typically postmodern gesture of exposing its own fictionality – denounce its own negotiations with the 'real' as just another such construct, or as Gideon states in his memoirs: " Perhaps the essential truths may only be possessed in utter contrivance, where the artifice is openly acknowledged, as in a painting or a work of fiction where no facts may be found at all." (p. 667)

10 Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*, p. 35.
11 Chris Tiffin and Alan Lawson, "Introduction," in: Chris Tiffin and Alan Lawson (eds.), *Describing Empire: Post-colonialism and Textuality* (London: Routledge, 1998), p. 8.
12 Terry Eagleton, *Ideology: An Introduction* (London: Verson, 1991), p. 209.

The present novel, on the level of aesthetic composition, manages to alert the reader to its overtly contrived manipulation of historical data by refusing – in contravention of Georg Lukács's injunction with regard to the canonical historical novel – to carefully camouflage its own status as fiction through blending it with just the right amount of factuality, thereby creating what Roland Barthes referred to as "un effet de réel."[13] On the contrary, the text is such a mixed bag of documentary evidence, both factual and invented, plainly fictional elements, of disparate levels of concreteness and abstractness as far as the action is concerned that it comes very close to fulfilling Linda Hutcheon's definition of historical metafiction: "The contradictory 'contamination' of the self-consciously literary with the verifiably historical and referential challenges the border we accept as existing between literature and the extra-literary discourses surrounding it."[14]

What then is the merit of this kind of historical fiction or fictionalized history? Paul Ricoeur supplies a convincing answer to that question: " Le *quasi-passé* de la fiction devient ainsi le détecteur des *possibles* enfouis dans le passé-effectif."[15] In the present case the hidden historical possibility consists in there having been individuals like Gideon Chase and Walter Eastman who resisted the prevailing colonial discourse of racial and cultural contempt for the Other by setting up a counter-discourse of respect or at least understanding for the Other. This then leads to the speculation of what course history might have taken had this more enlightened discourse prevailed. However, the history of colonialism has shown how powerful an instrument colonial discourse has proved to be and how it totally blinded Europe's self to the worth of the Other. It would have needed a host of cultural mediators like Gideon Chase and Walter Eastman to accomplish this. But this is exactly the epistemic function it is literature's task to fulfil, namely to open up an imaginative space where unrealized (or unrealisable) versions of reality can be experimented with free from pragmatic constraints.

13 Roland Barthes, *Le degré zéro de l'écriture* (Paris: Seuil, 1953), p. 28.
14 Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism* (London: Routledge, 1988), p. 224.
15 Paul Ricoeur, *Temps et Récit*, III, *Le Temps Raconté*, p. 278.

4.

To what an extent, by way of conclusion, does a cultural mediator have to become imbued with his or her target culture? When Gideon first mentions to Father Ribeiro his intention of becoming acquainted with Chinese culture his mentor exhorts him as follows: "What is asked of you, my son, […] is to *accept*, to become a blank sheet on which will be inscribed the accumulated literary wisdom of a passage of whole centuries. The spirit of the lands from which we came is, alas, to enquire, to tear down, to scrutinise. To learn the language of the Chinese is perforce for you to become something of a Chinese yourself or at least adopt for a while their habits of thought." (p. 122)

It is important in this context to lay the emphasis on the qualifier 'something'. Anybody wishing to immerse themselves in another culture cannot possibly shed entirely their hermeneutical prejudice, which is the result of having been conditioned by their own culture. In intercultural learning one therefore speaks of becoming an honorary member of one's target culture, which very graphically highlights the in-betweenness or the approximation one could or should at best aspire to. Homi Bhabha has designated this as "hybridity," which term implies that both cultures – the dominant culture of origin and the culture worked upon – both emerge from their contact altered as well as mutually enriched: "It is significant that the productive capacities of this Third Space have a colonial or postcolonial provenance. For a willingness to descend into that alien territory […] may open the way to conceptualizing an *inter*national culture, based not on the exoticism of multiculturalism or the diversity of cultures, but on the inscription and articulation of culture's hybridity."[16] Jacques Derrida has coined a neologism for this in-betweenness which is neither the one nor the other, "antre." This *portmanteau*-word made up of French "entre" and "autre" is succinctly expressive of sameness and difference all wrapped in one. Gideon Chase, after

16 Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 38.

his assiduous studies of Chinese culture, has become, as is attested by his memoirs, a cultural hybrid himself – a New England Brahmin deeply influenced by Chinese thought who forever inhabits that third space created by a cross-cultural encounter not skewed by relations of dominance or subservience. But even under the worst of circumstances where acculturation is enforced upon the colonized, the dominated can always assert some measure of agency by subverting the dominant culture and appropriating it for their own purposes, thereby robbing it of its supposed authority as an uncontaminated and absolute presence. The Anglo-Indian cultural contact is a case in point, because it has produced an "Indianized" British culture with its bungalows, pyjamas, sun-downers and kedgerees. This leads to the deconstruction of racial or cultural difference, which – following Barbara Johnson – "is thus not an annihilation of all values or differences; it is an attempt to follow the subtle, powerful effects of differences already at work within the illusion of a binary opposition."[17] Superiority is thus always shot through with inferiority and vice versa, just as much as identity is based on alterity, each term thereby bearing the imprint of its negation.

But the present novel itself is also a perfect instance of this because the established European paradigm of the historical novel has now become infused with some new elements hitherto alien to the genre, such as the suspension of its teleology that traditionally takes the form of history presented as a linear story. Thereby, through enacting on the level of aesthetic composition what it proclaims on the thematic level, i.e. the fusion of cultures, it merges the constative and performative functions of language in a way one comes across frequently in postmodern metafiction, albeit that in the present case this is done with a postcolonial twist.♦

17 Barbara Johnson, *The Critical Difference: Essays in the Contemporary Rhetoric of Reading* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980), p. XI.

♦ Responsible editor: Hsiu-wen Huang (黃秀文).

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