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THE MACAU-LIVERPOOL BORDER

A few years ago, a dinner guest discovering I was part-Irish, as he himself is, asked me if I “vibrated” to Yeats. I told him that I didn’t, I don’t, which dismayed and upset him, as if vibrating to Yeats was in every Irish person’s DNA. I added that the first time I’d visited Ireland, a dozen or so years ago, contrary to my own expectations, my emotional chords had not been twanged by that experience either. My father was Irish, but I’d never known him, and had not been socialized into Irishness. At best, along with hundreds of thousands of others, I can lay claim to an Irishness at one remove, that of the Liverpool-Irish. For it was in that cosmopolitan port city that I grew up. And in my ethnic mix there is also Liverpool-Chinese.

When I was a small boy, living in that unusual city that sits precisely opposite Dublin across the Irish Sea and yearns not for the mountains behind but for the sea before it, I was looked after by my grandfather who was originally from Nanhai, or Namhoi, near Canton. He would often take me with him on his sorties to Chinatown, or outlying suburban Chinese outposts, where he had “business”. But just as often we’d go together to the local, neighbourhood shops. We’d walk together around Liverpool’s Faulkner Square, now often used as a set for Edwardian-period television series and films. Many decades later I would come to learn that the square had been the site of midnight police raids on the homes of to-be-deported Chinese former seamen who were rounded up and repatriated in 1945-1947 on the orders of Home Office. While downtown Nelson Street had replaced the blitzed Pitt Street Chinatown, Faulkner Square and its surrounding streets

named after nineteenth-century politicians, Canning and Huskisson, were home to many settled Chinese seamen and their local wives and their hybrid children - which I know makes them sound like mutant varieties of dahlias, but which is preferable to “mixed-race” or, as they were called locally well into the 1970s, “half-castes”. This area was also where my grandfather had run his wartime seamen’s café in a large Edwardian house where, with the seamen long-gone, I grew up.

As we walked around Falkner Square, with its railed-off gardens, once the preserve of the square’s key-holding residents and now a modest municipal park, my grandfather would point to a large, white, oval, emblazoned plaque above a doorway. It announced a particularly well-kept building as the Consulate of Portugal.

I wasn’t sure, aged 5 or 6, where Portugal was exactly but I knew it wasn’t in China; my school chums talked a lot then about European football. It was while passing in front of the Portuguese consulate that he told me about Macau, and how the Portuguese had ruled the territory for centuries. He told me that he’d lived there after his father had died in a squall on the Pearl River -- which tragic event had followed his mother’s having abandoned his father and her two sons. I never knew any more than this, never heard any more about a brother, and even these meagre details came from my mother and not from my grandfather, so they are worth what they are worth. But Macau was a fact. And perhaps Macau was far off, but somehow it seemed more accessible, more imaginable to that small boy than the vast unknown that was China. Walking past the Portuguese consulate a half-century after my grandfather passed away, I am always reminded of him and of Macau. Even now that I have visited and become acquainted with Macau over some forty years, that Edwardian house still triggers the impossible desire to know the Macau he knew.

So, no, I don't vibrate to Yeats, who by the way was an appallingly exoticizing, Orientalist like his friends Fenellosa and Pound. And while Dublin is a beautiful city and its people charming, I feel no emotional "buzz" when I visit. However, the first time, flying into Hong Kong's Kai-tak airport, that I saw the Pearl River, and its surrounding hills, I did indeed feel a surge of emotion. It felt like a coming-home. But Hong Kong was not my destination and I stayed on the plane; I was en route for Taiwan where I was to spend a couple of months at a summer school. Taiwan in 1978 was still in the grip of schizophrenia, suspicion and fear. Chiang Kai-shek was not long dead, and the KMT government was readying itself for the imminent US diplomatic recognition of Beijing; Taiwan which at home was always called Formosa, did not give me an emotional buzz either. All my Taiwan friends in London were pro-Taiwan independence, and I was invited to dinners where the guest of honour would be the spouse of someone locked-up for their anti-KMT stance. I'd visited Spain a couple of times by then, and the Taiwan government with its world anti-communist rallies broadcast on the television, reminded me of Franco's fascist regime. I'd even had to smuggle in my copy of Lu Xun's short stories and my mainland dictionary, both were banned books. But then perhaps, I was prejudiced by overheard conversations in my childhood. At an early age I'd come to understand that Chiang Kai-shek was not one of the good guys.

Back in Hong Kong as summer drew to a close, and having being denied a visa to visit China because I'd spent too long in Taiwan, I decided to take the ferry to Macau. I fell in love with the place. The then sparsely populated enclave with few cars, when compared to Hong Kong at least, allowed me to see myself treading in my grandfather's footsteps. I walked one day up to the border gate and imagined him taking that road back to his native Namhoi.

Some of today's Macau landmarks stood in more solitary splendour in 1978 and were visible from afar. I stayed in the other-worldly Bela Vista Hotel for a night; while not too expensive, on a student budget I could not afford to stay longer. I recall that the staff, as in other hotels, would not accept tips. I'd visited Lisbon two years before, at the height of the mid-1970s Portuguese Carnation Revolutionary fervour where gratuities had, temporarily, disappeared, along with the old fascist order. But I hadn't expected the tip-less culture to have been extended to Macau; but there again China's Cultural Revolution had also left its scent. I stayed mostly in a cheap, ramshackle guest house on the island of Coloane, not far from the Tam Kung temple. The guesthouse, more a sort of a dormitory, was on a low promontory by the shore. The sunset over the channel that separated Coloane from China was almost magical.

Taking the big yellow and white Fok Lei double-decker bus, by day I'd visit Macau proper, where I discovered an old bookshop at 9 Largo do Senado. I still have the phone number scribbled on a bit of paper: Macau 2121. I delved into that bookshop whenever I was in Macau. On my first visit I purchased a Spanish-Portuguese dictionary. The following year, living in China, I again visited Macau and headed once more to the bookshop where I bought the Book of Odes, the *Livro dos Cantares*, translated by the Jesuit Joaquim A. Guerra. It is well laid out. I have it in my hands now. On the left-hand page is the Cantonese transliteration of each ode, followed by the characters, and on the facing page the translation into Portuguese. The book is 1254 pages long, includes over 250 pages of notes and commentary, and is a testament to the dedication and industriousness of the Jesuits and their project of imagining China through translation.

This then, was my Macau. But my Macau was not his Macau. It was not my grandfather's. My Macau I created for myself from spaces and places and moments, and imagining him as a young man in his late teens, in the crepuscule of the nineteenth century, the last decade of the declining Manchu dynasty, schooling himself in its canonical texts. Yet, his Macau was also a place to flee as soon as he was able, so as to pursue his studies – he managed eventually to get to Nanking - and to get away from his ungracious aunt with whom he had lodged since his father's demise.

My Macau, some eight decades and two republics later, was fuelled not only by a liking for the sounds of Cantonese language and its varieties, but by a curiosity for the local, now largely disappeared, Macanese creole which I tried to make sense of with my schoolboy Spanish, and the Portuguese I'd taught myself to read; as a young man I was passionate about Latin America and its literature, García Márquez, Neruda, Mário de Andrade, and so came to Portuguese via Brazil. I bought anything I could that was written in creole, or Patuá as it is called, and even found some sound recordings of one of the last tale-tellers. I was drawn to everything that was a fusion, that seemed meshed together out of vying already fused together languages and customs, which were a far cry from the sterile, official model of Portuguese and Chinese national languages and cultures that would be imposed on the territory in the final decade before the "hand-over" in 1999. But all that was Macanese was fading fast, squeezed by lusophone newcomers and mainland Chinese immigrants who are now after all simply moving from one part of China to another. In any case what was linguistic and cultural currency in Macau, was largely a mirror of the monetary: it came from Hong Kong. And Hong Kong money literally flowed off the ferries in the pockets of aspiring or addicted gamblers. Very little flowed back.

So, in the Macau of 1978, there were just faint snatches of what my grandfather might have known, seen, and tasted. A mountain vista he would have taken in, a street he'd have trod. Over the years I would come to know Hong Kong much better than Macau and at times would feel at home there. Down by the old Star Ferry terminus with its adjacent bus station that reminded me of my childhood by the Pier Head where with my grandfather we'd take a ferry across the Mersey to see a friend or someone in need. Down by the dock road that still boasted an overhead railway; he took me on it just once. The Star Ferry terminal was like a perpetual space-time warp for me. Now both Hong Kong and Liverpool waterfronts have been warped into something else, something less welcoming.

Despite my affection for Hong Kong, I always felt more "at home" in Macau, and I found a way of conjuring up a simulacrum of my grandfather's Macau. I imagined it through a process of filtering and subtracting what I saw with my eyes: the churches, monuments, bridges, casinos that I captured in Kodachrome in 1978:

From multiple vantage points he would have stared at the Macau skyline which always offered a view of China's verdant hills, then unimpeded by towers, casinos and banks. And he'd have seen the governor's mansion nestled midst lush greenery in its rosy glory.

On Coloane, I imagined him glimpsing the lone fisherman crouched on the rocky outcrop that sloped gently into the sea, his outstretched rod in one hand, a cigarette in the other, a wicker hat perched on his head.

I'd see him staring out, as I was, over the water's shimmering grey-blackness illuminated by the sun going down, as a fishing boat glided down the channel that separated us from China, both then

and now.

Of course, he would not have known the yellow-and-white liveried bus waiting at the Coloane terminus. But, yes, he might have penetrated into the unpaved *ruelas* of the outmost lying island of Coloane. But on this island that so pleased me back in 1978, he would not have seen the monument recalling the seeing-off of pirates – it was erected in 1910, when he was long gone. He would not have seen St Francis Xavier’s church, since for all its old-worldliness it was only built in 1928 – he was then in England.

But my method lacked rigour. To the filtering out of what he could not have seen, must be added what he probably did not see. Would he ever have set foot on Coloane? The causeways linking first the mainland to the island of Taipa, and Taipa to Coloane did not exist then. Why would he wish to, how could he afford to, take a boat out to those islands?

No, his stamping ground was limited to the Macanese mainland, its temples and churches that lined the quotidian alleyways and streets he walked. Especially the route to his aunt’s preferred church, where he was meant to buy and light candles for her. He didn’t. He saved the money, bought books and smuggled them back into the house. His aunt’s religious regime, the temples and churches that populated the streets and rhythmised Macanese daily life seemed to have left no mark on him, no positive trace anyhow. He was the most unreligious man I have ever known. Indeed, at the time, the English would have called him a “heathen”. Years after my grandfather had died, when I was a teenager attending a hard-edged, city-centre grammar school, there were just two boys of visibly Chinese origin and both were in my class. I can’t recall other boys being racist towards them; it

was the era of Bruce Lee and kungfu and Chinese were suddenly popular. But our maths teacher, who was also our form teacher, was another matter; he was a born-again Christian. One day one of my “Chinese” classmates, Steve, was being reprimanded for some minor transgression or other, and as he was dispatched to the corridor the teacher let fly with “you filthy heathen”. Several of us then misbehaved in solidarity so that we’d be sent out of the classroom too. The year was 1968.

In the old seamen’s café there were no religious icons, no Buddhas, no red candles, no joss sticks burning. My grandmother’s beliefs didn’t extend beyond a thin tissue of superstitions and folk customs she’d picked up in her Cotswold childhood. There was just a souvenir Jerusalem cross in olive wood she’d brought back from Palestine before the First World War. To bring good luck on the household she’d sweep out the four corners of the living room as she chanted out the names of the four gospels, but she never set foot in a church. And my grandfather never showed any interest in religion. He was a modern man by his own lights. He was devoid of superstition. It was as if his claim to “Chineseness”, to being a “Chinese national”, of belonging to the China he had dreamed of but never saw and would never see, demanded of him a rigorous secular approach to life. And even on the premises of the Che Kung Tong that he ran in Chinatown, the so-called Chinese Masons, there were no insignia or paraphernalia to be seen at all. All was plain and straightforward. One consequence was that the only “Chinese” stories he told me lacked all religious connotation. I recall him telling me the story of a man who gradually moved a mountain through tenacity, perseverance and patience. It was only years later studying the Taoist text *Liezi* that I’d recognize it as the story of Yu Gong. Similarly, every now and then, I’d see something that would remind me of him. In a Macau restaurant one evening I saw a cook “pulling noodles”. It was the first time I’d seen that spectacular culinary performance since I was a small child. I never tired of watching my



grandfather conjure noodles out of just flour and water as if by some acrobatic magic.

But if my Macau, was not his Macau, today's Macau is neither his nor mine. *Our* Macau is gone, transformed for ever: Skyline metamorphosed, shorelines disappeared under "reclaimed" land, human-sized buildings dwarfed and cramped-out by spectacular yet sinister hotel-casinos. And yet the house that was home to the Portuguese consulate is still there on the other side of the Macau-Liverpool border, standing proud on that picturesque Edwardian square, and just like my grandfather's Macanese story it brings to mind each time I pass by, it is preserved and intact.