THE POLITICS OF HISTORICAL DISCOURSE AND INTERCULTURAL REPRESENTATION IN TIMOTHY MO'S *AN INSULAR POSSESSION*

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Abstract: The present paper analyses Timothy Mo's interrogation into the nature of historical experience and records in ***An Insular Possession****, his ironic replication of the traditional historical novel, which portrays the cultural transgressions and misconceptions opposing the Chinese and British Empires during the Opium Wars. The paper highlights the diversity of narrative techniques deployed in the historicising of fictional discourse, as well as the parodic strategies aimed at debunking the putative objectivity of historiographic writing and documentary sources. We argue that the novel's ingeniously orchestrated pastiche of historical referentiality, illustrating the multi-voiced, dialogical discourses of textual or visual archives, articulates a meta-fictional, meta-historical counter-discourse which critiques and demythologises conventional constructions on the validity of historiographic discourse and documentary evidence. The paper also probes into Mo's ironic questioning of the potentialities of cultural translation and mediation in achieving intercultural comprehensibility.*

Keywords: postmodern, historicised discourse, Chinese, British, cultural (mis)representations

An Insular Possession (1986) is Mo's most daunting project to date, whose agenda goes beyond the novelist's avowed preoccupation with the irreconcilable clash of cultures. It engages the postmodern philosophy of history, which interrogates the discursive practice of history writing and the validity of documentary sources. While striving to maintain the illusion of objectivity and factual realism, Mo questions the objectivity of historical records and historiographic discourses. If the novel emphasises the subjective nature of all records of historical events, the novelist self-consciously draws attention upon the inherent subjectivity of his own representation of the past. Being the first to engage a fictional representation of the birth of Hong Kong in the aftermath of the Sino-British wars of the 19th century, the novelist relishes not only the thematic originality of his project, but also the prospect of stamping his readers' imaginative representation of the period. He seems to relish 'the idea that everybody's notion of the Opium Wars in sixty years time will be mine', but professes the sincerity of his endeavour: 'You see, our version of 19th-century London is not really Mayhew's or Marx's, it's Dickens's version, which is a complete falsification…I've tried to make the economic analysis of it truthful, and sincere. I may have done violence to the facts at some stage, but you can rely on it as a sincere representation of that time and place' (Mo, quoted in Parker 34).

Mo emphasises the tenuous distinctions between fact and fiction which underlie the realist aesthetic and our assessment of its referentiality. He also teases our readiness to take for granted the illusion of truthfulness installed by the historical or realistic novel. Moreover, he undermines the authoritativeness and interpretive finality of historical texts, records and sources. He chooses to play a tantalizing postmodernist game which simultaneously confirms

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and subverts his reader's assumptions. As Ho argues, 'Mo deliberately blurs the boundaries between fact and the factitious and in doing so, raises serious questions about authenticity as a criterion of value for historical fiction' (Ho 71). Mo artfully mixes the self-conscious bathos and cynicism of the post-modern mindset with the pleas for credibility and suspension of disbelief characteristic of the 18th and 19th century novel. Another thing he shares with Swift, Defoe, Dickens and Thackeray is the confidence in the instructive and formative function of his prose. This duplicity of voice and vision is captured by Ho's comment: 'In announcing that what he offers is his own 'version' of the past, and in wanting it to become *the* decisive reading, Mo acknowledges the innate subjectivity of his novel. At the same time, he is also arguing for the power of fiction, much more than conventional histories, to intervene in shaping our collective memory and understanding of the past'(Ho 71).

On account of his Anglo-Chinese parentage and background, many critics have considered Mo as an apt chronicler of the Sino-British relations. His bicultural education and heritage have been deemed as a vantage point, which warranties an accurate insight, as well as a balanced, objective view on the history and culture of the two empires. The critic Dick Wilson emphatically observes: 'Mo has a Cantonese father, an English mother and a Hong Kong birthplace: whom is more suitable to pen a great epic uncovering a rich clash of cultures and suggesting, as only a good novel can, the plurality of motive and diversity of individual character that rescue such episodes of history from the straight-jacket of political myth-making? It is somewhat, perhaps, like Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, which Mo admires so much' (Wilson 60-1). Given the novel's focus on colonial appropriation and possession, many might have expected a markedly postcolonial outlook. With the equidistance implied by his hybrid identity, the author discretely steers clear of any ostensible political pronouncements or partisanship. His position remains one of divided loyalties and equidistant detachment: 'The fact of Mo's birth in Hong Kong convinces many that his work is primarily preoccupied with postcolonial concerns, especially as he left a colonised location to be educated at, and later work in, the old centre of the British Empire…As a migrant writer with his own tethering to the old imperial centre, Mo occupies that peculiar positions place both within and without, belonging and not-belonging' (McLeod 107, 128). This is indeed the interstitial, 'insular' position from which he portrays the world of *An Insular Possession*.

Mo downplays the role of the knowledgeable insider, with an indisputably legitimate claim to accuracy of insight and interpretation. He strives for the effect of objectivity and ideological detachment, without assuming the stance of knowingness: 'As a writer who was born and first educated in Hong Kong, Mo, in his fictional treatment of its early colonial history, could have laid claims to the privileged view of the insider. But *An Insular Possession* seems to have been deliberately conceived to frustrate any such claim' (Ho 1994, 52). Mo achieves this distancing effect through a whole array of narrative strategies. The central ploy resides in his narrating the events through the neutral, detached perspective of his American protagonists, 'whose nationality places them on the periphery of the British opium trade and the imperial politics that sustain it' (*Ibid.*). The vast historical panorama is the background to the fates, experiences and careers of Walter Eastman and Gideon Chase. Swirled in the whirlpool of a war in which they can no longer remain mere spectators, the two Americans come to act various parts (narrators, commentators, arbiters of opinion and taste, war reporters, intermediaries, diplomatic mediators and interpreters, and ultimately informed

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chroniclers of history in the making). The centrality of their history, which effaces Mo's narratorial authority and smoothes the postcolonial edges of his discourse, confers the novel not only the immediacy of lived experience, but also the objectifying perspective of what Ho calls 'Mo's project of third-party history', as experienced by 'outsiders struggling for some form of cultural involvement'(*Ibid.*).

The author's choice of a mediating American perspective is, in Ho's opinion, 'consistent with Mo's interest in marginal characters' (Ho 2000, 73). Indeed, all his novels evince a preference for narrators or observers situated on the margins of the dominant social or political order, which we also find in Rushdie's work. For their protagonists, marginality is productive of a particular sensitivity to events and atmosphere, which counteracts their claims to detachment and neutrality. At the same time, their peripheral angle of perception justifies their claim to objective observation. In *An Insular Possession*, 'the American nationality of the two protagonists…places them as outsiders to the Sino-British conflict', and helps Mo project a version of 'history written from the vantage point of the disempowered third party' (*Ibid.*). Mo occupies the middle ground between any clear-cut ideological or cultural commitments. As Ho argues, 'the cross-boundary negotiations of identity that are recurrent in Mo's fiction resist precisely those binary structures of which the oppositions of imperial/periphery and Western theory/non-western writing are too familiar rehearsals' (Ho 1994, 52). By relying on the perceptions and judgements of a third party, the novel 'implicitly positions itself as the fictional alternative to both imperial (British) and nativist (Chinese) versions of history, and confronts history and identity as constituted of voices whose possibility has not been previously imagined' (Ho 2000, 73, 75).

The highly opinionated voices of the two American protagonists, initially confined to the private space of their expatriates' enclave at the Factories, strive to penetrate the public space through the medium of a journalistic venture. The newspaper Eastman and Chase create, the *Lin Tin Bulletin and River Bee*, is designed as an anti-establishment publication, offering an alternative discourse to that of the *Canton Monitor*, the mouthpiece of the British opium traders. The title alludes directly to Lin Tin Island, the unofficial headquarters of the 'nefarious trade'. Its main purpose is to expose the onerous practices of British trade with China. Its editors also aim to promote fair judgement of the claims staked by the conflicting sides. At the same time, Chase, who assumes the penname 'Pursuer', pursues his project of cultural mediation by writing didactic pieces on Chinese customs and culture, meant to promote a knowledge and understanding of Chinese cultural idiosyncrasies and thus dispel distorting Western prejudice. The *Bulletin* deals with 'a history that takes place elsewhere, to which its editors…claim greater freedom of access and knowledge by virtue of their alibi as exiles from their own race and ethnic community' (*Ibid.*). Their initial motivation to counteract the supremacist, colonialist rhetoric of the *Canton Monitor* soon dissolves into acerbic commercial, ideological and intercultural competition rendered as a textualised confrontation which tends to become an end in itself. The printed exchange of affronts and satirical shafts degenerates in an actual duel, in which Eastman wounds his rival editor. Most of the narrative consists of extensive reports from the pages of both publications. Mo's dexterity in mimicking the journalistic discourse of the time is remarkable, despite the somewhat overwhelming length and density of the texts quoted in small type: 'the period

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flavour in the speech of the Westerners is managed well, though the prose of the two newspapers can be oppressively orotund' (Enright 498).

The press excerpts function not merely as a variation in narrative strategy or as tokens of documentary evidence, but as a major premise in Mo's deconstruction of historical records and history writing. In highlighting the biased rhetoric of the editors and their contradictory accounts, the narrative 'encloses the contest between two competing versions of history narrated by the two newspapers…[and] underlines the conflicting ideologies that inform them' (Ho 2000, 75). The novel's humour and irony derive from the discrepancies between their versions of reported 'reality'. The *Canton Monitor* represents 'the voice and very often the propaganda of belligerent British commercial and imperial interests' (*Ibid.*). Its columns are mainly devoted to a programmatic disparagement of Chinese culture and its right to oppose the aggression of British trade. Its xenophobic and hegemonic campaign against the 'venal authorities of Canton' is characterised by inflammatory urges that the British officials forsake diplomatic negotiations and resort to military force: 'If the high road to Free Trade and riches in China may only be reached through a river of blood, then let the blood which is shed be Chinese…let us have a Napoleon, if we must' (Mo 1987, 38). That is why the measures of Captain Charles Elliot, the Superintendent of Trade, who hands in the coffers of opium to the Chinese so as to avoid unnecessary military engagements, are constantly chastised as signs of inadequacy and pusillanimity.

The *Monitor* is also a fervent supporter of the idea of obtaining from the Chinese a territory where the British could establish an independent and secure base of trade operations, preferably on one of the coastal islands. The desirability of a British commercial haven is propagated in its pages through effusive, passionate expressions of imperial acquisitiveness: 'it will then be expedient (tho' only in the last resort) to withdraw the British commerce altogether from the control of the Chinese authorities, and to establish it in some Insular Position on the Chinese coast where it may be satisfactorily carried on' (*Idem*, 98). The acquisition of a new imperial possession is heralded in tones which glorify the Empire's resourcefulness and the righteousness of its advance: '*If the Emperor will not concede some eligible situation, some suitable island possession, then let us take it*' (*Idem*, 100). The editor's martial tone occasionally gives way to a lyrical romanticising of imperial appropriation and progress, envisioning the acquisition as a utopian realm of unhindered commerce with the world. The utopian, narcissistic self-justification of colonial discourse is subtly debunked by Mo's ironical view of the imperial dream hymned on the printed page: '*Lantao!* There may be a name which will be written on a glorious and immortal page of Britannia's destiny! The Gibraltar of the East. Lantao!' (*Idem*, 98). The stylistic convolutions of the establishment mouthpiece, with its 'mixture of jingoism, hypocrisy, hard business sense, and a fearfully arch would-be literariness' (Enright 498), accentuate Mo's parody of colonial discourse. The discourse of the *Monitor* inscribes 'history seen on a daily basis from the point of view of the colonialist supremacist (Ho 2000, 75). By contrast, Eastman and Chase's publication advocates reason and malleability, praising the diplomatic caution of Captain Elliot, and trying to promote a knowledge and understanding of the Chinese 'world outside the expatriate cloister of trade and tiffin, club and cricket' (*Idem*, 76). However, the two heroes' ethical commitment is often affected by their divided loyalties. Their 'self-

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fashioning…as idiosyncratic outsiders and fearless challengers to the British establishment' (*Ibid*.) often comes in contradiction with their increasing proximity to the British forces.

As the conflict escalates towards armed confrontation, the competition between the two newspapers acquires more serious ideological overtones. The different ethical and ideological positions are mirrored in their jarring interpretation of events. In order to highlight such inadvertencies, Mo deliberately juxtaposes excerpts from both papers. The *Monitor* commends the bravery of British troops, who have magnanimously saved the Chinese from their own kind: 'The men in general behaved very well. There was little opportunity for plunder and inebriation, the troops rather protecting the houses and abandoned property against Chinese robbers and marauders'. Recounting the same event, the *Bulletin* focuses on 'the scenes of distress', on the destruction and 'humiliations inflicted upon a proud and frequently courageous people, who in many instances…preferred death by their own hands to the dishonour of defeat and defilement'. The allegedly gentlemanly conduct of the troops is denounced as sheer barbarism: 'Rape, robbery, arson, and murder were the order of the day among the Indian troops. When their brutish appetites were slaked, they did not scruple to mutilate the outraged flesh of their victims' (Mo, 575-6). These jarring accounts are in turn checked with the more veridical testimony of Chase's letters or the daily entries in a would-be war journal, which records, in the third person, what he witnessed himself. This is meant to confirm both the objectivity of the *Bulletin* and its composite sympathies, divided between the plight of British soldiery, seen as 'brave men engaged in a wrongful cause' (Enright 498), and the senseless massacre of the Chinese population. Yet, the reliability of both newspapers in terms of historical evidence is questionable. Both publications 'are clearly shown to be embedded in the socio-cultural and ideological situations of those who produce them and to put strikingly different constructions on events' (Ho 2000, 75).

The dystopia of warfare is 'graphically recounted' (*Ibid*.) by the newspaper reports and the narrator's notations of Chase's experiential peripatetics in a dystopian, embattled underworld. The entries in this war journal, replete with dates and places, and reported in the present tense, convey the chaotic engagement of forces by means of richly sensorial imagery. The account has the immediacy of reportage. It sustains the illusion of veracity and first hand testimony, in which the time of narration and narrated time are superposed in the dilated present of an experiencing consciousness. The immediacy of sensation, the accelerating pace of events, and the hypertrophied perception of horror in this fictitious war-reportage offer a heart-rending, surreal image of lived absurdity. Short, brisk, elliptical or arrestingly sentential sentences punctuate the narration like lyrical adagios to an engulfing tragedy. Language is wielded so as to create a highly cinematic juxtaposition of images, replicating the effect of filmic freeze frames, dissolves, or cuts, of scenic dilatations of inner duration, rendered by comments such as : 'Time slows' (Mo 566). It is a pictorial evocation of dystopian warfare, of a hyper-reality of the mind and the senses, in which the understatement of would-be factual reporting communicates more than ideological or ethical speeches. Nonetheless, despite the author's use of indirection and understatement, the narrative resonates with anti-colonial undertones.

By relying on the authority of would-be authentic texts, the novel comments on the narrativity of history, which 'raises questions about what New Historicists have called 'the textuality of history' (Ho 2000, 74). The novel's text is meant to evoke the prismatic,

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ideologically informed and ultimately perspectival nature of historiographic records and documentary sources. In Mo's project, 'history…is not written in the form of a master narrative, or from the point of view of a single authority…it is a jumble of narratives, told by a multiplicity of voices, all jostling each other for supremacy' (*Idem*, 75). In its deliberate avoidance of a coherent, unifying narration of history, the novel illustrates Lyotard's postmodern distrust of in the self-assumed authority of any master narrative. Furthermore, Mo's ironic subversion of the claims to objectivity of factual records enjoins the debate over the shared narrativity of both historiography and fiction insofar as it 'installs a critique of the methods, procedures and ideological alignments of traditional historiography' (*Ibid.*). The novel's subversive blurring of fact and fiction, its concomitant complicity in and critique of the traditional ideologies underlying both historical and literary representation fall into Hutcheon's paradigm of historiographic metafiction, which she views as an emblematic product of postmodernism's wariness of realism, of the illusion of referential transparency. The historical discourse crafted by Mo places the novel 'in the context of a serious contemporary interrogating of the nature of representation in historiography' (Hutcheon 47). Much in the manner of Rushdie, Mo envisages 'a historical novel that is also metahistorical in that it parodies the lack of self-reflexiveness of much traditional historiography' (Ho 2000, 74).

Mo's programmatic juxtaposition of texts traditionally regarded as first-hand, veridical historical evidence – letters, journals, press reports –tantalises the reader with the illusion of veracity, exposing the ideologically biased construction on events which such materials provide. Ho emphasises the author's disingenuous investment in 'primary documents', traditionally regarded as 'indispensable in the verification of 'facts'': 'In casting a critical eye on contemporary records of events as post factum constructions, Mo implicitly undermines the traditional historioghaphic practice of asserting the truth of 'what happened' on the basis of a study of extant 'sources'' (*Idem*, 75-6). Factual documents are used and abused, as if to demythologise their infallibility. Mo's complicit reliance on the legitimising effect of period documents, counteracted by the ironical undermining of their reliability, supports the deconstructive projects undertaken by theorists such as White or Dominic LaCapra, who have 'acted to de-naturalize notions of historical documents as representations of the past and of the way such archival traces of historical events are used within historiographic and fictive representations' (Hutcheon 48). Mo's heavy use of such documentary evidence, suggesting both a complicity with and critique of their mythical aura of truthfulness, subtly demonstrates how documents can have 'critical or even transformative relations to phenomena "represented" in them' (*Ibid.*). As Ho observes, 'the devices – the objective journalistic report, realistic visual representation, firsthand or eyewitness accounts – in which master narratives are often justified are counterpointed in the text, and each revealed, in turn, to be inherently flawed' (Ho 2000, 74).

The novel's ultimate irony is that its satirical undermining of historical evidence turns upon itself, in a patently postmodernist movement from irony to self-irony. The appendices which follow the text, meant to create the illusion of historical veracity, constitute an effective strategy in Mo's pastiche of historical discourse. Mo's gives an ironic twist to the traditional claims to historical referentiality of the realist novel. His use of para-textual features is germane to the 'postmodern exchange between realism and fantasy' and capitalises on 'its

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currency of playful generic transformations' (*Idem*, 82). The intersection of fiction and history is graphically inscribed by the para-textual insignia of scientific accuracy commonly used to authenticate the historiographic text. 'Appendix I' is purported to be a 'real' document attesting the veracity of the people and events portrayed in the novel. '*A Gazetteer of Place Names and Biographies Relative to the Early China Coast* by An Old Hand' (Mo 652), supposedly published in Shanghai in 1935, contains entries which mix the real historical figures evoked in the novel with references to Chase and the painter O'Rourke, thus playfully casting doubt upon their assumed fictitiousness. The short biography of 'Chase, Professor Gideon Hall' (*Idem*, 654), is strategically inserted between a historically verifiable personality and a real toponym, so that the 'truth status of these two names seeps into that of Chase, mystifying it with the aura of verity' (Ho 2000, 83).

Mo's insertion of his characters' biographies fulfils a double function: on the one hand, he gives a sense of closure, informing the reader of the protagonists' fates after their projected departure, with which the novel ends (Chase's subsequent career as a world-famous Orientalist and his lifetime engagement with Chinese culture and the fate of Hong Kong; Eastman's success in advancing his revolutionary technology); on the other hand, Appendix I also 'draws the reader into its ludic process…of enigmatic exchanges between fact and fiction', where 'the semblance of the real' (*Ibid.*) induces the suspension of disbelief and tempts us, however fleetingly, to believe in its truth. The illusion of truth is more strongly sustained than in Appendix II, which purports to offer an extract from Chase's works, as a kind of adagio to the novel's historical meditation, but which can be more easily dismissed as fictional than the technically authoritative *Gazetteer*. The latter 'document' contains a further authorial entrapment, baffling the reader's predictable reflex to connect Eastman's name to Eastman-Kodak.

As Ho argues, the fact that Eastman's name is not included in the index of names 'poses a problem – and a temptation – of another kind': 'This fictional nineteenth-century photography enthusiast bears the same surname as the actual nineteenth-century American photography enthusiast who was to invent the Kodak camera and to found Eastman Kodak. It is as if Mo is challenging the reader *not* to wonder naively – just for a moment – whether the two might be related. In this way, Eastman figures as another signpost of the intersection between the real and the make believe that tantalise and tease' (*Idem*, 84). Mo's authorial game takes both our credulity and investigative vigilance for granted. He makes us wonder in order to have us 'fall precisely into the novel's ludic trap…set up to subvert established boundaries between [fact and fiction]', in a hazarded 'attempt to enact closures upon the debates upon the mimetic, which it is the novel's project to re-imagine and carnivalise' (*Ibid*).

Mo's parodic use of the para-textual markers of historical texts draws attention to the fact that his novel is as much about history-writing as it is about history-making. It is relies on the postmodernist ironic impulse to subversively hybridise the discourses of fiction and history, in order to challenge our certainties about historical knowledge and its representations. Meant to illuminate the historical context which led to the birth of Hong Kong, Mo's text draws attention to the cultural antagonism underlying its myth of origin, subsequently sublimated in the hybridity which the place bespeaks. The irredeemable incompleteness and partiality of historical knowledge is formally represented by the narrative incompletion of the novel itself, which drops the destinies of its protagonists at a moment

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which is both an end and a beginning. It is the end of the two Americans' wrestling with history and the two inimical cultures they have tried to reconcile, just as it is the beginning of their and the new colony's future. Ho contends that the novel does not fulfil the promise of its title, that the 'insular possession is given no story', that 'Hong Kong has no presence…as community or culture, except in the final moments as the haven or retreat of foreigners displaced from pone trading post to another' (*Idem*, 86). Yet this is only partly true. The insular possession inflames the imagination of British traders, Court officials and their emissaries to China, just as it fills the pages of the official press in Canton, and of the novel itself, with the promise of utopia. Its final appropriation as colonial possession materialises their desire to conduct their more or less respectable trade with the East unhindered by Chinese officialdom, from a place where they can have the best of both worlds.

For Mo, what is worth remembering is not the history of Hong Kong's existence, but the history of its birth. As Ho also notes, 'Hong Kong's identity is predicated on its history, on its coming into being as a colonial possession; the moment the city comes into being in the narrative is the moment of colonisation' (*Ibid.*). The triumphant possession of utopia is overshadowed by the dystopia of death and destruction underlying the quest. If the utopian anchorage was born of the dystopia of the war, the process is now inverted. The achievement of the trader's ideal is to establish a trading community in Hong Kong is encumbered by epidemics, natural hazards and death. The tension between utopia and dystopia is suggested by the ironic detail that the proliferating funerals are officiated the cemetery located in the 'Happy Valley'. With morbid humour, Mo subversively comments on the colonists' moral and physical fragility, on the human costs of possession when the place begins to take its toll. A fatal misprint in the colony's paper, now renamed 'The Hong Kong Guardian and Gazette', has it that 'The morality at Hong Kong continues to give rise to concern' (Mo 606). A subsequent *Erratum* admits to the 'trifling error', with a hilarious indication, incidentally pregnant with allegorical warnings: 'For 'morality' read 'mortality'' (*Idem*, 613). Though intended ironically, this 'errata' can be read as a serious commentary on the shifting truths of human action and history confronted with the finality of death. The ultimate truth is reasserted, this time in a tragic key, by Eastman's remark in the last chapter: 'The only end, Gid, is death' (*Idem*, 650). Though duly humbled, Chase cannot help adding an ironic touch: 'That is as inevitable as the victory of the British' (*Idem*, 658).

It is a victory that puts into sharp relief the defeat of Eastman's and Chase's endeavours. The least we can hope is that some trace of their work will survive somewhere in a hidden archive, and not share the fate of O'Rourke's paintings, all burnt to ashes. That the sole evidence of his work, as 'Appendix I' informs us, survives only in two 'early Daguerreotype photographs by an unknown hand' (*Idem*, 660) constitutes Mo's ironic comment on Eastman's new art getting the last laugh in its dispute with painting. This image of the painter O'Rourke's work as absence is paralleled by the silence replacing Eastman's and Chase's former articulacy and their defeated ideals. That Chase's last protest against an act of injustice of the early colonial administration is expressed 'in a private letter which has no public effect' is sadly symbolic of his utter inconsequence in the public forum. There is also 'a particularly ironical twist' in the fact that the justness of the infant colony is stated in Chase's defeated, silenced voice: 'Through Chase, Hong Kong *is* given a non-imperial voice, but it is only that of an outsider and loser…its subject position, if any, is articulated by the

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enfeebled voice of dissent in a last gasp of illusory agency' (Ho 2000, 87). Yet, Chase's succeeds in his brilliant career as a Sinologue who continues to disseminate his cross-cultural project. After all, he becomes an authoritative witness of Hong Kong's history, just as he has witnessed its arduous coming into being. It is as if the narrative of the insular possession, interrupted at the start of its colonial destiny, were handed over to Chase to continue.

Despite the elegiac mood of the characters in the novel's last scene, riddled with intimations of mortality and the nostalgia of parting, there is a strong sense of promise for the place and its people. Even though the spectre of death seems to be haunting the British triumph, the novel ends with the promise of life, captured in the image of building: 'The insects continue working on the roof of the barracks' (Mo 650). Eastman's last words of wisdom to his young disciple praise the certainty of the present moment: 'At this moment, Gid, I know I am immortal I know the hot sun on my knee, the smell of smoke in my nostrils, the refulgent spark of the sea below. Be content with a knowledge of that' (*Idem*, 651). In the idyllic peace and creative energy of the summer day on the island, it seems as if utopia, as always, beckons people forward.

Having unravelled and redesigned the history of the colony's birth as an act of collective colonial imagination, Mo lets his reader imagine, or rather reinterpret the future of Hong Kong. If the insular possession and its imagined community are born from the clash of cultures, what remains is the lingering hope that British and Chinese settlers might learn to co-habit and forge a more inclusive sense of identity. The novel itself incorporates hybridity in its blending of the teleological perspective of the European novel with the expanding present of its Chinese counterpart. The seamless juxtaposition of two narrative traditions creates a hybrid, but coherent text. The illusion of historicity is sustained by the period flavour of the language, which Ho describes as 'an idiom which attempts, almost heroically, to conjure the past in the present in order to fulfil what Mo has called 'a sincere representation'' (Ho 2000, 86). However, the critic expresses her doubts as to the postmodernist ideological and aesthetic validity of Mo's response to his challenge and concludes, somewhat unfairly, that the novel's postmodern, pre-eminently ironic thrust has fallen short of its target, that it 'has fallen into the gap between imitation and mimicry…[and] Mo might be said to have fallen victim to his own powers of imitation' (*Ibid.*).

Mo's project fully evinces the political and aesthetic duplicity of the postmodern pastiche, the ironic juxtapositions of discourses, traditions and cultural idioms. More than an imitation of the historical novel, it is a postmodern collage of discourses and images, retracing the feel of distant spaces and times in the reinvented idiom of the past. Mo writes a relentlessly self-reflexive text, which also corresponds to Steven Connor's category of the 'historicised' novel. *An Insular Possession* is a postmodern experimentation with voices and idioms, a dialogical, polyphonic novel which brings together Thackeray, Fowles, Rushdie and New Journalism in a brilliant choric synthesis.

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