

## O TO BE A DRAGON

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### Introduction

In this essay, in line with the focus of this issue of the journal, I write from the perspective of a contemporary New Zealand poet—someone who was stimulated to begin writing while living in Asia and whose poems make frequent use of Asian artistic repertoires, topics, and locations. But before I attempt a discussion of those poems, I should like to acknowledge an earlier New Zealand writer, some of whose best work was also the product of an engagement with Asia, and whose resonant question ‘What is it makes the stranger?’ is, I have come to understand, one that informs much of my own writing.

In the early years of the 21st century, we are concerned with revising and adjusting relations between Asian and non-Asian communities in New Zealand, with elaborating multiple notions of Asian-ness and New Zealand-ness, and with identifying the creation of some vibrant new cultural strands.

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This essay is dedicated to Lydia Wevers, Director of the Stout Centre at Victoria University of Wellington, who in 2003 conceived and ran a seminal lecture series entitled ‘Chinese New Zealand’, and who compiled the first selected edition of Robin Hyde’s poems (Wevers).

I am grateful to Jacob Edmond who, with the invitation to participate in the Symposium from which this issue of the journal grew, offered me the opportunity to compose an author’s commentary on her own work. I should also like to thank Duncan Campbell, Director of the Chinese Programme of the School of Asian and European Languages and Cultures at Victoria University, Elizabeth Smither, and Emeritus Professor Ann Trotter for the encouragement that allowed the essay to take the direction it has.

It goes without saying that current moves are impelled, partly at least, by a history of doing the opposite. But if cultural separation and discrimination were the norm among non-Asian New Zealanders for the first century and a half of our settler culture, there were some remarkable exceptions.<sup>2</sup> In the literary field, Robin Hyde—novelist, poet, journalist, war correspondent, occasional speech-maker, and prolific letter-writer—was exemplary.<sup>3</sup>

Hyde's brief life ran against the unthinking, generally racist, grain of the times. Her profile complicates the stereotypes that defined European-Asian interactions in the 1920s and 30s. From her journalism and letters, it is clear that she was empathetic, personally and ideologically, towards the local Chinese and, though they appear less often in her work, Indian communities, whose members were conventionally painted both as outsiders and belonging to an underclass.<sup>4</sup> I have traced a pedigree of interest in China and the Chinese community in the novel *The Godwits Fly* and two of her journal entries (see Bridge, 'China'). If certain of Hyde's pre-China writings reveal a longstanding interest in Asia, her China-based work reflects those cross-cultural and humanitarian impulses in a more international framework.

What drew me to Hyde's 'China' writings—the letters and journalism from that period of her life; the memorable travel text, *Dragon Rampant*; and, finally, the poems—were the rich particulars of her appreciation, together with a strong sense of their accuracy. Hyde went into China, without a knowledge of the Chinese language, at a time when it was torn by bitter internal conflict and large areas were under the brutal control of the Japanese. Despite these and other obstacles, obstacles that might have distorted and limited her understanding, Hyde fundamentally 'got China right'.

To position a writer in relation to his or, much less often, her literary antecedents is traditional Chinese practice. As if he were following Chinese tradition and adapting it to New Zealand circumstances, Vincent O'Sullivan, in remarks that launched my second book (a book that drew on the experience of living in China),<sup>5</sup> connected my work to the China-based poems of Robin Hyde. I had not at the time read Hyde's poems and did not, therefore, feel able to position myself in relation to them via ideas of influence. But uncovering points of contact between Hyde's work and my own for the present essay has shown me that the comment was deeply intuitive. If poems written more than sixty years apart, in entirely different

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<sup>2</sup> For a cross section of essays that discuss aspects of racism in New Zealand, see Ip; Ferrall, Millar, and Smith; and Johnson and Moloughney.

<sup>3</sup> For a chronology of Hyde's life, see Leggott 384–90. For Hyde's biography, see Challis and Rawlinson. Brief biographies are to be found in the introductions to the re-issued editions of Hyde's novels.

<sup>4</sup> Hyde's attitude towards the local Chinese is reflected in the article 'The Hands that Teach'.

<sup>5</sup> See Bridge, *Girls*; in particular the section 'Unbidden Images' (24–40).

conditions, can be seen to throw up common concerns, then, I would suggest, some of those same issues and concerns are likely to apply to the work, and the psychology, of other writers involved in the process of reflecting Asia in their writing. I am pointing here in the direction of a lineage of New Zealand writers, Asian and non-Asian, in which Hyde would occupy a significant early place. It is a lineage that exists to be traced.<sup>6</sup>

### **What is It Makes the Stranger?**

In the first line of a long, fragmentary, apparently unfinished and untitled poem from China, Hyde articulated the question: ‘What is it makes the stranger?’ Her poem plaits together Chinese and New Zealand scenes:

Coming to your land, I saw little boys spin tops.  
The girls marked patterns in chalks about your street—  
This game I might have told them at five years old. (‘What is It’ 336)<sup>7</sup>

It swells, via a string of particulars such as these, into a paean to the theme of similarity in difference. Behind it lie the thought clusters that hold in always shifting arrangement notions of home and away, of strangeness, alienation, and exile; of being a guest and being an other; of the changes that are effected by relocation and transplantation to the notion of home. These are the preoccupations that drive many of my own poems. By employing quotations from Hyde’s poems and letters as epigraphs to sections of this essay, I have in effect structured it with her resonant and still pertinent words. In the suggestive spaces between these excerpts and my own poems and observations, the reader will discern the issues that bind one writer to another. But, just as the life of the poem cited above lies in the cross between the question that connects and the depiction of entirely unlike particulars, so those spaces may be seen to embody difference as well as correspondence.

### **An Eyebrow Commentary**

The rest of this essay centres on a discussion of my own body of work.<sup>8</sup> To provide a commentary is a quintessentially Chinese thing to do. The essay, from here on, is an ‘eyebrow commentary’, or author jottings. These may be envisaged as inscribed in an authorial red in lines adjacent to the text. It goes

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<sup>6</sup> Paul Millar’s entry in *The Oxford Companion* and his chapter ‘Canton Bromides’ constitute a beginning.

<sup>7</sup> For a variant version, see ‘Fragments from Two Countries’ (342).

<sup>8</sup> This comprises four collections of poetry: *Landscape with Lines* (1996), *The Girls on the Wall* (1999), *Porcelain* (2001), and *Red Leaves* (2005); I also refer to a collection currently in manuscript.

without saying that any background that a writer is willing and able to provide to her work will cast light on it only so far. Her commentary must also take its place alongside other critical responses. But as an ‘eyebrow’ commentary, the following words exist in something like the relationship of Tao Yuanming’s shadow to its body, or body to its soul, in the three-part poem of that name (Lu 35–37; Acker).

The two features of my writing most relevant to the topic ‘Representing Asia, Remaking New Zealand’ are its use of Asian repertoires and its frequent situation in an Asian location. From time to time I have drawn on theoretical perspectives—narratives of exile and of the exotic—to frame introductions to my poems. But such ideological positioning by the writer can work to limit meaning. A writer may appropriately offer a clue to the background of individual poems. She may muse about the preoccupations that trigger poems, or cause a group of them to belong together. But to theorise her work much beyond that is to misrepresent the innocent atmosphere in which poems usually arise. And there remains the risk of changing the nature of the soil—a clotted, deep, unknowing soil—in which the seeds of further poems may sprout.

### A Word on Background

Shaking the sweet-bitter waters within my mind,  
It seemed to me, all seas fuse and intermarry. (‘What is It’ 337)

My life has been a patchwork composed of multiple locations. Its contour also shows a shift from scholarship to poetry. Some time toward the end of the 1980s, when I was living in Hong Kong and completing a doctoral thesis on Chinese classical poetry, I began to write poems. My dissertation was a study of developments in prototype versions of China’s most formally perfect verse form, regulated verse or *lüshi* 律詩 (‘Poems on Things’). It included, along with translations from earlier in the tradition, a core sample of fifteen intensively annotated translations of poems by the Six Dynasties poet, Xie Tiao 謝朓 (464–99).<sup>9</sup> At a time when I was preoccupied with the courtly vocabulary, arcane allusions, and the metrical and tonal patterns of an emerging verse form in fifth-century Chinese poetry, my own voice pushed up. It may not be an inevitable or even a usual step, but there is a link. When I started to write poems I was unconsciously emulating the court poets who were the object of my academic interests. To take Eliot Weinberger further than he perhaps intended to be taken, ‘Translation is not appropriation, as is

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<sup>9</sup> These poems have been published as a translation paper (Bridge, *Unexpected Legacy*).

sometimes claimed; it is a form of listening that then changes how you speak' ('Anonymous Sources').

My poems are hybrid in more than one sense. They are written in English but bear the stylistic imprint of an attraction to Chinese classical verse. In terms of subject matter, they began, and have largely continued, as a response to aspects of the cultures, histories, politics—and occasionally even the economics—of the Asian countries in which I have lived and studied. Almost all my early poems, and many of those I write now, have been triggered by an intersection with another people, another culture, another person. In my case the 'other' is nearly always an Asian other.

The first line of the first poem I wrote went something like this: 'Slap of a limp mop grey against the pane'. The poem, which, thankfully, I have now lost, looked back to the experience of living in Beijing in the late seventies. The line recorded my surprise as I stood, one late-October afternoon, in the Hall of Paintings in the Forbidden City and watched the treatment being accorded a priceless fourteenth-century painting. A woman guard was wiping a filthy rag mop over the glass of the painting, which was by Ni Zan 倪瓚 (1301–74), one of the Four Great Masters of the Yuan Dynasty. The wiping had the effect of blurring the dry, fastidious brushwork and of erasing Ni's consummate landscape. I saw it as a metaphor for the actions of the then communist government which, when it did not actively denounce classical culture or overlay it with its own ideology, failed to do anything at all to preserve it.

### **Sold into Strangeness<sup>10</sup>**

My way behind me tattered away in wind,  
Before me, was spelt with strange letters. ('What is It' 337)

Although I was profoundly affected by living in China, my experiences were stored away for later. Writing only became central to my life in India; and it was India that became the catalyst to serious writing. I wrote compulsively there to try and make sense of a civilisation that Salman Rushdie has described as 'a non-stop assault on the senses, the emotions, the imagination and the spirit' (ix). The feelings that accompanied transplantation—feelings of dislocation, non-belonging, loss of and the need to remake identity—also fed into the creative equation. In India I experienced a double uprooting, from my New Zealand base and from my Chinese preoccupations. As many before me in similar situations have known, writing comes near to an act of survival.

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<sup>10</sup> 'I too am sold into strangeness' ('Journey' 332).

The lines below come as close as I have, or perhaps can, come to describing the state that accompanies the early stages of writing. The excerpt comprises the first section of a poem which, after the Chinese manner, locates the scene for the reader in its title, 'At the Entrance to the Lu Tomb'. This scene holds within its particulars the experience of engaging more broadly with Chinese culture, and it catches as well at the nature of the creative experience itself.

At the entrance to the tomb a tree arches  
its dragon arm. It is laced and veined  
with the passion vine, studded with celadon  
fruit, a bleached late summer green  
that turns your eye liquid and your body taut.  
Possession is impossible. Everything  
inside will be placed with a Chinese  
precision. You are afraid to go on. (*Porcelain* 26)

But I did go on, impelled by the impulse, an impulse that is true of all writers, to construct and reconstruct a world, and to locate myself in some sort of relation to it.

### **Indian Present**

Now as I go between sands red and yellow as poppies,  
Or across a desert many-breasted like Kali ('Journey' 332)

One of the most extreme of those early assaults on the imagination resulted in a poem called 'Sati Marks'. In the largest and most brutal-looking of all the Indian forts, Meherangarh, at Jodhpur, on the edge of the desert, you come face to face with a panel of fifteen red palm and finger marks: the suttee marks of the wives of Maharajah Man Singh, who threw themselves on his funeral pyre after his defeat in battle in 1843. Although Rajput codes of conduct render the action explicable, the response of most who encounter those stark discoloured prints today contains at least an element of rejection or denial. My own response was to wrap up the experience in a metaphor: that of using the hand to do block printing. In the poem that resulted, I tailored the recounting of experience to a child audience. The language became coded in the sense that its imagined audience could not be expected to pick up on the grave and shocking event to which it refers, nor the sexual loading and the irony contained in the last line.

To make a panel

some girls once dipped their hands in a  
primary colour and block printed them

into a square. Each entrusted her  
rudimentary character to a wall the

colour of unbleached cotton. Some  
of the hands tremble as if the artist

was doing it for the first time. (*Landscape 8*)<sup>11</sup>

If my early poems openly interacted with Indian places and historic sites, there was more than a trace of a Chinese past in their Indian present. When my first book, *Landscape with Lines*, was reviewed in India, two reviewers singled out a poem called 'The Park' and referred approvingly to the way in which it was constructed (Daruwalla; Satchidanandan). I mention that fact only because I had unconsciously structured the poem in conformity with the prescription for a classical Chinese poem. Like the majority of regulated poems, my poem was eight lines in length; its first six lines set the scene and its last two comprised the personal response that refocuses the preceding description.

These were spontaneous aesthetic decisions. If I had to try and disentangle my motives for the study of Chinese language and literature, I would identify the root impulse as aesthetic. Aesthetic preference was honed by more than a decade's reading of Chinese poetry. Many of my own poems have in common with those Chinese poems the fact that they are short. Like them, they often offer an oblique approach to topic. And, like most Chinese art forms, they value and employ symmetry. Being composed in English they have, of course, to forego any attempt at tonal alternation; nor do they often go as far as closural rhyme or employ the parallelism that is endemic in Chinese verse.

### Chinese Past

I'm going to write a poem about China [. . .] about one particular ideograph: a cold one and I don't know if I can fish it out from its own special deeps (Hyde, Letter to Denis Glover, 16 January 1938)

If Chinese classical poetry had from the first influenced the form of what I wrote, it also began to people the settings of my work. I found that I had

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<sup>11</sup> For a review that contains a fine close reading of this poem, see Nair.

written an eighth-century Chinese poet into a description of the north Indian landscape. The title piece of *Landscape with Lines* was written in Simla, close to the Himalayas—and to a raft of ideas concerning the spiritual significance of mountains. The poet Wang Wei 王維 (701–61) was a devout Buddhist, some of whose greatest poems depict the illusory nature of existence. The middle lines of my poem contain the phrase ‘slanting on moss’, which alludes to a line from one of Wang Wei’s most famous poems (‘Deer Enclosure’).<sup>12</sup> I intended the allusion to travel outwards to encompass other poets as well as myself.

Somewhere a poet is slanting  
 on moss, a voice heard or not  
 heard. This landscape foregrounds  
 a self lost between lines. (*Landscape* 18)

The China-based poems of my first two books jump from ancient Chinese sites to modern Chinese tragedies. They combine the work and lives of classical poets, painters, and historians with the experiences of friends who had survived the Cultural Revolution. These compressed collages of a non-New Zealand life must have represented something of a challenge for the non-Asian New Zealand reader; that awareness lay behind the decision to place notes at the back of each collection. Within the poems, I relied heavily on images to build a bridge from the known to the unknown—and I hoped that they would also perform that function for my reader. Although I was not deliberately attempting to communicate when I reached for the most accurate and resonant imagistic correlatives I could find, or opted to conclude poem after poem with an image, I would have argued, after the moderns, that images make the most satisfying of all bridges.

I sought correlatives for the feelings of partial comprehension that a particular aspect of Chinese or Indian culture evoked:

Some say you may be  
 line upon line Gertrude Stein  
 stopping short each time  
 of syntax.

You exist between the cypress boat  
 and the man who sits wave-tossed  
 in its cradle.

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<sup>12</sup> For a penetrating analysis of nineteen other translations of this poem, see Weinberger, with further comments by Octavio Paz, *Nineteen Ways*.



You are out of reach  
 and your gap is the reason  
 for singing. (*Landscape 26*)<sup>13</sup>

More often I looked for the opposite: to capture in a metaphor one of those occasional flashes of insight that connect a person to a culture not her own. ‘Images for Sages’ is a poem that uses the form of a Chinese character to symbolise the Chinese way of looking at the world (*Landscape 21*). The observer sees reflected in the physical form of a character not only aspects of the Chinese aesthetic sense but an attitude to territory: of a centre that considers itself strong in relation to the strength of its borders. The last stanza of the poem glances off the way in which one strand of the early philosophical tradition understood meaning and the process of making it known, and substitutes a fantastical version of its own: a slip from image into sign. This poem also acknowledges the theme of outsider incomprehension and spotlights a few of the insecurities that a writer working in English from within and without the Chinese tradition faces.

A character surfaces on West Lake,  
 its neat bars slotted like  
 a grave plaque into grass ripples.  
 I ask the waves to freeze—  
 only for a moment—  
 and let meaning through.

And if they did  
 could I read what is  
 strung across a landscape,  
 holding the edges of a world to order,  
 centered, symmetrical,  
 border-fixed and square?

Though they say, and I know,  
 the process is otherwise,  
 once in a lifetime when the sage  
 is laughing, you may turn your head  
 quickly and catch the spin  
 of image into sign.

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<sup>13</sup> The ‘Songs’ of the title (‘Talking to the Songs’) refer to the *Shijing* [Classic of Songs], the earliest Chinese anthology; see *Landscape 57n*.

***Landscape with Lines***

It may not be obvious to the casual reader, but the writer of *Landscape with Lines* is possessed by a sense of hovering illicitly on the extreme edge of the canvas. It is a feeling that is implicit in my choice of title. In a Chinese painting there is often an inscription, lines brushed across a space in the scroll that stands for sky or mist. These lines are penned by other viewers, from the Emperor down: friends, scholars, connoisseurs who have owned or felt a particular affinity for the painting and recorded their feelings on it. A Chinese painting is read as testament to the temperament and character of the person who painted it and inscriptions will often reflect that knowledge. Their relationship to the actual work may be quite oblique. I saw my own 'lines' as occupying an even more tangential relationship to the ancient 'landscape' of China and the vast heterogeneous canvas of India.

The feeling of being out on the rim, lacking knowledge and perspective, was accentuated by the antiquity and the complexity of the Asian landscapes in which I had placed myself. The conviction that my own intersections with India and China would always lack security might have acted as a deterrent to writing. I was fortunate that it worked the other way. While I was writing my second book, I came across some words by Mikhail Bakhtin that served as an encouraging subtext for someone questioning her right, as well as her competence, to comment on another culture. I used them as an epigraph to that book.

In the realm of culture, outsidersness is a most powerful factor in understanding [. . .] A meaning only reveals its depths once it has encountered and come into contact with another, foreign meaning: they engage in a kind of dialogue, which surmounts the closedness and one-sidedness of these particular meanings, these cultures. (Bakhtin 7)

***The Girls on the Wall***

So sat I silent, and watched the stranger, why he was strange.  
(‘What is It’ 336)

The poems of my second collection are even more directly about relating to an unfamiliar society, about making connection with others within that society, and about encountering some of the most deep-seated barriers to human communication: caste, religion, politics. In one poem, ‘Chrysanthemum’, I call them our different legends (*Girls* 47). Although the speaker in that poem is blind to it, I had discovered that the oldest legends are likely to hold things in common. In the last stanza of the poem, the lines ‘All

this was water / in the beginning' may sound to Western ears as if they come from the book of Genesis, but they are, in fact, taken from the Creation Hymn in the ancient Indian collection, the *Rig Veda*: 'Darkness was hidden by darkness in the beginning; with no distinguishing sign, all this was water' (25). The similarity is the ironic point of a poem that addresses the difficulty of communication across cultures.

Many of the poems in my second book centre on an interplay with Indian art. This is an art that is largely devotional. The female figures in sculpture and painting with which my poems interact are nearly always part of the Hindu divine pantheon. In the sacred narratives, women are frequently cast in an ambiguous but subsidiary role, which is reflected, particularly in sculpture, in their smaller size relative to the male protagonist. This feature allowed me to pick up on the subordinate role of women in many contexts and to go on to suggest something of the female predicament in some of the Asian countries in which I have lived. The situation could be extended to include my own: that of a woman who, as the wife of a New Zealand diplomat, was cast in an appendage, if privileged, part. I called the collection *The Girls on the Wall*.

### Looking at Porcelain

I can be neither tile nor lamp,  
 Only a footprint. Some boy sees it at dawn  
 Before his tilted cart creaks over it ('What is It' 338)<sup>14</sup>

My third collection, *Porcelain*, was written in Taiwan. In it I confronted a double trajectory. The first trajectory might be described as the pursuit of a knowledge that is perceived as cultural; cultural enquiry is both the catalyst to composition as well as its sustaining momentum. Another, secondary, trajectory acknowledges limitation and reins in the first in a number of different ways. Several of the poems in *Porcelain* pursue a balancing act between cultural information and an awareness of cultural ignorance. In the poem 'Interrogating a Scroll', the subject is a handscroll that now survives in sections and in variant copies held in museums in the People's Republic of China, Taiwan, and Europe (*Porcelain* 23–24). The scroll, by the eleventh-century artist Li Gonglin 李公麟 (1049–106), plays with different painting styles, which become codes. Deciphering these styles poses something of a puzzle for art historians. For the poem's narrator, who wrestles with inadequate language as well, the problem is doubled. 'Interrogating a Scroll' confronts the idea of the gap, which meant many things to me; for example,

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<sup>14</sup> A slightly different version of these lines occurs in 'Fragments' (343).

reading between the lines is part of the reading process in classical poetry. But a gap, sometimes a chasm, is what any non-Chinese—whether she has linguistic and cultural knowledge or not—must find a way of bridging if she wishes to engage with Chinese culture.

A kind of balance emerges in the poem's last stanza. While the narrator is 'Silenced as a scholar among mountains', the simile makes her one with generations of Chinese. The silence is also rewarded by a glimpse into the creative process.

I recognise the search and can't  
give up a word of it. Silenced

as a scholar among mountains,  
I sit and watch the way an ink line

traverses the stubborn slub of silk  
to become a fall of water.

The form of some of my work from this period also reflects the idea of a gap; it fractures as though in sympathy with its topic. The poem 'Looking at Porcelain'—which, in a collection entitled *Porcelain*, stands as the title piece—is about viewing the collection of pots in the National Palace Museum in Taipei (21). This is something I did regularly when I lived in Taiwan. I discovered on one visit that a greatly enlarged version of the character for porcelain had been projected on a screen about a third of the way along the exhibition hall. Suspended between exhibits which dated from the end of the ninth to the start of the tenth centuries, the character thus pinpointed the time when Chinese potters improved their technical skills to the point where they became capable of making that tough, delicate, high-fired ceramic ware known as porcelain. That moment of achievement has a presence in my poem.

Instead of brush strokes, the strokes of the character were envisaged as shards of porcelain. This threw into sharper than usual relief the spaces between the ten (or eleven) strokes of which the character is composed, and it foregrounded the idea of a balance between solid and empty, a philosophical conception which is fundamental to Chinese thinking. Spaces, placed in a manner that maintains the idea of a visual balance and that is consistent with meaning, are included in my text. Those gaps, and the poem's elliptical transitions, are also intended to reflect the difficulties of interacting with another culture. No matter how much information the outsider might glean and gather—for example, the facts that pile up in the poem's second stanza—there remain more areas and connections that she will not grasp. In the way of poems, this one collapses more than one occasion. It draws in its final

stanza on a visit to the Chinese collection in the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford which I visited, on leave from Taiwan, with my elder daughter, Lucy.

Thrown whole against a wall  
 the character *porcelain*  
 splintered into blue and white shards  
 once brush strokes  
 magnified so large spaces assert themselves  
 independent as solids they contradict  
 emptiness reach into enveloping air  
 the fluid we live in its turbulence  
 pooled and ordered  
 into peace

Projected on a screen dividing first attempts  
 rustic and charming from the genuine article  
 heated to perfection our eyes swim in glazes  
 new as the tenth century  
 combings incisions rakings  
 of the pearl and green skin  
 bodies archetypal splashed or moulded  
 examples so rare  
 they like the emperor will never  
 be seen again

Situate someone out of context watch them  
 separate verticals elongating  
 behind glass the nodes and sticking points  
 of character curios reassembled  
 in the exhibition halls and bookshops of museums  
 your daughter framed  
 among cases of spaced bowls  
 her elegance a foil to  
 the perfection of bases

### **The Act of Remembering**

The urge to discover is what drives most poems. But when I looked back from the extremes of India, or the cultural remoteness of Taiwan, towards New Zealand, it was to a place that, rather like a secure and happy childhood, resisted any sort of probing. Perhaps for some of us it is not easy to examine as subject the society in which we came to maturity, the landscape that has

entered our bloodstreams. At any rate, in my first three books, my own country seldom served as an imaginative site for representation. The majority of the poems in those books grappled instead with the issues that the representation of Asian topics entailed for the non-Asian writer. While my voice and perspectives, as well as familiar themes like those woven around gender and exile, may have provided a way in to the work, little else on the surface could have been familiar to a local audience.

On my return to New Zealand, I became aware of some new preoccupations starting to underpin my work. As I recalled the rich experiences of a life, a large part of which had taken place elsewhere, I became more attentive also to the act of remembering itself. A poem called 'Among Rhododendrons', written after a visit to the rhododendron garden at Pukeiti, near New Plymouth, contains the sentence 'Patches of / bell-shaped life compete and / fall' (*Porcelain* 6). This is the way I came to view the distinct experiences of a life lived for more than sixteen years across several different countries and cultures. I began, as I settled back, to move from topics and a repertoire that had been rooted in the two Asian cultures in which I had lived to a blending, recovery, and embedding of experience in my own soil. I wanted to connect the multiple strands and remake them in writing. As so many writers before me have known, writing becomes a way of continuing to own experience, for to be not of the same place and time is to acknowledge loss. A poem, 'From where I Stand', sums up these feelings in two of its images. The 'upturned roof' in the poem is a Chinese roof. In the last line, the word 'Ming' is hyphenated to a description of the sea at Pencarrow. To me what that word signals is a need to continue to draw on Asian subjects, themes, and imagery, and to look at contemporary New Zealand through their prism.

A shag parts the rock  
and becomes its skewed finial.

There is the clutter of driftwood all over  
the shore. A few bulky women

prodding in pools for kina,  
their crumpled hair trailing the wind.  
A truck sprays the scene with ochre dust  
but before it has rounded the point,

one of the endless points,  
the wind returns it.

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Picking up paua shells,  
skimming stones, the skin on my palms

toughens. Waves float the line  
of an upturned roof

onto the rocks. I am trading  
a pattern detached from its past

for half circles of sand,  
heaped driftwood,

a backing of scored hills,  
the Ming-blue plate of the sea. (*Red Leaves* 30)

### **The Imprint of India**

If the poems of my fourth book, *Red Leaves*, were written in Wellington and organise themselves around new preoccupations, India remained a potent location and context for my work. I had become interested in the moment when external and internal factors come together to initiate a poem. As I pondered, I wondered why the Indian subcontinent had proved so stimulating and decisive a catalyst to me as a writer. I explored that question in a series of small poems that engage with aspects of Indian art, religion, and society. In each poem I evoked an element of the culture that had kick-started me into writing. I wanted to cut to the heart of an outsider's interaction with another culture and, in doing so, pin down the start of the creative process itself.

These poems glance off Mughal architecture, Hindu and Buddhist sculpture, and South Indian dance. They muse on the British colonial experience as encapsulated in E. M. Forster's great novel, and draw in the Mountbattens. The poems were intentionally small; as I said in the note to them, they were intended to operate 'as a material reflection of the fact that a foreigner's take on things is at best partial and fragmentary'. Each also acknowledged that 'for the outsider in India, there can be no half-way step between eating a chilli, raw and green, and not eating a chilli'. I called this sequence 'The Imprint of India'.

**Red Leaves: Bridging the Distance**

The acquisition of distance is an essential component of the creative process and distance is, literally, what is handed to you when you leave your own country. You can look back through its lens at the home you have left behind or you can use it to examine the new place in which you have found yourself. I shone the light forward on the ground in front of my feet. I am not sure that choice was involved but I am conscious of taking a path that differs from most New Zealand writers. I have always believed that my use of Asian repertoires was just that: a repertoire employed to pursue common human questions. I hoped, like any poet, that the themes of my poetry were large, relevant, explicit, and interesting enough to draw the reader into it. But I also realised that my work held a dilemma, the dilemma of how to make the strangeness of the poems' particulars accessible. I began to think about issues of representation and to think more urgently of the audience for whom my poems were intended. It was perhaps not enough to articulate the thought that my poems reflected a national identity and a literary community that were acquiring an increasingly sophisticated and diverse character as different cultures came forward to take their place in New Zealand society.

The poems in the sections that precede 'The Imprint of India' in *Red Leaves* reveal a generally less compressed and more discursive idiom. In some of them I can discern the beginnings of a persona with which I hoped to bridge the information gap between my non-Asian reader and the poem. In recent work I have carried that strategy further by aligning the narrator of many poems with a putative traveller who aspires, much as I did when travelling in India, to a kind of knowledge. It is a knowledge that, initially at least, presents as cultural.

What, I ask, when we return to the fudged  
grey world of stones, most of them broken,  
bird droppings, picnickers—what, in the end,  
does it mean? You'd think I'd know; I've read  
the books, I grant you not as well as you,  
just looking for something to help me soar like  
a kite—if that's what those birds are—above  
this miraculous site, to take it all in from the air ('Just Looking')

In the sequence of poems of which 'Just Looking' forms part, the fluctuating narratorial voice generates layers of unknowingness; not knowing is almost an obsession. The inability to know another culture is conflated, in the following poem, with the inability to know another person.



What I see is ordered to within an inch  
of its life: pilasters, gods, pilasters, women  
alongside, preening, griffins rearing,  
women underfoot; a scheme designed—  
ordained—repeated to tilt us out  
of comprehension, wouldn't you say?

You don't say. Your relationship is with  
tapering height, ideals of light, shade; all right,  
we have only one life, its sum of ecstasy  
invested not as the god king meant when  
he looked up along these swarming sides ('The Temporal Face')<sup>15</sup>

Sometimes the impossibility of understanding a culture's gods may stand in for the impossibility of knowing that culture. At others, it stands for the more general impossibility of knowing not just a Hindu god but any sort of god at all. At other times again, an image, or series of images, arrives to provide its own unexpected answer.

Meaning, for us, is improvised in running script across  
a crenellated outline, picked up in the interrupted sweep  
of an archway struck off the day's mild sky. The god  
of Bijapur lies here—on his side, in the gap between stones.  
And if we cannot read the ripples of calligraphy  
that cap an arch or wash against a tablet in a mosque  
or screen around a tomb, we do see that he signs his name  
in shields and squares of grass, in half-moon flowerbeds.  
And scrawls it in less geometric script across clouds  
stained by sunrise. Like a remnant of the same  
slow-rising sun, a girl in fluttering orange standing  
on the edges of our scene. The keeper of men's shoes.  
('The Gap between Stones')

Ultimately, these poems conclude, the best you can hope for is a moment of perception, like that described at the conclusion of a poem entitled 'Stupa':

You think you're getting close to it, to what is real—the re-  
arrangements of your mind like leaves adjusting to the light.

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<sup>15</sup> This poem was first published under the title 'Gopuram'.

### **Conclusion: The Heart in Pilgrimage**

Poems are pieces of a differently envisioned narrative, one that splinters off from the poet's own life. A few years ago, Israeli poet Gabriel Levin wrote some perceptive words that sharpened my understanding of the impulses that connect my individual poems:

I cannot help feeling that the act of poetry is for you at heart, above all, a form of searching out reality [. . .], of being *en route*, as Celan would say—the 'heart in pilgrimage'—and that the Far East is, paradoxically, in all its strangeness and inwardness where you are brought closest to yourself.<sup>16</sup>

It seems to me that Levin's words chime with the thoughts of Robin Hyde as expressed in a letter she wrote to C. A. Marris, from Hankou on 15 April 1938.

The journey has been a million times more than I expected of it—almost a destiny instead of a journey, for things seemed to have worked out so that I've come into contact with all that my nature most leaned to, and the kinds of knowledge I wanted to understand, but only touched in the farthest way.<sup>17</sup>

In the end, it took the words of another poet, the American poet Marianne Moore, to provide the title for this essay, 'O to be a dragon' (Moore 177). I used Moore's line, from the title poem of her collection of the same name, to embody the link between two writers for whom China became the catalyst to writing. And I used it for the way in which it links all those writers whose search for understanding and cultural knowledge takes them right across into the territory of the other.

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<sup>16</sup> The 'heart in pilgrimage' mentioned in Levin's letter is taken from George Herbert's 'Prayer'.

<sup>17</sup> This letter is cited as the second epigraph to *The Book of Iris* (Challis and Rawlinson).

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