

## **‘THE FAIR CHINESE MAID; A TALE OF MACAO’. OR, THE FIRST ENGLISH POETRY OF HONG KONG?**

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To give its full title, ‘The Fair Chinese Maid; A Tale of Macao in Rhyme’ was published anonymously by Joseph Thomas in London in 1842.<sup>1</sup> The only clue we have to the identity of the author on the title page is that it is ‘by an officer in China’. In the brief prose introduction (iii-v), the author states that this piece was written to ‘wile away a tedious fortnight in the harbour of Hong-kong’, after a ‘short visit to Macao’. The poem, the ‘first canto’ of an envisaged series, was completed just before the author was called up on active duty ‘in the north’. It was most probably written during the first Opium War (1839-1842), quite possibly after the occupation of Hong Kong by Bremer (26 January 1841), and before the Treaty of Nanjing (29 August 1842).<sup>2</sup> As Queen Victoria is mentioned in stanza X, composition must have occurred after her accession on 20 June 1837. Further evidence for dating is the mention of the ‘new penny post’ in stanza LXXXI, which puts the date of composition after the introduction of the universal penny post on 10 January 1840, or the penny black stamp on 6 May 1840. The mention in the preface, however, of impending ‘active professional employment in the north’, that is, a military campaign, strongly suggests that the poem was composed while the officer was confined on board his ship in the fortnight before 21 August 1841,<sup>3</sup> when Sir Henry Pottinger’s fleet sailed north on the campaign which would eventually result in the Treaty of Nanjing.<sup>4</sup> If the author implied ‘Canton’ in his reference to the north, however, then a likely composition date would have been either in April or May 1841, when a sizeable fleet was also located in Hong Kong harbour.<sup>5</sup> This poem is very likely to be the first published piece of Anglophone poetry ever written in the territory (later colony) of Hong Kong.<sup>6</sup>

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- 1 This scarce text has recently been re-published by the British Library, Historical Print Editions, 2011, but has yet to attract any academic attention, a situation this article attempts to redress. The actual date of publication is given as 29 October 1842 in *The Examiner*, 704.
  - 2 See Hoe and Roebuck; Endacott, 14-34.
  - 3 See Coates, 219.
  - 4 ‘The campaign was renewed in March 1842’ (Endacott, 21), so the poem may have been written just before then, but the publication date of 1842 in England becomes less likely.
  - 5 General Sir Hugh Gough mentions a sizeable fleet of ‘eighteen ships of war’ in the harbour at that time (in Hoe and Roebuck, 170).
  - 6 There are conflicting views about the legality of Keshen’s so-called cession of Hong Kong (see Hoe and Roebuck, 152-3), but, whatever the actual legal status of Hong Kong, the fact remains that the British were in effective occupation of the territory.

Aboard ship, the author states in the preface that he is experiencing ‘many of the privations, with none of the pleasures, of warfare’.<sup>7</sup> Whatever the ‘pleasures’ he was about to encounter, how does a poet, about to embark on a highly uncertain military foray into China, portray Macao and the Chinese, and how might this portrayal serve to justify warfare? I also ask what this depiction shows about his assumptions and anxieties at the time,<sup>8</sup> and suggest that this poem reveals more about British attitudes in Hong Kong than it does about either Macao or the Chinese, and thus, has a place as the earliest example of Hong Kong Anglophone poetry.

In the preface, the author promises to write a second canto if the first is well received by ‘the English reader’, but no second canto was forthcoming, as the nameless author seems to have predicted: ‘but if it meet with harshness or neglect, ..., the fate of the second will, like the name of its parent, remain shrouded in darkness forever.’ Whatever the reason for the absence of the second volume, including the possibility that the author was killed in China, he does make it clear that the poem has a purpose beyond mere entertainment. Even though the author admits the poem’s ‘defects’ in the preface (a conventional trope, but not without justification), his avowed reason for publication is to provide ‘information, perhaps not wholly without amusement, nor wholly devoid of interest’, to an English audience ‘to whom Chinese histories and customs are novel things’. The purported aim of the poem is, therefore, educational, though the idea that British writing on China was ‘novel’ is somewhat disingenuous. This poem’s presentation of China is part of an already well-established Western debate on the subject, ranging from positive ideas of Chinese civilisation<sup>9</sup> to common stereotypes of Chinese barbarity which became increasingly pervasive in the Victorian period.<sup>10</sup> Similarly, as Wagner notes, while Romantic authors frequently ‘idealized’ the seeming ‘timelessness’ of Chinese culture, Victorian travellers increasingly saw it as lacking in energy and ‘mired in the past’.<sup>11</sup> The author claims, further, that the information he provides about the Chinese can be backed up by ‘respectable authority’, though he has had no time to provide annotations, which are the ‘dress, stays and bustles of modern literature’. This colourful metaphor refers to the common, contemporary practice of providing copious footnotes to travel writings and poetic texts. Nicholas Meihuizen argues that it is a way of ordering empire. Meihuizen quotes Nigel Leask’s argument that ‘the “pull of the exotic visual image or allusion” is “constantly checked and qualified” by the annotation, which thereby draws the reader “away from the dangerous proximity to the image” in

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7 The narrator says, in stanza CXVI, that he has not yet travelled to the Great Wall, but that he ‘*hope[s] to do it*’. The italicisation in the poem indicates the importance attached to this desired outcome of the impending British invasion of China, that is, unrestricted access to all Chinese territory.

8 I owe an inspirational debt for this article to Nigel Leask’s *British Romantic Writers and the East: Anxieties of Empire*.

9 See Lach and Foss, 32 and *passim*.

10 See Forman, 59.

11 Wagner, 23.

order to “inscribe” that reader “in a position of epistemological power”, defined by Leask as “the commanding vision of imperialist objectivity” (Leask, 1998: 168).<sup>12</sup> As we will see, even though the author eschews annotations, much of the poem is devoted to comments about Chinese history and culture, and these are suitably inscribed within the ‘epistemological power’ of ‘respectable authority’. The informational content of the poem can, thus, be seen as part of the imperialist project. Yet the ‘knowledge’ presented on China here is, as the author has admitted, all second-hand and already well-attested. The information on offer might, therefore, be performing an additional function, that is, serving to justify war with China.

The poem itself is a curious amalgamation of the information mentioned above, travel narrative, and a (probably fictitious) love story. An analysis of this mixture should offer a fascinating insight into the prejudices and assumptions of a British naval officer at a critical period in the development of Hong Kong and Anglo-Chinese relations. The author also styles his poem, in the preface, as a tale, and compares it to the Chinese ‘tail’ (or ‘queue hairstyle’) and the silver coin, the ‘tael’. I shall return to this later, but will first proceed with an outline and brief analysis of the poem.

‘The Fair Chinese Maid’ is forty one pages long and consists of one hundred and forty six sestets (headed by capitalised roman numerals) and two love poems. The poem itself is a type of ‘frame’ narrative, with the presence of the author implied in the preface, a narrator who is strongly identified with the author, and a hero who is a slightly naïve, young Englishman, a technique which allows for differing perspectives and the generation of irony.<sup>13</sup> Stanzas I-V constitute a poetic preface in which the narrator avers that his rhyme is poor, but that he has ‘something to impart’, as the ‘author’ does in the prose preface. After this the story itself starts in stanza VI, where the narrator positions the hero ‘beyond the gate / Of that old Christian settlement, Macao’. The hero, a ‘young English sailor, blithe and free’ (VII), on his first journey to Asia, is entering the territory of a nation his country is about to attack. This extra-liminal position is fraught with conflict and anxiety. Apart from entering the territory of a foreign nation, as a tourist, which the author (not the hero) is just about to attack as a soldier, the hero is also twice removed from the marginal safety of his own countrymen in Hong Kong. He is ‘young’, just like the occupation of Hong Kong, whereas the Portuguese settlement is ‘old’, but a place that could not necessarily guarantee safety for the British, especially after their enforced evacuation from Macao on 26 August 1839.<sup>14</sup> He is ‘free’, in the sense that he still has freedom of movement, but that is soon to be curtailed. Even the Christianity of Macao is not inclusive, as it is Catholic, and the narrator and hero emerge later as Anglicans. His step beyond the border gate, thus, puts the hero at three removes from England and safety, via Hong Kong and Macao. We can read the hero, therefore, as a projection of

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12 Meihuizen, 114.

13 This may recall Byron’s *Don Juan*, but the form of this poem is different, and the hero has only one encounter with a lover from another culture. The hero, then, may represent a comment on Don Juan’s (albeit reluctant) promiscuity.

14 Coates, 194.

the author's trepidations about the imminent invasion of China, though he will enter the country with a large force, unlike the hero who steps across the border alone.

The narrator then interrupts Edmund's adventure with a description of western civilisation in Macao that presents perceived Chinese views of the west, so it is surely meant ironically:

... the gate – the long established limits  
 Of western, ruthless, proud barbarian sway;<sup>15</sup>  
 Cooped up in that small town, as well befits  
 Wild beasts, whom reason has denied a ray – (VII)

A patriotic British reader would easily detect the simple irony.<sup>16</sup> The easterners, by implication, are the ruthless, savage and unreasonable barbarians, whereas those within the gate are the opposite. But the position of the hero within Macao was also uneasy, especially after these lines have set up a typically Orientalist east/west, savage/civilised dichotomy, as his attitude to the Portuguese, who established these 'limits', is equivocal. The narrator perceives differences between Portuguese and British colonial attitudes which the Chinese, by implication, do not. The Portuguese rule of Macao is described as 'timid' (VI). This shows a misunderstanding of Portuguese policy towards the Chinese. Even though the Portuguese did their best to protect the British in Macao, while retaining their neutral position,<sup>17</sup> this neutrality is perceived here as timidity, probably because the narrator is standing behind 'the British cannon's roar, / Announcing death on Han's celestial shore' (VI), whereas the Portuguese did not have the same military support. A perhaps unintended implication is that it is the British who are proud and ruthless, unlike the 'timid' Portuguese, even though the British were still effectively excluded from Macao. The narrator's bravado is continued in the statement that the supposed reason the Chinese would not allow women in Canton was that 'Barbarian dames might colonise the land' (IX). The 'dreaded lady' who will do this 'is no merchant's wife', or Portuguese, but rather 'England's Queen' (IX). The sabre-rattling, jingoism of the narrator becomes, in effect, 'civilised' 'reason' backed by the cannon. To repeat, from our perspective, the intended irony backfires. The Chinese were not the aggressors, and the British were the ruthless barbarians in this case, the Sino-Lusitanian accommodation being much more civilised and reasonable.

Finally, before commencing the narrative proper, the author claims that Queen Victoria's life is shielded by '*Barbarian swords by thousands*' (X), as if the Chinese were about to attack her! Ironically, what draws the protagonist across the barrier gate

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15 Many British were outraged that the Chinese considered westerners as barbarians. See James Matheson's article of 1836, quoted in Lovell, 79. Thurin (1999) notes how the Chinese 'racializing' of the foreign visitor tends to subvert the imperialist gaze: 'The 'foreign devil' meeting the 'celestial' and the 'barbarian' meeting the 'barbarous' represents a unique combat between counter-stereotypes, a simultaneous orientalizing and occidentalizing', 20.

16 See Wagner, 24, who terms this potential reaction: 'appreciative self-irony'.

17 See Coates, 179, 185, 188, 193, 194.

is his own pursuit of a woman with bound feet, or, at least, the synecdoche of one: 'But what he now so ardently pursued, / Were two small feet with novel charms imbued' (XI). 'Edmund (our hero)' is described as 'of that young daring class' who 'follow more their fancy than their reason' (XI). This gives a clue as to his motives in this pursuit and, ironically, casts some doubt on the 'reason' of those within the gate, to which the author has just, also ironically, averred. Edmund wants to see a 'youthful form on formless feet' (XII),<sup>18</sup> a sight not available to him in Macao as 'ev'ry honest Chinese girl in town, / is kept at home much like a captive bird' (XII). In other words, he claims not to seek a dishonest girl (a prostitute), though his own admittedly fanciful intentions are obscure. Edmund finally sees the feet, crying 'Those little high-soled twinklers shining bright' (XIII),<sup>19</sup> but is then determined to see her visage. At last he sees her 'pretty face', but as he does so, with many locals beginning to 'grumble', she shouts 'Fankwei!' and flees (XIV). At the same moment he is seized by Chinese men who 'want his cash to steal' (XV).

Apart from the fact that his stalking of the girl is clearly upsetting 'passers by', an historical reason that Edmund might not have been that welcome beyond the barrier gate is that Captain Smith had recently (June 1840) attacked this area and 'completely routed the Chinese soldiery, destroyed barrier buildings and barracks'.<sup>20</sup> Edmund, however, ascribes the lowest motivation to his attackers, and, whereas he feels attracted to the Chinese woman, clearly entertains racist hatred for the men, again portrayed using synecdoche: 'But being English he despised them all, / The shaven long-tailed sons of Heaven's son' (XVI).

Edmund feels that the approaching combat is 'unequal' (four to one), but refuses to yield. The Chinese men threaten him, possibly with martial art displays: 'Whilst they described upon the yielding air / All kinds of figures ere they ope'd th'attack' (XVIII). Edmund endures 'blows upon blows' (XXI), but manages to best the original four attackers, including a second wave, while making for the border gate. Technically, this is a retreat, but Edmund refuses to run, and claims the engagement as a victory: 'And now had victory for Albion fought' (XXIII). The 'steady Lusitanian sentry', who has 'witnessed all the fun' (XXV), prepares to let him back into the sanctuary offered by Macao. 'Just as the entrance he had gladly gained, however', a fresh wave of opponents sallies forth and Edmund is struck on the head and knee: 'He fell unnerved in speechless agony' (XXVII). At this moment, the sentry intervenes and shields Edmund from the 'recreant foe' (XXVIII). Whether this engagement occurred in real life or not, it clearly enacts, on a petty scale, the anxieties about the sheer numbers of potential Chinese adversaries which could easily be felt by a military man just days before the imminent

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18 This is a bizarre inversion, as bound feet are certainly 'formed'.

19 On the subject of foot-binding, Thurin (2007) notes: '... there is not a little voyeurism in early Western accounts of the practice. Victorians had their own foot and leg fetishes', 100.

20 Coates, 203.

incursion into China by the British fleet.<sup>21</sup> What is portrayed as a victory, though, is actually a retreat and defeat (in unequal combat). Edmund is eventually saved (in a very liminal position) by the very Portuguese whom he has previously defined as 'timid'.

While he lies unconscious, 'a padre' (XXIX) notices Edward and orders that he be carried to his own home. Though his hosts fear for his life during the night, Edward awakes to a pair of 'sparkling eyes' (XXIX). His young nurse has a 'complexion clear and beautifully white', and looks like a 'seraph child' in a painting by 'Raphael' (XXXIII). She is wearing Chinese dress, but the costume 'sought in vain to hide / the lovely form'. She also has 'tiny' 'twinkling' feet (XXXV), but they are natural, not bound. In terms of physical description, the fair Chinese maid could hardly be more western: her 'Chineseness' is almost completely elided. The only indicator of difference is her superficial garment, which could be easily divested or changed. The description of the maid's features lack any racial or Orientalist typing, and her tiny, natural feet further mark her as an idealised image of perfection, rather than a product of Chinese fashion. As David Porter argues, '[the] "feminine" and the "Chinese," ... , were reciprocally constituting categories throughout much of the [eighteenth] century, collectively evoking otherness and extravagance while dialectically combining the tantalizing allure of superficial beauty with the troubling specter of transgressive monstrosity'.<sup>22</sup> Though the naïve Edmund might have been initially beguiled by a pair of bound feet, the narrator's racist and vitriolic opinions are made clear: 'Oh, monstrous land! my patience nearly fails, / With thy crook'd, bandaged feet, and ape-like tails' (XXXVI). Chinese women with bound feet are seen as deformed, and the men as 'apes', to the extent that: 'Their owners prize them so, 'tis quite a toss / If heads or tails would be the greater loss' (XXXVII). A monstrous thought indeed, where the life or death of the Chinese depends on the spin of a coin! I will return to this idea later. The fair Chinese maid here, however, is exempt from this monstrosity owing both to her western appearance as well as her westernised upbringing, as we shall see.

The encounter is a case of love at first sight for Edmund. He snatches 'an impassioned kiss' from the Chinese girl (XXXIX), which leaves her feeling conflicted. She has been told by her guardian (the priest), and her Portuguese nurse (XLIII), to avoid 'Fankwei youths' (XLI), but also feels a 'pleasurable pain' as she has long wanted to 'converse freely with the fair haired race' (XLII). Edmund notices that her name is 'Kathleen' and that she speaks with an Irish brogue! (XLIV), further evidence of her almost complete westernisation.<sup>23</sup> He asks her to explain her history, and she promises to do so when he recovers. Edmund spends the night in a fever of love.

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21 It was a later Victorian commonplace to describe the Chinese as 'cowardly' (see Porter, 161), but this does not occur here. Edmund could hardly be described as heroic if he were facing a cowardly foe. Similarly, on 24 April 1841, General Gough, stationed in Hong Kong, wrote in a letter that the Chinese 'are neither wanting in courage or bodily strength', though he admits that they are an 'unmilitary nation' (in Hoe and Roebuck, 169).

22 Porter, 8.

23 Indeed, we never learn if she has a Chinese name.

The following day, Kathleen recounts her story, which is summarised by the narrator. She was an orphan, found on the 'Praya Grandé', the 'Lusitanian beach' (LXXIX), one of the few acknowledgements of Portugal's possession of Macao in the poem, and taken care of by an Irish Jesuit, Father Dillon: 'He was by art, by nature, and by-Jingo! / A clever fellow, skilled in Chinese lingo' (LXXI). He is also described as a good person, though not a typical Jesuit: 'An Irish Jesuit *good*? Be quiet, fool! / My one exception only proves your rule' (LXXIV). An Anglican would have been better, the narrator opines – the Anglican Church drawing the 'middle course' between Catholic and other Protestant excesses (LVI). A lengthy digression on the conversion of the Chinese follows, but the narrator eventually gives up the question here of whether they will be saved or damned: 'I, whose wealth is cloak and sword, / Should not pursue paths metaphysical!' (LXV).<sup>24</sup> The narrator is simply 'a son of Mars' (LXIX). The fact that father Dillon finds the abandoned girl saves her from a fate in a Buddhist nunnery, where she would pray to 'dumb' 'idols', or being raised as a prostitute where she would serve pleasure and profit (LXXXIV). The narrator then mentions the Owenite ideal of free love,<sup>25</sup> but claims that the Chinese know nothing of this: 'Their real god being, like most Christians', Mammon' (LXXXVI). This is another ironic moment from our perspective. The narrator has eschewed most Christians, and the Christian mission, so which god is he ultimately serving with his 'wealth of cloak and sword', if not Mammon? Father Dillon, however, is a likeable chap (because he has been cut off from Irish politics), and manages to gain a few converts, though China 'unlike Greece, detest[s] all things new' (LXXVII).

The author digresses again with a story about how easy it is to get lost in China and Macao:

I cannot well describe the very street  
The padre lived in, though I know it well;  
No names affixed th'inquiring eye to meet  
Are in Macao: and passers by can't tell,  
Or won't. My road I sadly lost one day;  
But greater folks in Chin have lost their way.  
(LXXXIX)

This is not specifically the fault of the Chinese, he admits, because they invented the compass long before the western islanders (the Britons) 'wore any clothes' (XCV). The stanza, however, exemplifies the contradictions and tensions running through the narrative. The British outsider claims to know the territory well, but clearly he does

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24 The narrator clearly identifies himself with the author of the preface here. Might this be an ironic reference to Jesus's instructions to his disciples in *Luke* 22:36 to sell their cloaks to buy a sword if they could not afford one?

25 The author makes a reference here to the Owenites, followers of Robert Owen, a 19<sup>th</sup> century reformer who argued for utopian communities to be established along socialist or communistic lines. Owenism was popularly associated with free love (see Harrison, 86). The argument is that the Chinese use the idea of 'free love' for gain in the form of prostitution.

not, because he gets lost. He claims that there are no street signs in Macao, but this is historically inaccurate, and more an indication of the narrator's own inability to see and read the signs.<sup>26</sup> He wishes the territory to be mapped for his own benefit, but the narrator's British imperial gaze is thwarted by what he views as Portuguese colonial incompetence.<sup>27</sup> Other pedestrians cannot give him directions, because they do not speak English, or because they will not, perhaps resenting his very British status as an outsider. Clearly, the narrator is not the monarch of all he surveys, though he often pretends to be.

Father Dillon takes care of the child because he feels paternal affection, but also because he wishes to use the girl later as a means for converting the heathen Chinese, as a 'channel of salvation' (XCIX). He procures for her a Christian nurse and gives her a patriotic Irish name, Kathleen (CI). He educates her further in Catholicism and Anglo-Irish history, and she is also taught to read the works of Edward Gibbon and David Hume.<sup>28</sup> The fair maid of Macao is, thus, almost completely westernised, in name, education, and appearance, in this poem. Her historical and philosophical education inclines her towards the mildly Anglican views of the narrator. The *padré* also sees fit to teach her Chinese history, as this will make it easier for her to convert her own people (CII). The Chinese maid's view of Chinese history is, therefore, thoroughly filtered through a western gaze. At this point, the narrator digresses again to teach the reader, as Kathleen had supposedly learned it, something of Chinese history, thus setting himself up as an authority: 'dear reader, you, / If you will "lend me" – *eyes*, may learn it too' (CIII).<sup>29</sup>

Kathleen, according to the narrator, has read of the mythical demi-god, and man, 'Pwankoo' (CIV).<sup>30</sup> She knows about the 'Four Books' of Confucius, the introduction of Buddhism into China, and the works of 'Laontsze' (sic). The narrator's point (and, therefore, the lesson that Kathleen and the reader should draw from the history

26 It is true that some of the streets in the Portuguese town were still unnamed in 1842. The governor, Ferreira Amaral ordered the naming of unnamed streets in 1846, and street signs changed to a 'black background with white lettering' (Zhang, 46). This implies that there already were street signs in existence. As Zhang Queqiao shows, both the Portuguese and the Chinese had street signs during this period (11). Zhang also gives examples of early granite street signs in Portuguese (Zhang, 9, 43).

27 See Mary Louise Pratt's, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* for a full discussion of the imperial gaze.

28 This is an ironic education for a Catholic priest to give, as Gibbon was generally considered to be either atheist or anti-religious, though, as Wolloch points out, the description of him as a 'religious agnostic favouring toleration' is closer to the mark (176). Even today, though, Gibbons is seen in some quarters as a fundamentally anti-Catholic writer: 'As a matter of fact, the anti-Catholic historian Edward Gibbon, in his monumental work *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, goes so far as to declare that it was the existence of the Catholic Church which destroyed the Roman Empire' (Stravinskias, 28). David Hume's philosophy was often viewed (and still is, at times), as a rebuttal of Christianity. See Foster, 1997.

29 The italicised '*eyes*' is a telling variation in the allusion to Shakespeare's famous phrase: 'lend me your ears' (*Julius Caesar*, 3.2). Perhaps the ominous fate of Caesar was not considered here.

30 In pinyin, 'Pangu'. See Loomis for a description, 17-8.



of Chinese religion) is that most Chinese religions, unlike Christianity (CIX) were tolerant: 'Idolatry (to Christians, 'tis veneration) / Was mostly preached, and practised toleration' (CVIII), and 'Yet neither strove the rival faith to smother, / Nor pleasure took in damning one another' (CX). The narrator does note that the emperor 'Tsin' burned his scholars: 'Of all his wisest men he made a bonfire!' (CXI),<sup>31</sup> but stresses that most Chinese do not approve of this imperial act of censorship, and damn him every day (CXIV). Apparently, as an act of conscience, Tsin decided to build the great wall, but at enormous human cost: 'To keep his subjects safe from Tartar hosts / He made vast numbers of these subjects – ghosts' (CXV). The narrator admits that he has not travelled to the great wall yet, but that he '*hope[s] to do it*' (CXVI), though the wall has a monstrous history. The narrator's own italics draws attention to the unknown outcome of the British military campaign he was about to embark upon. But even if he does get there (that is, if the invasion is successful), his projected response is still equivocal as he regards the monument as a symbol of pride, in much the same way that Shelley describes the monument to Ozymandias: 'For Humanity must sigh / O'er those sad drooping, dying sons of Han; / As on that spot, where ancient Egypt groans, / The pyramids pride recalls' (CXVII). This is the first indication in the poem of some sympathy for ordinary male Chinese, though it is short-lived and confined to history. He further notes that the wall, ironically, failed as a Tartar did indeed gain the imperial throne in China, and that such projects could not be ordered by modern despots, like the 'Russian Nick', because the masons would refuse to do the work, and have 'th' Emperor's head off' (CXIX).

The final sentiments, that the barbarous Manchus and Mongols were civilised by the Chinese, though they conquered them, concludes his catalogue of Chinese history, supposedly imparted to the hero by Kathleen while he is convalescing. Perhaps, by implication, the British 'barbarians' will also conquer the Chinese, even if they are 'civilised' by them later. As neither Manchus nor Chinese were Christians, however, the narrator himself supposes that they will all go to hell: 'Alas! That the celestial of this world, / Must, in the next, to Pluto's realms be hurled' (CXXII). Chinese history and civilisation, is, thus, completely circumscribed by the Christianity which the narrator brings with him, even though he is not a fervent believer (one wonders what Kathleen's sentiments on this would be), and, therefore, effectively dismissed.

Douglas Kerr and Julia Kuehn summarise the range of images constructed by foreigners of China in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries: 'ancient, traditional, beautiful, ingenious, disciplined, spiritual and full of wisdom, or old-fashioned, hidebound, quaint, devious, cruel, superstitious and lacking in energy'.<sup>32</sup> In the sections on Chinese history and culture, our author has admitted that China has an ancient civilisation, and that the Chinese are ingenious people, and tolerant spiritually, but his vignettes concentrate on imperial cruelty. Chinese culture has also deformed its women, and

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31 Common lore has it that the emperor Qin Shihuang organised book burnings, and buried 460 Confucian scholars alive. According to Mao Zedong, this was not nearly enough! See Fu, 129.

32 Kerr and Kuehn, 4.

bestialised its men with their 'ape-like' tails. The implication is that if the Chinese (at least, the women) were completely westernised, they would be perfect, like Kathleen, and also be saved from 'Pluto's realms'. It is the British cannon (followed by British trade) which will ultimately redeem the Chinese in this world, rather than the Christian mission. This serves as a justification for invasion. The narrator also assumes a right to *see* China (the bound feet, and the Great Wall), which is currently being thwarted. The imperial gaze itself, therefore, is its own justification for warfare.

It is Kathleen's 'sweet voice', rather than the contents of her reported narrative, which cures the narrator, 'Spite of a Chinese doctor' (CXXIII). This quip leads to another digression, this time on Chinese medicine, which, the narrator is convinced, does much to 'thin the population' (CXXV).<sup>33</sup>

Edmund recovers quickly, but, as the second mate of a merchant vessel (CXXVIII) is soon forced to leave. This is the first time we learn of Edmund's occupation. The unholy trinity of colonisation are thus present in the poem, in the form of the (Irish) priest, an (English)man involved in trade, even if indirectly, and the presence of the narrator, who, we have been informed, is a soldier. Both Edmund and Kathleen are grief-stricken at the news that he must leave. They spend their final evening walking through Macao, including the Praya Grandé, the battery defending the harbour, and San Francisco's church, before ascending a hill in the moonlight. The scene is pastoral: 'While Portugal's gay colonists were seen / Dancing all joyous on the moon-lit green' (CXXX),<sup>34</sup> but Edmund and Kathleen embrace each other mournfully. She asks him to sing a song, to bring some cheerfulness to their moods, which he does. The message of the song is that 'heartfelt, pure, devoted love', is more valuable than ambition, soulless pleasures, or untold wealth: 'Peru – both Indies – all are vain'. This seems to be a reference to the colonial wealth implied in John Donne's 'The Sun Rising'.<sup>35</sup> If so, the hero is claiming that love is more valuable than the fruits of trade, but the message is undercut by the voice of the older, more mature narrator who has, several stanzas before, disparaged the hero's attitude to love: 'But when, alas! One's more advanced in years, / Love's passion does not warm the heart, but sears' (XXXVIII). The lovers here, though, pledge themselves to each other eternally. Father Dillon, however is quite happy to see Edmund leave, as his plan was for Kathleen to marry a Chinese Christian, 'to cope / The better with poor Heathens in conversion' (CXL), but Kathleen is averse

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33 The narrator likens Chinese doctors to the British quack physician James Morison (1770-1840), famous for his "vegetable pills". See Pamboukian, 77. He acknowledges, thus, that western medicine might not be perfect, but still better than Chinese medicine as a whole.

34 The narrator intervenes here and mentions that when the British were protected by the Portuguese in Macao the place was less festive: 'Yet, when proud Britain's sons here shelter sought, / They spread the gloom and dullness which they brought' (CXXII).

35 '... both th' India's of spice and mine' (line 17). The Spanish colonial Viceroyalty of Peru contained the territory of Bolivia, and most importantly, the silver mines of Potosí which played a major role in Spanish colonialism, and from which much of the silver made its way to China.

to this.<sup>36</sup> Kathleen's mind is made up. As they part, she gives Edmund a watch-chain made from her own hair, and a poem which pledges fidelity whether Edmund survives or not: 'I'll share on earth thy woe or weal, / Or pray for thee in heaven'.

The narrator then concludes the poem rather abruptly and in a completely unromantic fashion, saying that Kathleen's poem was written on rice paper, which is not, as he originally thought, made from rice (CXLIV). He fancies that if paper could be made from vegetables, then we could see the works of Babbage 'printed upon greens, or – cabbage' (CXLVI). He imagines that 'dull fools' will quote this 'poor joke' and ignore everything else he wrote. This is a bathetic deflation of the love theme, and suggests that, perhaps, the wealth of Peru and both Indies might be more important in the long run.

The first canto ends here and, whether owing to commercial failure or the death of the author, the continuation of this story will forever be left to the reader's imagination. Will Kathleen and Edmund re-unite and live happily ever after, or is the groundwork set for the tragedy of a Chinese Madame Butterfly?

By the time that this poem was written, much English fiction on China included, often in large measures, the exotic trope of 'spice'. What is immediately noticeable in this work, by their very absence, is that 'spice' and other exotica (besides bound feet and queues) play very little role. The only Chinese person described in any detail, Kathleen, is completely westernised. The descriptions of the various landscapes of China and Macao are fairly neutral, and only once is ancient China referred to as a 'flow'ry' land (CXX). Furthermore, there is no hint of the erotic besides a simple, chaste kiss. One might wonder, then, what the real point of this poem is, and, perhaps, many of its contemporary readers did too, seeing that it slipped rapidly into oblivion. As a modern reader, though, the key to reading this poem is, in my opinion, in its silences. Opium, the obvious spice, was still being traded heavily in Macao when the poem was written.<sup>37</sup> Opium dens were 'notorious' in Macao, and only outlawed in 1947.<sup>38</sup> The very presence of the British fleet in Hong Kong was intimately connected to the opium trade. And yet, neither opium nor British trade is mentioned directly in the actual poem, besides the fact that the hero is described once as being the second mate of a merchantman. In his theoretical exposition of the 'poetics of spice', Timothy Morton points out that the word 'spice' is derived from the Latin *species*. With its meanings of 'appearance', 'splendour', and 'beauty', as well as primary meanings of 'kind' or 'type', Morton argues that: 'two notions of appearance and particularity are features of poetry that employs spice, for

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36 The text mentions the 'merchant Lunquah' (CXLI). This may refer to the Chinese artist Lin Gua or Lamqua (actually Guan Qiaochiang), who was in Macao around this period. See Hao, 155. I can find no evidence that he was a Christian, but Kathleen fancies that this is just a feint and that Lunqhah is actually a follower of Confucius. She also thinks him 'rather old' (CXLI). Lamqua would have been around 40 if my dating of the poem is accurate.

37 The *Chinese Repository* claimed that between August 1841 and January 1843, 37 of 250 recorded ships were selling opium, and the British were the major opium traders. See Hao, 59.

38 See Lewin, 42. A Presbyterian missionary in 1843 noted how he had to hold his breath as he passed the opium dens of Macao. See *Seventh Annual Minutes*, 34.

two modes are generally in play. One uses *spice* as a sign caught up in connotations of aesthetic detail, another uses *spice* to suggest wealth'.<sup>39</sup> The absence of both of these modes in the poem, thus, most likely represents the author's (and British) anxiety about the very nature of this trade, and the reason their fleet is in Hong Kong, yet it forms the actual framing device of the poem. As the author claims in the introduction, it is a 'tale' of 'tails' and 'taels'. Money is the ultimate spice, yet the trade's underpinning was deeply embarrassing to many in Britain, and the means of procuring that trade, that is, military violence against the Chinese, equally argued against. The violence in this poem is directed against the hero by the Chinese, thus giving the author, a military man, an implied right to defend the interests of his fictional hero, but the economic reasons for the author's presence in Hong Kong are almost completely elided.

Though I do not agree with Frederick Jameson's much debated polemical statement that 'all third world texts are necessarily ... allegorical,' and that even stories of 'private individual destiny' can be read as national allegory,<sup>40</sup> there is no doubt that some of them can be read in this way. I would claim that much colonial fiction and travel writing can be construed as a form of national allegory too. In the case of the poem under discussion, the narrative tries to shape and order a space (Macao, China) of which the author, by his own admission, has little first-hand knowledge. Though the impression of knowledge is given by references to a few local place names, and some aspects of Chinese and Macaoan history and culture, it is clear that the characters and the plot are little more than projections of British anxiety and desire concerning British presence in the region. Edmund's desire to 'see' a pair of bound feet (like the narrator's desire to 'see' the Great Wall) is an allegory of British desire to occupy China, tempered by the dangers attendant on the venture. Edmund's attackers beyond the wall might stand for the Chinese military, but their purported desire to steal his 'taels' masks the British desire to control trade with China on their own terms, in other words, to gain those same 'taels'. Edmund's desire to see the monstrous feet is converted into an unresolved love story with an almost completely westernised Chinese woman, just as British engagement with China was unresolved when the story was written. The poem is not so much about Macao, the Portuguese, or the Chinese, then, as it is about the fraught British presence in Hong Kong, at a crucial moment in the history of that settlement. It has an important place, therefore, in the evolution of the English poetry of Hong Kong. As Elaine Yee Lin Ho points out, it would take more than a century from its foundation for an English Literature in Hong Kong to develop which did not use the 'language of power and command, and the orientalist subjection of the colonized through tropes of dehumanization and erasure',<sup>41</sup> or which used Hong Kong as 'an object of representation that co-ordinates divergent points of view on gender, class and cultural identities',<sup>42</sup> rather than merely as a base for colonial expansion and economic advantage.

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39 Morton, 21. The spice trade was also 'crucial to the establishment of capitalism in Europe' (Morton, 14).

40 Jameson, 69.

41 Ho, 7.

42 Ho, 6.

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### Biographical note

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