

New age warriors: negotiating the handover on the streets of Macao

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Abstract

At the time of the handover of Hong Kong to China (July 1997), open warfare erupted on the streets of Macao between elements of the South China underworld. This terminated abruptly roughly a month before the handover of Macao to China (December 1999). What and who was involved? The answer to this was never fully established. In this article I address the issue of what these events can tell us concerning a process that, outwardly and formally, presented itself as an instance of 'decolonization' – in fact, the last act of the former Portuguese Empire – but was, in reality, far more complex. In this way, I aim to show that the emphasis on the moment of 'Independence' in the analysis of colonial and postcolonial processes tends to conceal the continuities and the complexities of political, social and economic processes that are best seen in a global perspective rather than in terms of a localized relation between colonized and colonizers.

Keywords: Triads; South China; colonialism; handover; Macao

As dusk fell, the bikers pulled up on either side of the blue sedan on busy Avenida da Praia Grande, pulled out Chinese-issue pistols and fired point-blank, killing all three occupants. They then sped away, leaving bystanders gazing aghast at the bloody spectacle and compounding what has become a growing embarrassment for China, Macao's future master. The May 4 [1997] execution of the three men, said to be senior gangland figures, was just the latest chapter in more than a month of fire-bombings and assassinations that have killed fourteen people and injured twenty-one in this small Portuguese colony of 425,000 inhabitants (Chow 1997).

This is how journalist Raymond Chow described for the Associated Press one of the first of the series of violent events that shook the small territory of Macao in southern China. Young men in leather suits with veiled full-face helmets on top of flashy motorbikes suddenly came out of the monotony of everyday traffic to perform neatly staged acts of violence such as the one described – they are romantically called by the youngsters of the city 'big-headed Buddhas'.

By the time this event took place, one month before the handover of Hong Kong to mainland China, the style was already becoming familiar to everyone in the city – thanks not only to occurrences but also to the 'police and gangster films' (*gin2 fei2 pin2*)¹ that are such an important part of the Hong Kong film industry and have become a central element of the aesthetic imagination of the inhabitants of southern China.

As July 1997 approached and for most of the interim period, until Macao was itself handed over to the Chinese administration in December 1999, an open battle raged on various fronts. Firstly, on the streets and in the casinos of Macao, where violent acts were perpetrated mostly by gunmen who hopped over the border from the People's Republic, only to disappear back over it after the event; and secondly, in the Press, via the statements of lawyers, police officers and diplomats representing the principal political powers interested in the region. It was even fought out in fiction, as one of the principal Macao underworld figures (Wan Kuok-koi, known as 'Broken Tooth' Koi) produced a film of his life (called *Casino*), modelling himself on Martin Scorsese's earlier film of the same name, and sought wide media coverage. Hong Kong television, *Time Magazine*, *Newsweek* and *AsiaWeek* all featured extensive interviews in which he was allowed to flaunt his sense of personal achievement. From the *BBC* to the *Herald Tribune*, none of the major international newspapers and news agencies failed to carry reports on him. The setting was even briefly delocalized to include Arkansas and Washington, when it became known that President Clinton's association with some of the shadier figures of Macao's casino world was becoming a serious source of embarrassment for the American administration – the soon to be forgotten 'Donorgate' scandal.

None of this was to last long, however. As 'Broken Tooth' Koi himself predicted, all the mayhem would end a month before the actual handover in December 1999. What he did not predict was that he himself would be the loser. His imprisonment in a top-security prison with a fifteen-year sentence was the final scene of this filmic war. Photos of his grumpy expression behind bars went around the world, ritually informing everyone that a new peace, with new lords, was now in force.

But the media coverage and stage setting of the violence were so intense and excessive that the formal end of colonial administration in Macao will forever be marked by it. Nevertheless, although one has to assume the genuineness of the Public Prosecutor's efforts, the courts failed to prove responsibility for a single one of the many murders perpetrated in the city at the time. This in itself should not surprise us, given our knowledge of similar crime wars elsewhere around the world. Yet the major figures behind the various factions in the city were well known to everyone at the time and cared little to hide the fact. Thus, even though we roughly know who was fighting whom, many questions remain only partly answered. For example, what were the stakes involved and in whose name were these people fighting?

Apparently, there was a turf war among loan sharks in the casinos and, according to some journalists, also a conflict concerning the highly profitable smuggling of American tobacco into China. But the relationship between this war and the decision to split up the gambling monopoly that would be taken in 2001 remains unclear. Furthermore, this hardly seems sufficient to explain the way in which the troubles in this minuscule territory suddenly reverberated across China and the world in events such as the deposition of President Estrada in the Philippines, arms smuggling in south-east Asia, the Donorgate scandal in Washington and the troubles related to casinos in Mongolia, among other events.

I will not go into detail here, since I have provided a general description and analysis of these events in the chapter 'Triad Wars' of my recent book *Between China*

and Europe (Pina-Cabral 2002). In this article I aim to address the issue of what these events can tell us about a process that, outwardly and formally, presented itself as an instance of decolonization – in fact, the last act of the former Portuguese Empire.

Imperialism and colonialism

In *Culture and Imperialism*, Edward Said provides us with handy definitions of ‘imperialism’ and ‘colonialism’: “‘imperialism’ means the practice, the theory and the attitudes of a dominating metropolitan centre ruling a distant territory; ‘colonialism’, which is almost always a consequence of imperialism, is the implanting of settlements on a distant territory’ (Said 1993: 9). These definitions, in their stark simplicity, provide us with a general sense of what the words are taken to mean by the vast majority. Nevertheless, there are a number of reasons for caution.

This territorialization of relations of domination and emphasis on distance as the factor determining imperial rule raise a number of problems. Indeed, such definitions tend to turn nineteenth- and early twentieth-century forms of territorially extensive, capitalist colonial administration based on a dichotomous ethnic classification system (in particular, the British and French examples) into the prototype of colonialism. Said explicitly admits this (1993: 10), but it creates difficulties in at least three instances.

Firstly, it creates difficulties when one considers traditions of expansion that did not for most of the time share such features, or where the metropolis did not have the means to control its empire financially. This is notably the case for large periods of time in many parts of the Portuguese empire. Macao, where metropolitan economic interests practically ceased after the fall of Malacca to the Dutch in 1641, is a good example. Another, as recent Brazilian historiography has shown, is the eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century commercial elite of Rio de Janeiro (Brazil), which was so strong that it easily overshadowed the metropolis.

Secondly, such definitions can reduce the visibility of forms of territorially-based political domination that do not share the outward appearance of empire. For example, Said argues that ‘In our time, direct colonialism has largely ended; imperialism [...] lingers where it has always been, in a kind of general cultural sphere as well as in specific political, ideological, economic and social practices’ (1993: 9). This is problematic in the cases of present-day Tibet or southern Sudan, where colonialist policies of a drastically ruthless nature (and not of a ‘general cultural sphere’) are being enforced.

Thirdly, the emphasis on explicit rule creates difficulties of definition in a number of situations such as, for example, those where imperialism is not formally present. This would lead us to exclude from the category of imperialism the kind of informal political domination enforced by means of the Bretton Woods institutions, so visibly problematic today in many African and Latin American countries. This is also true in the case of situations that present themselves outwardly as colonial but do not share the characteristics of the high-British imperial prototype. Here, of course, I have Macao in mind.

Many of these problems would be minimized if we took more care to avoid anachronism. This can take two forms. The first involves the difference between

explicit formulation and substance. If imperialism is indeed the violent exercise of the power of sovereignty over a territorially or ethnically defined group by a foreign political entity – something that has happened on many occasions in the past – then we need to distinguish it from the legal and political institutions that it produces. This is both because there may be imperialism without such explicitly formulated institutions, and because the formal aspects may well survive in situations where the actual relations of power have changed considerably.

Secondly, colonialism has been one of the major forces in shaping a globalized world. The exercise of imperial and colonial power is not something that can be carried out in a localized, isolated fashion – as, for example, with the Aztecs, who did not even imagine the existence of other continents. Thus one cannot treat colonialism independently of the political, cultural and economic conjuncture of the world at the time it occurs. This may seem a truism but it is all too often forgotten. To give just one graphic example: the liberal, politically legitimated and largely non-racist type of colonialism that was experienced in Hong Kong from the late 1960s to the mid 1990s was hardly the same type of political system that governed the same colony from the 1840s to the 1950s. To merge the two under the heading of colonialism, as is all too often done, can be misleading.

Colonialism in Macao

Let us turn again to Macao. The political and administrative status of the citadel that the Portuguese erected at the mouth of the Pearl River in South China at the end of the sixteenth century was never too clear. I will pass over the complex history of the first three centuries and will briefly consider the last 150 years.

In earlier writings (Pina-Cabral and Lourenço 1993; Pina-Cabral 2002), I have divided these years into three periods: the ‘colonial period’, going from the foundation of Hong Kong by the British in the late 1840s through to the late 1960s when the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution was raging in China; the ‘postcolonial period’, from that time to 1987, the date when the Joint Declaration between the People’s Republic of China and the Portuguese State was signed, determining the timing and conditions of a final handover of power over the Territory; and, finally, the ‘transition period’, which corresponds largely to the 1990s. The so-called ‘Triad Wars’, which form the main topic of this paper, took place from around July 1997, when Hong Kong was handed over by the British, to December 1999, when the handover of Macao took place.

Profoundly challenged by the change in conditions in the Far East caused by the foundation of Hong Kong, the Portuguese authorities attempted to impose a colonial model of administration on the city of Macao in the 1870s. This attempt was embodied by the tragic figure of Governor Ferreira do Amaral who paid with his life for his colonial bravado at the hands of Chinese bandits, in all probability hired by circles close to the Vice-Royalty of Canton. His death and the events immediately following meant that, even although Macao was now outwardly a colonial possession of Portugal, the actual relations of power in the Territory became more, rather than less, complicated. China never agreed to sign an international treaty validating this

move, as it was forced to do in the case of the Chinese possessions of other European nations. Indeed, it is safe to argue that, if successive Chinese governments failed to intervene more directly in the running of Macao's affairs during this period, this was only because China was undergoing a period of economic and political collapse.

In practice, for Portugal Macao was more useful from a symbolic point of view, helping support Portugal's always uncertain claim to the status of colonial power in relation to the fight for Africa, than as a possession in its own right. This was neatly put by the distinguished writer and diplomat Eça de Queiroz in a July 1871 newspaper chronicle:

Houve este mês um pânico patriótico: julgou-se que íamos perder Macau! A China, segundo se afirmava, tinha intimado Portugal a evacuar aquela colónia – onde só devia reinar o rabicho. Foi acusado acremente o Governo; a Baixa pululou de alvites; e o orgulho nacional da Rua dos Retroseiros pareceu profundamente ferido. Corria que o Sr. Carlos Bento, como outrora Caim, ouvia, a horas mortas, vozes vingativas que lhe bradavam:

— Que fizeste tu de Macau, Bento?

E tanto que o Governo, para nos tranquilizar, bradou dentre as colunas do *Diário do Governo*:

— Não, Portugeses, não, Macau ainda é vosso!

A verdade parece ser que Macau está ainda preso à metrópole – por alguns telegramas que se estão trocando entre o governador de lá e o Governo de cá. Diríamos que está *por um fio!* – se tão lamentável equívoco se pudesse escrever, quando se trata do orgulho nacional e da Baixa.

As relações de Portugal com as suas colónias são originais. Elas não nos dão rendimento algum; nós não lhes damos um único melhoramento: é uma sublime luta – de abstenção. (Eça de Queiroz 1966: 1028)

[This month there was a patriotic panic: word went round that we were going to lose Macao! China, it was said, had urged Portugal to evacuate the colony – where only the pigtail should rule. The Government was bitterly blamed; downtown (Lisbon) was infested with opinions; and, in the haberdashery district, national pride seemed deeply wounded. It was rumoured that Mr Bento (the then briefly-serving Prime Minister), like Cain before him, was hearing vengeful voices crying at the dead of night:

'What have you done to Macao, Bento?'

To calm us down, the Government had to proclaim from the pages of the *Official Bulletin*:

'No, Portuguese citizens, no. Macao is still yours!'

It seems that Macao is still linked to the metropolis – by a few telegrams exchanged between the governor there and the Government here. One might say that it is dangling from a wire – if such a sorry pun were acceptable when national pride and downtown opinion are at stake.

Relations between Portugal and its colonies are decidedly original. They provide us with not a cent of income; we provide them with not a single improvement: it is a sublime struggle – of abstention! (my translation)]

In fact, Eça de Queiroz, in his capacity as Ambassador to Cuba, was one of the few Portuguese of his time to make a decided impact on Macao's history, due to his sustained public attack on the Coolie Trade, which eventually led to its prohibition. If I have chosen to call this period in Macao's history 'colonial', it is not so much

because of the Territory's outward form of government as because of the general attitudes and atmosphere that prevailed internationally at that time.

All this, however, started to change at a steady pace after the end of World War II, roughly coinciding with the end of civil strife in Mainland China and the establishment of the Communist regime. Very early on, the new rulers of China showed that they were perfectly aware that the regime they were about to implement would put them at a disadvantage in terms of access to international markets. In fact, the decision to maintain the *status quo* in Macao and Hong Kong was taken by the Communists even before they took power in Beijing in October 1949, grounded on solid economic and political reasons. In February of that year, in Hebei, Mao Zedong informed Stalin's special envoy to China (Anastas Mikoyan) of this strategic decision (Fernandes 2000a: 57–8).

In the 1950s, the Western powers' economic blockade of China meant that, once again, China was faced with its age-old problem of isolation – which had been at the basis of Macao's foundation four centuries earlier. Furthermore, its role in political struggles in Asia meant that it badly needed to re-arm itself. Hong Kong was economically very important, but its close alignment with American interests prevented it from functioning as an informal gateway to the outside world. Macao became the conduit for huge quantities of products that were indispensable to the survival of the Maoist regime: petrol, metals, automobiles, chemical products, etc., which were purchased by the People's Republic of China's representative in the Territory, the Nam Kwong Consortium.

This happened so openly that it led to repeated complaints against Portugal within NATO's China Committee. Portugal eventually decided to take a stand, which served only to irritate the Communists. The half-hearted attempt to curb this clandestine traffic of goods was at the source of the 1952 border incidents which, in time-honoured Macao fashion, were eventually silently resolved after the customs controls were once again dropped (Fernandes 2000b: 59).

One of the most important products in question was gold. Having been a neutral country during World War II, Portugal did not sign the 1946 Bretton Woods agreements that banned the import of gold for private use. Being outside the International Monetary Fund, Macao could, unlike Hong Kong, function as a clearing-house for the gold that China needed in order to purchase products on the international black market. A summary examination of Macao Government official statistics immediately suggests the enormity of what was at stake. Between 1949 and 1973, just under 934 tons of gold entered Macao legally. There is ample evidence that this gold was re-exported but there are absolutely no official figures for export fees. If all that bullion had stayed in Macao, the city would now be paved in gold (Fernandes 2000b).

In the course of the 1950s, the People's Republic's control over the running of the Territory increased steadily until, by the onset of the Cultural Revolution, they had managed to expel the representatives of the Kuomintang from the city. At that time, feeling that they risked losing their monopoly over the traffic in gold and some of the smaller gambling concessions, the group of capitalists that constituted Macao's Commercial Association promoted a Cultural-Revolution-type revolt against

Portuguese rule. The public uprisings started in December 1966, continuing for most of the following year, until they were eventually quelled by pressure from Chinese leaders in Canton and Beijing, who were re-establishing their power after the Cultural Revolution's worst period of civil disobedience and for whom Macao remained an indispensable gateway to international black markets.

This resulted in a new way of running the city. From then on, all government activities were overseen by a Chinese shadow government whose power was based on the establishment throughout the Territory of Communist controlled residents' associations and the dictates of the Chinese-language press. When the Portuguese fascist regime collapsed in 1974, it was the Chinese authorities themselves who refused to negotiate a handover of power. From 1976 onwards, after the Portuguese Government withdrew its military presence, the Territory was run under a special dispensation in the Portuguese Constitution, declaring Macao 'a Chinese territory under Portuguese administration'.

I stress again that I call this period 'postcolonial' less because of the formal institutions of government, which remained outwardly colonial to the end in 1999, but because of the way in which Macao inserted itself into an international order in which postcolonial attitudes and conditions prevailed. Thus, when formal decolonization took place, everyone was prepared for it. Those who felt they had to safeguard themselves against China's changing regime had already made their arrangements well in advance. In Hong Kong, the late colonial period was remembered as a time of prosperity, reasonably efficient and responsible government and political freedom. The handover, inevitable as it seemed, was marred by a deep nostalgia and sense of foreboding concerning the city's future. By contrast, in Macao, where the People's Republic had effectively been in power since the late 1960s, everyone seemed to be enthusiastically in favour. Except that everyone had different motivations for this.

The decolonization of Macao in December 1999 was yet another instance of equivocal compatibility (Pina-Cabral 2002). For the Chinese leadership in Beijing and Canton, it was a crucially important step in the affirmation of China's national integrity: the wounds of the pre-Liberation period still rankled for the PRC leadership; for the local Chinese middle-classes, the open assumption of administrative functions for the first time in history was a moment of ethnic affirmation in the face of their past rivals (the Territory's Eurasian administrative elite) and of their perceived future challengers (the migrant Chinese from across the border); for the Portuguese in Portugal, it was perceived as an affirmation of modernity and Europeaness, a symbolic triumph in the face of international public opinion.

Given the lack of any reasonable expectations of economic neocolonialism, the Portuguese public enthused over the handover of Macao and, shortly after, the granting of independence to Timor Leste [East Timor]. These were major moments for validating a sense of pride at having transformed imperial relations into relations of collaboration and linguistic brotherhood, of the type that in theory are sustained with Brazil (Vale de Almeida 2000). The public euphoria that accompanied these gestures can only be understood in the context of the bitter memories of the African

Wars of Independence – perceived by the majority of Portugal’s population as a dictatorial imposition by a hated regime – and the sense of public ignominy and betrayal that, to this day, accompanies the memory of the granting of independence in Africa, immediately followed by civil war, economic rapine and cultural collapse.

In such circumstances, the onset of the Triad Wars at the time of the handover of Hong Kong was a bitter blow to everyone: the Portuguese who never understood what they had to do with it; the British, whose apparent efficiency in doing the job had been challenged by the surfacing of previously unnameable tensions; the Chinese leadership, who thought they had successfully co-opted the Hong Kong and Macao underworld; the local Chinese elites, whose moment of glory was being marred by the public exposure of their dirty laundry. What had gone wrong?

Peace in the feud

In its attempt to blame the Portuguese authorities for what was happening at the time of their own handover, the Anglo-American Hong Kong Press repeatedly derided the Macao Government, claiming that its blatant corruption and lack of efficiency were at the root of these wars. In turn, Macao’s public relations officers explained that peace had long reigned in the Territory and that, although fighting was still going on, the public and visitors to casinos should not worry since these were neatly planned crimes strictly between gangland figures. As a matter of fact, this Government claim was quite correct: the number of collateral casualties of these three years of struggle turned out to be minimal.

Outbursts of this kind between the different armed groups overseeing the considerable clandestine and semi-clandestine interests that permeated the Territory were not unheard of in the city’s history – it was only the extent and the theatrical excess in the staging of the crimes that seemed to be new on this occasion. Residents would remember these outbreaks of violence for many years to come – as when, for example, in the early 1970s, one whole floor of the high-rise hotel over the city’s main casino was devastated by machine-gun fire in a fight-out between different families of loan sharks. The authorities, however, seemed to forget these eruptions the moment the bullets stopped flying. Macao’s size and permeability meant that any other attitude would be tantamount to suicide.

On a daily basis, however, peace does reign in the city and Macao is a reasonably safe place for those of its inhabitants who are not involved in any kind of clandestine business. The type of sporadic crime that shocks foreign visitors who peruse the pages of local newspapers leaves residents cold, for they know that such crimes have rules and are directed at whoever breaks them. I am by no means condoning such attitudes and such a way of life: my point is that a precondition for the running of a city that specializes in casinos, money laundering, prostitution, arms dealing, illegal gold trafficking, drug dealing, etc. is that there should be what Max Gluckman and Evans-Pritchard have called ‘a peace in the feud’ (Gluckman 1955). The various armed interests – which here converge around a kind of loose gangland association known as ‘Triad’ – tend to establish moments of equilibrium that allow for prolonged periods of surface peace. These are periodically broken by eruptions of violence, caused by

processes of generational substitution or changing power bases, which seldom take long to be resolved.

Both of these factors seem to have been at play in Macao's underworld at the time of the handover of Hong Kong. On the one hand, new figures were making themselves known in the city and trying to find a niche in the power system at a higher level than that of routine gangster activity. Wan Kuok-Koi's attempt to become a media personality was just such a move. It angered many and, in the end, proved fatal. On the other hand, the Asian economic crisis, and China's need to protect its currency by curbing its capital exports, meant that Macao's real-estate bubble – severely over-stretched – suddenly burst. Loans could no longer be collected; conflict immediately exploded.

The usual mechanisms for resolving such problems were set in motion. For example, newspapers reported that, as early as July 1995, as signs of trouble were emerging, the police organized a meeting between the four main Triad leaders in Macao. Allegedly, a short-lived alliance called the 'Group of Four United' was created as a result. Later, attempts were made on the lives of some of the top underworld figures (such as the one reported in the quotation heading this article), in order to clear the field. Macao's police and the Hong Kong and PRC authorities tried to push the most public figure – Wan Kuok-koi – off the turf by temporarily banning him. Co-ordination of the different police forces in the Territory was tightened to prevent them from taking sides, as was traditionally rumoured to occur. When none of these measures worked and the fighting intensified, it started to become clear that new actors were entering the scene and that what was at stake had not been foreseen by anyone.

Brothers-in-arms

As I have argued previously (Pina-Cabral 2002), in his film persona, Wan Kuok-koi's *nom de guerre* is 'Giant' rather than 'Broken Tooth'. To play his role he chose the Hong Kong movie star Simon Yam Tat-wah, who has long specialized in the 'police and gangster' genre, himself being brother to Peter Yam Tat-wing, then head of the Hong Kong Police Tactical Unit and former head of the Organized Crime and Triad Bureau. When asked by newsmen what he thought about Wan, the actor declared that he was 'a good boss', adding: 'I respect him as a friend. Films often exaggerate things' (Fraser 1998). It is important to note that the Cantonese expression normally translated as 'boss' literally means 'elder brother'.

Stress on the value of fraternity is central to the aura afforded to underworld association in southern China. As John Colmey (1998), interviewing Wan Kuok-koi for *Time Magazine*, noted: 'For Broken Tooth Koi, it's all part of the "beautiful war," in which the victors are chosen by the Chinese God of War, Kuan Yu, to whom every true Triad prays for guidance. "But I am a very old-fashioned guy", says Wan. "That means to defend the interests of the society, to fight for your brothers and to uphold the codes of the brotherhood.'" He echoes the words of the god's sworn brother Liu Pei who, in the novel that underscores his legend, says: 'A brother is a limb. Wives and children are but clothes, which torn can be mended. But who can restore a broken limb?' (cited by Moss Roberts in Lo 1976: xxiii).

Euro-American readers may not grasp one central aspect of this ideal of brotherhood that is so central to the Confucian heritage; namely, the fact that it coexists with a deep sense of hierarchical co-dependency. In fact, the concept of 'fraternal submission' (Hsieh 1967: 177ff.) functions as a major structuring metaphor of modern everyday life, performing a central role in the attribution of meaning to the interpersonal relations of subjection and mutual support that are the very stuff of young male association – both in entrepreneurship and in youth gangs. The genetic link between familial feelings and political allegiance, highlighted by the neo-Confucians, has not simply vanished.

The term for elder (dominant) brother (*daai6 goh1*) is widely used to mean 'boss', 'chief' or 'leader'. The respective term for younger brother (*sai3 lo2*, literally 'small fellow') again stresses the element of protection and submission. The brotherhood bond (of submission and mutual loyalty) is thus a major structuring element in the symbolic construction of the relations of male cooperation that are omnipresent in Cantonese daily living and economic relations. David Ownby discusses the relevance of these concepts for the general development of 'secret societies' in China:

Of course, the idea of brotherhood can and frequently does suggest egalitarianism, which clearly clashes with the hierarchical orientation of Confucianism, but many examples of brotherhood contain their own hierarchies (including those within biological families). Even small brotherhoods in South China generally chose 'elder brothers' as well as 'second elder' and sometimes 'third elder' brothers, presumably to maintain discipline and facilitate common action, and the elaborate hierarchy within larger secret societies is well known. Indeed, anthropologist David Jordan notes that in modern Taiwan, brotherhoods are sometimes seen as superior to mere friendships in part because the built-in hierarchy of the brotherhood supposedly works to reduce conflict. (Ownby 1993: 16–17)

In conceiving the film that was supposed to crown his fame, Wan Kuok-koi was inspired by Martin Scorsese's 1995 film *Casino* and by his self-avowed hero, the actor Robert De Niro. But he is solidly grounded in a long-term fictional tradition, the basis of which is deeply rooted in Chinese history. The main example of this martial-arts fiction is the novel by the Hong-Kong/Singaporean newspaper magnate Louis Cha (a.k.a. Jin Yong, translated into English as *The Deer and the Cauldron*), regularly serialized by Chinese and Hong Kong television channels.

In the battles in Macao, 'big-headed Buddhas' sped around on motorbikes, dealing out (supposedly 'deserved') death in peak-hour traffic, or walked into restaurants toting a large gun in each hand, shooting their human target in full view of the customers before calmly exiting. The city's Triad Wars were neatly staged with a keen theatrical eye. One day, for example, a motorbike, with the cap of its petrol tank removed, was revved up and allowed to speed riderless down a street, crashing into the glass doors of a shop where it exploded.

Even the way in which Wan was finally caught has a strange fictional quality. The car of Macao's Portuguese Police Chief was blown up by a bomb while he was out jogging on a hilltop overlooking the city. A few hours later, Broken Tooth was watching an interview of himself that was being shown on a Hong Kong TV channel

in one of the halls of the main casino, when the police burst in, accompanied by press photographers, and took him off to prison, charged with having planned the explosion. The very next day, his film *Casino* was premièred in Causeway Bay, Hong Kong, with his wife and friends giving tearful interviews to the reporters. There is a singular irony in the fact that, ultimately, no evidence could be produced to support the charge that he was involved in this particular car bombing.

The importance of such a model of brotherhood and the hold it has on the popular imagination can be judged by its role in popular religion. In the streets of Guangdong, Hong Kong and Macao, the cult of Kwan Kong (Mandarin 'Kwan Yu'), the God of War, is second only in importance to that of Kun Yam (Mandarin 'Kwan Yin'), the Daoist/Buddhist Goddess of Compassion. His mythical existence finds its roots in the Chinese epic novel *Three Kingdoms* (Lo 1976). In this Ming-period classic, the central theme of brotherhood intertwines with the discourse of national integration in its representation of the fight for Han Chinese revival.

Indeed, this nationalist/ethnicist link with Han restoration is central to an understanding of what was going on on the streets of Macao. Although today all sources report that there is no mystical element left in the youth gangs that constitute the building-blocks of gangster politics in southern China, the sense of mystical legitimacy continues to be strong. Triads find their mythical origins in the Han Chinese fight against Manchu foreign rule. Such a notion continued to be stressed as Triads played their role in the establishment of the Chinese Republic.

This nationalist/ethnicist aura, which validates young male association, permeates the whole of Chinese culture and it is, therefore, no surprise that, when confronted with foreign rule, Chinese authorities should often show sympathy towards Triads. As the new 'one country, two systems' formula began to be implemented in the 1990s, the PRC authorities felt obliged to broadcast that the transfer of power over Hong Kong would not jeopardize the Triads. The press repeatedly cited Deng Xiaoping's comment that the secret societies in Hong Kong were also 'patriotic' (e.g. *Sunday Times*, 30 August 1997). Moreover, Wong Man-fong, a former Chinese diplomat in Hong Kong, is reported as having declared in May 1997 that he met with Triad leaders before the signing of the 1984 Sino-British Agreement, to tell them that, if they did not disturb Hong Kong's stability, the government would not spoil their business. Finally, in April 1993, the head of the Public Security Bureau, Tao Siju, told the press that some 'patriotic' Triads might constitute excellent allies, as long as they showed concern for Hong Kong's stability and prosperity (*Associated Press*, 14 May 1997).

By the early 1990s, negotiations had been undertaken with the foreign powers ruling Macao and Hong Kong, and increasing attention was being paid to China's voice in international arenas. The initial fear of the populations of Hong Kong and Macao concerning Communist rule were gradually allayed by implementation of the 'one country, two systems' concept. Even the underworld elements of the future Special Autonomous Regions had been assuaged. What, then, is the missing piece in this puzzle?

Internal margins

Increasingly, it became clear that most of the crimes were being perpetrated by gunmen from across the border, most of them with People's Liberation Army-issue ammunition and weapons. The fighting, which initially mainly involved the two major Triads in the Territory ('14k' and 'Shui Fong', translated into Portuguese as *Gazosa*), started to involve an increasing number of members of another Triad called 'Big Circle' – a group linked to military circles in Mainland China. In the Coloane high-security prison there were three entirely separate sectors: one for each of these three forces. The Mainland links of Wan Kuok-koi's principal opponents, specifically another casino gangster known as 'Kai Si' Wai, became increasingly obvious. Newspapers reported that the opening of this man's new casino, which constituted yet another act of this brutal drama, was made possible only by the heavy presence of gunmen with recent PLA affiliations.

In the end, it must have become obvious to the Chinese authorities that there was only one way of terminating this struggle which was threatening to spoil the handover of the Territory to the motherland. They had to respond positively to some of the demands being made. At the end of May 1998, the leadership of the neighbouring region of Zhuhai was changed in order to tighten its links with Chinese military circles. By July, there were signs that collaboration between the different defence forces of the Territory and China's Ministry of Public Security had improved. A number of 'liaison officers' and 'experts' were by this time working in the Territory. On 18 September, at the start of the Third Plenary Session of the Macao Special Administrative Region Organizing Committee, Vice-Premier Qian Qichen declared that a small garrison would be posted in Macao after the handover as 'a symbol of China's sovereignty' and in order to help with 'security problems'. This ran counter to explicit earlier agreements between Portugal and China that had been publicly confirmed by the Chinese authorities in 1997. The Portuguese side manifested only mild surprise.

At the end of the month, the casino invited the PLA military band to Macao. By October, there were indications that cooperation between Chinese and Macao defence forces had been strengthened, and the Ministry of Public Security launched a major 'land and sea anti-crime drill' involving over 1,000 men in Zhuhai.

Wan Kuok-Koi's closest aides were picked out one by one, killed by other gangs or captured by the police. In November 1998 his considerable financial assets were frozen by the court. By that time, newspapers reported that there were indications of internecine feuds within his Triad. In March 1999, there was an attempt to pass judgement on him, but this ended up being adjourned and the judge returned to Portugal. Finally, four weeks before the handover (23 November 1999), he was sentenced to fifteen years' imprisonment, his huge assets were confiscated, and his main aides were also sentenced.

The day after the handover a small detachment of PLA forces entered the Territory. Their presence was not what stopped the fighting by any account. By then, as Wan had predicted, it had all been settled. Reliant on a strongly centralist notion of the state, the Chinese authorities had seen these foreign enclaves as unruly margins of its

system and had dealt with them in corresponding fashion. They had negotiated with their external margins.

What they had not contemplated were the claims of China's own internal margins (Pina-Cabral 1997). The decolonization of these territories meant not only their formal inclusion in the outwardly legitimate system of government. The 'patriotic' discourse which constructed the triads as a Han response to foreign oppression allowed for negotiation to take place outside China. But Triad-type associations also pervaded society inside Han-controlled China, specifically in central institutions such as the military. These interest groups demonstrated on the streets of Macao that they, too, had to be taken into account in the reallocation of positions at a time of political realignment. What was at stake was not only, strictly speaking, new local ways of making profit but also, more importantly, penetration of the international black markets which Macao had mediated for so long.

Conclusion

Most analysts today tend to accord a central historical significance to the schism between colonialism and postcolonialism. Indeed, following Edward Said (see, for example, Said 1993: 6), many tend to see the colonial moment as the key explanatory device for understanding the unhappy postcolonial condition of most of the so-called 'Third-World' countries.

In my view, this tendency involves two kinds of distortion: on the one hand, a surprising poverty of terms for analysing the new forms of imperialism that help explain the economic precariousness and political marginality of most 'Third-World' countries; on the other hand, the difficulty of conceptualizing global relations in such a way as to overcome nationalist presuppositions. In most cases, such countries became nations at the moment of 'Independence' since, before the colonial era, their territories had not constituted consolidated political wholes. Thus, since our thinking is moulded by nationalist expectations, the moment of 'Independence' can be seen only as a moment of fulfilment, which is then presented retrospectively as an historical necessity, something that would have already existed before it actually did, if only it had been allowed to flower fully as it should have done. The sheer novelty and modernity of the forms of political power and corresponding elites that are validated by Independence tends to be concealed by that ideological screen. I readily accept that there may have been ex-colonies where such conditions did exist. We have to admit, however, that this was not the case for the majority. One of the cruellest features of nineteenth- and twentieth-century colonialism was precisely the way in which it undermined the previously existing sociological and political integrity of the territories it appropriated.

Macao is a useful example of why such nationalist expectations often fail us in our attempts to make sense of the postcolonial moment. Formed in the fifteenth century – long before the sort of colonialism that Said has in mind (he refers only to nineteenth- and twentieth-century British and French colonialism) – and governed for the last thirty years by the Portuguese under a closely supervised Chinese overlordship, Macao's transition and re-integration into China is surprisingly

revealing of the fact that what was at stake was not a local nationalist struggle but a global repositioning of the Territory, both in relation to the position of China's elites within the international order – namely, in relation to global trends in the underworld – and in relation to China's internal negotiation of its margins.

Note

1. These numbers (as in *jing2*) refer to the tones that identify words in Cantonese. This is a standard form of transcribing Cantonese.

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