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Politics of Space and Narrative Strategies: Exploring the Significance of Spatial and Discursive Metaphors in Select British Authors in China

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Abstract:
Nineteenth and twentieth century China which witnessed repeated foreign incursions in the form of military encounters, economic colonization and socio-cultural imperialism, entailed the development of a variety of societal norms and discourses via which the China coast foreign community made sense of their own roles, position as well as privileges at the heart of an essentially alien world. Within this context, the growth and proliferation of simulated foreign spaces whilst functioning as a source of emotional and social security also fortified the significance of cultivating local identities, as well as encouraging distance from the native world around them. Furthermore, the importance of fomenting a quintessentially discursive discourse also sought to condition and shape the opinions and perceptions of those deemed unaware of the "realities" of life in treaty port China. Within this framework, the current study, seeks to further an interdisciplinary understanding based on close reading of S.E Brady's 'Little Mertens', Leonard d'Oliver's 'The Vampire Nemesis' and Charles W. Mason's 'The Shen's Pigtail' as representative texts of the less explored genre of treaty port writings with the objective of examining the significance of foreign spaces and the workings of the discursive dynamics that informed Sino-foreign relations in 20th-century China.

Keywords: Foreign spaces, Colonial discourses, China, Treaty ports, foreign community, Imperialism.

Introduction

Published in 1894 and 1905 and set against the backdrop of the China coast's foreign community, S.E Brady's 'Little Mertens' from his larger collection *The Jewel in the Lotus and Other Stories*, Leonard d'Oliver's 'The Vampire Nemesis' from the

collection *The Vampire Nemesis and Other Weird Stories of the China Coast*, and Charles W Mason's titular story 'The Shen's Pigtail' from his collection *The Shen's Pigtail and Other Cues of Anglo-Chinese Life*, despite the lack of any palpable engagement with the country, nevertheless function as representative texts elucidating, as it were, the significance of treaty port discourse and quasi-foreign/European spaces to the expatriate world of China. The treaty ports, opened on account of China's earliest military encounters with Britain—the First and Second Opium Wars (1839-1842 and 1856-1860), served not only as bastions of Western imperial power but also as unique zones of cultural intersection, where foreign and native populations coexisted in close proximity. Exhibiting a wide ranging heterogeneity in terms of population, trade, and living conditions, the treaty ports society's stringent adherence to the insignias of Western life consequently transformed them into miniature simulations of their homelands. Indeed, American journalist Harry Frank's observation regarding "the archetypal Shanghai resident" who "makes it almost a point of honor to come into the least possible contact with the Chinese…I have met adult children…who were born and have spent most of their lives in Shanghai yet have never been in China…they have never set foot in the Chinese city, just across the street from the foreign settlement…"—corroborates amply the presence of this imperceptible racial line that upheld differences and maintained status quo (Frank as qtd., in Wood 4).

In the midst of sporadic anti-foreigner backlash, rebellions, and trade disruptions, the treaty ports paradoxically flourished, driving growth and commerce, and while living conditions were often less than ideal, these foreign enclaves persisted well into the 20th century, when escalating costs and the shifting political landscape of China during the Second World War ultimately rendered the outdated treaty system untenable, leading to its abolition.

MAPPING THE EXPATRIATE ENCLAVE: THE FOREIGN PRESENCE IN TREATY PORT CHINA

The historical realities of 19th and 20th century China thus engendered the presence of two worlds—the heavily Westernized world of the treaty ports, and the vast stretches of rural China in the interior, which saw no effects of these modernization drives, but remained perpetually on guard against large-scale anti-foreign as well as anti-feudal insurrections owing to the declining livelihood of the populace, on account of heavy taxations (due to the repeated indemnities imposed by the Western powers), inflation (due to the collapse of Qing economy) and the general worsening of indigenous industries together with rampant natural disasters (Cheaneaux 240). This, together

with the presence and proliferation of foreign industries and banks and their periodic loans to the crumbling Manchu government, in essence, engendered a condition in which the West exerted a certain monopoly over Chinese economy and finances, carving out mines and railways, extorting the country's natural resources and dominating tariff control, imports and exports via the foreign lead Imperial Maritime Customs Service (IMCS), the largest revenue raising body of the Qing government (Tan 271-273). Consequently, by the final years of the 19th century, each foreign power had established absolute control over its designated "sphere of influence", a concept that gained prominence after the Sino-French (1884-85) and Sino-Japanese wars (1895). These spheres, characterized by extraterritorial concessions beyond Chinese jurisdiction, threatened to fragment China. It was amidst such precarious conditions that the Boxer Rebellion (1899-1901) erupted, a populist peasant movement targeting all symbols of foreign presence and influence.

Nevertheless, it was the Boxer uprising, which ironically created conditions that not only led to the assimilation of this foreign community under the blanket of the "Empire", functioning as a sort of "rites to passage" within a quintessentially colonial discourse, but paradoxically transformed China into a safer haven than ever before (Bickers 34). The thoroughly humiliating Boxer Protocol of 1901, thus fortified the position of this community, which in effect, allowed them to exercise a sort of hegemonic sway over its privileges and status quo in China, challenged only with the rise of militant anti-imperialist nationalism in the post May Fourth era.

Within this context, the dogmatic provincialism and stringent narrow-mindedness exhibited by this group, together with their unwillingness to implement adequate reforms, in essence jeopardized the very nature of Sino-British/foreign interactions with the changing socio-political conditions and the eventual rise of Chinese nationalism which posed a serious threat to the sustained imperialist incursions of the 19th and 20th centuries. China, being an informal semi-colony functioning, as it were, without the control of an official colonial government, essentially entailed that the foreign community proliferating there remain susceptible to nurturing a dual identity—local and national, something which, in effect, buttressed the significance of cultivating the differences, which not only bolstered their own self-image as members of a superior race, but also encouraged distance and distrust towards the native world around them (Bickers 68). As Bickers observes:

> Factual reporting and popular culture's fictions identified difference, taught distance and encouraged distrust. China and the Chinese were denigrated, their politics and society ridiculed. Moreover, these mediums supplied the

> vocabulary through which treaty port recruits made sense of their world, and they shaped the behaviour of treaty port Britons (Bickers 23).

The discourse thus created, therefore not only effectively reiterates the significance of their white supremacist identities, but also corroborates the role of the community in shaping and conditioning a very specific vision of China. Within such a framework, any new additions into this world, consequently came furnished with a prior knowledge about navigating a 'Chinese' world through the presence of a variety of published works by treaty port propagandists or the "Old China Hands", who having hegemonized this discourse, ensured that the China coast community remain well-informed about the accepted norms and behaviors patterns necessary for interacting with the Chinese, thereby establishing a shared understanding of how one "ought to behave" in China.

DISCURSIVE LANDSCAPES: EXPLORING THE LITERARY TERRAIN OF BRADY, D'OLIVER AND MASON

The importance of a simulated English/foreign spaces as represented by the treaty ports themselves, and the prevalence of the discourse that shaped foreign behavior in China can thus hardly be exaggerated. Within this context, S.E Brady's short story 'Little Mertens' from his larger collection *The Jewel in the Lotus and Other Stories* featuring the life of the newly arrived Briton, Mertens, brother to an "important" persona in the Peking Legations, thus serves as a representative narrative, elucidating, as it were, the necessity of cultivating and adhering to the precepts of standard treaty port discourse and the role of the community as guardians and proliferators of the same discourse.

Consequently, the actions of the pseudo-Sinologue Mertens in hiring a Chinese teacher and engaging extensively with the native language and culture is seen as an aberration to the established norms of the China coast foreign community, something which eventually poses a threat to the safety and security cultivated by the creation of simulated British/foreign spaces in the heart of China. Within this context, Merten's liaison with the Chinese girl, Mei together with his buying of a Chinese house and living life entirely in native fashion, thus ultimately endangers his own life. Having caught a glimpse of the affluence and luxury of life with a foreigner, Mei tempted by the possibility of having it all for herself (on account of Merten's will which names her as heir to his property), subsequently poisons an already ailing Mertens, eventually killing him and settling down to a life of tranquility and comfort with the unnamed Chinese man who is also revealed to be the father of the child whom the naïve Briton mistakenly considered his own.

Functioning, thus as a sort of warning to the unaware readers about the dangers of navigating a Chinese space, Brady's narrative therefore seeks to further a very specific discourse—the significance of communal security to the liminal foreigner within a quintessentially alien space and the dangers afflicting the alienated Briton who having transgressed (quite literally in Merten's case) the bounds of foreign safety and European-ness must pay a steep price.

The significance of this discourse that shaped the vision of China in Western imagination is taken a step further in Brady's remark about the role of fiction in conditioning the amateur recruit's perception of the world around him—"…so, after lie read all his brother's novels, and all those in the club library; and having concluded that riding Chinese ponies over frozen or snow-covered ground wasn't all it was popularly supposed to be…he subsided into a settled melancholy" (Brady 46). It is consequently the gap between the realities of China and the unrealities propagated by the published works of the Old China Hands, that ultimately leads the inexperienced newcomer, Mertens towards a life of transgression. The hiring of a Chinese teacher, who interestingly also acts as a mediator between Mertens and Mei and even procures for them the Chinese house, a space which not only subsumes the overt European-ness exhibited by the China coast community, but also ultimately functions as a hazard to the alienated Briton, thus reinstates the necessity of maintaining distance from the Chinese world around them.

It is then, a declining European-ness which is delineated as being essentially dangerous within a semi-colonial contact zone, with Merten's ingenuousness pitted in sharp opposition to not only the author's ability to assess Chinese character adequately (possibly on account of his long-term resident-ship in the country), but also in the observations of those around him. Thus, Leland "a longer resident in China and not so credulous acceptor of the point of view presented by the wily celestial" remains unconvinced by Mertens' show of excessive faith and trust in the warmth and goodness of Mei, an attitude which is mirrored later by his own brother's concern over his safety—"But do you think he is properly looked after? The young ass has got himself tangled up with that little Chinese beast, and living as he does, so secludedly, one doesn't know what happens" (Brady 66-70).

The dangers thus evoked by the Briton's direct contact with Chinese spaces and his subsequent alienation from the safety represented by the simulated English spaces, together with Merten's expression of a transgressive sexual license and his ignorance of treaty port discourse, therefore form the crux of Brady's conflict in 'Little Mertens.' Nevertheless, Merten's marital bliss and the seemingly perfect life in his Chinese home, also provides Brady with the opportunity to voice stereotypical visions of the

country, while at the same time reiterating treaty port status quo and norms. Thus, Mei's repeated evocation of "the old, old times the days of the glorious Mings, the song-days of the T'angs, the martial life of the Hans", appears to locate her, as the representative of her race, in an antiquated and regressive space, untouched by the enlightenment of the West; while Merten's own remark about his dislike for Eurasians and his unwilling to marry Mei essentially hints at a certain amount of integration of the newly arrived Briton into the societal norms of his community, while at the same time corroborating the exceedingly isolating position of half-caste/Eurasian children in both foreign and Chinese circles (Brady 56 & 65).

The sexual liberty within a colonial setting, together with the prevalence of concubinage (specifically due to the lack of European women in the colonies), although seen as engendering a "stabilizing effect on political order and colonial health—a relationship that kept men in their barracks and bungalows, out of brothels and less inclined to perverse liaisons with one another", in Brady, it is presented as an aberration that cuts off Mertens from the protection of the British Empire as represented also by his own brother who is said to occupy an important post at the Peking Legations (Stoler 637).

Furthermore, by giving agency to the conventionally passive and voiceless subaltern and subsequently transforming her into an iniquitous force hell-bent on stripping the alienated Briton of his physical vitality, Brady also convolutes the nature of the discourse he appears to be propagating. A similar ambiguity is present also in Leonard d'Oliver's 'The Vampire Nemesis' from the collection *The Vampire Nemesis and Other Weird Stories of the China Coast*, which tells the story of the newly arrived duo, the narrator Ward and his college friend Fergusson to China, employed as IMCS staff in Ningpo. Athletic and adventurous with experience in colonial escapades in British Guiana and the Malay States, d'Oliver thus locates his protagonists as the archetypal imperialist adventurers and aimless, elite idlers come to the Far East in hopes that their athleticism will prove useful within a semi-colonial setting.

Equipped thus, with the masculine vigor and intrepidity characteristic of the Briton in an essentially imperialist milieu, the narrator and Fergusson thus launch their Far Eastern careers as servicemen in one of the most hegemonic bodies in semi-colonial China—the Chinese Maritime Customs Service. The placidity of their lives, is however, disrupted when Fergusson initiates his career of villainy against the Eurasian watcher, Matthews, whom he unjustly dismisses from service, following which he commences a liaison with the Eurasian's young wife, May. The episode is swiftly succeeded by Matthews' failed attempt at killing Fergusson, following which he himself proceeds to commit suicide. Under the influence of alcohol, Fergusson,

degrades further, abusing May and stooping more and more into moral and social degradation.

It is only after an episode of extreme sexual violation of the ever silent May, that narrative climax is reached when a terrified Fergusson hints at the possibility of the transmigrated soul of the watcher, Matthews come back from the dead as a vampiric entity to enact its terrible vengeance, by first killing his faithless wife and then unnerving the guilty Briton. The rest of the story focuses entirely on the activities of a horror-struck Fergusson hiding out in the narrator's apartment, from where he plans on absconding justice by escaping in a ship. His plans, however, remain in vain, as subsequent to his hurried attempts at walking over a tightrope between the narrator's window and the pole that flies the Union Jack at the British Consulate, in the face of immediate arrest by local police, he falls and dies after the supposedly transmigrated Matthews in the form of a vampiric bat attacks and bites him.

Thus, much like Brady in 'Little Mertens', d'Oliver also delineates the conventionally passive colonial subject, in this case the half-caste Eurasian as an active force of justice, while at the same time alienating the reader's sympathy from the luckless Matthews towards the guilty Britons, Fergusson and Ward. Via such ambivalences, the author whilst corroborating the significance of an overt European-ness to the China coast community, also reinforces the necessity of the civilizing agency of the Victorian moral code in an essentially non-European space, where the moralizing hold of the Empire seemingly falls apart. The transgressing Briton, Fergusson, thus, challenging and distorting the very precepts of English morality and virtue by his antithetical and quintessentially un-English behavior, not only on account of his psychological corruption, but also by his divergence from established rules of conduct by his direct association with the native populace, is consequently detrimental to the overall well-being and prestige of his community.

Furthermore, the significance of a British/foreign space is reiterated also in the symbolic rendering of the precarious tightrope which Fergusson must cross in order to arrive at safety. The tightrope which is delineated as bridging the gap between the alien and hence dangerous space represented by the narrator's apartment over a Chinese shop, and the security represented by the flying Union Jack in the British Consulate, the epitome of English might in China, is therefore ironically both the protagonist's path to safety as well as a means of escaping British justice. It is therefore, not surprising that that it is the transmigrated Eurasian, functioning in the interstices of racial lines (being both European and Chinese and hence able to traverse both spaces), who is ultimately able to bring the dissenting Briton to justice.

Such an overarching tenor of security provided by the cultivation of simulated foreign enclaves in reiterated also in Charles W Mason's 'The Shen's Pigtail', where right from the start, narrative focus is placed on the description of the native houseboat of the Westernized Chinese Mr. Yang, who ironically having made his fortune from the lucrative opium trade, now leads a life complete with all insignias of foreign presence in China. Having "visited Bombay, and spent many years in Hong Kong" (both interestingly being full-scale British colonies), Mr. Yang delineated as harboring "strong foreign proclivities" is consequently characterized as not posing a threat to the foreign company on his boat, whose faith in the protective agency of essentially Western spaces is reinforced also by all accoutrements of foreign luxury in treaty port China together with the entire entourage of semi-Westernized domestic help—boys, cooks, coolies, sampans, etc—

> The boat was well stocked with the best champagne, which is another extravagance much affected by rich Chinese in the foreign trade. The cabin was excellently furnished in foreign style with hanging lamps, mirrors, velvet lounges, and a handsome ormulu clock, a small group of Graces…In the rack stood three ordinary doubled- barrelled twelvebores, a sporting rifle…and a very beautiful sixteen-bore repeater of American make, presented to Mr. Yang by some of the Hongkong foreign merchants whom he had been in the habit of entertaining up the Canton River…while the opium pipe, lamp, and tray on the crimson velvet divan was a present from the Parsees of the Bombay house, magnificently encased in gold filagree-work, set with small garnets and amethysts (Mason 3-5).

It is therefore, only when Mr. Yang invites an apparently unassuming Chinese priest on board his semi-Westernized space, that things are seen going awry for the foreigners. An infringement of the safety represented by the simulated semi-foreign space of the houseboat is consequently followed by an attack by robbers who having tied up those on board, proceed to escape with all valuables, including the unnamed narrator's watch and rifles. Not surprisingly then, as first response, the entire party proceed to Chinkiang (Zhenjiang), a treaty port complete with all emblems of Western modernism—in this case a telegraph line which connects the otherwise isolated port to the economic capitals and foreign strongholds—Peking and Shanghai.

The conventional image of China (in this case the vast outskirts) as being backwards, regressive and quintessentially dangerous to the liminal foreigner who can only hope to fathom its inscrutability is thus amply reinforced in Mason's narrative. This motif, is taken a step further when the Shen (the superintendent of police with control over the entire judicial system of a certain area) surreptitiously asks the narrator, a CMCS

official, to not inform the British Consul or the Customs Commissioner of the incidents of the previous night—robbery and murder of the priest, being desirous to avoid an uproar. Such an action on the Shen's part buttresses further the swiftly alienating position of the narrator who himself confirms his proclivities towards doing things without permission—"I went with alacrity, as I loved to do things without permission" (Mason 12).

Stripped thus of the protective agency of the British flag by his own digressive tendencies, the narrator is set afloat in a series of unforeseen events in which he finds himself face to face with the diabolical machinations of the Shen, during which, in order to hide his own role in the robbery and murder of the priest, the wily and experienced official is effectively able to trap the intrepid, but inexperienced narrator into a web of lies. Even after, British morality and judgment has successfully foiled Chinese cunning via the narrator's ability to convict the Shen of his crimes, Mason's narrative reinforces the utter impossibility of fully thwarting the potency of Chinese administrative machinery. As the Shen observes:

> Your whole accusation against me is a tissue of cobwebs which would collapse in the strong air of public investigation. The result for yourself, you, a young foreigner in the service of the Chinese Emperor, bringing so serious an accusation against one of the Emperor's old and tried judges, would be disastrous. The Inspector-General…would never retain in his service an Assistant against whom a powerful native official should urge a plausible complaint of the most serious possible nature (Mason 55).

Reiterating therefore, the quintessential liminality of the foreigner in China and the dangers afflicting the alienated Briton, cut off, as it were, from the protective agency of the community that kept him safe, the Shen, thus becomes a mouthpiece for Mason to articulate the conventional discourse of the China coast foreign world that effectively alerted those uninitiated or unaware of the precariousness of life in the treaty ports. Discoursing on this utility of fictional narratives propagated by resident writers Bickers notes:

> Treaty port writers wrote with prescriptive intent. By demonstrating that Chinese could be described, they provided a tool for treaty port Britons who, if they learned well from the experts, could quickly become capable of handling Chinese. Also running through all the analyses of the experts was the idea that, by identifying what was Chinese, they identified what was British, and what was acceptably British in the treaty port world. They taught Britons how to behave, and fostered a sense of community rooted in the treaty

> ports and attacked by Bolsheviks, Chinese, British diplomats and indirectly by the well-meaning 'idiocies' of the missionary enterprise. (43).

It is ultimately then, the narrator's transgressive tendencies, not unlike Mertens or Fergusson, which lead him further away from the security represented by the bulwarks of foreign incursions in China. Having, thus joined a cryptic, anti-dynastic secret society, on account of his love for the inscrutable Ayesha, the narrator is eventually seen being completely integrated into an overtly Chinese space as symbolized by the arms *catche* inside a dilapidated temple "many miles from Chinkiang" (Mason 79). It is here that the narrative climax is brought to its head, when a meeting between the narrator and the iniquitous Shen, a leader in the powerful secret society with partisans in both the 'yamen' and the 'gaol', confirms the alienated Briton's complete assimilation into an essentially alien and dangerous Chinese space. Indeed, the ambivalent ending to Mason's narrative where the fate of the narrator is left distinctly undecided, corroborates, not only his complete severance from the protective power of the British Empire and his immediate community, but also interestingly, his estrangement from the yoke of the then Manchu government (on account of his interactions with the Shen and his anti-dynastic secret society and his membership in the CMCS), which upheld the validity of extraterritorial rights and privileges of the foreign powers in China as opposed to the progressively rising anti-imperialist sentiments among the Chinese masses.

Furthermore, the Shen's ability to speak fluent English, his experience in the Hong Kong police service as an "invaluable" member of the force, together with his ability to camouflage his identity at will, essentially locates him as an inter-racial and spatial persona, who is able to navigate multiple spaces whilst appropriating multiple identities (the Shen, the priest, Chinaman Jack, the Taoist priest and leader of the society), something which effective transforms him into a formidable antagonist to the alienated Briton. Such a layered usage of spatial metaphors in Mason, thus doubtlessly corroborates the quintessential significance of cultivating local identities for the China coast community, which then acted as a foundational principles furthering the discursive discourse that kept in place Sino-foreign relations in late 19th century China.

Thus, while Mason's mention of anti-dynastic secret societies undoubtedly places him as an informed author aware of the developing trends of the time—namely the rise of anti-feudal nationalism against the reigning Manchu government in late 19th and early 20th century China, his ultimate integration in the discourse of power that conditioned Western image of China whilst keeping the status quo enjoyed by the foreign community in place, therefore, effectively positions him as a representative

expatriate writer of the China coast, whose local loyalties ultimately functioned as the bedrock facilitating spatial and cultural segregations.

CONCLUSION

Thus, the narratives of Brady, d'Oliver and Mason, as representative texts of the genre of treaty port writings, serve to underscore the necessity of sustaining simulated British/foreign enclaves within semi-colonial contact zones. Moreover, their narratives exemplify the discursive power of discourses in mediating and conditioning reader perceptions of navigating an ostensibly Chinese environment. This reinforces the notion that maintaining social distance was essential for the China Coast community, thereby substantiating the centrality of spatial and cultural segregation that characterized foreign presence in early 20th-century China. As Bickers observes—the necessity of "recreating Britain in the home [served] both as a source of psychological relaxation, and also as a statement of identity and purpose" (Bickers 89). It is then the cultivation of distinct local identities which facilitated the creation of such discourses which whilst bolstering authenticity (on account of their empirical observation of the country), also foregrounded the necessity to foster a sense of community, while maintaining a part-time resident-ship in the Empire, the source of their security (military and economic) in an essentially alien world. Treaty port narratives, fortifying, albeit tacitly, the local allegiances of settler and expatriate authors, while concurrently functioning as cautionary tales for unsuspecting readers and newly arrived recruits, therefore, in essence, perpetuates a hegemonic discourse that had historically given shape to Sino-British/foreign relations as it had existed in 19th and 20th centuries in China.

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