

Between Southern Portugal and Southern China: The Poetry of Fernanda Dias

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Abstract: Fernanda Dias is an artist and writer who lived in Macau for almost twenty years from the mid-1980s. The author of three collections of poems (as well as one collection of short stories), her work reflects her attempts to understand and identify with the culture of Southern China, while also evoking the strength of her native roots in the Alentejo. Many of her poems express the tension within her as a traveller and observer, and as an exile. As a woman writer, she also fires a shot across the bows of traditional Luso-Tropical patriarchy.

It is a postulate enshrined in studies of postcolonialism that postcolonial literature often, if not always, reflects the diasporic condition, and that this in turn is closely linked to the situation of a writer, or the group whose life is evoked by that writer, as being one of re-adjustment resulting from migration, alienation, and, ultimately, exile. In the case of lusophone countries since 1974 and in the wake of the April 25 Revolution of that year, which ushered in a process of sudden and hurried decolonization, postcolonial diasporas were established in the old metropolis as waves of migrants, often erroneously labelled as “retornados,” descended on the hub of Portugal, even if many of them later resettled across the Atlantic in Brazil, or in other non-lusophone environments where, of course, they formed further diasporas. In parallel to this population movement, economic migrants from Cape Verde,

S. Tome and Guinea-Bissau, along with refugees from continuing wars in Angola and Mozambique, also settled in Portugal and elsewhere, in particular from the 1980s.

By the end of 1975, with the exception of East Timor (illegally occupied by Indonesia), Macau was the only remaining "colony" of Portugal and, even then, it was not considered as such by either Portugal or China, its official designation being, once diplomatic relations were re-established with the People's Republic of China in 1979, that it was a Chinese territory under Portuguese administration. Indeed, its situation as a colony, in the sense that we generally understand the term, had been ambiguous ever since the sixteenth century, when the Portuguese first established themselves on this peninsula on the western side of the Pearl River estuary, which is not to say that colonial attitudes towards the local Chinese did not exist among the resident Portuguese and Macanese. For most historians, however, Macau was effectively decolonized in 1967, after the riots that forced the Salazar Government into a humiliating apology to Beijing for casualties inflicted upon some of the territory's civilian population.¹ It is therefore important to remember that Macau constituted a type of postcolonial colony, an environment in which the Portuguese diaspora was only one of several communities encrusted on a majority Chinese population that spoke no Portuguese, had no particular aspiration to or interest in learning it, and lived within an essentially Chinese cultural world.

All this is not to say that Macau had somehow escaped the Lusotropicalist myth. However, in Macau this myth manifested itself in the usual ways we have come to expect, but with unique local political consequences. During the transition years between 1987, when the agenda was set for handing over the territory to China, and 1999, Portugal's self-styled unobtrusive colonialism, the readiness of the Portuguese to mix with native populations, had, according to official discourse, made Macau a true meeting point between East and West, giving it a cultural status that, by implication, put it at an advantage over neighbouring Hong Kong. Nor was the Chinese Government averse to using the idea of Sino-Portuguese cooperation (in a sense, their interpretation of Portugal's Lusotropicalism) as a stick with which to beat the obstinate British during the final years of the colonial regime, when there was an attempt by the Patten administration to institute democratic reforms in Macau's near neighbour. The only divergence between Lisbon and Beijing would appear to have been one of patriarchal rivalry over what might be termed Lusotropicalist agency. The Portuguese had, of course, always emphasized the sexual

attraction and encounter between Portuguese male and local female, and in Macau, this encounter was commemorated in the sculpture at the bottom of the steps leading up to the façade of the church of S. Paulo, Macau's most iconic monument, which depicts a Portuguese sailor and a local woman apparently advancing towards each other. Interestingly, after the handover, the balance was righted with the performance of a specially composed ballet, "A Noiva de Macau," which centred on a romance between a Chinese sailor in Portugal and a local Portuguese woman, thus turning the Lusotropicalist myth, if not on its head, then certainly askew.² Whether or not this was supposed to be a sexual encounter for a postcolonial public, the fact is that the woman's voice is as absent from this expression of the colonial encounter as it was in the writings of Gilberto Freyre about colonial Brazil.

It is for this reason that the writing of Fernanda Dias marks a new departure in literature set in Macau and enriches our understanding of the literary and artistic manifestations of exile and integration among lusophone diasporas. Dias is a native of the rural Alentejo, where she was born in 1945. She trained as an engraver and artist, and took up residence in Macau in the mid-1980s, where she taught at the local Portuguese school while immersing herself in the artistic and cultural life of the territory. She eventually returned to Portugal in 2005, after nearly twenty years away. She is the author of one collection of short stories, *Dias da Prosperidade* (1997), and three collections of poetry, *Horas de Papel* (1992), *Rio de Ehru* (1999), and *Chá Verde* (2002). What makes Dias different from other writers who have engaged with the East, such as Camilo Pessanha (1867-1926) and Maria Ondina Braga (1932-2003), is, firstly, her emotional involvement with people, and her genuine attempts to understand the local culture, even to the extent of concluding that she may not understand it at all. Secondly, her rural upbringing in the Alentejo and her memory of this very personal, regional Portugal is a hidden trope behind a number of her poems, especially as such memory, apart from compensating for a feeling of exile, also contrasts with her experience of a modern, distant and relatively impersonal urban environment such as that offered by Macau in the rapidly changing years of the 1980s and 90s. It is this, for example, that marks her off from Maria Ondina Braga, whose experience of the city belonged to the early 1960s, when Macau was still a relatively small, provincial town. Thirdly, because of the length of her residence in Macau and the intensity of her experience, her poetry became more infused with Chinese cultural influences as the years progressed, even though there is an overlapping of themes from one

collection of poems to another. Finally, because Dias is first and foremost a graphic artist, her poems possess a pictorial quality, which means that scenes and evocations of a physical landscape are seen through the eyes of someone acutely conscious of colour, tone and composition, a feature that makes many of her poems entirely compatible with Chinese literary tradition.

During the 1980s and 90s, there had never been so many lusophone writers in Macau. Teachers, journalists, civil servants, often with an experience of living in Portuguese Africa (some even born in Angola or Mozambique) re-located to the territory, sometimes semi-permanently. Publication of poems and fiction had never been easier, given that literary activity was subsidized by the Macau government and a number of cultural foundations, possibly in an implicit attempt to manufacture some sort of a local Portuguese literary tradition in the territory that might survive the handover, thus helping to ensure the survival of the former colonial power's language and culture. Many writers focused on the Portuguese residues, the living or, in most cases, inanimate architectural ghosts that attest to Portugal's time-honoured presence in the area, as well as reflecting what some saw as a past heroic age. They did this in an attempt to reflect on Portuguese history. Such a mapping of Macau's landmarks is also present in some of Fernanda Dias's poetry, except that her personal experience is never far from the surface. "Primeiro Olhar" (*Horas* 13), for example, speaks of her Alentejan background as she gazes at the city, as does "Plúmbago Azul," a poem written in or about the Lou Lim Ieoc garden, one of the Chinese beauty spots of Macau, and which is the subject of poems by other writers. Here she is acutely conscious of her solitude in her new environment, but finds comfort in noting similarities between what she sees in front of her and what she remembers of her native town, namely the intense colour of the blue jasmine that features in both the Chinese garden and the square in her home town:

Ninguém sabe o meu nome em Macau
 não tenho amigos na cidade
 Mas no Jardim Lou Lim Ieoc
 o plúmbago azul
 é tão azul como naquela praceta
 no outro lado do Mundo. (*Horas* 14)

A similar sentiment is evoked in the poem "Coloane," taken from the name of the town and (former) outlying island of the territory of Macau, which she

likens to a village in her native Alentejo, with its “roda-pés azuis, alteias cor-de-malva / e púrpura aflorando os beirais!” (*Horas* 57). And if the obvious exoticism enshrined in traditional Western orientalism is not totally absent in Dias’s writing, its presence attests to an admission of its limitations: the dream of rural China, as portrayed so often in its painting, contrasts with the concrete reality of the city where she lives, as in the poem “Rua de Jorge Álvares”:

Tão belas que não existem, as montanhas;
Como sempre as sonhei, azul-da-china.

Na frente dos meus olhos,
estão mais longe do que quando as sonhava.

E a água cintilante e acerada,
como uma arma aflora o colo da cidade
esta sim, bem real,—um tudo-nada amada—

como se sempre tivesse sido minha. (*Horas* 18)

But it is in this first collection of her poetry that we see the dismantling of one of the cornerstones of Lusotropicalism: the de-sexualization of the European female and the native male, and the over-sexualization of the European male and non-European female, who were, so the myth assumed, irreversibly attracted to one another. In a sequence of poems in the section entitled “A Cidade do Adeus,” we glimpse a European female who has become emotionally involved with a local Chinese or Macanese man and who has, to some extent at least, gone native in both dress and literary and artistic tastes, visible in “O Adeus de Cada Dia” (*Horas* 39). In “Ano Novo,” we have the beloved leaving Macau, abandoning his Western lover to the East and its values while he pursues his dream of the West, casting her ironically in the role of the woman left behind on the shore in the “cantiga de amor” tradition of medieval Portugal:

Era o limiar do ano do cavalo
—no Kun Iam os monges enfadados
salmodiavam os velhos ritos—
[.....]

Partias, já ausente e desatento.
 Levava-te de mim esse cavalo doido
 e o sonho de um lugar a ocidente
 Lá onde os deuses daqui não têm templo. (*Horas* 40)

At the same time, this emotional attachment to person or place gives the poet a type of perverse sense of belonging, which then forms the tension between her memory of her native land and her current surroundings in the rest of her poetry. Indeed, her next two collections are, to a large extent, elaborations on themes and preoccupations hinted at in the first. The passing of time and, with it, the inevitable swelling of memory (to some extent anathema to time, relating as it does to events consigned to the past and therefore cut off from any possible future) is expressed in the poem, "Interior com Poetas," which seems to emphasise not only the pictorial quality of the scene (the very title of the poem suggests that the poet views it as a painting) but also its static nature. It is a domestic gathering, a mixture possibly of expatriate Portuguese and Chinese poets. The reference to "o poente de Abril" is perhaps a reference to some conversation around the theme of a revolution that has long died. The table at which they sit is round (common as a gathering place in Chinese households); the beverages they have taken are Portuguese and Chinese. The cycle of time, symbolised by the jasmine blossom on the balcony, contrasts with the gradual ageing of those inside the house and the dwindling of their future, inside the false bubble of their security.

Lá fora ainda é dia,
 porém as luzes estão acesas,
 servem para atizar as sombras.

nas janelas como peixes
 em redomas de vidro
 há quem se afoite a viver
 o poente de Abril.

sentados à mesa redonda
 estão os poetas divagando plácidos
 uns beberam vinho, outros beberam chá
 outros ainda nada.

nas varandas é tempo de jasmines
em casa envelhece-se devagarinho.
as coisas vão andando para os tempos
em que serão memória. (*Rio* 45)

The memory of her childhood in the Alentejo surfaces in a number of poems, in which her interlocutor appears to be her urban, local lover. Here, the difference of background seems on the one hand to underline the lack of understanding, even suggesting that it is a source of tension between them, or possibly an excuse for continual misunderstanding. This is reflected in the very structure of the poem, which takes the form of a dialogue, or better, two mutually exclusive monologues. At the same time, her rural Portuguese background also constitutes a refuge for the poet from her lover's attempts to control her, reinforcing the link between identity and memory as well as serving as a contrast between the vastness of natural space in her home region of the Alentejo and the crowded Babel that is Macau and her lover's home environment:

ao menos que me escutes, disse o outro.
peregrinos urbanos atravessam as minhas noites
com olhos de brasa crestam o meu rosto,
lançam-me em quatro idiomas
anátemas que nunca entenderei.

disso e de outros incidentes nunca te falarei...

E disse eu: deixa, que se lixe, olha,
o clima andaluz da minha terra,
margem esquerda de um rio,
é povoado de grilos que não lutam,
silêncios que se ouvem, casas que não são senão montes,
montes que não são senão céu,
penumbras que não são senão estevas e tomilhos.

E ele: deambulo de um bar a outro,
conferindo as caras iguais.

e eu: uma brisa, um perfume, sei lá, urde um mistério
 ao cair da noite, os lençóis queimam a pele,
 a brancura no escuro é uma lua,
 uma angústia sonolenta e mortífera.

e ele: se ao menos tu me escutasses, eu ainda... . (*Rio* 56)

The Alentejo is also present in her consciousness of time passing and loss of youth, in the close link between memory and psychological time, in which the vastness and emptiness of her native region somehow symbolises the seemingly endless future perceived from adolescence, as, for example, in the poem, “José” (*Rio* 57). And, finally, the Alentejo is present in her sense of loss, in the aptly entitled “Perdi” (*Rio* 59). It is this exile from her rural Portuguese roots that perhaps makes her seek some sort of identification with rural Chinese women who have somehow made Macau their home. In both “Não Quero Ir” (*Rio* 61), in which she places herself in the persona of a Chinese woman who has migrated to Macau, and in “O Olho,” in which she observes and in turn is observed by a woman from the rural interior, she gains a more genuine feeling of belonging to Macau at last, for the woman’s gaze seems to have no thought behind it, and therefore no need to classify her as anything other than just another inhabitant of the city. At the same time there is a type of rural pride in this impoverished woman, which the poet admires, possibly because she associates it with her own rural pride as someone from the Alentejo:

Olhou-me, era um olhar ativo, sem nenhum pensamento por trás.
 Uma centelha fria enluarada brilhava no olho esquerdo quando
 passei. E eis que na lucidez do avesso desse olhar, eu não era
 estrangeira, mas genuína habitante da cidade... . (*Rio* 74)

The final collection, *Chá Verde*, contains further elaborations on the theme of exile. Apparent memory and nostalgia for her native region are tempered by the recognition that one cannot return to places known before without some profound feeling of disillusionment. The poem “Lugar” is a poetic vignette on Iain Chambers’s theme of the “Impossible Homecoming” and the positive value of migrancy, as opposed to migration.³ Playing on the word “lugar” (“place”), and the name of the Celtic deity Lugus, broadly an equivalent of Mercury in the pre-Roman, Celtic Iberian pantheon, and a god therefore

associated with movement and travel (and, by extension, exile), Dias weaves a poetic tapestry around the notion, no matter how saddening, that the journey is ultimately more important than the place that must remain consigned to our memory. Something else, therefore, must “re-place” place. Her tiring of the place she is in, encapsulated in her final reference to the Lilau fountain in Macau (whose waters, once drunk, will, in Macanese tradition, always bring the person back to Macau), and her fear of returning to her origins, suggest an elaboration on the emotional expression of that other poetic exile in the East, Camilo Pessanha, who, in a letter written to a friend in Portugal while in passage to Macau for the last time, stated that he wished the journey would never end:⁴

lugares que se deixam são casulos vazios
 por culpa desse Lug, deus dos sítios
 tecelão da memória, dramaturgo
 que nos ata e desata, nos atrai e expulsa.
 e decreta os encontros e desencontros
 o desatino da ausência. o adeus. a espera.
 o medo do regresso ao que antes foi.
 oh céus! estou farta da fonte do Lilau. (*Chá* 51)

Ultimately, Dias finds no consolation in the journey, or in unbelonging, as some migrant writers and theorists do, among them the already mentioned Chambers, glorifying a type of hybridity based on continual reinvention. Her poems from the beginning are predicated on the desire to understand and to be understood. Inevitably, the poet's relationship with the surrounding language is problematic. In the spoken, everyday language—Cantonese, with its nine tones—she is at her most alienated, but in the written language that is somehow associated with her departed lover, language takes on a poetic quality that crosses cultural boundaries. In the spirit of the epigraph to the book, a quote from Yuan Mei's eighteenth-century treatise on tea, Dias is “em busca do sabor para além do sabor, o aroma [que] perdura na taça já vazia” (*Chá* 3), the meaning that is beyond meaning itself, that is beyond purely local understanding. Possibly, it is also the artist's need for the aesthetics of visual representation rather than practical linguistic comprehension that is being suggested in the poem, “A Fala e a Escrita,” in which the author casts herself in the role of Penelope, Macau being her Ithaca:

rosto, mais do que tudo amado,
 brilhas quando falas, sol meu iridiscente
 sobre todas as coisas plácidas como ilhas
 Quando escreves ociosamente as iluminas,
 duras, inamovíveis e dormentes. que importa
 que eu não entenda quando as dizes. (*Chá* 69)

Elsewhere, her affirmation of an identification with Chinese culture and social norms suggests that she has somehow succeeded, perhaps momentarily, in abolishing the border between self and other, as in the poem “Fevereiro”:

gosto da cor do rútilo jasmim
 e da fragrância do gengibre fresco
 sob a lâmina álcree do cutelo

vestida de lilás, sobre os jardins
 flutuo na brisa áspera de fevereiro
 com umas asas enormes de libélula. (*Chá* 71)

Finally, in “Aqui, eu,” while preserving the symbol of Macau as Ithaca, she appears to wish to see herself as “the other” sees her, that is, she wishes to be the “other’s other”:

Eu quero farejar o tu dos outros, isto é
 quero ver o que vêem os que olham aquela aqui,
 esta além, e descobrir quem sou e para que vim (*Chá* 72)

only to conclude, by recourse to the myth of Narcissus, that that “other” is herself. In the solitude of her exile, the barrier of thought that lies between self and other is finally abolished, and, rather like Pessoa’s heteronym, Alberto Caeiro, she merely *is*, and is *here*, as the poem’s title suggests:

eu, aventura, eu insondável, nem preciso pensar
 respiro e sei como narciso: o outro sou eu,
 que se debruça sobre o mar-de-espelho. (*Chá* 72)

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Of all the lusophone writers who have taken up residence in Macau over recent decades, Fernanda Dias is certainly unique in the sense that she managed to bridge the gulf between the expatriate Portuguese community and the indigenous Chinese. She was certainly the only writer to openly base her work on an attempt to understand her surroundings, while also maintaining a firm sense of her own national and, above all, regional identity. In a postcolonial world still governed by notions of centrality and peripherality, there are few places more peripheral within Portugal than the Alentejo, an area of extensive plains and landed estates, of economic neglect, whose peasant population has traditionally had to migrate to the cities, at the very least seasonally, in search of work. And yet the people of the Alentejo, perhaps like the rural Cantonese on the periphery of China, have a strong sense of region, and it was possibly this that enabled Dias to seek some sort of identification with the migrant, and especially female population that she saw during her lengthy sojourn in Southern China, a sentiment that gave her a feeling, no matter how illusory, of belonging. On the other hand, the growing urbanization of the territory in the years following the handover, the gradual erosion of green spaces in Macau itself, and even more so in the residential areas of Taipa and Coloane, allied with her own sense of time passing, so visible in her poetry, eventually caused her to return to Portugal to take up a teaching post in Faro. Indeed, the somewhat spurious cosmopolitan character of the far southern tourist coast of Portugal perhaps proved the ideal compromise between her remote and more recent past. Finally, further work since returning to Portugal, namely translation into Portuguese of contemporary Chinese poetry, and new visits to Macau, lend credence to the idea that it is not so much migrancy that is important in proclamations of identity; rather, it is the fact that our residence in and experience of “other” locations and cultures give us our own individual hybridity.⁵ Even when we move on, or “go home,” we take these pasts with us, preserving them in our present.

Notes

¹ For a full analysis of the events of 1966/7, see Fernandes 83-242. For an interpretation of the way the events were taken by the Macanese, see Pina-Cabral 72-5.

² The ballet was performed at the XII Festival de Artes de Macau, held at the Centro Cultural in March 2001. It was written by Choi San and Ying E. Ding, music composed by Ye Xiaogang, and the leading parts were danced by Huang Qicheng and Li Nan.

³ See Chambers 1-8.

⁴ A letter written to Carlos Amaro, published in *Obras* (95).

⁵ In 2007, she published translations of the work of the Chinese poet, Gao Ge (*Gao Ge – Poemas* [Macau: Instituto Português do Oriente]).

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