



INTERSECTION: WHAT IS HONG KONG'S HEARTBEAT? EAST OR WEST?

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Abstract: This article presents a postcolonial analysis of the short story *Intersection* (1972), by Liu Yichang. To provide context, the article begins by outlining postcolonial theory and examining how colonial forces have influenced literature, reviewing the historical development of the theory. In addition, the study provides a concise historical overview of colonial Hong Kong to better contextualize its literature, which carries deep marks of colonialism. In this sense, the short story is analyzed through the lens of postcolonial theory. The analysis concludes that *Intersection* is, in many aspects, a postcolonial literary work, due to its structure and content, which resists the Eurocentric styles of writing and breaks stereotypes associated with the East by the West. However, the text also presents Eurocentric influences, particularly in its gender representation. The female character, Ah Xing, embodies negative traits associated with the West, while the male character, Chunyu Bai, embodies the positive traits of the East, which can be interpreted as a misogynistic representation.

Keywords: Postcolonial theory; Hong Kong literature; *Intersection*.

Intersection: em qual lado do globo bate o coração de Hong Kong? Oriente ou Ocidente?

Resumo: O artigo apresenta uma análise pós-colonial do conto *Intersection* (1972), escrito por Liu Yichang. Para fins de contextualização, o artigo introduz a teoria pós-colonial e à forma como o colonialismo influenciou o campo da literatura, retomando o desenvolvimento histórico da teoria. Além disso, o estudo propõe um olhar voltado para a história de Hong Kong colonizada, com a finalidade de contextualizar a literatura presente na cidade, a qual carrega marcas profundas do colonialismo. Nesse sentido, a narrativa do conto é analisada através da perspectiva da teoria pós-colonial. A análise conclui que *Intersection* configura-se, em grande parte, como um texto pós-colonial, por conta da sua estrutura textual e do conteúdo presente, que resiste às formas ocidentais de escrita e quebra paradigmas associados ao Oriente pelo Ocidente. No entanto, o conto apresenta influências eurocêntricas, especificamente na representação de gênero na narrativa. A personagem Ah Xing personifica as características negativas associadas ao Ocidente, enquanto o personagem Chunyu Bai personifica os aspectos positivos do Oriente, o que pode ser interpretado como uma representação misógina.

Palavras-chave: Teoria pós-colonial; Literatura de Hong Kong; *Intersection*.

Introdução

In the twentieth century, Hong Kong's literary works were not seen as relevant, they were considered "popular trash" (Sturrock, 1996, p. 99). However, that thinking shifted with Liu Yichang (and other authors, such as Ni Kuang and Jin Yong). In 1963, the author wrote the influential novel *The Drunkard*, which criticizes this low status of literature in a commercialized Hong Kong. The novelist presents the story of an alcoholic author, who is very frustrated with his literary context, in which only popular literature can survive in the Westernized city.

Besides that, Liu Yichang's works are not so acknowledged outside of China, but his influence is very latent in the world through cinema. Several films from the famous director Wong Kar-wai took inspiration from Liu Yichang's work, such as *In the Mood for Love* (2000) and *2046* (2004), both movies were inspired by *The Drunkard* (1963) and *Intersection* (1972). The films reflect a great part of Liu's intentions with literature, in Wong Kar-wai's ways of resisting some Eurocentric styles of film directing, which involve its content, its photography and its format. Both of them do not present happy endings and "linear" stories, as it is in most Western films and literary works.

However, as in Wong Kar-wai's films, Liu also has some colonial influences in his works of literature. Those influences are shown through gender issues in his stories, which are related to a specific area of postcolonial theory (Postcolonial Feminism, an intersection between both theories), and those issues are pointed out throughout this analysis. This study conceptualizes elements of postcoloniality in Liu Yichang's short story *Intersection* (1972), taking into consideration Hong Kong's historical and cultural context.

Postcolonial theory

Colonial exploitation left marks that have endured and will continue to endure social, economic, and political aspects of many cultures around the world, shaping the way societies think. Since literature can be a powerful instrument to know how a specific culture views different topics, in literary works it is possible to identify the colonialist

influence. However, the English literary theorist Peter Barry (2017) points out that, during a long time in literary theory, liberal humanist critics would disregard the different cultural aspects of literary works and would state that great literature has a timeless and universal significance.

Universalists' claims disregard cultural, social, regional, and national differences, which collaborated to the marginalization of works that do not follow a particular standard. Barry exemplifies that "a routine claim about the 'Wessex' setting of Hardy's novels is that it is really a canvas on which Hardy depicts and examines fundamental, universal aspects of the human condition" (Barry, 2017, p. 194). This statement is considering only one way of representing reality, as an unquestioned norm, which devalues every other type of human interaction that does not fit the white European experience. However, those types of norms started to be questioned and rejected by postcolonial critics (Barry, 2017).

In the book *The Wretched of the Earth*, Frantz Fanon (1967) discussed what he called "cultural resistance". Fanon's idea is to regain the colonized people's identity, by reconnecting to their own past, the past before colonization, which erased that nation's historical experience. Schools usually teach students that history starts when Europeans arrive in the country, which puts the pre-colonial era in a position of historical limbo. Besides that, the author also argued that the next step is to destroy the colonialist ideology that caused all the cultural and historical erasure (Barry, 2017).

In *Orientalism* (1979), Edward Said reflects on Europeans' cultural tradition of seeing the East as inferior to the West, identifying them as the Other. According to the author, the East became the projection of aspects that only fit the European way of thinking, consequently the way they were represented was with "cruelty, sensuality, decadence, laziness, and so on" (Said *apud* Barry, 2017, p. 195). This can be exemplified in the Brazilian context, *e.g.* due to the Eurocentric taint in the ways Brazilians think, indigenous peoples in the country were sexualized because of the vestments that some tribes use, not covering parts of the body that the majority of the Westernized Brazilian population would consider promiscuous to show. So their social constructions are applied to groups of people who have less political, economic or military power. Besides that, a similar situation can be historically observed with the way that the West saw the peoples from the East, which are not seen in an individual way, with different experiences

of life, but as a massive group of people with actions defined by irrational emotions, rather than by the decisions that their consciousness makes (Barry, 2017).

Thus, if on the one hand the liberal humanist critics disregard cultural differences, on the other postcolonial critics draw attention to it. In this sense, postcolonial criticism approaches literary works focusing on distinct issues (*e.g.* gender issues, class issues, and sexual orientation issues, among others). Therefore, to analyze those issues, it is necessary to understand the historical context of the work and the colonial forces that influence or are even rejected in the literary text (Barry, 2017).

Hong Kong's historical context

Since 1997, Hong Kong has been a special administrative region of the People's Republic of China (PRC), however, before that period, the city was a British colony. According to Brian John Hooper (2000), archaeological studies indicate that Hong Kong's territory started to be populated thousands of years ago, although the region was settled during the seventh century by Han Chinese (an ethnic group, which represents the majority of China's population nowadays). Also, a great number of immigrants went to Hong Kong during the Ching Dynasty (960-1279), from the north of China.

The British started to emigrate to the territory, because of the development of trade, started by the British East India Company, which made first contact with China in 1699. Those trades involved opium — a mixture of substances extracted from a flower, which can produce legal and illegal drugs, such as heroin —, which was prohibited since 1799 in China. However the British monopolized its trade until 1834. Due to the opium's trade growth, Chinese authorities eradicated the drug, destroying almost all opium in Hong Kong, therefore the British sent forces in 1840, causing the First Opium War. As China lost the war, Britain and Western powers occupied concessions and earned commercial privileges. As a result, Hong Kong was ceded to Britain through the Treaty of Nanking in 1842. In 1856, a Second Opium War started because of the forming treaties between China and Britain, which ended two years later. In 1860, the "Convention of Beijing" ended hostilities and granted the British a concession on the Kowloon Peninsula, a Hong Kong island. The United Kingdom, in 1898, secured a 99-year lease granting control of the territory, expanding the size of the colony's surroundings (Hooper, 2000).

After that, at the end of the nineteenth century and beginning of the twentieth century, Hong Kong started to be developed as a British trading hub in southern China. Despite British control, with World War II and with the Communist party taking control over China, a massive part of the citizens of China immigrated to Hong Kong. With them they brought their cultural baggage and values, which were combined or imposed along with the Western one. So Hong Kong-Chinese people speak both Cantonese and English in different levels or just one of the two languages (Hooper, 2000).

Aspects of Hong Kong's literature

To comprehend a part of Hong Kong's literature, it is necessary to know its authors, as the colony was a place of passage, and its literature was shaped not only by those born there. According to Hooper (2000, p.10), the scholar Wong Wai-leung defines an authentic Hong Kong writer as:

writers 'born, educated and having their literary career in Hong Kong'; writers 'educated and having their literary career in Hong Kong'; writers 'having started and continuing their literary career in Hong Kong'; writers 'continuing their literary activities in Hong Kong as a major part of their entire career' (Wong *apud* Hooper, 2000, p. 10).

Besides that, Hooper (2000) also argued that to approach Hong Kong's literature there are three traits to set the stage for it. The first one is the sense of transit: geographically, Hong Kong was portrayed as a point of passage, there was a sense of vague awareness of temporariness, and, at the same time, motion related to money and time. The second trait is the sense of the city as a tourbillon: how the streets and buildings were "organized" in a physical sense, looking like a labyrinth, and the massive population that transitioned there. The third one is the sense of contrast: allied to the cultural diversity, caused by colonization, it is a place of contraries (rich and poor, East and West, communist and capitalist, among others).

Ackbar Abbas (Abbas, 1997, p. 119) said that in Chinese-language Hong Kong literature "the main and most powerful character is often the city of Hong Kong itself", as if the city dictates what happens in the story. This can be identified in many works of literature, but particularly in *Intersection* (1972), written by Liu Yichang. The author was born in China, but emigrated to Hong Kong because of China's civil war.

Intersection

Intersection (1972) tells the separated stories of two characters who end up bumping into each other in Hong Kong's streets. On the one hand, Chunyu Bai is a solitary and introspective old man, who is originally from Shanghai, and had been living in Hong Kong for over 20 years of his life. On the other hand, Ah Xing is a young girl, who, apparently, was born or raised in Hong Kong — the story does not express it, but it can be assumed, because of her characteristics. Both of them are walking through the city.

As the story progresses, the reader finds out that the characters are taking similar paths. They pass through the same stores and witness the same daily violent events happening in the city, the way they react is very similar. Both of them are almost doing mirrored physical actions during the story. For example when one of them is looking at a mirror, the other is looking at his or her reflection in a showcase. However, they differ drastically in the ways of thinking about life as well as the way their minds ramble through their thoughts.

While they are physically very close, almost at the point of encountering each other, both of them are very far away from each other, in an existential way. Chunyu Bai is always thinking about the past, about China, about his arrival to Hong Kong, he is very nostalgic, in that sense. Meanwhile, Ah Xing is always thinking about the future, about what she wants to be, about what man she is going to marry, and also consumed about the idea of getting rich and famous. As a result of the similarity in their paths, they end up sitting side by side in a cinema, both with impressions about each other, although they do not exchange a word: he thinks she is pretty, reminding him of a girl who studied with him, and she thinks he is a weird disgusting old man.

After the film, they go to their respective homes and sleep. He dreams about her, and she dreams about having sex with a young actor. In his dream he was with her, and he was transformed into a young man, also having sex with Ah Xing, almost as a symbol of a way in which they could be together, because they have such opposite personalities. In the morning of the other day, two birds perch on the rack outside Chunyu's window. One flies towards east, and the other flies towards west.

A postcolonial work with taints of colonial influence

From a postcolonial perspective, it is possible to interpret that the bird that flies towards the west represents Ah Xing. The text Otherizes Ah Xing, but from a colonized perspective, stereotyping her as a very superficial person, reinforcing a very sexist representation of women, instead of just the superficiality of Westernized people. The only desires in her life are related to money, fame and love. Also, her thoughts are portrayed, as she passes through the stores and daily events of the city, as almost like a daydream, and not represented as a logical way of imagining things, which gives that sense of her character as being a very delusional person. Therefore, the bird that flies towards the east would represent Chunyu Bai. The character shows a decolonized perspective from the author, giving depth to his personality, as a down-to-earth human being, very connected with what one day was real. However, his thoughts are portrayed, as he passes through the stores and daily events of the city, as reminiscences of his own life story, which gives a sense of his character being nostalgic, but close to reality.

Although they were both spacing out, the representation leaves one of them in a position of intellectual superiority. As in the following passage, from Chunyu Bai's perspective, "Looking at himself in the mirror, Chunyu Bai thought about the battles raging about the International Concessions in Shanghai; he recalled the scene as three bombers flew over the Huangpu River and destroyed the ship Chyun" (Yichang, 1988, p. 90). But in Ah Xing's perspective, its content is very shallow, "Ah Xing was particularly interested by that outfit printed with the English words 'I LOVE YOU'. 'Mom doesn't know English,' she thought, 'I'm sure Mom won't scold me if I buy it'" (Yichang, 1988, p. 87). Besides the superficiality in her line of thought, the shirt with the English words demonstrates the presence of the British (and American) influence in the cultural context of Hong Kong. Ah Xing uses English, on purpose, as a way to avoid her mother's judgment about the shirt's content. This can be related to the Western ideals present in Ah Xing's perspectives of life, which differ drastically from traditional Chinese values. Also, through the character of Ah Xing, it can be noted that the Western ideals more easily influence those who speak the colonizer's language.

Nevertheless, the organization and style of the short story can be interpreted as a resistance to Eurocentric ways of writing. Firstly, the story is organized through semi-chapters of different sizes, which intersect points of view of the story, the first is from Chunyu Bai's perspective, the second is from Ah Xing's perspective, the third is Chunyu

Bai's perspective, and successively. Besides that, the way Liu Yichang expresses the sense of the city as a tourbillon is very characteristic, and goes beyond the content, it applies to the style. As Hong Kong is a city where there are several things happening at the same time, he depicts that experience in his writing through short phrases with some random descriptions of things, without connecting them in certain points of the story:

The Japanese dolls in the department stores had lovely smiles. The song-stresses at the opera house had eyelids with double folds produced by the surgeon's knife. A revolving restaurant. The registration for buying next year's mooncakes by instalments had begun. A thirty-percent discount on all books put out by this publisher. Fresh-water crabs from Yangcheng Lake on sale at 3 p.m. tomorrow. Shrimp dumplings, spring rolls, taro croquettes, steamed rice dumplings, barbecue-pork buns... (Yichang, 1988, p. 87).

Those two specific ways of writing do not follow the Western structures and styles of writing texts, so it can be interpreted as a way of going against Eurocentric norms.

In general, *Intersection* (1972) can be interpreted as a postcolonial work of literature. The story does not stereotype Hong Kong people in the way Edward Said describes in *Orientalism* (1979). Instead, the author represents them as individuals, rather than through a stigmatized or essentialized view of people from the East. However, the text stereotypes people from the West, through the representation of Ah Xing, who is portrayed as the Other, as the West, and as a symbol of capitalism. In this sense, representing all that the East considers to be negative, Othering the female representation in the story, the text stigmatizes women as more easily influenced by Western culture.

In conclusion, the text presents several characteristics of Hong Kong literature. The city is a place of dual identity, where people are different, with opposite cultures, creating a sense of not belonging there. However, these feelings create Hong Kong's own identity, with influences of the Western and Eastern, as seen in *Intersection* (1972), which reflects the heartbeat of Hong Kong, a theme beautifully expressed in Joan Rogers' poem, "Hong Kong Belonger":

And on this crowded island
Where cultural rivers meet
I join the progeny of time
Who throng each busy street
And calling through the rush hour,
Whispering night,

Echoing down the flight of years
 The voices all unite
 Who am I? Where am I
 going?
 To what do I belong?
 This cry in the blood of East and West
 Is the heartbeat of Hong Kong. (Hsia, 1977, 142).

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