

The Transnational Order of *qing* 情 (Feelings) Corruption Cases in Qiu Xiaolong's *A Case of Two Cities*

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Abstract This study will discuss Qiu Xiaolong's ambivalent, yet powerful response to what Shu-Mei Shih defines as "suturing calls of Chineseness from China" (Shih 2011, 710). The first section of the study will concentrate on what one may define as Qiu's 'aesthetics of crime' as well as his scathing critique to the contemporary Chinese society, "corrupt throughout" (Qiu 2006, 15). The second part will focus instead on Qiu's homage to traditional Chinese culture. In particular, it will underscore his attempts to create what one may define a 'trans-national narrative of qing'. Such an analysis will lead us to conclude that Qiu Xiaolong's narratives are built in order to convey that "globalization straddles the negative pole of alien and the positive pole of English, reshuffling world population, concepts, and goods and services like iron filings" (Ma 2014, xi).

Keywords Qiu Xiaolong. Sinophone writing. Qing. Crime fiction.

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1 Introduction

Qiu Xiaolong is one of the most famous writers of detective fiction in the world. Born in Shanghai, he came to the United States in 1989 and he has lived since then in St. Louis. His novels have been published in more than a dozen languages. However, since they are all written in English, not everyone would agree that they fit into the category of ‘Sinophone literatures’. This notwithstanding, they can be interpreted in terms of ‘Alienglish’:

Haltingly, aliens come to speak in the Anglo-American tongue that you and I (me and you?) would understand, but what emerges is somehow skewed by accents, syntax, body language, and non-standard contextual references – an uncanny, off-kilter language that I call “Alienglish”. Either an alien’s English that estranges or an alienating English because it sounds so natural [...]. The neologism *Alienglish* threatens to mongrelize the very name of native speakers’ mother tongue, which has, ironically, twisted and scorched millions of nonnative mouths. [...] Reflecting the Marxist theory of laborers, the have-nots-nonnative speakers – sweat and contort in linguistic and cultural emulation of the haves, *as much to advance as to abandon their old selves*. The magnet of globalization *straddles the negative pole of alien and the positive pole of English*, reshuffling world population, concepts, and goods and services like iron filings. (Ma 2014, xi; italics added)

Qiu Xiaolong’s detective novels are generally set in Shanghai – his birthplace – and narrate the virtuous feats of Chief Inspector Chen Cao of the Shanghai Police Bureau. Chen shares many commonalities with Arthur Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes,¹ described by Stephen Knight as “a detective who is highly intelligent, essentially moral, somewhat elitist, all-knowing, disciplinary in knowledge and skills, energetic, eccentric, yet also in touch with the ordinary people who populate the stories” (Knight 2004, 55). Unlike Sherlock Holmes, however, Chen Cao has been raised as an intellectual. Graduated in English literature, he misses no opportunity to exhibit his profound knowledge of Western modernist poetry as well as Chinese classical and modernist poetry.

The creation of an upright poet-detective who relies on classical poetry as a source of inspiration in order to ponder about the criminal cases on which he is investigating and who is imbued with traditional Confucian virtues such as filial piety, among others, is a clever expedient to create a culturally, ethically and ethnically defined cultural product which aims at representing both the beauty and the moral

¹ Velie mentions Qiu Xiaolong’s indebtedness to Sherlock Holmes (2017, 80).

values of the Chinese aesthetic tradition as well as the intrinsic contradictions of a modern, market-oriented postsocialist Chinese nation. Qiu's desire to address the manifold and complex 'dark aspects' of China is evident from the different subject matters he deals with in his novels: environmental bad policies, internet and media censorship, power struggles within the Chinese Communist Party are only a few of the issues which Qiu Xiaolong is willing to address in his detective fiction via his alter ego inspector Chen Cao.

A Case of Two Cities, which narrates a very complex case of corruption, is the novel that best showcases the writer's desire to both "advance and abandon his own self" (Ma 2014, xi). In fact, by setting the first part of the novel in Shanghai and the second part in the United States - more specifically in Los Angeles and in St. Louis - the author manages to address the question of globalisation, the (his?) Chinese identity in a globalised economy, the emergence of a Chinese upper middle-class and last, but not least, the radical changes occurred in postsocialist China.

Before offering a critique of this novel, it is important to consider Qiu Xiaolong's identity as an 'overseas Chinese' writing in the English language. As Shu-mei Shih reminds us:

Sinophone writers and artists around the world, in Southeast Asia, Australia, Taiwan, the Americas, Europe, and elsewhere, have sought to resist the suturing call of Chineseness from China. This has gone hand in hand with their search for local identities, which are often at odds with locally dominant nationalist, colonialist, or racist paradigms. On the one hand, the assignation of such racial identities as 'Chinaman', 'chino', and 'heathen chinee' has prevented immigrants from China and their descendants from becoming fully accepted in their adopted lands. Yellow-peril racism in the Western hemisphere has thereby risked pushing immigrants from China and their descendants into the embrace of China. On the other hand, the Chinese state has effectively and continuously disseminated the ideological category of 海外华侨 ('overseas Chinese') who shall always remain loyal to China, exploiting racist injuries to their feelings or other forms of alienation that can easily transfigured into long-distance nationalism for the benefit of China. It is no accident that the Chinese state refers to overseas Chinese with the same term that the French state applies to its department and territories 'overseas' (*outré-mer*): China sees the overseas Chinese as subjects who must be loyal to the motherland just as the French state lays claim to its overseas department and territories. (Shih 2011, 710)

This study will discuss Qiu Xiaolong's ambivalent, yet powerful response to the «suturing calls of Chineseness from China». The first section of the study will concentrate on what one may define as Qiu's

'aesthetics of crime' as well as his scathing critique to the contemporary Chinese society, «corrupt throughout» (Qiu 2006, 15). The second part will focus instead on Qiu's homage to traditional Chinese culture. In particular it will underscore his attempts to create what one may define a 'trans-national narrative of *qing*'. Such an analysis will lead us to conclude that Qiu Xiaolong's narratives are built in order to convey what Ma has already underscored: the idea that "globalisation *straddles the negative pole of alien and the positive pole of English*, reshuffling world population, concepts, and goods and services like iron filings".

2 A New Chinese Ethics and the Aesthetics of Crime in the Era of Globalisation

"Chinese is still an evolving language. Corruption - *fubai* - literally means 'rotten,'" Chen said in a quiet voice to Lei, "in reference to the bad meat or fish. Now it refers exclusively to the abuse of power by the Party cadres". (Qiu 2006, 16)

"Socialism is going to the dogs. These greedy, unscrupulous dogs of the Party Officials! They're crunching everything to pieces, and devouring all the bones," the short one declared in indignation. "Our state-run company is like a gigantic fat goose, and everyone must take a bite or pluck a feather or two from it. Did you know that the head of the City Export Office demands a five percent bonus in exchange for his export quota approval?

"What can you do, man?" The tall one said sarcastically. "Communism echoes only in nostalgia song. It's capitalism that's practiced here - with the Communist Party sitting on the top, sucking a red lollipop. So what can you expect of those Party cadres?"

"Corrupt throughout. They don't believe in anything except doing everything in their own interest - *in the name of China's brand socialism*".

"What is capitalism? Everybody grabs for his or her money - in spite of all the communist propaganda in our newspapers. They're just like the beer froth in the tub."

"The cops should have bang-banged a few rotten eggs!"

"Cops?" the tall one said, splashing the water with his big feet. "They're jackals out of one and the same den as those wolves."

Chen frowned. Complaints about the widespread corruption were not surprising, but some of the specifics did not sound too pleasant to a naked cop, or to a naked editor either. (Qiu 2006, 15-16)

These are two among the many passages of *A Case of Two Cities* which revolve around the issue of corruption. The explanation of the term

fubai in the first passage is certainly useless for anyone who has a basic knowledge of Chinese. It rather suggests and underscores that the implied reader of this novel is not Chinese. The second one is instead a representation of the sentiments of public despise for political authorities.

In *A Case of Two Cities* Inspector Chen Cao initially investigates a murder. The naked body of a renowned and respected detective is found to be lying next to the body of a prostitute in a public bathhouse. Chen Cao soon understands that the murder was perpetrated in order to prevent the cop from investigating corruption and fraud offenses. Chen Cao, appointed as the Chief inspector of an anticorruption campaign by Comrade Zhao, begins to investigate Xing Xing, a high Party Cadre who, after abusing his position of political power in order to smuggle huge amounts of capital, has fled to the United States. He interrogates all his Chinese connections who are still living in Shanghai, both “[t]hose with official positions and those without” (Qiu 2006, 34). He first interrogates Dong, a Party official engaged in the real estate business. Not only does Dong evade all the questions related to Xing, he even subtly threatens Chen by hinting that something bad could happen to his mother. Chen’s visits to Qiao Bo – once a modernist poet who had achieved notoriety for his book entitled *China Can Stand Up in Defiance* – and to Gu, the manager of a karaoke bar eventually lead him to the tracks of the beautiful anchorwoman An Jiayi, a former friend of Chen with whom he shared a passion for reading and literature. After these interrogations, he receives an anonymous envelope containing “pictures of An [Jiayi] in a variety of scandalising poses with a man” (Qiu 2006, 67). Chen does not hesitate to contact her and to use the photos as a weapon to obtain information both about Jiang (another corrupt official who is also An Jiayi’s lover) and Ming, Xing’s beloved stepbrother. Two days after Chen’s interrogation, An Jiayi’s naked dead body is found lying in her bedroom before she could disclose further information about the suspects.

Chen is eventually requested to give up his investigations in order to perform as the head of the delegation of the Chinese Writers’ Association during an official visit to the United States. Chen is taken aback because instead of choosing outstanding artists, the Association has favoured those writers who had important personal connections. However, the delegation’s visit to Los Angeles provides Chen not only with the thrill of being recognised as a talented poet and translator, but also with the chance of meeting Xing, who is now living in Los Angeles with his mother. Knowing that Xing’s mother is a fervent Buddhist and that Xing is a filial son who accompanies his mother to the local Buddhist temple, Chen disguises himself as a skilled reader of karmic premonitions and meets Xing and his mother at the temple. When the delegation moves to St. Louis, Chen has to deal with another crime. In fact, Little Huang, the official inter-

preter of the Chinese delegation, is found murdered. Detective Lenich, in charge of the investigation, asks Detective Catherine Rohn, to perform as an interpreter of the delegation. Chen Cao (who has all along had a crush on her ever since their first meeting in China some years before) relies on her assistance to obtain the transcripts of Xing's telephone conversations, which he sends to his closer collaborators in China (Detective Yu and the retired cop Old Hunter). Ming is eventually captured and arrested. His brother Xing accepts to return to China in exchange for Ming's extradition to the United States. At the end of the novel, however, Chen Cao has not solved all the crimes. The culprits of An Jiayi's and Little Huang's murders are not identified, let alone arrested.

I have described this plot in detail in order to suggest that Qiu Xiaolong's commitment to the detective novel is a pretext to provide a social picture of postsocialist China. This is far from being surprising. As Mary Evans suggests, what has triggered off an increase of the popularity of detective fiction as a genre is the fact that

[n]o longer do writers of [crime and detective] fiction maintain the comforting view that the guilty party is merely the one rotten apple in the social barrel; now there emerges a highly skeptical view about the health of the whole barrel. We are asked by writers of crime fiction, to think of social questions that many people would rather ignore: questions about the origins of human actions and social responses to both the merely unconventional and the more dangerous and damaging. (Evans 2009, 3)

Qiu Xiaolong's description of a corrupt and greedy society is far from being surprising. As Hobsbawm has argued in his *The Age of Empire, 1875-1914*, the beginning of the twentieth century was characterised by the growing convergence between economics and politics, which triggered off the emergence of capitalism. The access of postsocialist China to a global market economy entailed the birth of an affluent society greedy for both money and consumer goods. What Qiu Xiaolong criticises in *A Case of Two Cities* is the increasing blurring of boundaries, or - even worse - the conflation between political and economic power. This is clear in a passage where the corrupt cadre-entrepreneur Dong declares that corruption is indispensable to the spread and growth of economic development:

"Corruption may have facilitated our economic development in a large way. It's a paradox, isn't it?" [Dong said]

"I have not studied the issue. You are an authority on the new economic development." [Chen replied]

"Well I have just read about it in an essay," Dong said *pulling out an English magazine* from the shelf, which covered one side of

the room. There were titles Chen had never seen before. Several bookmarks stuck out of pages, as if showing the owner's knowledge. "According to the author, China's success has been associated with an epidemic corruption among local officials in charge of the economy. Why? The transformation of Party cadres from unproductive *political entrepreneurs to productive economic entrepreneurs*. But what pushed those cadres over the edge? A contradiction between the *socialist system and the capitalist practice*. The time-honored communist propaganda about Party members being selfless public servants of the people excludes explicit rewards and incentives for those cadres. Their incomes are still fixed and unrelated to their performance. Is that really fair? So, some Party cadres see corruption as a sort of compensation, like in Western economies. That makes our fight against corruption much harder..."

This talk was turning out to be harder than Chen had expected. Dong launched into new theories, as if forestalling Chen from taking a more authoritative position. Indeed, Dong was not merely higher in the Party rank, but also more experienced in delivering the "Party talk." Chen decided to come to the point more directly.

"Your guess was correct. I am engaged in an anticorruption investigation. More specifically an investigation of Xing Xing, and it's directly under the Party Discipline Committee. I have some questions for you. (Qiu 2006, 38-9; italics added)

The stakes here are the tensions between global neoliberal social practices (the reference to the English newspaper is one of the many examples in this novel) and culturally specific shared values. As far as moral values are concerned, anthropological studies have distinguished two kinds of societies: shame-oriented societies and guilt-oriented societies. As Stephen Knight has argued in his *Form and Ideology of Crime Fiction*,

[i]n a shame-oriented society values are public and shared, and anyone who acts contrary to them is disgraced, losing status in a society as a result. Honor is crucial to the individual [...]. Shame is greatly feared since it is an exclusion from the valued, and ultimately mutually protective group. [...] In a guilt-oriented society, on the other hand, the individual creates his or her own ideas of rectitude, and misbehavior is felt personally as guilt even if it is not publicly criticised or even recognised as wrong. Morality is private, and public displays of virtue are seen as hollow shams (Knight 1980, 26).

Party-entrepreneur Dong's explanation is an ingenious expedient to represent the evolution of Chinese values in postsocialist China. In

fact, China has all along been characterised by the idea of *face*, an idea which traditionally conflated two specifically distinct aspects, “*lian* which involves moral character, social obligations and ethicality, and *mianzi* which involves prestige, status, and social recognition” (Ealey 1997, 80). This conflation – which results from the fact that in premodern China values were public and shared (e.g. it was, following Knight’s reading, “a shame-oriented society”) – provided (at least theoretically) the necessary precondition of a harmonious society in which private and public interests were interdependent. Dong’s dialogue with Chen underscores how in postsocialist China the concepts of *lian* and *mianzi* no longer coalesce.

Dong – as well as all the other ‘evil’ characters – theorise instead a necessary opposition between *lian* and *mianzi*. As is clear from this passage, Dong argues that he is compelled to forsake his own *lian* (moral character, social obligations and ethicality) in order to maintain his *mianzi* (prestige, status, and social recognition). Instead, what Inspector Chen Cao embodies is a new and updated version of a traditional and Confucian *lian*. The famous Confucian adagio – *There are things a man should do, and there are things a man should not do* – repeated over and over again in the story, is shown to be Chen Cao’s guiding principle. Such an adagio serves as a foil to underscore the tension between the upright Inspector’s ideas of rectitude and ethical values (ideas that in this novel are nothing but an updated version of traditional Confucian virtues) and the new Chinese postsocialist ‘neoliberal’ values. Seen in this light, Qiu Xiaolong forges a Manichean vision of society, a vision according to which the establishment’s endorsement of *mian* inevitably compels the ‘upright Chinese citizen’ to take a clear-cut ethical stand in order to follow the guiding principles of *lian*.

In his analysis of Clive Bloom’s critique of the detective story in Western literature, Maurizio Ascari argues:

Bloom describes detective fiction as a bridge between late romanticism, which was marked by individualism and the search for an organic theology, and modernism, which “felt itself freed both from ‘a theological moral purpose’ and from ‘the cult of personality’”. According to Bloom the detective story contributed to this transition by idealizing personality as ‘pure thought,’ thereby reconciling ‘the contradictions of a society under the dual pressure of eccentric individualism and dubiously safe conformism. (Ascari 2007, xi)

In his novel Qiu Xiaolong also shows his strenuous efforts to reconcile these contradictions. In fact, he tries to construct the image of a hero endowed with specific ethnic and cultural connotations without being necessarily insensitive to the aesthetic fascination of global modernity. On the one hand, Qiu highlights Chen’s ongoing concerns for his aged mother (hence bestowing him with a profound sense of

filial piety), his rectitude and righteousness, his humanity and loyalty towards his colleagues and team, his cooperativeness with equally upright superiors, his good taste for traditional art and food; on the other one, he indulges in passages portraying his passion for beautiful women (although he is always entertaining platonic love affairs, so as to avoid possible barriers in his career progression), his personal ambitions and his concerns about his social status and last, but not least, his fondness for modern and luxurious Chinese entertainment venues such as restaurants and hotels. Shortly put, while being conservative in terms of ethical values, Chen Cao is far from being an outdated and outmoded character.

There are indeed aesthetic qualities in Qiu Xiaolong's fiction – addressed mainly in the second part of this study – which clearly stand out mostly in those passages dedicated to Chen Cao's romantic ravings about beautiful women. In *A Case of Two Cities*, Qiu Xiaolong describes Chen's ambiguous and platonic infatuation with three women who belong to his both past and present personal history: Ling Ling (the daughter of a high cadre of the Chinese Communist Party, who is only hinted at in the novel), Catherine Rohn (a detective living in St. Louis and with whom he occasionally collaborates) and An Jiayi (a former friend with whom he had shared a passion for reading in the past, now a probable suspect, involved in the corruption case which Chen Cao is investigating).

An Jiayi, a powerful anchorwoman who relies on her social position to both expand her personal networks and promote her personal company of public relations, becomes Qiu Xiaolong's expedient to ponder about the ephemeral nature of beauty. This is particularly evident in the passage where Chen Cao receives an anonymous envelope containing some pictures displaying An Jiayi lying naked with a mysterious lover:

They were pictures of An in a variety of scandalizing poses with a man. Chen took in a sharp breath. One of her drying herself with a white towel, her bare ass like two shining moons, the man sitting on the edge of the bed, his hand reaching out to her breasts. Another of her throwing her naked body across the bed strewn with pear blossom petals. In still another, the two were sitting up in bed, her bare shoulders flashing out of the blanket, reading, leaning against his. [...]

Whoever the man in the picture was, it was not [her husband] Han. Moving the lamp over, Chen took a closer look at her clandestine lover. [...] Chen was no moralist. In the mid-nineties, an extramarital affair was no longer seen as something corrupt or scandalous. Not in An's circumstances. In spite of a story of success with fame, family, beauty, and her own company too, he sensed her loneliness behind the glittering façade.

Exquisite as jade,
She cannot compete with the autumn crow flying
Overhead, which still carries the warmth
From the Imperial Palace...

It was understandable that there was some other man in her life. Or men. Chen did not want to judge, though he could not help feeling slightly depressed. (Qiu 2006, 67-8)

Qiu Xiaolong's consistent alternation between narrative passages and both Chinese or English poems (which shall be addressed in the next section of the present study), evidences the author's attempt to aestheticise the woman's transgression. In this section, devoted to an analysis of Qiu's social critique to contemporary Chinese society, it is worthwhile underscoring how straightforward and rather down-to-earth expressions such as "her bare ass like two shining moons" as well as the prudish omission of the term 'penis' are juxtaposed with fine poetic metaphors. Also, in this case, just like in Dong's conversation about corruption, there is a *vis-a-vis* confrontation between the vulgarity and the decay of present-day social mores with the exquisite aesthetic refinement of the Chinese past.

The same narrative strategy can be found in the description of Chen's interrogation to An occurred in the confined room of a luxury restaurant:

She seemed to be at home. Possibly a regular customer in the company of Jiang, or of some high-ranking officials. After the lime-light, after the wine, she must have found it hard to turn back [to the days when they were meeting together to discuss about literature]. A company of hers would ensure the luxurious lifestyle she enjoyed. There was perhaps nothing wrong with it in this materialistic time, he admitted. (Qiu 2006, 75)

There seems to be on Qiu's/Chen's part a nostalgia of an idealistic/idealised time of the past in which they were young, an era dominated by ideology and fervent idealism. The present, however, had the advantage of bestowing pleasures and comforts which were unimaginable in the Maoist era.

The so-called 'materialistic time' is nothing but a historical time inaugurated by Deng Xiaoping during his Southern tour in 1992. His all too notorious slogan "to get rich is glorious" also triggered off heated debates on the interrelatedness between the spiritual and material aspects of civilisation which entailed the birth of the concept of *suzhi*. As Tamara Jacka points out:

Suzhi, which refers to the innate and nurtured physical, psychological, intellectual, moral, and ideological qualities of human bod-

ies and their conduct, is, in Raymond Williams's terms, a "keyword". In its contemporary usage, it has become widespread only since the 1980s. However, it intersects with, and contains powerful traces of, other keywords, such as *civilization* and *modernity*, whose histories are long and fraught and entangled with developments across languages and cultures. Laden as it is with cultural and historical associations, *suzhi* is of critical importance to contemporary China's booming, globally oriented market economy and to new, "postsocialist" forms of state governance and social control. It plays a central role in contemporary processes of citizenship, simultaneously contributing to understandings of the responsibilities, obligations, claims, and rights that connect members of society to the state; to determinations of which individuals and social groups are included in this set of rights and responsibilities and which are excluded; to discourses on how to produce the "ideal" citizen as well as what to do about the less-than-ideal citizen; and to processes and institutions that produce and reproduce boundaries and gradations between different types of citizenship and citizen. (Jacka 2009, 524; Author's italics)

Indeed, Qiu's/Chen's object of investigation is a specific kind of citizen: the upper-middle class. Qiu looks at the this newly born class from a 'privileged' position. While he acts and speaks with great ease and confidence in all sorts of social environments, his position as a detective belonging to a formal establishment enables him to both describe the process of formation of the new middle and/or upper middle class' *suzhi* and formulate aesthetic judgments of such classes. A close analysis of the passage which describes Chen Cao's close observation of the pictures portraying An Jiayi's sexual liaison allows us to conclude that Qiu Xiaolong maintains a twofold attitude. On the one hand, Chen Cao despises the excessive vulgarity displayed by the new parvenus, on the other one, he cannot prevent himself from harbouring nostalgic feelings for his old friend which he externalises in his citation of a classical Chinese poem.

Equally representative is the description of the discovery of An Jiayi's cadaver:

He walked with [detective] Kuang into the bedroom, where her body had not been moved yet. On her back on the carpet, An lay spread-eagled, wrapped in a white terry robe that slipped high up, revealing her bare thighs and belly. Her silk lace panties were removed, not torn, but rumped into a ball beside her. Her face turned to one side, already bluish under the light. He noticed that her skin was slightly waxy. Her fingernails and toenails painted scarlet, looked unbroken, unsoiled.

He had seen her numerous times on TV, always elegantly dressed, reading the news with a halo of political correctness. He had never imagined his last image of her would be like this. It would perhaps haunt him for a long time.

He knelt down and gazed into her eyes, which stared back, unblinking. The corneas appeared cloudy, which reinforced Dr. Xia's estimate of the time of death. He studied her face for a minute before touching her eyelids. He muttered almost inaudibly. "I'll catch the murderer, An."

To his astonishment, her eyes closed slowly, as if in response to his words.

"Wow! It's like in those old stories," Kuang exclaimed in a low, shocked voice. "Your touch worked the miracle". (Qiu 2006, 87)

As the poet W.H. Auden has observed, "murder is unique in that it abolishes the party it injures, so that society has to take the place of the victim and on his behalf demand atonement or grant forgiveness; it is the one crime which society has a direct interest" (Auden 1968, 148). Besides this, Qiu Xiaolong adds up both Gothic and sensational aspects which, as Ascari highlights, have all along been an intrinsic part of detective fiction. The minute description of An Jiayi's corpse (significantly absent with all other male cadavers) contribute to the creation of an aesthetics of murder. Joel Black's insightful *The Aesthetics of Murder. A Study in Romantic Literature and Contemporary Culture* well explains that it was Thomas De Quincey's 1827 "Murder" essay to legitimate the most brutal killings as a sublime form of art. As he suggests, "by treating murder as an art form, De Quincey demonstrated the aesthetic subversion of the beautiful by the sublime, and generally, the philosophical subversion of ethics by aesthetics" (Black 1991, 15).

Chen Cao's contemplation of An Jiayi's corpse in this passage differs substantially from his gaze on the low quality and vulgar photos described above. The detective's scrutiny of her almost naked body triggers off a moment of both aesthetic contemplation which makes the detective forget about An Jiayi's true nature as a corrupt upper middle-class rampant woman who has relied on sex to promote her PR company. The closing of her eyelids after Chen Cao's promise to capture the culprit – a promise which he will not eventually keep – is also a part of Qiu Xiaolong's 'politics of the sublime', in which, unlike in the traditional Western detective fiction, ethics and aesthetics are always interdependent.

The aesthetics and poetics of qing in the era of globalisation

...Should I explain a Chinese joke
With the help of an English book
After baseball, chips and dips
And helpless tongue slips
After deconstructing the character “ai”
Into radicals - heart, water, friend and eye,
After the pallid sleepless stress
Smoothed by her golden tress
On the rug of an iron tree,
After turning on the TV
Without understanding why
Those players laugh and cry.
It's impossible to say
What I want to say!
What if she, kicking
Off her sandals and trimming
Her toenails, should say,
“That is not it at all,
That is not what I meant at all.”
Then how should I begin
To spit out all the butt-ends
Of my days and ways
And how shall I pray and pay?..
(Qiu 2006, 299-300)

In a groundbreaking analysis of classical Chinese poetry Stephen Owen said:

There are some basic similarities between the reading of the world in Chinese poetry and the way in which Western readers approach detective novels. Both focus the attention on the “evidence” that can expose hidden truth, and both demand *the presumption of a coherent world order of empirical reality by which the evidence can expose that hidden truth*. Both are texts of limitation that lead to fullness, and *both are based on epistemological models*. However, in the Chinese case the empirical reality presumed in the detective novels is supplemented by a further reality of correspondences and associations based on cosmology and the literary tradition.

Both genres engage the reader to decipher the world: the detective novels always succeed within the text, but in the Chinese poem *fullness lies outside the text*, as the end of the reading process. At its least complacent, a *Tang and Sung poem moves toward a fullness that is never attained* - an ambiguous reality, a world of unmanageable complexity, or a true failure of intelligibility. But

the more complacent social poem and the detective novel have served their respective societies in fundamental ways: *they are epistemological models that teach readers how to know, and at the same time reassure their readers of the worlds' intelligibility.* (Owen 1985, 69-70; italics added).

In both Qiu's/Chen's long stanza and Stephen Owen's analysis of the similitudes between Chinese classical poetry and the Western detective novels the reader can easily find a common concern: epistemology. "It's impossible to say | what I want to say" is what Qiu/Chen spouts in English "with a Chinese accent" (this is Chen's only poetic composition in English, all the others being merely translations from ancient Chinese poems).

The reader of Qiu Xiaolong's detective novels cannot but feel disoriented. The verses "Should I explain a Chinese joke | With the help of an English book" suggest that Qiu/Chen is compelled to move constantly between not only two very different linguistic systems, but also different world systems informed by different values. However, "the fullness never attained" of Tang and Song poems is the expedient on which the poet/novelist Qiu Xiaolong relies on to capture the "hidden truth" of a global world in which different races and different cultures coexist and interact.

We, as readers, cannot fail to notice that in *A Case of Two Cities* - except for the American poet T.S. Eliot, with whom both Qiu Xiaolong and Chen Cao are enamored (Velie 2017, 80) - Qiu/Chen mainly translates Tang and Song dynasty poems. There is a confrontation between the representation of immensely rich and powerful globalised but morally and culturally decaying present-day China and the aesthetic and moral values of the past. This confrontation imbues the narrative with a strong feeling of nostalgia. It cannot be otherwise because, while Chen Cao ultimately lives and works in China, Qiu Xiaolong lives in St. Louis, in the United States.

Shu-mei Shih's notion of Sinophone studies is helpful to reconsider not only the necessary ambivalent stands that Chinese overseas such as Qiu Xiaolong take against their own culture as well as other cultures, but also the relationships between roots and routes, which are both crucial elements in *A Case of Two Cities*:

2. Sinophone studies allows us to rethink the relationships between roots and routes by questioning the conceptions of roots as ancestral rather than place-based, or routes as wandering or homelessness rather than a more mobile conception of homeness that is paradoxically also more ethical and place-based. [...]

3. When routes can be roots, multidirectional critiques are not only possible but also imperative. Transcending national borders, Sinophone communities can maintain a critical position toward

both the country of origin and the country of settlement. It is no longer an either/or choice between the ancestral land and the local place, which has been shown to jeopardize the well-being of the immigrants and their descendants. (Shih 2007, 189-90)

The alternation between narrative passages and poems, to my view, should be interpreted less as Qiu Xiaolong's willingness to turn back to traditional Chinese fiction or poetry than a way to overcome such an either/or choice. While narrative passages – which, as already noticed, are very descriptive and colloquial in narrative register – address the moral decay of contemporary China, classical Chinese poems have the function to trans-late a (local) culturally defined human quandary into a global one.

The interconnectedness between the local and the global, the inner local realm and the outer global world, the aesthetic realm and the social and political domain is made possible through Chen's recourse to the notion of *qing*, a notion which is crucial to the birth and the development of classical Chinese poetry. As the "Great Preface" to the *Book of Songs* underscores:

The poem is that to which what is intently on the mind goes. In the mind is being intent; coming out in language, it is a poem. [...] The affections (*qing*) emerge in words; when those words have patterning, they are called "tones". The tones of a well-managed age are at rest and happy; its government is balanced. The tones of an age in turmoil are bitter and full of anger; its government is perverse. The tones of a ruined state are filled with lament and brooding; its people are in difficulty (cited in Owen 1992, 40-3 *passim*; translation modified)

Paula Varsano, who comments this passage of the "Great Preface", suggests that there are "two states of being (affections and words) juxtaposed at consecutive points in a space/time continuum, *obviating the need for any further precision of the location of the event* (Varsano 1996, 387; italics added). The interrelatedness between the inner sphere (*nei*) and the outer sphere (*wai*) which allows the subject – to use Varsano's expression – to get "there from here", as well as the interdependence between the subject (e.g. his aesthetic tastes and his moral/political values) and the management of the state are intrinsic characteristics of Chinese poetry on which Qiu Xiaolong relies in order to avoid choosing between the ancestral land and the country of his settlement.

One interesting, albeit trivial example of Qiu's/Chen's modalities of use of poetry can be found at the beginning of chapter 13, which describes Chen Cao's arrival to the United States with the delegation of Chinese writers:

I left the city of the White King
In the morning, in the midst
Of the colorful clouds,
Sailing thousands of miles
To Jiangling all in a day's trip,
The monkeys crying on
Along both the banks,
And the light boat
Speeding through the mountains.

Chen quoted the Tang dynasty lines as the airplane was beginning to land at the Los Angeles airport. He added in a hurry, "Of course, ours is a Boeing, not a boat".

Perhaps he should have chosen another poem, more appropriate for the occasion, in the company of those established writers. The flight had been delayed for ten hours in Tokyo. Nor had any monkey been heard or seen throughout the journey. It was not like in his bureau, where, whatever the chief inspector chose to cite, his colleagues would raise no question. Still, reciting the lines seemed to have relieved his tension. So far, everything had been smooth sailing, in spite of the delay, in spite of finding himself the delegation head. (Qiu 2006, 134-5)

While the circumstances that have stirred Chen Cao's poetic afflatus are trivial, the dynamics that entail such an afflatus exemplify the ways in which classical poetic discourses can work as an effective bridge between the past and the present, the local and the global (or trans-national), the epistemological and the emotional. Qiu's/Chen's effective juxtaposition between the plane and the boat suggests that classical Chinese poems may refer to specific circumstances but can also be translated to other events; they are a reaction to a specific circumstance, but they become universal when and if the reader shares the poet's same epistemological journey; last, but not least, they are on the one hand an emotional bridge between the poet and the world and, on the other one, a link between the poet and the reader who, after reading the poem, eventually understands the poet's human quandary and his/her own reading of the world.

Qiu Xiaolong does not limit himself to rely on classical Chinese poetry to create a bridge between the local/epistemological/emotional subject and the rest of the world. Poetic compositions are the site where discourses on culturally specific shared values and ideas are deployed. This becomes evident when a poem is used by Peiqin - the wife of Chen's best friend, detective Yu - as a clue to find Ming's whereabouts.

Peiqin is described as reading the transcripts of the telephone conversation between An and the government official Bi Keqin:

But one short conversation intrigued Peiqin. It was between An and Bi Keqin, a senior city government official in charge of the textile industry export and import. As with other phone calls, An approached Bi directly about the whereabouts of Ming, but Bi's answer was a strange one.

"Come on An, how can I know? It's like in that Tang dynasty poem. 'You ask where the tavern is, | and the cowboy points toward the apricot blossom village.'"

"Oh, thank you so much Bi."

[...]

Peiqin knew the poem. A Tang dynasty quatrain. The first two lines read "*With the continuous rain of the day of Qingming | people feel broken-hearted on the road*". What Bi quoted were the next two lines. In the original, whether "apricot blossom village" was the name of a tavern or the village in which the tavern was located, she failed to recollect.

Then she remembered something. In one of his investigations, Chen had quoted a poem to say what was impossible for him to say under the circumstances. If Chen had done that, so could Bi. So "apricot blossom village" might be a hint. (Qiu 2006, 196)

This passage cannot but make us reflect upon Owen's analogies between Chinese classical poetry and Western detective fiction. What is called into question in this passage is the practice of reading poetry not only as an epistemological exercise, but also as a cultural practice which acknowledges a specific corpus of poetic compositions as a shared cultural patrimony. Seen in this light, we can suggest that classical Chinese poetry in Qiu's fiction calls to mind Shu-mei Shi's notion of "roots". Yu's inspection at the exclusive club called "Apricot Blossom Village" - which will eventually allow detective Yu to follow Ming's tracks - indicate the manifold functions of poetry. As shown in this case, the advent of modernity notwithstanding, what defines 'Chineseness' is the common acknowledgment of both shared cultural practices (e.g. filial piety among others) as well as a specific corpus of poems.

Interestingly enough, as the stanzas quoted at the beginning of this section, this corpus of poems indeed transforms Qiu Xiaolong's detective novels into a metatext. It is a meaningful exercise of translating culturally defined texts for the sake of the new 'global reader'. Not only does Qiu/Chen translate poems or stanzas of Chinese classical texts, he even pays homage to one of the most famous modern Western poet/translator of the Chinese classical tradition: Ezra Pound (1885-1972). In *A Case of Two Cities*, the reader eventually comes across Pound's translation of Li Bai's famous and acclaimed quatrain *The Grief of the Jade Steps*:

Waiting, she finds her silk stockings soaked with dew drops
Glistening on the marble palace steps.
Finally, she is moving to let the crystal-woven curtain fall
When she casts one more glance at the glamorous autumn moon.
(Qiu 2006, 236; italics in original)

This quatrain, cited after Chen Cao's telephone call to his platonic love Detective Catherine Rohn, cannot but attract the reader's attention. Qiu/Chen, in this case, resorts to the *American* modernist poet and translator Ezra Pound in order to attune himself to his *American* beloved. This English translation of this love poem is, once again, an enlightening example that *qing* is a notion that can move beyond the local boundaries to become a trans-national value which people from all cultures can enjoy and rely on to produce values.

3 Conclusion

In *On Not Speaking Chinese. Living between Asia and the West*, Ien Ang has insightfully explored the reasons why 'overseas Chinese' choose not to write in Chinese. As she explains, the overseas Chinese writers' autobiographical urge is closely related to the issue of both authenticity and authority. At this regard, she states:

If, as Janet Gun [...] has put it, autobiography is not is not conceived as "the private act of self-writing" but as "the cultural act of self-reading", then what is at stake in autobiographical discourse is not a question of the subject's authentic "me", but one of the subject's location in a world through an active interpretation of experiences that one calls one's own in particular "worldly" contexts, that is to say, a reflexive positioning of oneself in history and culture. In this respect, I would like to consider autobiography as a more or less deliberate, rhetorical construction of a "self" for public, not private purposes. The displayed self is a strategically fabricated performance, one which stages a *useful* identity, an identity which can be put to work. It is the quality of that usefulness which determines the politics of autobiographical discourse. (Ang 2001, 23-4)

Seen in this light, Qiu Xiaolong's 'invention' of Chief Inspector Chen Cao is an effective strategy to express, to say it with the "Great Preface" to the *Book of Songs*, "that to which what is intently on the mind goes" (cited in Owen 1992, 40). By creating a detective-poet who is compelled to deal with the darker sides of a contemporary Chinese society which is rapidly changing, Qiu Xiaolong successfully establishes a meaningful tie to his motherland from the United States, his country of settlement. As already suggested, Chen Cao, Qiu Xiao-

long's alter ego, allows the author to deploy meaningful discourses on what Shu-mei Shih has effectively defined as "roots" and "routes". In this sense, Chen seems to be Qiu Xiaolong's "rhetorical construction for public not for private purposes" (Shih 2007, 189-90).

The readers of *A Case of Two Cities* are, via Chen Cao, able to come to terms both with traditional ethic and aesthetic values and a Chinese society which has not yet completely forsaken its roots. Qiu Xiaolong has convincingly shown that Confucian moral values such as filial piety and 'the cult of *qing*' are not easily relinquishable by either upright or evil Chinese citizens, no matter if they live in China or are overseas Chinese. These ingredients, that have transformed Qiu Xiaolong's detective novels into global bestsellers, cannot but make us ponder if there is or there can be a notion of 'Chineseness' in this new global era.

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