

Visions of China Stories from Macau

Selection, introduction and translation by
David Brookshaw

A joint publication by



GÁVEA-BROWN

PROVIDENCE, RHODE ISLAND

and

香港大學出版社



HONG KONG UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cover by António Conceição Júnior

www.arscives.com

© 2002 Gávea-Brown Publications, and David Brookshaw

Library of Congress Control Number: 2002 141121

All rights reserved. No portion of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical including photocopy, recording or any information storage or retrieval system, without prior permission in writing from the publishers, Gávea-Brown or Hong Kong University Press.

Published by Gávea-Brown Publications

Department of Portuguese and Brazilian Studies

Box O, Brown University

Providence, RI 02912, USA

Distributed by Luso-Brazilian Books

538 State Street

Brooklyn, New York 11217, USA

ISBN 0-943722-29-2

Secure On-Line Ordering:

www.brown.edu/Departments/Portuguese_Brazilian_Studies/

In Asia, Australia and New Zealand

Published by Hong Kong University Press

14/F Hing Wai Centre

7 Tin Wan Praya Road

Aberdeen, Hong Kong

ISBN 962-209-592-5

Secure On-line Ordering: www.hkupress.org

This publication was sponsored in part by the Instituto Português do Oriente, Macau, and the Instituto Camões, Lisbon, Portugal.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	11
Deolinda da Conceição	21
<i>Cheongsam</i>	23
<i>An act of charity</i>	37
<i>A conflict of feelings</i>	42
<i>The suffering of Lin Fong</i>	47
<i>The jade ring</i>	51
<i>The model</i>	56
Henrique de Senna Fernandes	61
<i>Tea with essence of cherry</i>	63
<i>Candy</i>	97
Maria Ondina Braga	153
<i>The mad woman</i>	155
<i>The lepers</i>	162

<i>The pedicab driver</i>	169
<i>Racial hatred</i>	176
<i>The child of the sun</i>	184
Fernanda Dias	191
<i>The watermelon</i>	193
<i>The room</i>	199
<i>Tenants</i>	204
<i>Daydream at Hac-Sá</i>	210
<i>The last supper</i>	214

INTRODUCTION

A quarter of a century after the 1974 revolution, which overthrew the country's fifty-year old dictatorship, ushering in a period of decolonisation and democratisation, Portugal relinquished its last remaining colonial outpost, Macau, in southern China. Like its much larger neighbour, Hong Kong, forty miles away across the estuary of the Pearl River, Macau has become a special administrative region of China, its autonomy and way of life guaranteed for a further fifty years. This minute territory of 16 square miles comprises the city and peninsula that gave it its name, and the two outlying islands of Taipa and Coloane, joined to it by bridge and causeway¹. Prior to 1999, Macau had long since ceased to be a colony in anything but name, for most administrative decisions deliberately avoided confrontation with Beijing, whose influence in the enclave had grown considerably since the 1960s. The vast majority of its inhabitants speak Cantonese, originating as they do from the hinterland of Guangdong, the province where Macau is situated. For most of the twentieth century, there was a more or less continuous inflow of refugees from other parts of China, fleeing civil war, the Japanese invasion, and later the communist revolution, to find safety in the enclave. This 'internal' diaspora served to reinforce a tendency that had been evident since the end of the nineteenth

century, namely, the steady emergence of a Chinese commercial elite which counted among its number some of the territory's wealthiest inhabitants.

Comparisons with Hong Kong are, of course, entirely appropriate in this respect, but in other ways Macau was very different from its brash 'British' neighbour. For one thing, it was a much older settlement, having been first settled by Portuguese traders and adventurers in the 1550s, with the agreement of the Chinese authorities. Secondly, its pattern of settlement and consequent social and cultural *mores* reflected a peculiarly Portuguese colonial tradition. The first settlers were, for the most part, lone Portuguese men, who brought with them women from other imperial or commercial entrepôts, such as Malacca, Goa, and even Nagasaki and Timor. Later mixture with the local Chinese produced, over the centuries, a Eurasian population, which came to bridge the gap between Portuguese administrators and the Chinese authorities and trading community, serving as interpreters, and staffing the local civil service. The Macanese, as they came to be called, identified themselves as Catholic and Portuguese speaking, even though the language of the home, certainly up until the nineteenth century, was a Creole known as 'Patuá', which had certain affiliations with the 'Papiá Kristang' of Malacca. Patuá was descended from the late medieval Portuguese of the navigators, along with lexical and syntactical characteristics derived from local languages. Most Macanese also spoke more or less fluent Cantonese, even though few of them could write Chinese characters. By the time Portugal handed Macau over to China on 20 December 1999, some four hundred and fifty years after its foundation, this mixed group numbered approximately twelve thousand out of a total population of a little over four hundred thousand.

On the other hand, because of limited employment opportunities in Macau and the various crises that had afflicted the territory over the years, the Macanese had produced their

own diaspora in other parts of the world. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, they had spread to the international settlement at Shanghai and to Hong Kong, and then later to Australia, Canada and California (significantly a major destination for both Chinese and Portuguese emigrants), not to mention Brazil and Portugal². It is the existence of this unique frontier population, coupled with the long and generally unobtrusive Portuguese presence in Macau that has given this new autonomous region of China its distinct characteristics.

It is impossible to talk of a Portuguese literary presence in Macau without referring to two poets whose names are inextricably linked to the city. Luís de Camões probably spent a brief period of exile there shortly after the city had been founded, although the rationale for his presence there is essentially a legendary one, symbolized by the nineteenth-century bust of the poet situated in the rocky outcrop of what is now a public garden, the 'Jardim Camões', where tradition has it, he sat and wrote his epic poem, *Os Lusíadas*. The second poet, Camilo Pessanha, lived there for thirty two years as a teacher and lawyer, wrote essays on Chinese civilization and culture, and died in 1926 from the effects of opium addiction. He lies buried in the city's main cemetery. In the centuries between these two figures, and in more recent years, Macau and China have been evoked by other Portuguese writers who either visited the city or made their careers there, or quite simply spent some years in the territory before moving on. The stories in this anthology not only represent a cross-section of the shorter fiction in Portuguese produced in Macau over the last fifty years, but some of them evoke a historical period which was crucial to this tiny former Portuguese outpost. Portugal's neutrality during the Second World War ensured that Macau was saved from Japanese occupation, which meant too that it became a place of refuge. The war years became engraved in the memories of those who lived through them as a time of trauma and endurance, hunger and hardship. In this respect, it is significant that an entire floor of the 'Museu de Macau' (Museum

of Macau) is dedicated to the city during the war years, thus emphasizing their role in reinforcing the city's 'siege culture'.

The stories of Deolinda da Conceição and Henrique de Senna Fernandes, both Macanese writers who experienced those war years, are set at least partially against the background of the Japanese occupation of China and Macau's beleaguered and somewhat vulnerable independent status between 1943 and 1945. Deolinda was a journalist who experienced at first hand the brutality of war, having lived in Shanghai during the Japanese occupation, where she was briefly interned in a concentration camp. In Macau after the war, she worked as a journalist on the main Portuguese-language newspaper, *Notícias de Macau*, where she ran the women's page and also published editorials, chronicles and some of her stories. Her only published collection of short stories came out in Portugal in 1956, a year before her premature death, under the title, *Cheong-Sam, A Cabaia*. The title story of the collection, 'Cheongsam', which features in this anthology, and 'A conflict of feelings', both focus on a theme that was of particular concern to Deolinda, namely, the conflict (often seen as a conflict of loyalty) between the aspirations of western educated women and the expectations placed upon them within traditional Chinese marriage. In the first story, reassertion of independence on the part of the female protagonist has tragic consequences, brought on in part by the hardship and brutality of war, although the exemplary nature of the tale invites the reader to reflect on who was at fault: the wife, the husband, or war itself. In the second story, the woman's choice of freedom, albeit as a concerned mother, leads to a positive and hopeful outcome.

As a Macanese, Deolinda da Conceição straddled the division between east and west, which was why she was particularly sensitive to the position of the mestizo within a hierarchical colonial society. In 'An act of charity', a young man of mixed parentage prepares to leave Macau for Portugal to continue his

studies, while he ponders on the shame of his illegitimacy and the malice of his friends and acquaintances. Yet our sympathy is directed towards the figure of the Chinese mother, who emerges from the crowd and is publicly rejected by her offspring, for we know that the woman who gave him life will, like so many in her position, in all probability be abandoned by her Portuguese 'husband', now that the embodiment of the link between them has gone. A similar predicament is described in 'The suffering of Lin Fong', but here, the father of the forsaken woman's unborn child is a soldier, suddenly recalled to Portugal when his battalion leaves. As in 'Cheongsam', the female is punished for turning her back on her own people and placing her misguided trust in a foreigner, but Deolinda suggests that Lin Fong's romantic hope was a response to grinding poverty.

The promise of love as an antidote to poverty and neglect is also the theme of 'The jade ring', in which a young servant girl allows herself to be seduced by an artist, and finds out too late that she has become a concubine rather than a choice for a wife. The problem seems to be that those in flight from social oppression invest their aspirations also in the superficial symbols of that wealth, in this case an unhealthy attraction for a jade ring. The tragic outcome is seen to originate in this, rather than in the legitimate struggle to overcome adversity. The dividing line between women's struggle to be independent and the accumulation of riches is narrow and inherently treacherous. Many of Deolinda's sad characters fall foul of it. Yet the author's underlying message seems to be that the importance of life lies in what one does rather than in how outwardly successful one is, and this is the theme of 'The model', the fifth story by this author to feature here.

The only surviving literary figure of the generation of Macanese intellectuals which emerged after the war, is Henrique de Senna Fernandes, a former teacher and lawyer, and author of two novels, *Amor e Dedinhos de Pé* (1986) and *A Trança Feiticeira* (1993), as

well as two collections of shorter fiction. Fernandes is the only writer to concentrate almost exclusively on the inner world of the Macanese, in stories that seek to evoke the customs and society of the 'Christian' city in the early part of the century, and its relationship with the 'Chinese' quarter. Fernandes is essentially a romantic, whose literary models lie in Portuguese novelists of the nineteenth century such as Júlio Dinis. Yet unwittingly perhaps, his stories are also compatible with the rich popular cultural tradition in China in so far as he is a master of the happy ending. It is no coincidence, for example, that his novel, *A Trança Feiticeira*, which recounts the romance between a young Macanese boy and a Chinese water carrier, was turned into a successful film and shown in China. 'Tea with essence of cherry' is taken from his collection of stories entitled *Nam-Van* (1978), and in its vision of Macau and the interface between its 'oriental Portuguese' inhabitants and the 'native' Chinese, as well as in its period setting, is representative of Fernandes' other fiction. Its happy ending, in which its orphan hero and heroine, Maurício and Yao-Man, after much hardship, come together in happy marriage, foreshadows the outcomes of his two later novels in suggesting the emergence of a new, more liberal Macau, in which the city's Portuguese and Chinese traditions were somehow harmonized through the romantic trope of true love.

In 'Candy', also originally published in *Nam Van*, Fernandes touches on the theme of the Macanese diaspora. The tale is developed by means of flashbacks, as two former lovers encounter each other by chance after a period of twenty four years. In a well crafted story, set over a day in Hong Kong in 1970, the recollections of the two main characters – Candy, a Hong Kong Portuguese, and a nameless Macanese migrant in Brazil - range over the war years when they had an affair, leading up to a dramatic climax in which the unexpected is revealed. Candy, the female, rejected her Eurasian Macanese roots when the war ended, in favour of a good marriage to a Hong Kong Englishman. As in some of the stories of Deolinda da Conceição, we are not

sure whether Candy's current feeling of alienation from her family, including her 'British' offspring, is punishment for aspiring to wealth, or whether her aspirations were justified by her experience of poverty and humiliation in Hong Kong after the Japanese invasion and in Macau as a refugee. Whatever the case, and the author appears ambivalent in his portrayal of the unfolding recollections of his protagonists, 'Candy' is a story that evokes the vulnerability of the Macanese in the diaspora, and the pressures on them to assimilate the values of their hosts. Unlike the Fernandes prototype, the 'orphan' lovers are not destined to end up together, but are divided by history and the struggle for survival.

Maria Ondina Braga and Fernanda Dias are both writers from Portugal, whose residence in Macau over a number of years was to prove a determining influence on their work. Some four hundred years after Camões left for India, Maria Ondina set off on another epic journey during which she spent time as a teacher at convent schools in Angola, Goa and Macau. Her departure from Angola was hastened by the nationalist uprising of 1961. Similarly, her stay in Goa was curtailed by the Indian invasion of the same year. It was in the aftermath of the fall of Portugal's Indian enclaves that she arrived in Macau, where she stayed until 1966. Stemming from her experience there, she published *A China Fica ao Lado* (1968), a collection of stories that won her critical acclaim in Portugal. Since then she has written further works inspired by her experience of China, notably, *Angústia em Pequim* (1984), a collection of essays and impressions based on a spell at the University of Beijing as a teacher of Portuguese in the early 1980s, and *Nocturno em Macau* (1991), a novel set once again in the city she had known thirty years before. The Macau Maria Ondina encountered in the 1960s was similar to that evoked by Deolinda da Conceição, in the sense that it was a city with an expanding population of refugees from the various upheavals experienced by Maoist China, and which would culminate in

the Cultural Revolution. It is, for example, no coincidence that four of the stories included in this anthology refer either directly or indirectly to problems of exile and displacement. For the rest, Maria Ondina adopts the stance of a fascinated observer, whose vision of Chinese difference, or 'otherness', is to some extent informed by the magical realism of the 1960s.

The Macau of Fernanda Dias, a graphic art teacher and engraver, with two volumes of poetry published, and one collection of short stories, *Dias da Prosperidade* (1998), is very different from the city that was home to Maria Ondina Braga some forty years ago. Her stories are set against the background of the transition years beginning in the 1980s, when the relatively small, provincial town experienced a construction boom which transformed its skyline, making it more like Hong Kong. Fernanda Dias' Macau is a city of towering apartment blocks and urban anonymity in 'Tenants' and 'The room'. Gone too are the essentially colonial social relationships, for some of these stories depict the emotional involvement between European female and non-European male, and the negotiations of identity that have to be made to seek to understand and accommodate an unfamiliar culture at an intensely personal level, and within an urban, cosmopolitan environment. Compare, for example, the adjustments that have to be made by the European female in a story like 'The watermelon' or 'Tenants', with Maria Ondina's far more oblique and abstract rendering of the relationship between a European woman and a Chinese man in 'The child of the sun'.

The internationalisation of Macau, with the corresponding decrease in Portuguese influence is suggested in the tale, 'Daydream at Hac-Sá'. For the first time, too, since the days of Deolinda da Conceição, the frontier is open again, and the foreign residents of Macau can travel within China. It is the greater familiarity with the China beyond the border that distinguishes the fiction of Fernanda Dias from the stories of

Maria Ondina Braga. The younger writer witnesses the uncharacteristic modernity of the new, post-Mao China, viewed with bewilderment and some distaste in, say, 'The watermelon'. Macau, for all its redevelopment, becomes for her the symbol of an edenic past. In this respect, the last tale in the collection, 'The last supper', is not only a vignette on the loss of innocence of a lovelorn adolescent schoolgirl for one of her teachers, but it is something of a lament for the possible end of a paradise – the unique cultural identity of Macau and its Luso-Chinese heritage.

I should like to thank Fernanda Dias and Henrique de Senna Fernandes, in Macau, and Maria Ondina Braga, currently living in Braga, for giving me their permission to publish translations of their stories. Similarly, I should like to express my gratitude to António Conceição Júnior in Macau and Dr. Rui Alves in Lisbon, for allowing me to include the work of their mother, Deolinda da Conceição, in this anthology. It was particularly kind of António Conceição Júnior to agree to design the cover of this book at short notice. I am also grateful to Tereza Sena, formerly of the Instituto Cultural de Macau, for putting me in touch with two of the authors, as well as for giving me a copy of her CD-Rom, 'Macau nas Palavras' during my visit to Macau in 1999. I have found it most useful. Equally, I should like to signal my gratitude to Ana Paula Laborinho, Director of the Instituto Português do Oriente, for her welcome on that same visit, and for her interest in my work. A hearty thanks too to John Kinsella, at Maynooth, a colleague and friend of many years, for suggesting I approach Gávea-Brown with this project, to Onésimo Almeida for agreeing to take it on board, and to Alice Clemente for her care and expertise in overseeing the edition. Last but not least, I should like to thank Jane Camens, Director of the Hong Kong International Library Festival, for her help in successfully launching this project.

David Brookshaw
Bristol, England, June 2001

CHEONGSAM

The scream that shattered the silence of night had come from the cell containing the man who, some hours before, had listened, impassive and serene, to the judge sentencing him to life imprisonment.

The guards rushed forward and found him, with vacant expression, staring fixedly at a wall, upon which the shadows of a nearby tree formed strange figures in grotesque positions, driven by the wind battering its branches.

“Get to sleep, A-Chung, and stop worrying about such things. Are you scared of shadows, then?” Asked one of the guards.

As if summoned to his senses after some awful nightmare, the prisoner looked around him and murmured breathlessly:

“I’m sorry, it was nothing, or rather, it was a bad dream. But if it’s possible, I’d like to move to another cell. That tree is making me nervous with its shadows.”

“Okay, okay, we’ll see what we can do tomorrow, because

we can't do anything about it now. Get to sleep and don't bother us anymore. And if you can't sleep, at least get some rest and let the others sleep."

A-Chung calmed down and lay on his cot once again, his hand raised in a gesture of polite thanks. Later, he began to stare wide eyed at the ceiling, but then once again, a cry lodged in his dry throat, a low cry, as if stifled at birth.

The guards came and found him pacing quickly up and down, and mumbling to himself repeatedly

"Take that cheongsam away, tear it up, throw it in the fire. It's got a curse, it's laughing at me, it's alive, it's got her life in it... the one I killed. Ah! She's dead, truly dead, and this is how she gets her revenge, persecuting me with her cheongsam..., but I'm going to tear it up, rip it to pieces, just as I did to her."

"Be quiet, A-Chung, and calm down. Can't you see there's no cheongsam here? Have you gone crazy, man? Get to sleep, and we'll talk tomorrow. But don't disturb people now. The other prisoners need to sleep, if only you'll let them."

A-Chung's clasping hands buried themselves nervously in his hair, and he walked towards the darkened corner of the cell where his cot was. He lowered himself onto the wooden boards, and lay down stiffly, his eyes closed, his body taught and twitching nervously.

Little by little, he calmed down, and silence returned to the gaol, until, at daybreak, it filled with a noise peculiar to prisons, of hundreds of men getting ready for their daily tasks.

Only A-Chung remained motionless, gazing vacantly, head in

hands, as if he were trying to control the thoughts that kept coming to him, causing him time and time again to re-live all the dramatic events of his life.

A strange, and at times seemingly convulsed smile hovered on his half open lips.

He was thirty-two years old and life weighed on his soul like a dark cloud.

Soon, he would be banished into exile, alone, without the comfort of a single friend. Never again would he set eyes on the innocent faces of his three children, cast into orphanhood by a cruel fate. If he suffered now, it was for their sakes; so young were they that they barely understood what life had in store for them.

What a cursed war! A cursed war, that had taken everything away from him and turned him into a criminal, a murderer, a heartless father, a man incapable of rational thought.

Then, as if surprised by his own reaction, he jumped up and went and leaned by the window.

His fate had been decided and that was it. He would leave. His tears would water the land destined to sustain him for the rest of his life, and he would stifle his feelings. His children, his children were no longer his and maybe his cruel fate might prove a blessing to them. They shouldn't have to suffer the consequences of his crime. But... was the crime really his?

* * *

The two families were neighbours, and their shops stood opposite each other, both equally prosperous, devoid of rivalry or competition. Their black wooden signs displayed red characters,

old Vong Cam's reading "Rice Merchant", and that of his friend and partner in long sessions of mah-jong, Tai Sang Leong, "Wine Merchant".

The families often visited each other, and the two men began to exchange confidences. They were worried about the future. There was talk of wars and atrocities committed by the Japanese throughout China, although where they were, life went on normally.

Vong Cam couldn't decide what to do about his son A-Chung's studies, for he was now helping him in his shop and he seemed a thoughtful, hard-working boy. A-Chung was sole inheritor of his father's already considerable fortune, and was destined to take charge of his affairs so as to support his mother and sisters, and the old man's concubines after he died. He resisted the idea of going abroad to further his studies. He had mastered the use of the abacus, he knew a fair number of characters, could read the newspaper, and that was enough.

He felt he would suffer discomfort and inconvenience away from his familiar surroundings. Apart from this, he enjoyed working in his father's business. He knew all about the different qualities of rice, was able to classify them and put the correct price on them; he knew the market, the farmers, and that was all he needed. Even if war broke out in the area, rice was a vital commodity. So his business would certainly not suffer greatly.

Tai Sang Leong didn't have any concubines. His wife had only given him one daughter, and he hadn't sought to force the gods to increase his offspring. Apart from this, his trade in wine was limited in scope. He had begun life by selling the drink from door to door, amid all sorts of difficulties, and so had contented himself with only one wife and the daughter she had given him. Even so, he had three mouths to feed and rice was ever more expensive.

Then, good fortune seemed to protect him, and he set himself up in his little shop, with its red lettering on its sign. Life was good, for his daughter was growing up, brimming with health and beauty, attending schools where she had no difficulty in learning all she was taught.

The young girl was ambitious, and time and time again had hinted at her wish to know the world and experience contact with other folk and other customs. But he wanted her to marry a young man of means, so that she would never go through the hardships that her mother had suffered.

One day, while talking to his old friend Vong Cam, Tai Seng Leong confided his aspirations for his daughter Chan Nui, who was by now fifteen. The two old men, after many exchanges of view, decided their children should marry, and so unite the interests of the two businesses in the future, bringing them both under the one sign.

The two young people obediently agreed with their parents' decision and became engaged, without, however, cultivating their social relations any further. The marriage would take place within three years, with the due pomp that their respective fortunes required.

However, while everything was running serenely in Vong Cam's home, the same was not happening in Tai Sang Leong's, where Chan Nui persisted in pressing her father to allow her to experience something of western civilization before taking on the responsibilities of marriage. She had learned the language of the new world and, through films, admired all she saw of that country, which seemed so attractive to her, with its different lifestyle, habits and customs, and because of the excitement it caused to race through her veins. So insistent was she that her father eventually gave in, but not before getting old Vong Cam's permission. It was decided that Chan Nui would leave for the

new world in order to complete her studies, but would not be away for more than two years.

A-Chung didn't mind at all because he had only had the minimum social contact necessary with his fiancée. At home, after his father, he was absolute master, respectfully obeyed by the old man's concubines and by his sisters, with the characteristic submission of Chinese women, who still respect and keep alive the ancient traditions of their country.

For two years, letters and photos from Chan Nui revealed the changes she was undergoing, but the old folk only dwelt on her growing beauty and the marvellous things she told them about that faraway country.

The girl who had left, shy and unsure of herself, came back a perfect woman, elegant, confident in her conversation and firm in her gestures, self-assured and aware of her fine education.

When A-Chung saw her, he realised Chan-Nui would never be like the women of his own household. She was decisive, and spoke to him as an equal, without servility, independent, able to make immediate decisions about how to conduct her life and behave socially.

After a few months, they were married, and Chan Nui's calm air, her purposeful movements and gentle but firm speech stood in flagrant contrast to A-Chung's hesitation and lack of self-confidence.

Beautiful and elegant, she was relaxed as she performed those acts imposed on brides in China, such as kneeling in front of the parents-in-law, traditionally offering them tea, kowtowing submissively before the elder members of both families, and so on.

While A-Chung faltered and floundered, she remained serene and of a natural composure that was enchanting.

For dinner, she set aside the sumptuous dress of scarlet satin embroidered in gold, with its complicated skirts and sashes, and put on an elegant, stylish black satin gown, with a design of leaves in various colours, which gracefully highlighted the seductive contours of her curvaceous body. She was so radiant that gasps of amazement greeted her entrance.

A-Chung, thick set, clumsy and dull next to his slim, fresh, self-confident spouse, was conscious for the first time of his inferiority, but faced with her gracious smile, and the formal deference she was able to show him during the festivities, he banished any unpleasant thoughts.

Chan Nui listened in silence to her husband's opinions and tried to adapt to his manner, but there was something distinguished and impressive about her that nothing could destroy, not even the cut of a less stylish gown, or the absence of lipstick imposed on her by her husband.

In her speech, her walk, her gestures and her attitudes, she was clearly a modern girl, of refined manners, gracious, elegant, and at the same time natural. The two years she had spent in the new world had become imprinted in her delightfully feminine personality.

After five years of marriage, she was the mother of three children, the youngest of whom was only a few months old, born during the period of mourning for A-Chung's father, old Vong Cam, who had departed the world happy for seeing his son in a good marriage, and his business flourishing.

Chan Nui had known how to pay her respects during the

funeral, with all its complex sequence of rituals. In spite of her state, she had not flinched from prostrating herself, touching the ground with her forehead, while weeping for her departed father-in-law. She had put on a white tunic and attended the burial, accompanied by two elderly women servants.

A-Chung could find nothing in his wife except reason for comfort and satisfaction.

Meanwhile, war was spreading and getting nearer. Trade was affected and things started to go badly. Chan Nui's parents and A-Chung's mother met to discuss matters, and it was decided that the young couple would take their three children and leave for the south, so as to protect them from the horrors of war.

So for some months, Shanghai became their refuge. They had taken with them all the money they could muster. The old folk took it upon themselves to send them more later, when they had managed to sell something.

But soon, the Japanese began to bomb Shanghai. The couple and their three little ones fled further south, without being able to get news from home and their family.

Their money began to run low, and they were unable to get any more help from home. In the city where they settled, they knew no one. They moved into a lodging house and waited for hostilities to end. But things got worse, and they had less and less money.

They moved to ever-cheaper lodgings until they ended up in a dark, smoky room behind a guesthouse of dubious repute. There, they slept and ate their rationed bowl of rice, with a few cabbage stalks.

It pained Chan Nui to see her children so ragged and hungry.

Little by little, their best clothes had ended up in the pawnshops. Their cases followed, until all their worldly possessions fitted into two wicker baskets, tied together with string.

A-Chung, downcast, scoured the papers avidly every day, hoping to read that the ever more powerful enemy had been defeated.

China was being consumed by the fire of constant battles, and its people lay crushed, lifeless, in a state of frightful chaos, where all vestige of human solidarity had disappeared.

Chan Nui beseeched her husband to go and find work, but A-Chung had been overcome by apathy and depression, which offered no hope whatsoever of his getting a job. Sometimes, he would set out resolutely from home, only to return at the end of the day, tired and crestfallen, bitter to the point of despair.

No one knew him, and besides, there was hunger all around. Only those prepared to sell themselves to the cruel enemy got any work. All that was left for them to do was to starve to death and watch their children die.

Chan Nui lost her temper. She wasn't prepared to accept such a fate for herself, much less for her children. She berated her husband for the lack of conscience that had got the better of him, for his cowardice, for taking the easy way out. Yes, it was easy to die and let the little ones die, for he wouldn't have to fight, to face up to life, to the difficulties and the horror of their situation. She shouted all her indignation and scorn at him, all of her life's disappointment at being shackled to a creature like him, devoid of any paternal instincts, and she swore she would square up to whatever fate held in store, war, hell, even death itself, in order that her children shouldn't go hungry anymore.

What did she care about prejudice, tradition, decency, dignity,

and all those things that made up life's conventional values, if the life they were leading didn't obey any of the rules they were familiar with? If he couldn't get work, she would find the means to provide for her family, if she had to sell her soul or even her body in order to do so.

Shocked by what her words suggested, she collapsed, sobbing convulsively. Her usual air of calm had disappeared completely, and her spirit, hitherto governed by noble concepts, lay like a limp rag between the two of them.

He, pale and with a vacant look in his eye, stared at her in disbelief, while she, distressed and humiliated by her own words, wept bitterly.

Misfortune and tragedy reigned in that painful scene.

Chan Nui dragged herself over to A-Chung, and the two, holding hands, sought to discuss their desperate plight. He cleaned her face and tried to console her. Exhausted, they remained sad and lost in thought. Life was treating them cruelly, but they were young and the war wouldn't last forever. They would face up to their fate, and one day they would be able to tell their children of the pain they were now going through.

Chan Nui would go and look for work in the city's nightclubs, while A-Chung would look after the children. She was young, beautiful, she danced well and there were always people with money, looking for enjoyment. Every night, after putting the children to bed, A-Chung would go and wait for her, and what she earned would enable them to survive the crisis, which couldn't last for much longer.

From the bottom of one of the baskets came the long black satin gown, with its design of coloured leaves, which she had worn at her wedding banquet and had so lovingly kept.

Some relatively peaceful months followed in their home. They no longer had to ration their rice, and there was fish or meat everyday to keep the little ones in noisy happiness. But between the parents, the silence was ever deeper, ever longer. They avoided each other's gaze and more than once, A-Chung threw his chopsticks on the floor in a gesture of revolt against the rice, which had been bought at such a high cost, in return for his dignity as a man and a husband.

It must be said that Chan Nui only danced with the many rich men who sought her there. And, when one day he was tempted to put his arms around her, he saw before him the gown that so many men knew and had in their arms. He felt like tearing it to pieces, but the rice she brought home was vital for their children...

He became taciturn, quick-tempered and nervous, to the point when he would often punish the children. Then, he would come to his senses and weep bitter tears in the privacy of his cubicle, while Chan Nui would spend hours on the dance floor, laughing and in lively conversation.

Her initial reluctance to join such frivolous circles had disappeared, and she became used to a lifestyle, which she now found bearable.

One night, a rich man from a neighbouring city invited her over to his table. The man was of good appearance, well dressed, and spoke the foreign language that she knew so well. They talked for a long time and Chan Nui felt some of her long lost happiness returning. She knew he was a man of wealth, vast wealth, and disposed to spend his money.

At home that night, she unwittingly compared, in her thoughts, that man, so active and full of means, earning pots of money,

with her timid, vulgar bumpkin of a husband. She looked at him, full of pity, and closed her eyes so as not to see the harsh reality that she found so distasteful. If her husband were like that, she would never have had to reduce herself to the condition of a nightclub hostess.

She struggled with her conscience all night long, thinking of her children, those three innocent creatures.

A week went by, and then she told A-Chung that she was going to have to accompany someone to a nearby city, for which she hoped to get enough money to be able to give up work once and for all.

Her husband was reluctant, but when she promised to be back within three days, he agreed. Three days would pass quickly, and afterwards, maybe he would be able to set up in business with the money Chan Nui would earn...

She said goodbye to the children, telling them to be good, and promising them sweets and goodies.

A-Chung took her by the arm and repeated insistently: "three days, don't forget, three days."

And so she left quickly, feeling anguished but also happy.

In the neighbouring city, she soon forgot about her wretched existence. She was living a new life, full of light and excitement, with music and glamour that left her starry eyed.

A week went by and she had hardly been aware of time passing. She had been regaled with beautiful things, perfumes and jewellery, sumptuous gowns. She had been infatuated by luxurious and elegant surroundings, she had sat at abundant dinner tables, and tasted the most precious wines, in short, she

had lived, lived life to the full...

One morning, lying languidly in her soft bed, she noticed an advertisement. It was A-Chung appealing to her to go home, as their youngest son was dangerously ill. Horrified, Chan Nui forgot everything and caught the first available boat.

When she got home, without any money or presents for the children, she discovered that the advertisement had been a trick by her husband to oblige her to return. She thought of the jewels, of the precious things she had left behind, of the opportunity she had let slip, and she was angry.

Her husband was equally indignant, and likewise screamed his complaints at her, but Chan Nui was mad, stark raving mad.

Forgetting herself completely, she accused him of betraying her, of depriving her of a chance to regain her independence, not just hers, but his and their children's too.

A-Chung, livid with rage, quivering nervously, ran to the sill of the only window in their room, grabbed a kitchen cleaver and submitted Chan Nui to a frenzied attack.

Taken by surprise, she tried to defend herself but it was as if A-Chung were possessed by some hellish, satanic force.

Neighbours rushed forward in answer to her screams, and Chan Nui, lying on the ground, bleeding profusely, with a supreme effort tried to call her children whose voices could be heard as they played in the yard, ignorant of the drama unfolding inside the house.

Hours later, Chan Nui's cruelly mutilated body was carried away in a humble casket.

A-Chung allowed himself to be led away, handcuffed and head hung, his face, body and hands still stained with his victim's blood.

The children were placed in an orphanage by the local authorities, unaware of what had happened.

As he left the room, the wretched man looked around and saw the black satin gown hanging on the back of the door, billowing in the wind, as if provoking him, ironically taunting his suffering soul.

They were unable to squeeze a single tear from him, nor so much as a single word.

And when, some time later, he heard the sentence banishing him to exile in perpetuity, he opened his mouth as if to say something but only a sigh, as if of relief, passed his pale, trembling lips.

Serene, with a serenity he had not known before, he held out his arms to receive the handcuffs, and with firm, decisive step, he followed the guards who led him off to prison.

It was his thirty-second birthday.

THE LEPERS

When the sun sank into the sea, the hill at the end of the island was a flaming torch. It was as if the world were going to end there, or perhaps begin, as if new forms, or else nothingness, were about to emerge decisively from the fiery mass of elements – clayish earth, sky and water set alight by the breath of the Spirit – and as if whatever time span were to begin there, it would do so with a perfect day in which nature had been cleansed.

A-Mou, whose face was marked by one or two of the red spots of a leper, went out every day to admire the sunset, trembling with anxiety and hope.

It was the hour when the other patients would retire to the corner of their bunks, either because the reflection of the sun in the sea burned their infected eyes, or merely because of some secret, inexplicable superstition.

A-Mou was young, and the disease, still in its initial stage, caused her no suffering. Indeed, all she had were the spots. The doctor had promised to cure her. She loved life, she liked to beautify

herself with coloured dresses, flowers in her hair, varnish on her nails.

Late afternoon, hugging her beloved guinea pig, which slept at the foot of her bed like a cat, A-Mou would climb to the top of the hill, dreaming of a new, different, and better tomorrow.

One could see the whole island from up there: the marshy rice paddies down in the valleys, glimmering in the last rays of sunshine; the plantations of tea and of yam in terraces along the steep slopes; the black and yellow stones among the evergreen clumps of fir trees. And to gaze upon the island was, in some way, like contemplating the world, catching a glimpse of life beyond the leper colony. In the wide curve of sea, boats returned from the fishing grounds. Then, night descended upon the Earth. And A-Mou's romantic soul was filled with faith, with a feeling of warmth towards existence itself, with a happiness that brought tears to her eyes.

The others thought her strange: while they, like proper Chinese, enjoyed company, gossip, noise, especially as night fell, A-Mou liked to be alone. She didn't behave like a Chinese, they remarked. And if they asked her why she went out alone at that hour, she just smiled. She wouldn't say, nor would she know how to say it, that it was just because no one else went out, because something supernatural marked the moment, because it was dark when she returned, the first toads, the first field mice would venture out onto the path – and she would wait for them to start talking, just like in childhood stories, and the waves breaking among the caves in the cliff had the solemn sound of sacred music.

When she got back, A-Mou would find her companions crouching in the darkness of the yard, singing while combing their hair. Some asked her hushed questions about what she had seen in the darkness. They talked of spirits. The blind

women, their eyes open and unmoving in the shadows, seemed like visionaries of unknown and mysterious horizons.

A-Mou sat among them, stroking her guinea pig in her lap and listening, transfixed, to the tales of ghosts and witches that the old women, without hands, noses or ears, recited in solemn tones.

That was how she learnt that love was a dangerous thing. In the old women's stories, love, passion, betrothals, were always subject to adverse fortune, curses, tragic outcomes.

A-Mou had never loved, nor did she quite know what it was.

She had fallen ill as a young girl, and as a young girl she had ended up there, ignorant of life: and she was growing bored. But every evening, she was touched by emotion. As if she were to be told she was cured on the following day: a farewell party in the leper colony, with kisses and presents.

Yet, as she thought of the day of her resurrection, sitting there in the yard among her companions, she wondered what she would do afterwards. She had no family. Her grandmother, with whom she had fled from somewhere near Canton, had died soon after she had been interned there. She was a sad little old woman, with a greenish black velvet bonnet, who sat smoking opium for hours on end.

She remembered her grandmother's friends, who were also destitute: the elderly teacher, with his scrawny beard and learned words (she remembered poems he had taught her); the woman who sold snake oil by day, and at night spoke with the spirits of her ancestors.

Every morning, amid the clanging of saucepans in the kitchen, the sweetish smell of rice porridge in bowls in the refectory, dogs barking, A-Mou joyously greeted the sword of light that

penetrated her alcove. In the mirror on her table, the blotches were still there on her cheekbones, sometimes pink, other times almost purple. But a new day beckoned. She had a lot to think about – plaiting her hair, seeing to her dress, waiting for the sun to go down.

Nor was she even aware of the arrival of the boy at the men's house, on the other side of the hill. The old women told how, one moonless night, he had crossed the river on a raft he had made himself. His condition wasn't serious. The doctor would put him right within a few months. He was a handsome boy.

A-Mou then began to imagine him as some sort of god, like the household deities at the entrance to the temple, brave, with birds on their shoulders, or like the evil spirit, who clutched a viper as if it were a sceptre – a god of terror as far as her grandmother was concerned, but whose beauty she, for her part, found seductive.

And so, without having tried to catch a glimpse of the new arrival, A-Mou found herself waiting for him all the time, and it was because of him that she took such care with her hair every day.

The boy, of course, would never come, for men were forbidden to invade the women's quarters, nor did she ever think of looking for him. But she thought of him in the morning, when she woke up, and during her evening walk, when she got dressed, and when she plaited her hair. She was convinced he had come especially to awaken her from the tedium of the passing hours.

Could it be that he knew of her existence? Surely, he must. Her grandmother used to say that threads of thought are stronger than those of a weaver. Thoughts could spin webs as long as imperial highways, capable of resisting typhoons, and crossing rivers and seas. She had thought so much about him that he

knew all about her. And he had already committed himself to her.

Naturally, neither of them could expect anything lasting from each other. Once cured, if they happened to meet out there in the world of the healthy, they might pretend not to know one another. In the world of the healthy, nothing could be the same because they themselves would be different.

And she got to the point where she thought herself lucky for being ill, for their both being ill, for both rotting away there. What would become of him without her? What would become of her without him?

In the world of the healthy, they wouldn't need each other so much. Was that why God had sanctioned their illness... and their exile? In their misfortune, people became more important. Take her grandmother: at the end of her life, she never lacked the *white powder* for her pipe. And what a funeral the old teacher had had! The rich old woman of eighty who sat out in the main yard – surrounded by maids, and with no legs from the knees downwards – in health, she was just the mistress of her house; in sickness, she had the entire hospital at her beck and call.

Yes, indeed, misfortune had its compensations. In the world of the healthy, they would both lose their individuality. And she would never be as sure as she was now. The tales the old women told were of jealousy and betrayal. In their case, such things could never happen. Stories of folk who were free. Freedom had its price. Although she might not be able to count on his constancy later, A-Mou could count on him completely now.

And she thought about the boy with devotion, like someone whose thoughts dwelt on household gods, like someone recklessly worshipping the spirit of evil.

Time rushed by. Evenings merged into night. The women no longer included the matter of the new leper in their gossip. And A-Mou waited.

It was on one of her twilight walks that the dream became reality. Suddenly, when the sun had already set, she noticed a shape by her side, a shape that addressed her, told her his name, wanted to know hers. It could only be him. None of the patients, male or female, ever came there at that hour, and the healthy were filled with fear at the very sight of the lepers' hill. In the darkness, A-Mou could only see his eyes. The sea echoed among the hollows in the rocks. He plucked a sprig of lemon verbena from a nearby bush, crushed its leaves between his fingers, and the perfume spread and took hold of the night.

After that, it was more or less always the same. He would come after sunset. There was the scent of lemon and the sigh of the sea. On moonlit nights they managed to see each other perfectly. He complimented her on her plaited hair. She, in her heart, compared him to the young gods in the temple. The meetings repeated themselves, always the same, but always unexpected: the hours doubled their time; their silence expressed more than their words; their gesture was freely given; their soul was released.

But the months given by the doctor to cure the boy went by quickly. Could it be that he no longer had any blotches on his body? She was incapable of asking him, and without even wanting to know it, A-Mou saw hers grow, day by day, in the mirror.

As the women chatted in the evening, they now directed more questions at her.

And A-Mou had less and less to say.

When it came down to it, what was there to say? The purple

blotches on her face spoke for themselves, just as the legs she no longer had, spoke for the grand old lady who sat in the inner yard, and for others, hands, noses and ears. All faithfully resigned to their misfortune.

But how good it was that he had come to her on one, three, thirty nights. And how good it was that she, during all those nights, had believed in the apparition.

She still went for her evening walk to the top of the hill, but she no longer did so in order to contemplate the blaze of sunset, or to dream of a better tomorrow. Nor did she do so because of a man. She did it for herself alone. Because she had to live, in spite of being marked by death. Because the doctor had never again mentioned the possibility of a cure, and she needed to know about the joys of love in order to be able one day, crouching in the yard, to tell of them to some innocent young girl who might be sent to the leper colony.