

The Bewitching Braid

Henrique de Senna Fernandes

translated by David Brookshaw



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	<p>Hong Kong University Press is honoured that Xu Bing, whose art explores the complex themes of language across cultures, has written the Press's name in his Square Word Calligraphy. This signals our commitment to cross-cultural thinking and the distinctive nature of our English-language books published in China.</p> <p>“At first glance, Square Word Calligraphy appears to be nothing more unusual than Chinese characters, but in fact it is a new way of rendering English words in the format of a square so they resemble Chinese characters. Chinese viewers expect to be able to read Square Word Calligraphy but cannot. Western viewers, however are surprised to find they can read it. Delight erupts when meaning is unexpectedly revealed.”</p> <p>— Britta Erickson, <i>The Art of Xu Bing</i></p>
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INTRODUCTION

One of the characteristics of Portuguese overseas expansion in the sixteenth century was the early appearance of mixed populations in the territories that came under some form of Portuguese political or economic control. Most of those who journeyed with the annual fleets that left Lisbon for the Indian Ocean were soldiers destined to defend the forts and trading stations that were vital in Portuguese efforts to gain and sustain a monopoly in the spice trade. More often than not, these *soldados* never returned to Portugal, preferring to settle down with local women, while often involving themselves in trading activity, or continuing to ply their military skills in the service of the Portuguese Crown or even as freelancers in the pay of local rulers and princes. These *casados* (married men) raised families, and their mixed offspring would, in due course, form the basis of distinctive ethnic groups, intermediaries between the representatives of the colonial administration and the native populations that lay within or beyond the political borders of the colony. The Goans, Malacca Eurasians, the Burghers of Sri Lanka, the Topasses of Timor and, of course, the Macanese are all examples of such mixed communities. Interestingly, the tradition of soldiers remaining in colonial territories after completing their periods of service and marrying into the local community, would continue virtually right up until the end of the empire in 1974.

When the Portuguese were allowed to establish a trading settlement on the Macao peninsula in the 1550s, they brought with them women from Malacca and Goa, both of which had fallen into Portuguese hands decades earlier. This is why some of the oldest Macanese families in the territory claim descent from these groups, as well as from the Chinese, with whom the Portuguese later mingled. Down the years, there would frequently be other admixtures — Dutch, French, English, Timorese, Filipino, and even Thai and Burmese — reflecting Macao's importance as an international trading and ecclesiastical centre. Over the centuries, these *filhos da terra* (literally, children of the land) came to be united by a set of common cultural references, which are nonetheless mixed and multiple in their origins. While the Macanese have traditionally taken great pride in their Portuguese, Catholic affiliations, their unique cuisine blends ingredients and flavours from Portugal, India and Southeast Asia with those of Southern China. Their language, popularly known

as *patuá* (patois), mixes medieval Portuguese with lexical and even syntactical influences from Malay, Cantonese, the languages of the Indian sub-continent and even Japanese. While *patuá* was, for a number of centuries, the language of spoken communication, domestic intimacy and a vibrant oral tradition, the Macanese (in particular the elite of that group) also cultivated Portuguese, and helped guarantee the legitimacy of the language in the area. For example, it was in some measure at least thanks to the presence of the Macanese that the first independent newspapers in Portuguese were founded in the city during the nineteenth century, in the wake of the liberal revolt that swept Portugal after 1820, and whose effects were felt throughout the empire. But it was during the nineteenth century too that many Macanese left the territory in search of new opportunities. They took with them their language and cultural traditions, establishing 'Oriental Portuguese' diasporas in Hong Kong, Shanghai, Guangzhou and the other port cities of China. In the twentieth century, they would migrate further afield to North America, Brazil and Australia. Most Macanese also had a greater or lesser fluency in Cantonese, and although few could write Chinese, they nevertheless provided a crucial link between the Portuguese colonial officials and the local Chinese authorities.

Henrique de Senna Fernandes was born in Macao in 1923, into a family whose presence in the territory goes back several centuries. After the end of the War of the Pacific in 1945, he obtained a scholarship to study law at Coimbra University in Portugal, from where he graduated in 1952. It was while he was in Portugal that he began to write short stories, one of which won a literary prize. Upon his return to Macao, he set up a lawyer's office, but also worked as a teacher and wrote for the local press, which began to flourish again in the 1950s, after the harsh war years. He was a member of a generation of intellectuals who began to explore and express the cultural foundations of the Macanese and their social predicament at a time when their homeland began to undergo profound changes, and when the Portuguese colonial empire came under threat.

His first collection of short stories, *Nam-Van*, was published in 1978, and contained a selection of his fiction written since the 1950s, some of which had appeared previously in the press or anthologies. Two of the longer pieces from this collection, 'Tea With Essence of Cherry' and 'Candy', feature in English translation in the anthology, *Visions of China: Stories From Macau* (Gávea-Brown/Hong Kong University Press, 2002). Since his first collection of tales, he has published two novels, *Amor e Dedinhos de Pé* (Love and little toes), and *A Trança Feiticeira* (The bewitching braid), both of which were made into successful films. His third collection of tales, *Mong-Há*, was published in 1998.

Macao has, of course, formed the setting for a considerable body of literature over the last century or so, and in particular during the 1980s and

90s, the so-called transition years leading up to the handover to China in 1999. But most of this literature was written by visitors and residents of greater or lesser duration who often had little real interest in trying to grasp the cultural world that surrounded them. This is why Fernandes is a unique figure, for his stories are set in an entirely Macanese world, from which the Portuguese, whether as colonial officials or other representatives of the 'metropolis' are largely absent, and even when they do appear, they are essentially background figures. His fiction evokes not only the relationship between the Macanese and Chinese on both a social and a cultural level, but it also focuses on the internal dynamics of social change among the Macanese themselves, for there are inevitably class divisions and rivalries within this ethnic group. *The Bewitching Braid*, set in Macao in the 1930s, is undoubtedly the work that most effectively includes all these competing interests in the figure of its hero, Adozindo, the product of an old Macanese family, representative of the decline of patriarchal society, who is torn between his attraction to A-Leng, a Chinese water-seller, and Lucrecia, a *nouveau riche* Eurasian widow, whose deceased husband had made his money by migrating to Shanghai at the beginning of the twentieth century. Lucrecia clearly has the capital that Adozindo's family lacks, while the latter has a more respectable social pedigree, originating as it does from Santo António, one of the oldest parishes in the 'Christian city'.

The raw material for Fernandes's stories is often taken from the rich oral tradition of the Macanese, and usually involves a love relationship across social boundaries. His fiction is conventional in the sense that in its intricately woven plots, boldly depicted characters and occasional recourse to theatricality, its eye for local colour and language, and its strong moral purpose, it is reminiscent of the nineteenth-century narrative, especially in its Dickensian blend of romance and social realism. Yet, in his predilection for harmonious conclusions, Fernandes's stories are also eminently compatible with the popular Chinese storytelling tradition. Indeed, his intellectual and literary formation is as complex and multiple as the ethnic make up of the Macanese themselves. Fiction writers in Macao over the last twenty years have, of course, been exposed to the examples of writers like Christopher New and, in particular, Austin Coates, from neighbouring Hong Kong, both of whom wrote lengthy historical narratives about European interaction with China. Indeed, it was Coates's *City of Broken Promises* (1967), a romantic story set in Macao during the eighteenth century, that may have provided a type of 'rags-to-riches' blueprint for subsequent works that were to emerge in Portuguese from the territory. Fernandes, for his part, claims an affinity with English-language literary models, among them the short stories of the popular early twentieth-century American writer, O. Henry. However, there are also echoes in his work of the Portuguese

romantics, Almeida Garrett and Júlio Dinis, while his spirited proletarian girl, A-Leng, hovers between the slave heroine of Bernardo Guimarães's nineteenth-century Brazilian novel, *A Escrava Isaura* (The slave girl Isaura), and Jorge Amado's later Brazilian barefoot beauty, Gabriela, in the novel *Gabriela Cravo e Canela* (Gabriela clove and cinammon). Fittingly, both these Brazilian classics, rather like Fernandes's novels, have been turned into television soap operas and films with considerable international success. Apart from this, however, Fernandes's moral objective in *The Bewitching Braid*, is, as in all his stories, to evoke a sense of Macanese identity and to pay tribute to the ability of this resilient borderland ethnic community to survive and adapt to the great social changes of the twentieth century.

For Fernandes, the most profound and long-lasting changes to the social fabric of Macao were brought about as a result of the watershed years of the 1940s, beginning in 1941 with the Japanese occupation of Hong Kong and the ensuing War of the Pacific and continuing through to the communist victory in mainland China in 1949. Portugal's neutrality in the Second World War meant that Macao became the only safe haven in the area for refugees fleeing the Sino-Japanese war, which in turn caused the population of Macao to mushroom between 1941 and 1945. Later, new arrivals fleeing the civil war of the late 1940s and the communist revolution further swelled the ranks of the Chinese population of the city. The increasing influence of Chinese traders in Macao had, of course, been felt ever since the nineteenth century, but it was the wars and political instability of the middle of the twentieth century that intensified this tendency. The huge influx of refugees had a profound effect on the character of the city and on the time-honoured sense of Macanese identity, for the population born in greater China increasingly came to outnumber that of whatever ethnic origin born in Macao itself. At the same time, while many Chinese regarded the territory as a stepping-stone to the outside world, others brought a robust capitalist enterprise to Macao, emerging as a new middle class that tended to ignore old, colonial hierarchies and had little respect for the notion of Portuguese sovereignty over the territory, which had never been formally accepted by any Chinese government anyway. Some of the older Macanese families responded by migrating in the lean, post-war years, convinced that the city's days of Portuguese rule over their tiny homeland were numbered, and that Macao was destined to be surrendered to China at some point in the near future. For those who remained, it was undoubtedly the rivalry between the Macanese and this new, entrepreneurial Chinese social class that would come to a head and, to some extent at least, be reflected in the disturbances of the 1960s, as a result of which Beijing's influence over the Portuguese administration of Macao would become more clearcut.

The Bewitching Braid can therefore be read in a number of contexts. It

is, of course, a nostalgic look back at the Macao of the author's youth, at a time before its skyline had been changed by the construction boom of recent decades. In many ways, Fernandes laments the onset of modernization that has made Macao a more global, cosmopolitan conurbation, paradoxically both less Portuguese and less traditionally Chinese than the city he evokes in his fiction. The Macao he recalls with nostalgia is the relatively small town of the early decades of the twentieth century, with its picturesque waterfront boulevard, the Praia Grande, before it was hemmed in by land reclamation, and the less urban pursuits of its inhabitants, such as kite-flying in green areas long since built over, fishing, hunting in Chinese territory on the other side of an easily crossed border, sea-bathing on beaches now swallowed up by the growth of the city. The 1920s and 30s were decades when the Macanese, as the author points out, felt secure, unaware of the great upheavals that were to come, when their culinary arts were still practised by the old families and *patuá* was still spoken among an older generation. At the same time, we must never forget that the novel was first published in 1992, after the Sino-Portuguese declaration of 1987 which had set the agenda for the handover of Macao to China in 1999. Crucially, it is a work that reconciles the Portuguese and Chinese traditions that have given the city its unique cultural characteristics. Adozindo and A-Leng personify these traditions and are the Adam and Eve of what the author conceived as being a more liberal and tolerant, less colonial bourgeoisie, that was an appropriate example of harmonious integration for the Macanese during the anxious years leading up to the territory's return to China as well as for the Chinese majority. Within this partnership, Adozindo never abandons his Portuguese or Macanese habits completely, but learns to respect the Chinese. This is not the case at the beginning, for Adozindo is a young gadabout, who is drawn to A-Leng because she represents a different type of challenge to his usual pursuits, a poor young beauty to be exploited, enjoyed and then abandoned. In time, however, the relationship becomes one in which Adozindo is obliged and enabled to overcome his moral irresponsibility by seeing A-Leng as a fellow human being. Moreover, it is through her that he comes to accept that side of his cultural heritage, the existence of which he, like most Macanese of his age and class, would normally have denied.

A-Leng, for her part, undergoes greater change: as a result of her experiences, she learns Portuguese, becomes a nominal Catholic at least and receives a Portuguese baptismal name, but she also preserves her Buddhist faith, and in due course becomes an elegant middle-class Chinese woman when she swaps her *tun-sam-fu* (tunic) for a cheongsam and her clogs for high-heels. She therefore enters what Homi Bhabha would call the Third Space, that cultural borderland of Macao which defies notions of

cultural purity. It is, indeed, through A-Leng that Fernandes demonstrates the dynamics of hybrid cultures in the way they operate through a series of compromises and contradictions: while inner beliefs are sometimes masked by social convention and prejudice, they nevertheless find a way of negotiating obstacles in order to express themselves. A-Leng surely understands this when she approaches the formidable figure of Dona Capitolina, devout Catholic and pillar of the parish of Santo António, and preys on this Macanese matriarch's submerged belief in Chinese geomancy in order to gain her favour. Similarly, it could be said that A-Leng, the former water-seller from the Chinese quarter, has become Macanese by the end of the novel, for she too has added a devotion to Saint Anthony to her former (and now submerged) attachment to the Buddha of the Tou Tei Temple. Nowhere is the co-existence of different cultural habits more apparent than in domestic life, and in particular in the area of food and eating habits, and here, the novel depicts with some sensitivity the contradictions that occur in a marriage between partners from different cultural backgrounds and the compromises and humour that are required to co-exist. In this sense, *The Bewitching Braid* is a very personal testimony to the cultural tolerance that exists in Macao and a homage to its mixed families.

Finally, a word about the translation. It is self-evident that the Portuguese character of Macao differentiates the city from other urban milieus in Southern China, which is why the street names and most place names appear in the original Portuguese. In addition, many terms from the local Portuguese or *patuá*, or from Cantonese, especially culinary names, have been preserved in an attempt to convey more vividly the plurality of the local culture. Where this has occurred, the original Portuguese spelling of Cantonese terms has been kept. On the other hand, where Chinese terms, such as *feng shui* and *mah-jong*, or even *cheongsam*, have become common currency in English, these have replaced the Cantonese rendering used by Fernandes in the Portuguese original. Similarly, the Portuguese *cabaia* has been rendered in English by *kebaya*, a term for 'gown' that has its origin in Malay. Finally, unless it features in a Portuguese name or title, the English (and old Portuguese) spelling of Macao has been preferred in this translation to the modern Portuguese 'Macao', by which this Special Administrative Region is also known. A glossary of Portuguese, Macanese and Cantonese words has been included at the end, some of which were explained in footnotes in the original Portuguese edition.

David Brookshaw

FIRST WORDS ...

Whoever goes down the Calçada do Gaio and wishes to take a short cut to the Rua do Campo, turns the corner and inevitably has to cross a labyrinth of narrow thoroughfares, dominated by an untidy and uncharacteristic mass of dwellings that make up Cheok Chai Un.

It wasn't always like that. Cheok Chai Un, with an area bordered by the Rua Nova à Guia, the Rua do Brandão, the Rua do Campo, and by the rear wall of the Santa Rosa de Lima College, where some of the remains of the old wall of Macao can be seen, was, until about the beginning of the 1960s, an area of unique character that progress subsequently tore down.

In more remote times, it belonged to a tree-covered area, that included the São Jerónimo hillside and stretched, albeit sparsely, as far as the vegetable gardens and the even ground of the Campo da Victória, part of the lowlands of Tap-Seac, an area that was called the 'Garden of Birds' by the Chinese.

As the City of the Name of God developed, attracting people from the surrounding villages in search of better opportunities, the village of Cheok Chai Un was born. Years later, when the wall of Macao was built, it became part of the city, while nevertheless maintaining the characteristics of a Chinese village, without being contaminated by the influence of the 'Christian city' right next to it. Not even when the wall was demolished and it became an urban quarter did it change its peculiar character. The original layout of the grey-stone village was changed as a result of the terrible typhoon of 1874, which all but flattened the quarter, causing much loss of life. It was replaced by a grid of straight streets and alleyways, but the hovels and small houses of two, and less frequently, three storeys remained. And it lasted for a few more decades like this.

Its residents watched over their little world carefully. They were very inward-looking, marrying among themselves, suspicious of and even hostile towards any strange face that lingered there, whether it belonged to a European or a Chinese from another quarter more given to an urban way of life. It had its market and its temple, its little shops and eating houses, its healers and herbalists, its matchmakers and 'worthy men' who

resolved conflicts over money, family quarrels, business disputes and other disagreements. These 'worthy men' enjoyed the prestige of age and white hair or of a more prosperous economic position.

From its very beginnings as a village, Cheok Chai Un was marked by the stigma of being a place of ill repute. It was dirty, harboured many diseases, a den of rogues and of all the dregs of humanity. Not even when it became a quarter did these labels disappear. Above all, they were applied to the youth, considered spivs and trouble-makers, blood in their gills and their hands ever ready for a fracas. Such categorization was, in huge measure, exaggerated, but they never freed themselves from the shame of such a stigma. So much so that when a young lad misbehaved, or got involved in fights or scams, showing scorn for social norms, he was called, in Macanese slang, an 'a-tai from Cheok Chai Un', 'a-tai' meaning a rascal. It was a humiliating insult!

The population of Cheok Chai Un numbered a few thousand, almost all of them poor people, packed into a confined space that was their world. It is certainly true that there was a small group of hoodlums, but the vast majority of residents were orderly and peaceful, toiling hard for their daily bowl of rice. The men were labourers, joiners, carpenters, messenger-boys, rickshaw coolies, hawkers, dray pullers, and so on. The women were domestic servants, weavers, street-sweepers, hair-braiders, washerwomen, water-carriers, etc. All were people involved in the most humble jobs and few managed to become their own boss.

In many a house and hovel, young girls and old women worked making incense sticks and matchboxes. There were also women who did embroidery or darned clothes, seated at the doors of their houses, making use of the sunlight to complete their work, while they gossiped. Electric lighting would only be introduced much later and I can still remember seeing hovels lit by the flickering flame of oil-lamps.

The conditions of hygiene were abysmal, often mentioned in Health Service reports, the drains were rudimentary and there were no lavatories in the modern sense of the word. The quarter was so closed to the outside world that the passing of time, as if clocks didn't exist, was marked at night by certain men who, every now and then, would bang on metal plates and cry out the hour as they walked through the silent streets.

That was what Cheok Chai Un was like and how it remained, more or less, up until the end of the 1950s. When the old city began to be knocked down indiscriminately, Cheok Chai Un didn't escape either. The construction of multi-storey buildings from reinforced concrete deprived it of its own characteristic features, just as happened, of course, with other

neighbourhoods in Macao, and it blended into the rest of the city in an irksome move towards monotonous and unsightly uniformity.

My contact with Cheok Chai Un began when I was at secondary school. I lived on the Estrada de São Francisco, which was then lined with trees and paved in the Portuguese style, and I had a choice of two routes to school. I either skirted the Boca do Inferno and crossed the Estrada dos Parses and then descended the Calçada do Paiol, or I turned into the Rua Nova à Guia. I would get to the top of the Rua Tomaz da Rosa and rush stumbling down the steps straight into the heart of Cheok Chai Un. I would pass the well and the old Tou Tei Temple and come out in the Rua do Campo. From there, I would turn right and in five minutes I would reach the entrance to the secondary school at Tap-Seac. My preference was for this second route.

At that time, the Company had not yet laid pipes for water in the quarter, so that everyone used the well, whose precious liquid, always clear and suitable for drinking, was available to whoever needed it. Consequently, the well, which has now disappeared, was a meeting place from morning till night, especially for the womenfolk, who would assemble there, just as happened at all the other public wells. Here, they drew water, that is, they filled buckets with water in a continual buzz of activity. The well was also a place of social gathering, for people talked and gossiped there, reputations were made or destroyed, and one found out the latest news and heard the latest slander.

When I passed by shortly before nine in the morning, there was always a crowd of garrulous, merry water-sellers, who would fill their buckets with water and carry it to different destinations using a 'tam-kon,' a stout wooden pole over their shoulders to each end of which was attached a bucket with a piece of rope. They earned their living by selling the water from their buckets to houses where there was no spring water suitable for drinking. Apart from Cheok Chai Un, they would sell their water throughout the neighbourhood along the Rua do Campo, the Rua Nova à Guia, the Calçada do Gaio, and the Rua do Brandão. There were water-sellers of all ages, but I was already a tall, lanky boy, and my eyes focused on the young girls wearing a 'tun-sam-fu', a short 'kebaya' and trousers, clothes that although tight-fitting, didn't hinder their movements. Tanned by the sun, without any make-up or face-powder — unthinkable in their line of work — they usually walked around barefoot, come summer and winter. They had an androgynous chest, for they would wrap the curve of their breasts tightly with a strip of cloth, out of modesty and discretion. Their only luxury or touch of vanity lay in their long hair, which was arranged in a single braid that tumbled down to the base of their back. This hairstyle was common to all Chinese girls of the

proletariat. It was pure seduction to watch these shining black braids, their tresses plaited into a thick rope, tied near the end with a piece of red ribbon.

Apparently uncomplicated, the preparation of this hairstyle nevertheless demanded great care and much discomfort, but they surrendered meekly to their torment. The threads of hair were pulled back and stretched to such an extent that it made the scalp sting. A hard comb would be passed through it again and again, soaked in wood oil, the braiding-woman's hands likewise soaked in the same oil to give the hair the necessary sheen and resistance. The little wisps that were left at the top of the forehead and could not be disciplined, sticking out like skinny, rebellious shrubs, were plucked out with a thread, an exercise in painful pruning that didn't bring the slightest moan of protest from the stoical girl who had submitted herself to it.

In the vicinity of the well, there were also washerwomen who scrubbed clothes on wooden boards, now long gone, having steadily been replaced by washing machines. They also wore the same hairstyles and clothes, and went around barefoot, or on special occasions, wore 'chiripos'. The washerwomen and water-sellers almost made up a separate society of their own. They predominated over men in the area round the well, and would disperse to their various destinations, returning there later to meet up again, living off their earnings and within their quarter, which they never left even in their leisure time.

Not even during the festivals of the Chinese New Year did they feel the allure of venturing outside their quarter. Firecrackers, snacks, incense sticks, everything was sold in the little shops and in the local market. Up until the War of the Pacific, the 'clu-clu' tables filled the streets and alleys, where people could play High-Low and other games, without having to wander off to other thoroughfares beyond the boundaries of Cheok Chai Un.

They clung so dearly to their neighbourhood that they even prayed for good fortune and prosperity in their own temple, the Tou Tei Mio, instead of going to the temple of the Goddess A-Má at Barra, or to the Kin Yam Tóng, at Mong-Há, which were traditionally used for such ceremonies by the Chinese Buddhist people of the City of the Name of God.

During the Tou Tei's own festivities, on the second day of the second lunar month, which almost always fell in early March according to the Gregorian calendar, a bamboo shed was erected, paid for by public subscription or from the profits of the temple, where Chinese opera was performed to large audiences by both professionals and amateurs. This custom is still kept alive today.

The women, whether married or single, were for the most part illiterate, for they were sent off to work early in life. The men didn't have very much

more education, for they too were forced to toil, as soon as they reached a certain age. It was a harsh, frugal life, devoid of entertainment and comfort, but the people who had to put up with it seemed content with their lot, or merely resigned, or didn't even ponder the possibility of any other destiny.

This, then, was the scene, at the beginning of the 1930s, onto which Adozindo suddenly burst by chance, the Handsome Adozindo for the romantic young girls of the age, who caused something of a revolution in the very heart of Cheok Chai Un.

*A*dozindo hailed from the Largo de Camões, so he was a true son of the Santo António quarter of old Macao. The same went for his parents and his other closest relatives.

He lived in a large yellow house with a long balcony that overlooked the square, enjoying the shade of huge red acacias. In summer, from early morning, it was bathed in the twittering of birds in the Poet's garden, the cry of the cicadas, mixed with the crowing of the cockerel. In winter, the house groaned under the weight of the humidity and with the sadness of an empty, grey and nondescript square, where street-vendors plied their wares with their doleful ditties.

He was an only son in a house full of women — his mother, his maternal granny and aunts, one of whom was a spinster and the other a widow, a female cousin who was the widow's daughter, and three maids. According to some, that was why his father, a former functionary of the Chinese customs house and now the owner of a shipping agency, would shut himself away, when he was at home and after family prayers, to read in his study, exhausted by the chattering and prattling of the womenfolk from daybreak until night time.

From an early age he had heard people say how handsome he was. And this was indeed true. As an infant, his pretty cheeks made folk want to pinch them; he was a light-skinned child, with green eyes, maybe inherited from his Dutch great-grandmother; and with his brown hair, he was the picture of a grandfather from the North of Portugal.

He should have been born a girl, people said. Yet he hadn't turned out a sissy, in spite of his face. On the contrary, he demonstrated manly qualities from an early age, scuffling with fists and footwork, with bigger lads than himself who tried to make fun of his milksop's physique, whether in the Largo de Camões or at school.

And so he grew up among women who doted on him. He was very clean and took great care with his appearance. A mark on his suit, the merest

crease in his shirt were enough to produce a crisis. His shoes had to shine like a mirror, without a trace of dirt. He was painstaking in the time he took to wash, springing from the bathtub, smelling like a garden flower.

When he did his hair, he would use two brushes and three combs, each for a different purpose, in a ritual that only he understood and carried out to the letter. Nothing would make him shorten the time it took, and he refused to be hurried in any way. He was proud of the silkiness of his curly, wavy hair, of his straight nose, of the roundness of his cheekbones that came from his Chinese side, of his shapely lips and his magnificent row of teeth. In fact he was proud of every aspect of his physical appearance. Having finished seeing to his hair, his clothes and his shoes, he would look lovingly at himself in the mirror, and murmur with heartfelt conviction:

‘Oh! God! Thank you for making me so handsome!’

As he grew up, his natural good looks became even more noticeable. He didn’t get involved in fisticuffs, which had been such a common occurrence in his childhood, not because he had become a cowardly lad. Far from it. He was just scared that in the heat of a fight, someone might become overzealous in his punching and kicking, and spoil his facial harmony.

A girl would not have examined with such care every aspect of her physiognomy. He even went as far as to assert that he had been born with the most perfectly proportioned ears, ‘tender in design’. Whatever the advantage he might reap from this, he never explained.

As an adolescent, he got pimples on his face. He was overcome by panic, gestured wildly, became more and more agitated, and wept profusely. His outbursts sent his afflicted family into paroxysms of despair. Nor was he consoled by the argument that pimples were a common occurrence in youth. They were going to leave his face pitted, prematurely lined, permanently grooved. He took courses of treatment, ran to the doctor’s, smeared himself with creams, went on diets and took injections, even went to consult specialists in Hong Kong. To no avail. He aired the possibility of going to Shanghai in order to consult a German specialist in dermatology, but his father Aurélio’s spirit of economy put paid to such a wild idea. That was really too much!

A herbalist in the Rua da Prainha, a humble fellow, with little eyes that darted behind thick lenses, suddenly came to the poor lad’s aid. He subjected the pimples to a thorough inspection, passed his smooth-skinned fingers over them, and interrogated him in a Chinese he could barely understand. He prescribed a course of bitter teas, made recommendations regarding his diet and dug out a pleasant-smelling ointment to spread over the infected areas. Gradually, the pimples disappeared, and the skin returned to its former smoothness and beauty.

When it came to his studies, he didn't disappoint, but on the other hand, he was never an outstanding pupil. He attended the day school of the São José Seminary, subjected to the iron-fisted but effective discipline of the priests, and with only one failed paper, completed the fifth year of the General Certificate at the state secondary school.

There was no need to proceed further. Neither Hong Kong nor Shanghai beckoned, much less Portugal, so far away. As an only son, cared for by parents and a host of female relatives who idolised him, his duty was to carry on the family name in Macao. As for him, he was relieved, for he went to so much trouble to look handsome that he had no time left for books.

He was a man of limited education, but in keeping with the values of the time, this was enough. Used to being indulged and to his creature comforts, he faced the future with a light heart, for the future would be the same as the present and the past. That was how secure people felt during the 'patriarchal era', an age that was to be shattered by the Japanese attack on China and then, straight afterwards, the War of the Pacific. That was why he had the audacity to cry bombastically, upon completing his fifth year:

'Ah! So much the better! I'm done with studying!'

It wasn't that his father was rolling in money, but he had a comfortable position in life. As a functionary of the Chinese Customs House, he had received a sizeable payout when he retired. He had prudently invested this along with some other savings in such a way as to give him a comfortable return. In addition, he had set up a shipping agency representing the big freight companies based in Hong Kong, from which he made a steady profit. Like anyone weaned in Santo António, he was generous in his hospitality, known for the dinner parties he hosted and for the excellent food that came out of his kitchen.

At the still tender age of eighteen, Adozindo went to work for the firm that he was destined to inherit one day from his father. In effect, this meant that he toiled little and did a lot of swanning around. Time was on his side and something better was bound to turn up, he told himself by way of a justification. His father's employees began to resent him, as they noticed he was more interested in the mirror than in the accounts or getting the work done. This was why they scornfully referred to him as the Handsome Adozindo.

He considered himself irresistible, and indeed he was. He collected hearts, casting amorous glances, flashing his white teeth in a smile and raising his eyebrows in a fashion he practised at home. He was always in the company of beautiful women, was an expert in sweet talk and danced divinely.

For better effect, he always arrived alone at dance parties. He would

stand at the entrance to the ballroom, taking in his surroundings with the irritatingly superior air of a bored Englishman, as if he had to fill out a bill of lading. In no time at all, he would be surrounded by the rustling of skirts. The girls competed for him, spared no effort to get his attention. He also knew how to melt the hearts of old ladies and married women. When he waltzed like a professional to the tune of the Blue Danube or the Count of Luxemburg, a space opened up across the dance floor for him and his partner. And so he flirted around, conquered the girls and was the target of consuming passion.

There was no shortage of good matches for him, girls of sound means, willing to go to any lengths. But he skilfully avoided any commitments, convinced in his own mind that he had not yet found a woman who deserved him.

One of his rejects, however, suffered a romantic illness and was hurriedly packed off to Switzerland to forget and recover. Another, more serious and more of a martyr, took the veil, and went to end her days in a nunnery of the Franciscan Missionaries of Mary. These events, rather than sully his reputation, increased his prestige. With godlike detachment he would brush off all responsibility with the simple declaration:

‘They left as virgins. I didn’t break any maidenhead!’

He encountered some defect in all of them. This one because she had bad teeth, that one because she was as skinny as a toothpick, another one because she would run to fat straight after giving birth to her first child, and another because she was too intelligent and he didn’t want a know-all for a wife. And so on and so forth. In a word, none of them were any good, to the despair of his parents who yearned for grandchildren, and of his granny and aunts who wanted to see him spoken for. Only his cousin Catarina, who was a few years older than him and had a pointed nose, rejoiced in this delay, for she harboured a secret hope that he would at last turn his gaze upon her. This was why she took such care of his clothes, darning his socks and sewing buttons back on his shirts and drawers.

The Handsome Adozindo had a good heart, but vanity and boastfulness got the better of him as the years went by. If only he could hold his tongue a bit! But no. It wasn’t enough for him to make real conquests, he had to make a show of them, bragging about them irritatingly in a monotonous display of uncalled for cheap talk. On these occasions, he became intolerable, unconsciously alienating possible friends, making all of them fed up, green with envy and consumed by resentment.

‘That one? I’ve been with her. She’s a lousy kisser. Norma? She’s got a bigger navel than she has eyes. Esperança? She’s got bad breath and cries a lot. Laurinda? My God! What a clingstone! She sticks to you like glue and you can’t get rid of her.’

‘So you mean you’ve had them all.’

‘How can I help it? They won’t leave me alone ...’

His only true friend, Florêncio, another local playboy who openly contented himself with the crumbs left by Adozindo, warned him:

‘Be careful, lad ... Don’t play around so much.’ Adozindo would laugh and reply unmoved:

‘Don’t worry, I’ll find a slipper to fit my foot.’

Around this time, his father, Aurélio, took the difficult decision to move house. For a long time now, he had found the thick curtain of acacia trees annoying, depriving the balconies of a view of the Largo de Camões. They encouraged mosquitoes, May-bugs, moths and other types of insect. And then there was the headlong fluttering of bats that terrorized people. Besides, the old house, rented from the Santa Casa da Misericórdia, was decrepit, full of draughts, gnawed away by white ants, a paradise for rats that scurried ceaselessly across the roof space. It needed sweeping renovation from top to bottom.

He had decided to buy a large new home on the Estrada da Victória, from which a pleasant lane led to a row of elegant houses, each with a garden. Adozindo backed his father in his decision for it gave the family more ‘status’.

The womenfolk didn’t take to the change. They were used to worshipping at the church of Santo António, to their devotion to its saint, and they had all their friends in the quarter, all their occasions for gossip. There was the bun and pastry seller, the morning and evening cries of the street-vendors, and then they only had to walk down the street to be in the middle of the market where they could do their daily shopping. They put up tearful resistance, arguing that those who had prospered in a house shouldn’t leave it, because of the good *feng shui* brought by favourable winds.

But the men of the house shouted:

‘Superstitious nonsense!’

They won and the women eventually agreed that they would be much better off in the new residence and the family would improve its social position.

One of the first things the Handsome Adozindo did when he took possession of his comfortable bedroom, was to take out a pair of binoculars and scan the neighbourhood, the Vasco da Gama Garden, the Campal and the houses on the side of Monte Hill, in search of pretty faces, any beauties who, until then, might have escaped his seductive power.

*A*mong the water-sellers who ‘drew the water’ most energetically from the well at Cheok Chai Un, was A-Leng, at the time twenty-two years of age, brimming with health and life. She fetched and carried tirelessly around the well from early morning, filling buckets of water, transporting them, one on either end of the long pole she placed over her shoulder, balancing herself gracefully, her body taut with the weight, her supple hips sculpted in a sensual curve, rolling inside her tight *tun-sam-fu*.

For her, there were no seasons in the year. She was always working, in winter, she wore a woollen jacket, and her *tun-sam-fu* of rough cloth that hardly protected her from the cold, in summer, she wore one of thin cloth, that only came halfway down her arms, and was stained down the back and under the armpits with her perspiration.

Of all her fellow workers, she was the tallest and the most slender. No matter how carefully she swathed her breasts, in her modesty, under her *kebaya*, as was the custom in those days among the humbler classes, her vague contours excited the imagination, like some promise of a hidden treasure. Her almond-shaped eyes, gently curved upwards to a point, made her oval face, with its high cheekbones, irresistibly attractive. When she smiled, two dimples in her cheeks gave her an impish air.

She spoke with a high, musical voice, and had the brisk manners of one who did a hard job, out in the open air, come sun or rain, but most of the time she radiated good humour. She would laugh, revealing an even row of white teeth that she cleaned with the stick of a liquorice plant, chatted non-stop and was the dominant figure in the group. When she was angry, her voice would explode all around the area of the well, her face would glow, and the nostrils of her small nose flare.

She didn’t flirt with the boys. She would confront the most daring ones with her tongue, answering their salacious comments in kind. When this wasn’t enough, she would face up to them, ready to beat them with the pole

she used for carrying buckets. In this way, she had earned respect in the area, in spite of being alone, with no other member of the family to defend her. She had tacitly risen to the position of princess among the water-sellers, given that the queen was a well-endowed woman of about forty, who held sway over the well, the Queen-Bee of all those women, responsible to them as a counsellor, marriage broker, medical adviser and midwife.

The Queen-Bee treated A-Leng as a pupil. She looked upon her as her successor and would have passed on her skills and position to her, if other events hadn't dictated otherwise.

When the Queen-Bee flew into a rage, everyone round the well fell silent, the local householders retreated indoors and the restless children fled in fright. Only A-Leng dared to approach her, serene and self-assured, bravely weathering the first onslaught of her anger and little by little calming her down. As she was the only one never to have been seen assailed by that terrible temper, many people, when they wanted a favour from the Queen-Bee, did so through her pupil. As a result, she was held in esteem in the area and in that peculiar little world.

A-Leng was not without her vanity. The object of this was her thick braid of hair that, when loose, cascaded down the length of her back. She looked after it with great care, allowing herself to linger with her favourite braiding-woman, in whose hands she would stoically suffer torture without so much as a murmur, as docile as the most docile of young girls. But she was fastidious. She wouldn't rest happy as long as the blackness of her locks, bathed in wood oils, hadn't been given the desired sheen, as long as there was a thread of rebellious hair out of place, and as long as the plaits of her braid were not the ideal thickness.

Sitting erect and composed at the side of the road on an awkward little stool in front of the braider's shop, not far from the well, her hands on her knees and her legs drawn in, she would take as much time as was needed for her hair to be combed. Of all the heads of hair consigned to the braider's care, hers was the most well liked because of its copious black abundance, and because of the sensuous pleasure her hands felt as they pulled the tough, resistant threads of hair. As she got on with her combing, the braider would smile and tell stories, soon attracting an audience who would squat around her, like the ladies-in-waiting of a princess.

A-Leng's world was the area where she lived and to where she had been taken as a little girl by an old woman she called granny, without her being so. She didn't know who her parents were, which was why she adopted the family name of the old woman who had treated her with homespun affection. She knew no more than that about her kith and kin.

As a young girl, not yet strong enough to carry buckets, she began by making matchboxes, experiencing in the raw, like all her contemporaries,

all the privations of childhood, in her granny's foul-smelling, airless hovel. She grew up skinny, but with an iron constitution, unlike so many others who succumbed to tuberculosis, dysentery and other diseases that were so easily picked up by the destitute in a poverty-stricken ghetto.

She benefited from the Queen-Bee's motherly interest. When she became a water-seller, thus escaping the tyranny of the matchboxes, she jumped for joy for being able to work in the open air. She had no ambitions beyond what her own quarter could offer. When her granny died, she would inherit the hovel. In due course, she would take the Queen-Bee's place when she too died or abdicated her position of her own free will, for this was what she was being prepared for. She earned enough for her daily bowl of rice, had a few coppers to buy her clothes and get her queue braided, and considered herself happy. In her condition as a water-seller, she couldn't contemplate flying any higher, nor did such things worry her. She wasn't interested in involving herself in anything outside the work she was familiar with. She didn't feel at ease in the Rua do Campo or in the Rua do Hospital,¹ neither of which was far from Cheok Chai Un. The Praia Grande and Avenida Almeida Ribeiro led her into a completely unknown and even hostile city, where she couldn't see a familiar face, and where even the water-sellers and maids looked different and haughty. The Inner Harbour and Mong Há were so out-of-the-way that she thought of them as if they were remote lands at the end of the Earth.

The *kwai-los*, as all the Portuguese were called, regardless of whether they were native sons of Macao or had come from outside, were viewed with suspicion. None of them lived in Cheok Chai Un, and if she supplied any of their houses with water from the well, contact with them was almost non-existent. She found them gruff and lacking in manners, speaking a gobbledegook of obscure, inaccessible sounds, insolent and forward in the way they stared shamelessly and intensely at women, as if they were undressing them in their thoughts.

As for the women, they were dolls who lacked any inhibitions whatsoever, showed off their legs and the weight of their bosoms, and some of them were yellow-haired and blue-eyed, something spooky and to be wondered at.

The few times she walked along streets and through squares where she knew she would come across them, she lost her customary self-confidence and put on a falsely arrogant air as if to protect herself. But she compensated for her fears when she was in a group. Then she would stamp forcefully on

1. So called because it contained the São Rafael Hospital. Now called the Rua Pedro Nolasco da Silva.

the paving stones with her clogs, and her companions imitated her, as if they were issuing a challenge. Whenever she left the area where she worked, she wore her clogs.

The ones that scared her most were the African soldiers from the garrison because of their pitch-black colour, and their height and military demeanour that imposed natural respect.

The pretty water-seller from Cheok Chai Un didn't have many distractions. She didn't know what a cinema was, for she had never had occasion to see a film. In fact, the picture houses where Chinese films were shown, were in the vicinity of the Inner Harbour, and therefore at the end of the earth. And so she spent all her days in toil. Her only leisure time came after her evening meal and when she had washed herself, for then she would squat by the door of the Queen-Bee's little house and take part in all manner of conversations. The Queen-Bee knew how to tell marvellous stories better than the braiding-woman. Legends of old, macabre odysseys of spirits and ghosts, epic tales of love and hatred. The prominent position she had managed to achieve in this society was not only due to her personality, but to the fact that she had learned to read and write. In the midst of those illiterate women and young girls, it was inevitable that she would reach the top. To listen to her and absorb her wisdom and experience was the greatest pleasure A-Leng possessed.

The girl would look forward to the annual festival of the Tou Tei Temple, which broke the unending routine of her days. She would sit, spellbound, through sessions of Chinese opera, attentive to every change in the programme. She had a special *tun-sam-fu* for such occasions, which she would lovingly take from the bottom of her trunk. And wearing a woollen blouse over it, another luxury she took great care of, she would settle down in a seat with a good view half an hour before the show began, talking excitedly all the while.

Her hair glowed, and her jet black braid was coiled, decorated with a comb studded with beads at the top of the nape and the beginning of the plaits. Outside her own neighbourhood, A-Leng would always be a pretty proletarian girl. But there, among the raucous audience in the large shed where the show took place, she was indeed a princess because of her upright physique and the way her own awareness of her beauty gave her just a hint of arrogance.

She also looked forward, with excitement, to the feast days of the Lunar New Year, the only three days of the year she allowed herself to take a real rest. Then, she would deck herself out in full, white powder on her face, droplets dangling from her ear lobes, and gold and jade ornaments in her hair. She would begin at midnight, amid the noise of firecrackers, by going to kneel in the temple and touch the floor with her forehead, asking the

gods for a new year full of prosperity, good health and much money. After that, she would go out into the night to have fun, burning fireworks, visiting her friends who would meet up to eat fried snacks and titbits in the their local yard.

Later, she would venture out of her area as far as the Bazaar. Delighted, she would walk along the Rua dos Mercadores and the Rua das Estalagens, jostling her way through the festive crowds, stopping here and there, at the *clu-clu* tables to put some money on the High-Low. In the Largo do Patane, she would amuse herself and make admiring comments as she watched the acrobats and jugglers, the puppet theatre shows and listened to the storytellers, recounting the deeds of the heroes of old and of immortal warrior maids.

She didn't dare go into the Hotel Presidente,² the main gambling centre, for it belonged to a class of people she couldn't rub shoulders with. She limited herself to standing at the door for a few minutes, peeping at the crowds of people coming in and going out, her eyes resting on the dazzling cheongsams of the women, secretly yearning to wear them, but knowing full well that her condition as a water-seller would never allow such an opportunity.

When the festive days were over, she went back to carrying the buckets, without complaints or lamentations, indifferent to her fate, but happy for her good health and the strength that enabled her to work hard.

2. Nowadays known as the Hotel Central, on the Avenida Almeida Ribeiro.