

Timothy Mo

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Main Text

Born in 1950, Timothy Mo read History at St John's College, Oxford, and worked as a reporter for *Boxing News* before becoming a full-time writer. His Chinese father and English mother divorced when he was eighteen months old. The first nine years of his life were spent in Hong Kong where he was educated first in a Chinese convent school and then in a school for the children of English expatriates. This formative experience he relates in a little-known but important essay (Mo 1996) published long after he had achieved recognition as a novelist. The essay offers an explanatory narrative for the way his career and identity as a writer unfolded over two decades. In hindsight, Mo sees himself as a child "endowed through genes and upbringing with a precocious conceptual intelligence, adrift within an ideographic literary culture" (305), stifled by teachers who compelled him to read and write Chinese characters. In the English school, which he found liberating, he learnt boxing and developed a preference for anglo-western culture and stories of action and adventure.

The essay addresses the issues which had framed the critical reception of Mo right from his first two novels, *The Monkey King* (1978) and *Sour Sweet* (1982): his cultural identity and unique propensities as a fictionist. Set in mid-twentieth century Hong Kong, *The Monkey King* narrates the fortunes of the Poon family, and the battle of wits between the patriarch Mr Poon and his son-in-law, Wallace Nolasco. Wallace, a Macanese of Portuguese descent, is the outsider who eventually triumphs to replace Mr Poon as head of the family. In *Sour Sweet*, the setting is Chinatown, London where the immigrant Lily Chen struggles for survival in an environment she barely comprehends, with little on her side but wit, willfulness, and an inalienable sense of herself as authentically Chinese. Both Wallace and Lily are marginal to the social milieu in which they find themselves, and Mo constitutes their marginality as a variety of perspectives from which to satirize the Chinese family and cultural traditions. The subjects of these novels and Mo's ancestry focus attention on the issue of Chinese identity at a time when ethnicity of any stripe was almost invisible in British fiction. This focus runs counter to Mo's professed antipathy to Chinese culture, and tends to distract from more perceptive appraisal of his talents as a writer: his ability to draw complex and sympathetic main characters, a stringent eye for detail in scene-setting, and the capacity to make descriptions of physical action and combat deliver their impact.

These strengths are on full display in the ambitious epic narrative of his third novel, *An Insular Possession* (1986), which explores the so-called First Opium War fought between Britain and China in the nineteenth century, which led to the colonization of Hong Kong. In the two protagonists, Gideon Chase and Walter Eastman, American journalists caught between the two empires, Mo refocuses his abiding interest in marginal

subjects and viewpoints but away from Chinese ethnicity and culture. This is a move he continues in *The Redundancy of Courage* (1992), considered by some to be his finest work to date. The novel, set in the fictional island of Danu, which closely resembles East Timor, relates the islanders' war of independence, first against a European colonizer and then against an imperial neighbour. The fighters are observed by Adolph Ng, the first-person narrator, a Danuese whose Chinese ancestry is important only in so far as it separates him from his native and mestizo comrades-in-arms. Of much greater significance is the novel's critique of hegemonic power and its sympathetic but also dispassionate portrayal of characters who take up roles of resistance. Mo's own mimetic prowess is such that the novel garnered praise from no less than José Ramos-Horta himself, the Timorese leader and Nobel Peace Laureate, who found its realism remarkable especially considering that Mo had not been to East Timor. (www.timothymo.com, accessed August 15, 2008). The novel was published before East Timor's struggle exploded onto the world stage and demonstrated Mo's prescience as a global observer and commentator.

In his fifth novel, *Brownout on Breadfruit Boulevard* (1995), Mo migrates to another Asian location, the Philippines. By the time of the novel's publication, Mo was spending more and more of his year in Asia, not only in the Philippines but also Thailand and on family visits to Hong Kong. He had also turned his back on mainstream commercial publishers to set up his own Paddleless Press, a high-risk venture for an established author that bears more than passing resemblance to the intriguing mix of courage and bravado found in his characters. *Brownout on Breadfruit Boulevard* is populated by ordinary men and women who, like their counterparts elsewhere in Mo's fictional worlds, inhabit a society over which they have little control and who have to negotiate daily with powerful structures that rule and ruin their lives. Their actions are both admirable and nugatory, the outcomes alternately tragic and comic. In describing the foibles and antics on both sides, Mo is characteristically humorous. But he also bares his satire's lacerating edge. The novel attracted controversy for its perceived attack on Filipino and other nationalities as much as for its venue of publication.

In his latest novel, *Renegade or Halo*² (1999), the protagonist Rey Castro is a migrant labourer travelling out of the Philippines to Asia and the anglo-american west, a contemporary Ulysses, anti-heroic in the modernist vein but made visible in a late-modern globalizing world where the cross-cultural encounters of an entire underclass of working migrants rarely merit public and fictional concern. The novel contains descriptions of rape, torture and cruelty but also sensitively probes Rey's psychology. His acerbic comments present a host of cultures and cultural characteristics in unflattering light. Mo's apparent readiness to rank cultural differences and levy value judgments is highly unusual at an historical juncture in which cultural relativism appears to be the order of the day.

Due to recent interest in diasporic literatures, *Sour Sweet* remains Mo's most popularly read and widely-taught novel to date. Though a pioneering work that remains the best novel on Chinatown Britain, it does not show Mo's full range as an artist. Mining the groove of his undoubted realist talent, Mo consistently sets his fiction against

forces that impose boundaries on human action and expression wherever in the world he perceives them. The perceptions can be partial and provocative, but they are always uniquely and astutely those of a cosmopolitan writer for whom questions of value, justice, and social action do not afford much room for gentility and compromise.

SEE ALSO: Twentieth-century and contemporary literature; adventure fiction; colonialism; emigration; empire; ethnicity; globalization; historical fiction; identity; immigration; migration; modernism; multiculturalism; narrative; postcolonialism; realism; satire; war and conflict.

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Elaine Yee Lin Ho has published articles on Renaissance literature, anglophone world literatures and Hong Kong literature and culture in journals including *SEL*, *Literature and History*, *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, *Wasafiri*, *Ariel*, *PMLA*, and contributed chapters to edited collections of essays by Rodopi, University of Minnesota Press, and Hong Kong University Press. Besides the monograph on Timothy Mo, she is author of *Anita Desai*, Writers and Their Work Series (2006), and has just finished editing a collection of essays *China Abroad: Travels, Subjects, Spaces* to be published by Hong Kong University Press (2009).