

“Alternative” and “Imagined”: Keywords in the Study of Macau’s Modernist Poetry Movement

Review: *Ageless: An Introduction to the Modernist Poetry Movement in Macau*, by Chung-to Au

Chung-to Au, *Wu sui wu shi—Aomen xiandai zhuyi shichao daolun* 《無歲無時——澳門現代主義詩潮導論》 [*Ageless: An Introduction to the Modernist Poetry Movement in Macau*]. Macau: The Institution of Research and Publication of the Cultural Affairs Bureau of the Macao Special Administrative Region Government, 2023. 235pp. MOP\$80. ISBN 978-99937-0-530-7.

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Ageless: An Introduction to the Modernist Poetry Movement in Macau is a study on modernist poetry in Macau during the 1980s and 1990s.¹ The author, Au Chung-to, mainly uses *The Oxford Handbook of Modernisms* (2010) as a research framework to analyze the influence of Macau’s colonial history and unique urban modernity on literary writing. The first chapter, serving as an introduction, discusses the positioning of Macau’s modernist poetry within Chinese and global modernism. Through the examination of the modernist poetry of five poets—Tao Li (陶里, 1937–), Tao Kong Liao (淘空了, 1943–), Liu Xing Zi (流星子, 1958–), Wei Ming (葦鳴, 1958–), and Yi Ling (懿靈, 1964–)—Au proposes two conceptual terms for Macau’s modernist poetry: “alternative modernity” (10) and “imagined modernity” (18). Chapter 2, through four investigations of the issue of “alternative modernity,” addresses three classic themes in modernism studies—identity, mobility of modern life, and poetics of travel—in the context of Macau’s modernist poetry movement. Au presents novel insights about each of these topics. Chapter 5 and

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¹ Regarding the English title of the book reviewed, I would like to provide some clarification. At the time of writing this article, I was unable to find an official English title for the book. Therefore, I translated it myself into *Ageless: An Introduction to the Modernist Poetry Movement in Macau*. After this article was accepted, I contacted the author for confirmation. She stated that she had never given the book an official English title; however, the publisher had once translated the book title as *An Introduction to Macao Poetry*. The author also expressed her approval of my translation here.

6 then explore “imagined modernity,” delving into the inheritance and transformation of Chinese literary traditions within Macau’s modernist poetry. The final chapter, titled “Introduction” but functioning as a conclusion,² synthesizes the study of these five poets, revealing how, in the colonial city of Macau and under the influence of globalization, they developed a cultural expression distinct from mainstream Western modernity.

Macau is often celebrated as the “City of Poetry,” where it is said that, on average, one in every ten thousand residents is a renowned poet (Lv 1). During the 1980s and 1990s, Macau’s literary scene experienced a golden era with the remarkable coexistence of four generations of poets. The first generation included Hua Ling (華鈴, 1915-92), who rose to fame during the Second Sino-Japanese War. The second generation featured prominent poets in their prime, such as Tao Li and Tao Kong Liao. The third generation comprised young poets like Wei Ming, Liu Xing Zi, and Yi Ling. Finally, the youngest were a group of student poets in their twenties (W. Cheng 82). While Au selects only five poets for her study, they are the core figures across these four generations. These poets are also the pioneering proponents and theoreticians of Macau’s modernist literature. In terms of their backgrounds, Tao Li was a repatriated Chinese expatriate from Vietnam; Tao Kong Liao and Liu Xing Zi were new immigrants from mainland China, while Wei Ming and Yi Ling were native-born Macanese. This diversity of identities makes these five poets particularly representative, highlighting the distinctive characteristics of Macau’s modernist poetry. Au argues that the modernity reflected in Macau’s poetry is not only a reflection and critique of Western modernity but also an effort to reconstruct cultural identity. This unique expression of modernity embodies Macau’s distinctive historical and cultural context while also revealing the cultural anxieties and imaginative responses of poets from diverse backgrounds as they navigate the fluid social landscape of Macau amidst the forces of globalization and cross-cultural influences.

² Huo Chaoqun has noted that the concluding chapter is titled “Introduction,” suggesting that Au may have cleverly adopted the circular narrative technique commonly used in fiction. This choice echoes the book’s title, *Ageless*, and highlights the pioneering aspects of this monograph in the study of Macau literature. For more details, see Huo.

I. Alternative Modernity: A Path Beyond the Western-Centric Models

“Alternative modernity” is an important concept in this study, referring to a distinctive developmental path that Macau has pursued in the process of modernization. Rather than fully replicating the Western model of modernization, Macau has forged a unique trajectory shaped by its colonial history, cultural interweaving, and local identity.

As a colonial city, Macau’s modernization was not directly driven by the industrial revolution or capitalist expansion. Instead, it evolved gradually through trade, cultural exchange, and colonial governance. In Chapter 2, “Macau,” Au provides a comprehensive review of the history of Portuguese rule over Macau, arguing that Portugal’s control was relatively ineffective. This foundational review allows Au to discuss Macau’s “alternative modernity” and to illustrate how Macau’s poets express their understanding of this unique modernization process through their poetry.

Compared to mainstream Western modernity, Macau’s modernity is filled with contradictions and complexities. On one hand, the influence of Portuguese colonial culture in Macau is not as direct or forceful as British colonial influence in Hong Kong, resulting in a more circuitous and obscure modernity in Macau. This ambiguity has led to three typical modes of poetic expression. For instance, Liu Xing Zi, when critiquing issues of urban modernization, does not directly reference Macau in his poetry; Tao Kong Liao, on the other hand, distorts or idealizes Macau’s urban environment, pastoralizing it and “diluting the problems of the city of Macau with nature-related imagery” (Au 45). Similarly, Tao Li and Wei Ming, when depicting city landmarks as symbols of Portuguese governance, approach them with ambiguous attitudes.

On the other hand, the poets’ inheritance and introspection of Chinese traditional culture add another layer of particularity to Macau’s modernity. In their works, Macau’s poets, while critiquing the Western modernization path, also seek new modes of expression rooted in local culture. A particularly representative element in these texts is their portrayal of city landmarks. One such frequently depicted landmark is the bronze statue of Amaral and his horse, which commemorates the Macau Governor Comandante João Maria Ferreira do Amaral (1803-49). However, in Tao Li’s view, this statue “symbolizes the decline of the old empire of Portugal,” failing to establish the authority of the colonizer (Au 47). For another major landmark, the Ruins of St. Paul’s, Tao

Li's description also transcends the perspective of colonial symbols, instead viewing it as "a passionate lover stranded in a foreign land" (53). Such poetic works defy straightforward interpretation through colonial or postcolonial theory; instead, their approach is rooted in local perspectives and ultimately highlights the alternative nature of Macau modernism.

However, there is also the issue of "Macaense" (土生),³ which is closely tied to the notion of locality. Au acknowledges this group to some extent in the book but does not utilize the works of Macaense poets to illustrate Macau's "alternative modernity." This is perhaps due to the study's focus being limited to the five selected poets. Existing studies have already pointed out that Macaense poetry often offers a unique perspective on Macau—whether reflecting on human relationships and social conditions or capturing the natural scenery—providing readers with fresh insights and novel reading experiences (Chang 15). Macaense poets such as José dos Santos Ferreira (1919-93), Leonel Alves (1920-80), and Carlos Marreiros (1957–) demonstrate a deep concern for Macau's local culture and even a recognition of Chinese cultural identity that transcends the conventions of colonialism, thereby complicating the question of Macaense identity. The presence of Macaense poets should also be considered a distinctive feature of Macau's modernism. Given Au's expertise in comparative literature, it would be fascinating if she could extend the scope of her study to include Macaense poetry, placing it in dialogue with the works of the five selected poets. Such an approach could yield new and compelling insights into the subject.

II. Imagined Modernity: Dual Imaginings of the Future and History

The concept of "imagined modernity" centers on cultural imagination in Macau's poetry. In particular, it indicates how poets attempt to fill the gaps in their identity created by the process of modernity by envisioning and reconstructing history, culture, and the future. Previous studies analyzing the traditional elements in Macau's modern poetry have predominantly focused on how poets transitioned from classical Chinese poetic forms to modern free verse. Lv Zhipeng, for instance, notes that Macau's modern poetry, from its early

³ The term "Macaense" is defined in a rather complex manner but generally refers, from a genealogical perspective, to the descendants of intermarriages between Portuguese and local Chinese residents. This group does not constitute the majority of Macau's population and occupies a middle-tier position in the social hierarchy. See Au 50-51.

stages, was almost entirely shaped by the influence of Chinese classical traditions. Many poets transition from composing in classical forms to writing modern poetry, yet their creative frameworks, modes of thought, and aesthetic habits remain rooted in classical poetry. Lv describes their works as “free-form classical poetry” rather than the emergence and transformation of classical elements within the framework of modern poetry. He argues that only a small number of poets, including the five poets selected by Au, are able to truly embody the essence of modernism in their works (Lv 173-83). In contrast, Au’s research moves beyond the formalistic approach to poetry. Instead, from the perspective of poetics, she examines how Macau’s poets use imagination in their works to construct a realm of modernity that is both grounded in reality and transcends it. In general, when Macau’s modernist poets seek solace, they tend to “return to tradition, relying on memory and history” (Au 125), resulting in a form of poetic expression that bears the characteristics of the “poetic history” tradition.

Interestingly, the tradition of “poetic history” does not necessarily refer solely to “history” or “reality”; it also embodies “a pursuit of universal poetics,” pointing toward the “future” (Au 127). This orientation toward the “future” is also evident in the lyrical components of Macau modernist literature. However, due to past misunderstandings about the relationship between modernism and tradition, this aspect has often been overlooked and not well studied. Au insightfully observes that “the relationship between lyricism and modernism has been deeply intertwined from the very beginning” (20), and Macau’s modernist poetry “largely inherits the themes and imagery from the lyrical tradition, with some poets even making bold transformations” (190), thereby guiding the meaning of Macau’s modernist poetry toward the future.

Therefore, in Chapter 5 “Poetic History” and Chapter 6 “Lyric,” Au explores, on the one hand, how Macau’s modernist poets inherit the tradition of “poetic history” from a perspective of universality. She reveals, for instance, how Tao Li often leaps across historical timelines in pursuit of a universal truth (142); how Wei Ming employs myths of the “past” to predict the “future” (144); and how Tao Kong Liao’s poetry in homage to Li Bai (李白) encapsulates a collective cultural sentiment common among the Chinese people (149). On the other hand, Au investigates the “modern transformation” of this tradition, exploring how Liu Xing Zi subverts the theme of “melancholy autumn” (170-72); how Tao Li reinterprets the Cuculidae motif; and how Wei Ming

modernizes the image of the solitary swan goose (178-79). Through the study of the “poetic history” and “lyricism” traditions in Macau’s modernist poetry, Au suggests that this poetry embodies an “imagined modernity.” These poems are not just a depiction of reality. They also envision both future and historical dimensions. Here, I would like to supplement Au’s argument with references to Yi Ling’s poetry about the Mazu (媽祖) imagery. In Yi Ling’s poem “Searching for a Poem of Macau” (〈尋找一首澳門的詩〉), Mazu is portrayed as a great guardian deity of selfless devotion. However, in “A Glimpse on the Walls of St. Paul Church” (〈牌坊上的窺探〉), Yi Ling writes:

The undying ruins are the will of heaven, (殘垣的不倒是天意，)
 They built faith for the fishermaid—(它為漁女建立了信仰——)
 Burned yet unyielding, (焚身而不屈，)
 But the torrents of reality overturned religion
 (但現實的洪流傾覆了宗教)
 In an unknown era, people await the baptism of rebirth!
 (在未知的時代裡人們期待著重生的洗禮！)
 (53)⁴

This illustrates that the Mazu imagery in Yi Ling’s poetry not only connects to Macau’s historical identity as a fishing village but also serves as a metaphor for the city’s cultural identity anxieties amid globalization. The “imagined” quality of Mazu in Yi Ling’s work is thus readily apparent.⁵

Macau is a city characterized by “placelessness” or “non-place,”⁶ where the cultural identity of its poets evolves in response to the city’s historical context. The dual imagination of both future and history often imbues the cultural identity of Macao’s modernist poets with a sense of drift and disorientation, which has become a defining feature of Macao’s modernist poetry.

⁴ The excerpt and the two poem titles are my translation.

⁵ For further exploration of the Mazu imagery, see C. Cheng.

⁶ According to Au’s explanation, “placelessness” refers to the loss of a sense of place, while “non-place” refers to those places that lack connections, have no historical associations, and are unrelated to identity. Please see Au 68 and 70.

III. The Interweaving of Alternative and Imagined Modernity: Cultural Displacement and Identity Loss

The uniqueness of Macau's modernism lies in its modernity being both "alternative" and "imagined." Confronted with the influence of Western modernization, Macau's poets neither fully embrace it nor return to traditional roots. Instead, their poetry reveals a sense of cultural displacement and identity loss.

In Chapter 3, Au first addresses "placelessness" and "non-placeness" characteristics of Macau, and then through the analysis of the "urban flâneur" in Macau's poetry, illustrates the individual's sense of alienation and loss amidst the city's modernization. Au believes that Macau's poets frequently use the urban landscape to reflect the fragmentation of modern life, cultural multiplicity, and a sense of identity displacement. Yet, when transforming into urban flâneurs, these Macau poets often show a unique perspective. For example, in Tao Kong Liao's work, while moving through the city, his thoughts frequently transcend the immediate reality. In Tao Li's poetry, the flâneur is detached from the consumer culture of the modern city and immersed in the city's past, with the ambiguity of remaining or departing reflecting Macau's placelessness/non-place nature. Meanwhile, Yi Ling, as a female flâneur, breaks the traditional gender constraints of the European flâneur, focusing on the issue of Macau's placelessness/non-place in her poems. Through the analysis of Macau's modernist poetry, Au finds the poets' estrangement from this city. The creation of poets is not merely a response to Western modernity, but represents a transcendent exploration of modernization that moves beyond the Western-centric paradigm, underscoring Macau's unique position as a cross-cultural city.

Faced with the dual forces of globalization and modernization, Macau's poets frequently find themselves on the cultural periphery. They often express their cultural and identity anxieties through spatial movement or travel writing, yet this also intensifies their sense of identity displacement. Au even asserts that "the poets' sense of identity does not lie in Macau" (121) and that "Macau people are more inclined to identify themselves as Hong Kongers than as Portuguese" (55). This striking observation offers a fresh perspective on Macau

literature studies.⁷ In their poetry, these poets construct an imagined cultural identity that transcends reality—both as a way to escape the present and as an effort to redefine their cultural affiliation—although this affiliation ultimately may lie outside of Macau. Thus, in Chapter 4, “Tourism,” Au characterizes Macau’s modernist tourism poetry as embodying three key features: “an alignment with Chinese culture or tradition as a marker of cultural identity, using lyricism as the main writing approach, and a softening of reality” (109). These features echo the poets’ perception of Macau’s placelessness/non-place nature. More importantly, Au’s conclusion reminds future researchers that the relationship between Macau’s writers and Macau itself may not necessarily be strongly connected, adding a layer of complexity to the study of Macau’s literature.

IV. The Unique Significance of Macau Modernism

Ageless: An Introduction to the Modernist Poetry Movement in Macau unveils the complexity and uniqueness of Macau’s modernist poetry through the two key concepts of “alternative modernity” and “imagined modernity.” In this book, Au provides an in-depth analysis of how Macau poets reflect on colonial experience, inherit and transform Chinese literary traditions, and construct cultural identity in the context of globalization and cross-cultural background. This unique modernity suggests that Macau’s modernist poetry deserves a dedicated examination within the broader field of Chinese modernist literature studies. Au’s research integrates Macau’s colonial history and multicultural background, enriching the framework for Macau literary studies and providing new perspectives for global modernist research. She challenges readers to reconsider established paradigms of cultural identity and literary expression in a post-colonial context. While the unique characteristics of

⁷ Previous studies often emphasized the poets’ identification with Macau’s local identity, such as the Macaense poets. For instance, Alves, in his poem “Filho de Macau” (“A Son of Macau”; the poem title and the following excerpt are my translation, for the original poem, see Alves 34), writes: “Coração chinês e alma portuguesa. (A Chinese heart and a Portuguese soul.) // Casa com a chinesa por instinto, (Instinctively marry a Chinese woman,) / Vive de arroz e come bacalhau, (Living on rice, eating Bacalhau,) / Bebe café, não chá e vinho tinto. (Coffee instead of tea and wine.) // É muito bondoso quando não é mau, (He is very kind when he is not mean,) / Por interesse escolhe o seu recinto (Chooses his place with self-interest) / Eis o autêntico filho de Macau (Behold, the authentic son of Macau).” This vividly portrays the unique cultural hybridity of Macau’s identity. Therefore, while Au’s assertions might seem strikingly provocative, they refresh and challenge the established perceptions of modernist poetry in Macau, offering a new lens to understand its complexities.

modernist poetry movements in mainland China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong have already been widely acknowledged, her work completes the puzzle by addressing the modernist poetry movement in Macau.

Admittedly, Au's book focuses exclusively on five early figures of Macau's modernist poetry, which may seem somewhat limited in scope. While providing depth, she risks overlooking the emerging voices and the evolving dynamics of Macau's poetic expression, potentially narrowing the broader understanding of Macau's literary landscape. However, in terms of its "introductory" value, this relatively concise work opens up numerous fresh perspectives for readers. The true significance of this work lies in its potential to stimulate further research, encouraging scholars to delve deeper into the intricate tapestry of Macau's literary heritage and its complex modernist narratives. Notably, this monograph is also a significant part of Au's broader research on China's diverse modernisms. The issues raised by the modernist poetry movement in Macau may well be further expanded or echoed in Au's subsequent studies, making this an anticipation-worthy continuation.

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