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**“BOWING BEFORE DUAL GODS”: EXPLORING CULTURAL HYBRIDITY AND
DISILLUSIONMENT IN HAROLD ACTON’S *PEONIES AND PONIES***

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Abstract

*With the onset of China's imperialist era, a number of treaty ports were opened to foreign commerce and residence. Soon enough, these ports became the centers of imperialist policies with the development of a community which prioritized its own privileges and status quo over the smooth functioning of Sino-foreign relations despite the semi-colonial status of China vis a vis the imperialist powers. During his long stay in China from 1932-1939, Harold Acton became both a witness as well as a part of this community, specifically the diplomatic world of Peking's expatriate society. The purpose of this paper is to examine the sharp, satiric and skillful delineation of this community in Acton's 1941 novel *Peonies and Ponies*, in order to probe into the issues of cultural hybridity, dislocation, cultural consciousness, cultural exile and rootlessness, together with the motifs of imperialist exploitation and disillusionment. By doing so, this paper aims to further an interdisciplinary approach based on the close-reading of the text in order to examine the manner in which the cross-cultural hybridity of the contact zones engenders new discourses, ambivalences and types that not only challenge and deepen the reader's perception of imperialism and cultural hybridity, but also gives a through sense of the cultural contradictions and dichotomies so much a part of 20th century China.*

Keywords: Treaty ports, imperialism, cultural hybridity, China, cultural exile, colonialism, disillusionment.

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INTRODUCTION

Published in 1941 and set against the backdrop of the expatriate world of Beijing, Harold Acton's *Peonies and Ponies* offers a sharp portraiture of the foreign community consisting of a motley crew of characters who raise significant questions regarding the issues of cultural hybridity, dislocation, ethnicity, and cultural consciousness. Inspired by Acton's own stay in China from 1932 to 1939, the novel delineates a mature treaty port world, which by the 1930s was already on the verge of decline. The treaty ports, opened as a consequence of the First and Second Opium Wars (1839-1842 and 1856-1860), functioned as dynamic spaces of imperialist incursions that witnessed the development of a variety of socio-cultural norms and practices that kept the status quo of the foreign world in place. Power in this community, monopolized mainly by big businesses such as Jardine, Matheson & Co., Swires, Hong Kong and Shanghai Bank, B.A.T, together with the elite settler community in the ports, the diplomats, officials and the missionaries, became a means not only to fortify their own positions and holdings in China, but also to exert a sense of superior complacency towards the native world surrounding them. China, being a semi-colony with the kind of imperialism at work being largely informal in nature, gave rise to this unique settler/expatriate community that not only harbored local and national identities, but also functioned as a subversive force that threatened to jeopardize Sino-British relations during the turbulent 20th century owing to their large scale propaganda, the dispatch of gunboats or troops and general resistance in the face of rising Chinese nationalism which ultimately forced them towards reform and dissolution (Bickers 10-13).

It is, however, the diplomatic world of the Beijing Legation Quarters that form the object of scrutiny of Acton's novel. The Legation Quarters together with the foreign diplomatic presence in China's capital, created as a consequence of the Second Opium War that shifted the headquarters of this body from Hong Kong to Beijing, carried with it the significance of the imperial prestige of having withstood the three months long Boxer siege of 1900. So despite the

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presence of a dual government (with the Revolutionary Nanjing government functioning in the south) and the changing of the name of Beijing to Beiping by the Revolutionaries to eliminate its corrupt association with the Warlords and their overt reliance of British/foreign economic aid, the diplomatic community prioritized prestige over an awareness of the socio-political condition of China (Bickers 117). Despite the fact that Peking legally remained outside foreign control, overt amounts of extraterritorial privilege made the community extend its rights well beyond treaty bounds, with Peking being transformed into a hub for non-diplomatic foreign residents, travelers and sightseers (Feuerwerker 29). It is this world, complete with all its oddities and peculiarities that Acton had encountered during his stay in China.

LIMINALITY AND ALIENATION: LOCATING ACTON IN CHINA

As an aesthete, writer and translator, Acton's interest in China as his *Memoirs of an Aesthete* show, precede his seven years of stay in the country, which throughout his career he described as "the happiest years of my life." Discouraging on the niceties of Acton's role as a translator and a teacher in China, Tessa M Thorniley says—

Acton pays particular attention to the literary movements of the early-twentieth century in China when modern fiction was emerging and developing. As well as explaining, for the lay reader, the major influences on Chinese fiction writers, Acton places the contemporary stories in a global literary context. He draws parallels between the Chinese writers of the 1930s who would have been largely unknown to English-language readers and Russian and Anglophone writers who would...be familiar to most Western readers. He encourages his readers to consider the new movement in Chinese writing as 'largely a result of contact with the West', in order to make it easier for them to approach but he is equally careful to stress that Chinese writers are no mere imitators and that an 'essentially

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Chinese' quality and an 'innate concern for style' are apparent in their finest works (Thorniley 166).

Thus, Acton may be said to have served as a kind of bridge between the East and the West, bringing together the intellectual and literary currents of the two nations by virtue of not just his long stay in the country, but also his familiarity with the Chinese intellectuals of the time. Commenting on the limitations of sinological studies by Western thinkers in his *Memoirs*, Acton observes—"It was evident that the influence of sinology on foreigners was anything but benign. It brought home to me the sharp difference between Cathay and China, and with all due respect to Cathay, it was China that I wished to know" (Acton as qtd. in Thorniley 179-180). Being thus familiar with the shortcomings that afflicted not just sinological studies, but also the fiction being produced by impassive writers who often failed to see beyond their national prejudice thereby transforming China to a sort of unreality that failed to assess the realities of her socio-economic and political changes in the modern world, Acton thus removed himself more and more from the foreign world of Peking, who as he notes "did not share my enthusiasm for China" (Acton as qtd. in Thorniley 180).

Acton's life itself, therefore becomes an indicator of treaty port status quo that perpetually remained on guard against the ever present dangers of "going native", something that was said to act as a derogation for the white man's moral and social character. "Writing English and studying Chinese absorbed far too much time to enable me to indulge in stupefaction of the senses, yet because I kept myself comparatively to myself I had evidently become a sinister figure in European eyes. Lurid stories were repeated about my arcane activities", he writes (Acton as qtd. in Thorniley 180-181).

As a recurrent motif in all his writings on China, Acton, therefore continues to harp on the misconceptions and prejudices that Westerners continued to harbor against China as a nation,

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with the fear of a Chinese takeover being ubiquitous in the myriad writings on the “yellow peril” metaphor. Whilst talking about inviting dinner guests to his home, Acton thus notes:

These friends viewed Chong Sung [his Chinese cook] with suspicion and stared into my eyes to see if I were smoking opium. When they came to visit me they trod gingerly, sniffing the air, peering about for an adjacent chamber of horrors. Sometimes I detected a shiver. That bogy-man [sic] of fiction, the villainous heathen Chinee with long fingernails and dangling queue, had not yet been effaced by Pearl Buck and Lin Yu-t’ang. Even Anita [a local friend from Chile] said that she felt uneasy in Chong Sung’s presence (Acton as qtd. in Thorniley 184).

Thus, disappointed yet hopeful of the changing social trends towards cultivating a greater sympathy towards China, Acton delineates himself as a person willing to fight against such fallacies, even at the cost of social ostracization. His innate love for China, the blossoming of his intellectual and artistic sensibilities in the country, his need to escape the stifling societal norms and a highly industrialized world of Europe, thus transformed it into “a spiritual home”, a fact made more poignant by his sustained belief that “through cultural and aesthetic appreciation...greater closeness and understanding” may be forged “between two nations” (Thorniley 187).

Nevertheless, the motif of cultural alienation or exile is also something that continues to hover over Acton’s writings, his memoirs and fiction. Having been deeply influenced by China, Acton it seems sought a kind of association or closeness with the culture and its people, which remained frustrated due to his outsider status. Both a sense of intimacy and a sense of alienation towards China, therefore engenders an irreconcilable contradiction, a dichotomy that sets the stage for the development of the characters in his novel *Peonies and Ponies*.

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CAUGHT BETWEEN TWO WORLDS: CULTURAL HYBRIDITY AND DELUSION IN THE EXPAT, PHILIP FLOWER:

Haunted by a deep sense of rootlessness and cultural hybridity, Philip Flower, a character loosely based on Acton himself, seeks an affinity with China that remains stifled throughout the narrative. Introducing Peking as a sort of “mistress”, Flower in the very first chapter is portrayed as being deeply revolted by the likes of Mrs. Mascot whose callous indifference towards the country irks him to the point of sympathizing “whole-heartedly with the most ruthless and fanatical of Boxers”, undoubtedly a reference to the Boxer Rebellion of 1899-1901, that shook the foreign world of the treaty ports by its large scale anti-foreign and anti-Christian activities by rebelling peasant masses and secret societies during the turn of the century (Acton 2). Distressed by the wholesale imperialist incursions of the Western world, Flower appears to be stuck in a past that had long ceased to exist. Perceived as a “ceremonious clown”, a “Manchu maniac”, a “patronizing British imperialist” and a “self-styled Sinologue” by both his foreign and Chinese compatriots, Flower leads a life alienated from his entire community—“...the barrier of being British separates me from the Chinese, and I am too Chinese for the foreign community”(Acton 78).

Beneath the pathos of his seclusion, however lies an essentially flawed understanding of his immediate socio-political milieu. While the readers are able to sympathize to a certain extent with his desire to “meet the Chinese on their own ground and be accepted as one of them” or the need for company in his advancing years, the sheer scale of his obsessions in a way not only alienates the readers, but also integrates him into the coterie of those misinformed expatriates and settlers who treated China as an exotic locale to be exploited and exoticized. Thus, in his need to be ‘adopted by a Chinese family’, to perform the ancient ancestral rites, his declaration that his household staff has “descended from those who had formed the Imperial Household brigade”, his almost melodramatic desire to be buried in Peking, his proclamation that—“My

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body is foreign but my soul is Chinese” (Acton 98), or even in his absurdly comical longing for the restoration of the Manchu dynasty, one perceives a similar incomprehensibility that afflicted the self-proclaimed experts of China, namely writers such as Rodney Gilbert, J.O.P Bland, Edmund Backhouse or Reginald F Johnston, all of whom not only undermined the significance of Chinese nationalism, but also furthered a quintessentially flawed and delusional support for the restoration of monarchy, even going so far as to uphold a pro-Manchukuo (Japan’s puppet state in Manchuria, 1932) stance which ultimately amounted to a baseless attack on their own state at the height of the World Wars.

His passion for an ultimate union with China, which manifests in his adopting of the young actor Yang Pao-ch’in is also absurdly sentimentalized—“...I was drawn to Yang the moment I set eyes on him. He appealed to my imagination...I suppose it’s because he is a living symbol of China and I’m in love with China” (Acton 121). In his attempt to actualize his longing for a complete communion with the chosen land of his exile, he forces upon Yang all the bygone accoutrements of an antiquated Chinese world—a classical Chinese education, a Manchu tutor to oversee his protégé’s progress, an astrologer to identify the auspicious time for commencing his studies, the elaborate apparel of ancient times, all of which ultimately lead to an absurdly theatrical recreation of a fantasy which subsumed the very nature of China’s reality. Transforming himself into an “extinct type of Oriental” by affecting an entirely Chinese lifestyle, Flower thus seeks something he is never able to achieve—to make Yang adhere to his outdated perception of China and in the process achieve a sort of spiritual union with the country. In his final character arc, the readers therefore witness a brand new Philip Flower, a detached pessimist who lives on in spiritual exile even after the ushering of a full-scale Japanese invasion after the Luguo Bridge incident of 1937. In failing to find the succor and companionship that he had so deeply sought, Flower under Mr. Tun’s (Yang’ Manchu tutor) influence turns towards

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Buddhism, which ultimately guides him towards the life of a recluse, living alone in his Chinese home, detached from all of life's concerns.

A VICTIM OF TIME: CULTURAL EXILE AND AMBIVALENCE IN THE WESTERNIZED CHINESE, TU YI:

This sense of a cultural exile stemming from a cultural hybridity is present in equal parts in the West educated Alice Tu or Tu Yi. Introduced in the second chapter by Elvira MacGibbon, the artistic socialite of Peking's expatriate community, as a "porcelain mask" that hides the true nature of the girl, Tu Yi is presented as someone who is unable to cast off her Chinese identity. She continues to remain an inscrutable enigma and despite Elvira's efforts they eventually drift apart only to be reunited at the Peking theatre a couple of years later when Miss Tu appears to have cast aside all vestiges of her life in Paris. Driven by the compulsions of an intensely traditional society, Yi all too suddenly had been thrown back into a life of restrictions after her return to China—being forced to marry and then branded as "unfilial" and a "Communist" when she had refused. The essence of her personality is summed up by her own words to Elvira—"You do not know China...My family considers itself progressive, but in essentials it remains conservative. What does it matter if the bride's sedan chair is replaced by a motor car? Underneath it all the conventions are the same. In China progress is measured by motor-cars" (Acton 24-25).

Tu Yi cultural hybridity, stemming from both a sense of loyalty to and aversion towards her homeland, together with the inability to fully escape the constraints of her life despite being "the only full-time lady member of the faculty" at Mo-teng University, consequently engenders a conflict in her personality. This ambivalence, as it were, remained quite common among "returned" Chinese students since the 1870s. As Jerome Ch'en observes:

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The intellectual ambivalence of the 'returned' students naturally percolated deeper than the levels of life-style and languages. Their love of China and Chinese values was just as intense as their hate. They were quite incapable of resolving the conflict between Eastern and Western values and yet they were emotionally committed to both China and the country in which they had studied. Most Western-trained students in humanities and the social sciences un-bashfully displayed their two sets of mutually contradictory loyalties; they defended Chinese values against Western criticism and defended Western values against Chinese criticism. In so doing they were culture mongers rather than original thinkers trying to arrive at a coherent synthesis of these two great traditions (Ch'en 159).

Such a cultural ambivalence undoubtedly engendered a crisis of identity and in an age when the country (i.e., China) itself was grappling to reconcile the extremes, represented by the Confucian tradition on the one hand and Western modernization on the other, it seems quite apparent that the nation's intelligentsia would face a similar dilemma. With the intellectual, social and cultural effulgence of the May Fourth Movement of 1919, the country had been ushered into an age of progressive modernism that not only paved the way for new modes of thoughts and reforms on a national scale, but also saw the emergence of the modern, educated woman, influenced not just by the revolutionary spirit of the times but also by "new role models in the guise of famous Western figures like Joan of Arc, Mme. Roland, Florence Nightingale and Catherine Beecher, whose biographies were translated, printed and reprinted in magazines" (Spence 240-241). Nonetheless, continuing imperialist incursions, the corruption of the warlord regime, the mounting tensions between the Nationalist government and the Communist Party, a heightened nationalist and anti-imperialist sentiments among the populace, together with Japan's increased aggression, entailed that the country remained in a state of flux and unremitting disturbance with cultural and social progressiveness barely managing to penetrate the bulwarks of tradition.

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Such an ambivalent and equivocal state undoubtedly engendered a conflict of identity and allegiance with an irreconcilable gap existing between the traditional orthodoxy of the previous ages and the emerging progressive modernism of the 20th century. Thus, in a later episode when Yi meets Feng, her potential romantic interest, she cogently sums up this emotional and intellectual turmoil that had ultimately served to render her numb and indifferent—“When I was abroad I could only think of China...I longed for the day of my return. And all throughout my absence I felt that a great thing was happening at home...I mean the intellectual awakening of the people, the flowering of a new consciousness...Then I came home...My family soon made me realize that this was an illusion. I was scarcely allowed to be an individual. There was nothing I could do for my family represented China to me” (Acton 179-180). Discoursing further on the contradiction so much a part of the Chinese social milieu, Yi muses on how the country’s fight against feudalism and backwardness, have itself remained a hollow sham, with the winds of progress barely penetrating the façade of modernism. “It is not the toiling masses who are oppressed” she says “...It is we the intellectuals, who bear the greatest burden” (Acton 181).

As a climax to Tu Yi’s character arc, the readers are once again taken back to her relation with Elvira, the person who functioned as her sole link to her life in Europe. Having confided that emotional coercion from her family had ultimately compelled her to accept marriage much to the consternation and disillusionment of Elvira, Yi attempts suicide by hanging herself, an episode whose pathos and poignancy is once again undermined by the farcical situation engendered by Mr. and Mrs. Tu together with Elvira’s domestic help regarding the tree being haunted by a hungry ghost out for revenge.

Despite surviving the attempt on her life, Yi ultimately is unable to escape her fate. Married off to a certain Yu Wang-shu and subsequently having to resign her position at the university, Yi it seems is buried alive in a coffin of traditions, obligations and ceremony, all at the cost of her independence and intellectual fruition.

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HYPOCRISY OR SINCERITY: THE DILEMMA OF THE CONSERVATIVE PATRIOT, FENG CHUNG-HAN:

Yet another character, suffering from conflicting allegiances is Feng Chung-han described in the second chapter as “a poet with a future.” Introduced to Tu Yi by the socialite Elvira, Feng it seems is trapped within the same dilemma of tradition vs. modernity that his country had been grappling with. Intensely patriotic and plainly critical of all things foreign, Feng throughout the narrative demonstrates a cross-cultural hybridity quite unlike Flower or Yi. Posturing as someone concerned with the well-being of his nation, Feng at the same time is unable to elude the bonds of tradition that appear to be deeply integrated in his consciousness. Thus, amidst the sound of the distant hu-ch’in and Yi’s fervent singing, Feng is moved to raptures—“At last I feel I’m in contact with reality—the reality of our China...With all those foreigners about me it was hard to realize I was in China” (Acton 32-33).

The motif of Western imperialist incursions and what it entailed for the Chinese, especially on an intellectual and psychological level, is perhaps made most apparent in the characterization of Feng. Published shortly after China’s New Cultural Movement of the 1910s and 20s, when the nation as a whole was attempting language and cultural reforms by promoting a greater emphasis on scientific sensibilities, egalitarianism, modernization, social progress and anti-Confucianism with the vestiges of tradition and convention still percolating deep into the people’s consciousness, the ambivalence of Feng and those in his position seem quite manifest. Thus amidst the incessant propaganda, conferences and assembly aimed at cultivating “the spirit of the Chinese race among the people to-day, so that that nation could develop into a stronger state to meet the present crisis”, Feng in Acton’s narrative becomes a mouthpiece for articulating the ills of imperialist incursions, as he repeatedly harps on about the sheer callousness and indifference of the insouciant foreign world that went about its own, selfish pursuits, disregarding of the poverty, suffering and exploitation just beyond their hallowed circles (Acton 36).

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Perpetually perturbed by worries of China's present plight, Feng also demonstrates a narrow-minded, almost provincial mentality. Consequently, he finds dancing halls unpatriotic, fears for the impact that Western culture might have on Chinese womanhood—"...you foreigners bring with you the wrong influences...Callow youngsters who look to the West for enlightenment might think there was something in it, might search for a message behind all this nakedness and wriggling. It's bad enough for them to see models of Venus of Milo exhibited in our stores...The missionary schools are producing a new type of Chinese girlhood, with mind and muscles like that Russian dancer", and demonstrates a deep-seated aversion towards anything that does not conform to his particular version of nationalism or femininity (Acton 141).

Despite this, however, Feng is unable to reconcile both ends, and his own perception of himself as someone with "modern opinions" comes in sharp contrast to the reality of things. Thus, in the Black Dragon Pool episode when he meets Yi alone, this ambivalence resurfaces yet again—"As soon as one left the city, the power of tradition imposed itself in one form or another...he was afraid of being considered foreign, no true son of Han...Yet he could not help wishing that he and Yi were foreigners" (Acton 178). Stifled by traditions, yet unable escape, Feng not unlike Yi becomes a victim of cross-cultural hybridity, and although he is revolted by what he perceives as a sort of "colonization of the mind" by the influence of Western discourse and incursions, he himself remains powerless against its influence. This contradiction is addressed yet again in the portraiture of Feng's mother, a woman considered much too "progressive" and hence ostracized by her own family, being a supporter of Sun-Yat Sen and adhering to Western standards by providing a Western education for her sons, but who nevertheless, continues to be caught up in constraints of conventions as demonstrated in her interactions with Yi, who feels stifled by the conventionality and tediousness of the son and mother duo.

Not surprisingly then, in Feng's final character arc, one finds him, once again succumbing to his fantasized, almost reverential perception of womanhood in his interactions with Miss Hsu, a

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woman his mother has chosen for him to marry. Interestingly, Miss Hsu is projected as a perfect amalgam of things traditional and modern. Working as a nurse at a certain hospital, Miss Hsu, according to Feng's mother is "a rare exception", one who is able to maneuver the intricacies of balancing a professional, independent life while at the same time being "keenly aware of her social obligations" (Acton 280). Thus, while Feng had been at a loss to perceive the complexities of Yi's character, he seems completely capable of comprehending the conventional triteness of Miss Hsu.

DISSIMULATION AND DELUSION: CONFLICTING ALLEGIANCES AND INTELLECTUAL COLONIZATION IN THE CHRISTIAN THEORIST LI AND THE "OCCIDENTAL MANIAC" YANG:

Such a conflict of identity and culture is perhaps made most palpably discernable in the characterizations of the Westernized Chinese thinker and philosopher Dr. Li Ssu and Flower's protégé Yang. The mission trained Dr. Li introduced by Elvira in the second chapter becomes an awkward rendition of the notion of "colonization of the mind", whereby his entire personality, it seems is marked by a monumental contradiction—"A Chinese vicar of Bray, alternatively he strove to be all things to the East and all things to the West: in Chinese circles he spoke of Westerners as the 'only barbarians we have failed to assimilate'; among Anglo-Saxons he would denounce the 'rickshaw civilization' of China, and laud his missionary friends for all they have done to emancipate Chinese womanhood" (Acton 17). A hypocrite, Dr. Li, who despite harping on modernism failed to unbound his wife's "lily hooks" or relinquish the influence of the Confucian tradition despite being outwardly critical of it, is delineated as someone who abhors the Westerners, but is equally keen to impress them, even discoursing at great lengths about the whole-sale impact that Western modernism and progress has had on the Chinese civilization. It is therefore, quite ironic that at the very end of Acton's narrative, Dr. Li is made the "Minister of

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Education”, an action which yet again reinforces the cultural skepticism so much a part of 20th century China.

A complete delineation of the notion of “self-otherization” and “colonization of the mind” is however made most apparent in the characterization of Philip’s protégé, Yang Pao-ch’in, an actor whom he adopts after the execution of Yang’s Manchu tutor Mr. An, a character suspected of being an agent of the Japanese. Completely enamored by the West and all that it represents, Yang throughout Acton’s novel harps on being “modern” and seems possessed by what Philip describes as an “Occidental mania.” Reluctant to wear the clothes of his own country or speak in his own language, Yang functions as a sharp contrast to Philip’s monomaniac fixation with ancient China. “I want to be modern”, Yang declares often, even expressing his fervent desire to leave Peking and travel to a foreign country. Yang’s enthusiasm for the West, however wanes significantly by the end of the novel, when he expresses an eagerness to fight the Japanese and work towards the absolution of all treaty privileges. The war against Japan, as Acton had himself observed had “strengthened and canalised” the artistry and innovation of Chinese writers, even furthering that—“China’s Renaissance may truly be said to have begun with the Sino-Japanese war” (Acton as qtd. in Thorniley 177). Thus seized by the spirit of nationalism, so much a characteristic of his times, Yang not only fails to actualize the union that his adoptive father seeks with China through him, but also becomes a manifestation of the cultural hybridity and nationalistic consciousness exemplified by the other Chinese characters.

EXTORTION AND MISUSE: THE ORIENTAL ENCHANTRESS, MRS. SHIELA MASCOT:

This ambivalence, however, is not a part and parcel of all of Acton’s characters. His sharp yet skilful delineation of the expatriate foreign community of Peking, gives his readers a sense of the class conscious and rigid world whose residents clung to their own exaggerated sense of a white

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supremacist identity, engendering a self-sustaining world that functioned in the niches of the Chinese empire, extorting and exploiting its resources and traditions. Thus, the jack of all trades, Mrs. Sheila Mascot has the reputation of creating “just the right Oriental atmosphere” for her customers and visitors, so much so that they finally “felt” as if they were in China. “My outlook has been so steeped in the visions of the Orient that I’m afraid I’ll get all out of focus by dabbling in the Occident”, she declares (Acton 123). A conscienceless predator of China’s culture, art and heritage, Mrs. Mascot, the founder of a variety of enterprises (The Costume Salon, the tea shop, the lending library, The Chow Club, a night club named The Whoopee Hop, the Hopei Crafts and Arts) makes a living out of duping people by carefully curating fantastic stories, projecting herself as an authority on all things Chinese and cashing on her position as a long term resident of China. Making a spectacle out of the execution of Mr. An, the teacher of Flower’s protégé, Yang is also not beneath her, even proudly declaring—“Really this is not really so colourful as it used to be, when there were blue-hooded Peking carts instead of motor-cars and all the men had pig-tails—not nearly so dramatic” (Acton 169).

The expatriate world of Acton’s narrative not unlike the hardened treaty port propagandists or “Old China Hands”, generated a certain discourse, propagated further by a series of published works by sinophiles, academics, novelists, missionaries as well as globetrotters. Hegemonizing this discourse by projecting them as the sole authorities on China, these propagandists therefore sought to control not just their own community by keeping them “well-informed” about how to behave or act in China, but also make sense of the world they themselves inhabited. As Bickers notes:

Factual reporting and popular culture's fictions identified difference, taught distance and encouraged distrust. China and the Chinese were denigrated, their politics and society ridiculed. Moreover, these mediums supplied the vocabulary through which treaty port

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recruits made sense of their world, and they shaped the behaviour of treaty port Britons (Bickers 23).

Thus, it is not beyond Mrs. Mascot to beguile innocent travelers by ensnaring them in her perfectly “oriental” mansion complete with a variety of exotic elements, including tea from Empress Dowager Cixi’s lady in waiting (even suggesting that the Dowager herself is still alive), silk from the Forbidden City, a K’o-ssu panel embroidered by the Emperor’s Kangxi’s mother, a boudoir full of exquisite jade objects, etc.

Interestingly, under the literary influence of Kipling, both Mr. and Mrs. Mascot had once been drawn to the missionary vocation earlier in their lives that had eventually led them to the distant land of China. Nonetheless, failure to convert, together with their lack of success in finding “a single case of bestiality” drove them both to separate professions. Dick Mascot, described as “a man of action” speedily changed professions, leaving his spouse behind to ironically pursue a career as a “gun-runner, dealer in high-explosives, adviser to upstart bandit-generals” (Acton 91). Mrs. Mascot, however, stayed behind, changed her name as well as her identity and by a mockery as though of destiny and of her former life, made a living out of “converting” everything she touched into Chinese. It is perhaps not surprising then that Mrs. Mascot, a propagator of fiction on China, ultimately marries the creator of fiction, Lancelot Thistleby, the novelist in search of “local colours”, who had once by the magic of his words drawn Mrs. Mascot towards the Orient.

A NARRATIVE OF ART: INSPIRATION AND DISILLUSIONMENT OF THE ARTISTIC EXPAT, ELVIRA MACGIBBON AND THE AMERICAN OUTCASTS, THE ASPERGILLS:

Yet another motif governing Acton’s narrative is that of inspiration and disillusionment. Peking here functions as a seat of imagination and artistry, a space of exoticism and mystique that lures

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the characters towards the Far East. The discourse at work here is the one that gained immense popularity in Europe during the late 18th and 19th century which witnessed Europe's rise in power post the Industrial Revolution. The 19th century Europeans perceived China in terms of binaries, apprehending it via a series of anti-realistic aesthetics (the 19th century chinoiserie motif in European art and architecture), which reduced the country into a superficial, but nonetheless ubiquitous motif peppered by arched bridges, porcelain plates, comic operas, and opium dens that served the dual function of reassuring the Western world of the imminent decline of the unchanging Chinese civilization, and alerted them to their own role in pushing it towards modernization (Chang 27-31). The misrepresentation of the colonial space, thus becomes an epistemic strategy in which aesthetics become the foundational principles of racial issues.

Thus, Elvira MacGibbon, the eccentric sculptor and socialite of the foreign community in Peking, left behind the "isms" ridden world of 20th century Paris to "penetrate another unexplored reality" (Acton 6). The British biochemist and historian, Joseph Needham had once observed—"Chinese civilization presents the irresistible fascination of what is totally 'other' and only what is totally 'other' can inspire the deepest love, together with a strong desire to know it." So, completely taken in by the fascination of the East, Elvira, it seems is driven by a deep-seated passion to penetrate what she perceived to be the reality of China—"...China was outside her: she was never beyond the fringe of the magic circle. By hook or by crook she was determined to force her way through" (Acton 34). However, much like Philip Flower, her desire for inspiration and understanding remains thwarted, as conveyed much later in her sculpture "Frustration." Questioning the authenticity of China as the "orient", Elvira's musings ultimately border on the absurd—"One was infinitely more remote from modern civilization in Palestine or Morocco", she declares, assigning greater credence even to the novelist Lancelot Thistleby's make belief Orient (Acton 203). Consequently, her myopic perception prevents her from grasping Tu Yi's dilemma, and while she vehemently announces—"This place is a tomb" and that "the finest

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intellect would rot in it”, she remains insensible to the fact that her own statements ultimately further the very narrative of the cultural and intellectual stasis of China that had taken over and proliferated in the consciousness of the white world (Acton 246).

As a final attempt for stimulation, Elvira marries the U.S Marine Robert E Dixon, a union being as frivolous as her own self, fails to provide any succor. Soon bored “intellectually”, Elvira leaves yet again, and just as she had once bid farewell to her life in Europe, so she leaves Peking for USSR, a place which she now looks upon as her “spiritual destination.”

In a similar vein, the outcast Americans Cedric and Veronica Aspergill, who shock Captain Gulley’s provincial mentality by their regular visits to the native “infested” Central Park by reiterating the recurrent motif of an elegant, ancient and graceful Chinese culture as symbolized by the peonies and the old-fashioned English entertainment as signified by the ponies—“I’m afraid Veronica and I prefer peonies to ponies, Captain Gulley”, experience a dilemma similar to that of Elvira (Acton 28). Bored and disillusioned by the lack of stimulus or contact with anyone outside the Legation Quarters, aspiring Sinologue and music composer Cedric Aspergill and his wife soon take refuge in their bedroom, which for them serves as a liminal space of security from a Peking, which they perceive as the source of all their troubles. Soon, however, Cedric takes shelter in Mrs. Mascot’s night club, ignoring and even mistreating his wife, while Veronica, herself tired of life in the East, has a rendezvous with Captain Gulley in Mongolia. Both their escapades, nevertheless end in failure as the narrative ends with their ultimate reconciliation.

CONCLUSION:

Cultural alienation, hybridity, cultural consciousness, and dislocation together with disenchantment and frustration thus forms the basis of Acton’s narrative. “I was writing a novel to illustrate the effects of Peking on a typical group of foreigners and the effects of these foreigners on a few Chinese. Peking is the real hero of the novel...My characters were amalgams

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of actual people...Had I drawn them straight from life, not only would the book have been libelous, it would be dismissed as pure, or impure, grotesquerie” wrote Acton in his *Memoirs* (Acton as qtd. in Sun 54). Reading *Peonies and Ponies*, thus one cannot ignore the inescapable link between Acton’s own life and his fiction. Himself having experienced firsthand the pitfalls of cultural exile and the problems stemming from the Orientalism of the mind, Acton is therefore fully equipped to delve into the complexities and ambiguities surrounding cross-cultural interactions within a colonial space. His own disillusionment following his return to Europe, where “nobody took more than a superficial interest in China” (Acton as qtd. in Thorniley 186), sensitizes further the reader’s awareness of the hazards of transcultural hybridity that became a staple phenomenon of the contact zones. While the anomalous nature of imperialism in China, a country that was never fully colonized, together with its own dynamic socio-political changes during the 20th century did foster a situation that stood apart from conventional instances of colonialism, it nevertheless through its variance engendered new discourses, types and conflicts that challenged as well as deepened the reader’s perception of imperialism and China. Thus, Acton’s characters in his novel, are in a sense types, who through their own peculiarities and complications reinstate the ambivalence so much a part of the author’s own life as well as his social milieu. Thus, in a world haunted by misrepresentation, rootlessness, cultural hybridity and disillusionment, the readers get a sense of not just the inner workings of the expatriate foreign world of Beijing, but also of the cultural contradictions and dichotomy so much a part of 20th century China.

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