

# Orienteering: The Experimental East in Auden's *Sonnets from China*

China was impossible to know.

W. H. Auden

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An eccentric young poet of rising reputation, soon to be branded traitor with the outbreak of world war, W. H. Auden arrived by boat in Hong Kong in February 1938, chain smoking and wearing slippers with the toes cut out. Against this caricature of a man, we place the poet's *Sonnets from China* (1938) that across twenty-one poems modulate different, even competing tendencies in Auden's poetry through the late 1930s. In another poem from *A Journey to a War* (1938), the cross-genre work (co-authored with Isherwood) that introduces the sonnet sequence, the poet initially describes Hong Kong as a banker's circus isolated from the looming, "off-stage" war, thudding "like the slamming of a distant door."<sup>1</sup> Such marginalizing of China within the contemporary geopolitical arena acknowledges the poet's concern about European ignorance of the war in Asia, including his own, which had been going on for at least the previous seven years. Under such apparently inauspicious circumstances that of the persona's ironic dislocation from his subject Auden's Chinese sonnet cycle nevertheless reiterates the crisis apparent within prewar modernism, concerning intervention of the work of art within the political arena.<sup>2</sup> Characteristically, Auden intervenes in this debate formally, by implementing wide-ranging innovations within the traditional structure of the sonnet and its sequencing, whose suites represent a heuristic of necessary re-education for the metropolitan subject traveling abroad.<sup>3</sup>

The first section of this essay situates the *Sonnets from China* in their historical context, as well

engage with works written by Westerners in China in terms beyond Orientalism. I argue that as a de-centered, homosexual subject, Auden is not secure enough to reproduce orientalist platitudes about Chinese subjectivity; rather, he engages with both orientalizing and occidentaling discourses to challenge the British canon, a concert that motivates his formal experimentation. The second section reads the colonial locale — in this case, Hong Kong — as instrumental to Auden’s modernist “orienteering.” Part of China, and yet exempted from the Sino-Japanese war (from 1931 until its invasion by the Japanese in 1941), prewar Hong Kong provided the another staging ground for Auden’s “retour”: the ceaseless deferral, through travel, of colonialist desire.<sup>4</sup> The concluding section offers brief analysis of the techniques Auden utilizes in his sonnet sequence in response to these historical conditions, with various scholars having noted the pressure placed upon modernist poetry to address long-standing preoccupations about the contingency of art when faced with an uncertain world.<sup>5</sup> As one such response, Auden’s experimentation with the sonnet form reveals a “Petrarchan template”<sup>6</sup> that shapes creative displacements of the occult signifier “China.” Auden’s juxtaposition of such metaphoric displacements, and their metonymic relocation within a destabilized Western sonnet form, I refer to here as the text’s “orienteering.” By undertaking such experiments to render the East, Auden does nothing so much as redefine his own formal understanding of the Western sonnet. Disoriented by “China,” yet confirming the unsettling legacy of the West in the East, Auden’s Chinese sonnets emboldened technical practices for which he, residing permanently in America after 1939, would become well-known.

### I. Au Dung

After having failed to secure notoriety as ambulance driver *cum* war correspondent during the antifascist struggle in Spain, by late 1937 a deflated Auden was determined to have a war all his own.<sup>7</sup> The poet seemed bent on unearthing an “authentic” war-reporting experience and

chose China, among other "Asian" options suggested by his agents at Faber's and Random House. The celebrity of war correspondence excepted, there is little preliminary indication that Auden had anything in mind by taking on the project, other than the writing of a travel book along the model of his reasonably successful *Letters from Iceland* (1937). Auden and Isherwood disembarked from London on 18 January 1938 with recollections of their heady sojourn in Weimar-era Berlin. Making sporadic visits to Germany after 1929, the two had marked upper-middle class time abroad by writing occasionally, slumming, and enjoying bouts of sex tourism. Upon arrival in Hong Kong in mid-February, Auden's initial description of the "charming and chaste" locals does little to diminish the impression of his touristic displacement from the Chinese: they appeared to him as one of two types, either "pretty but insipid flowers, [or] sympathetic frogs."<sup>8</sup>

Such stock treatments of the Chinese subject notwithstanding, Martha Bryant suggests that as homosexuals Auden and Isherwood engaged in representational practices of a more subversive nature. Offering a gay camp of documentary reportage, *Journey to a War* parodied wartime tropes of heterosexuality and de-centered the "man-making" feats upon which imperial masculinity and its documentary reportage depends.<sup>9</sup> Under such a guise, yet "conspicuous as actresses",<sup>10</sup> the writers' oblique approach to the East (as homosexual subjects) allowed Auden, newly renamed "Au Dung" in phonetically translated visiting cards,<sup>11</sup> greater latitude to engage "China" in differently colonial, if not expressly counter-colonial terms.<sup>12</sup>

I suggest that the *Sonnets from China* present strategic instances of a semantic counter-colonialism. Specifically, the relation between the sonnets' structure as metonymies of colonialism and the metaphors of absolute cultural difference that are "China," produce instability in the resulting hybridized sonnet form. In such terms, Auden's sonnets subvert a naïve poetic dialogism through their very tendency to allow the Western persona to "foster a compression, an almost intolerable rigor or exclusion in which the lapsed itineraries of a word may come to life."<sup>13</sup> Auden dares not to overwrite "China" using Western poetic

traditions, yet nor does he presume, as Pound did, an imperial monologics of appropriation.<sup>14</sup> The careful balancing act that results, between naïve cross-cultural dialogics and Orientalizing monologics, invokes Auden's own poetic traditions that determine, but do not subsume, the poet's encounters with cultural difference.<sup>15</sup>

Accordingly, neither radically disjunctive of tradition nor "traditional" in the strictly canonical sense, Auden's *Sonnets from China* invoke Orientalizing tropes at the same time as they delimit the scope of the Western imagination and foreground its violence in a time of war. The persona within the cycle tests and reorients the limits of his subject position, not through reinforcement of stock, romantic treatments of Chinese inscrutability, but a foreshortening of the Western gaze that cannot adequately contextualize Chinese alterity.

Auden's "orientteering" during his four months in China likewise may shed some light upon more recent appropriations by Asian artists of Western texts — including Orientalist ones — which scholars have of late described as "Occidentalism":

...a strategy of discourse opposed to Western cultural hegemonism, or an ideological force challenging Western power.... It is far from [being] a full-fledged episteme, covering [as] wide [a] range of learning and representation as Orientalism, nor has it become a discipline.<sup>16</sup>

Undisciplined, Occidentalism draws force not from East versus West binaries (as does Said's formulation), but the discontinuities and slippages between such oppositions.

Inherently deconstructive, the textual practice of Occidentalism is counterhegemonic, allowing that Orientalist texts have to be evaluated in historical context and that they even may have politically or culturally progressive effects in the hands of local artists and movements.<sup>17</sup> As with the case of what Hugh Kenner called Ezra Pound's "magnificent misreadings" of Chinese language and culture, Chen Xiao-mei suggests that Occidentalism — the refashioning of Western discourses by Eastern cultures in terms other than dominance — can avoid the pitfall of essentializing Chinese subordination to the West.

Like Pound's misreadings of Chinese culture, Auden's sonnet cycle orients itself liminally within — or rather astride — both Orientalizing and Occidentalizing discourses through the steady reinscription of sexual difference. The “childish creature” (I: 8) whose *bildung* encompasses the first nine sonnets in the sequence acknowledges the “forbidden fruit” (II: 1) of his homosexual desire, yet abandons his own culture in England (II: 4), because the pleasures he experiences there can teach him “nothing new” (II: 2):

They left. Immediately the memory faded  
Of all they'd known: they could not understand  
The dogs now who before had always aided;  
The stream was dumb with whom they'd always planned.  
They wept and quarreled: freedom was so wild. (II: 5–9)

Even (or especially) in China, the “dogs” of British national tradition tail the poet, and so embolden the cycle's reflexive critique. The poet acknowledges the temerity of all attempts to outpace his dogged pursuers in the Orientalizing tradition (including Marvell, Coleridge, and de Quincey), whose cultural stream flows to China not with the quick but the dumb. And as Pound's poor (meaning “unauthentic”) translations of Lao Tsu and other classical Chinese works attest, one cannot simply outrun the “wild” self, free from aspects of subjectivity informed by Western modes of thought, English language use, and resulting literary conventions. Without knowledge of Chinese, Auden dares to translate his Chinese subject into English, resulting in an entirely different literary construction: a different measurement of an alien reality.<sup>18</sup>

Perhaps the fiercest dog of them all, Arnold's shadow falls everywhere upon Auden's Chinese sonnets, and the cycle does not entirely succeed in recrafting the register of its own anti-Arnoldian defiance: “Across wide lawns and cultured flowers drifted/The conversation of the highly trained” (XV: 3–4). Prevailing and ardent disavowals of the English canon enjoin the dissident cycle to the same national tradition it criticizes: “They hid their pride,/But did not listen

much when they were chidden" (II: 2–3). The implication is that the émigré poets listened a little, and what appears here as just another instance of "modernist exportation" abroad<sup>19</sup> arises from the cycle's mode of anti-nationalist protest, or perhaps of protesting too much against what to them "looked a picture of the way to live" (XV: 8).

Written after Auden returned from China, the sonnets still urge liberation from the strictures of Western subjectivity, to reinvent a touristic sublime beyond the English pale:

Strangers were hailed as brothers by his clocks,  
With roof and spire he built a human sky,  
Stored random facts in a museum box,  
To watch his treasure set a paper spy.

(VIII: 4–8)

The eighth sonnet frames domestic predicaments, the clocks and facts of modern anonymity, against a somber backdrop: the human sky as urban nightmare on the Prufrock model. Such are the metropolitan "push" factors for the persona of Auden's sonnet cycle, in search of sexual and textual alternatives that travel to China can provide, if only provisionally. Even so, the persona may be less of a "stranger" abroad, the argument goes, with his treasure of sexual difference actually something worth guarding there. Such an etiology of conspiracy, Bozorth suggests, marks Auden's use of a coded poetics that "allegorizes cruising as espionage: disguise [as] crucial but [also] fallible."<sup>20</sup>

Within such a sexualized tropology, clearly "Auden country" appropriates China and Chinese subjectivity in "the interest of sexual and discursive liberation."<sup>21</sup> So appropriated, Chinese alterity in the cycle risks effacement in Orientalist discursive terms, "marked by a permeability of signs that is produced by and necessary to the closet."<sup>22</sup> At least initially, then, Auden's poetics of displacement from the English literary tradition clearly conform to conventional imaginings of sexual fulfillment on the beaten path to the exotic East.

Yet the fuller realization of recent historical events, occurring prior

to Auden's arrival and others developing during his visit, urged the poet's consciousness towards a sharper, if still not strictly documentary, appreciation of the difficulties faced by the Chinese and his inability to represent them. Emerging details about atrocities committed during the Japanese attack on the Chinese capital of Nanjing two months earlier, in December 1937, cast shadows upon Auden's otherwise touristic consciousness of newsworthy events. Similarly, on 12 March Auden and Isherwood were notified by German diplomats in Shanghai of Hitler's annexation of Austria, in response to which event Isherwood wrote: "What does China matter to us in comparison with this?"<sup>23</sup>

China did matter, but questions posed to "China," the sign that neither affirmed nor refused Auden's avid approaches, remained necessarily rhetorical. Nor is it clear how Auden could have dared to "reveal" the question of Chinese identity in any case, with the colonial order evaporating around him in wake of the Japanese advance, and the Chinese principals of the anticolonial struggle already engaged and well beyond his orbit.<sup>24</sup> To the extent that Auden did travel beyond the enclaves of the European colonial concessions in Hong Kong, and the now-occupied Shanghai from which they departed China on 12 June, Auden witnessed at every turn the stark irrelevance of Arnoldian civility in full midst of an anticolonial war.<sup>25</sup>

Back in England after midsummer, Auden began work in earnest on the Chinese sonnets, which possess a more aggressively political, if also more reflective, tone than the "London to Hongkong" poems. He gave careful attention to observations recorded in Isherwood's journals and remained wary of prescriptive statements about the Chinese subjects and cultures he observed while abroad. Paradoxically, Auden found himself considered an expert-informant about the "China Question" while on an all-England lecture tour, prompting deep misgivings about his own futility both during and after his visit: "I get very depressed running all over the place chatting about China. Does it do any good?... Or is this just selfish."<sup>26</sup> The sonnet cycle offers evidence of this initially disoriented, and then reoriented, subject position, as Auden composed his Chinese sonnets using the wholly

Western poetic tools, language, and techniques at his disposal. As his and Isherwood's questions suggest, Auden attempts to situate "China" only rhetorically, by stressing the negative impact of the recent colonialist legacy. There remains an Occidentalizing urge throughout, suspicious of colonial allegories that might reduce Chinese alterity to representations of imperial conquest:

The quick new West is false, and prodigious but wrong  
 The flower-like Hundred Families who for so long  
 In the Eighteen Provinces have modified the earth.  
 (XI: 12–14)

Here the immemorial legacy of Chinese history is presented as a great earthen works, which the "quick new West" destroys haphazardly.

By brokering his own liminality from the Arnoldian mainstream, Auden's effacement as British (the "falseness" of the West) allows him to identify his persona with Chinese subjects as refugees, excised from their own local histories because of events beyond their control. Moreover, the expropriated national (and implicitly homosexual) subject of the sonnet cycle is often represented in open spaces — not those of the Asian exotic, but on the battlefield, which location suggests the destruction of Chinese culture and traditions in the service of foreign (Marxian as well as fascist) ideologies:

Far from a cultural center he was used:  
 Abandoned by his general and his lice,  
 Under a padded quilt he turned to ice  
 And vanished

.....

His name is lost forever like his looks.  
 Though runeless, to instructions from headquarters  
 He added meaning like a comma when  
 He joined the dust of C

This vanishing into dus

victimization through anonymity: not that of the Chinese tradition, which is viewed as runic and expressive, but of Western modernity. The latter offers merely punctuation ("like a comma"), signifying a brutal appositive, and representing the banality of the Chinese soldier's death (and of others following him) for whom no merciful full-stop is intended. Asserting the dignity of such an off-stage death, occurring far from imperial and cultural centers (such as Beijing, London, or Tokyo), the persona registers the heroic status of Chinese subjects on the doubled margins of national and colonial consciousness.

The identification of the poet with the soldier also acknowledges a mournful dislocation of the persona from his own off-stage scene of mortality, despite the journalistic imperative to record events truthfully. As both imperial invader and Occidentalizing sympathizer, Auden attempts "through codes of enigmatic heroism ... [to] reject both Romantic sincerity and modernist impersonality,"<sup>27</sup> both of which literary modes ably served colonial elites in China before, during, and after the war. Yet insofar as Auden enjoyed the favors of these elites in Hong Kong and elsewhere (including the British ambassador in Shanghai, Archibald Clark-Kerr) his sonnets bear the onus of colonial complicity and convey "signs which ... mark the passages of earlier exploring men."<sup>28</sup> The persona speaks, in many instances, against its own influence.

The cycle's twenty-first sonnet offers a gentle appreciation of E. M. Forster, the figure, who perhaps more than any other, embodied to Auden (as well as subsequent critics) tensions between homosexuality and its literary construction. Auden concludes his cycle by offering delicate praise for the oldest living dog available, the man who undertook to fashion, but did not entirely achieve, what are considered homosexual counter-discourses in the post-Wilde era:

As we dash down the slope of hate with gladness,  
 You trip us up like an unnoticed stone,  
 And, just when we are closeted with madness,  
 You interrupt us like the telephone.  
 Yes, we are Lucy, Turton, Philip: we

Wish international evil, are delighted  
 To join the jolly ranks of the benighted

Where reason is denied and love ignored,  
 But, as we swear our lie, Miss Avery  
 Comes out into the garden with a sword.

(XXI: 5–8; 13–14)

Auden's final word to Forster was originally his first: what appears in subsequent editions as the concluding sonnet in the sequence was in the first edition a prefatory dedication. As both dedication and summation, the sonnet to Forster brackets Auden's overall project, and attempts to re-route his cycle back home in form of a rarified, yet personable, figure of the British domestic — an old man embraced by, yet also sexually insecure within, the Arnoldian establishment.

Here the persona, like that of the "Musée des Beaux Arts" in Auden's celebrated poem written later the same year, gazes not upon China at all, but backward upon Forster, whose legacy was perceived by the 1930s generation as both profound and somewhat precious. As in "Beaux Arts," the poet invokes a "nostalgia for a past or passing time...in which one could choose not to look back."<sup>29</sup> As the "we" of the sonnet suggests, the persona speaks of a displaced England with an affectionate nostalgia, compelling yet inadequate, that cannot fully compensate for the destructive visitation of imperialism upon China.

Intended to be a competing vision adverse to colonial excess, the sonnet's recrafting of a faraway hope back in England appears not only remote but hapless. Forster's domestic heroine, a resplendent Miss Avery donning the national-allegorical aspect of a martial liberalism, was ill-equipped to resist Hitler at Munich, conveyed the "Truth" of bombs to Asia by arming Japan after World War One, and enticed the persona, represented as a tourist-coloniser (Honeychurch/Turton), toward the false mysteries of the East. The praise here for Forster is real, yet it possesses a rhetorical and retrospective quality that we can at once associate with inefficacy.<sup>30</sup>

Accordingly, Auden's conflicted inheritance from the British

canon situates the various persona of the sonnets in terms of Forsterian cliché, each like Adela, looking for the “real” China, as well as inscribes the inevitable posture of colonialist abjection. The violence of the war in China, including Japan’s involvement in it, was largely the result of Western interference in Chinese affairs. Alongside Auden’s own sense of complicity, the implication of Forsterian inadequacy — Miss Avery stranded as it were back home in the Edwardian garden — rive the otherwise presumptive authority of the British tradition to conceive, let alone render, “China.” That “Au Dung” was conveyed to the front at Suzhou in a rickshaw is an occurrence that, whether or not viewed as mock-colonial reflexivity, bids us look further at the sonnets, in an effort to grasp their achievement in terms beyond apology to a China “laid waste with all its young men slain,/Its women weeping, and its towns in terror” (XV: 13–14).

## II. Hong Kong Retour (the Back Door)

As a poetics of shared predicament, the *Sonnets from China* perform failure and disappointment as the “retour” of the Western metropolitan subject who finds no “home” abroad, in China. The persona of the poem arrives in Hong Kong, fails to liberate himself through the enlistment of the orientalized Chinese Other, and so collapses inward. A Conradian paradigm Naipaul later imbued with postcolonial nuance, the “retour” took Auden away from England altogether — to America.<sup>31</sup>

Much of Auden’s initial desire to embrace the “real” China was motivated by his rejection of the colonial atmosphere he encountered in Hong Kong, where he and Isherwood disembarked on 16 February 1938. Auden was put off by the arrogance and “wait and see” attitude of the British elite, who described the Sino-Japanese war as “merely a quarrel between two sets of natives.”<sup>32</sup> The two writers stayed for ten days as a guest of the vice-chancellor at Hong Kong University, a clear indication that Auden’s stock was rising in the British academy — a role with which he was not entirely comfortable — and which assured him some degree of additional status. The apparent insularity and safety

afforded by the British colonial regime in Hong Kong and elsewhere in China (downplayed as merely the camp-bed circuit Auden and Isherwood traversed, shuttling from one British consulate to another) sustained the fantasy of British regional power and belied actual preparedness. Both inside and outside the colonial ‘rooms,’ the *stanzas* of the sequence convey a Western persona at one dislocated from the Chinese subject and insulated by the British colonial establishment.

What is registered in the sequence, accordingly, is the projection of violence beyond the discursive ‘box’ of the insular colonial elite in Hong Kong, a desire linked to the Western subject’s fantasy of participation. The Westerner has but limited access to the Chinese front, the scene of battle where the Chinese might “not again/Be shamed before the [Western] dogs, that, where are waters, Mountains and houses, may be also men.” The front beyond the colonial enclave initially offers opportunities for what will ultimately amount to bankrupt heroism, a site of struggle where the Chinese subaltern (expressed in the cycle as a “horde” of brothers without name [V: 6; XX: 1]) *may* become men. Although the mainland Chinese soldier’s prospects are uncertain, he is favorably contrasted with the colonized Chinese subject in Hong Kong. In either case, the colonized-uncolonized binary is simplistic, and the persona’s willful dismissal of Hong Kong-style colonialism also deprives him of the latter’s discursivity in historical time, of the means colonialism engages with its subjects, with the latter represented as symbolic absences, or imaginary lacunae, within Western understanding.<sup>33</sup> What results in the Chinese sonnets is a kind of imagined, colonial stasis, falling out of time and memory:

Our global story is not yet completed,  
 Crime, daring, commerce, chatter will go on,  
 But, as narrators find their memory gone,  
 Homeless, disterred, these know themselves defeated.

(XVI: 1–4)

The rejection of narrativity here is significant. By disassociating the chatter of discourse from the producers of dissent, now silenced, the

poem offers little hope either for historical accountability (“their memory gone”) or renewal of different discourses under what will later be called postcolonial conditions. The particular jibe at Hong Kong’s mercantilist origins here, as in the poem “Hong Kong,” leaves no room for what Hong Kong would eventually become: a powerful bastion of capitalism under both Chinese and Western auspices which, in turn, has engendered its own contestatory poetics.<sup>34</sup> Hong Kong is thus the constitutive (if seldom mentioned) coda in Auden’s sonnet sequence, and port of call and embarkation for the colonial imagination, even as the mainland is everywhere present: both sites are necessary to the poet’s orienteering process. Denied access to the Chinese subject, “otherwise,” the soldier-poet must retreat to his own bastion, or as did Auden and Isherwood, not venture far from the protections it afforded.

Hong Kong itself remained ‘safe’ for the English until the Japanese invasion of 18–25 December, 1941, and even after occupation it remained uniquely situated as “subject to a double gaze: that of the English colonialists and that of the Chinese” (qtd. in Lee 325).<sup>35</sup> A discursive battleground where colonial and emergent national (both republican and socialist) discourses were contested, the “China” of different poems in *Journey to a War* throws different and ambivalent colonial voicings: the tautness and sharpening of tone in the *Sonnets from China*, for example, present an anxious departure from the bemusement about prewar Hong Kong that Auden described as a “worthy temple to the Comic Muse.”<sup>36</sup> Consequently, the *bildung* of the sonnet founders: the arrival of the metropolitan poet in Hong Kong, and his valiant marshalling of forces against a perceived external threat, collapse under the weight of disappointment:

At his command they left behind their mothers,  
 Their wits were sharpened by the long migration,  
 His camp fires taught them all the horde were brothers.

Till what he came to do was done: unwanted,  
 Grown seedy, paunchy, pouchy, disappointed,  
 He took to drink to screw his nerves to murder

(V: 5–11)

Once conjoined to colonialism the development of the persona (through the first nine poems) becomes distorted, and his parable stultifies. The denatured, metropolitan voice (“seedy, paunchy, pouchy, disappointed”) casts off the illusion of international fraternity and imposes mastery: what the colonizer “came to do.” Notably, the colonial locale nullifies Western desire, yet also prompts further fantasies of travel elsewhere, “Falling in love with Truth before he knew Her/He rode into imaginary lands” (VI: 5–6).

Excepting such “imaginary” outposts, colonies such as Hong Kong, the Western subject had no beachhead from which to invade the signifier “China,” no space from which to perform the discursive work necessary to translate, if not to justify, the aggression of all of the major European powers in China at the fin de siècle. The launching of the Western subject in Asia therefore required the present absence of Hong Kong as “off-stage” instrument, the colonialist fall-back position when, as it turned out, the desirable prospects of imaginary invasion fragmented. The colonizer looks in the eyes of Truth, “awe-struck but unafraid/saw there reflected every human weakness/And knew himself as one of many men” (VI: 12–14). The “weakness” as presented is at once universally damning and binding: it is the power and temptation of an outworn colonial mastery, a way of viewing the world wherein the colonizer is represented not so much as good or evil but inherently *familiar*, the figure of a flattened and vacuous legacy.

Auden left China after Munich knowing, as everyone did, that his return likely would entail a journey to another war, probably a European one, and would necessitate the profession of a national loyalty he, ultimately, would never make.<sup>37</sup> Moreover, the imminent collapse of East/West discursive distance — the visitation, albeit in a different form, of China’s “native” disaster upon Europe in a context of global war — revealed that the tactics used by the European press to bridge the ideological divide between the Chinese crisis and its European audience had been patronizing. Far from securing a scoop about China (“we’ll have a war all of our very own,”<sup>38</sup> Auden was

overtaken by the Asian war itself; the horrors he witnessed in China did not sit so well with the enthusiasm of the undertaking, and "So an age ended" (X: 1).

Like the persona in *Sonnets from China*, Auden and Isherwood enjoyed this privilege of opting out of — and then back into — the Western-style metropolitanism Hong Kong and other colonial outposts (like the treaty-port Shanghai) afforded. Their escape from the imagined "China" via the back door (as with Spain in 1937 and England after 1939) was wilfully antiheroic but emasculating, an unintended juxtaposition of their return to the West with the option of sexual normalcy — a return via the closet door.<sup>39</sup> This surfeit of colonial options weighs heavily on Auden's Chinese cycle, and overdetermines the poet's dismissals and anxieties about Hong Kong and Macao, 'safe' colonial spaces Auden initially decried as nonconducive to the fashioning of international brotherhood but without which, in terms both real and imaginary, he could not have staged his retour from war-torn China. In the seventeenth sonnet, the denunciation of the colonial subject — his very portability — is palpable:

Think in this year, what pleased the dancers best,  
When Austria died, when China was forsaken,  
Shanghai in flames and Tereul re-taken.

(XVII: 9–11)

Seamless in its presentation, the passive voice used to describe China (which *was* forsaken) betrays the absent and portable colonial subject. It is the chastened poet, even more than the imperial nation, who has forsaken her. On 12 June, Auden and Isherwood opted to embark for America from Shanghai where, even as the city was under Japanese occupation, they had moved about freely.

After China, Auden's poetics would be forever marked by this peculiar spatialization of colonial disappointment he had first observed in Hong Kong: the failure of the liberal Western subject to secure identity within any colonial epistemological framework, combined with the ceaseless desire to find a country someplace else, beyond

colonialism, where (just as impossibly) he could. In other words, the colonial exceptionalism that had prompted Auden's mockery of Hong Kong and Macao had become his own: far from gaining a better purchase on Chinese alterity through his writing, he had merely confirmed his credentials as colonial short-timer, a redundancy in terms that made the poet's many protestations to the contrary sound hollow.

### III. Orienteering

In Auden's cycle, the sign "China" connotes the Westerner's inability to square civic responsibility in political terms with a newer, more expressive vision of poetry.<sup>40</sup> In this context, Auden attempts to craft his sonnets as vehicles for marginalized textual values that a Western poet cannot entirely perceive but attempts to render in the context of civic (one might venture Forsterian) obligation:

Lines came to him no more; he had to make them  
 (With what precision was each strophe planned):  
 Hugging his gloom as peasants hug their land,

He stalked like an assassin through the town,  
 And glared at men because he did not like them,  
 But trembled if one passed him with a frown.

(VII: 9–14)

As above, the "planned" strophes are "made," but do not visit unbidden; the sonnets are forced, subject to the poet's anger at the sympathy withheld him. These lines state clearly the relation between the construction of art and the necessary complicity of the subject: without adequate knowledge of, or favor from, "China," the poet does not create; he kills. Alternatively, he "makes" — risking assassination of the present truth, in hopes for subsequent innovation. Stylistic variation within the sonnets accordingly remains an adequate measure of Auden's own artful attempt to construct a Chinese strophe: the poet's Occidentalist impulses, tempered by his Orientalist urges, are registered with a coeval certitude in the text

In shouldering this complicity, Auden flags it, by turning to considerations of form.<sup>41</sup> Himself a cultural outsider to China, Auden frames the horrors of a modern colonial war in terms recognizable to him, as one among a British audience that could not but view the country remotely. In abeyance of Pound's injunction to break tradition with poetic form, to "break the pentameter," Auden reformatizes his poetic technique by returning to more familiar discursive terrain — rhyme scheme variations within, and modifications upon, the octave and sestet rhythm of the Petrarchan sonnet. In her study of the Petrarchan sonnet form, Sandra Bermann suggests that the privileging of metaphor characteristic of modern literary texts is less pronounced in the sonnets of the early Italian renaissance poet, Francesco Petrarca (1304–1374). The latter's corpus demonstrates "an unusually strong reliance on the metonymic," including syntagmatic characteristics we associate with "the order of words and meaning" rather than on metaphoric substitutions creating new possibilities about the plotting of similarity and difference on the paradigmatic axis.<sup>42</sup> Bermann offers numerous instances where Petrarch curbs the operation of metaphor through a metonymic practice that limits mimetic authority:

...the Petrarchan sonnet often questions its own project and leaves its statements semantically open, almost as if they could continue interminably were the sonnet not restricted in time and space by its very form.<sup>43</sup>

Bermann notes that Petrarch challenges poetic tradition in his poems, particularly Virgil, and "refuses to define his persona according to any precursor... Within its short scope, the sonnet effectively sets forth the poet's metonymic, grammatical patterning."<sup>44</sup>

The structuring weight of Petrarchan metonymy in the *rime sparse* is a useful analogy to that used in the *Sonnets from China*, because the metonymies Auden employs signify inalienable cross-cultural differences between a dominant Western articulation and its elusive Chinese subject. While distancing himself from the Arnoldian mainstream of English literary tradition, Auden returns to an older — but no less Western — model in the attempt to express a radically

different Chinese alterity. Moreover, his text is written in English, for an English audience, and negotiates fields of cultural meaning denoted as “the English tradition.” These several elements, these stylistic “retours,” are linked metonymically to that sociopolitical epiphenomenon produced by British (literary) culture within a specific historical context that renders them homologous: the nexus of signifying relationships called imperialism. By choosing to represent China in the Petrarchan sonnet form, Auden links China irrevocably to a delimiting, and undeniably Western, textual field.

However, as Bermann also suggests, the overdetermination of metonymy in the Petrarchan form necessarily presupposes fugitive metaphor, an embedded linguistic variety that produces ambiguity: “...although the poet binds up these various ambiguities through the force of his grammar ... his complex grammar that so effectively dramatizes this self in fact remains riddled with questioning.”<sup>45</sup> The Petrarchan form which attempts to house such metaphorical difference merely foregrounds the defining grammar of the persona, whose rhetorical questions invite but never fully achieve metonymic or syntagmatic closure, and produce an occult figure of the Other in the text.<sup>46</sup> In terms of such occult utterances and attempts to discipline them, Auden’s Petrarchan sonnets produce Orientalism as the discursive-linguistic metonymy of Western imperialism, the grammar of English dominance, and their ideological reinscription. However, the “occult signifiers” of China Auden does introduce throw the authority of each sonnet into doubt, and question the operative violence of Western metonymy upon Chinese linguistic difference:

Loss is their shadow-wife, Anxiety  
 Receives them like a grand hotel, but where  
 They may regret they must: their doom to bear  
 Love for some far forbidden country, see  
 A native disapprove them with stare  
 And freedom’s back in every door and tree.

(XVI: 9–14)

Here the "native" stares disapproval, even as "China" turns its back to the persona, the "forbidden country" denying him access to any semblance of freedom he may imagine but can no longer remember (XVI: 3). Metonymies of a Western signifying system with a problematic mandate in a time of war, the *Sonnets from China* invoke metaphors of Chinese difference primarily to showcase the locked-in, cultural grammar of the "defeated," "homeless [and] disterred" English persona, (XVI: 4) himself a drifting metaphor cut loose from syntagmatic moorings.

Written in England, by an Englishman who would never again call England home, the *Sonnets from China* are hardly "from" China at all. What comprises the sonnets as a sequence is merely Auden's rather unconvincing assertion that it is one. A de-centered sequence, the various suites (I–X; XI–XV; XVI–XX) lack coherent structure and development, and in the case of the sonnet to Forster (as shifting pretext and post-script), are given a telling, if unsatisfactory conclusion. Moreover, Auden's modification of the Petrarchan form suggests a greater trend toward the deconstruction of standard English sonnet forms, resulting in a proliferating sequence of combined Petrarchan and Shakespearean hybrids. Even as they unravel, however, the exuberant variety of individual sonnet rhyme schemes remain invariably English, and are not exclusively limited to the Shakespearean octave and Petrarchan sestet pattern, as one scholar has suggested.<sup>47</sup> As in Figure 1, only eleven out of a total of twenty-one sonnets in the sequence conform to this pattern. Several among the remaining sonnets achieve a more Miltonic effect, namely the privileging of a loosely Italian form combined with a more lively and variable rhythm. Such vitality, when considered alongside the disjunctive sequencing of the several suites, suggest strong tension within the overall project giving rise to what sonnet scholars of a later literary episteme would call "the urgency of the deconstructive moment."<sup>48</sup> Such tension emerges not only between Western metonymy and occult Chinese metaphoricity as suggested above, but equally from the poet's sampling of the full range (formal, narrative, and lyric) of approaches to the sonnet. The ostensibly Chinese textual field, then, is anything but. Auden's experimentation

with the Petrarchan sonnet form capitalize on the blank field of “Chinese” signification, and prepare the ground for even bolder experiments modeled upon Rilke, who appears “tonight in China,” (XIX: 8) as yet another muse of silent energy.<sup>49</sup>

Figure 1. Petrarchan Rhyme Scheme and Variations in Auden’s “Sonnets from China” (1938)

S#1	2 <sup>a</sup>	3	4 <sup>c</sup>	5	6	7 <sup>b</sup>	8 <sup>a</sup>	9 <sup>b</sup>	10	11	12	13 <sup>c</sup>	14	15	16	17	18 <sup>a</sup>	19 <sup>c</sup>	20 <sup>c</sup>	21 <sup>b</sup>	
line#	μL																				
1	a	a	a	a	a	a	a	a	a	a	a	a	a	a	a	a	a	a	a	a	
2	b	b	b	b	b	b	b	b	b	b	b	b	b	b	b	b	b	b	b	b	
3	b	a	a	c	a	a	a	a	a	b	b	a	b	a	a	b	a	a	c	b	b
4	a	b	b	b	b	b	b	b	b	a	a	b	a	b	b	a	b	b	b	a	a
5	c	c	c	d	a	c	c	c	c	c	c	c	c	c	c	c	c	c	d	c	c
6	d	d	d	e	c	d	d	d	d	d	d	d	d	d	d	d	d	d	e	d	d
7	d	c	c	f	a	c	c	c	c	d	d	c	d	c	c	d	c	c	f	d	c
8	c	d	d	e	c	d	d	d	d	c	c	d	c	d	d	c	d	d	e	c	d
9	e	e	e	g	d	e	e	e	e	e	e	e	e	e	e	e	e	e	g	c	e
10	e	f	f	h	d	f	f	f	f	f	f	f	f	f	f	f	f	f	h	e	f
11	f	e	f	g	e	g	f	e	f	e	f	e	e	g	g	f	f	e	i	c	f
12	g	g	e	g	f	g	g	g	g	e	f	f	e	e	e	c	g	j	f	g	
13	g	f	f	h	e	e	e	f	e	g	e	g	e	f	g	f	e	f	h	e	e
14	f	g	e	g	f	f	g	g	e	f	g	f	g	f	e	c	g	i	f	g	

As the above rhyme schemes suggest, Auden’s formal recontextualization of the signifier “China,” in an increasingly unhinged Petrarchan-English sonnet form, stylizes the deconstructive visitation of the Occident upon the Orient, all the while without conveying prescriptive “truths” about the impact of such cross-cultural encounters. Offering witness to a fascist-modernist will to power (poetic values expressed by Pound in free verse), the sonnets perform Western incursion within a documentary frame (“China”) of civic responsibility and witness. Accordingly, Auden’s “Chinese” sonnets

invite a reciprocal reading against the formal poetic tradition of the West, wherein the sonnet form is destabilized by “occult” significations of Chinese alterity within its stanza-rooms, locked inside the colonial ‘box.’

#### IV. Conclusion

Auden's finding solace within the confines of his own tradition, alongside his culmination of the cycle with praise for Forster as a model, seems at once appropriate — the refusal to speak for “China” — and yet overly modest. Beyond his own Orientalism, Auden does not dare to engage with Chinese subjectivity directly, in terms of a more programmatic and dialogic cross-cultural poetics. Yet his routing of Chinese alterity through the English tradition of the Petrarchan sonnet form signals a more deliberate involvement in a cross-cultural process where the poet's own values, models and cultural forms may be questioned.

The twenty-one sonnets comprise a sequence that meditates upon the role of the Western subject in China, and lend themselves to a broader architecture than that of homosexual displacement. In an orchestrated exploration of Orientalist avowal and willed insubordination toward his own tradition, Auden's sonnets present China as a gay man might, while affirming the ignorance of the Western subject who might claim to read “China” authentically beyond the semiotic pale. For a poet as able as Auden, “China” remains nothing more, and nothing less, than a signifier — some loose amalgam of sensation and privileged misinformation fashioned into discourses of power he would have rendered Otherwise, but as a Westerner cannot.

As a Westerner, Auden cannot in good faith rediscover a lost signified of Oriental fantasy. Rather, his poetic task is to represent a viable, alternative route towards his own subjectivity in terms of a new poetic discourse. Forster's benevolent tutelage Auden might tolerate, but any other rhetoric of filial obligation or *amor patria* was suspect and fair game for revision. Explicitly addressing such a traditional literary

ethos, Auden's sonnets respond creatively in two ways: by invoking Chinese inscrutability to ward off unwarranted incursions the poet himself represents; and by conceding that despite the universal (even desiring) presumptions of colonialism, the Western gaze must remain foreign to a Chinese way of viewing the world, despite his wish that "all the horde were brothers" (V: 8).

With benefit of hindsight one suspects that no textual strategies (explicit or implicit) could fully exculpate Auden and Isherwood of their Orientalism. The pleasures of the body, alongside those of the text, might well have been sufficient to salve any cross-cultural compunction they may have felt. Yet just as clearly, the signifier "China" did serve Auden strategically, and allowed him to render relative, dare I say "Occidentalize," equally arbitrary Western impositions of value upon the Chinese people in wartime, "triggering the author's scrutiny of their own expectations and motives". The persona's willingness initially to acknowledge, and then to recast in Western terms of the sonnet form, his sympathy for Chinese alterity chills the operation of colonial-homosexual allegory in the sonnet cycle. The chilling effect of Auden's liberal critique, moreover, links European and Japanese fascism to global imperialism, which together in ideological lockstep marched toward not only political domination but mastery over all constructions of desire:

...ideas can be true, although men die:  
 For we have seen myriad faces  
 Ecstatic from one lie,  
  
 And maps can really point to places  
 Where life is evil now.  
 Nanking. Dachau.

(XII: 9–14)

In the concluding spondees of the final line, Auden links these two otherwise distinct geographical place names within the topography ("map") of disenfranchisement for European and Chinese subjects alike: "The sonnet, by avoiding the full musical [metrical] statement,

implies that there is nothing more to say" (Fuller 35). In form of desires rendered ecstatic, experienced by Western travelers as the sublime disregard for local cultures, Auden reminds his reader that solipsism in the guise of fulfilling desire can also be a dangerous presumption of imperial power.

The pursued domestic subject (taking leave of national traditions) may always threaten to become the imperial pursuer (merely reimposing national traditions in colonial contexts) by refusing to acknowledge the adverse consequences of the operation he performs with the very utterance of the term "Oriental." Tacking between a Orientalizing sympathy and modest disavowal of the colonial prerogatives that Occidentalists today refashion to their own purposes, Auden's sonnets initially disorient, and then reorient themselves across the identities reduced to binary oppositions in Said's *Orientalism*: as homosexual, Briton, tourist, and colonial insider. The persona in the sonnets consistently refuses to voice such subject positions reductively, thereby threatening to collapse the implied opposition of East vs. West that all too often limits Western representations of Chinese alterity as merely fantasy projections of the desiring Other.

### Notes and References

- 1 "Hong Kong," 11–12.
- 2 Mendelson, xviii–xix.
- 3 "Hong Kong" 11–12.
- 4 Gikandi, 20.
- 5 Mendelson xviii–xix.
- 3 My understanding of the term "metropolitan subject" conjoins different discursive registers within prewar British modernism: the first national (Auden as a British national subject participating within domestic movements, roughly leftist, such as socialism and Mass Observation); the second colonial (Auden as a British colonial subject encountering and producing cultural difference along the routes of empire). These two registers are neither necessarily coextensive nor mutually reinforcing; as in the *Sonnets from China*, Auden's sexuality and flair for populist politics placed stress upon both British national and colonial signifying practices

within the broader context of his global cosmopolitanism. For analysis of the nationalist formations of Auden's politics in the 1930s, prior to his trip to China, see Hynes, *The Auden Generation* and Buzard, "Mass Observation." Lane's *The Imperial Passion*, while not addressing Auden directly, offers a compelling reading of the psychic debts and compensations homosexual writers owed to colonialism.

- 4 Gikandi 20.
- 5 Nigel Alderman describes Auden's *The Orators* (1936), written just prior to the *Sonnets from China*, as a "pocket epic ... simultaneously suggesting an ambitious project of mapping some form of totality and its deliberate restriction. Pocket implies a position secreted within the folds of the major canonical economy of the epic and perhaps hints at some form of obdurate resistance" (1). Morson links modernist contingency in Auden's work to the Aristotelian legacy: "The order of art and the mess of experience: this opposition underlies much Western thought, which...may be seen as a series of footnotes to Aristotle.... For Aristotle, and for the tradition of poetics deriving from him, the harmony of art ideally eliminates all contingency from the artwork" (287).
- 6 Spiller 6.
- 7 Carpenter 225.
- 8 Carpenter 235.
- 9 Bryant, 175.
- 10 qtd. in Callan 128.
- 11 Carpenter 235.
- 12 Such desires may be read problematically, as at once the excesses of the British "nation" and their homosocial accommodation along the broader arteries of the British empire (Lane 8–9). At once desiring and complicit, the sonnets embrace the imperial privileges that Isherwood and Auden enjoyed at the time, "afternoon holidays from their social consciences" in Shanghai brothels (and elsewhere) with male prostitutes (qtd. in Bryant 180).
- 13 Boly, 27. The textual and sexual dialogics of Auden's poetry have been analyzed in detail elsewhere (see Boly; Bozorth). Here I would extend these readings further to include the constitutive and cross-cultural emergence of the signifier "China." As observed in the next section of this essay, "China," such as it is, appears in the sonnet cycle not as the "authentic" signified of Western discovery, but the reconstructed, occult signifier that inhabits and remains resistant to the Western sonnet form the poet imposes.

- 14 Bakhtin rejects the genre of poetry out of hand in favor of narrative prose, whose terrain he views as more amenable to an emergent historical materialism. In contrast to the "one unitary and indisputable discourse" of poetry, the historical consciousness of the novel invites the effectuation of political change (Bakhtin 286).
- 15 In this respect, I distinguish Auden's poetic text from his related performances as camp colonizer, amateur photographer, and sex tourist, activities which Carpenter loosely groups under the label of schoolboy antics "on holiday among a crowd of comic foreigners" (Carpenter 236). Similarly, the "carnavalesque" aspect of Auden's intellect invites a Bakhtinian reading of his Chinese poems, rather than their crystallization of specific traditions within the British canon (Callan 8).
- 16 Wang, 66.
- 17 One notable example of Occidentalism in the Chinese context is the Meng Long school that in the 1980s used Pound's translations to contest the hegemony of Western poetic modes (qtd. in Heise 269).
- 18 Translation studies focus neatly on-going debates about the role of interpretive arts in grasping cultural difference: "Literary translation can only fail to seem audacious to a person who has never attempted it. The result is bound by nature...to be inadequate, but the translator persists despite that knowledge, responds to certain defeat not with resignation but by mustering the highest possible degree of creativity and passion. Translation is a form of imitation that is anything but slavish. It is a practice of writing in which the writer, having recognized the necessary limits, settles down to making hard choices" (Burian 301). Of translating without any prior knowledge of the language, the well-known American poet and translator, W. S. Merwin, mentions Auden directly: "I don't know that such a procedure can be either justified or condemned altogether, any more than translation as a whole can be. Auden, for one, thought it the best possible way of going about it" ("Preface" 99).
- 19 Blanton, 341.
- 20 Bozorth, 720.
- 21 *Ibid.*, 711.
- 22 *Ibid.*, 712.
- 23 Carpenter, 236.
- 24 Through diplomatic connections, Auden and Isherwood met Chiang Kai-shek, and via Agnes Smedley, representatives of Mao's Eighth Army, with both Nationalist and Communist armies in uneasy alliance against the invading Japanese (Carpenter 225; 236).

- 25 Callan, 129.
- 26 qtd. in Mendelson, xxxiv.
- 27 Bozorth, 723.
- 28 Bryant, 185.
- 29 Harries, 233.
- 30 Forster, for all his great impact in fashioning liberal critiques of empire, had never been beyond India and the Middle East. Rather, the Edwardian novelist emblemized to the younger modernists not only the laudable allegiance to moderate principles in extreme times, but an entirely un-Forsterian dilemma: Auden's homosexual cathexis for the plight of the Chinese soldiers cannot fully accommodate ("only connect") his conflicting attitudes toward his own literary and liberal inheritance.
- 31 Auden's own retour was emblematic: he did not return to England the way he came, departing with Isherwood from Shanghai and traveling via Vancouver to the United States, the country he would later adopt. Of the two men at the height of their abilities as writers, Carpenter writes, "[They] had in a sense left China empty handed" (239). On the other hand America, as to Lawrence before him, seemed to Auden to present new possibilities. Blanton writes that even beyond Pound and Auden, "The ideological identification of modernity with America the question "how might one be modern elsewhere?" has imprinted itself on British poetry ... [and] continues in a series of largely underground borrowings, from Black Mountain to language poetry" (342). The institutionalization of Auden, among others, within the New-Critical American establishment after the war is the subject of Rasula's analysis in *American Poetry Wax Museum*.
- 32 Carpenter, 234.
- 33 JanMohamed, 83–5.
- 34 [See P. K. Leung and Agnes Lam]
- 35 qtd. in Lee, 325. Lee makes special note of the fiction of contemporary Shanghai writer Eileen Chang, whose *Violet (Ziluolan)*, 1943) recounts the "butterfly" tale of a young woman who turns to prostitution in Hong Kong. Chang's "othering" of Hong Kong within a broader Chinese context complicates the rather-too-tidy notion of a British, Hong Kong-based Orientalism diffusing northward along Auden and Isherwood's touristic route.
- 36 "Hong Kong," 4.
- 37 Forster publicly defended Auden and Isherwood's emigration to America in the press (*Spectator*, 5 July 1940) after hearing that the young writers

had been criticized in the House of Commons. With all dignity and flourish the septuagenarian could command, Forster wrote: "...whether there could not now be a close time for snarling at absent intellectuals... The attacks are highly moral and patriotic in tone, but their continuance raises the uneasy feeling that there must be something else behind them .... It diverts public attention from certain Englishmen who really are a danger to the country... Let [our "literary lampoonists"] leave their absent colleagues alone...and denounce our resident Quislings instead" (Furbank 2: 238).

38 Carpenter, 225.

39 Hong Kong figured prominently as the "back door" for numerous (British) colonial invasion narratives, including an anonymous publication from 1897, recently reissued, which involved the invasion of Hong Kong by Franco-Russian armies from the north (Bickley 11–18). As Chang and Auden's narratives likewise suggest, the presence of Hong Kong as a multi-directional portal, from which "China" could be entered, exited, and discursively *situated* by both Chinese and Western elites was crucial to the construction of Hong Kong as a "back door" for both Chinese and colonial elites before, during, and after the war.

40 Mendelson, xvii–xviii. Mendelson suggests that the historical crisis of the 1930s provoked a bifurcated response within modernist poetry: toward civic obligation, which produced a dangerous inclination toward authoritarian politics; and a vatic impulse, based upon freedom from previous models of tradition.

41 I do not presume to establish the now unfashionable, apparently hydraulic, relation between form and content. Positing some discernible content of the form, however, can allow us to make better judgments of how Auden's sonnets interact with their Chinese subject in destabilizing concert, in an effort to crack a Chinese code without a cipher, a poetic practice Shoptaw calls "lyric cryptography." Lyric cryptography takes a poem "neither as an isolated object nor merely as a document for cultural study, but as the product of multiple forces, some of them deriving from the poet...others from his or her history, culture, and especially language" (221).

42 Bermann, 18–19.

43 *Ibid.*, 38.

44 *Ibid.*, 44–45.

45 *Ibid.*, 41.

46 Jameson, 114–15. Of such questionings, Jameson writes, "The social

totality can be sensed ... from the outside, like a skin at which the Other somehow looks, but which we ourselves will never see" (114).

47 Spiller, 6.

48 *Ibid.*, 31.

49 Such experiments previously included the sonnet-like narrative verse of "The Secret Agent" (1928) and ultimately moved Auden beyond the Petrarchan form in "The Quest" (1940).

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