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Macbeth of Kelantan

Abstract:

‘Macbeth of Kelantan’ is an accompanying piece to ‘How to Read Shakespeare in the Post-Atomic Age’, a paper that I presented at the 2018 AAWP conference. Both short stories use Pierre Bourdieu’s cultural capital theory as a point of departure to untangle the complexities of how individuals assign different values to various reading practices in situated contexts. Both stories draw on key themes that emerged from a small qualitative study which examined the cultural capital of reading. While ‘How to Read’ examines the value assigned to reading canonical literature across generations, ‘Macbeth of Kelantan’ explores how the value of reading practices are negotiated across fields.

Biographical Note:

Emily Sun is based in Whadjuk Noongar Country and has been previously published in various anthologies and journals, including *Cordite Poetry Review*, *Mascara Literary Review*, *Australian Poetry Journal*, *Westerly*, and *Growing up Asian in Australia*. She recently completed a Research Masters in English and Creative Arts at Murdoch University.

Keywords:

Cultural capital – habitus – Pierre Bourdieu – postcolonial Australia – Asian-Australian

People who understand everything get no stories. – Bertolt Brecht (2015: 52)

He will not cry because men of his generation do not cry. It was beaten out of them late last century.

I'm sure my father has cried. It's just that he does it behind closed doors. He often emerges from his room with puffy red eyes, but blames it on hay-fever, the damn pollen from the bottlebrush that the neighbour refuses to prune, or an immune system finally weakened by age, even though the only time he's caught a cold in the past decade was when he ate my son Ethan's leftovers when Ethan had the flu.

In his late eighties, Dad is older than the average nursing home resident and far older than our next-door neighbour who can only leave his house on a mobility scooter. Dad's still capable of re-paving the patio, washing the car, and rearranging the furniture. Neighbours often see him cycling to the shopping centre in his old Superman t-shirt. His only kryptonite is what he perceives as my son Ethan's distress, so it is worrying when I return home one evening to see him curled up in foetal position with an opened packet of Panadol on his bedside table. In all the years I've known him, he's rejected medication and has never spent a single day in bed. He refuses my offers of assistance and grimaces in pain when he attempts to sit up.

Men are not allowed to cry. That's why he still hasn't spoken to Mrs Lim, the widow of his best friend, since old Lim died from a stroke or a heart-attack not long after they lost their only son. No one really knows how the son died because my father still refuses to phone her, even though she's an old friend from one of the Malay villages in which he spent his peripatetic childhood. His excuse is inertia. It's been five years since he's made an outgoing call, and, besides, there are too many time-zones in America.

My father was born in Malaya before the second world war, decades before Malaysia and Singapore became independent nation states. His parents, like other Chinese sojourners of the early 20th Century, went to the British colony of Singapore to get rich quick, send money home to relatives, and had every intention of returning home one day. His father was one of the first generation of university graduates in Doctor Sun Yat Sen's new Republic of China, and he shared the common dream of intellectuals to restore China, the humiliated 'sick man of Asia', to the prosperous and powerful middle-kingdom it once was. An idealist, he joined the home-office department in Nanjing in the 1920s, but when Doctor Sun died of cancer in 1925 the fragile new nation fell into the hands of feuding warlords. The country once again plunged into political chaos, which led to civil war in 1927. That was most likely the year my grandparents fled China.

My father has always said that his parents were ill-suited to life in the colony. They had no business nous to survive in the cut-throat colony, nor a clan to protect them from opportunists. My grandfather was a bookworm who did not have the strength or stamina of the coolies to work the rubber plantations and tin mines.

'This is the first time in 80-plus years that I've taken paracetamol,' Dad states. 'Mr Edwards drove me this morning to the doctors,' he says. 'They did an echogram ...'

Mr Edwards is a neighbour who is the same age as Dad. He grew up in country Victoria and the two would have had little in common a decade ago, but, as most of their friends are dead, sharing the same timeline is enough to forge a friendship. The last time I saw Mr Edwards was the day he was diagnosed with terminal cancer and announced that he could no longer deliver bread to those in need. No one, especially those who've lived through war time food rationing, is comfortable throwing fresh bread and pastries in the bin. At the end of that last bread run, Mr Edwards spoke of all the beautiful and ugly places he'd been as a Qantas air-steward: a postcard-perfect sunset on a beach in Fiji, the ruins of Ancient cities, and a local police cell where he was raped by a homophobic policeman who arrested him for being gay.

'The policeman is probably still alive,' Mr Edwards had said without bitterness.

Imminent death makes you divulge stories that you thought you would take to the grave.

'Is there tightness in your chest?' I ask my father. 'When do you get the results? Did you see the GP who makes you take an echogram even if you're in for a runny nose?'

'I was working in the garden ...' he winces, as he gingerly props himself up.

'You always work in the garden ...'

'I saw some bricks on the neighbour's verge...'

'It was so hot today. Did you wear a hat?'

I ask him questions one would ask a five-year-old child because my Chinese is limited. In my late teens I made the conscious decision to stop speaking to him in English, in hopes that it would improve my Cantonese. But it didn't.

'I don't need to "Slip, Slop, Slap,"' he says. 'I grew up in the jungle. I survived malaria and appendicitis without doctors.'

His face screws up in pain when he turns to get out of bed. I insist that I take him to Emergency and to my surprise he does not object.

He slowly gets out of bed while I pack a small bag for him just in case he is kept overnight. I help him put on his 'A-team' flanno, his favourite; one that he wore when he took Mr Lim to Shark Bay almost two decades ago. In the grunge era, the dirty and torn 'Made in China' jacket with missing buttons would have been 'on-trend', but in boom-town Perth and the age of cheap fast-fashion, he looks like an anachronistic beggar, one who would not be out of place in Dickensian London. He is halfway to the car when he remembers how long Mr Edwards had to wait in emergency, and asks me to grab his book, a dog-eared copy of *Mill on the Floss*.

It's rainy and visibility is low, so I take the route lit by warm fog lights and neon from the shops and petrol stations dotted along the main road. Even with the windows up and the drizzle of rain, the smell of overused cooking oil and fried, battered chicken wafts into the car when I stop at the lights outside clusters of fast-food joints.

Dad asks me to speak for him when we get to Emergency. He doesn't need to explain why because growing up it wasn't uncommon for us to say 'I no speak Inglis' when

missionaries knocked on our door. When I was older, I noticed that the people soliciting our souls were Asian as we'd been earmarked by previous proselytisers as non-English speakers. Our new strategy was to pretend that no one was at home.

In the emergency department, I repeat the words that Dad already understands and translate his answers to the triage nurse's questions. He is rushed through to the ward where he is immediately tethered to a heart and blood pressure monitor.

Dad reads his novel and I flick through a *Woman's Day* magazine that someone's left on the hospital bed. There are the usual suspects: the Kardashians, the Clooneys, and young TV stars I can't recognise. Someone is getting divorced and someone else is making a superhero movie. Another, according to an anonymous source, has obviously had extensive plastic surgery and uses synthetic baby foreskin to keep their skin supple. *No one over 50 looks that good without some intervention!*

A young doctor pops by to let us know that they've reviewed Dad's notes and that they will x-ray him when the machine is free. The doctor speaks with a clipped British accent and looks as if he could be Chinese or Korean. As we are still playing the 'I no speak Inglis' game, I translate everything the doctor says. But my father suddenly asks the doctor, in English, 'Where are you from?'

The doctor says, 'Hong Kong, 九龍¹ but I studied in the UK, Bristol.'

'My blood pressure?'

'123 over 80'

'Not bad for a 老头子!'²

'I will be back soon Mr Chang,' he says, and leaves to consult with a colleague.

'He looks like he's from a middle-class family,' Dad continues. 'But then again, in Hong Kong you see the children of market-stall owners doing their homework on cardboard boxes. Here, they can't even pay people to study in universities. There's too much money in the mines.'

A patient service assistant interrupts to ask if I would like a cup of tea and asks me to tell my father to put on a hospital robe she is holding. Before I have a chance to return to our little game of subterfuge, he says to her in the Queen's English, 'I had colleagues from Yorkshire,' he says. 'A married couple. Paul and Margery.'

'How did you know I was from Yorkshire love?'

'I lived in England, and *All Creatures Great and Small*.'

I leave in search of coffee and the two reminisce about what they both miss and don't miss about England. I return about half an hour later to find Dad sitting upright in a *Chux Superwipe* hospital gown, engaged in a lively conversation with an elderly man. The man's face has seen too much sunlight for someone with so little melanin, and age spots mark his leathery, creased face.

'Mr Smith is from Southern Rhodesia,' my father says to me in English, and in Cantonese adds, 'He's one of those white people who came here after Mugabe took back the farms.' To Mr Smith, he says, 'I'm sorry you lost your farm. But as I was

saying, you have to respect Mugabe. He's older than both of us *and* he was still in full-time employment in his early 90s, leading a country!' Then says in Cantonese, 'Did you know we all thought of Mugabe as a hero when he fought the British?'

'He's a corrupt bastard,' Mr Smith says. 'He took our land.'

'We had to study your history when I was in school,' Dad says. 'I saw your soldiers in the barracks during the Malayan Emergency.³ We saluted you and the British ... the Australians.'

'Now look at us,' Mr Smith guffaws, but has to check that his cannula is still in his arm.

'We've been talking about countries that no longer exist,' Dad explains to me in English. 'He is as old as I am. We've been comparing our schooling ...'

'They were fine schools. Your father here would have made a good public servant for the Empire.'

'A good comprador⁴ you mean?' Dad smiles wryly.

'Do you want me to draw the curtains?' I ask in Cantonese.

'There's no need,' he replies in English. 'Mr Smith and I studied the same things: British history from the Anglo-Saxons to the Battle of Hastings, the War of Two Roses, also mythological kings like Arthur and the knights of the round table, Robin Hood of Sherwood. In modern history in our senior classes we studied the 'Great Empire' beginning with Queen Elizabeth to the Second World War.'

'The Great Empire. A lost empire ...' Mr Smith sighs. 'I met the Queen Mother when she visited Rhodesia ...'

'I met the British High Commissioner Gerard Templer when he came to our school. Churchill appointed him after the communists killed his predecessor.'

'Did you sit your Cambridge certificate?'

'That was the whole point of my school. I couldn't speak a word of English when I started, but my mother couldn't afford to send me to the private Chinese school. Most of the students were Malays. I went to school alongside Tunkus.'

'Don Glues?'

'Tunkus, Malayan Royalty.'

'You went to school with royalty? What the hell are you doing down here?'

'I went to China. They thought I was a communist.'

'Why on earth did you go to China?' Mr Smith asks. 'I thought everyone tried to get out. Flee the communists.'

'Maybe I wrote too many essays about Britain's superior navy and their formidable rise to supremacy after defeating former great powers Portugal, Spain, and France, or Walter Raleigh, who introduced tobacco to the world. I was more interested in the bicycle Raleigh, presumably named after Sir Walter, and Francis Drake, the sea-dog who became a knight. I found it hard to believe that a pirate becomes a national hero and that we had to learn about his life to pass exams.'

‘You and I both know that stranger things have happened since,’ says Mr Smith, who has not yet changed into his hospital gown and is still in his blue Ralph Lauren polo shirt and khaki pants. ‘Look at what’s happened in America and in Britain.’

‘Play as you play, and work while you work. No one ever disputed this axiom. Yet when I played I was constantly haunted by my school policy. It didn’t matter how popular I was. If I failed to score 60% or above in the final exam, or failed any of the compulsory subjects, I would be expelled from the school and go back to my life as a village boy. I would have been working in a shop, helping my mother, looking after my siblings instead of playing rugby, basketball, volleyball but never cricket – I didn’t have time to play cricket, not that I minded. Never liked the sport ...’

‘Hang on. What’s wrong with cricket?’ Mr Smith interjects, but Dad is lost in reverie.

‘No doubt we had a substandard copy of what pupils in the motherland studied ...’

‘You mean China?’

‘I had no time to pledge allegiance to either Chiang nor Mao when I was at school. Maybe that’s what they did in the Chinese schools, but I was too busy learning how Captain Cook founded Australia, the treaty with Maoris in New Zealand, the colonisation of Africa, including South Africa, two Boer wars, the Zulus, Cape Town, Johannesburg, Free State, Kenya and the Mau Mau, Nigeria, the Gold Coast, Malta, India – the Black hole of Calcutta, Pakistan, Burma, Malaya, Sir Raffles, China, the Opium War, Treaty of Nanking, and Peking.’

‘It sounds like what we learnt at school,’ Mr Smith says. ‘I had to explain to my grandchildren that there have been two world wars. Young people know nothing.’

‘Young people must have a strong sense of identity, to belong somewhere,’ Dad says. ‘It’s why I went to join Mao’s revolution, the one in the 50s when everyone was idealistic ...’

I stop eavesdropping and instead flick through Dad’s copy of the *Mill on the Floss*, now abandoned at the foot of the bed. As I read Elliot’s description of the idyllic English countryside, I wonder whether my father loves this book so much because it is set in the temperate green belt that his colonial masters spoke of as they sweated through lessons in their equatorial classroom. It’s possible that Dad clings onto the book because the villagers in the story are imbued with a secure sense of place and identity, something that my father has never experienced. Dad grew up on a diet of 19th Century English literature, in the way I’d grown up on a diet of Hollywood film and TV – both soft-power tools that insidiously influenced our tastes and place in the world. Even when Dad condemns British imperialism, he speaks highly of the good manners of the British people and their respect for human rights.

‘I loved my time in Beijing,’ I hear him say to Mr Smith. ‘It was the first time that I didn’t have to worry about rushing home from school to slaughter chickens for dinner, or have neighbours look down upon us for having malnourished chickens and small crops of sweet potato leaves. I could have been Macbeth of Kelantan, or at least McDuff or Malcolm, but I had too much responsibility at home after my father died.’

I find an underlined passage in the novel – *She wished she could have been like Bob, with his easily satisfied ignorance, or like Tom, who had something to do on which he could fix his mind with a steady purpose, and disregard everything else* (Eliot 2004/1860) and wonder if Dad ever wished that he'd been a more filial son and accepted his scholarship to regional Queensland to study agriculture, instead of following his Chinese-educated mates to Beijing to study Marx and Mao?

The Mill on the Floss is a narrative he can relate to because it is about a story about a family who loses everything and pins all their hopes on their educated son.

'My mother was furious when I went to China,' he says to Mr Smith. 'My family never forgave me. I was supposed to look after my family after my father died but I couldn't. She never forgave me. I don't know why I walked away from it all ...'

'You've already told me why Mr Chang,' Mr Smith says. 'You just said that when you were a child, you saw your primary school teacher shot dead, the Japs tie villagers strapped to poles in the middle of the jungle and torture them by pouring honey over their heads to attract the giant ants before executing them. Then, after the war, you witnessed public executions of collaborators, entire families bayoneted during peace time. Both of us read Shakespeare at school, but you had to memorise passages on your walk to school where you never knew when you would see severed heads on display at the T-junction. Your teacher could've picked Macbeth's head off the streets of Kelantan. Then you lived through another war. The Malayan Emergency was a hot war, my brother was there. People killed, people died.'

'Maybe you are right,' Dad concedes. 'When I arrived in Beijing, they gave me a warm bed, food, and free books to read. I didn't see death. That's the closest I've been to living like a student from *Tom Brown's School Days*.'

'I went to Beijing a few years ago when my son was working there, for Toyota. He married a clever trilingual Shanghainese girl. They took us to a Royal Shakespeare Company production of *Henry V*.'

'I had to forget about his plays and his sonnets. I read Mao.'

'How times have changed ...' Mr Smith trails off.

Dad doesn't respond and instead asks me for his book, and I return to reading gossip rags.

The patient service assistant returns with a hospital robe and a barium drink for Mr Smith.

'I know it tastes terrible, but it'll help the doctors get a clear picture of your insides,' she says, and draws the flame-retardant curtains around Mr Smith's cubicle, forming a silvery wall between the two elderly men.

'Someone will be in to see you soon love,' she calls out to Dad.

The Hong Kong doctor pops in to tell Dad that he is free to go. All vitals are normal, in fact they are excellent for someone his age.

'Is there anything that he did today that was out of the ordinary?' the doctor quizzes me.

Dad says, in Cantonese, ‘I used the wheelbarrow to lift some bricks,’ then, switching to English, says, ‘The neighbours are so wasteful. They were going to send beautiful limestone blocks to the tip. I lifted them and tried to wheel them back to my house.’

‘And how far did you have to go?’ the doctor and I both ask.

‘About 50 to 100 metres, or more,’ Dad says sheepishly.

‘張先生⁵,’ the doctor says. ‘You shouldn’t be lifting limestone blocks at your age.’

‘I helped build the Great Hall of the People when I was young. I even fell off the bamboo scaffolding, landed on my feet and pierced my foot with three rusty nails, and I was fine. No stitches. No infection.’

‘That was many years ago. You need to take things easy,’ the young doctor advises. ‘I’ll prescribe some Panadeine Forte, but you need to take them before you experience pain.’

‘Did you understand what he said? You need to take the medication before you are in pain.’ I translate, relieved that he will be returning home tonight.

After a nurse returns with a script and starter pack of pain killers, I ask Dad if he wants to say goodbye to Mr Smith.

‘No,’ he says quietly. ‘He won’t be getting out of here tonight. He’s a very ill man.’

Dad is silent for most of our drive home, only commenting, ‘After the British returned to the village after the war, we had no respect for them, yet we were still afraid of them. Mr Smith’s brother would have been one of the soldiers in the barracks.’

Decolonisation makes for strange bedfellows.

Endnotes

1. 九龍 Kowloon /kěulòŋ/ (Cantonese)
2. 老头子 Old man lǎo tóu zi (Mandarin)
3. The Malayan Emergency (1948-1960) was a guerrilla war between the British Commonwealth and Communist guerrillas, most of whom were ethnic Chinese. See Sunderland 1964 for further reading on the socio-political space Mr Chang describes.
4. Comprador – Portuguese for ‘buyer’. Name given to Chinese merchants in the 18th to 20th Century who facilitated Western trade in China. The term is used to describe those viewed as traitors who enabled Western exploitation of the East.
5. 張先生 Mr Cheung /dʒɜːŋ/ (Cantonese). ‘Cheung’ is commonly used in Hong Kong. ‘Chang’ is the Wades-Giles Romanisation of 張. In Teochew 張 is ‘Teo’, and ‘Chong’ in Hakka dialects. The transliteration of Chinese names in British Malaya was inconsistent and often at the whim of individual clerks.

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ERA Statement

Research Background

My short story ‘Macbeth of Kelantan’ was written in conversation with my sociological and qualitative study, which used Pierre Bourdieu’s cultural capital theory to explore how various reading practices are valued, and the extent to which they are stratified by individual and group dispositions – or, in Bourdesian terms, ‘habitus’. The study addressed why and how reading matters to an individual’s personal, private, and political lives. ‘Macbeth of Kelantan’ drew on key themes that emerged from the critical component of the study. Aspects of the story were originally part of its accompanying piece ‘How to Read Shakespeare in the Post-Atomic Age’ (Sun 2016) – a multi-ethnic Australian work of short-fiction that explores the value assigned to reading Shakespeare across generations.

Research Contribution

‘Macbeth of Kelantan’ contributes to a growing body of interdisciplinary research that uses Bourdesian theory outside of sociology, in order to explore how agents act relationally within specific social spaces. This narrative illustrates how individuals learn the ‘logic’ of a game (Bourdieu 1984: 110) or deploy the appropriate cultural capital to enter a field and then position themselves in an advantageous position. The story draws upon a key research finding, that, while marginalised reading practices are acknowledged and valorised in specific micro-fields, they lack meaning in the broader field of power when they are not recognised by a formal institutions, such as a school or university.

Research significance

This story documents how those on the periphery of the colonial and post-colonial spaces have engaged with and disavowed various reading practices. More specifically, it examines the racialised positions of colonial subjects, and how symbolic violence is internalised by individuals belonging to dominated groups. Imaginative writing such as ‘Macbeth of Kelantan’ furthers understanding of the complex interplay between agency and structures – habitus and institutions – across geo-political spaces. Notably, the inclusion of my research and writing at the 2018 AAWP conference legitimises a narrative that would have otherwise been positioned beyond the boundaries of Australian literature.

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