Confucianism in Timothy Mo's *The Monkey King*

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In his novel, *The Monkey King,* Timothy Mo presents a fictional critique of Confucian ethics. Set in Hong Kong during the 1950s, the novel questions Confucianism on two issues. First it asks if Confucianism is a dead weight of formal restrictions which crushes spontaneity and creativity. Crucial in Mr. Mo's answer is the differentiation between the early Confucian philosophy, which resisted "legalistically codified and objectified norms," stressing "the necessity for each man . . . to make his own judgments," from later Neo-Confucianism with its "stultifying moral zeal," which became "the orthodoxy of the Chinese state in the period of its most extreme authoritarianism" (Mote, 44, 47, 63). This distinction lays the basis for the struggle between Wallace and his father-in-law, Mr. Poon, in which Wallace triumphs because he succeeds in discerning the authentic Confucianism, its spirit, whereas Mr. Poon can do no more than sporadically and ineffectually follow the letter of ritual and tradition.

Secondly, the novel asks if Confucianism is a relic of ancient Oriental culture which fosters xenophobia and hinders the Chinese from fully participating in the modern world. Wallace's triumphs – in developing his own character, in the success of his marriage, in succeeding Mr. Poon as family patriarch, in becoming a village headman, and in business, all the clear results of following Confucian principles – leave no doubt that Mr. Mo is an advocate of Confucianism, finding it as timely and useful today as ever.

Quick and obvious ideological answers to these questions are precluded by Mr. Mo's recognition that Confucianism, like any deep philosophical or religious culture, can only manifest its virtues in the process of maturation. The most obvious precedent for illustrating spiritual development is Confucius' admission of his own slow progress: "At fifteen my mind was

set on learning. At thirty my character had been formed. At forty I had no more perplexities. At fifty I knew the Mandate of Heaven. At sixty I was at ease with whatever I heard. At seventy I could follow my heart's desire without transgressing moral principles" (*Analects*, 2:4).

Although Wallace is twenty-five years old and newly married when we meet him, he is an adolescent character. This, his naivete, and the comic narration, are necessary to illustrate the Confucian belief in *Jen*; that man's heart and instincts are innately good. Mencius tells us that, "humanity, righteousness, propriety, and wisdom are not drilled into us from the outside" (Chan, 54). Nonetheless, most of us lose the Way (Tao) "due to the underdevelopment of one's original endowment" (Chan, 55). It is crucial that Wallace not cynically repress his ingenuousness, his child's heart, as does his brother-in-law, Ah Lung; for "the great man is one who does not lose his [originally good]child's heart" (Chan, 76).

In the first third of the novel, Wallace is a student of Confucian ethics, perceiving them from the perspective of an outsider, an immature youth, or – conveniently for Western readers who know little of Confucianism – from the perspective of a Westerner. He feels that Confucian ethics are burdensome, inflexible, and prohibitive. However, in the second and third books of the novel, as Wallace matures and develops an adult identity, he comes to existentially affirm Confucian values and consequently no longer experiences the opposition between his desires and his duties. Viewing Confucian values as an insider, as a civilized adult who professes in Confucian values, Wallace experiences prosperity, respect, love, responsibility, and wisdom. Thus Timothy Mo demonstrates that far from being inhibitive and repressive, Confucian values continue to be sound and productive of a satisfying and desirable life, as much today as in the distant past.

The second question, concerning the universality of Confucian values, or how intricately they are tied to a distinctively Chinese cultural expression, is less obviously answered by Mr. Mo, partly because in seeking a reformation of Confucian values in answer to the cultural threat of Westernization, Mr. Mo offers his own synthesis, which is fundamentally nontraditional in at least one aspect: of choosing the relationship between husband and wife as more fundamental than that between father and son. Because the question is considered by using Chinese characters, who struggle to balance the traditions of their grandparents with the Westernized fads and enthusiasms of their peers, themes concerning cross-cultural values, Westernization, modernization, and loss of tradition culture, make the novel more philosophically

questioning than Mr. Mo's fine second novel, *Sour Sweet*, which is much more committed to the theme frequently found in Commonwealth literature: illustrating the tragic effects of living in one culture while trying to follow the values of another culture.

Mr. Mo does tamper with traditional Confucian values in offering what he perceives to be a fusion of the best elements in Eastern and Western cultures. Most obviously, Mr. Mo replaces, or at least redefines *hsiao* (filial piety, family loyalty) as a fundamental Confucian virtue, to center on the relationship between husband and wife rather than that between father and son. Reasons for this may include the necessary opposition between Wallace and Mr. Poon in recovering or rectifying true Confucian values, as well as seeking a balance between East and West. Nonetheless, Mr. Mo's strong and wise women characters, and his spiritual understanding of marriage, seem to owe more than a little to the West. Accordingly, Wing-Tsit Chan tersely comments, that "from Confucius down, Confucianists have always considered women inferior" (47).

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Because Confucius said he was only transmitting the wisdom of the ancients (7.1), and because Confucianism became nearly synonymous with Chinese culture, Wallace's attempts to assert his Portuguese ancestry and disassociate himself from the Chinese, can be seen as more than adolescent rebellion. They are – especially to Western readers who are likely to identify with Wallace because of his individualistic quirks – evidence of Wallace's repudiation of Confucian manners (*li*). The narrator makes it plain that the Nolascos differ from their neighbors culturally rather than physically: "The Nolascos called themselves Portuguese . . . but, physically, it would have been difficult to tell them apart from their Chinese neighbours" (*The Monkey King*, 3). Despite this, Wallace "joined several Portuguese clubs" and was "keen on demarcation, he cut the neighbours at every opportunity." Dressed in a tie at home – where other Chinese, who had to wear a tie at work, reverted to pajama trousers and undershirts – Wallace "courted the hoots and abuse of the younger Chinese as affirmations of his own superiority" (4).

Had he continued in this adolescent rebellion and cultural affectation, Wallace likely would have become as much a caricature as the Major, an ineffectual and ostracized Chinese youth who apes his British boss and later, pathetically hopes to recover his Chinese identity by becoming a

militant Maoist.

This theme of Chinese cultural alienation is well rendered by the description of "a celebrated Victorian photograph of British officers" prominently hung next to Wallace's school diploma in his father's house. The photo shows the severed heads of pirates "clenched like coconuts in the fists of moustachioed representatives of the master race." One head, because of its slanted eyes and high cheek-bones, seemed "a caricature of the Oriental" (5). It is as though the photo illustrates what will happen to those who insist on remaining Chinese, on following the wisdom of the ancestral sages; while the diploma, like Wallace's family name, beckons with power and novelty. The Japanese occupation in World War Two and their treatment of the British makes the illustration provided by Wallace's father less convincing, but also leaves Wallace floundering for direction and role models.

After his father's death, Wallace marries, "out of necessity as well as filial respect," the daughter of Mr. Poon's second concubine (6, 8). Western readers will expect the novel to proceed by describing the evolving relationship between husband and wife, which it does after some time. But in a distinctively Chinese manner, Wallace seems more interested in his father-in-law than in his wife. Actually there are several reasons for this. Because he is immature, because his father has just died, and because of the cultural crisis, Wallace is in greater need of a father's guidance than a wife's love. Secondly, because Wallace comes to live in his father-in-law's house, he is naturally concerned to find his place in the family, which means that he must understand the authority of Mr. Poon. Thirdly, *The Monkey King* is largely a comic novel of manners in which much of the humor is derived from the family relations of Wallace and the Poons. Through much of the book, power is at the root of the family struggles and once again power can be traced back to Mr. Poon.

Mr. Poon is certainly not an authentic Confucian philosopher, but he does maintain an extended family, is committed to what he perceives as traditional values, and by the end of the novel it is clear that Mr. Poon has been instrumental in setting the course of Wallace's life along Confucian values in contrast to the hopes of Wallace's own father. Thus, instead of the threatening photograph of decapitated Chinese heads, in Mr. Poon's reception room Wallace finds "a tinted photograph of Mrs. Poon's father, the patron of Mr. Poon, imposing in the cap and robes of a junior Manchu mandarin" (5-6).

Mr. Poon arranged May Ling and Wallace's marriage because he wanted "posterity, the more the better," for "even a concubine's grandchildren could venerate an ancestor" (8). Mr. Poon's concern on this point is obviously rooted in traditional Chinese thought; and although Confucius "was rationalistic and decidedly humanistic" rather than other-worldly, scholars say that "his endorsement of ancestor-worship seems to have been unreserved" (Noss, 278-9).

Mr. Poon is a man of business. Evidently he made his fortune by "supplying rice to the Japanese internment camps" during World War Two (5). Thoroughly pragmatic, Mr. Poon deals with those in power rather than examining the ethical nature of their power. In this respect Mr. Poon clearly runs counter to the Confucian insight which delineates that "the superior man understands righteousness; the inferior man understands profit" (4:16). That Wallace is often shocked by Mr. Poon's unethical business deals is a sign that he is searching for the Way and not simply an expedient to make money (15:31). Further, we are told that "compromise was at the centre of Mr. Poon's political system" (8).

Mr. Poon extends his compromise system beyond business to juggle elements in the clash between Eastern and Western values. Thus, Mr. Mo offers us a third visual symbol to juxtapose along side the photographs of the severed Chinese heads and the Manchu mandarin: in Mr. Poon's "own room a sadistically technical crucifixion reclined across the belly of a chubby bronze Buddha." Mr. Poon explains his eclectic altar, saying, "You could be better safe than sorry." This also explains why Mr. Poon is "a member of the Baptist congregation" (22-3); why Mr. Poon has Wallace married in a Baptist service (14); and why Mr. Poon arranges his own funeral service, employing the simultaneous services of a Taoist priest, a Catholic priest, and a Buddhist monk (189-90). Mr. Poon's attempts to reconcile East and West are idiosyncratic expedients. The philosophical contradictions create humor and sometimes result in tragedy, as in the case of Mr. Poon's own son, Ah Lung, who succumbs to despair, as well as syphilis, and loses his place in the family.

From the very beginning, Wallace instinctively searches for a consistent ethical and philosophical system by which to live his life. When he first comes to live with Mr. Poon, Wallace faces several problems. He has no face or identity conferred by a formal position in relation to the family. He feels "a denial of his existence" by the other members of the family and craves "some identity in the eyes of the others" (21). Secondly, Wallace

threatens the authority of Mr. Poon simply because Wallace has been raised in Western values which often conflict with Chinese tradition. Thirdly, Wallace is involved in a rivalry with Ah Lung in regard to marriage and how to treat a spouse.

Dealing with each of these problems, Wallace initially adopts a Western attitude. As a tactic to gain face in the family, Wallace uses the tradition of celebrating the Chinese New Year to his own advantage. He traps Mr. Poon's sisters, against whom "Wallace looked forward to avenging numerous slights and insults," by manipulating them with custom; they were "helpless against the huge tug of convention" and end by kowtowing "robotically" to Wallace (23-24, 27). Throughout this scene, Wallace remains a comparative cultural spectator, unaffected by conventions.

"Major treason" against the family occurs when Wallace impulsively challenges Mr. Poon's authority. Wallace discovers Mr. Poon beating Ah Lung with a golf club for stealing family money to pay his gambling debts. The entire beating incident is ritualized, a kind of game, as the golf club suggests. The narrator says, Mr. Poon "rained blows on his son's shoulders, carefully avoiding his head and landing with the handle." For his part, "Ah Lung wept, making no attempt to avoid the heavy strokes" (20). Wallace does not perceive the ritualized enactment of filial piety by Ah Lung and paternal responsibility by Mr. Poon. Instead, Wallace reacts as we might expect a stereotypical nineteenth century British colonialist to react: he seizes the golf club and vents moral indignation based on ancient Greek and Judeo-Christian concepts of man and ethics. Thus, Wallace berates Ah Lung for cringing rather than standing up for his individual rights and sense of dignity. Mr. Poon's confused defense of his time honored actions makes it clearer that Wallace is a cultural outsider. Mr. Poon says, "I punish him. It in the bible. It was our old Chinese custom" (20). Wallace responds, "You couldn't behave like this in the modern ages" (21).

This scene is significant, not only because it illustrates the clash of cultural values between East and West, but because it also illustrates the groping expediency and loss of cultural direction experienced by Mr. Poon, which consequently imperils the continuity of his extended family. Perhaps the most fundamental of the five Confucian relationships is that existing between father and son, which is paradigmatic for the less intimate, non-biological relationships, especially those beyond the family. Clearly, Mr. Poon has no positive guidance to offer his son. In many ways, Mr. Poon is a barbarian. He has garnered a measure of power and money, but

is unable to do more than hoard them because of his insensitivity to and ignorance of values beyond these (cf. 6:19). Confucius believed there was "an inseparable connection between intellectual disorder and moral perversity" (Noss, 276). His answer for many problems, which Wing-Tsit Chan says, "has been a perennial theme in the Confucian school," was the Rectification of Names (Chan, 16). Had Mr. Poon clearly understood the obligations and responsibilities of fatherhood, he would have been a role model to his son. Ah Lung's moral demise is largely, though not entirely, attributable to Mr. Poon's worldly values, his syncretism and subsequent loss of Confucian ethics. There is also room for individual responsibility. Thus, as Ah Lung loses his place in the family, Wallace gains a place, by rectifying the concept of *hsiao.*

In regard to Wallace's third problem, the rivalry with Ah Lung, Wallace again reverts to his Westernized upbringing. He decides that "if the Poons snubbed him, he would spite them by consorting with his wife! He would detach her from them" (35). Wallace embarks on a scheme to Westernize May Ling, specifying a course of study based on the *Reader's Digest,* brushing her teeth three times a day, drinking milk with her tea, and using cosmetics (36-37). Although there is much humor in these incidents, the purpose is serious: to subvert the extended family by destroying the family-conferred identity of May Ling and building up a Westernized independent ego in its place. Wallace's intent is essentially a continuation of nineteenth century European colonialism in China. His brain-washing might be likened to a reverse Maoism: whereas Communist struggle sessions were designed to annihilate the independent ego, Wallace's schemes are designed to destroy the socially conferred identity. This dialectic is further illustrated with the Major who easily renounces his British affectations for Maoist ones.

In his battle against the Poon family to establish a Westernized marriage and nuclear family, Wallace enlists the aid of Mabel Yip as a role model for May Ling. In contrast to Mr. Poon, we are told that "Mabel made no concessions" (41). The narrator is referring to the fact that Mabel is a style setter in Hong Kong; her style is obviously Western and consciously destructive of tradition. From Mabel, May Ling learns the rudiments of creating a Western ego: to save face by claiming conspicuous consumption, for example, saying you came in a taxi instead of a bus (44); to distinguish fashionable beach tans from peasant sunburns (55); and above all to spend money, in flagrant opposition to Mr. Poon's miserliness. The narrator muses: "It was a word to conjure with – shopping – with its connotations of wealth,

leisure, and taste. It was a pre-war, fundamentally Imperial recreation. What the 'Missies' did" (45).

In some ways, the missy image symbolizes European colonialism in Asia: the rigor and beauty of virginal youth, mildly entertained by uninterpretable foreign sights, secure in the conformity to Victorian dress and manners, which elegantly draped the technology of world domination. This is a Western counterpart to the photograph of the Manchu mandarin and is the necessary female compliment to the photograph of the severed heads. Who else are the British soldiers posing for, so casually dangling the chopped heads "from oily pig-tails," if not for the missies, to shock and titillate them with their display of naked male power?

Mabel Yip's attempts to be a Chinese missy are studied and vigorous. Like the Major, her efforts are affected, but with better results. The narrator comments that Mabel's efforts "seemed almost an act of choice: a mutilation" (40). Especially significant for a Chinese, Mabel has no past, no family. Her inventions of a past are superficially stylish, but in the end the dependency is reversed and Mabel becomes an adopted member of Wallace's family.

From the Western perspective, May Ling is condemned for not becoming an enthusiastic disciple to Mabel, as does Pippy Da Silva, a Chinese girl who finally catches an Englishman and leaves Hong Kong to go "home" to England (181). From the traditional Chinese perspective, May Ling is condemned by the presence of Fong, Ah Lung's wife, a walking affront to Wallace and May Ling, "an interloper, with child" (60). As a producer of sons, Fong should be the happy wife, but she is so miserable from Ah Long's subjugation that she attempts suicide. In sarcastic criticism of Neo-Confucian custom, the narrator comments that "Fong's attempt at suicide disturbed the house very little: far less than Wallace's clumsy efforts to tamper with its arrangements. Her action even met with modified approval . . . as an honourable revival of a defunct custom" (61). This comment, and the male domination by Ah Lung in imitation of his father's domination of the family, makes it clear that Mr. Mo does not advocate a simple rejection of Western influence and subsequent retreat into a fabled Chinese past. Once again, Mo's criticism of the worst elements in Chinese custom – criticism which becomes increasingly obvious by the end of the novel – relies on the Confucian concept of the Rectification of Names for eradication, not on Western imports such as Christian ethics or enlightened, scientific management. Thus, for example, because Ah Ling is not a proper

son, a proper husband, nor a proper father, he has no identity and consequently fades from the plot, becoming, in effect, nameless, without a family, a hungry ghost. Ironically, Mabel, who initially seems hopelessly corrupted by Westernization, without a past, becomes part of the family; whereas Ah Ling, who belligerently defends corrupt Neo-Confucian customs, loses his place in the family.

This consideration of identity would be incomplete without mentioning the Chinese conception of identity after death. In revering his ancestors in the Ching Ming (cf. Japanese Bon) rites, Mr. Poon is a slave to superficial convention, causing us to remember Confucius' question: "If a man is not humane (*jen*), what has he to do with ceremonies (*li*)? (3:3). His ignorance of how the spiritual experience should give rise to the physical act is aptly demonstrated when "Mr. Poon appropriated a wreath from a nearby plot . . . and placed it on the grave of his ancestor" (64). Mr. Poon's shallow materialism and ignorant performance of ritual are entirely counter to Confucian discernment: "The Master said . . . ritual performed without reverence, the forms of mourning observed without grief – these are things I cannot bear to see!" (3:26). And more sweeping still, was Confucius' trenchant comment on ritual: "Till you have learnt to serve men, how can you serve ghosts?" (11:11). The point is that Mr. Poon would do better to nurture reverence for his living family than to follow the empty ritual for his deceased ancestors. This is exactly the point illustrated by Wallace and it is his primary qualification for reanimating the extended family under his paternal care.

If the traditional Chinese attitude is one of uncritical conservation of custom, while the Western attitude is one of infatuation with novelty and progress, neither is endorsed by Timothy Mo. Instead, he advocates the recovery of Confucian wisdom: reviewing, "the old so as to find out the new " (2:11). Arthur Waley, in his translation of *The Analects* makes an obvious comment on this passage, saying, "The business of the teacher is to give fresh life to the Scriptures by reinterpreting them so that they apply to the problems of modern life" (90). Wallace finally comes to illustrate this process, but is successful in employing it only to the degree that hard won personal wisdom makes possible. In replacing Ah Ling as a father to his two nephews, Wallace attempts to teach them, saying, "You Chinese boy had only one fault. You were all so hard-working but you never had any imagination. You never ask the reason for doing anything. . . . You just did it because it was always done that way" (70). Inspired by this,

the boys question their school teacher, and are humiliated for creating a disturbance. Yet, Wallace is closer to the Confucian mark (e.g. 19:6) than are the school teachers, recognizing that the boys were victims "of stupidity" (71). However, for his part, Wallace must learn to "remove all trace of coarseness or impropriety" from his acts (8:4), to act without ego, "to look at nothing in defiance of ritual, to speak of nothing in defiance of ritual, never to stir hand or foot in defiance of ritual" (12:1), not in unthinking conformity to convention, but as a spiritual discipline to eradicate egotism and achieve harmony with the Tao so that he might, in some degree, approach Confucius, who "had no arbitrariness of opinion, no dogmatism, no obstinancy, and no egotism" (9:4).

Following the pattern of an initiation novel, Mr. Mo has Wallace discover successively larger and deeper worlds. His Westernized upbringing causes him to recognize and question the very different customs he encounters in Mr. Poon's family. When Mr. Poon gets Wallace a job, Wallace confronts a larger, still different world. After the war, Mr. Poon ironically decides to make money in the construction business, thus, being in the uncomfortable position of making money by building the new, Westernized world, which he feels is destroying his old familiar world. Poon obtains a position for Wallace in a government office for the purpose of circumventing the law to obtain contracts and to blackmail Wallace once he is implicated in the conspiracy. Mr. Poon explains that "This was the Chinese way. It was our custom, it go on thousand and thousand of year. You help your friend, you help your family" (77). Mr. Poon continues with his cynical advice, saying, "No one going to help you for nothing, Wallace" and when Wallace capitulates to the plan, Poon calls him "son" (78). Once again, this is a perversion – though a popular one – of Confucian concepts which can be eradicated by the Rectification of Names. Meanwhile, Wallace learns about money and power.

Acting on his own initiative, Wallace asks for more work to do at the office. Instead of being rewarded for demonstrating dedication to his job, Wallace is punished for questioning the routine, just as his nephews were at school. After discovering that most business in done in conformity to time honored custom, Wallace next discovers that the customs are arbitrary and even accidental. His British boss admits that "Most of us foreign devils are pretty small fry giving ourselves airs here that we aren't really entitled to. We're aping what we've never known at home" (81). We now have a ridiculous circle of Chinese, like Mabel and the Major, imitating British

colonial governors who are themselves imitating what they conceive to be the manners of the British aristocracy. This is certainly not the Way or the Tao.

Book one ends with a confusion of all values. Once again, Mr. Mo uses a visual symbol to communicate this. Mr. Poon seeks to entertain a British government official, whom he is in the process of professionally destroying, by taking him on a tour of the garish and hideous sculptures in Tiger Balm Gardens. The statues illustrate the debasement of Chinese culture to fit what the Chinese guessed were the aesthetic principles of the West. What they produced was the worst of both worlds. Cultural misunderstanding is further illustrated when Mr. Poon pays some children to stir up a monkey: "A volley of stones rattled into the hutch. A terrified monkey shot out but was jerked short, throttling on a chain. The tallest urchin jabbed it with a long stick. It squealed and capered." The Chinese laugh but the "Englishman had a look of thunder on his face" (92). Mr. Allardyce seizes and breaks the stick in an action which parallels that of Wallace seizing the golf club from Mr. Poon when he was beating his son. In both cases, there is a unbridged cultural misunderstanding.

After Mr. Poon has given Wallace the impression that he is implicated in destroying Allardyce, Wallace kowtows to his father-in-law in unprincipled fear: like a child, "Wallace levered Mr. Poon's thumb up and made a fist around it. 'Uncle' " he says, acknowledging defeat as well as dependence. For his part, Mr. Poon, in his broken English, typically perverts a Confucian value, saying, "I don't think you knew how much our family were loving you" (100).

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At the beginning of book two, Wallace and his wife believe they are hiding from the law in a fairly remote village in the New Territories. Here they are on their own: "We was here alone by ourself. No Dairdee, no family, no nobody. We did it ourself, hah?" (123). We are told that even in the villages, "custom was a waning force," for "many old ways had fallen into disuse during the Japanese Occupation" (107). For Wallace and May Ling, like the refuges from the People's Republic, "there was no ancestral hall here" and they were "excluded from membership of the clan" controlling the village.

The problem which confronts Wallace is essentially the same as he faced in marrying May Ling and coming to live with the Poons: how to

gain a face or earn the respect of a community, thus gaining a place in it. With the Poons, Wallace was asked to renounce his Westernized upbringing and conform to the autocratic regime of a conservative and unenlightened Chinese family. In saying "Uncle" to Mr. Poon, it seemed that Wallace had capitulated. However, in the village, where Wallace and May Ling otherwise have nothing to do, they begin to discover the steps which will put them on the authentic Way or Tao. The village experience is a true initiatory experience for both Wallace and May Ling. When they leave, they are masters of themselves and consequently ready to serve others.

With the breakdown of tradition in the village, the narrator suggests the difficulty in discerning the Way. He reports that "Under the Manchu empire the headman's family had supplied generations of scholar-administrators," but laments that "learning was no longer, as it had been in the old days, the avenue to political power" (109-10). Thus, there is no father figure for Wallace to rely on. He must discover the Way for himself.

It is significant that despite all the leisure and the time spent rambling in the countryside, Wallace's self-possession and growing authority are distinctly Confucian rather than Taoist or Ch'an (Zen). Confucius repudiated reliance on meditation to discover an authentic self, saying, "I once spent a whole day without food and a whole night without sleep, in order to meditate. It was no use. It is better to learn" (15:30). What must be learned is the human Tao or the Way to be truly human, for "One cannot herd with birds and beasts. If I do not associate with mankind, with whom shall I associate?" (18:6).

Neither his own father nor his father-in-law offered Wallace useful guidance; nor can the village headman serve as a surrogate father. Consequently, Wallace begins to "rectify" the only human relationship he has, the one with his wife. He no longer has stock plans to train her to become another Mabel Yip. Indeed, he now seems to desire a more traditional spouse. When she begins to teach Wallace about village life, he bridles, for he "did not like her pert manner." When she continues to show no respect for Wallace as her husband, "he seized her grimly by the elbow," whereupon May Ling cries out, "you hurting me, Wallace." The narrator then comments, "Appeased, he released her" (113). What is interesting in this slight incident is not so much the assertion of Wallace's authority as a husband along traditional rather than Western lines, but that the ritualized use of force between husband and wife is nearly identical to the ritualized use of force between father and son, which Mr. Poon had attempted to display with Ah

Lung when Wallace intervened, asking "What madness is this. You beat him?" (20). The point is that Wallace now understands, not in an academic or self-conscious way – which would continue to keep him a cultural outsider – but directly, through his own experience, one of the steps in walking through life with a spouse. Life, the Tao, is the true teacher.

In choosing the relationship that exists between husband and wife as more fundamental than that existing between father and son, Timothy Mo seems to betray a Westernized attitude. Moreover, women play a very prominent role in the novel. Perhaps this can be explained as a Taoist influence rather than a Western influence. A recent text on comparative religions comments that "Confucianism was the most misogynistic" of Chinese traditions, while "Taoists were kinder to women" (see Carmody, 161). In any case, we should recall that the photograph, which symbolically stands for Mr. Poon's entire lineage, is of "*Mrs Poon's* father, the patron of Mr. Poon" (6). Thus, in a sense, Mr. Poon's authority is derived from a feminine power. His obsession with engendering progeny to revere him after his death is also, ironically, dependent on the feminine. Early in the novel, Ah Lung, kicking his wife, boasts that he has her well trained (39), but in the end it is Wallace who "trains" her, by being sensitive to her inclinations and talents, to become his business associate. Mabel Yip is full of verve in meeting the new, Westernized world, while her husband, "a helpless, wizened addict," retreats into a dream world in a pattern similar to that of Ah Lung's demise (41).

Even in his early battles in the Poon household, Wallace chooses to cultivate the relationship with his wife over that with his father-in-law. At one point the narrator says, "Wallace cheated; he abetted May Ling in what was fundamentally a woman's quarrel" (60). As the intimacy between them grows during their honeymoon in the village, May Ling nurtures and supports Wallace's growth. When Wallace scoffs at the idea of replacing Mr. Poon as the family patriarch, "May Ling was quite obstinate," saying, "it could happen" (116). When Wallace inadvertently desecrates the village burial site – an incident which symbolically suggests patricide and a complete break with the traditional Chinese concept of family identity stretching through the centuries – again May Ling supports Wallace, prompting him to say, "you were being good little wife to me this day. I would not forget" (119). All the father figures fail Wallace. It is his wife, and her maternal love, who succeeds in guiding him to discern the Way, so much of which is family life.

After Wallace desecrates the grave site, May Ling suggests that Wallace offer his wristwatch as a compensatory sacrifice. The watch has a double significance. From the beginning, it has served as an obvious symbol for the authority of the patriarch, the person who "watches" the family through a period of eternity. Initially, Wallace believes the watch to be his as part of a dowry. Mr. Poon tells him, "Son, there was something our family want to give you," displaying the gold pocketwatch, "mesmerically" (9). However, the watch, as a symbol of patriarchal authority, must be earned; it cannot be simply inherited, otherwise it would belong to Ah Lung. Ironically, Wallace demonstrates his inability to possess the watch by pilfering it to pawn.

During the period when he is experimenting with a Western identity by befriending the Major, Wallace acquires another watch. The Major tells Wallace, who is reluctant to buy a watch because it "bore unfortunate associations" for him, that "a gentleman had to have one" (84). And it is still true that in Hong Kong and Kuala Lumpur, the symbol of success among a class of Chinese men is a gold Rolex. In its second association, the watch symbolizes Westernization.

The fact that Wallace sacrifices his watch at his wife's suggestion signifies: a renunciation of his Western affections; a dedication to his spouse and marriage as sources of wisdom; and a rededication to his Chinese heritage. Paradoxically, by burying the Western wristwatch, Wallace begins to earn Mr. Poon's old pocketwatch, which he finally inherits (178).

At the end of the chapter in which Wallace buries the watch, the narrator offers us a counterimage to Wallace's auspicious future as a man with a "rectified" family, that is a family as it ought to exist. The headman, who feels the loss of the traditional meaning of his position, sits alone hearing the women of his household "arguing in advance over the dispositions he would be found to have made after his death." He smiles to himself because he was written a will "to endow a trust in commemoration of himself" (121). This illustrates the disintegration of the traditional extended family, fostered by village life, under the force of egotism, fostered by Westernization. Timothy Mo's advice is not to indulge in a xenophobic rejection of everything Western or modern, but a Rectification of Names centering on a proper recognition of mutual love and dedication in marriage. If the headman's family is disintegrating, Wallace and May Ling's family is germinating. Neither case is accidental. Both are explicable in Confucian terms.

Once Wallace and May Ling rectify their relationship as spouses, they can turn their attention to helping others in the village. In contrast, the eternal bickering in the Poon household depletes everyone's energy. Moreover, this attitude is cynically extended beyond the family to account for the business corruption and predation of Mr. Poon.

As Wallace and May Ling's marriage illustrates, Timothy Mo advocates a specific synthesis of East and West: a fundamentally Confucian foundation, though there are changes, on which Western technique can safely build. Despite Mr. Poon's business acumen in the construction trade, it is precisely this lack of foundation which thwarts his ambitions and causes him to build a hodgepodge life. This is especially evident at Mr. Poon's death when Wallace discovers that "he must have had over twenty European names: Henry, Harold, Alfred, Guy, Kenneth, Jeremy amongst them" (199). Mr. Poon's random, pathetic search for identity is countered by Wallace's resolve, in naming his son, that "there was to be a constant theme running through the names of the generation" (211).

When the village is flooded by a typhoon, the villagers turn to exorcists for help. "There was a Buddhist monk, a Taoist priest, and a professional geomancer," who advocate "additional prayers and sacrifice offered at your ancestral tomb in the usual way" to alleviate the trouble (127, 129). As an enlightened Confucian, Wallace has "a basic plan, crude but logical, which incorporated more commonsense than expertise." When he has difficulty persuading the headman to adopt his plan, "May Ling came to the rescue," by suggesting a model demonstration (135). Wallace's plan, using dynamite and engineering theory – that is, modern technique – saves the village and establishes a place for him and his wife in the community. Their motive had been communal service, not business rapacity.

Wallace then develops a scheme to bring prosperity to the village, turning it into a minor version of Sun-Moon Lake in Taiwan: "Wallace decided to turn the pond into a classical water garden, with an island, wooden pagodas, silhouette bridges, and a spinning water-wheel and falls" (155). The scheme may not render the village into the purity imagined in a classical model, but it does bring prosperity to the villagers and is certainly a more aesthetic, humane, and even traditional, environment than Tiger Balm Gardens.

When a neighboring village begins to jealously vandalize the park, Wallace lives up to his pidgin English name, "War-less" (31), thus illustrating another Confucian virtue. Wallace devises a sporting contest to avert hostilities. He proposes a game of field hockey, recalling a Hollywood version of a

North American Indian game, lacrosse. The game, finally played by the villagers, is an adaptation of foreign games, not a slavish imitation. Moreover, it serves not only to sublimate the violence, but to strengthen community relations. Thus the narrator comments that "it was the co-ordination between the players that was impressive;" equally impressive, "there was not the factionalism . . . with the jealous stars fighting each other for possession" (162).

For his creative communal service, Wallace, in effect, earns a giant watch. He obtained "a giant clock for measuring boxing rounds," which "was smuggled off an American aircraft carrier" and used to time rental boats on the lake (158). In association with this symbol, Wallace has become the true headman of the village. He has renewed the concept and the office by acting as the village leader in confronting contemporary problems, while the nominal headman simply bemoans his inability to solve current problems using past technique. His position is confirmed when the villagers later entrust their money to Wallace for investment. Once again, Wallace's good fortune, his rise of status in the village, is explicable in Confucian terms.

May Ling has also blossomed. When Wallace was trying to make her over into the image of Mabel Yip, he urged Pippy Da Silva to give her "advice about the make-up and other thing." In response, Pippy offers to "teach her how to swim first." But after getting her in the water, Pippy abandons May Ling to pursue her British boyfriend, saying, "You keep plugging, May Ling" (55). The entire scene at the beach, where she is pressured to adopt a Westernized identity, becomes a humiliation for May Ling.

While living in the village, May Ling has become an accomplished swimmer. At the South Bay beach, Wallace had punished May Ling for her reluctance to imitate Mabel and Pippy: "He pushed May Ling down with his feet" off of the raft and into the water where her "desperate thrashing resumed" (55). Now, at the village beach, May Ling reverses the roles. After displaying her prowess in the water, Wallace approaches May Ling. "A look of cunning passed over her dripping face" as she splashed Wallace "full in the face." Wallace is "hit by another deluge. And another. May Ling tittered. He opened his mouth and tasted the bitterness of salt water." When he manages to open his mouth, "his shouted threats had no effect on her" (170). Wallace chases her on the beach but cannot catch her. Like the golf club beating of Ah Lung and the field hockey game between the villages, this is a sublimation or refined ritualization of violence. May Ling simultaneously asserts her individuality – she will not be a Pippy

Da Silva, an imitation of someone else, anymore than Wallace will consent to be like the Major, aping a British identity – and surrenders her ego to her husband in playfulness. He cannot catch her, but she will surrender herself to him. Thus, when he reaches home, Wallace finds "she had already laid out a fresh shirt for him" (170).

Having won identities in the village and then having mutually surrendered those identities in marriage, Wallace and May Ling return to the Poon family with a very different status. They are no longer children, but adults ready to assume responsibility in the family, just in time. For Mr. Poon is languishing on his deathbed, Ah Lung has nearly turned his sons into delinquents, and the family seems on the verge of disintegration. Hopes for renewal and continuity center on Wallace. Because he had demonstrated his worth in the village, Wallace is enthroned in the position of honor at the dinner table as the family patriarch. When Ah Ling attempts to claim a hereditary right of succession, Chinese subtlety is demonstrated by the adults in the family. One of the sisters "insinuated herself past him and placed the dish with its brimming marrow-shell in front of Wallace. Mrs Poon moved from her old seat to flank Wallace and removed the ladle from her son's grasp. May Ling pressed her knee against her husband" as though to remind him of her expressed confidence in his ability to assume this position (176). "From then on Wallace had the keys to Mr. Poon's" business empire, complete with the watch he had once pawned (177-8).

After burying Mr. Poon, Wallace turns his attention to reclaiming his nephews. He comes to replace Ah Lung in their affections and dispels his corrupting influence even as Ah Lung disappears from the family. Wallace establishes a business and investment office for both the family wealth and that of the village, knowing, unlike Mr. Poon, that "virtue is the root, while wealth is the branch" (Chan, 92). Although "there was a new rhythm to the life in the household with a set of evolving and rapidly established precedents," it is clear that Wallace has not simply taken up where Mr. Poon left off (214). Wallace has met the crisis of Westernization and succeeded in creating a more loving and prosperous family by adhering to authentic Confucian values.

The last image in the novel confirms the seriousness of the theme in *The Monkey King,* despite the comic tone of the book. The title alludes to a Chinese myth of Sun Wu Kung, a legendary king of the monkeys. At one time, Wallace explains to his nephews that the "monkey was really clever," and "was so brave" that he sometimes got into mischief, causing

his master to put "an iron band to go round his head to control him" (69). Confucian ethics are such a band, constraining the bestial elements in man, making man more than a monkey.

The man as a monkey dilemma arises again when the misunderstandings between East and West are the greatest. After Mr. Allardyce explodes in anger when the Chinese expect him to be mildly amused by the capering monkey, the Major explains that the "monkey was special to the English because it remind them of man." He goes on to render a humorously fractured version of Darwinism, but the reader should discern a serious and universal problem. The Major says, "those monkey crafty like anything. You did anything, it didn't matter how difficult, and they could copy you and do it" (93). The point, for the Chinese, is that they can imitate Western styles and use Western technique to achieve prosperity, but if they do so at the expense of simply abandoning their traditional values and culture, will they be anything more than a troop of monkeys? Such a thought must be acutely painfully for a civilization as self-conscious, historically lengthy, and proud as the Chinese.

The closing scene of the novel presents a nightmare. Wallace dreams of eating a live monkey brain, an idea made somewhat familiar to American readers by Maxine Hong Kingston's book, *The Woman Warrior* (107-8). Wallace dreams of a cage; inside, "immobilised with manacles around its feet and hands, and iron band clamped around the top of its head, the dome of which protruded through a hole in the top, was a young monkey." Hot oil is ladled, hissing and popping, on the slimy surface of the exposed brain after the skull is broken and peeled away like a coconut husk (215).

Mr. Mo leaves Wallace shaken by this image to reinforce the Confucian notion that high office is a place of service and dreadful responsibility not an opportunity to indulge luxury: "An officer must be great and strong. His burden is heavy and his course is long. He has taken humanity to be his own burden – is that not heavy?" (8:7). Reverting to the monkey level sacrifices the brain, the mind, what is distinctively human.

There is also a more subtle significance in the dream, for it visually represents Wallace's philosophy of life. Mr. Mo presents a symbolically concise visual series. Wallace's father's photograph of the severed Chinese heads was meant to communicate an advocacy of Westernization by illustrating the consequences of opposing the technological and military power of the West. Mr. Poon's photograph of the Manchu mandarin was meant to communicate an advocacy of cultural conservatism and a traditional

literalism which sought to remain unpolluted by modernization. In both cases, evil is naively construed as an external threat, something outside the nature of man which can be kept at bay through appropriate rituals, either those of traditional China or of modern science.

The Confucian position pronounces both of these superstitious. For the battle is not with ghosts, foreign devils, nor anything exterior to man. Confucius tells us the battle is to recover the human heart from bestial habits on the lowest levels of human life and egotistic indulgence on the higher levels; not to be a monkey, but a human. Thus, the *Analects* advise, "Attack the evil that is within yourself; do not attack the evil that is in others" (12:21). The image of the monkey meal is meant to suggest that the threat imperiling mankind is not Western progress nor Eastern conservatism. The danger today is exactly the same as it was in Confucius' day, the danger of being no more than a monkey, of allowing the bestial to eat up the human (*Jen*). Mr. Poon was perilously close to being little more than a monkey; his family a cage of bickering monkeys. That Wallace is frightened by the prospect of devolving into a beast is a measure of his dedication to the Confucian Way of recovering the human heart.

* * *

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