

*'This Is Getting a Little Too Chinese for Me':  
The Representation of China in Crime Fiction Written in English*

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**Abstract:** The article addresses the representation of China in contemporary crime fiction written in English. A close examination of a selection of works set in China by Lisa See, Peter May, Catherine Sampson, Lisa Brackmann and Duncan Jepson reveals that, following the hardboiled tradition and crime fictions produced in post-colonial times, these narratives scrutinize the West's many deficiencies. However, the authors do not articulate a truly postcolonial discourse aimed at destabilizing the notion of the assumed superiority of the West and its right to intrude in other countries' affairs. Furthermore, these narratives seem to be written to confirm the readers' worst expectations about China, which is fated to stay poor, backward and ultimately Other, unable to achieve some degree of 'normalization' or Westernization that could legitimize China's claims to modernity, improvement and ascendancy in our global economy. Thus, as we vicariously travel the country through these narratives, we face the usual array of fraudsters, tricksters and blood-thirsty murderers that populate crime fictions, but it is China itself that is singled out as the true monster of the stories.

**Keywords:** crime fiction in English, China, (sino)Orientalism, post-colonial/postcolonial crime fiction, Lisa See, Peter May, Catherine Sampson, Lisa Brackmann, Duncan Jepson

Ever since the origins of the genre, detective fiction writers have looked at foreign lands as settings for their stories. Edgar Allan Poe situated his seminal "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" (1841) and his other two Auguste Dupin mysteries – "The Mystery of Marie Rogêt" (1842) and "The Purloined Letter" (1844) – in Paris. Successive authors chose more exotic locations like Seringapatam, India, in Wilkie Collins' *The Moonstone* (1868); Salt Lake Valley in modern Utah in Arthur Conan Doyle's first Sherlock Holmes' novella, *A Study in Scarlet* (1887); or, to mention one last example, the colonial Middle East in Agatha Christie's *Murder on the Orient Express* (1934), *Murder in Mesopotamia* (1936) or *Death on the Nile* (1937). In fact, detective fiction was born and developed in conjunction with the British Empire and, as a consequence, as critics such as Upamanyu Pablo Mukherjee (2003), Caroline Reitz (2004) and Stephen Knight (2006) have demonstrated, the genre "is an early, often the first voice, to respond to new

social and cultural encounters generated by the colonial situation” (Knight, 2006: 25). Detective fiction not only placed its plots, or parts of them, in the colonies but the genre itself became an arena where the tensions, fears and anxieties generated by transnational contact and “unassimilated racial and cultural difference” (Pearson and Singer, 2009: 4) were dramatized, often using the alien locale and/or ethnic villains as sites of evil and wilderness against which British superiority, ‘civilized’ values, and authority could be asserted. In this way, detective fiction, together with the coetaneous genre of imperialist adventure, contributed to “the energizing myth of English imperialism” (White, 1993: 6) and participated in Orientalist practices that, under the pretence of informing the stay-at-homes about foreign lands, helped define the difference between civilization and savagery and provided a rationale for the right of “the West to control, constrain, and otherwise govern (through superior knowledge and accommodating power) the Other” (Said, 2003: 48).

The allure of the foreign in crime fiction has not vanished with the dismantling of the Empire; quite the opposite. Firstly, an alien setting is a marketable commodity in the crowded crime writing scene. Ellen Carter and Deborah Walker-Morrison draw on Casanova’s thesis in *The World Republic of Letters* to explain the success of authors such as Caryl Férey who place their crime mysteries in foreign lands.<sup>1</sup> They explain, “with thousands of freshly minted novels annually clamouring for the reader’s wallet, authors cannot risk their genius languishing in publishers’ rejection piles” (2014: 19). Consequently, crime fictions that approach foreign locations to local readerships are saleable since they add the mystery of the *outré* to the crime investigated by the detective. In this way, they become exciting alternatives to travel writing, using “strategic exoticism” (Whitfield, 2008: 20) to allow readers to “embark on ‘journeys’ (from the comfort of their armchairs) not so much to explore new geographies or recently ‘discovered’ countries as to scrutinize different cultures and societies” (Anderson, Miranda and Pezzotti, 2014: 1-2). And secondly, (to us) foreign settings are the locations of postcolonial crime stories written by authors from the ex-colonies that use the genre’s potential to delve into the dark recesses of society to explore the effects of colonialism and imperialism, challenge white supremacy and/or expose the inconsistencies and depredations of Western interventionism abroad. Even though these stories do not particularly present postcard images of the countries they portray, they are still exciting for readers that crave for knowledge about foreign lands, are attuned to the genre’s dismaying revelations about the workings of our world, and, at the same time, draw a certain satisfaction from the observation that the West is not without flaws, but it is infinitely better than (or, at worst, as bad as) the societies portrayed in these stories – even if the West itself is to blame for the convoluted situations in postcolonial countries, which remain “insecure, dangerous and corrupt” (Christian 2010: 284).

China, itself a postcolonial country,<sup>2</sup> has also become the chosen setting of crime stories written by American and British writers, as well as by dissident Chinese living and working abroad such as Qiu Xiaolong or Diane Wei Liang. To mention just a few that will be analyzed in this paper, Lisa See, Peter May, Catherine Sampson, Lisa Brackmann or Duncan Jepson,<sup>3</sup> all have novels with Chinese detectives as protagonists situated, partly or in their totality, in different parts of China. Indeed, especially in the case of Lisa See and Qiu Xiaolong, their stories are peppered with references to traditional and popular Chinese culture, particularly food, festivities, proverbs and religious practices, thus “adorning [the books] with characteristics that are unmistakably

'Chinese', especially in the eyes of the non-Chinese reader" (Luo, 2014: 51).<sup>4</sup> Consequently, they "[feed] into the Western imaginations of China" and do not break free from the "exoticism on the literary representation of Chinese culture, as exoticism is still the hallmark that helps to sell the books" (Luo, 2014: 55).<sup>5</sup> Certainly, as a (part-time, beginner) student of Mandarin Chinese myself, the location of the stories and the possibility to learn more about the country is what drew me to these narratives to start with. However, these novels offer an altogether grim picture of the country, which – ridden with corruption, oppression, poverty, eco-deterioration and mass migration – seems anchored in a stubborn backwardness in spite of its great leap forward toward prosperity and its supposedly beneficial Westernization. I also found that they are mostly blind to China's colonial past and the nation's troubled and resentful relationship with the 'foreign devils'. In fact, references to China's colonial history, as Jeffrey C. Kinkley demonstrates, do not figure much, either, in detective fiction by Chinese writers, mostly addressed in sub-literature produced during Mao Zedong's era and used as propaganda which raised "the pitch of anti-imperialist rhetoric to unprecedented levels" by designating "all Chinese history from 1840 to 1949 as 'semi-colonial' – that is, manipulated from afar by economic and political forces let in by the 'Unequal Treaties'" (Kinkley, 2001: 112-113). In turn, in detective stories set in China but written in English, Mao and his infamous Cultural Revolution are steadily portrayed as haunting presences responsible still for the Chinese protagonists' worst nightmares and the political and social situation in which Chinese citizens live nowadays.

This dispiriting overview of Chinese society is consistent with the demands of the genre, which, since the development of the hard-boiled tradition in the 1920s in the United States, has left its original conservatism behind to showcase the underbelly of corruption, destitution and sheer despondency which characterizes societies. As Christian phrases the idea, "As a genre, detective fiction often moves from the interrogation of suspects to the interrogation of society, where crime stems from flaws in the political, social, and industrial systems" (2010: 284). In postcolonial crime fiction, this aspect of the genre has been used to take the West to task by featuring detectives who are members of the groups that "were once colonized or marginalized ... struggling against neo-colonialism, assimilation, and the hegemony of Western culture" (Christian, 2010: 283). The novels considered in this article, mostly, but not exclusively, those which have parts of their plot situated in the United States and the United Kingdom – Lisa See's *The Flower Net* (1997) and *The Interior* (1999), Peter May's *Snakehead* (2002), Catherine Sampson's *The Pool of Unease* (2007) and *The Slaughter Pavilion* (2008), Lisa Brackmann's *Rock Paper Tiger* (2010) and Duncan Jepson's *Emperors Once More* (2014) – do not shy away from criticizing the West. Immigration policies and the fate of Chinese immigrants, both legal and illegal, in the United States, for instance, are depicted as nightmarish for those involved. Chinese workers were originally brought to America "to work on [the] railroad" (See, 1997: 152),<sup>6</sup> but after the Exclusion Act of 1882 "[n]o Chinese were supposed to be let into the US" (See, 1997: 178), which resulted in waves of illegal Chinese immigrants entering the country nevertheless, expecting "to become rich men" (See, 1997: 178) but finding poverty, destitution and abuse instead. More than a hundred years later, the situation for illegal Chinese immigrants is not much better. They are still working in sweatshops or massage parlours to earn meagre salaries with which to pay back the money owed to snakeheads. If found out living illegally in the country, they are treated with contempt and indifference to basic human rights by the police and then "hauled up before the

immigration court and threatened with repatriation" (May, 2002: 84). Even though the court is required to allow them "to make contact with their consulates, and they [have] the right to legal representation," few of them have "access to a lawyer, never mind the means to pay for one," (May, 2002: 169) while the law is served by "fast-mouthed conveyer[s] of ersatz justice, delivered on tap for the man with the most dollars in his hand" (May, 2002: 167). Caught in the gridlock of the greed of Americans and Chinese alike to make money by using illegal workers and restrictive immigration policies, it comes as no surprise that Chinese aliens "long for the familiar hardships of [their] home village" (See, 1997: 210) in a country where multiculturalism is only a façade of "[f]ast food joints ... Chinese, Mexican, Italian," in a "battle between burgers and Beijing duck, French fries and fajitas" (May, 2002: 179). A visitor in London, Blue Tang, one of the Chinese protagonists of Catherine Sampson's novels, experiences in her own skin the abuse against ethnic citizens. Chased by hooligans who target her for her appearance – one of them tells her "I smell Chinese fucking takeaway" (Sampson, 2008: 186) – Blue feels she has "stepped into a nightmare" where thugs "[have] white skins" and are "armed with beer bottles" (Sampson 2008: 186).

The ideal of a bountiful West regulated by democratic principles is further belied as the protagonists come to terms with, or simply observe, the iniquities that plague advanced countries with supposedly fully-developed civil societies. Deprived expanses of "[r]otting wooden shacks with crudely patched roofs" – punctuated by "disenchanted black youths" with nothing to do apart from watching the traffic of "ancient rusting cars" limping along "pitted and potholed" roads – exist in cities such as Huston, which in certain areas resembles "a shanty town on the edge of some third world city, instead of the fourth largest city of the richest country in the world" (May, 2002: 248-49). A London slum equipped with "broken windows and sheets rigged up as curtains" (Sampson, 2008: 183) is populated by drunken thugs, beggars and religious fanatics. As recession hits hard in the country, especially in industrial cities, there are places "with an angry depressed feel" to them characterized by "grim housing, run-down pubs, and boarded-up shops," revealing a decade of "economic devastation" as mills shrunk and "laid off workers" (Sampson, 2007: 23). Meanwhile, industries are dismantled and transplanted to countries such as China, as well as "Indonesia, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Haiti" (See, 1999: 225), where labour is cheaper and there is more profit to be made, even if this means that workers become virtual slaves in "a global market [where] there is no such thing as a minimum wage" (Sampson, 2007: 138). All in all, Western countries are revealed to have been built by "corporate and industrial bandits" who pull "themselves up by their boot straps by any means possible" (See, 1999: 300) and now are "eating away like insects at the rotting bamboo curtain ... crawling all over everything" (Sampson, 2007: 280). British and American politicians may "beat their chests about China's unfair trade practices [or] its selling of nuclear technology to rogue nations" (See, 1999: 334); or boast about their "precious ideals of liberty and equality" (May, 2002: 321). However, they do not "look at the shades of grey in the big picture" (See, 1999: 334). In *Snakehead*, for example, the United States is involved in crop-spraying actions in coca plantations in Colombia in order to "kill the plants where they grow and cut off the cocaine trade at source" (May, 2002: 160), even though they are infecting large numbers of people and animals with "pretty horrible diseases," which is "tantamount to waging biological warfare on the people of Colombia" (May, 2002: 161) and "trampling over other people's rights and sovereignty" (May, 2002: 321). In *The Pool of Unease*, Catherine Sampson focuses on a fictional steel mill in northern

England, Kelness, which she uses to showcase the irresponsibility of factory owners in their vain effort to save companies in Britain's decayed economy. Kelness failed to buy radiation detection units since the monitors were too expensive. As a consequence, a "container-load of scrap from Russia" which "should never have got through the gate without an alarm going on" was left at the scrapyards radiating poison for a week before "the one functioning monitor in the whole bloody place raised the alarm" (Sampson, 2007: 192). And this is not to mention other cases of corruption and shady deals, as well as empire-building practices, depicted in the novels, since Western governments are more interested in "guarding their budgets and their turfs" (May, 2002: 127) than in the wellbeing of their citizens or the people they exploit in third-world countries.

These novels do indeed expose the underbelly of British and American societies and denounce neo-imperialist/colonial practices in China and elsewhere. However, they cannot be regarded as postcolonial texts writing "for the seat of empire, what is called the metropolis or metropole, with the aim of transforming it" (Christian, 2001: 9). Neither do they zero in on the ills of Western societies in order to disqualify the West's self-appointed right to interfere with the fates of people in deprived countries. Also, even though they feature sympathetic Chinese detectives who are sceptical about the West's intrinsic worth, these selfsame detectives ultimately uphold Western values regarding human rights and democratic principles that clash against the stringent policies and flagrant human rights violations in China – in *Snakehead*, for instance, Inspector Li Yan confirms that prisoners are tortured by the police, "beaten and blindfolded and stuck with ... electric cattle prod[s]" in China, but "it's never happened on my shift" (May, 2002: 44-45). Furthermore, in most of the cases, members of the detectives' families were targeted as traitors to the People's Republic of China and subjected to torture, injury or death during Mao's Cultural Revolution and, as a consequence, they are cynical about Mao's legacy and the country's ensuing politics. Finally, they are all fluent speakers of English, some of them – Li Hulan in Lisa See's novels and Alex Soong in Jepson's *Emperors Once More* – have even been educated in the West. All in all, they are not representatives of China's common citizens and function instead as the authors' figureheads that speak to and from the West to confirm the readers' worst expectations about China and the country's essential difference from the West. In fact, these novels are furiously engaged in the process of Othering China by activating a series of strategies ultimately devised to reassure the West, if not of its superiority, at least of its inherent decency, social stability and overwhelming value in a world which has lost its master narrative of the Cold War that, just a few decades ago, helped to fabricate interested knowledge of the East.

To start with, these novels depict the formidable invasion of foreign companies in Chinese territory taking advantage of the country's resources and affordable land and labour prices, not to mention the huge potential of a new moneyed class eager to consume Western products. In the interior city of Taiyuan, for example, American companies "had set up joint-venture coal mines in the outlying areas and export companies in town" (See, 1999: 50), while Australians and New Zealanders were growing pigs and sheep and Germans and Italians brought heavy industry. In Beijing, Song, the private detective protagonist of Catherine Sampson's novels, laments the overwhelming presence of foreigners in a city that had been isolated from the world just a decade before:

Young Europeans set up cafes on the pavements, the Americans put stern-eyed marines at their embassy gate, Filipinas sang in hotel lounges, the French collected antiques, the Italians shopped for textiles, the British opened schools for the children of the rich, the Germans ran five-star hotels, the Russians bartered furs, and Mongolian women worked in the brothels, the Koreans opened barbecue restaurants and the Japanese ate raw fish and refused to apologize for history. (Sampson, 2007: 280-81)

However, the authors do not establish a sense of continuity between China's colonial past and the neo-colonial practices at work in the country, as if neo-colonialism was a phenomenon that, far from revealing the West's uninterrupted encroachment on foreign territories, has finally made Chinese people aware of the opportunities and prosperity they had missed when the Bamboo Curtain fell.

In fact, of the books analyzed in this article, only two address past colonial violations of China's sovereignty, See's *The Interior* and Jepson's *Emperors Once More*. In both cases, in any case, those who criticize the West's infringement on Chinese territory are either bad or mad, or both. In *The Interior*, Amy Gao – one of the characters working for the governor of Shanxi Province, corrupt Sun Gan – explains that “[for] centuries the West has wanted a piece of us ... In the last century the British intoxicated us with opium, forced us to open our ports, and very nearly destroyed us” (1999: 412) and now she is against Western factories being set up in China. Nevertheless, she is dismissed as “either crazy or deluded” (1999: 413) and is revealed to be a murderer who killed innocent people in her race for the governorship. In *Emperors Once More*, the serial killer villain, Seng Pok, is a religious fanatic obsessed with the Boxer Revolution who wants to trigger an uprising “to restore China to its rightful place ... fulfilling a destiny that will wipe away the hundreds of years of humiliation we have suffered” (2014: 275). In spite of the legitimacy of the claims of those who started the Boxer Revolution, in the novel it is exposed as a failure characterized by superstition, blood-lust and ineptitude; in fact, revolutions in general, like the 1967 revolts in Hong Kong against the British administration, are frowned upon in Jepson's novel since they result only in hundreds of victims and traumatized individuals like Seng Pok himself, who is, after all, moved by “an underlying rage and fury that stems from more than just politics” (2014: 371), so he is not a true revolutionary and is written off by the Western-educated protagonist as “crazy” (2014: 324), “fucking deluded” (2014: 326) or “a vicious madman” (2014: 345). Focusing as he does on the ex-colony of Hong Kong, Jepson does not intend to denounce the abuse of locals by the British administration before 1997 or to address the difficult relationship between contemporary Hong Kong citizens and mainland China. He is concerned, instead, with undertaking a defence of progress based on the adoption of Western values.

In this context, Mao's revolution – no matter how pernicious it turned out to be in the end – to free China from years of subjection is presented as a big historical tantrum “led by a party of paranoia, fearing contamination” (Sampson, 2007: 280) that stalled China's progress for over four decades. Consequently, even abusive foreign companies such as the fictitious Knight Ltd. in Lisa See's *The Interior*, which employs female peasants in the provinces, bring prosperity to rural areas that had, in the past, been at the mercy of “famine or drought or flood” (1999: 182). In fact, “at least [the factories aren't] the fields” (1999: 150) and even offer women the opportunity to escape from

“abusive fathers or unwanted marriages” or from “bandits or other rogue groups who [sweep] through remote villages kidnapping women to sell into marriages” after the one-child policy resulted in “millions of abortions of female foetuses” so “women ... [have become] a valued commodity” (1999: 153). Furthermore, these women send their earnings home to their peasant families or save their salaries to open little businesses, so suddenly Chinese girls are “seen by their families as leaders of social and economic change; as a result ... female infanticide [has] dropped for the first time in recorded history” (1999: 425).

If the working conditions in foreign companies in China are bad, on the other hand, this is due to the complicity of the country itself, where it is not against the law to make money “by putting people’s health and safety in jeopardy” (See, 1999: 216). Indeed, foreign businesses go overseas for “cheap labour and great tax breaks” but also because they can “skirt around ... laws by hiring children, by using chemicals that would never pass [Western] safety standards, by having working conditions that [are] dangerous, and by employing people for inhumane numbers of hours” (See, 1999: 223-24); after all, they are in China and they “can get away with a lot” (See, 1999: 252). Also, and just in case foreign interests in China were seen as too opportunistic, the owners of American or British companies in these novels are not necessarily aware of the conditions in which their employees work– nor to be blamed for them. Again, in See’s *The Interior*, Knight Ltd.’s owner, Henry Knight, is a philanthropist for whom “China is just another cause” so he has “given money to hospitals, children’s organizations, various shelters” (1999: 117), and who thinks “he’s doing good for these people, paying them well, providing housing” (1999: 211). However, the money he sends for the company to operate goes through the area’s governor, Sun Gan, whom Knight unwisely trusts. Since “[t]his is China and Sun is a smooth operator” he keeps part of the money that is supposed to be used to pay for workers’ salaries as he is implicated in a “scheme that net[s] him hundreds of thousands of dollars a year” (1999: 236).

The connivance of the country’s government and Chinese individuals in the abuse of their own people is also used to explain the massive diaspora of Chinese citizens to the West. As one of the characters in Lisa See’s *The Interior* puts it, “even though [they] don’t admit it, every single person in China would like to leave” (See, 1999: 209), an opinion that even the cynical protagonist of Peter May’s novels, Li Yan, corroborates when he witnesses the hardships which Chinese immigrants are ready to endure to reach the United States.<sup>7</sup> The West, in turn and in spite of its deficiencies, is presented as a land of opportunity, freedom and justice which is offered as a better option than China by comparison. Los Angeles in Lisa See’s *The Flower Net*, for example, is a paradise of balmy weather, carefree people, voluptuous girls, and lush Spanish-style villas where the investigation the Chinese and American governments conduct together moves forward with the help of “charts and ... support staff,” so that officers can “cast a flower net and trap anyone or anything that lays within its reach (1997: 156). Justice proceeds with search warrants and rules of evidence, unlike in Beijing, where courthouses are “typically cold,” the air smells of “cigarette smoke and ... fear” and death or labour camp sentences for crimes such as bank robberies or housebreaking are “meted out with amazing dispatch by a panel of three judges in military uniforms” (1997: 229). Unsurprisingly, this explains why the Chinese protagonist, Liu Hulan, does not practice law in Beijing in spite of her training. It also explains the reluctance of Peter San, Hulan’s partner, to go back to China, since “[i]t is difficult for a snake to go back to hell

once it has tasted heaven” (1997: 162). Huston in Peter May’s *Snakehead* is also a “spectacular” landscape of “shining glass tower blocks and skyscrapers” and the site of the Texas Medical Center – forty-two medical institutions “serving five million patients a year in a hundred buildings ... [w]ith an annual operating budget of more than four billion dollars and research grants of more than two billion” – which employs “fifty thousand people, attract[s] ten thousand volunteers and one hundred thousand students” (2002: 27). Like “everything else in Texas” it has ambitions to be the biggest and the best, and “probably it [is]” (2002: 27). This is demonstrated when medical experts collaborating in the investigation manage to identify the sophisticated gene engineered by a fanatic intent on spreading the Spanish flu virus using illegal Chinese immigrants as carriers and threatening, not only the lives of many, but also and very importantly, the site of democracy itself which serves man’s “inalienable rights ... [l]ife, liberty, happiness” (2002: 217).

Even Ellie Cooper – the sceptical protagonist of Lisa Brackmann’s *Rock Paper Tiger* who, once in China, observes the deprivation and abuse of Chinese citizens – undertakes a defence of American policies abroad after a spell in Iraq as a medical aid for the army during which she witnessed the torture of prisoners of war. Brackmann, in fact, deflates responsibility for what Americans do in places like Iraq by justifying interventionism in a Conradian admission that “the conquest of the earth [may not be] ... a pretty thing when you look into it too much” (Conrad, 1998: 140–41), but the idea still redeems it. The circumstances in which people live in Iraq “just suck,” which means that “people around there [are] dirt-poor and [live] in shitholes with intermittent electricity and contaminated water” (2010: 111). The country as a whole is embodied in images of “desert; flat, endless scrub, different shades of dirt, an occasional clump of cinderblock buildings that [blend] into the grey dust”; towns that are “just a crossroads and a couple of telephone poles stuck between mud-brick houses and a few cement storefronts”; or impressions of horror in the form of a donkey hooked up to a cart, its “flanks crisscrossed by whip scars, ribs sticking out, head hanging down, like it’d had a lifetime of getting the shit kicked out of it” (2010: 61). Into this mix Brackmann throws in the oppression of the Republican Guards who kept jails not “for car thieves or burglars or that kind of thing. More for regime opponents. Draft-dodgers. Or folks who pissed off the local sheik” (2010: 152). As a consequence, the local nationals are “glad we’re here” (2010: 62), and American soldiers hold the optimistic belief that if they “cut the guts out of this whole bullshit resistance around here” they can “finally get things running the way they should. Fix the sewers and the power plant, show the locals it’s all been worth it” (2010: 131–32). This, in turn, disqualifies resistance since, in the logic of the novel, this hinders the advance of progress. Furthermore, it is the fact that hajjis engage in unending resistance that justifies the means used by soldiers to control prisoners of war. After all, they are used to it: “These people respect power and fear. You come across weak, they’ll rip your throat out the minute your back’s turned. ... This is a shame-based culture” (2010: 159).

In contrast, the West, especially the United States in the novels considered here, unlike places like China or Iraq, offers people the possibility of earning a decent salary, even becoming rich,<sup>8</sup> and if Chinese immigrants do not manage to succeed this is, once more, because they are exploited by their own people. “Homeless and helpless and desperate to reach America” immigrants expect to find “[t]he Beautiful Country [美国, Měiguó, the name given to the United States in Chinese], the Mountain of Gold” (May, 2002:

49) but they are taken advantage of by the snakeheads working for the triads. These have “healthy international connections,” meaning “glorious access to heroin coming through the Golden Triangle,” and draw “a continual supply of foot soldiers to do their dirty work” (See, 1997: 14) from new immigrants. They “bring a lot of crime into [the United States]” (May, 2002: 21) in the form of “casinos, bookmaking, loan-sharking, prostitution, extortion, credit-card and food-stamp fraud ... and ... heroin smuggling” (See, 1997: 15). And, of course, one of their main businesses is “the illegal smuggling of Chinese” which “generates revenues of more than three billion dollars a year” (May, 2002: 58). Illegal immigrants have to pay a considerable amount of money to snakeheads to be taken to the States. This involves a dangerous sea passage from China with hundreds of people crowded in insalubrious conditions in the upper and lower decks of old and rusty boats, subjected to “the pain and indignity and humiliation of an endless journey to the promised land, in the hands of ruthless individuals who [rape] and beat them for pleasure and dollars” (May, 2002: 47). Then they are taken to countries like Guatemala, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, El Salvador and, eventually, Mexico, where they are smuggled in into the States, often in false floors in the back of trucks where they spend “hours without food or water or the chance to move” so they have to “soil themselves where they lay, squeezed together like sardines, lying in their own filth” (May, 2002: 49). This suffering is all for nothing. Since they do not have the money to pay for their trips to start with, they “[contract] with the triads – a free trip, room and board” in exchange for “years of indentured servitude” working in “sweatshops and restaurants, as prostitutes and drug runners” (See, 1997: 19). When they cannot meet their contractual obligations as the fees are too high, they are slaves for life. To add insult to injury, apparently respectable Chinese Americans are involved with the triads. In Peter May’s *Snakehead*, the *ah kung* or “the supreme grandfather” (2002: 59; emphasis in the original) of one of the *tongs* is Councilman Soong, who began life in America as an illegal immigrant, was granted amnesty by President Bush after Tiananmen, and is now “[t]he living embodiment of the American dream,” the “chairman of the Houston-Hong Kong Bank” and “a very rich man” (2002: 176). Soong, however, is in the “exploitation business ... charging poor people more money than they could dream of ... to come to America and be forced into slave labour. A slightly more sophisticated version of what the British did to the Africans two hundred years ago” (2002: 272). Meanwhile, Beijing is complicit in the trade with illegal Chinese immigrants since “there are too many people already in China and too few jobs” and once they are abroad “all those illegal immigrants send money home” injecting “millions into [a] local economy ... that would probably collapse without them” (2002: 273).

The crime fictions in English with Chinese settings considered in this paper do not only ultimately exonerate the West from its intrusion and depredations in foreign lands and blame China itself for the fates of its citizens abroad. They are also intent on presenting the country as essentially backward because of its inability to leave the past behind. China’s recent history, particularly Mao’s Cultural Revolution, is singled out as responsible for the country’s chronic deficiencies. As Daniel F. Vukovich explains, “Maoism was an active, real alternative to both Soviet and American development and modernity” that, in spite of its “grave mistakes and its foreclosure by Deng,” was characterized by “radically egalitarian social policies centred on co-operative rural development and mass participation; the empowerment of an urban proletariat; [and, among others] the attempt to overcome the rural/urban and manual/intellectual labour

split" (2012: 29). Kinkley also points out that China "could be viewed by its citizenry as the first nation in Asia, including Russia, to stage a successful republican revolution; the bearer of modern nationalism to Korea and Vietnam; and, since the 1960s, the world socialist vanguard and leader of the Third World, without quite having to belong to it" (2001: 112). In the novels analyzed here, however, these are not aspects that are taken into account to present the country in a favourable light. Instead, Mao's pernicious shadow keeps the country in a perpetual state of arrested-development, unable to forget or overcome the past. Thus, the years of "bloody turmoil lay buried in the soil and in the souls of the people" (See, 1999: 50) and haven't "just vanish[ed]. [They]ha[ve] made [their] mark on all of them" (Sampson, 2008: 93). The Chinese citizens' sufferings because of Mao's policies are, in fact, used as shorthand for the country's whole traumatic past. In the novels, this past manifests itself both as haunted memories of tragic events and as an ingrained state of being that prevents China's complete modernization, especially in rural provinces away from big cities such as Beijing, Shanghai or Hong Kong, characterized by a lack of basic facilities such as toilets, electricity or telephones. Thus, when Liu Hulan visits the "primitive interior" only "three hundred miles from Beijing" (See, 1999: 54), she feels "she could have been stepping back in time a hundred, even a thousand, years" (See, 1999: 55). Private detective Song has the same feelings and, when in Lower Xiaoshanzi, a tiny village of "ancient tile-roofed cottages," he thinks he might have "stepped back a couple of hundred years" (Sampson, 2007: 319). Even in Beijing, modernity shares space with anachronistic reminders of China's dilatory state of progress, such as the "army of men wielding hammers and picks, and a cavalry of donkeys" (Sampson, 2007: 8) that arrive to demolish one of the *hutongs* to make way for new tower buildings.

Actually, the association of China with the past, as Tao Zhijian asserts, "warrants not only change but also alterations that most preferably conform to Western ideas of progress and modernity" (2009: 26), which in fact underwrites the assumption that Westernization is a desirable objective. However, the crime novels set in China analysed in this article do not allow China to completely become 'Western' and, therefore, contribute to confirming an essential asymmetry between China and the West. Thus, China is made to remain Other, suspended in a perpetual process of becoming 'normal' and yet moored in chaos and poverty because of its inherent cultural and political differences, unable to reach Western standards beyond the mushrooming of high-rise buildings and the proliferation of Kentucky Fried Chickens, McDonalds, Pizza Huts, Waffle Kings or Starbucks. Therefore, in common with a constellation of other "scholarly, literary, filmic, journalistic and other texts" (Vukovich, 2012: xiv), these novels produce interested, flash-in-the-pan, scare type knowledge that keeps alive China's "third affliction", "its largely negative image in the world" (Chu, 2014: 164). This is offered in the form of sketches of tyranny, abuse, corruption, wily bad cops, frame-ups, extorted confessions, death sentences delivered with rapid dispatch, tight control over information, ingrained sexism, the effects of the one-child policy and criticism of the Communist Party; also, and very significantly, in vignettes of urban and rural desolation and defective infrastructures where souls are lost through the crush of everyday life. David Trotter (1991: 71-72) argues that crime fiction can never remove the upsetting impact of the dead body, so a residue of the horror genre remains in crime fiction. In crime novels set in China written in English dead bodies proliferate but the horror comes from the rendition of the New China that capitalism has spawned, which becomes the true fear-inducing monster in these narratives.

Thus, capitalism has brought prosperity to the country, especially “all along the coast – in Shanghai, Guangzhou, Shenzhen and Fujian Province” (See, 1997: 54). However, it has also transformed the outlook of cities since capitalism means frenetic change. Consequently, “nothing look[s] ... traditionally Chinese” (Sampson, 2007: 55) anymore as high-rises, neon lights and gigantic advertisements occupy the places of traditional *hutongs* in cities where “construction sites ... [spring] up wherever there [are] slums or empty ground” (Sampson, 2007: 177) and working gangs are “bashing away with picks at the tarmac or digging ditches or straddling pneumatic drills ... engaged ... in the brutal, back-breaking creation of ... modern metropolis[es]” (Sampson, 2007: 269). These construction sites turn cities into wastelands with mounds of rubble atop of which “mechanical scavengers ... [pull and push] at the debris” along roadsides as “mules balefully [eye] the hot tarmacadam” and “[p]easant women [pick] through the ruins, piling bricks on top of ... carts” (Sampson, 2008: 17). Indeed, transformation has not brought a change for the better. A few years back, the interior town of Taiyuan had been made up of “avenues and alleyways ... filled with the reassuring hum of bicycles transporting people and merchandise” and the air “had been clear and filled with the perfume of flowering trees” (See, 1999: 50). Now streets are crowded with “bumper-to-bumper traffic” and the air is “filled with exhaust and other fumes that [spew] from factory chimneys” (See, 1999: 50). Shanghai has been taken over by “brash and unsightly” skyscrapers and a TV tower “like an alien killer spider rising above Pudong” (Sampson, 2007: 332), so it is a city of “neon lights ..., the Martian TV tower illuminated in pink, skyscrapers on whose massive sides gigantic advertisements [play]” (Sampson, 2007: 339). Commercialism is fiercely active so hawkers “offering ... toys and souvenirs and food” (Sampson, 2007: 332) besiege people on every side. In this new China, in fact, only money seems to matter and, as a result, crime – “kidnapping, petty crime, violent crime, ID theft, insurance fraud, corruption and trickery in every facet of personal and commercial life” (Sampson, 2007: 6) – is burgeoning “like fungus in the grey sludge that [washes] up around the edges of the harmonious socialist society” (Sampson, 2008: 12) and cities like “Beijing [are] not as safe as [they were]” (Sampson, 2008: 210). In their pursuit of money, thugs are in the increase, abducting “children ... for sale, either, in the case of girls, as wives to men in rural areas ... or into prostitution. Babies and young boys ... to childless couples, and older boys ... as slave labour” (Sampson, 2008: 127-28). The illegal bear bile trade, to mention one last example, has resulted in bear farms where these animals are kept in cages “with no room to stand or even sit up”; they are also made to wear “metal corsets around their middles” so some of them have “gangrenous infections that [fester] and [ooze] pus from beneath” (See, 1997: 312). In China, indeed, “[e]verything’s for sale” (See, 1997: 332) and “there [is] only the reality of cash” (Sampson, 2007: 121) no matter the cost in human lives, misery or abuse.

Capitalism in the novels has also “created an economic chasm unlike any seen before in history” (See, 1997: 54). While the Red Princes and Princesses – the sons and daughters of the political and business elites – do not work or are handed cushy jobs, wield enormous power and have money that allows them to wear Rolexes or jewellery “worth more than what an entire peasant village might earn in a lifetime” (See, 1997: 115), the situation for the rural or labouring population is one of sheer despondency. Peasants are “the poorest of the poor ... working land that [is] filled with too many minerals to sustain proper life” (See, 1999: 45), so they survive “only at the caprice of nature” (See,

1999: 66) caught in a “struggle between flooding and draught” (Sampson, 2008: 88) in areas that are always described as vast expanses of bare “red earth ... [that] the wind [whips] into a dusty haze” (Sampson, 2008: 332) populated by strange visions of men on bikes weighed down with bizarre loads such as “pig carcass[es]” or “used tyres” (See, 1997: 65). In these unwelcoming landscapes men and women bear the signs of age earlier in time, their skins “wrinkled and stained dark brown from the sun” (See, 1999: 57). In factories, the working conditions are harsh: “The hours are long. The living facilities are substandard. The noise level on ... factory floor[s] must be bad for [the] ears” (See, 1999: 197). They are also dangerous. An old beggar who approaches one of the protagonists of Sampson’s *The Pool of Unease* had been working in a plastic factory, there was an explosion and one side of his body was burned down; now the skin of his face stretches “tight over the bone, his lips all but gone” (2007: 60). Privatization and economic reforms have also resulted in lots of people being laid off. People trying to escape poverty, therefore, migrate to the cities thinking “the streets are paved with gold” (Sampson, 2007: 138) and “looking in vain for a better life, only to find bitterness” (See, 1999: 59). Thus, buses from the provinces disgorge their cargoes of country migrants with “tanned, burned faces; bulging nylon net bags with faded stripes; patched cast-off clothes; strange, stiff shoes” (Brackmann, 2010: 4-5) who are going to “end up living in a shanty town in a refrigerator box,” picking “through junked computer parts for gold and copper wire” or stuck in “factories and malls and McJobs that treat people like trash and throw them away whenever they feel like it” (Brackmann, 2010: 18).

At night, cities like Beijing become fantasy worlds of fluorescent light with “flashing peacocks, shimmering rainbows and incandescent butterflies” (Sampson, 2007: 73), but they do nothing to counter the brutality of day-time China, the ‘real’ China beyond this “weird twilight world” (Brackmann, 2010: 1) which the authors present to their readers. This is a country of “cast-concrete high rises of shoddy design and even shoddier construction” (See, 1997: 232), where “[d]epartment store roofs collapse; chemicals poison rivers; miners suffocate in illegal mines” (Brackmann, 2010: 2) and factories release “orange-brown chemicals from their smokestacks” (See, 1997: 302). Transport is under-resourced and the conditions in which people travel are inhuman with train compartments where “babies [wail], spit up, [pee] (or worse) on the floor;” men chain-smoke “rough-smelling cigarettes, occasionally hawking murky sputum” and often missing the spittoons, so “horrible globs of mucus [end] up on the floor;” people sit on “hard seats” and eat their provisions of “fragrant – sometimes too fragrant – ... noodles” or “slivers of garlic on cold buns;” soon these odours blend with those of the toilet producing a “combination of [nauseating] smells” (See, 1999: 45-6). Cities are a haze of pollution, air “thick with coal smoke [and] exhaust”, and “cacophonous swarm[s]” of “people, bicycles and cars” (See, 1997: 64-5). People live just above the poverty line in “crowded neighbourhoods” in “dilapidated conditions ... [and] primitive facilities” (See, 1997: 73) or in outlying villages where “families [struggle] against dirt and the bitter cold and poverty” (Sampson, 2007: 71). As “in most of China, there [is] rubbish of every variety lying about” (See, 1999: 72). In a village square there are “twisted pieces of iron, scraggly baskets, some old barrels” (See, 1999: 72); outside walls of toilets, forests, ponds and abandoned quarries are turned into unofficial dumps forming “a carpet of degradation” (Sampson, 2007: 273) littered with “old plastic bags, odd shoes, empty food packaging,” (Sampson, 2007: 63) or a mess “of cigarette butts, dried faeces, discarded condoms” (Sampson, 2007: 273). All in all, the whole country is a

nightmare of waste dumps, shabby neighbourhoods and Dantesque landscapes with “acres of roads, ... inflated buildings, ... [wild] construction sites with their earthen dunes, their gaping foundations” (Sampson, 2007: 58), home to a cast of miserable figures that populate the background of the stories. There are armies of “beggars everywhere now” (Sampson, 2007: 59): “a girl with no legs ... who push[es] herself on makeshift wheels”, “ragged women with sleeping children in their arms,” a woman who pushes a “boy in a wheelchair, his mouth agape and drooling”, or a boy who darts back and forth “dropping to his knees, head jerking and bobbing in servile desperation, palm outstretched” (Sampson, 2007: 340). Scavengers move about “waterfalls of detritus”, “bent, spines doubled over their task” amidst the “reeking garbage” (Sampson, 2007: 288-89) in dumps and gutters. The only children in the streets have “red wind-roughened faces and runny noses” (Sampson, 2007: 71) or are “bare-bottomed” babies on the hips of “dark-skinned” (Sampson, 2008: 87) peasant women. China’s dark and steamy environment, thus, has given birth to an ecosystem inhabited only by corrupt or criminal politicians, businessmen or policemen that share space with construction gangs and with the wretched of the earth, as well as with a fauna of always described as scrawny or scruffy mongrel stray dogs (Sampson, 2007: 70, 71, 145, 270), cats or kittens (Sampson, 2007: 332; Sampson, 2008: 87), sheep (Sampson, 2007: 288) or chicken (See, 1999: 72; Sampson, 2007: 269).

To conclude, China, like any other society, has deficiencies, made worse by the severe policies, tight control and stark oppression by the Communist Party. In fact, as Chu Yingchi writes, China’s representation of “herself to the world as an egalitarian society in which everyone is able to participate in the evolving market economy under the governance of a political collective ... does not stand up to scrutiny” (2014: 164). Having said that, China has also “wrenched itself from more than one century of decline to become the great global game-changer of our time, pulling more people out of poverty in a shorter space of time than ever before in human history” (Fenby, 2013: 1). In any case, the country as it emerges from the crime fictions by authors such as Lisa See, Peter May, Catherine Sampson, Lisa Brackmann and Duncan Jepson is beyond redemption, so it could be argued these books partake of a (sino-)Orientalist discourse, as defined by Edward Said, that celebrates Western exceptionalism by emphasising the decrepitude of China. And yet, Said’s contention that, in the condemnation of the brutality of ‘the East’ there is an implicit defence of Western “human dignity, liberty and self-determination” (Said, 1994: 343) does not apply, or at least does not apply unproblematically to these novels as the West’s shortcomings, ironies and contradictions are also scrutinized. These crime fictions set in China, therefore, may not be truly Orientalist but we cannot regard them as postcolonial, either, since they do not ultimately demand a symbolic overhaul of the West or put its superiority and concomitant interventionist policies into question. Neither do they try to find exonerating values in China or foresee improvement in the country through increased self-determination, economic prosperity or a relaxation of the government’s control over its citizenry. For that matter, they do even not allow China to resemble what’s best of the West since China has merely adopted capitalism without working for the construction of a civil society. Thus, the China produced in these crime novels written in English remains the big bad communist monster – on capitalist steroids – of old, condemned to linger behind, backward, poor, depressed and dreary. And there is no intimation that the country will someday emerge from the swamp of moral sludge where it is moored. As Lisa Brackmann writes, Mao’s revolution was “something deep, strong

and full of rage, a tsunami sweeping everything away” that allowed “the underdogs [to] stake their claims” (2010: 332). The problem with revolutions is that “[e]ventually the whole fucking thing repeats itself” (2010: 332).

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<sup>1</sup> In the case of French author Caryl Férey, his novels *Zulu* (2010), *Utu* (2011) and *Mapuche* (2013) are situated, respectively, in South Africa, New Zealand and Argentina.

<sup>2</sup> China was colonized by the West 'only' in Macao, Hong Kong and South East Asia, though imperialism did indeed undermine China's sovereignty and the country's self-perception as the Middle Kingdom (中國, Zhōngguó), the centre of the cosmos. Authors like Kinkley (2001) define China as a post-post-colonial country, the country that has emerged after Mao's (post-colonial) China.

<sup>3</sup> Lisa See has three detective fictions situated in China: *The Flower Net* (1997), *The Interior* (1999) and *Dragon Bones* (2003). Peter May's Beijing's Inspector Li Yan's mysteries consist of: *The Firemaker* (1999), *The Fourth Sacrifice* (2000), *The Killing Room* (2000), *Snakehead* (2002), *The Runner* (2003) and *Chinese Whispers* (2004). Two of Catherine Sampson's Robin Ballantyne's stories take place in China: *The Pool of Unease* (2007) and *The Slaughter Pavilion* (2008). Lisa Brackman's novels set in China are *Rock Paper Tiger* (2010), *Hour of the Rat* (2013) and *Dragon Day* (2015). Finally, Duncan Jepson has one novel that takes place in China: *Emperors Once More* (2014). Even though there are many other British or American crime writers that situate their stories in China, only a selection of those written by the authors mentioned here are analysed in this paper basically for practical purposes taking into account the required length of articles for publication.

<sup>4</sup> Names in Chinese start with the surname and are followed by the name, without a comma. Thus, I follow this pattern throughout the article (for example, Luo Hui or Chu Yingchi). However, these selfsame names are standardized with a comma after the surname in the reference list (Luo, Hui and Chu, Yingchi). For the names of the Chinese protagonists of the novels analyzed in this paper, I follow the pattern used in the novels, where sometimes they follow the traditional Chinese practice (for example Li Hulan or Li Yan) or are sometimes Westernized (for example, Alex Soong).

<sup>5</sup> For an analysis of the exotic in Qiu Xiaolong's novels, see Luo Hui's "Shanghai, Shanghai: Placing Qiu Xiaolong's Crime Fiction in the Landscape of Globalized Literature", in Anderson, Miranda and Pezzotti (2014: 47-59). The exotic in Lisa See can be observed, to mention an example, in her novel *The Flower Net*. Amidst the Beijing traffic, the American protagonist observes "a caravan of camels loaded with goods" (1997: 78), while he witnesses other 'curiosities' on every street corner that reflect the city's domestic life: "On a street corner stood a cart laden with candied crab apples on bamboo skewers. On another, a man grilled fragrant strips of marinated pork. On yet another, a small crowd of people clustered around a kiosk to slurp redolent noodles from enamelled tin bowls before handing the empties back to the proprietor" (1997: 84). The Chinese Liu Hulan, on the other hand, converses with her mother about "light things. How the cherry blossoms looked lovely along the hillside at the Summer Palace. How Old Man Chou was selling the first snow pea greens of the season. How the silk that Hulan had chosen for a dress shimmered" (1997: 86).

<sup>6</sup> An in-depth account of the Chinese and their participation in the advance of the American frontier is Arif Dirlik's *Chinese on the American Frontier* (2001).

<sup>7</sup> Li Yan wonders, "Could life possibly have been so bad for these people in China that it was worth enduring this? He knew that virtually none of them was fleeing political persecution. They were what the United Nations would call 'economic migrants'. The idea that in America they would find the fabled Golden Mountain was an illusion. And yet the myth persisted" (May, 2002: 135).

<sup>8</sup> In Los Angeles, Liu Hulan and her partner, Peter San, interrogate a Chinese citizen in his house. Peter cannot believe "Chinese people live in these villas" since what is called "a villa in Beijing [is] nothing compared to" these "ostentatious mansions too large for their lots" (See, 1997: 203).

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