A Borrowed Place on Borrowed Time: Childhood, Ambivalence and the Symbolic Power of the Japanese Occupation of Hong Kong in Martin Booth's *Music on the Bamboo Radio* (1997)

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Abstract

Martin Booth's *Music on the Bamboo Radio*, published in 1997 (the year of Hong Kong's transfer of political sovereignty to China), is a young adult novel set during the Japanese occupation of Hong Kong. The 1941-1945 Japanese occupation represents a turning point in Sino-British relations, symbolising the beginning of the end of British rule in East Asia: although Britain regained administrative powers over Hong Kong at the end of World War II, the island of Hong Kong, Kowloon peninsula and the New Territories (according to treaties signed in 1898, following China's defeat in the Opium Wars) were inevitably to be returned to China at the end of the 20th century. By juxtaposing these two eras, Martin Booth explores the anxieties of a falling empire, and the uncertainty towards the future of post-handover Hong Kong, through the perspective of Nicholas, a British child raised in a territory under temporary and precarious colonial rule. This article examines how the author, by setting the novel during the Japanese occupation of Hong Kong, subverts colonial power structures, placing both British and Hong Kong Chinese as oppressed allies against a common enemy; and explores how post-handover anxieties are expressed through the ambivalent alignment of symbols of Japanese and British oppression, the use of metaphors of decrepitude, and representations of overt and covert forms of resistance to colonial occupation.

Keywords: Young Adult Literature; Postcolonial Studies; Hong Kong Studies; Children's Literature Studies; Anglo-American Studies.

Resumo

Music on the Bamboo Radio, da autoria de Martin Booth e publicada em 1997 (o ano da transferência de soberania política de Hong Kong para a China), é uma obra de literatura infanto-juvenil que recorre à ocupação japonesa de Hong Kong como pano de fundo. Este período de quatro anos, entre 1941 e 1945, foi um momento decisivo nas relações sino-britânicas, representando o início do fim do domínio britânico sobre a Ásia Oriental. Com efeito, apesar de o Reino Unido ter recuperado o poder administrativo sobre Hong Kong após a Segunda Guerra Mundial, os tratados assinados em 1898 após a derrota da China nas Guerras do Ópio determinaram que a ilha de Hong Kong, a península de Kowloon e os Novos Territórios teriam inevitavelmente de ser devolvidos à China no final do século XX. Ao justapor estes dois períodos, Martin Booth explora as angústias de um império em decadência, bem como a incerteza perante o futuro de uma Hong Kong pós-ocupação e pós-*handover*, através da perspetiva de Nicholas, uma criança britânica que cresce num território sob um domínio colonial temporário e instável. O presente artigo analisa de que forma o autor, ao escolher o período de ocupação japonesa de Hong Kong como pano de fundo para a sua narrativa, subverte hierarquias de poder colonial, representando britânicos e chineses de Hong Kong como aliados contra um mesmo opressor; e também aborda de que modo as angústias pós-*handover* são expressas no paralelismo entre símbolos de opressão japonesa e britânica, no uso de metáforas de decadência e na representação de atos de resistência, tanto visíveis como invisíveis, à ocupação colonial.

Palavras-chave:

Literatura infanto-juvenil; Estudos pós-coloniais; Estudos sobre Hong Kong; Estudos sobre literatura infantil; Estudos Anglo-Americanos

Published in the year of Hong Kong's transfer of political sovereignty to China in 1997, Martin Booth's *Music on the Bamboo Radio* is a young adult novel set during the Japanese occupation of Hong Kong, between 1941 and 1945. Though Britain regained administrative powers over Hong Kong at the end of World War II, this territory would not remain under British rule indefinitely: in fact, according to treaties signed in 1898, following China's defeat in the Opium Wars (1839-1842 and 1856-1860), the island of Hong Kong, Kowloon peninsula and the New Territories were to be returned to China after a period of ninety-nine years. The 1941-1945 Japanese occupation represents, in this sense, a turning point in Sino-British relations, symbolising the beginning of the end of British rule in East Asia. By juxtaposing these two eras, Martin Booth, who spent his childhood years in post-World War II Hong Kong, explores the anxieties of a falling empire and the uncertainty towards the future of post-handover Hong Kong, through the perspective of Nicholas, a British child, born and raised in a territory under temporary and precarious colonial rule. This article[1] examines how the author, by setting the novel during the Japanese occupation of Hong Kong, subverts colonial power structures, choosing to emphasise how both British and Hong Kong Chinese[2]

were oppressed allies against a common enemy, only briefly alluding to British oppression and the negative effects of British rule over the Hong Kong population. Additionally, this article will explore how post-1997 handover anxieties come to play at an implicit level, through the ambivalent alignment of symbols of Japanese and British oppression, the use of metaphors of decrepitude and representations of overt and covert forms of resistance to colonial occupation, both British and Japanese.

Besides Hong Kong, which was occupied by the imperial Japanese army for four years, Japan also invaded other East Asian territories under Western rule, such as Burma, Malay and Singapore, claiming to be freeing them from European tyranny: for this reason, the Japanese invasion was relatively well accepted, at the start, in many of these countries – except for China, which was at war with Japan since 1894 (Snow xxiv; Tsang 119). Although relatively welcome in an initial stage of the invasion, the Japanese ended up leaving massive destruction in their wake, peddling opium, controlling all main infrastructures and viciously repressing any threat to their power with their military police (Tsang 127-8). According to Phillip Snow, author of *The Fall of Hong Kong: Britain, China and the Japanese Occupation* (2004), the Japanese, "by the very fact of their conquest, dealt a mortal blow to the prestige of the whites . . . it was impossible for the local populations to look on their former masters with the same eyes" (xxv). For Snow, the Japanese invasion of Western-dominated territories in East Asia, for all the misery it inflicted, still had what he calls a "dynamic effect", leaving these societies brutalized, but irreversibly changed. In fact, the four-year period during which Britain lost imperial control over Hong Kong became a social, political and economic turning point in the history of Sino-British relations. Upon Japanese surrender in 1945, Britain reclaimed ownership of Hong Kong, although not indefinitely – the reason being that, according to treaties signed in 1898 (following China's defeat in the Opium Wars), the island of Hong Kong, Kowloon peninsula and the New Territories were simply ceded to Britain, to be returned to the mainland after a period of ninety-nine years. The 1997 handover marked the end of British rule and is regarded by many as the final act of the British overseas empire (Hook and Neves 109; Maxwell 1384). The fact that British sovereignty over Hong Kong had an expiration date from the very beginning popularized the view, in the late twentieth century, that this territory was no more than "a borrowed place on borrowed time" (Snow xxii; Hook and Neves 110; Tsang 124).

Children and young adult literature, much like literature intended for an adult audience, is a space where colonial and postcolonial experiences are represented and negotiated (Grzegorczyk 32, 3). The Japanese occupation and the 1997 handover play

an important role in a postcolonial reading of *Music on the Bamboo Radio*, a young adult novel set in Hong Kong during the four-year occupation, published in 1997, the year of the transfer of sovereignty to the People's Republic of China. The author was a British expatriate who spent his childhood and teenage years in Hong Kong post-Japanese occupation. By setting the novel in this period, Martin Booth presents young readers with a falling empire through the perspective of a British child, Nicholas, who was born and raised in Hong Kong and a witness to the Japanese invasion. Given this is a novel intended for a young adult audience, *Music on the Bamboo Radio* presents this ambivalence in subtle ways, symbolically linking both periods in such a way as to evoke the nostalgia and feeling of displacement of a British national contemplating Hong Kong's return to the mainland with unease. Hong Kong does not easily fit into the larger history of decolonisation, on the one hand, because it was under British rule until significantly later compared to other British former colonies, and, on the other, because it didn't become fully independent in 1997: it can therefore be argued that Hong Kong's *post*-colonial reality is, more accurately, *in-between* (Darwin 18). According to Yiu-Wai Chu, Professor at the University of Hong Kong, "the postcoloniality of Hong Kong is an ambiguous notion that goes beyond the framework of Europe and other Western countries, given its unique circumstances" (58). In this sense, in order to include this reading of *Music on the Bamboo Radio* in a postcolonial debate on children and young adult literature, this article shall apply the concept of ambivalence as defined by Homi K. Bhabha, essential to understand how a seemingly simple and straightforward narrative of a colonial setting can, paradoxically, allow more subversive readings, since, according to Bhabha, the ambivalence of colonial discourse resides in the fact that it openly contradicts itself (82-3; 97).

In his essay "The Other: Orientalism, Colonialism, and Children's Literature" (1992), Perry Nodelman compares western representations of the East to the way adults represent children, particularly in how both discourses reveal asymmetrical power dynamics. By applying Edward Said's analysis of the historical and social impact of Western discourse about the East as presented in his controversial study *Orientalism* (1978), Nodelman argues that children's literature also constitutes a discourse of colonization: in other words, that it teaches children how to be childlike, as well as providing them with good models, themes and messages that teach them how to be more like adults. According to Nodelman, children's literature as a discourse often reveals power hierarchies and "colonial" dynamics similar to those imposed by the western enterprise on Middle Eastern, East Asian and South East Asian nations throughout history, forcing them to adopt European values, languages and legislation,

all the while forcing these nations into objectifying, self-confirming and preconceived Western images and stereotypes (Nodelman 29). There are other authors, such as Clare Bradford, that consider Said and Nodelman's model excessively static, ahistorical and essentialist (7). Although the underlying power imbalance (inherent both to children and young adult literature as discourse and to orientalism as discourse) remains a pertinent issue, it must also take the ambivalence of colonial discourse and of the colonial relationship into consideration, reading beyond the surface-level stability of the adult/child and the coloniser/colonised dichotomies. In *Music on the Bamboo Radio,* this power imbalance and its ambivalence are explored through three main axes: adult oppression over children, Japanese oppression over British and Hong Kong Chinese, and, more implicitly, British colonial oppression over Hong Kong Chinese.

The asymmetrical power dynamic between adults and children is present in the first chapter of *Music on the Bamboo Radio*, particularly regarding the relationship between Hong Kong Chinese adults and the British child. When the Japanese imperial army invades Hong Kong on Christmas Day, 1941, Nicholas Holford, the main character of this novel, is alone in his home, a colonial style mansion known as Peony Villa. His parents left him at the care of his servants to join the resistance as civilian volunteers (Booth 5). When two Japanese soldiers approach Nicholas' hiding place, Ah Kwan, the gardener, comes up from behind and covers his mouth, ushering him to safety. Ah Kwan, along with Tang, the Holford family cook, and Ah Mee, his wife, take Nicholas to the New Territories; as they arrive to the fictional village of Sek Wan, they cut Nicholas' hair and dress him in Chinese garb to make him pass as a member of their family and avoid getting him sent to a European prison camp. Martin Booth's novel begins with a military invasion superimposed with a sequence of events that show how impotent Nicholas is to the will of the adults in his life. In addition to obeying his parents' orders to stay in the house during the attack, Nicholas is also forced to obey Tang's orders to ensure his survival, with the latter assuming the role of his "Chinese father". The cook, whom Nicholas calls "the ruler of the household" (Booth 8) makes all the decisions throughout the first chapter, and even silences Nicholas' objections by saying "You no talk . . . You do what I tell you, no question. Just do. You understand?" (Booth 12). Despite his status as "Young Master", as he is called in the beginning of the novel, Nicholas doesn't disobey Tang, Ah Mee and Ah Kwan's orders because they are adults and, therefore, authority figures – in other words, the fact that Nicholas is a child inverts what is perceived to be the conventional dynamic between himself and his Hong Kong Chinese servants, and that even when evading

Japanese oppression, Nicholas is still subjected to the orders and the whims of the adults around him.

In addition to his inferior status as a child in the adult/child power hierarchy, as a British citizen, Nicholas also finds himself oppressed by Japanese invaders, who overpower Hong Kong Chinese and European citizens alike. The existence of a common enemy helps create strong alliances between British and Hong Kong Chinese in this novel, a feeling of camaraderie generally expressed by the novel's Chinese characters. A few examples of this are, for instance, when Tang tells Nicholas that "this war not just English people and Chinese people fighting Japanese people. It is good people fighting bad people. We are good people. It is our job to fight evil" (Booth 79). It is important to point out that the "enemy" category includes not only Japanese soldiers, but also all those supporting the occupation: in the words of Dr. Wu, a Chinese doctor trained in London whom Nicholas visits in chapter 2, "only together can we survive this bad time. Yet do not trust everyone. There are people who work for the enemy. They kill their fellow countrymen and hoard food to sell at high prices. They are evil men" (Booth 45). In *Music on the Bamboo Radio*, the Japanese invasion also symbolizes the fear of role reversion, specifically, the fear that the coloniser would be overpowered and colonised in return (Bhabha 44), and this is illustrated by how Japanese oppression is often associated to symbols of British imperial administration. For example, when escaping Peony Villa, Nicholas comes across a British military vehicle being driven by Japanese soldiers, the headlights of which illuminate the corpse of a Chinese dock worker (Booth 11): in this instance, the instruments used to reinforce Western imperial power are appropriated and used against the British, reflecting what Bhabha describes as the coloniser's awareness that the colonised dreams of the opportunity to take their settler's place (44). Nicholas mentions this "dream of the inversion of roles" explicitly when he watches a group of British war prisoners walking by, surrounded by Japanese officials:

> The British were no longer the rulers of Hong Kong but the vanquished underdogs. And, like the prisoners, *Nicholas too was conquered*. The realization scared him yet, at the same time, *it made him feel defiant* . . . He had no idea how he would – or could – fight back: all he knew was that, *if the chance arose, he would do so*. (Booth 15, emphasis added)

This feeling of outrage hints at what Phillip Snow called the "dynamic effect" caused by the Japanese invasion: namely, the fact that these acts of resistance to Japanese oppression ended up leading to deep political and social changes after 1945 (xxv). This

defiance finds its full expression in the character of Ah Kwan, the gardener, particularly through his involvement with the East River Column, a guerrilla formed in resistance to the Japanese presence in Hong Kong. This organization, although politically affiliated with the Chinese Communist Party, was also supported by some members of the Nationalist Party (also known as *Kuomintang*) and helped by Allied European forces, namely through the British Army Aid Group, "the first organisation in which expatriate Britons, Chinese and other nationalities of Hong Kong served together without clear and unbreakable racial divide" (Tsang 129). Ah Kwan works for the Column mostly as a spy, disguising himself as a dock worker in order to approach British war prisoners undetected and pass on messages and supplies. The only information provided on Ah Kwan background is that the Holfords met him when he was a child, begging in the streets of Hong Kong after his parents died in a devastating typhoon. Nicholas' parents then decided to take him in and have Ah Kwan work for them (Booth 9). This double role of master and saviour played by the Holfords adds to the novel's ambivalence, simultaneously displaying generosity and oppression. Ah Kwan is the only Chinese character that continues to call Nicholas "Young Master", even as the young boy becomes more and more assimilated into the Sek Wan community and becomes involved in the East River Column's activities, emphasising the social gap between them in an effort to keep a sense of fundamental difference: for instance, when Nicholas visits Kowloon to get medicine and sees Ah Kwan, in disguise, working next to British soldiers forced into labour, Ah Kwan shoos him away, saying "Young Master no see me" (Booth 51). Ah Kwan's experience in many ways mirrors Nicholas', from being taken in by another family to adapting to a new environment, language and job from a young age, which further emphasises the main difference between them: the fact that Ah Kwan is a Hong Kong Chinese local who is also part of a Communist guerrilla, wanting the Japanese occupation to be over and, implicitly, for Hong Kong to not be returned to the British in the aftermath. The ambivalence of Ah Kwan and Nicholas' relationship intersects Ah Kwan's status as a servant to the Holfords and his political beliefs, a doubling effect where images associated with safety and protection are superimposed with a sense of oppression and covert violence: for example, when Ah Kwan saves Nicholas in the beginning of the novel by coming up behind him and covering his mouth with his hand. In this moment, Ah Kwan is also the first character in the novel to speak ("No make noise!"), further reinforcing his symbolic importance despite his smaller role as a character (Booth 3).

Throughout the novel, acts of dissimulation such as the one shown in the previous passage are often perceived as forms of resistance. It is a trope especially

prominent in chapter three, when Ah Kwan finally asks Nicholas to get involved in an East River Column mission as an interpreter:

> [W]e are not soldiers like your father. We have no uniform, we do not go in marching parades. We live over the mountains. Nobody knows where. At night, *under cover of darkness*, we go to Hong Kong or into Kowloon and fight the Japanese. No big battles like your father fought. *We have no big guns, no airplanes* . . . We do not kill the Japanese with a big noise. We do it,' he reverted to English for a few words, '*softly-softly, no sound*.' (Booth 61-2, emphasis added)

Nicholas ends up helping the guerrilla destroy a bridge, witnessing General Tai Lo Fu's execution of a Chinese informant. Curiously, the language used in this passage to describe the alliance between the Communist guerrilla and the Allied forces does not evoke a sense of unity and cooperation, but rather one of control:

> Japanese no can win war. We win. *Communist fighter win. Chinese people win*. . . You want know why I talk English. I tell you. You see this boy? . . . He fighter for me, bring my men good luck . . . I know what you say. You say, if Tai Lo Fu got English boy, how many English men he got? I tell you. *I got plenty men*. In China. *Chinese men, English men, American men. We got gun, we got airplane, we got bomb*. One day, no long time. . . , Japanese soldier no more. (Booth 88, emphasis added)

This passage seems to suggest an additional layer of meaning regarding the dynamics of oppression represented in this novel – namely, that all forms of resistance to the Japanese occupation of Hong Kong can, in turn, be read as forms of resistance to Britain's presence in Hong Kong. In the abovementioned passage, we have a good example of this implicit contradiction: by highlighting the victory of the Chinese in general (and of the Communist Chinese in particular) without mentioning any possible re-establishment of British sovereignty over Hong Kong, General Tai Lo Fu reveals that the East River Column, through its cooperation with the Allied Forces, mostly served their own interests – namely, that of freeing Hong Kong (and East Asia) of all kinds of foreign occupation. Though the Column had supporters from all sides of the political spectrum, its official affiliation with the Chinese Communist Party from 1943 onwards affected Britain's relationship with China, particularly given that the British Army Aid Group was supporting the Column's activities in the field. Tensions between the Nationalist Party, then in power, and the Communist Party were escalating, culminating in an internal war won by the Communist Party four years after Japanese troops withdrew from the country (Chan n. pag.).

The narrative of *Music on the Bamboo Radio*, although linear and apparently straightforward in how it separates good and evil, enemies and allies, still displays some signs of ambivalence, especially when it undermines the fixed nature of these categories and implicitly subverts them (Bhabha 66). Resistance to Japanese oppression can be read metonymically as resistance to British presence in Hong Kong in many other instances throughout the novel: for instance, when Tang and Ah Mee pretend to not understand a Japanese soldier addressing them (Booth 30-1), or when Ah Kwan gives poisoned fish to Japanese soldiers ransacking his village's supplies (Booth 75). Although passive and dissimulated, these acts of resistance occur on a day-to-day basis through gestures that pass unnoticed to the coloniser's gaze. Symbolically, this ambivalence is also present when Nicholas comes across a *chow* dog trapped in a back yard in Boundary Street, wagging its tail in a friendly manner and then proceeding to growl at him when Nicholas gets closer (Booth 14); or when Nicholas finds the corpse of a Japanese soldier covered in flies and one lands on his own face (Booth 77): while the first example alludes to an apparently domesticated, yet trapped, animal that turns against his owners, the second embodies a sense of foreboding of what could happen to the British once the Japanese left Hong Kong. Witnessing acts of resistance and dissimulation towards the Japanese brings into question, as we have previously mentioned, the fact that these same strategies could (and definitely were) used against the British as well, adding to a sense of what Bhabha would call the inherent paranoia of colonial discourse, which requires implicit validation and recognition from the colonised. This feeling of uncertainty arises when the colonised resists (either overtly or covertly) the coloniser's demand for acknowledgement, reinforcing the narrative of the colonised as either resistant and violent, or complicit but secretly scheming and cunning (100-1).

Additionally, we encounter this ambivalence in the brief allusions to acts of violence enacted by the British: for example, when Tang threatens Nicholas by saying "Japanese catch you, he beat you. *More hard than your father when you naughty*. Maybe he kill you. You no more argue with me" (Booth 7, emphasis added). The threat of a British father's discipline towards his child can, in many ways, be associated to the normalization and general acceptance of forms of violence perpetrated by the British against Hong Kong Chinese. Another example of this occurs when, to protect Nicholas' identity, Tang lies to a Japanese officer saying, "No English, no Chinese. He name Wing-ming. He my wife son. *English master no good, make son with my wife*" (Booth 32, emphasis added). This cover story is shown to be believable enough for the Japanese officer to reply "English no good. Very bad to Asia people" (Booth 32). The

oppression of British rule, although not often referred to this explicitly in *Music on the Bamboo Radio*, is nonetheless present: in the abovementioned instances, as well as between the lines, particularly in the subtle signs of Hong Kong Chinese characters' resistance not only to Japanese occupation, but to *all* forms of colonial rule. Although the Japanese occupation threw together British and Hong Kong Chinese as never before, forcing the British into a subaltern position that made them regard the Hong Kong Chinese population with a newfound sympathy, the Hong Kong Chinese community also saw a rise in national pride and a growing anti-European sentiment after the Japanese surrendered in 1945 (Tsang 142). During pre-war times, the Chinese community was excluded from almost any significant political or administrative role in British Hong Kong: the British broadly occupied the commanding heights of the Hong Kong economy, owned the chief trading houses, as well as the three banks authorized to issue currency, and, before the Japanese invasion, members of the Chinese community filed regular complaints to the colonial government regarding poor work and social conditions (Tsang 109-11).

These examples also evoke what we have acknowledged throughout this article as the irony of colonial discourse, through which the coloniser claims to have a civilizing mission that justifies acts of violence, wishing, at an unconscious level, that the colonised recognizes the inherent "goodness" of these oppressive acts; yet, when the colonised refuses to satisfy this narrative demand by resisting the coloniser, the resulting frustration generates a sense of paranoia and uncertainty in the coloniser (Bhabha 98, 100). This can manifest, as we have previously ascertained, as a need for validation from the colonised, a phenomenon that can also be observed in *Music on the Bamboo Radio,* particularly when considering how most negative views about the Japanese (and, similarly, most positive statements about the British) are continuously uttered by Hong Kong Chinese characters. The novel oscillates between subtle allusions to the independence of Hong Kong, *i.e.* free from all kinds of foreign dominance, and more overt passages mentioning the return of the British to reinstate their dominance over the territory. In the novel, although Japanese characters clearly show disdain for the British, Hong Kong Chinese characters never openly criticise their former rulers, keeping to more matter-of-fact statements: a representative example is when Qing-Mai, a young Hong Kong Chinese girl, says to Nicholas: "If you live here for a long time, maybe you forget your own language. You must not. When the Japanese go, the British will return and you must be English once more" (Booth 22).

On the other hand, the novel portrays Nicholas not as a British child, but rather as a British national born and raised in Hong Kong, forced into hiding and pretending to

be half-Chinese in order to survive. Throughout the narrative, Nicholas' cultural identity becomes progressively more ambiguous, leading to feelings of displacement: he is given a Chinese name, taught to speak Cantonese and he even helps the local Communist guerrillas in their efforts to free Hong Kong from Japanese occupation. Nicholas, therefore, represents one of the many nuances of a burgeoning Hong Kong identity: that of a Hong Kong British, perhaps, in a more late-20th century perception, simply a Hongkonger, not entirely and homogenously Chinese or British. In the protagonist's journey of self-discovery, he ends up finding "not Self or Other but the otherness of the Self inscribed in the perverse palimpsest of colonial identity" (Bhabha 28, 44).

The paradigm of physical dependence and inferiority associated to childhood is also inverted in *Music on the Bamboo Radio*, with Nicholas' age and status seen as an advantage, rather than a disadvantage. The narrative's turning point (that lends the novel its title) relates to Nicholas' involvement with the East River Column, highlighting how Nicholas' experiences and contribution require validation from Hong Kong Chinese and British characters alike, specifically adult characters. At this point in the novel, Nicholas is fourteen years old and has found his own place in the village of Sek Wan, tending to livestock, helping Tang with his fishing and even starting to forget his life prior to the Japanese invasion (Booth 98-9). One day, Nicholas is approached by a British Army Aid Group officer working with local guerrillas and helping war prisoners held in Japanese prison camps in Hong Kong (Booth 105): the officer's story is consistent with historical accounts of life in these prison camps, mentioning starvation, forced labour, and the withholding of medical supplies (Emerson 18; Chan n. p.). The officer then asks Nicholas to take Ah Kwan's place as messenger and bring a package to a prison camp in Kowloon, an operation British military called "playing music on the bamboo radio" since the supplies and information provided to the prisoners were like "music to their ears . . . , [boosting] their morale, [letting] them know they are not forgotten" (Booth 106). This short passage seems to allude to the widespread frustration and low morale felt by members of the British military deployed in East Asia during World War II, known in the British press as "the Forgotten Army", given that the war with Japan was "perceived widely as unfashionably colonial and an unwelcome diversion from the main effort of defeating Germany" (Dunlop 13).

Although the East River Column had used Nicholas for his size, for his interpreting skills and for his ability to pass by undetected, this episode represents the first instance in which Nicholas is deemed "useful" by British military, as well as the first time his Chinese and British identities are acknowledged as fully integrated, with

Nicholas having to explain himself to the British prisoners, who initially believe him to be a Chinese teenager: "I am English. My Chinese name is Wing-ming but my English name is Nicholas" (Booth 118). The transition from a fixed, unquestioned British identity to a more ambivalent and fragmented sense of "otherness" within the self, whose borders are in permanent state of flux and undergoing constant change (Bhabha 114), coincide with Nicholas' transition from childhood to adulthood, his journey ending with Ah Kwan, the Chinese gardener and Communist guerrilla spy, complimenting him by saying "You are a very brave man" (Booth 111).

The handover of Hong Kong represented the last stage of the dissolution of the British Empire, consolidated after a transition period of 13 years. The drafting, negotiation and signing of a Joint Declaration between 1984 and 1985 determined the People's Republic of China would resume the exercise of sovereignty over Hong Kong as a Special Administrative Region with effect from July 1st, 1997. This transition period was deemed necessary, among other reasons, to avoid negatively impacting its economic and business prosperity – by the late 1970s, Hong Kong had also become an important source of foreign exchange for the Chinese economy, due to international companies establishing their regional head offices in the territory (Hook and Neves 108, 121-122). The end of British rule in Hong Kong had been predicted since the signing of the ninety-nine-year lease in 1898: however, this outcome hadn't always been perceived as being inevitable. In fact, it was only at the end of the 1950s that Hong Kong famously began to be perceived as a borrowed place on borrowed time: in other words, Hong Kong "was decolonised in substance, if not juridically, in the early 1950s at the same time as most of the remaining colonial territories in East and South East Asia" (Darwin 30). This sense of inevitability is can be directly correlated to the four-year Japanese occupation of Hong Kong, given that this was a moment of social, political and economic change when the British grip over the territory slipped irretrievably due to the increasing feeling of revolt and rising Chinese nationalism. The last chapter of *Music on the Bamboo Radio* is marked by Nicholas' symbolic return to his past and his British roots, forcing him to fully acknowledge his position between two cultures. On the day of the Japanese invasion, Peony Villa is described as a "two storey, red-brick colonial-style house with a deep veranda running all round it", mixed with East Asian influences in the furnishings and *décor,* including "rattan chairs" and "green glazed plant pots embossed with writhing golden dragons" (Booth 4), evoking an idyllic symbiosis between East and West. When Nicholas returns to his childhood home after four years, he is faced with a demoralising sight:

> The window-sills were peeling. Several shutters were missing, showing jagged broken glass in the frames. There were dark holes in the roof where there should have been tiles. On the veranda, one of the plant pots remained but it was cracked open. *The earth had spilled out and was growing weeds*.
>
> Nicholas did not want to go on. He could not account for it, but he was afraid, *as scared as he had been nearly four years before* when Ah Kwan had grabbed him from behind. (Booth 132-3, emphasis added).

The Japanese occupation of Hong Kong represented, in this sense, the beginning of the end of British rule over the territory, reinforcing the temporary nature of British reoccupation post-World War II. If, according to Bhabha, the highest historical and political potential for change resides in the space between Self and Other (28), then identities can only be truly negotiated in a "third space", a meeting point between cultures where "we may elude the politics of polarity and emerge as the others of our selves" (38-9). In its abandoned and decrepit state, Nicholas' old home continues to represent the relationship between Britain and Hong Kong: not only would the local population be unable to "look on their former masters with the same eyes" (Snow xxv), but, politically, China would perceive the end of the Japanese occupation as an opportunity to retrieve Hong Kong, although not immediately – China's primary concern at the end of World War II was in rebuilding its economy and in dealing with the civil war between Chinese Communist Party and the Nationalist Party (Tsang 125, 148). This anticipatory feeling is present in Nicholas' description of a decrepit Peony Villa, particularly in how Nicholas felt "afraid" despite there not being a threat to his safety any longer, as well as in the "spilled out" earth and "growing weeds" from the broken flowerpot (Booth 132).

The fact that the earth from the broken flower pot was fertile enough for new plant life to grow suggests a sense of hope for the future of Hong Kong – which, as we all know, turned out to be true, as Hong Kong emerged as a prosperous and thriving city after World War II (Hook and Neves 110-1). However, this passage in particular seems to correlate to the period in which the novel itself was written and published: namely, the years prior to the handover of Hong Kong back to China, and the anxiety over what this could mean for British and Hong Kong Chinese alike. The prosperity of post-war Hong Kong gave its residents a way of life different from that in the mainland, which is why the territory's return to the People's Republic of China was not perceived as an entirely positive outcome (Tsang 220). In choosing the Japanese occupation as the background for *Music on the Bamboo Radio*, Martin Booth presents the reader with an idealised image of British presence in Hong Kong, while

simultaneously evoking the ambivalence surrounding the inevitable end of a crumbling empire. As we have been able to ascertain throughout the present article, this idyllic image of Sino-British relations coexists with more ambivalent and disruptive elements, presented in two main ways: implicitly, through the alignment of Japanese and British symbols of oppression, and symbolically, through several metaphors of dissimulated resistance. By showing British and Hong Kong Chinese uniting forces against a common enemy, and using, to this effect, fixed dichotomies whereby British and Hong Kong Chinese represent the "good", and Japanese and their Chinese allies represent "evil", this novel is still imbued with an underlying sense of unease regarding not only Hong Kong post-Japanese occupation, but Hong Kong after its handover to China in 1997.

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[1] This article falls into the scope of my PhD research project, which aims to analyse representations of Macau and Hong Kong in Portuguese and British children's literature published in the late twentieth century and the early 21st century. It was also the subject of an essay written for a PhD seminar (taught by Professor Teresa Pinto Coelho) and a conference paper presented in the 40th APEAA (the Portuguese Association for Anglo-American Studies) conference, held on June 6th-8th, 2019.

[2] Prior to the Pacific War, the ethnic Chinese community in Hong Kong had not yet build a separate cultural identity from that of Mainland Chinese, and its non-Chinese community was mostly made up of expatriates from different countries, including the British community. Various authors consider the establishment of the People's Republic of China as the first stage of development of a specific, and complex, Hong Kong identity, after many Chinese refugees started settling in Hong Kong to escape the Communist regime from the 1940s onward (Tsang 180, 194-195). A distinct sense of community continued to grow with the rise of popular culture and the widespread use of Cantonese in the 1970s (Kam 16) and, after 1997, the people of Hong Kong increasingly saw themselves as "Hong Kongers" rather than "Chinese": according to different surveys done by the University of Hong Kong, "the proportion of residents who describe themselves as simply Chinese fell from a high 39 per cent in 2008 to just 16 per cent by the end of 2016", with those considering themselves as Hong Kongers rising "from 47 per cent to 64 per cent" (Bland 13). In that sense, "Hong Konger", "Hongkonger" and "Hong Kong Chinese" are terms that reflect changing perceptions of identity in Hong Kong throughout its history, and under the current political climate surrounding the Hong Kong protests, reflecting whether or not there is a cultural and/or political identification with mainland China (Kam 12; Chu 57). Given that the subject of the present article is a novel set in the 1940s, prior to the rise of a specific Hong Kong identity, and a time when the differentiation of Hong Kong identities was predominantly based on ethnicity and geographical factors, this article will be using the term "Hong Kong Chinese" rather than the current, most widely accepted term, "Hong Konger" or "Hongkonger".