

Berwick-upon Tweed Educational Association

'An Introduction to *Sour Sweet* by Timothy Mo'

By Dr Richard Moore, creative writer and lecturer, Newcastle University

Friday 1st December 2017 10am – 12.00 noon

Sour Sweet is a marvellous novel, funny and sad, grim and hilarious, and, above all, dealing in dualities and inversions, as when, even in the title, sweet and sour take-away food converts to its sour sweet mirror opposite. Perhaps the implication is that the novel and life itself contain both ingredients but the sour tends to come first. Ultimately, there is a double ending, blending both aspects, and thus perfectly reflecting the double tendency of the rest.

Timothy Peter Mo, the book's author, was born 30th December 1950 and is an Anglo-Asian novelist, born to a British mother and a Hong Kong father. In other ways too, he has a double inheritance. For instance, until the age of 10 he lived in Hong Kong. Then he moved to Britain where he was educated at Mill Hill School and St. John's College, Oxford. Initially he worked as a journalist but he soon found his vocation as a novelist, and has by now won many distinguished prizes. One of these is the E.M. Forster Award, perhaps specially appropriate to a man who writes about West and East and the sour-sweet links between them.

One of Mo's views is that the novel itself has a western and eastern face. The Western novel (including the American, British, French and German) unfolds itself along a path which to all practical intents and purposes is *linear*. The native eastern novel, by contrast, moves in a path which is altogether *circular*. This means it is made up of separate episodes, pretty generally of chapter length, which may refer only unto themselves and be joined by the loosest of threads. One of the skills in *Sour Sweet* is that both apply. There are many individual episodes and sometimes the story does seem to short-circuit, yet everything does progress and the whole is linked in a sour-sweet framework. Lily's stop-start car which in the book is almost a character, does, in fact, get to its destination but there may be many diversions and recapitulations on the way.

Sour Sweet as a whole is more a novel of individuals than a political statement. But it does link with a whole raft of literature of East-West colonisation. The primary narrative follows the fortunes of the Chen family as they create a life for themselves in an alien European culture. Determined to succeed, Chen and Lily emigrate from Hong Kong to London, where Chen finds a comfortable, if unexciting, job as a waiter in a Chinese restaurant. Lily meanwhile works at being a perfect wife and an even more exemplary mother to their son, Man Kee, whom she spoils relentlessly. While Chen seems content with their life, Lily has vague yearnings for something better. Indeed, she manages to save almost half of her housekeeping money for the future, when the Chens might start their own business—a grocery store or a restaurant.

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Initially, the Chens lead an uneventful and circumscribed life, punctuated occasionally by events which affect but do not seriously disrupt their rather bland existence. One event is Man Kee's birth. Another is the arrival from Hong Kong of Mui, Lily's older sister. Quite early on, the reason for the Chens' comparatively dull stability becomes apparent: the family are extremely insular. Snug in the warm cocoon of their family circle, the Chens have just two acquaintances outside their immediate family — only the wealthy widow, Mrs. Law, and Chen's colleague at the restaurant, Mr. Lo — both of them also Chinese.

There is, however, a change. Before long the Chens' quiet life is seriously disrupted. Chen, the husband, a victim of a gambling urge and the dupe of an unscrupulous colleague, becomes involved with a ruthless Triad operating within the London area. The family's removal to a dingy South London suburb where they open their own Take-Away is, on the husband's part, a quest to escape the trap.

The removal and the reason for it again reflect the novel's fascination with doubleness. There are two families : the Chens and the Triads. One family is threatened by the other. Mr. Chen himself has no desire to become a runner for, or victim of, what is essentially a hierarchically run gangster organisation. All he wants out of life is a modest income, sufficient to support his family with enough left over to send home to his elderly parents. To him, London is not really a home. It is simply a prosperous city that gives him the opportunity to work and earn the wages he needs.

The rest of the novel tells the tragic-comic story of what follows from the setting up of the Chinese Take-Away. Here again there is a duality – a broad sweep combined with fascinating intricate little details, these being often amusing as when Miu gets her entire knowledge of English life from watching endless broadcasts of *Crossroads*. One of the themes of the book is adaptability and another is integration or the lack of it. Of all the characters Lily is the most vibrant and resourceful but Miu perhaps the quickest to adapt. As for Chen, his fate is mutedly tragic and leaves a lot of question-marks. But the rest survive and the novel itself is moderately life-affirming. Come and hear more about it. It is worth a peek into this mixed yet separate world.

You do not have to have read the novel to enjoy the lecture, but if you do have a copy bring it along.

The cost of the lecture is £6.00 including refreshments.

The lecture will be held at the Berwick Voluntary Centre, Tweed St, Berwick-upon-Tweed, 1st December, 10 -1.00pm.

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