

Fernanda Dias

Stops: **France, Macau, Portugal**

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(1945 - )



Born in Moura, Portugal, Fernanda Dias experienced emigration, first in France and from 1986 to 2005 in Macau. In Macau, she taught, was associated with Oficina de Gravura da Academia de Artes Visuais (The Academy of Visual Arts Engraving Workshop) and participated in various international exhibitions with paintings, prints and engravings. In 2017, she completed her Master's in Communication, Culture and Art at the University of Algarve.

Macau is the space that permeates the work of Fernanda Dias, entirely published in this territory, consisting mainly of poetry. Among the published titles, it is important to mention: *Mapa Esquivo [Elusive Map]* (2016), *Contos da água e do vento [Tales of the water and the wind]* (2013); *Poemas de uma monografia de Macau [Poems of a monograph on Macau]* (2004); *O Sol, a Lua e a via do fio de seda—uma leitura do Yi Jing [The Sun, the Moon and the path of the silk thread - a reading of the Yi Jing]* (2011); *Chá verde [Green tea]* (2002); *Rio de Erhu [River of Erhu]* (1999), *Dias da Prosperidade, contos [Days of Prosperity, short stories]* (1998); *Horas de Papel, Poemas para Macau [Paper Hours, Poems for Macau]* (1992).

Woven at the core of the “complex network of cultural hybridisms,” Fernanda Dias’s writing is nourished by the “rice of China” (Simas 2012: 50-51), but above all by the experiences, the images of Macau, the surrounding world, the “self” and the “other” alchemically transformed into poetry. Moreover, as José Carlos Seabra Pereira asserts, she is a “writer with a high conception of poetry and its age-old pact with the human heart” (2013: 437). Thus, in *Paper*

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*Hours, Poems for Macau*, as Fernanda Gil Costa notes, we encounter “a poetic presentification of the city, in which emblematic places are visited and transfigured by a simultaneously lucid and almost euphoric vision, of manifest empathy and celebration, highlighting the hybridism of cultural encounter and its inspiring strangeness” (2019: 98).

About twenty-five years later, *Elusive Map*, also published by Livros do Oriente, presents a cartography of Macau as a fluid, elusive space, emphasising the modifications that have taken place over the past years. It is divided into four parts: “crónicas de um diminuto pedaço de chão” (chronicles of a minute piece of ground), “ofícios” (trades), “ao canto da lua lesta” (at the corner of the quick moon) and “caderno da flora urbana” (notebook of urban flora). In the first part, diverse and polychromatic images of Macau are woven. Various aspects of everyday life are evoked: the Kong Tac-lam Buddhist monastery, the first for women in the territory; celebrations at the Pou Tai Yun temple, marked by rituals described, sometimes with the use of synesthesia, such as the “tinkling of bowls,” the “steaming tea,” the “light ash of incense” that sow happiness in the pagan heart of the “self.” Similarly, departure, absence, the pulsation of the city, the construction workers, united with the “urban birds” in the same eagerness to “dry their wings in the sun,” inhabit these poems, populated by an intense pictorial charge and imbued with powerful images, from the orchid market to the night materialised in a “black orchid” or the torrential rain. Thus, through short poems that seem to contain reminiscences of the structure of Buddhist koans, marked by a method rooted in concise discourse, aiming to break reasoning in order to achieve enlightenment (Simas 2007: 250), Macau is woven with images that overlap, bringing it closer to painting, from a polyhedral perspective, in a palette of light and colours. This imagery construction is based on an ekphrastic process. Therefore, as we have mentioned regarding another work by the author, “painted in the unfolding of verses, Macau is the city of discoveries and mismatches, the territory where the ‘self’ tries to rediscover its personal and national identity, traced through the configuring lines of the ‘other’s’ portrait, revealing a need for intercultural dialogue” (Gago 2015: 121). In this way, in poetry, a hybrid cultural space is established marked by an encounter with the “new,” which, following the thought of Homi Bhabha (2013: 27), does not arise from a continuity between past and present but

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rather from an act of translation, and we would add, of cultural integration.

The same eagerness for integration that culminates in its success is also evident in the poetic prose of *Days of Prosperity* a work composed of nineteen short stories. In these stories, we often encounter a first-person narrator, Western, accompanied by A-Fai, a man of Chinese descent. The colonialist paradigm that traditionally associates the Asian or African woman with the Western man is contradicted. Additionally, gender-related issues concerning women's emancipation emerge, as observed, for example, in two stories: "Sai Kuá" and "Urban Games".

In the first story, "Sai-Kuá" (which means "watermelon" in Cantonese), the action takes place in China, where the narrator is staying in a hotel with A-Fai. The fascination with the observed foreign reality, combined with a sense of unfamiliarity, is clear. The description of the space, always crafted in the first person by the autodiegetic narrator, from the perspective of the visitor, is imbued with poetry, highlighting a profound relationship between the observing subject and the contemplated object: "With an entranced heart, I grasp the harmony of the place, where each object polished by use is beautiful in itself" (1998: 27-28). Thus, the narrator captures the beauty that seems hidden behind appearances. The eagerness for communion, for successful integration that aims to mitigate cultural divergence, is evident, as novelty and confrontation with the diverse compel the narrator to attempt to define her own identity through the intricacies of otherness. In this context, the subsequently recounted episode emphasises the profound cultural differences between the two members of the couple. After a stroll through the city, they buy a watermelon at the market, and it is the narrator who has to carry it since her companion refuses to do so. Initially, the protagonist reveals her disagreement, but she eventually submits, questioning the reasons behind his refusal: "[...] what proud prejudice prevents him from walking alongside a Western woman, carrying fruit in a plastic bag?" (Dias 1998:30). This behaviour, incomprehensible within the cultural parameters of the narrator, generates a conflict, primarily internal, but not intense enough to lead to a breakup. In this case, the gender question arises again, as being forced to carry the enormous watermelon may represent the weight of the stigma and prejudice

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borne by women in various societies. In the end, the narrator reveals a mixture of conformity and defiance: “I lift the yellow bag higher, pressing it against my breasts. The night falls, now without a trace of rebellion. Like a flag of submission, I enter the hotel proudly displaying a watermelon” (Dias 1998: 31).

On the other hand, the short story “Urban Games” describes some moments in the life of a couple and their interrelation with the urban space of Macau. It begins with the description of the genuine adoration that the female character reveals: “Yes, living with the beloved man is a dazzling, restless gift from the gods” (Dias 1998: 107). However, this unbridled passion does not seem to be reciprocated in the slightest. Therefore, as Mónica Simas points out, “there is an imbalance in the I/other relationship” (Simas 2007: 136). Consequently, we observe that he, on the other hand, views the woman as a mere object he possesses: “She belonged to him. He possessed her with that passionate rigour with which he enjoyed all things (...)” (Dias 1998: 107). Ultimately, we notice that the man seems to become aware of the existence of his companion – whom we only learn is named Ana Luísa near the end – when he needs a clean towel after a bath, only at that moment, astonished by her absence: “Without knowing why, he felt slightly guilty” (Dias 1998: 111). And so, we observe, in the post-Mao era when China was advancing in modernisation, that male power is maintained, even if it is that of seduction, generating a female submission that the characters themselves question and seem not to comprehend from a rational standpoint.

To conclude, in her work, crossing arts and cultures, Fernanda Dias captures, in a sublime and profound manner, both in prose and in verse, the essence, the soul of places, people, of an “other” culture, in this case, the Chinese – considering the “other” as singular, irreplaceable, in line with the thinking of Levinas.

## Quotations

“This China that I step on, smell, kiss, gaze upon with eyes filled with inexplicable sorrow,

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breathe in long breaths, this China, wet rice straw, ginger flower, blue window frames, crude umbrellas, hieratic buffaloes, warm mud, flaming banana trees, huts made of mats, and the multitude of eyes that look at me like black stars on the surface of lustreless faces.” (*Dias da Prosperidade*: 27).

“I meditate an immense river made delta

whose waters pondered being the sea”

(*Chá verde*: 71)

“I live here in this light of wonder  
Observing in the serene curve of the delta  
The mirage of the demolished palaces

Ochre waters that surrender  
To the sea, carrying with their muds  
Crimson droplets alight, other tears

I see from the window elusive traces  
Erasures, marks

Illegible signs on an ancient map.”

(*Mapa Esquivo*: 21)

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“What eyes did those have who passed through here  
And departed before a startle  
From the heart told them it was already too late  
Too late to leave and too late to stay  
the time of a verse, of a wave  
each memory like a sculpted  
rock, residues of a gaze petrified  
but each place crumbles and rebuilds itself  
with every blink a pilgrim  
with their bag sets out on the journey.”

(*idem*: 63)

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