

**Tamás Juhász**

## **The Dream of Sharing**

### **Business and Community in Timothy Mo's *Sour Sweet***

This essay argues that the central motifs of debt and contractuality in Timothy Mo's *Sour Sweet* (1982) are explanatory of the characters' sense of social belonging. The novel is approached from an angle where the behaviour and the interpersonal relations of young Chinese immigrants in London reflect their uncertain positions in the available, economic and not strictly economic, exchange mechanisms. The paper demonstrates how these individuals attempt to overcome their isolation by entering into various transactions and how their sense of unrelatedness is abused and manipulated out of economic interests. The theoretical framework of the paper hinges on the economic anthropological insights of Marcel Mauss, Claude Lévi-Strauss, and Karl Polanyi.

Timothy Mo's Chinatown narrative elaborates aspects of immigrant existence in the in-between territories of an ethnically heterogeneous, Western metropolis: "The Chens had been living in the UK for four years, which was long enough to have lost their place in the society from which they had emigrated but not long enough to feel comfortable in the new" (5).<sup>1</sup> An obvious culinary allusion in the title indicates how the rootless family intends to establish itself in an austere London. Following a period of regular employment, they launch their own business that brings them into contact with a number of groups and individuals, but in the long run, their attempts at expansion and adjustment produce mixed results. Similarly to a great deal of literature dealing with economically motivated migration, *Sour Sweet* (1982) demonstrates that the central motif of commercial engagement has obvious bearings on the characters' actions and psychological condition. The present essay will explore this linkage, and discuss the ways in which businesslike activities impact the issue of communal belonging.

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1. All parenthesized references are to this edition: Timothy Mo, *Sour Sweet* (London: Paddleless Press, 1999).

When in initial search of the specifics of the Anglo-Chinese author's novelistic craft, the reader may notice that while the motif of economic need is obviously basic for similar stories of relocation and diasporal self-definition, the related communal dynamic in Mo's novel is remarkably different from the one displayed by, for example, the thematically comparable fiction of Samuel Selvon and George Lamming. In the former's *The Lonely Londoners* (1959), and in the latter's *The Pleasure of Exile* (1960), a broader as well as more elastic narrative frame accommodates the characters' actions. Inside it, the bipolarity of having a real London as well as an equally real, if romanticized, Trinidad, gives the characters an actual, if rudimentary, social footing in two places, and facilitates the pulsation of episodic, back and forth narrative presentation in the interspace. The corresponding theme of financial need is also treated in a looser fictional structure: particularly in Selvon's text, money is not only about the bare essentials, but it features as the crystallisation of some ever-elusive promise because, Georg Simmel might explain, it has to do with the much desired transformation and expansion of the self.

*Sour Sweet*, however, is confined to a uniformly bleak urban territory that does not permit episodic wandering. Whereas a spontaneous understanding between fellow foreigners, which includes the less settled British as well, still translates into a sense of economic solidarity – the West Indian bus conductor “regularly undercharged” the travelling family, and as did the nomadic “aitchgevees” (120) in their illicit supplies for the new restaurant – the Chens do not, as a rule, conduct any real, i.e. personally felt business with anyone outside their ethnic rank. They serve food to distant and ineffectual white Londoners expertly but almost incidentally, because the restaurant is merely an instrument to help them with a much more serious business, which is the husband's ill-advised debt to the Chinese Triad Society. Thus, a more or less legal but publicly and impersonally conducted commerce is motivated by the existence of an illegal, clandestine, and profoundly experienced bad debt. These two layers of commerce are connected in a closely-knit narrative texture, and the various controlled exchanges leave very little to the outside of their sphere. Since both the lender and the creditor inhabit a territory in almost complete isolation from host country as well as home country, Mo can tie the other narrative threads in with the pivotally important motif of borrowed money. One may argue that in his narrative design, this particular transaction becomes an epitome of diasporal existence for the following reasons.

There is the fact, for example, that the sheer structural dynamic of the loan encapsulates key events and aspirations in the displaced family's life. The Chens' move from Hong Kong to London is shortly followed by the physical transference of a

given sum from one budget to another. As the husband's original intention to return the money with an interest forms an imaginative unity with his vague desire to return to his home land one day, both acts of relocation are expected to be but temporary. Moreover, the reversal of the right to dispose over the borrowed sum interrelates with the motif of gender role reversal between husband and wife. From the very beginning, Lily shows more aptness for traditionally male activities such as martial arts, driving and fixing things around the house, while Chen assumes the customary female role of the family with his general passivity. The couple's mutual crossing of gender lines produces the same dire consequences as the reversal of the money. Though Chen comes to possess an additional, if temporary, budget and Lily also increases her dominance within her family, the outcome is not an expansion of themselves, but rather, the shrinking of their individual freedom and connectedness. Chen first goes into hiding by choosing an obscure place for business, then he is killed. Afterwards, the first, triumphant Lily comes to confront the walls of loneliness that her own philosophy of ethnic pride and isolation erected. Thus, the link between the "diasporic individual's ambiguous or unsettled national identity" and "the fiction's dramatic conflicts"<sup>2</sup> can be specifically related to the misguided opening deal – in accordance with the traditionally usurious aspect of such loans, all parties involved pay a higher price than intended.

Yet, the full significance of the credit is not to be limited to its immediate consequences and the narrative suspense that it generates. The agreement is ill-legal not only because of the criminal conditions attached to it, but also because it lacks the kind of social-jural precedents that usually govern legal procedures. Transactions, so explain a number of economic anthropological theories, can be categorized as occurring either in a state of "embeddedness" or "disembeddedness."<sup>3</sup> The first term refers to a condition where "man's economy, as a rule, is submerged in his social relationships"<sup>4</sup> and where "economic ties are [still] personalized."<sup>5</sup> But during the transformation of such archaic or primitive economies into capitalist ones, the separation of personal status and economic function takes place. This new condition of disembeddedness manifests itself in, among other things, the rise of the concept of alienability. Gift-giving as the "exchange of inalienable objects" is now superseded by

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2. Shirley Geok-lin Lim, *Writing South East/Asia in English: Against the Grain* (London: Skoob Books Publishing), p. 94.

3. Karl Polanyi, *Primitive, Archaic and Modern Economies: Essays of Karl Polanyi* (New York: Doubleday, 1968), p. 82.

4. Polanyi, p. 82.

5. Raymond Firth, *Elements of Social Organization* (London: Watts, 1951), p. 137.

"[c]ommodity exchange [as] an exchange of alienable objects."<sup>6</sup> Transactions no longer constitute a "total social fact,"<sup>7</sup> they no longer have to do with "being born into a particular kinship/ethnic group,"<sup>8</sup> and "an institutionally separate and motivationally distinct economic sphere"<sup>9</sup> replaces the earlier field of all-encompassing trade in which, as Marcel Mauss explicates in his seminal study on gift-giving, "[e]verything is tied together."<sup>10</sup>

Although such observations and distinctions are from the fields of sociology and anthropology, they can be taken as explanatory of much of the plot and imagery of Mo's novel. There is, for example, the first encounter between Chen and the Triad members. This scene is quite emblematic of the criminal organization's favored technique of recruitment. Purposefully, the mobsters offer their prospective members what the rootless Chinese lack so miserably: a sense of relation between exacting economic services and social connectedness. For this reason, the situation becomes clearly evocative of archaic situations of trade. Set in a restaurant, the episode might accommodate the ritual of sharing dishes and reciprocal giving and taking: Chen keeps pouring tea for the criminals during the meeting, accepts that he is required to use the address "Uncle," and as the expected financial favour is staged as a quasi gift, the victim too brings along a bag of pineapples and mangoes. In turn, the Triads take the fruit bag, introduce a family terminology despite its obvious "presumption" and "incongruity," involve the question of Chen's sick father in the one-sided conversation, refer to themselves as a "friendship association," echo the family values of respect and loyalty, and finally, disgustedly refuse to go into the details of "repayment interests . . . in front of Uncle" (72). All this is but a manipulative performance to simultaneously impress and paralyse the confused restaurant-worker. They take the mango Chen offers only to step on it, and this act will read in contrast to the cultiva-

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6. Chris Gregory, "Kula Gift Exchange and Capitalist Commodity Exchange: A Comparison," in *The Kula: New Perspectives on Massim Exchange*, ed. Jerry W. Leach and Edmund Leach (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), p. 109.

7. Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*, trans. James Harle Bell, John Richard von Strumer and Rodney Needham (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), p. 52.

8. Janet Tai Landa, *Trust, Ethnicity, and Identity: Beyond the New Institutional Economics of Ethnic Trading Networks, Contract Law, and Gift-Exchange*. (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1994), p. 107.

9. Polanyi, p. 84.

10. Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: Forms and Function of Exchange in Archaic Societies*, trans. Ian Cunnison (New York: The Norton Library, 1967), p. 45.

tion of another mango in Chen and his son Maen Kee's garden, where it becomes a symbol of true social and familial alliance.

As the fruit was a gift, its crushing also epitomizes the strategically selective approach the triads have to schemes of exchange. On the one hand, they preclude any notion of reciprocity because what they give is something that the recipient can never return – Chen's embarrassment indicates his inequality throughout the situation. On the other hand, the triads borrow the logic of tribal gift-giving practices in the sense that their "gift" is not an isolable element but something that comes to have a claim on Chen's whole personality and, ultimately, on his life. And before that life is taken, in a mercifully distanced way, much narrative suspense stems from the various suggestions of the vulnerability of his family. Particularly Maen Kee is an easy target, and the reason why one day he may not return from his bus-trips to school is his unwitting involvement in his father's agreement with the Chinese mob. The Triads, who purposefully deploy archaic trading structures to impress their victims, may at any time act on the conviction that "personalities are in some manner the permanent possession of the clan [within which the] circulation of goods follows that of men, women and *children*."<sup>11</sup>

These lines are from a section of Marcel Mauss's famous study *The Gift*, where potlatch, the most distilled, "typical form [of] the archaic organization of exchange"<sup>12</sup> is discussed. Still extant in some territories, this native Indian practice along the North Pacific Coast is remarkable for its correlating the issue of social status and a wide variety of exchange mechanisms. Consisting in a combined process of feasting, marriages, initiation ceremonies and rituals of gift-giving, the various transactions are not motivated by material need, instead, they are performed to "maintain . . . human, personal, relationships between individuals and groups."<sup>13</sup> Thus, in the unfolding context of immigration and social disconnectedness, it is appropriate that Ian McEwan introduces various *potlatch*-like images in his screenplay. An early scene shows Chen and Lily's wedding ceremony, where the bridegroom can only "collect his bride"<sup>14</sup> if he is ready to pay "Nine hundred and ninety-nine thousand dollars,"<sup>15</sup> and Lily's father challenges the party-goers in tests of strength and courage. Though these homeland villagers no longer live in a tribal organization, their cultural reflexes

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11. Mauss, p. 45. Italics added.

12. Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share*, trans. Robert Hurley. Vol. I. (New York: Zone Books), p. 67.

13. Mauss, Evans-Pritchard's Introduction, p. ix.

14. Ian McEwan, *Sour Sweet* (London: Faber and Faber, 1988), p. 2.

15. McEwan, p. 3.

still call for an archaic coalescing of sexual, financial and verbal exchanges on such festive occasions. Mo's ironic plot construction, however, will move Chen from this realm of metaphorical dollars to a condition where the husband – at once in debt to his parents, his wife and the Triads – is literally reduced to a monthly money order.

Before that happens, the young entrepreneur's inability to seek help is exposed. Though his trouble is, partly at least, of a legal nature, he cannot find a legal frame within which he might find some solution. According to a Roman law distinction that was elaborated on by such theorists as, for example, Bronislaw Malinowski, Max Weber and Karl Polanyi, the individual's rights and obligations are regulated by either *status* or *contractus*. While the former is "acquired by virtue of a person being born into a particular kinship/ethnic group"<sup>16</sup> and governed by the archaic principles of "reciprocity and redistribution,"<sup>17</sup> the latter has to do with the "legal aspect"<sup>18</sup> of a given agreement and requires the existence of an independent, essentially commercially motivated realm of exchange.<sup>19</sup> But neither principle is applicable in Chen's case. Though the young husband soon recognizes what kind of men his benefactors are, his attempts to manage the problem on his own are doomed from the beginning. There is no community to protect him or at least appreciate his misguided attempt to improve the family budget: throughout the end, Lily and the rest of the family never even learn what in fact happened to the vanished husband. As far as the possible protection offered by the London authorities is concerned, Lily's amused refusal to consider the legal ways of tax reduction exemplifies the couple's inability to even identify, not to mention accept, any official assistance. Thus the opening sentence of the novel can be reread as a preliminary comment on the inherent weakness of the immigrant family's business strategies: belonging to neither the U.K. (place of *contractus* types of transactions, as shown by their emphatically impersonal restaurant), nor to China (place of surviving *status* types of transactions, as shown in the grandfather's reminiscences about ritual feasting with his friends), the new restaurant owners are not likely to complete successful transactions in the long run. Mo could have added that they do not belong to Chinatown either. The isolated friendship with Mrs. Law only accentuates the Chens' lack of connectedness with the fellow immigrant Chinese, and exposes how limited and conventionalized the existing relationships of this type are. Theoretically, the sympathetic and prosperous fellow exile Mrs. Law

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16. Landa, p. 107.

17. Polanyi, p. 84.

18. Polanyi, p. 84.

19. Polanyi, p. 84.

could find a settlement with the triads, but Chen, out of a sense of gender and class-related anxieties, never appeals for her help.

Thus, it becomes inevitable that the couple fall prey to the mock-version of economic embeddedness that the Hung family represents to them, and that they, in their isolation, are unable to resist. Living in a world where the everyday economic factors of their lives are completely severed from their social existence – so much so that even the protective aspects offered by modern Western institutions are not recognized – the husband cannot but accept the loan that is handed over as a so-called gift. Yet soon the gift as present becomes gift as poison, a semantic connection supported by Mo's references to Chen's required participation in drug-trafficking.

Seemingly, the family never meant to be connected with the triads, and on the level of novelistic plotting, the case is presented as a more or less accidental consequence of a malignant co-worker's interference. On another level, however, the ultimate connectedness of the two worlds is signalled. A large number of cross-references emphasize that both the non-criminal diasporal Chinese, including the Chens, are somehow allied with the Triads. Mo himself confirms the intentionality of this design:

That's what [*Sour Sweet*] was trying to do – to show how close the Chen family are to the criminals. What makes these criminal societies possible are the same values that Chinese people like to espouse. Respect for elders, the tradition of self-help, which leads to a distrust of the state . . . the fact that the family is the unit of survival, not the individual.<sup>20</sup>

On one level of representation, Mo portrays this connection as a specifically Chinese feature. The motifs of rigid hierarchies, the foregrounding of male principles, ritualized communication and the endorsement of unquestioning loyalty bring not only the exilic Chen and Hung families, but also the homeland territories into the same cultural focus. Selectively as they do, Lily and the Triads keep distinct memories of the circumstances that shaped them, and through his positioning of various key images, the narrator indicates that the two families reflect not only each other but the civilization that produced them. Chen's coming into contact with the Triads is necessitated by the pan-Chinese imperative to take care of his parents under any circumstances; his mental association of one of the mobster-creditors with a "crocodile" (72) echoes Lily's exploitation in a "crocodile shoe and purse factory" (19) in

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20. Kazuo Ishiguro, "In conversation with Timothy Mo," *The Fiction Magazine* (Winter 1982) 48–50, p. 49.

Hong Kong, and the mango imagery in the same episode evokes not only the Chens' own garden in England but also the dominant vegetable growth in the New Territories (163). The historically ingrained dictate of making self-sacrifices, as well as the readiness to accept it, is suggested by the framing correspondence between the money orders sent to Chen's parents by Lily, and the monthly cash sent to Lily by the Triads. Both substitute for Chen, both are welcome by their respective recipients, and as a link between the two, there is again the motif of the loan which, so protests one of the mobsters, does not come from an ordinary "money-lender" (70), but from "good Chinese people who stick together to observe the old ways" (70).

Yet, at the same time, Mo, who endows his two diasporal families with a number of obvious as well as exotic ethnic attributes, curiously denies the relevance of the Chinese setting. He claims to "know nothing about Chinese culture"<sup>21</sup> and proclaims, surprisingly, that *Sour Sweet* "wasn't about Chinese people living in London"<sup>22</sup> at all. And while his own definition of the real subject matter of his narrative is "the unity of good and evil,"<sup>23</sup> the reader may also recognize that the heavy contractual orientation of his plot is neither limited to the representation of historically specific Chinese immigrant life nor to its moral conditions. Instead, Mo presents the central motif of owing a deep "debt" (81) as a universal problem in the relationship of the individual and his or her community.

It is again Mauss as well as his theoretical successor, Claude Lévi-Strauss's work that can help one conceptualize the relevance of the exchange motif in the novel. As partly cited earlier, these anthropological theories address the issue of integration into a given communal formation through acts of giving and taking. Mauss's idea of archaic trade focused on "[g]ifts [that] are precisely not *objects* at all, but transactions and social relations"<sup>24</sup> and where the "[f]ailure to give or receive . . . means . . . a loss of dignity and social prestige altogether."<sup>25</sup> While Mauss was among the first to thoroughly expound on the link between trade and sociality in general terms, Lévi-Strauss's similarly oriented research and theoretical writings have resulted in the specific equation of exchange with family relations, sexual and linguistic structures.

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21. Lucy Hughes-Hallett, "A singular obsession: Timothy Mo," *Vogue*, August (1986) 33–5. p. 35.

22. Elaine Yee Lin Ho, *Timothy Mo* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2000), p. 12.

23. Ho, p. 12.

24. John Frow, *Time and Commodity Culture: Essays in Cultural Theory and Postmodernity* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), p. 124.

25. Mauss, p. 40.



His elementary structures of kinship can arise because an inter-tribal swapping of women can take place, and it is this transactional technique of overcoming incest that distinguishes man's cultural condition from his merely natural existence. Jacques Lacan adds that "speech . . . is in effect the original object of exchange"<sup>26</sup> and, among others, Luce Irigaray comments on how "the exchange of women as goods accompanies and stimulates exchanges of other 'wealth' among groups of men."<sup>27</sup> A transactional model can thus indeed be seen as "the basis of human society: in a sense it is the society."<sup>28</sup>

*Sour Sweet* reproduces this anthropological stance in two ways. The changing conceptions of home that the diasporal Chens embrace is "never simple territoriality, a geopolitical space or original home,"<sup>29</sup> instead, their complicated sense of social belonging is relative to their participation in the available transactural schemes. This tendency will culminate in their moving into a building that is both their work place and permanent residence (it should be added that this motif is reminiscent of the Verloc's place in Conrad's *The Secret Agent*, another novel to relate the conditions of foreignness and contractual engagement explicitly). But already on the opening pages, when Lily and Chen are introduced, Mo's narrative concern is almost exclusively focused on the various transactions that structure his characters' days and nights. Calculations, schedules and references to money punctuate the text that contains, initially at least, hardly anything else. One learns, for instance, that Chen's "week had a certain stark simplicity about it" (5) because he worked "seventy-two hours at his restaurant" (5), that he received "spectacularly good" (6) wages and "paid reasonable rent" (5) for a home that is clearly superior to their earlier lodgings in Hong Kong. With his exhaustion and aching feet, Chen is aware that you must give and take, or, as Mo puts it, that "[m]oney came at a cost" (6) But even the remaining "forty hours with his wife and child" (5) is not exempt from this principle. When returning home at night from work, the tired restaurant-worker enters a complex exchange ritual with Lily. Having already had an "employees' dinner," Chen does not want a second meal, still his spouse prepares a hot soup for him out of "wifely duties" and does not let him have some sweets after the salty dish out of respect for the "bal-

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26. Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book II: The Ego in Freud's Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis 1954–1955*, trans. Sylvana Tomaselli, ed., Jacques-Alain Miller (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 261.

27. Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), p. 172.

28. Lévi-Strauss, p. 19.

29. Geok-lin Lim, p. 194.

ance [of] yin and yang" (6). "[U]ncomfortably full" and "tortured with the last extremities of thirst," Chen does not choose to confront Lily's "steely will" and "unrelenting" decree (6).

Part of the significance of this particular scene is that it interlocks with the novel's rich imagery of improper, i.e., enforced, eating and catering: Chen himself will serve the wrong dishes for "appalled" (66) customers; Western patrons are generally regarded as "non-persons" (142); the physical torture that is depicted in chapter six is related to the Triad's common practice of "restaurant squeeze" (262), and fittingly, the two great showdowns of the rival mobs take place in eateries. In a sense, these later images and episodes have their roots in this late night communication between husband and wife. The scene exemplifies, on a miniature scale, that the gesture of accepting or refusing food is indeed inseparable from broader social relations. So the culinary-material exchange of the chapter is supplemented by highly "patterned" (6) visual, sexual and verbal exchanges. Lily's behavior during the dinner is laden with expectations and conditions. Chen consumes his dinner under her "reproachful eyes," and her continuing "sidelong glances from the sofa, her knees pressed closely together," "the baby's socks" in her hands and her standard question if "Husband . . . enjoy[ed] that" (6) compellingly indicate that more than the satiation of Chen's hunger is at stake. Lily is blatantly conscious that one should not "take something for nothing" (12). Just like enhanced social presence, friendship and alliance was promised along with the gift-like, but in reality unwanted loan, the wife's full (sexual) presence is the reward of the acceptance of the "unwanted" (23) dinner.

It is the same, introductory segment, that displays the link between commonality and contractuality by, as it were, default. If acts of exchange have the capacity to generate sociality, various suggestions of the painful isolation of the immigrant self necessitate the Chens' permanent involvement in one or another type of transaction. "They were no longer missed" in their homeland, makes the very first paragraph clear, and the only way the husband is "truly remembered" by his family is if the "money order he remitted to his father every month . . . failed to arrive" (23). The situation is not much better "in the UK [where] Chen was still an interloper . . . a foreigner [and] a gatecrasher" (5). It is with the non-occurrence of visual contact, arguably the most basic form of social communication, that the narrator intimates the void in which the young husband lives his new life: "No one . . . so much as looked at him twice" (5). A sense of decay and marginality permeates the moments when the man walks "past emptying public houses" or "hear[s] bottles rolling in the gutter," and a sense of emptiness, even non-existence, arises at times of "descending silence [and] dark" (5). Whenever there is a momentary pause in Chen's interactions

with his working ambiance and immediate family, a frightening gap opens up, and no fellow Chinatown dweller can fill it.

Considering this alternative of thwarted or terminated social intercourse, another reason for the enforced aspect of the featured exchange mechanisms emerges. So far, two factors could be seen as explanatory of the kind of violence that permeates virtually all transactions in this fictional world. One was the Chinese cultural setting itself that demonstrates, in a variety of ways, how communal interests just override individual ones. As White Paper Fan puts it: the family is “greater than any individual, however high-ranking he may be. The individual is of no importance in himself, only in his office. He can be replaced” (268). Added to this ethnically defined stance was the earlier quoted, broader anthropological view of Lévi-Strauss that relates the very rise of social formations to transactions taking place between clans or tribes. If basic kinship structures are derivable from the act of “binding men together [through an] alliance governed by rule,”<sup>30</sup> then this alliance will inevitably ignore individual needs or aspirations, because it “is not established between a man and a woman . . . but between two groups of men.”<sup>31</sup> Sexual politics in the novel calls for another study, but it should be noted here that Chen’s coming into contact with the Triads is not quite as accidental as it appears at first reading: his colleague, the malicious Fok prepares this trap for him because Chen disagrees with him on a story concerning prostitution (35), a traditionally enforced type of sexual exchange.

In addition, Mo’s hints at a bleak, non-social existence or death at the end of a line of diverse transactions signal yet another reason for the importance of giving and receiving. The immigrant individual, with his precarious position in his larger community, is in danger of losing all social interaction without engaging in some exchange with society. A *contract*, forceful as it may be, necessarily secures some minimum form of *contact* as well. For earlier examples, one can return to Rousseau, Henry James and particularly Conrad, but Ishiguro’s recent fiction is also demonstrative of the danger implicit in the refusal of social contract. When the central character in *When We Were Orphans*, Christopher Banks realizes that his entire social prestige and wealth is the result of some “sinful trade” he was not aware of earlier, and then, as a consequence, he begins to perceive the opening up of a “vast black space,”<sup>32</sup> the reader may recall how, as the second part of Mo’s framing device, Lily passes “dark, empty thoroughfares” (276) only to confront the “terminat[ion of]

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30. Lévi-Strauss, p. 481.

31. Lévi-Strauss, p. 115.

32. Kazuo Ishiguro, *When We Were Orphans* (Toronto: Vintage Canada, 2000), p. 290.

a blind brick wall" (278) in her search for Chen. With the collapse of the symbolic structure that commerce represents, the kind of silence intrudes that Lacan or his reader Žižek might associate with the Real. In the latter's words, "at the end of . . . the symbolic itinerary, we encounter the Real,"<sup>33</sup> where, in the former's words, one is "no longer, no longer anything, at all."<sup>34</sup>

Thus, the end of the narrative sees a curious mixture of irony, decline, liberation and familial reorganization. Alternating dejected and droll effects underscore Lily's firm belief that income for her family's life is still derived, and should be derived, in what she sees as the appropriately traditional form of self-support. She sneers at the very idea of a bank loan, registers information about unemployment benefit as a sign of her sister's growing lunacy, and she gratefully acknowledges the monthly remittances that she supposes to be coming from a fugitive, but in a way still supportive Chen with the words "We Chinese know how to look after our own" (286). Her unawareness of the criminal origin of the money is brought into a final parallel with her inability to understand the social-financial logic of government benefits in general (284). Always acting on the belief that the really important agreements occur within the ranks and files of families or ethnic groups solely, the young widow fails to recognize the scope of much larger, much more impersonal deals that so obviously affect her and her family's life.

But at the same time, the shift toward less intimate transactional patterns also produces an unexpected sense of relief. The change has to do with the disappearance, or at least the diminishing, of the enforced nature of the novel's exchange mechanisms: the "tough-skinned organism [that] their family had been" is now "two cells, sharing the same territory, happily co-existing but quite autonomous" (285). As in the examples for the earlier implicit forcefulness, this tendency of loosening discipline manifests itself on the combined levels of the economic, the sexual and the verbal. Mui's rejection of an interfamilial loan shows that money is no longer to be striven for as desperately as earlier, and Lily's surprising light-heartedness during her contemplations of her husband's absence compares meaningfully to an earlier description of the two partners' otherwise good sexual relationship in terms such as "degradation" (19), "subjugat[ion]" and "dominat[ion]" – even if the conqueror used to be the wife. This imbalance is not present now, and it is lost from the two sister's communication as well. As their last dialogue exemplifies it, Lily the elder sister's

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33. Slavoj Žižek, *Enjoy Your Symptom! Jacques Lacan In Hollywood and Out* (New York and London: Routledge), p. 21.

34. Jacques Lacan quoted in Žižek, p. 21.

previously undisputed superiority and leadership collapses, not to be challenged or fought against, but to be dissolved in laughter and sympathy – as the narrator puts it, the younger sister could now become “a friend, an equal” (285).

It is also the ending of the novel that treats once again the issue of immigration in explicit terms. Mui announces that she will acquire citizenship soon, because the UK is now her “home” (284). Whereas her adjustment follows the ready-made patterns of conducting business in a legal and profitable way (she and her husband will open a big fish and chip restaurant), Lily’s final settling down occurs in a quite different manner. With the vague suggestions that her own Chinese take-away may close down and she herself may become a bus driver, her future remains an unspecified one. Yet an interesting parallelism with an earlier segment of the text shows that she too begins to be “naturalized,” if only in a negative way. The reader may recall that when Lily and her husband selected a location for their new restaurant, they found an “open space, a demolition site” (76) whose desolate, already-conquered-and-left-behind quality immediately put Lily’s aggression and materialism into an ironic perspective. Situated on the same territory, the Chen’s garden resurfaces as a variant on the unsightly, deserted plot in the coda of the narrative. Lily still cuts a proud, if somewhat humbled, Asian conqueror figure, but her partial successes are undercut by the fact that her own final lot coincides with the images she used to form about the despicable English after seeing the demolition site. Disturbed by its abandoned aspect, she then concluded that English society is burdened “with loneliness and a shirking of responsibilities as well as inevitable physical extinction” (77). When she is last shown, strangely serene in her husband’s correspondingly abandoned garden, one may recognize that her homecoming, her gradual modulation towards Englishness happens along the same lines she condemned earlier: her own loneliness, Mui’s refusal of traditional Chinese responsibilities and Chen’s recent extinction.