**The Christmas Totem**

(Timothy Mo, 1950-)

Timothy Mo was born in colonial Hong Kong to a Cantonese father and an English mother. He was educated in Hong Kong and in England. After graduating at Oxford, he started to work as a journalist. His novels are set in both Hong Kong (*The Monkey King*, 1987) and in London (*Sour Sweet*, 1982), but his characters are mainly Chinese.

In his first novel, *The Monkey King*, Mo provides the reader with an inside view of an unfamiliar location, that is inside a traditional Chinese family, the Poons. The protagonist, Wallace Nolasco, is a Macanese of Portuguese descent who has married a Cantonese woman. With satiric strokes Mo depicts, as in the following passage, the hybridisation of western and eastern forms of culture and traditions.

Analyse the text by utilising the theories and frames of contemporary stylistics.

The New Year arrived. Not the new year of the government calendar. Not Hogmanay: that day when the sober, hard-bargaining Presbyterian factors of Mr. Poon’s acquaintance, husbands and fathers, men of substance, dressed themselves in kilts, to the imperfectly concealed derision of Mr. Poon: a day when the Poon girls were placed in protective custody and drunken members of the garrison roamed the streets. Not the festival but the lunar New Year, Chinese Year, as Mr. Poon called it with proprietorial emphasis.

The Poons observed the anniversaries of Occidental calendar with varying degrees of intensity. Christmas, for instance, was too near the lunar New Year – a matter of six weeks at its farthest remove – to be celebrated with single-minded enthusiasm. Still, as a member of the Baptist congregation, Mr. Poon had its obligations. At the end of November, Wallace had noticed the appearance of a mutilated stump in the corridor. This was the Poons’ Christmas tree. Down the years a series of accidental amputations had given it the appearance of a weather-beaten totem pole. Despite its bedraggled condition, it exerted a powerful hold over the imaginations of the amahs and the youngest, most suggestible members of the household. Ah Lung’s sons did not care to be alone with it in the dark corridor.

For their part, the amahs worshipped the Christmas tree as a potent phallic symbol. The colony’s major fertility cult centred around a large, thrusting rock, high on a bald hillside overlooking the harbour, but access to this involved a long penitential climb. The amahs were in the habit of making a pilgrimage to it twice a year. They welcomed the opportunity to venerate the tree, which apart from advantages of proximity and convenience, was also more likely to expedite personalised requests. They burned joss sticks in cigarettes cans before the stubby talisman, bidding for a generation of worshipping descendants through their brothers’ families.

Mr. Poon indulged them in the hope. In his own room a sadistically technical crucifixion reclined across the belly of a chubby bronze Buddha. In an enterprising moment the sisters had streaked the gaunt Christ’s pallid ivory body with red paint. ‘You could be better safe than sorry’, was Mr. Poon’s stock reply when interrogated by pedants.

No such embarrassments vitiated the New Year which exemplified a tradition in its purest form and was, moreover, a holiday recognised by the colonial government. And as Mr. Poon was fond of pointing out, even over the Border, they -the Reds- secretly liked to celebrate the festival, which made it a people’s holiday as well and not just a fragment of ancient superstition.

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Notes:

An **amah** or **ayah** (simplified Chinese: 阿嬷; traditional Chinese: 阿嬤; pinyin: ā mā, Portuguese: ama, German: Amme, Medieval Latin: amma; or ayah, Portuguese: aia, Latin: avia, Tagalog: yaya) is a girl or woman employed by a family to clean, look after children, and perform other domestic tasks. Amah is the usual version in East Asia, while ayah relates more to South Asia, and tends to specifically mean a nursemaid looking after young children, rather than a general maid.