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The International Settlement: The Fantasy of International Writing in Kazuo Ishiguro's *When We Were Orphans*

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Abstract

I identify two general approaches to the reception of Ishiguro's novels: World Literature critics writing on cosmopolitanism exalt what I am calling Ishiguro's "post-Japan novels" for their consideration of universal ethical dilemmas that transcend their historical moment and place; conversely, most criticism on his "Japan novels" performs problematically culture-specific exoticizing and Orientalist readings. Widely read as a detective novel about a British detective, Christopher Banks, solving the mystery of his parents' disappearance, *When We Were Orphans* is in many ways Ishiguro's most underwhelming novel. But, set in Shanghai, it is an anomaly among Ishiguro's "post-Japan novels." Its lackluster reception may be explained by simply acknowledging from the start that *When We Were Orphans* is just not a very good detective novel at all. The refusal or discomfort around doing so, this essay argues, is because the excuse of bad genre provides (like Japaneseness does for the Japan novels) precisely the convenient veil for why the novel does not work, or is not well liked. In other words, by historicizing the novel and reading it (with)in its political and historical moment, I argue that *When We Were Orphans* forces an exposure of the double standard and aestheticizing reading practices that critics often bring to their readings of Ishiguro's works.¹

Keywords: Kazuo Ishiguro, World Literature, Detective Fiction, Critical Race Theory, Japaneseness, Japan, Shanghai, Immigrant Writers

As a widely published and translated writer of Anglo-Japanese background, Kazuo Ishiguro has made his life – and a living – out of crossing borders of nation, language, and even genre. Ishiguro has emerged as one of the most prominent international writers of our time,

focusing often on various postwar or interwar periods. Ishiguro was born in Nagasaki on the 8th of November, 1954, and left Japan for the UK at the age of five, in 1959. As a Japanese immigrant to the UK, and naturalized British citizen, writing in English across various geographies, cultures, and even personal and national histories, Ishiguro embodies the kinds of crossings and mixings World Literature must take seriously. Ishiguro suggests works of art should be valued for the social life they help establish and indeed, as widely translated and translatable texts, Ishiguro's works themselves thematize the tension between their own singularity and multiplicity, as well as the cultural, national, and political boundaries they simultaneously enact and cross.

The critical acclaim Ishiguro's work has garnered and the interest in Ishiguro as a World Literature writer center on what I call his post-Japan novels, beginning with *The Remains of the Day*, which won him the Man Booker Prize, and ignore the crucial pivot at which Ishiguro became critically exciting – notably excluding his earlier geographically and culturally specific Japan novels. Critics have been alternately confused or impressed by Ishiguro's movement through and across genres. Yet Ishiguro does not so much write in different genres, seemingly unimpeded by a commitment to any particular one, as he does simply write in the genre of Ishiguro. The author, after all, has said tongue-in-cheek that he writes the same novel over and over. As readers, then, with each new novel, we approach an old paradigm anew. In other words, we learn to read Ishiguro by reading Ishiguro. I identify two general approaches to the reception of Ishiguro's novels. World Literature critics writing on cosmopolitanism tend to exalt Ishiguro for his crafting and treatment of complex, universal ethical dilemmas that transcend their historical moment and location, seemingly untethered to setting, nation, or race. Conversely, most criticism on his Japan novels performs problematically exoticizing and Orientalist readings. When the critics are not straining to unravel Ishiguro's ethical puzzles, they are cooing at the "Japanese texture" of his style; they either wrestle with his ethics, or sigh at his aesthetics. In other words, Ishiguro's body of work can be seen as cleaved into two sections: his Japan novels (featuring Asian protagonists), and his

post-Japan novels (all featuring white protagonists). The critical approach taken to his work is similarly bifurcated.

Ishiguro has emerged as the quintessential non-white writer in a very dominant conception of world literature, seeming, as he does, to have transcended borders of nation and language through his easily and widely translated “translationese” – English stripped of its particularizing and language-specific markers such as puns or idioms – that lends itself to translation. Claimed, in his fame, by both the country he was born in and the one he has adopted, the trajectory of Ishiguro’s claim to fame echoes this duplicity: it began with his first novel, *A Pale View of Hills*, set in Japan, and was solidified by his Man Booker Prize win with *The Remains of the Day*, set in England. The unique lens of a writer who does and does not belong to Japan offers the critical distance required both to read Japan and to read how the Japanese are read by the West. Ishiguro’s works are repeatedly read as quintessentially Japanese or British or cosmopolitan (as if failing to be recognized nationalistically, the national cathexis, ever present, must then be dispersed *everywhere*). The trends in Ishiguro criticism began with an interest in *Japaneseness*,² before shifting to ethics and morality,³ to psychoanalysis and narrative,⁴ and finally to world literatures and cosmopolitanism,⁵ as if to save him from himself – an apotheosis of his *Japaneseness* in his earlier books to abstraction that circulates above cultural specificity.

This inability or refusal to critically consider the non-West appears to be chronic, but not only limited to the Japanese context. In this essay, I look at one of Ishiguro’s least popular novels, *When We Were Orphans*, set in Shanghai, which stands out as an anomaly among his post-Japan novels, troubling the otherwise clean cleft that parts his body of work. I argue that the novel refuses and refutes the claim that Ishiguro’s novels should be cherished for promoting a replicable brand of cosmopolitanism, and reveals that they instead highlight and insist on politically and historically engaged approaches to reading. The novel demonstrates how Western critics have not attempted to seriously confront the non-West except through negligence and silence. As a novel that posits the dream of an ideal cosmopolitanism through the model of an International Settlement but in the East Asian capital of Shanghai, the book bridges the

two distinct segments of Ishiguro's oeuvre. The locus of the novel, the International Settlement nestled within Shanghai, which itself was semi-colonized, and semi-occupied at the time, is more telling than it may initially appear. For one, it marks Ishiguro's first and only return to Asia after what I am calling his "Japan novels," but with a white protagonist. The idealized space of the International Settlement represents the fantasy of cosmopolitanism that critics seek to read in Ishiguro's body of work. The fraught space of Shanghai and the International Settlement within it in which *When We Were Orphans* is set exists as a palimpsest of various cultures, classes, and even languages, and thus demonstrates and exposes the fantasy of universalism in the form of a "global village" and its ultimate failings. It is the subsequent crumbling of the idyllic International Settlement in the novel, buoyed after all by Shanghai's grey economy, dirty money, and set amidst growing international strife that indicts precisely the naïve reader or critic who would propose to read Ishiguro ahistorically, or sweepingly as a cosmopolitan writer, without an informed consideration of his Japan novels. Even as his general oeuvre post-*The Remains of the Day* has been roundly lauded, *When We Were Orphans* is the one novel that fades into the background as critics sidestep it uncertainly: they remark on its brilliance of style while awkwardly ceding that it does not do its genre very well. Set in an "international" bubble in another East Asian city, *not* Nagasaki, but one more well known for being international, the novel resists the orientalizing and aestheticizing screen through which Ishiguro's Japan novels have been conveniently read, revealing precisely such problematic reading practices inherent in the field of World Literature today.

Widely read as a detective novel about a British detective, Christopher Banks, returning to his childhood "home village" in Shanghai, determined to solve the mystery of his parents' disappearance, *When We Were Orphans* is Ishiguro's least popular novel and in many ways the most underwhelming. But its lackluster reception may be explained by simply acknowledging from the start that *When We Were Orphans* is just not a very good *detective* novel at all. In the same way that *A Pale View of Hills* is an immigrant narrative with no immigrant story, *When We Were Orphans* is a detective story with none of the delicious

spadework of the genre. Most critics implicitly recognize this, yet skirt around the issue, refusing to commit explicitly to such a criticism – Michiko Kakutani comes closest to making such a critique.⁶ The refusal or discomfort around doing so, I will argue, is because it provides precisely the convenient veil for why the novel does not work, or is not well liked. Which is to say, it provides probably the only way for the cosmopolitan-Ishiguro fan to dislike the novel without having to acknowledge that *When We Were Orphans* forces an exposure of their double-standard and aestheticizing reading practices.

Ishiguro finds himself in an awkward position when it comes to issues of race. Despite their interest, Japanese readers criticize him for what they see as his capitulation to literary consumerism, feeding the West with an exoticized Japan while capitalizing on book sales himself. On the other hand, Asian-American critics such as Sheng Mei Ma have criticized Ishiguro for rejecting his “Asian heritage” and writing in “white face” (81). Ma observes snarkily that none of Ishiguro’s protagonists, save his first, Etsuko, share his Anglo-Japanese status. But Ishiguro, in fact, inscribes himself into the novel rather quietly – as Mrs. Fujiwara’s eldest and only surviving son, also named Kazuo, a fact little remarked on by critics. After all, he may even be better aligned with Keiko, his alliterated absent creation – Ishiguro has revealed that “[his] mother was in Nagasaki when the atomic bomb was dropped” (Hunnewell). She was in her late teens and, like Etsuko, survived the bombs. In fact, Ishiguro’s personal history creeps into *When We Were Orphans* as well, allowing him to visit his complex relationship with not only Asia and Japan, but with internationalism as a World Literature writer, suggesting that the transnational writer may be likened to an orphan. If his Japan novels, set in Nagasaki where his mother was from, bring him to his Motherland, *When We Were Orphans*, set in Shanghai, where his father grew up, with the “sensibility of a Chinese man,” brings him to his Fatherland.⁷ Furthermore, if he feels that his Japanese name and face act as a straitjacket, as if he were only yellow on the outside, and British on the inside, he may rather seem more like a mix of Christopher Banks, who is white, but feels that Shanghai is home, and Akira, his childhood friend, an

immigrant Japanese boy in Shanghai who does not want to return to Japan.

Indeed this idea of mixing is offered by Uncle Philip, who posits the dream of a fantasy, liberal universe using the International Settlement as a model, set in the future in which peace is achieved not by particularization and segregation, nor by a uniform and monolithic homogeneity, but rather a universal *mixing*:

...it's true, out here, you're growing up with a lot of different sorts around you. Chinese, French, Germans, Americans, what have you. It'd be no wonder if you grew up a bit of a mongrel. ... You know what I think, Puffin? I think it would be no bad thing if boys like you *all* grew up with a bit of everything. We might all treat each other a good deal better then. Be less of these wars for one thing. Oh yes. Perhaps one day, all these conflicts will end, and it won't be because of great statesmen or churches or organisations like this one. It'll be because people have changed. They'll be like you, Puffin. More a mixture. So why not become a mongrel? It's healthy. (79)

Uncle Philips here questions the effectiveness of governments and organizations in bringing about peace, imagining instead a Habermasian ideal of a mixed universal community. He subverts the use of the word "mongrel," typically used pejoratively to describe mixed-breed animals and as a slur for children born from miscegenation, reclaiming it positively as the hope for the future. The irony of course is that Christopher is white, so if he is a mongrel, he is only so on the *inside*, in ways that remain invisible. Further, the illusion and facetiousness of Christopher's being a "healthy" mongrel is exposed by his contrasting pet name "Puffin" – one of few monogamous animal species. In other words, for all his exposure to diversity, Christopher is still, by blood, a pedigree. The "home village" that the International Settlement in Shanghai is, then, acts as a microcosm for the fantasy of a global village, representing a seed of ideal civilization that could unfold outward as a model for the rest of the world. And indeed the space of the International Settlement even gives expression to such immanent universalism – for it was a space where two little boys from different cultural backgrounds played with a shared understanding. Reminiscing on their childhood, Banks muses, "I had a feeling we acted out scenes from *Ivanhoe*, which I was reading at that

time – or perhaps it was one of Akira’s Japanese samurai adventures” (113). This highlights the fungibility of these stories across cultures, suggesting idealistically that cultural specificity is not necessary for cultivating a common understanding, or even that perfect translation need be achieved.

But this idyllic time of ideal harmony only occurs during their childhood in the safe space of each others’ houses. Elaine Scarry argues in her foundational study *The Body in Pain* that apartment blocks and houses symbolize homes and social safe spaces meant to comfort and protect, and that “in western culture, whole rooms within a house attend to single facts about the body, the kitchen and eating, ...the bedroom and sleeping...” (39). If architectural space can be read, as Scarry proposes, as coterminous with the body and its functions (39) – and by extension, identity, and even culture – the architecture of Akira’s house serves as an interesting monument to the character’s dual identity. Christopher informs us that both his and Akira’s houses had been built by the same British firm, but Akira’s parents had created a pair of “replica” Japanese rooms at the top of the house. Christopher recalls that “once inside...one could not tell one was not in an authentic Japanese house made of wood and paper” and that “the doors to these rooms [were] especially curious; on the outer, ‘Western’ side, they were oak-panelled with shining brass knobs; on the inner, ‘Japanese’ side, delicate paper with lacquer inlays” (75). Akira’s house, doubly surfaced – both on the outside and on the inside – troubles the notion of authenticity, and what is within and without. The doors to the room simultaneously seal *in* and seal *out both* “Englishness” and “Japaneseness”; they are simultaneously the sites of concealment and revelation, where “Japaneseness” is *enclosed* and *disclosed*. Positioned at a liminal space, the doors enact the tension that prevents worlds from colliding, the space at which borders are shared – the invisible point at which differences meld into each other, without erasing the other, and yet provide literal doorways to separate worlds.

In fact Akira’s house might almost be an inverse monument to Ishiguro’s own double consciousness: (he is, or wants us to believe he is) Japanese only on the outside, but English on the inside, and the metaphorical structure itself seems to draw from Ishiguro’s own past. The

house in Nagasaki that Ishiguro lived in till he was five displays a similar structure. Ishiguro has reminisced about the house, saying, “[t]here was a room on the top floor with Portuguese furniture” (Yamakawa 18, trans. and qtd. in Taketomi, “Kazuo Ishiguro and Japanese Films” xvi). Contrary to Sheng-Mei Ma’s claims that save for Etsuko, Ishiguro’s novels never betray any autobiographical detail, *When We Were Orphans* appears to be Ishiguro’s extended meditation on national identity, immigration, ethnicity, and belonging, especially of his own. Like Christopher, Ishiguro’s identity seems to display a dichotomous outside-inside. Ishiguro, who is both English and Japanese, is embodied by Christopher and Akira – inspired by both *Ivanhoe* and Samurai stories. Yet he shares Akira’s and Christopher’s worry of not being respectively “Japanese” or “English” enough. The young Akira believed that communication breaks down when children are not deemed to be English or Japanese *enough*. So, not to conform or capitulate sufficiently to the national norm (whatever it may be) is to result in the cessation of communication and the breakdown of the parental unit – which then catalyzes the crumbling of the world. It was by practicing “Japaneseness” or “Englishness” that Akira believed they did their part to keep the world in harmony: “we children ... were like the twine that kept the slats held together ... We often failed to realize it, but it was we children who bound not only a family, but the whole world together. If we did not do our part, the slats would fall and scatter over the floor” (73).

This scene in *When We Were Orphans* in fact echoes directly with statements Ishiguro has made about himself and his sense of identity in an early 1989 conversation with Nobel Prize winner Kenzaburo Oe. Describing himself as “a kind of homeless writer,” echoing the language of melancholic displacement,⁸ he has said that he “wasn’t a very English English” nor “a very Japanese Japanese” (Ishiguro and Oe 115). Because he “had no clear role, no society or country to speak for or write about,” and “nobody’s history seemed to be [his] history” (Ishiguro and Oe 115), he has often expressed a profound desire to be an “international writer”: “If the novel survives as an important form into the next century, it will be because writers have succeeded in creating a body of literature that is convincingly international. It is my ambition to contribute to it” (qtd. in

Sim 20). To get outside of this dichotomy, Ishiguro produces a fantasy of an international future for literature and has declared it his “ambition to contribute to it” (qtd. in Sim 20). Since Ishiguro feels himself a homeless writer, doomed as Heidegger says of Novalis’s homesick philosopher, to be nowhere at home, he imagines home to be situated in a third locale, outside the dichotomy of Japan-England: the international. The fantasy peaceful international future for which the International Settlement stands as a model overlaps with Ishiguro’s successfully surviving literary world. But this third “international” locale is both precious and precarious in its “international-ness” – it is not, after all, unhinged from the flawed world it finds itself in, whose ontology is still rooted in the nation-state. It is ultimately “fragile,” as Akira will later assert, at risk of dissipating into the air with the wave of a hand.

This dreamland is rudely unmasked as mere dream once Christopher begins to look beyond the settlement, realizing that the settlement does not – nor can it – exist as an independent bubble. The precarious nature of the International Settlement as a safe space is alluded to in the scene where Christopher first sees the Japanese launch shells into the Chinese area, thinking at first that he may be watching a firework show of some kind. He is told that “it’s the Jap warship in the harbor. The shells actually arc over [them] and land over there across the creek. After dark, it’s quite a sight. Rather like watching shooting stars” (170). A scene of warfare is defamiliarized and aestheticized – even naturalized – as the whimsical and wishful sight of shooting stars. This moment literalizes the dangers of defamiliarization that Viktor Shklovsky warns against – that it eats away at “work, clothes, ... *our fear of war*” (75, my emphasis). That the shells arc over them also calls into question the Allied nations’ literal and figurative privileged place in this strife – as in between, ineffectual mediator, paralyzed, if not petrified and hence, as good as outside of it.

Fig. 1⁹

Finally, Banks is forced to confront the “real world” when he accidentally leaves the International Settlement and enters the warzone of Chapei where he chances upon his childhood friend Akira, whom he has not seen for twenty-two years. This sets up a devastating and sobering dichotomy: if we are not in the fantasy world of a global home village, we are in the midst of war. Christopher imagines that the two of them will pick up where they left off, as if continuing their childhood adventures, and in a sense they do – but the grim backdrop of violence and strife unmasks the fantasy of their childhood games; the reader knows this adventure will lead nowhere redemptive. If earlier we imagined the space of home symbolized by Akira’s and Christopher’s houses to be comforting and safe, here the notion is literally blown apart. The violence performed on the physical architectural landscape of Chapei echoes the violence on bodies. In *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Susan Sontag reflects, that “a cityspace is not made of flesh. Still, sheared off buildings are almost as eloquent as bodies in the street” (8). Scarry concurs with this alignment of the body and the house in *The Body in Pain*, observing that the rooms of a house, after all, often echo this parallel in the ways that they attend to singular functions of the body – eating, defecation, rest, etc. (39). As Christopher and Akira move through the devastated slum area, his “impression” was that “we were moving through not a slum district, but some vast, ruined mansion with endless rooms” (258). This literal sense of the *unheimlich*, at the moment in which an unfamiliar and ruined neighbourhood feels all the more strange for its also feeling like a *house*,

is compounded by Akira's and Christopher's reminiscing about home in a space of destruction:

"I fight here, many weeks. Here, I know just like" – [Akira] suddenly grinned – "like my home village." ...

"Yes," I said. "I suppose it's my home village too."

...

"I'll tell you an odd thing, Akira. I can say this to you. All these years I've lived in England, I've never really felt at home there. The International Settlement. That will always be my home."

"But International Settlement..." Akira shook his head. "Very fragile. Tomorrow, next day..." He waved a hand in the air. (275)

While it is tempting to hold onto the International Settlement as home, and hence retain the false chiasmic fantasy of Home as an international space, it ultimately does not hold, and in fact collapses under the pressures of international strife. That Christopher earlier did not even realize they had left the settlement until he found himself in the warzone of Chapei highlights the illusory nature of borders and their permeability. Christopher's need to clarify that by "home village" Akira meant the International Settlement and *not* Japan calls attention to his own persistent sense of displacement. Home for them was neither England nor Japan – not tied to nationality – but Shanghai's International Settlement. The claim that their "home village" is really the "International Settlement" aligns itself with the contemporary dream of a global village. The word "village" insinuates a certain intimacy, smallness, or provincial quality – innocently connected by dialect, and free of the complications of modern financial systems – exposing the naiveté of such a wish. Akira's ironic description of his familiarity with war-torn Chapei as "like [his] home village" causes the space of the home and the place of strife to briefly overlap, forcing us to confront how home and the place of danger can be ineluctably entwined, not merely touching at the place of an invisible border, but not having one at all. If we are to believe that the International Settlement is "home," the novel immediately subverts that notion, pulling the rug out from under us. After all, Christopher's cherished memories of a perfect childhood in the International Settlement were entirely built on subterfuge.



Fig 2¹⁰



Fig. 3¹¹

The novel utilizes its genre merely as a guise to allow Christopher to move seamlessly through social situations, classes, cultures, and

geographies while the reader must suspend disbelief in order to reveal the darkness at its heart. It is only when Banks returns as a detective that he is able to pierce through the façade of the International Settlement and emerge into the “real” Shanghai. Early in the novel we learn that Banks was obsessed with – even jealous of – an old friend’s *connectedness*. “You always used to quiz me about my being ‘well connected,’” the friend laughs bemusedly, continuing, ‘Well connected? Just what does that mean, well connected?’” (5). Banks’s key concern (and the novel’s key theme) is thus highlighted well at the start of the novel. Recalling the imperative of *Howards End*, “only connect!,” Christopher’s obsession regarding his friend’s “well-connected”-ness belies the importance of the imperative for himself. As an orphan, it would seem Christopher is at a disadvantage on the London social stage, with no (family, social, political, etc.) connections of his own. Yet, it is Christopher – or us – who need “only connect!” to see, at the end of the novel, that he has been the *most* well-connected all along, and not necessarily in the ways he had hoped. Christopher is connected to friends and family across geographies. As a detective, the very essence of his job is to make connections, both social and logical. But when the mystery is finally unraveled, we learn that Christopher had unwittingly benefitted from the illicit money derived from the opium trade, and that it was his mother’s sacrifice of flesh and dignity to the Chinese warlord Wang Ku that bought his safety and freedom. His mobility and affluence are enabled through his mother’s invisible labor. Christopher’s illusion – his narrative of the self-made man of the meritocratic success story, the orphan who climbed the social ladder through his own intellect and volition – crumbles to dust to reveal the ways in which the affluent imperialistic West was not self-made, but immanently guilty of benefitting from the exploitation of peoples elsewhere. Christopher’s quest, Oedipus-like, returns him to himself. The answer to his *quest*(ions) after all – the capital that financed his education and way of life – is synonymous with his last name: Banks. The illicit international capital flows through the networks of the grey economy – the many unregistered “banks” of Wang Ku’s – aided the construction of Banks himself. Like him, his beloved “home village” International Settlement, is also funded and maintained through illicit connections and

capital. This symbolically shatters the myth of the developed West as independent, and autonomous, as its wealth, stability, even political innocence has been maintained by outsourcing its dirty work to the disadvantaged.

If *When We Were Orphans* is a bad detective novel, why is it nonetheless still praised for its style? The concessions the reader is asked to make to proceed with the plot of the novel begin as a little odd but eventually become egregious, unmasking its realist foil: an offhand chat leads Christopher to Inspector Kung, who holds the knowledge to where his parents may be, but of course, has forgotten it. An opium-filled haze brings the memory back to him, dream-like. Christopher's random cab driver conveniently knows the actor Christopher needs to find and takes him there. Finally, the childhood friend Christopher has been reminiscing about, whom he has not seen since he was a boy miraculously appears in the warzone. This all happens at a rapid pace, and Akira is led away by the Japanese before readers have even paused to ask themselves this: *Was this man even Akira?* Christopher's suspicious recognition of Akira rings with a certain casual racism: All Asian people look the same.

Christopher's disturbing failure to recognize difference is presented earlier on as well. In the midst of all this violence, Christopher mistakes the dying throes of two separate men to be one and the same. He only realized they were different men because when he realized the man "was shouting in Mandarin, not Japanese," and says that "The realization that these were two different men rather chilled me" (277). Christopher continues, "So identical were their pitiful whimpers ... that the notion came to me this was what each of us would go through on our way to death – that these terrible noises were *as universal as the crying of newborn babies* (277, my emphasis). Philip Henscher's creeping discomfiture at the same "universal voice" he identifies in his review of the novel begins to get at something similar: a lack of knowledge of cultural and historical specificity robs us of our ability to be empathetic creatures. And further, we must be aware of this lest we remain blind to the suffering of others. Christopher's realization provokes a belated realization in the reader; the novel snaps its fingers at us, such that our horror at Christopher recoils as a second wave of self-horror at ourselves for allowing ourselves

to be led along unquestioningly by such a careless narrator. Christopher's self-interested and self-invested forced reading of who may well be an unknown wounded soldier as Akira to fit the narrative he has decided must and will work for him parallels Western critics' incuriosity and superficial readings of Ishiguro's Japan novels. Our ready concession to the performance of bad genre executed with first-rate style highlights how easily we can be distracted from being attentive to suffering in order to satisfy our own curiosities – we want to know how the novel ends, and barrel through – aligns us with Christopher's narcissistic will to knowledge, echoing the horror of the heart of darkness.

We have reason to be suspicious then, of Ishiguro's claim that he decides on the setting of his novel last. Ishiguro admits partially to his capitulation to an exoticized style for literary commercialization: "It's very difficult for me to distinguish how much Japanese influence I've actually inherited naturally, and how much I've actually generated for myself because I felt I ought to," he explained. "I think I certainly do have a tendency to create a Japaneseness about my writing when I do write books in a Japanese setting" (qtd. in Clark). But critics are less sure of what to do about Chineseness in the specifically Chinese Asian locale – not least because Ishiguro's connection to Shanghai through his father is not so well known. Unable to perform the trite superficial readings of "Japaneseness," critics seem to have ignored the cultural and ethnic aspect of *When We Were Orphans*. Henscher unwittingly points this out in his observation on the queerness of what he observes to be the *absence* of "local colour" in *this* particular book: "The single problem with the book is the prose, which, for the first time, is so lacking in local colour as to be entirely inappropriate to the task in hand." When *was* the "local colour" of Ishiguro's prose appropriate to the task at hand? What does not occur to Henscher, is *his own assumption* that previous books *were* in fact adept with or rich in "local colour." As I have shown earlier, this was certainly not true of the Japan novels. Indeed, Henscher's conclusion both indicts himself and the critics who laud the "cosmopolitan Ishiguro" and delivers the final thrust of my argument. He concludes that "The resolution is moving and graceful, but the problem of the voice is a universal one, present and incredible in every sentence." I argue that the perceived

problem of Ishiguro's voice lies with the critics who read it as universal. His text in fact begs the reader to look beyond the veil of his aesthetics to mine the socio-historical, cultural aspects of his plots. Critics' inability to address Shanghai in the same way they wrote off Japan as purely aesthetic exposes their practice as precisely aestheticist.

Even his most English novels have a way of being seen as "Japanese." Mark Romanek, who directed the Hollywood adaptation of Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*, set in England, has again invoked the terms "wabi sabi," "yugen," and "mono no aware" in interviews. In an interview titled, "Mark Romanek Talks about Adapting Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* for the Big Screen," with *Vanity Fair*, both interviewer and Romanek read the final scene with the "plastic fluttering on the barbed wire fence" as touchingly and poignantly like "Japanese poetry." The interviewer, John Lopez, remarks that the "final shot with the plastic fluttering on the barbed wire fence did feel very Japanese." Romanek picks up the point and muses accordingly that "it's somehow Japanese, it's hard to pinpoint what it is about it, but it has a kind of quality about a visual haiku. It's just little hints of what felt to me like Japanese poetry, and imagery." That some piece of trash stuck on a fence which senselessly separates one empty field from another should be seen to possess some essence of "Japaneseness" is a potent reminder of the problems of our culturally shallow practices of reading and adaptation. Ishiguro's latest novel *The Buried Giant*, which comes to us ten years after the publication of its precedent and that critics have again read as a puzzling yet beautiful fantasy novel, is set in Sub-Roman Britain. Ishiguro had mentioned in several interviews before and after the publication of *The Buried Giant* that he was inspired by interwar and postwar Japan, the war in the Balkans, and the Rwandan genocide. Insisting on reading Ishiguro's Asian novels superficially – sighing at the pathos-laden plastic bags that remind us of Japanese poetry, or tut-tutting at a story of the Sino-Japanese war as a whimsical failure at genre – dooms us to finding ourselves further and further afield, condemning us to, when we finally put down the book, myopically believe we have closed the book on merely a queer Arthurian legend.

Notes:

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² See Lewis, Thwait, Dyer.

³ See Bain, Robbins.

⁴ See Wall, Reitano, Weston.

⁵ See Bain, Walkowitz.

⁶ *New York Times* book reviewer Michiko Kakutani has said of *When We Were Orphans* that "Mr. Ishiguro simply ran the notion of a detective story through the word processing program of his earlier novels, then patched together the output into the ragged, if occasionally brilliant, story we hold in our hands." See also Philip Henscher's review in *The Guardian*.

⁷ "My father wasn't typically Japanese at all because he grew up in Shanghai." See *The Paris Review* Interview.

⁸ See Anne Cheng's *The Melancholy of Race*.

⁹ "Shelling at Harbor." *The Young Companion* 132 (1937). Archives, Shanghai National Library.

¹⁰ "Chaos in the International Settlement." *The Young Companion* 132 (1937). Archives, Shanghai National Library.

¹¹ "Chapei in Blazes." *The Young Companion* 132 (1937). Archives, Shanghai National Library.

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