

Kureishi collected

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stage the issues that Kureishi had been exploring in and around London decades before.

When I ask whether adapting Adiga has helped him understand China's 21st-century boom, Kureishi says he remains sceptical.

"I am not really interested in economic power myself. What I am interested in is the growth to world power of countries that have so much censorship. I thought they would have filmmakers, novelists, satirists, poets and songwriters. Obviously China has those, but a lot are also in jail. That is very disturbing because I had always thought of economic power and cultural power going together."

And yet, Kureishi adds, this vision may just be the future for many societies across the globe. "I can see the Chinese model as a model for Malaysia, Indonesia, even India. You have religion and consumerism, why would you want freedom of speech and political freedom? I grew up in the 60s. I took it for granted that people would want that."

Two decades after *The Buddha of Suburbia* helped change the landscape of British fiction, and society, for good, Kureishi clearly has plenty to say.

He is still politically engaged and enraged. "My dad's family always thought power rendered white people unsophisticated. Look at the stupidity of invading Iraq. Every Muslim would think that was hilarious stupidity. It has destroyed American power in the world. The Iranians aren't afraid of them. The [North] Koreans aren't afraid. How stupid was that strategically, let alone morally? They have, as it were, shot their bolt."

He can still be wild, albeit after a more domestic fashion. "I still experiment with drugs," he says, before offering an ode to Ritalin, a drug used to treat attention-deficit disorder. "You can work for ages, Hoover your house, anything. You can't believe they give it to children. You are as high as a ****ing kite, completely smashed. I took two Ritalin pills the other day, and ran around the supermarket dancing."

But Kureishi's imagination is more controlled and efficient, shaped by his family (he has a son with partner Monique Proudlove, and twin boys from a previous relationship) and the challenges of growing older. "My kids aren't alienated. Older people are alienated. The whole world is built to satisfy teenagers. My children aren't bored. They've got too much to ****ing do. They do their homework, they're on the phone, on Facebook, watching TV, listening to their iPod."

"We were sitting in the bus shelter, bored."

Age carries its fair share of terrors, of which death is a central part. "I think about it every day. If you are intelligent, after the age of 45 you would think about it all the time."

But there are compensations too, in life and art alike. "I was in the kitchen this morning and thought, I'm really glad I have been a writer because I can just take it easy. I have done 30 years. I don't have to get up and make myself into a writer. I would rather be with the kids than write, any day."

"I can do whatever I ****ing like."



One of the ancient maps collected by the late Hendon Harris, some of which date to the Ming dynasty (1368-1644). Photo: Charlotte Harris Rees

Pipped at the post

The daughter of a famous missionary has taken up his work, using old atlases to show that the Chinese hit the Americas before Columbus. **Ed Peters** reports

It's debatable when the story starts: 4,000 years ago, or in 1972 when the late Dr Hendon Harris stumbled across a volume of ancient maps in a Seoul bookshop.

The atlas depicted distinct land masses, including North and South America inscribed with the words Fu Sang, the Chinese name for a mythical land in the East.

Harris, a Baptist missionary who lived in Sha Tin in the 1960s, later wrote a book arguing that Chinese seafarers had been carried eastwards by Pacific currents as early as 2,000BC. It made little impact, and Harris died in 1981.

Two decades later, his daughter, Charlotte Harris Rees, read British author Gavin Menzies' 1421: *The Year China Discovered the World*, which posited that Chinese explorers had reached America years before Christopher Columbus.

Her interest piqued, Rees published an abridged version of her father's book, *The Asiatic Fathers of America*, and has since followed it with *Secret Maps of the Ancient World*. "I was sceptical of my father's work at first, but then I started to think there was something to what he had said," says Rees, who is a graduate of Columbia International University in South Carolina and now lives in Virginia.

"The information I have amassed on this subject is like a table with 100 legs. I have tried to use supporting 'legs' that are from academic studies and aren't easy to discredit. However, even if one were to knock off one or even a dozen legs on the

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table it would still stand because it has so much support."

Some of Harris' extensive map collection has been dated to the Ming dynasty (1368-1644).

"The dating is partially done by looking at what is on the other maps in those books," Rees says.

"Certain cities did not appear before certain dates, or cities changed names after certain dates. However, I remind everyone that my father always contended that his maps were not the original of this style of map, but came many years later and so were copies of copies."

Rees cites a number of examples to back up her latest theory. About 100 Peruvian place names are derived from Chinese, including the country's name, which is said to come from *bai wu* – loosely "white mist" in Putonghua. A number of symbols associated with drawings by indigenous people in America are very similar to Chinese script. Native American infants share Asian babies' "Mongolian spots" – a birthmark sometimes found near the base of the spine. And ancient Chinese villages bear comparison with Native American settlements, including the teepees.

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Charlotte Harris Rees (above)

"I am a very patriotic American. My grandmother Harris was a member of the Daughters of the American Revolution. My goal is not to prove something for the Chinese but to arrive at truth."

Reaction to Rees' theory has been enthusiastic, and *Secret Maps* has been endorsed by Dr Hwa-Wei Lee, retired chief of the Asian division of the Library of Congress, as well as by Menzies.

Rees promotes her theory via her

website – www.harrismaps.com – and with a spirited programme of public speaking. "Overall, the reaction to *Secret Maps* and my speeches has been very positive," Rees says. "If people take time to read the book or listen to my speech, they are usually convinced."

One persistent critic from Australia has tried to prevent Rees speaking about her theory both at Stanford University and the Library of Congress in the United States – attempts which were ignored by the authorities and left Rees puzzled.

The critic has not made it clear why he objects, but Rees takes it in stride. "I realise that not everyone will agree with me – as the old saying goes 'none are so blind as those who do not wish to see.'"

"Chinese discovering America certainly doesn't make the stock market go up or down or give someone back their job. It will not change the future of our country. However, so much of what we are told has a spin on it. I want to know the truth about our history."

Rees says: "Earlier last year I was invited to speak at the National Library of China in Beijing, but all speeches there were suddenly cancelled because of the threat posed by the H1N1 virus."

"I would love to see Hong Kong again. We lived in Sha Tin above the Buddhist temple garden. There was no road but many steps getting up to our place from the train station. When we first moved there boats were still sailing in the small harbour below – but I've heard that's since been filled in."