

DISTANT
WATER
WILL NOT
QUENCH
A NEARBY
FIRE

Petrina

Ng

Distant water will not quench a nearby fire is a new project that revisits and reproduces a souvenir t-shirt from my childhood. The t-shirt reads “Hong Kong 1997” and depicts a caricature of a Chinese labourer painting the Chinese flag over the Union Jack. It commemorates the 1997 return of Hong Kong’s sovereignty from the United Kingdom to the People’s Republic of China, ending over 150 years of colonial rule.

Three days before Brexit was slated to officially take effect, I went to the Imperial War Museum in London, England, to look at some relics or evidence of the Opium Wars. The first Opium War led to the cession of Hong Kong from the Qing Empire to the British in 1841, and the second Opium War resulted in the cession of Kowloon in 1860. Hong Kong is the city where I was born; my family emigrated in the late 1980s. I hoped to be able to see some objects from this war, some physical proof of a history that has shaped my life but that I have no personal memory of — no feeling, colour, or texture that I can place.

36

Amy

Lam

I got off the bus at the museum, waded through crowds of bored or laughing schoolchildren, and asked staff at the front desk where I could find the display about the Opium Wars. They said, “You’re at the wrong museum, this one only starts at World War I.” They told me that there were artifacts and displays about the colonial wars that Britain had waged at another museum, the National Army Museum. I arrived there to see toddlers crawling around the lobby. The museum was stuffed with brightly coloured signage, organized into three major displays peppily titled “Soldier,” “Battle,” and “Society.” Word-clouds made up of terms like “sacrifice” and “freedom” appeared everywhere. I started with “Battle” but it turned out to be mostly rifles hanging from the ceiling. “Soldier” contained the most terrifying and highest-tech feature, where a large projection of a CGI British army commander would yell “March! Knees up!” at you while a sensor tracked your movements. If you faltered, the commander would become very angry. I walked out of the sensor’s range while the drill was still in progress, and the 3D army man screamed in rage, “Where do you think you’re going!”



Image: National Army Museum, London, UK.

Nowhere did I find any mention of the Opium Wars. I did, however, learn that the museum had been founded by Gerald Templer, a senior British Army officer who had led the defeat of the Communist Malayan independence movement in the 1950s, in the Anti-British National Liberation War, or, as the British call it, the Malayan Emergency.¹ The museum proudly notes that this was “one of the few successful counter-insurgency operations undertaken by Western powers during the Cold War.”² It also states that Templer is famous for coining the term “hearts and minds,” in referring to the need to win over civilian populations as well. What the museum does not relay is that Templer also pioneered several of the most violent and destructive strategies used by the United States in the American War in Vietnam a decade later, like spraying Agent Orange to kill plant life and food crops, and threatening entire villages with starvation for helping insurgents.³

It makes sense to me that someone who wielded this kind of violence and destruction would also be the founder of a major national museum: Templer’s aggressive propaganda project deflects from the horrific reality of his career. I left the museum with no further understanding of the Opium Wars, no “official British story” about Hong Kong, no insight into what the colonizers thought about the place they had colonized and why.

My family left Hong Kong in one of the big waves of emigration in the 1980s–90s, as people left before the city was returned to Chinese control in 1997. (1997 marked the termination of the wholly arbitrary ninety-nine year British lease of the New Territories, which forced the return of neighbouring Hong Kong and Kowloon as well.) We would return to visit family every year, and Auntie Elsie would always take my sister and I, then pre-teens, out to see things in the city. Out of my dad’s eight brothers and sisters, Auntie Elsie was the one who could speak English the best, was rumoured to have a white boyfriend, had the most interesting clothing, and was therefore the coolest.

We would go shopping or have lunch in the Central neighbourhood, and whenever we needed a bathroom break, she would take us to the lobby of a luxury hotel. We would walk in like we were hotel guests and use extremely clean toilets, often with an attendant who would hand you a hand towel for tips. Artificial scents would permeate the air. These fancy toilets were necessary for Westerners like my sister and I, who would complain if we had to use ones not up to our standards. We would often pee at the Mandarin Oriental hotel. I learned recently that the Mandarin Oriental was built in 1963 by a property development arm of the Jardine-Matheson business empire.⁴ Jardine, Matheson & Co. was founded in 1832 by William Jardine and James Matheson, the most successful opium traffickers of the time.

The opium trade to China was created by the British to solve a problem of profitability: the British found themselves buying an enormous amount of tea but, at the time, the Qing Empire would only accept silver as payment. The British didn't want to pay so much in silver—especially after the independence of some of their colonies in the silver-rich Americas.⁵ So in a gesture that sums up colonial commerce, the British came up with the idea of growing opium cheaply in another colony (Bengal, India) and illegally smuggling it into China. Demand for opium in China grew quickly, inflated by this unlimited supply. This was hugely profitable for the British; they were able to buy as much tea, silk, and other Chinese goods as they wanted now, no longer limited by silver. The Manchurian emperor Daoguang, dismayed at the lack of silver revenue, and trying to solve some of the Qing Empire's many problems (including the effects of drought and famine in the 1830s), ultimately decided to crack down on opium.



Image: The Mandarin Oriental, Hong Kong.

In a famous incident that is commemorated on the Monument to the Heroes of the People in Tiananmen Square, Daoguang's commissioner Lin Zexu destroyed 20,000 chests of opium by dumping them into the mouth of a river.

The British were enraged at the loss of their property and, more importantly, at the fact that the Qing Empire was trying to enforce their "despotic" laws on them. Jardine and Matheson, along with other British merchants, lobbied for Britain to wage war on China. Matheson voiced the opinion that the Chinese were "a people characterized by a marvelous degree of imbecility, avarice, conceit, and obstinacy..."⁶ The Opium Wars were justified by the idea that China needed to be both put in its place and dragged into Western enlightenment. China was to be forced to adopt the values of equality and liberty that the economic models of "free trade" and "open markets" supposedly enact. This connection between the profit motive and war mongering can be seen in the career trajectory of William Jardine, the opium trader, who having successfully helped to incite the conflict, went on to serve as a military advisor to Viscount Palmerston, the British foreign secretary during the first Opium War.⁷



Image: Brexit countdown, January 31, 2020, London, UK.

On January 31, 2020, three days after going to the war museums, I went to Parliament Square in London to experience the Official Brexit Countdown. I ended up standing, somehow, behind a statue of Viscount Palmerston. At 10.59pm—the countdown took place at the strange hour of 11pm—the crowd of mostly grim, mostly white British men around me yelled "5...4...3...2...1..." Then a man in what looked like a Halloween costume version of 19th century male British dress, standing in between me and Viscount Palmerston, yelled "FREEDOM!!!" Then the crowd sang "God Save the Queen" karaoke style, with the lyrics up on the Jumbotron for those who could not remember the words.

That cynical cry of "FREEDOM!" rang in my ears all night; I understood it as a cry for "IMPUNITY." This cry can be heard throughout the Opium Wars in the economic arguments constructed by the British, but also, most clearly, in the following story: in 1839, before the first War began, a Kowloon villager named Lin Weixi was murdered by a group of drunk British and American sailors.⁸ (The sailors also destroyed a local temple in their rampage.) The Qing commissioner Lin Zexu demanded that the murderer(s) be turned over. The British refused, instead meting out fines and prison sentences that were never served by the sailors, and the war escalated after this event.⁹

The British officially wanted "extraterritoriality," an assertion propped up by the argument that the Western legal framework is the most advanced and just. This insistence on immunity from local and indigenous law is, in essence, white supremacist—it is an insistence on freedom from any cultural and legal system deemed to be inferior. The word "freedom," in this usage, ultimately means a denial of care and responsibility.

The wish that remains with me, from this history, is to know what that Kowloon temple—before it was crashed through by the drunken white men—may have looked like, as a place of reflection and prayer. What were the cherished objects in it? The fact is that I can't see them in any museum.

There is a well-known photo of Margaret Thatcher tripping on the stairs of the Great Hall of the People in Beijing, from when she visited in 1982 to negotiate the future of Hong Kong with Deng Xiaoping. She's falling face first down the stairs, with a bunch of men anxiously reaching towards her. In this meeting, Thatcher and Deng settled upon the (again, completely arbitrary) fifty-year "transition period" where Hong Kong would remain somewhat independent of Communist Chinese control until 2047. My mom said that when this photo of Thatcher falling was published, people in Hong Kong thought that it was a bad omen for them, that it meant that China had won the negotiations. My parents and many others were not convinced by the promise of a transition period, and—having the resources and opportunities to—left the city.



Image: Margaret Thatcher falling down steps outside the Great Hall of the People, Beijing, China, 1982.

I remember watching footage of Tiananmen Square with my mom in Vancouver, shortly after our immigration. The year following the massacre, the Communist Party of China (CPC) latched onto the 150th anniversary of the first Opium War to demonstrate how they had saved China from "a century of humiliation."¹⁰ Although not wrong about Western imperialism, the CPC has instrumentalized the Opium Wars and the return of Hong Kong in 1997 for its argument of inevitable total Party control and Han Chinese supremacy.¹¹ The CPC, much like the Qing Empire, the British Crown, the contemporary Canadian petro-state, or any other empire, has always had to try to convince its subjects of its right to rule.

In the summer of 2019, I saw my parents transfixed by the protests in Hong Kong against the Chinese government. My dad streamed live cams of street fighting between cops and protestors and then had nightmares about what he had seen. He imagined himself as a young student living in Hong Kong and what he would do in that situation. In the Western media, the protests have been framed as ones against Chinese authoritarianism and for Western "rule of law." But, as in the history of the Opium Wars, Western ideals do not hold up when actually examined. In Hong Kong, British colonial rule of law fundamentally only applied to the British.¹² The so-called free trade that the British had started the Opium Wars to enforce was, in practice, a series of monopolies that created a Chinese elite class.¹³ Free trade also involved the global trafficking of indentured Chinese labourers (known as coolies). The social inequality created by colonialism can be seen today in, amongst other things, Hong Kong's real estate market.¹⁴ The bleak future that many of the protestors say they are struggling against is rooted in the past. In 1858, the former Governor John Bowring described Hong Kong as "[an] example of the elasticity and potency of unrestricted commerce"—the menace in his statement seems quite clear now.¹⁵

I can't know all the reasons why my parents decided to leave Hong Kong—why they would, in the most basic terms, leave their home. One reason they mention is the HK education system, which is very elitist and rigid. I remember having to

undergo competency testing as a toddler, where a group of nuns watched me walk up and down a set of steps in order to determine whether or not I'd be allowed into their pre-school. It was an event stressful enough that I can remember the colour of the steps (green). I realize now that my parents were driven by desires and fears that, at points, converge with the soaring narratives of war museums and propaganda about "freedom" and "sacrifice," and that, at other points, diverge completely. For example, both of my parents went to university as international students in Edmonton and have romantic memories of being young in a snowy landscape. After immigration, we ended up in Calgary partly due to their fond memories of snow. These small and subtle feelings involved in what a person chooses for their life, the honest acknowledgement and pursuit of flashing pleasures and joys—this is what capital looks to flatten and deaden but can never completely. These points of difference are what I would like to most pay respect to; the points that remain indeterminate, that remain ungovernable.

The "1997 Handover" T-shirt was created as a souvenir object, something meant to be bought as a way to remember, a prompt for memory. But memories are ungovernable and they threaten the official histories that are made to dominate and to forget. The official histories are split open by the unruliness of actual experience and trauma; they are undone by their own futures. Memory operates in this loose space of trouble and of spirit. It is both activity—"I'm trying to remember"—and a kind of intuitive openness—"it will come to me." I continue to work at learning something from this shirt, while also hoping to be able to receive it.

February 22, 2020.

46

47

5
Julia Lovell, *The Opium War* (London: Picador, 2011), 37. This description of the relationship between silver and opium is based on her book.

6
Quoted in P. P. Thoms, *The Emperor of China v. The Queen of England* (London: P. P. Thoms, 1853), 3. As quoted in Lovell, 4.

1
The British called it an "Emergency" for insurance reasons: if it were termed a war, London-based insurance companies would not insure its activities. "Malayan Emergency" Wikipedia, accessed February 21, 2020, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Malayan_Emergency#cite_note-9

2
"Gerald Templer: The Smiling Tiger," National Army Museum, London, UK, accessed February 21, 2020, <https://www.nam.ac.uk/explore/gerald-templers-smiling-tiger>

3
Britain was the first country in the world to use herbicides and defoliants in war; I found this description very telling: "...during the Vietnam War there was reportedly much Anglo-American cooperation of the use of substances invented and perfected at the British government's Chemical Defence Research Establishment at Porton Down. The British government was secretive about this help and Prime Minister Harold Wilson's minister of defence, Denis Healey, even tried, albeit unsuccessfully, to deny such aid in the House of Commons. This Malayan connection with the Vietnam War was officially revealed in early 1984 when British Government records, released under a 30-year secrecy rule, disclosed that much of the herbicide that Britain sprayed on Malayan crops during the campaign... was almost identical to... Agent Orange." Pamela Sodhy, *The US-Malaysian Nexus: Themes in superpower-small state relations*. (Institute of Strategic and International Studies, Malaysia: 1991), 284.

4
Currently, the Mandarin Oriental is operated by the Mandarin Oriental Hotel Group, and still one of the subsidiary companies of the Jardine Matheson Holdings Limited.

7
Lovell, 26.

8
Lovell, 71.

9
Lovell, 74.

10
Lovell, 344.

11
The CPC perpetuates fictions of Han Chinese supremacy by violently persecuting Muslims and other groups who have always also been a part of China's history. And Hong Kong's anti-extradition bill protest movement has demonstrated nativism and xenophobia towards mainland Chinese, while excluding or ignoring the rights of migrant workers from Southeast Asia. These different forms of ethnocentric supremacy follow the patterns of white supremacy.

12
See "The Criminal Trial Under Early Colonial Rule," Christopher Munn. In *Hong Kong's History: State and Society Under Colonial Rule*, ed. Tak-Wing Ngo (London: Routledge, 1999), 46–73.

13
Hui Po-Keung, "Comprador Politics and Middleman Capitalism." In *Hong Kong's History: State and Society Under Colonial Rule*, ed. Tak-Wing Ngo, 23.

14
As described in *Lausan*, a collective that publishes "decolonial left perspectives on Hong Kong," "[Hong Kong is] the world's costliest housing market... This is partially due to Hong Kong's residual colonial institutions, where authorities tasked with land reacquisition and planning also act as land developers and land premium negotiators; they use taxpayer funding to finance private development without public consultation or oversight." Brian Ng, "How real estate hegemony looms behind Hong Kong's unrest: An interview with Alice Poon," *Lausan*, November 6, 2019, <https://lausan.hk/2019/how-real-estate-hegemony-looms-behind-hong-kongs-unrest-an-interview-with-alice-poon/>.

15
Hui, "Comprador Politics and Middleman Capitalism," 30.