

# Exhibiting the Century of Humiliation

## Museum Devices of Historical Memory, Patriotism and Xenophobia of Contemporary China



### Introduction

Museums are important spaces states use to nurture and construct national identities, and their visualization of the imagined community to the public often make museum devices valuable tools to understand the formation of various nationalisms. I looked how the Chinese state dealt with its uneasy legacy with foreigners with narrative devices in the museum space.

This research heavily emphasizes the use of **primary sources**, since it is hugely limited in scope and size, I will not attempt to provide any revisionist standpoint or hugely supplement existing academic understanding of the subject. It however provided valuable training of primary research for myself.

### Research Destinations



### Self-Victimization

#### 贸易逆差与鸦片走私

TRADE DEFICIT AND OPIUM SMUGGLING

欧美工业革命后，西方各国到处寻找原料产地，扩大商品销售市场。在十三行的贸易中，中国始终处于贸易出超地位。西方殖民者为扭转贸易逆差和牟取暴利，竟然不顾道义准则，把罪恶的鸦片作为商品，以武装走私的形式贩卖到中国。

After the industrial revolution of Europe and the United States, Western countries kept on searching for source of raw material and expanding market. In the Thirteen Hongs, China enjoyed favorable balance of trade. Western colonists unethically sold evil opium in China by armed smuggling in order to turn adverse balance of trade into favorable balance of trade and get sudden huge profits.

Figure 1 – Description of origins for ‘unethical’ ‘evil’ opium ‘armed smuggling’ in Guangzhou, Thirteen Hongs Museum

The Chinese state utilizes a victim narrative by portraying itself as a victim of foreign actions during the Century of Humiliation. Chinese inaction to protect her advantageous position was the root cause foreign imperialists were able to exploit China.

### Bridging History with the Xi Jinping Thought



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Figure 2 – Multifunctional learning corner at the end of the exhibition, at Guangzhou Uprising Museum  
Figure 3 – Chinese Communist Party Oath at Shenzhen Archives Centre. The slogan on the top of both figure 2 and 3 reads ‘Never forget the original intention and keep the mission in mind’, with the officially stated mission being the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.

Historical narratives are conveniently shaped to align with the latest Xi Jinping teachings. The Century of Humiliation itself addresses a simple but important concept – everyone supports a stable, prosperous China.

### Encouragement of Self-Initiated Patriotism



Figure 3 – Visitor comments book at the end of the exhibition, at Guangzhou Uprising Museum, some of them reads: ‘May the mountains and rivers stay steady’ – an idiom for a stable country  
‘May the motherland be strong and prosper’  
‘May the motherland achieve the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation’  
‘Maintain the leadership of the CCP’

Museums are packed with school pupils on weekends to complete their school museum trips. I was even requested to help take group photos. Museums of CCP history are still very well maintained even when there were few visitors.

### Distinct Narratives Delivered to Chinese Citizens and Foreign Tourists

Figure 4 – Description of Cessation of Hong Kong after Treaty of Nanking at Nanshan Museum, Shenzhen

#### 鸦片战争失败 深港分离

Shenzhen and Hong Kong were Separated after the Opium War

自十九世纪初以来，西方资本主义列强用鸦片作为敲门砖，凭借坚船利炮，加紧对中国的侵略。1839年6月，林则徐率领民众在虎门销烟。同年9月4日，九龙海战爆发，打开了鸦片战争的前哨战，揭开了中国近代史的序幕。此后的半个多世纪里，深港人民同仇敌愾，顽强抗争。清政府被迫与西方列强签订了一系列的不平等条约，香港岛、九龙司地方一区和新界先后被“割让”或“租借”予英国。自此同根同源的深港分离。

1997年7月1日，我国政府对香港恢复行使主权，中华民族的百年耻辱得以洗刷。

Since the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, the western capitalistic countries intensified their aggression against China with their modern warships and artillery, using the opium trade as their stepping-stone. In June 1839, leading the populace, Lin Zexu destroyed the opium at Humen. On the 4<sup>th</sup> September, the Kowloon Sea Battle, the skirmishes of Opium war, broken out. This drew the curtain of Chinese modern history. After over half a century, Shenzhen and Hong Kong people showed their courageousness and indomitableness in wars against the cession of Hong Kong Island. The Qing government was forced to sign a series of unequal treaties with Western powers, and Hong Kong Island, Kowloon District and the New Territories were successively ceded or leased to Britain. Since then, Shenzhen and Hong Kong, which had the same roots, were separated.

On July 1, 1997, the Chinese government resumed the exercise of sovereignty over Hong Kong, erasing the century-old humiliation of the Chinese nation.

Not every museum had English descriptions, especially those dedicated to CCP history. Those directed at an international Audience had their English descriptions distinct from Chinese, and some occasionally absent for certain detailed descriptions and statements.

In Figure 4, the Chinese version emphasizes the separation of Hong Kong and Shenzhen compatriots; for international audiences it highlights the unjust acts of colonialism.

### Conclusion

This research did not look at a wide scope of primary sources, neither did it contribute much to our academic understanding of contemporary China. Yet, this provided a massive training opportunity to conduct in-person primary research, which will contribute to my further training as a researcher.



Figure 5 - Shenzhen Archives Centre

### Acknowledgements

My sincerest gratitude to Lord Laidlaw, everyone at the Foundation, HKU Horizons, my supervisor and friends for their support from the very application of this project. This research undertaking although a humble beginning to my academic career, is a huge boost to my personal growth. The Laidlaw programme was amongst the first I did not have to turn down due to my circumstances. I ventured out of my hometown Hong Kong for the first time in over a decade, making multiple humble but life-changing solo trips to the nearby cities in China to conduct research – first time visiting archives outside of Hong Kong. A fresh and strange environment set me for massive personal growth – I experienced, learned to be independent, learned practical life skills and overcame the biggest psychological barriers not found in my comfort zone. As the Chinese adverb goes: ten thousand scrolls are no better than ten thousand miles of journey. I have spent enough of my life devouring books in Hong Kong, I had dreamed to head out, and Laidlaw was the beginning of my dream. The most fruitful summer of my life so far would not have been possible without those who supported me along the way.

### Select Bibliography

In compliance with Chinese archival publication laws 《国家档案馆档案开放办法》，some materials are not shown directly on this poster.

- Archives of Macao
- Humen Opium War Museum
- Guangzhou Uprising Museum
- Guangdong Provincial Archives, Guangzhou
- Guangzhou Railway Museum
- Guangzhou National Archives
- Nanshan Museum, Shenzhen
- Shenzhen Archives Centre
- Thirteen Hongs Museum, Guangzhou
- Zhuhai Museum
- Zhuhai Revolution Historical Data Exhibition Hall

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