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CHINESE AND BRITISH IMPERIAL PAST

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The Duality of the Psyche of the People of Hong Kong

The author visits the Hong Kong Palace Museum and the British Consulate General in Hong Kong to discover the ways in which the people of Hong Kong remember their imperial past. He finds that the reactions of Hong Kongers to a museum exhibit of the Chinese Emperor Qianlong, and the bouquets for Queen Elizabeth II, demonstrate the duality of their psyche. The duality is seen in the pride of many Hong Kongers in being Chinese yet abiding by the laws and practices which are a holdover from Hong Kong's days as a British colony. Some Hong Kong people told the author in interviews that they believe the British administered Hong Kong efficiently in the latter phase of their colonial rule, and that is how they remember the British monarch.

The effects of the soft power of China and Britain reached Hong Kong in the third quarter of 2022. Chinese soft power was manifest in historical items from the Palace Museum in Beijing, exhibited in the Hong Kong Palace Museum. Most exhibits in the Hong Kong Palace Museum originated from the Forbidden City, a

complex of palaces of Chinese emperors in Beijing.

The soft power of Britain, the former ruler of the colony of Hong Kong which was returned to China on July 1, 1997, was on display when large crowds gathered at the British Consulate General in Hong Kong to mourn Queen Elizabeth II of Britain, who died on September 8, 2022.

The two events demonstrate the duality in the psyche of the people of Hong Kong. The duality in their psyche is seen in the pride of many Hong Kongers in being Chinese yet abiding by the laws and practices which are a holdover from Hong Kong's days as a British colony.

Britain took control of Hong Kong in 1841 upon defeating China in the Opium War. The aim of Britain in winning the Opium War was to force the Chinese government, then under the Qing dynasty, to allow Britain to sell opium in China, a morally reprehensible act which the late British Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, and the last British governor of Hong Kong, Christopher Patten, admitted was indefensible.

The Hong Kong Palace Museum opened to the public on July 3, 2022 to commemorate the twenty-fifth anniversary of Hong Kong's handover to China on July 1, 2022. This was part of the Chinese government's strategy to draw Hong Kong people closer to China and to use Hong Kong's international status to project Chinese soft power internationally.

At the opening ceremony of the museum on June 22, 2022, Li Qun, China's vice-minister of culture and tourism, said, "[Chinese] President Xi Jinping cares deeply about the arts and cultural development of Hong Kong . . . The completion of the HKPM [Hong Kong Palace Museum] allows Hong Kong citizens to appreciate up-close these beautiful and precious treasures, experience the profoundness of traditional Chinese culture, feel the heartbeat of the



development of contemporary China, and enhance the cultural confidence of Hong Kong.”

Mr Li continued, “Under the strong leadership of the Central Government, the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, and the National Cultural Heritage Administration, we will strengthen cooperation with the HKSAR Government [Hong Kong Special Administrative Region] to deepen cultural, artefactual, and tourism exchanges between Mainland China and Hong Kong, and further integrate Hong Kong’s cultural development into the overall development of Chinese culture, underscoring the city’s influence in an ever-changing global landscape and ensuring it can play an active role in promoting Chinese culture internationally.”

The Hong Kong Palace Museum is popular among Hong Kong residents. I had to book a ticket to visit the museum weeks ahead because most earlier dates were sold out. I visited the museum on Saturday, August 20, 2022. During my visit, virtually the entire exhibition at the museum was on the Qing dynasty which ruled China from 1644 to 1912. I saw some exhibits from earlier dynasties but they were kept by emperors of the Qing dynasty.

I saw an imperial seal of Empress Dowager Cixi of the late Qing dynasty, and portraits of various Qing emperors including Kangxi and Yongzheng. The focus of the exhibit, however, was Emperor Qianlong, who lived from September 25, 1711 to February 7, 1799, and reigned from 1735 to 1796. Having lived eighty-seven years, Qianlong was one of the longest-lived emperors of China and one of the longest reigning monarchs in world history with a reign of sixty-one years. He is in good company with Queen Elizabeth II, the longest-lived monarch in world history with a lifespan of ninety-six years and a reign of more than seventy years, the second longest reign of a monarch in world history behind King Louis XIV of France who reigned seventy-two

years. Items associated with Qianlong commanded the lion's share of the exhibits and took pride of place in the museum, such that he made the largest impression on me during my visit to the museum.

I suspect the motive for playing up Qianlong in the museum exhibition was that he was widely regarded as the most glorious Chinese emperor of the Qing dynasty. After his death in 1796, China went downhill, with its defeat by the British in the Opium War which resulted in China's cessation of Hong Kong to Britain in 1841. In what is called "the century of humiliation," China continued to be defeated by various European powers and Japan in several wars until the end of the Second World War on August 15, 1945.

In contrast, during Qianlong's reign, China was estimated by some economists to account for one-third of the world economy. The wealth of China under Qianlong attracted Europeans seeking trade, including a British trade mission to Beijing in 1793 led by George Macartney, an envoy of King George III. Through the exhibits of Qianlong, I think the Chinese government hoped to impress on the people of Hong Kong that China was now a wealthy and internationally influential country as it was during the reign of Qianlong, not the weak and internationally despised empire which was defeated by the British in the Opium War.

Another exhibit I saw was a large painting of Qianlong and his many sons by Giuseppe Castiglione, an Italian Catholic Jesuit priest. Castiglione, whose Chinese name is Lang Shi-ning 郎世宁, served as a painter in the Chinese court under the three successive Emperors Kangxi, Yongzheng, and Qianlong. Born in Milan, Italy, in 1688, he lived in Beijing from 1715 till his death in 1766. Castiglione's paintings are a fusion of European and Chinese techniques, combining Chinese brush strokes with Western three-dimensional perspective and lighting. His work had a significant impact on later Qing court

paintings, which incorporated European influence with realism, perspective, and light and shade, which previously did not exist in Chinese painting.



An eighteenth-century painting of Emperor Qianlong and his sons, by Giuseppe Castiglione, an Italian Catholic Jesuit priest.
Source: The Hong Kong Palace Museum.

The painting I saw featured Qianlong and his sons dressed in the traditional garb of the ethnic Chinese or Han Chinese, not the costume of the Manchus, the ethnic group to which Qianlong belonged. In real life, Manchu men like Qianlong sported pigtails, while Han Chinese men tied their hair in buns as shown in the painting. This was Qianlong's way of showing his familiarity with the culture of the Han Chinese, who formed most of his subjects. It was part of Qianlong's aim to prove he was up to the standard of civilization of the Han Chinese,

who previously looked down on the Manchus as uncouth horse-riding nomads.

At the museum I also saw a painting commissioned by Qianlong, which depicted various couples, men and women, of different races and nationalities. The couples included Thai people, Burmese, and Europeans dressed in their eighteenth-century costumes. This indicates Qianlong's interest in other countries and cultures.

The museum also featured clocks designed and made in Britain with some processing in the southern Chinese province of Guangdong, which the British sent as gifts to the imperial court in Beijing. This is an echo of China's present role as the world's biggest manufacturing nation, with much of the production done in Guangdong. Possibly, such exhibits were meant to convey the Chinese government's support for international trade and globalization.

The exhibits at the museum contained a combination of East and West, projecting the cosmopolitan outlook of the court of Qianlong. Ironically, Qianlong rebuffed Lord Macartney's request for more trade between China and Britain, which made China look inward and, in turn, led to China's decline and humiliation at the hands of Britain and other foreign powers.



A painting at the museum, commissioned by Emperor Qianlong, featuring foreigners.

Source: The Hong Kong Palace Museum.

The Passing of Queen Elizabeth II

After Queen Elizabeth II passed away on September 8, 2022, large numbers of people in her country and around the world mourned for her. Many people queued for as long as twelve hours to pay respects to her as she lay in state in London, according to media reports. World leaders including Chinese President Xi sent their condolences.

On September 11, 2022, I passed by the British Consulate General in Hong Kong and noticed large numbers of bouquets laid on the floor surrounding the Consulate General. In the distance was a Hong Kong Chinese man dressed in Scottish gear, playing “God save the queen” on bagpipes. I noticed a sign on one bouquet which said, “Dear Queen, Thank you! You live in our hearts forever. Hong Kongers.”

Why did so many Hong Kong people fondly remember Queen Elizabeth II? After all, the British seized Hong Kong by force in order to sell narcotics to the Chinese. Long ago under British colonial rule, there was institutional racism in Hong Kong. For example, until the 1940s, Chinese and other non-white people were not allowed to live on the Peak, the most prestigious district of Hong Kong. Until the early 1970s, corruption plagued the Hong Kong police. Since the establishment of the Independent Commission Against Corruption (ICAC) on February 15, 1974, corruption in Hong Kong has been reduced substantially. During the final years of British rule, Hong Kong people had generally prospered in a society with much freedom, the rule of law, and low levels of corruption. Several Hong Kong people told me that they believe the British administered Hong Kong efficiently in the latter phase of colonial rule.

One reason that Queen Elizabeth II’s power was “soft” is that she had little political power. The lack of political power in the monarch allowed democracy to grow in Britain. The inability of the later Qing emperors in preventing China from being bullied by foreign

powers, as well as the divisions within China under warlords in the early twentieth century, have made it difficult for Chinese leaders and Chinese people to appreciate the benefits of a constitutional monarchy. Shortly after the Republican revolution toppled the Qing dynasty in 1912, China was divided into regions controlled by warlords and influenced by Japan and some European powers. Sun Yat-sen, the leader of the Republican revolution, complained that China was as “loose as a plate of sand.” For Chinese leaders, a strong leadership is a prerequisite of good government. That is why many Chinese remember Qianlong fondly as a powerful emperor of a prosperous and respected empire.

These gestures exemplify soft power in contrast to hard power, which is the imposition of force on people or a country to wrest a desired result. For example, when Britain defeated China in the Opium War and gained Hong Kong as a spoil of victory, Britain wielded hard power against China.



Left: A remembrance card for Queen Elizabeth II from the people of Hong Kong left at the British Consulate in that city. Right: Flowers for the Queen left at the Consulate General in Hong Kong. Photos by the Author.

Apart from inviting people to pay respects to Queen Elizabeth II at the British Consulate General, the British government exerted little effort to attract big crowds to mourn its late sovereign. Large numbers of Hong Kong residents turned up to lay bouquets at the British



Consulate General for days on end of their own will. Now that is soft power.

Note on the Author

Toh Han Shih holds a B.S. in physics from the California Institute of Technology, and a doctorate in physics from Oxford University. He also has a Master's in Southeast Asian Studies from the School of Oriental and African Studies in London, and has completed a part-time Master's in Economics at Hong Kong University. Han Shih is a Singapore-born writer resident in Hong Kong with twenty years of experience reporting on business and economics related to China, including ten years as a reporter with the *South China Morning Post*. In December 2016, he published the book, *Is China an Empire?* From 2007 to 2008, he worked at Kroll, and in the late 1990s, he was a reporter at the *Business Times* in Singapore. He was also a senior correspondent of MLEX, a regulatory risk news agency, and senior reporter of *Finance Asia*, a financial trade publication. He is currently chief analyst of Headland Intelligence, a Hong Kong risk consultancy.