



An Insular Possession

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AN INSULAR POSSESSION opens with a description of the great river that runs between Chinese Canton and Portuguese Macao. The river, the central metaphor of the novel, can be likened to the British Empire in that it “succours and impedes native and foreigner alike; it limits and it enables, it isolates and it joins. It is the highway of commerce and it is a danger and a nuisance.” The commerce, in this case, as well as the danger and the nuisance, is the lucrative and illegal trade in opium. Opium, grown in India and transported via the East India Company, arrives in China to be traded for tea, which is sent to stimulate and comfort English textile workers, who produce cotton goods -- the cotton is grown by black slaves -- for India. The result is an economy based on human misery and drugs: The blacks are enslaved in order to grow cotton; the white textile workers are wage slaves; and the Chinese become slaves to opium.

The Chinese, however, are gearing up for war against the British “barbarians” who enslave the Celestial Empire with their navy and their drugs. The atmosphere in Canton smolders with resentment. Formerly docile coolies threaten white men with sticks. There is vandalism and looting. Prominent British military men are kidnapped. Against this contentious backdrop stand Walter Eastman and Gideon Chase, two young American traders. Breaking with their company, which is planning to engage in the opium trade, they found an opposition paper, THE LIN TIN BULLETIN AND RIVER BEE, a rival to the British propaganda organ, THE CANTON MONITOR.

The personal trials and triumphs of the two youths are played against the larger and increasingly threatening political and military events. The reader learns of events through excerpts from the contending newspapers, through letters and diaries, as well as through narrative. Interspersed among descriptions of war are passages on methods of early photography and musings about art and Chinese thought and letters (fascinating yet slowing the action). Timothy Mo’s book attempts and achieves much, capturing a critical moment in history and thrilling the reader with its dizzying panorama and the sheer beauty of its language.

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