“THIS IS HOW THE CHINESE PEOPLE BEGAN THEIR STRUGGLE”: HUMEN AND THE OPIUM WAR AS A SITE OF MEMORY

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To the historian, Humen is synonymous with Lin Zexu 林則徐 (1785–1850) and the Opium War (1839–42). Humen (literally Tiger Gate, Boca Tigris, or the Bogue) is where the Qing dynasty 清朝 fortified and barricaded nautical access to Guangzhou 廣州, it is where Lin disposed of the notorious foreign opium stocks, and it is where Admiral Guan Tianpei 關天培 (1781–1841) made his most famous last stand against the British invasion forces. For Chinese historians in particular, the site is also identified with the beginning of “modern” Chinese history—the moment that China stood up to and then collapsed under the weight of Western imperialism. In the Marxist-Leninist interpretation, the Opium War ushered in a profound change in the Chinese historical process, driving China into an age of “semicolonialism, semifeudalism.” During the Mao era of the People’s Republic of China (PRC), Humen came to represent resistance to imperialism, and to support China’s isolationist foreign policy. In the post-Mao era, Humen was further articulated as the place where China’s “Century of Humiliation” began. But paradoxically, as the Pearl River Triangle takes a leading role in Chinese commerce and manufacturing, the site is just as likely to be associated with global export, high fashion, and high technology.

The question pertaining to this chapter is whether Humen might be considered a lieu de mémoire in the terms described by Pierre Nora. That is to say, as a site where spontaneous and self-actualizing memory has been undermined by the critical discourse of history, leaving unhinged traces open to appropriation and the proliferation of signification.2

Given the apparent ease with which Humen accepts new identities, one might conclude that Humen indeed falls into that category, but

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1 Lin Zexu (1959), directed by Zheng Junli. I would like to thank the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada for supporting the initial research for this study in 2005.

the difficulty in making a wholesale transference of Nora’s concept to the Chinese context lies in the particular nature of the Chinese historical enterprise. Simply put, compared to its European counterpart, modern Chinese history has never been especially critical, it has not taken as its goal the destruction of memory, and it has not been actively engaged in the clear demarcation of boundaries between history and memory. The resulting diffusion between history and memory has allowed Humen to accumulate, recycle, and create new meaning in the sense of a lieu de mémoire, while maintaining a profound identification with the core values that brought it into memory/history as a site of resistance. Through the continuity of its relics and the creation of associated monuments, museums, texts, and films, Humen has acquired layers of signification that distinguish it, to use Jan Assmann’s term, as “objectified culture.”3 While each generation may relate to the site differently, by appropriation, criticism, preservation, or transformation, the site nonetheless acts to preserve and deliver the cultural memory of resistance to disparate communities long removed in space and time from the event of the Opium War.

Humen and the Opium War: A Narrative History

The key events of the Sino-British conflict in South China are known well enough—Lin Zexu destroys British opium, Britain retaliates with crushing force, the Qing capitulates and signs the first of its unequal treaties. In dealing primarily with causes and consequences, however, the textbook account obscures a side of the war that is essential to understanding how Humen has developed as a site of memory. Beyond the British victories, Humen and its nearby vicinity saw the Chinese forces earn a series of marginal successes, stalemates, and less-than-total defeats that had little impact on the progress of the war, but which were to have a profound effect on the Chinese disposition toward the conflict.4 These engagements are the basic elements from which the Humen resistance narrative would be constructed.

4 For more comprehensive discussions of how the Chinese understood the Opium War beyond Humen, see Waley 1958, Polachek 1992.