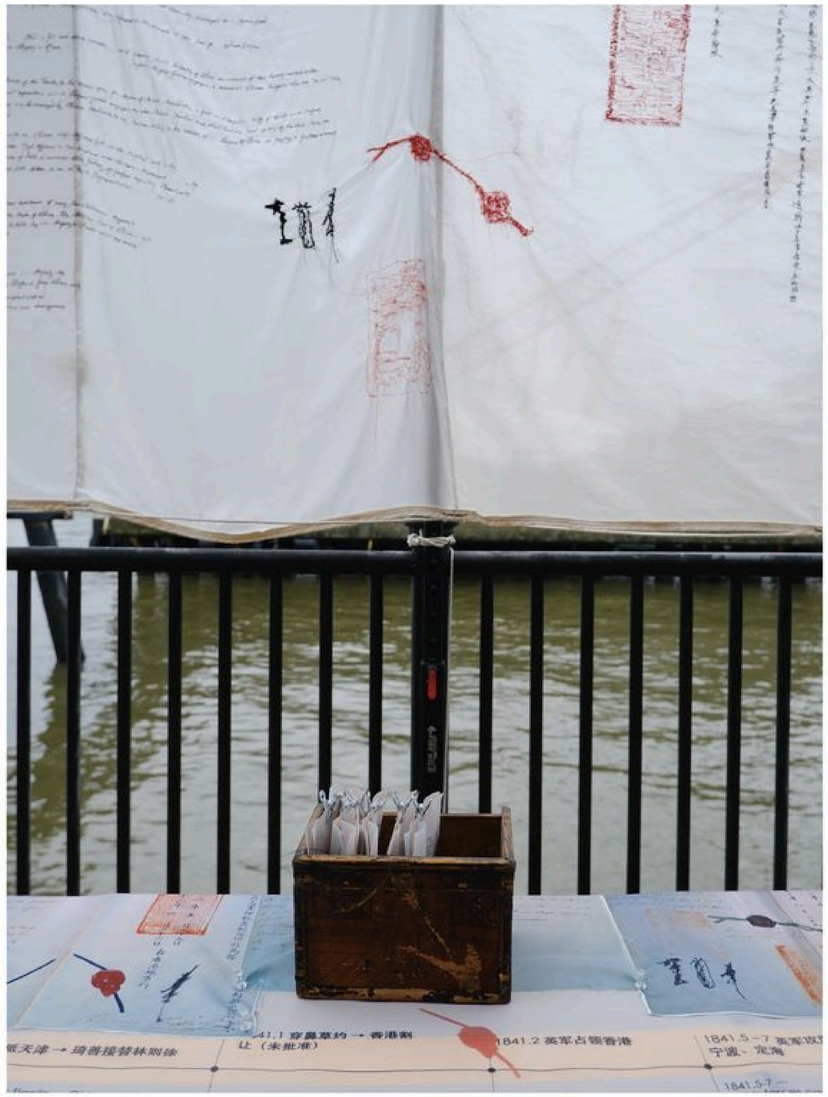

On Sail

Re-threading the Winds of Trade and Memory Between Tea, Opium, and Empire

Yao Yan
MA Situated Practice

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01
Context

Abstract

Abstract

On Sail is a cross-media artwork centred upon the Treaty of Nanking. Through embroidery, archival rewriting and spatial installation, it explores how power shapes narratives within historical texts, and how individuals might physically engage with, touch and reinterpret memories folded within this colonial history. The work draws inspiration from my experience personally handling the original treaty document at the London archives—a moment when I suddenly realised that "history" is not merely a past sealed between pages, but an enduring structure of perception and power.

The Treaty of Nanjing, regarded as the starting point of modern Chinese history, is often perceived as a symbol of national humiliation. Yet in Britain, it remains merely a page quietly archived in the records office. This contrast in attitudes reveals the fracturing and reproduction of memory across different cultural contexts. Homi Bhabha's concept of the 'Third Space' offers a theoretical framework for understanding this fissure—history is not static, but a space continually rewritten through difference and translation. As a Chinese student studying in London, I find myself situated precisely within this 'Third Space': simultaneously the subject of narration and the observer engaged in re-narration.

In the creative process, I chose to "transcribe" the Treaty of Nanking through the medium of embroidery. This exceedingly slow, repetitive labour, imbued with bodily warmth, became an act of resistance against the coldness of the text and the authority of the archives. Each phrase pierced by needle and thread represents a renewed touch upon 'sovereignty' and 'the right to speak'. The movement of needle and thread mimics writing while simultaneously deconstructing it; it restores texture to language and renders "history" tangible, suspect, and open to reinterpretation. Through the labour of the 'hand', I endeavour to return the symbols of the archive to the sensory plane, transforming the writing of power into bodily memory.

Another core component of the work is my site-specific intervention at the East India Dock Basin. Upon that wharf, once a symbol of colonial shipping routes and global commerce, I slowly unravelled a three-metre-long timeline. Printed on transparent tracing paper, this timeline spans from the seventeenth-century origins of global trade to the signing of the Treaty of Nanking in 1842, and ultimately to the establishment of the Shanghai Concession in 1845. As sea breezes rippled the scroll, its edges lifted gently, transforming history from a fixed line into a form inscribed by wind, light, and the passage of

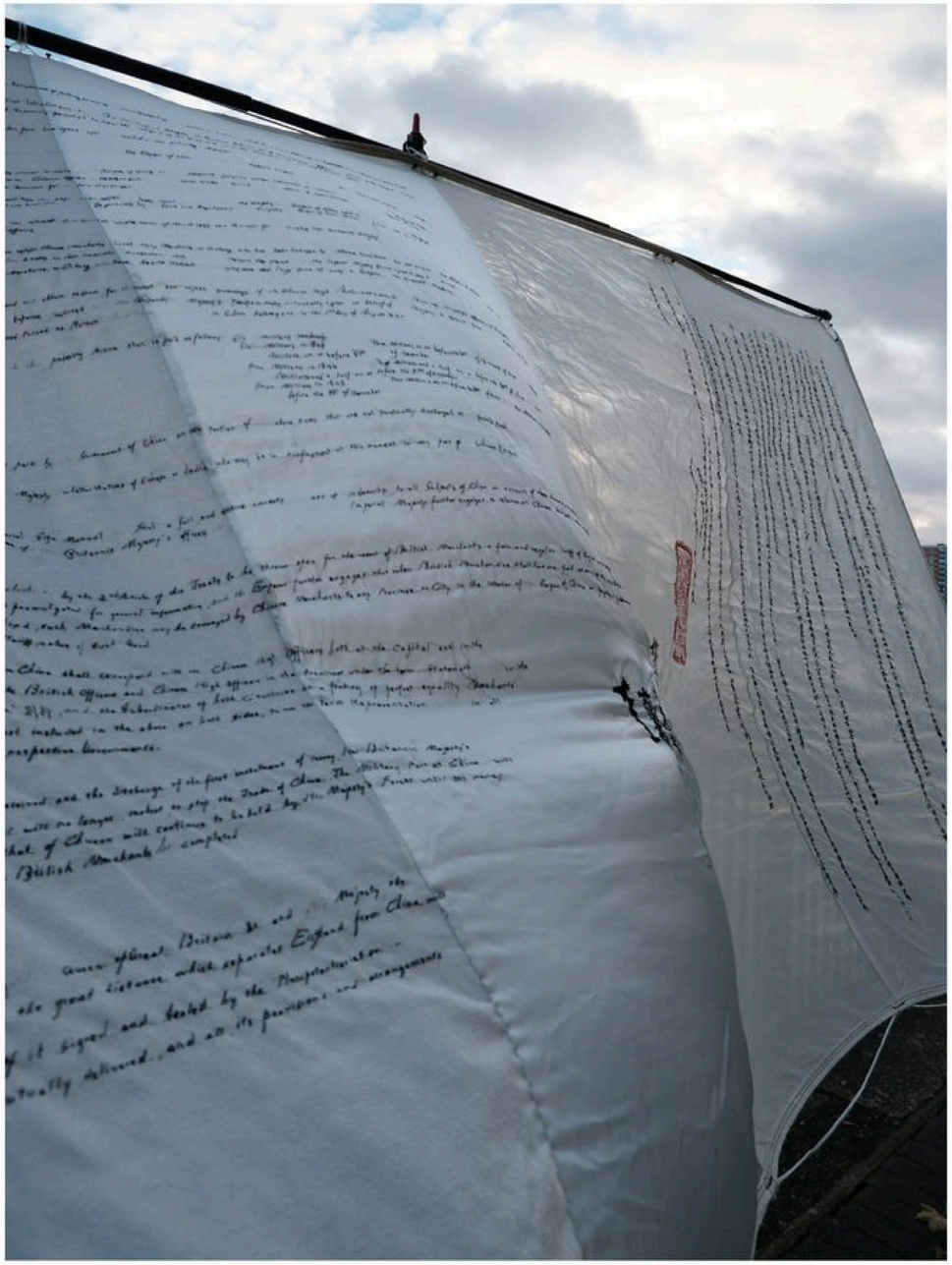
time. I pinned my remade archive sequentially to corresponding points along the timeline—each piece printed on sailcloth, serving both as archival material and an extension of the fabric itself. Each pinning action represents a renewed 'anchoring' and 'releasing'. Viewers witness the moment text is tugged by the wind and hear the subtle sound of needles touching fabric—a rhythm suspended between stitching and tearing.

This intervention seeks not to re-enact history, but to allow the archives to engage in a "breath-like encounter" with the site's environment. The wind here carries the scent of the sea and the echoes of history; the rust of the docks and the glint of water reflect tales carried away by the ocean and returned once more. As I stood in the wind, unfurling the scroll of time, I suddenly realised I was not merely "displaying" archives, but engaging in a dialogue with this very site, with history itself. The archives ceased to be cold records; they became material that could be stirred by the wind, re-touched by the body.

Thus, On Sail unfurls as a sail crafted from embroidered fabric—its form evoking navigation, yet also pointing to histories of trade, expansion and colonisation. The intervention is situated at London's East India Dock Basin, a geographical coordinate once emblematic of global commerce and imperial expansion, now serving as an extension of the work's context. As the sail billows in the wind, the text ceases to be mere words and transforms into a fluid spectacle: it is re-read, re-viewed, and re-experienced within the air and light. In that instant, the treaty escapes its static historical form, becoming a medium that encounters the present.

In my view, On Sail is not merely a "re-enactment" of history, but rather an experiment in re-understanding "the manner of remembering". It liberates archives from filing cabinets, allowing the body to once again become the medium of history. Through the repetition of manual labour and the tactile quality of materials, I hope viewers may sense a tension suspended between restoration and rupture—that unhealable fissure between us and history, between us and others, and between us and ourselves.

On Sail is a work about distance: geographical, cultural, emotional, and temporal. Using the sail as a symbol, it points towards drifting and looking back, towards a persistent self-questioning—how do we rewrite our own position within a history written by power? When the wind fills the sail once more, history ceases to be merely the past and becomes an existence still sailing.



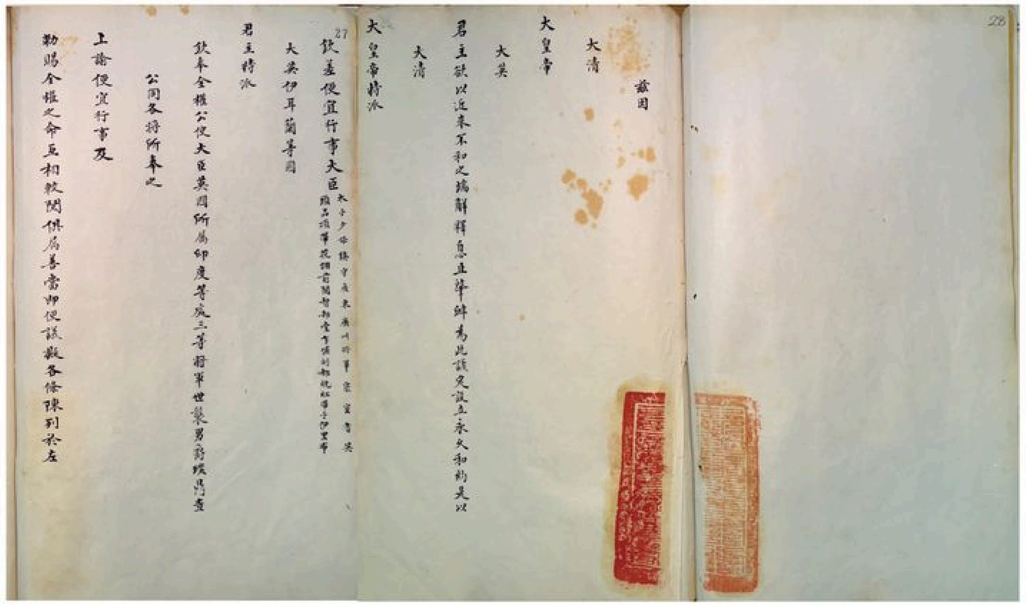
02 Research Process

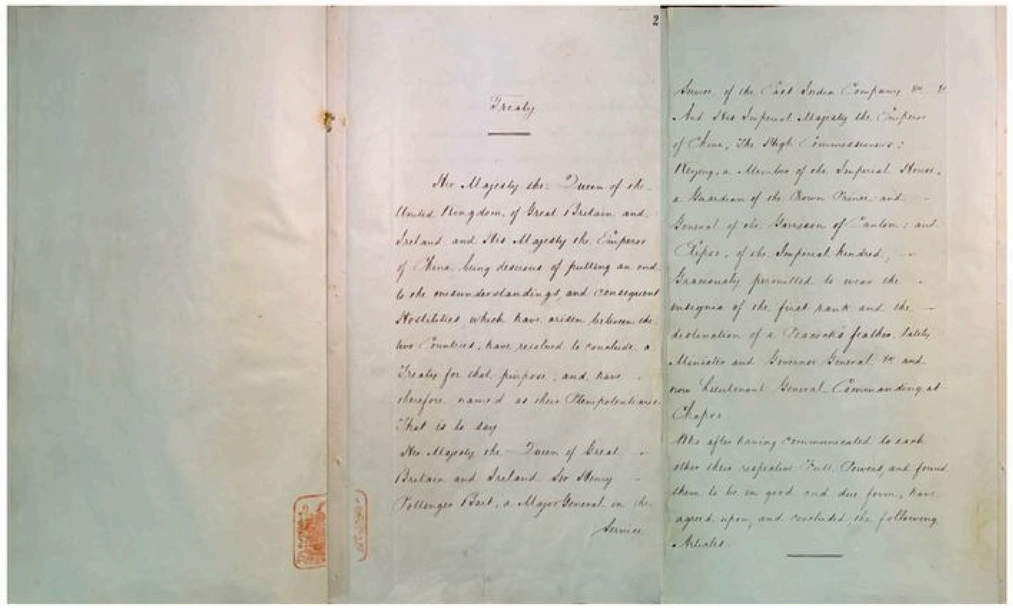
Archival Work / Material Research / Site Research / Making Process

Archival Work

Nanking Treaty

Introduction





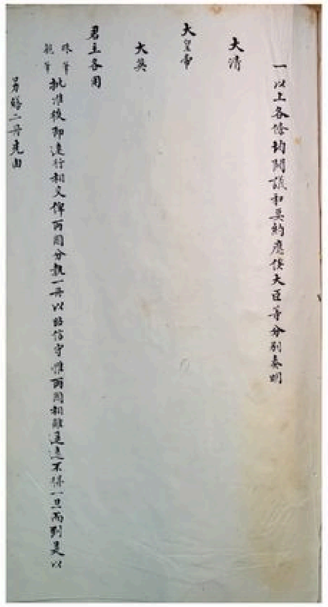
兹因，君主欲以近来不和之端解释息止挑衅为此议定设立永久和约是以大皇帝特派钦差便宜行事大臣：
太子少保镇守广东广州将军宗室琦英，头品顶带花翎前阁督部堂乍浦副都统红带子伊里布，大英伊耳兰等国君主特派，钦奉全权公使大臣英国所属印度等处三等将军世袭男爵璞鼎查公同各将所奉之。
上谕便宜行事及勒赐全权之命互相较阅俱属琦善当即便议拟各条陈列于左。

Her Majesty the Queen of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland and His Majesty the Emperor of China, being desirous of putting an end to the misunderstandings and consequent hostilities which have arisen between the two Countries, have resolved to conclude a Treaty for that purpose; and have therefore named as their Plenipotentiaries: That is to say Her Majesty the Queen of Great Britain and Ireland Sir Henry Pottinger Bart., a Major General in the Service of the East India Company &c. &c. And His Imperial Majesty the Emperor of China, the High Commissioner: Keying, a Member of the Imperial House, a Guardian of the Crown Prince, and General of the Garrison of Canton; and Eleepoo, of the Imperial Kindred, — graciously permitted to wear the insignia of the first rank and the distinction of a Peacock's feather, lately Minister and Governor General &c. and now Lieutenant General Commanding at Chapoo: Who after having communicated to each other their respective Full Powers, and found them to be in good and due form, have agreed upon, and concluded, the following Articles:

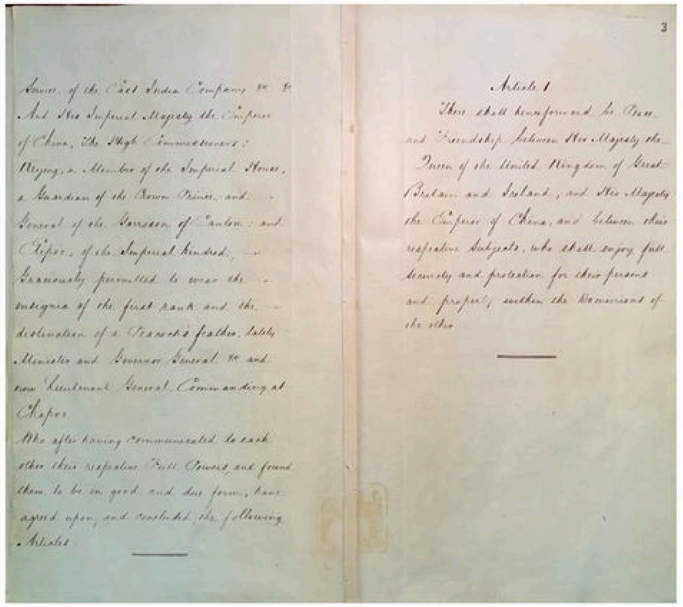
The National Archives, "Treaty: Peace and Friendship: Commerce: Indemnity. [Also Known as the Treaty of Nanking].," The National Archives, August 29, 1842, FO 93/23/1B, Kew, London.

Nanking Treaty

Treaty 1



君主永存平和所属英/华人民彼此友睦各
住他国者必受该国保佑身家安全。



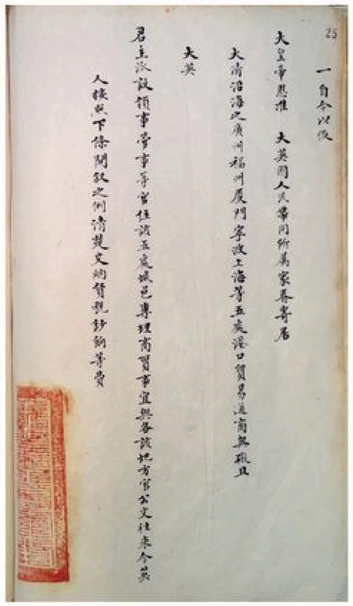
Article 1

There shall henceforward be Peace and Friendship between Her Majesty the Queen of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland, and His Majesty the Emperor of China, and between their respective Subjects, who shall enjoy full security and protection for their persons and property within the Dominions of the other.

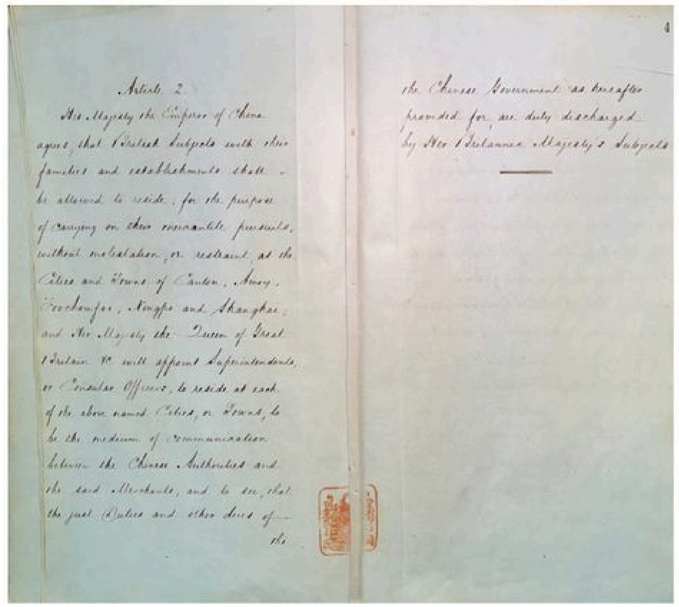
The National Archives, "Treaty: Peace and Friendship: Commerce: Indemnity. [Also Known as the Treaty of Nanking].," The National Archives, August 29, 1842, FO 93/23/1B, Kew, London.

Nanking Treaty

Treaty 2



大皇帝恩准大英国人民带同所属家眷寄居，大清沿海之广州福州厦门宁波上海等五处港口贸易通商无碍且，大英君主派设领事管事等官住该五处城邑专理商贾事宜与各该地方官公文往来合英人按下条开叙之例清楚交纳贷税钞饷等费.

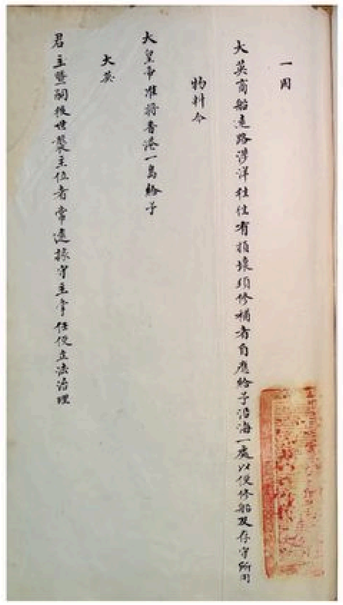


His Majesty the Emperor of China agrees, that British subjects with their families and establishments shall be allowed to reside, for the purpose of carrying on their mercantile pursuits, without molestation or restraint, at the Cities and Towns of Canton, Amoy, Foochowfoo, Ningpo and Shanghai; and Her Majesty the Queen of Great Britain &c. will appoint Superintendents, or Consular Officers, to reside at each of the above named Cities, or Towns, to be the medium of communication between the Chinese Authorities and the said Merchants, and to see that the just Duties and other dues of the Chinese Government as hereafter provided for, are duly discharged by Her Britannic Majesty's Subjects.

The National Archives, “Treaty: Peace and Friendship: Commerce: Indemnity. [Also Known as the Treaty of Nanking].,” The National Archives, August 29, 1842, FO 93/23/1B, Kew, London.

Nanking Treaty

Treaty 3



一四

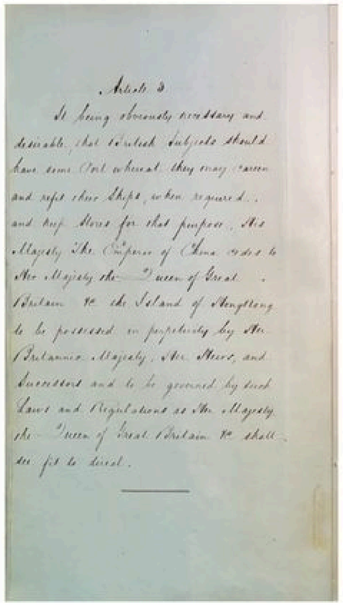
大英商船遠路涉洋往往有損壞須修補者自應給予沿海一處以便修船及存守所用物料今

大皇帝准將香港一島給予

大英

君主暨嗣後世襲主位者常遠守主掌任便立法治理

大英商船远路涉洋往往有损坏须修补者自应给予沿海一处以便修船及存守所用物料令，大皇帝准将香港一岛给予大英，君主暨嗣后世袭主位者常远夺守主掌任便立法治理。



Article 3

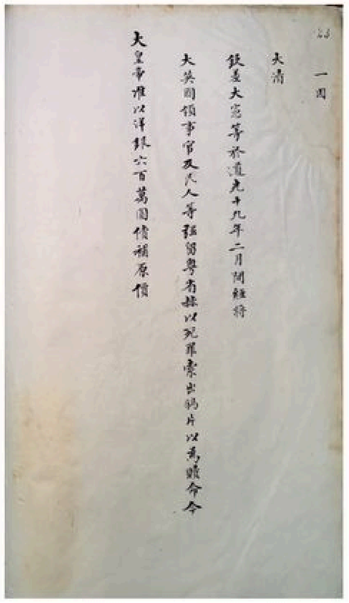
It being obviously necessary and desirable, that British subjects should have some Port whereat they may careen and refit their ships, when required, and keep stores for that purpose, His Majesty the Emperor of China cedes to Her Majesty the Queen of Great Britain &c. the Island of Hongkong to be possessed in perpetuity by Her Britannic Majesty, Her Heirs, and Successors and to be governed by such Laws and Regulations as Her Majesty the Queen of Great Britain &c. shall see fit to direct.

It being obviously necessary and desirable, that British subjects should have some Port whereat they may careen and refit their ships, when required, and keep stores for that purpose, His Majesty the Emperor of China cedes to Her Majesty the Queen of Great Britain &c. the Island of Hongkong to be possessed in perpetuity by Her Britannic Majesty, Her Heirs and Successors, and to be governed by such Laws and Regulations as Her Majesty the Queen of Great Britain &c. shall see fit to direct.

The National Archives, “Treaty: Peace and Friendship: Commerce: Indemnity. [Also Known as the Treaty of Nanking].,” The National Archives, August 29, 1842, FO 93/23/1B, Kew, London.

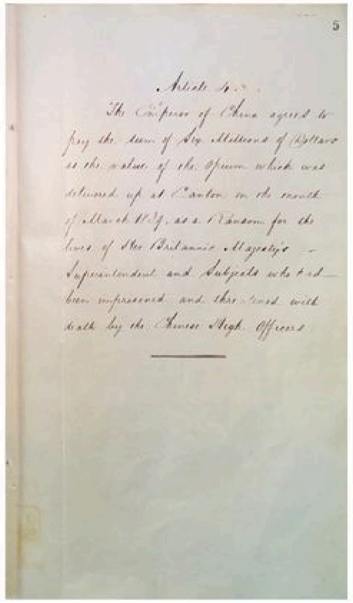
Nanking Treaty

Treaty 4



大清
一因
欽差大臣等於道光十九年二月間經將
大英國領事官及民人等强留粵省赫以
死罪索出鴉片以為贖命今
大皇帝准以洋銀六百萬圓償補原價

大清欽差大总等于道光十几年二月间经将大英国领事官及民人等强留粵省赫以死罪索出鸦片以为赎命，今大皇帝准以洋银六百万元偿补原价。



5

Article 4.

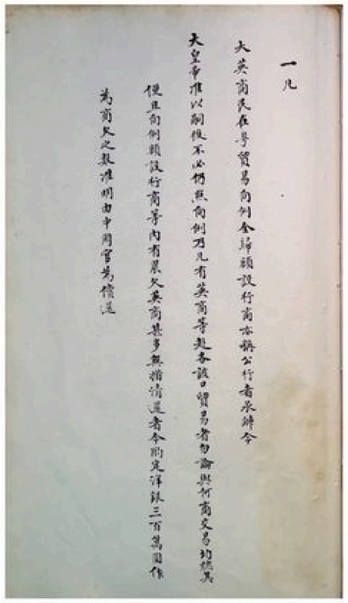
The Emperor of China agrees to pay the sum of Six Millions of Dollars as the value of the Opium which was delivered up at Canton in the month of March 1839, as a Ransom for the lives of Her Britannic Majesty's Superintendent and Subjects who had been imprisoned and threatened with death by the Chinese High Officers.

The Emperor of China agrees to pay the sum of Six Millions of Dollars as the value of the Opium which was delivered up at Canton in the month of March 1839, as a Ransom for the lives of Her Britannic Majesty's Superintendent and Subjects who had been imprisoned and threatened with death by the Chinese High Officers.

The National Archives, "Treaty: Peace and Friendship: Commerce: Indemnity. [Also Known as the Treaty of Nanking].," The National Archives, August 29, 1842, FO 93/23/1B, Kew, London.

Nanking Treaty

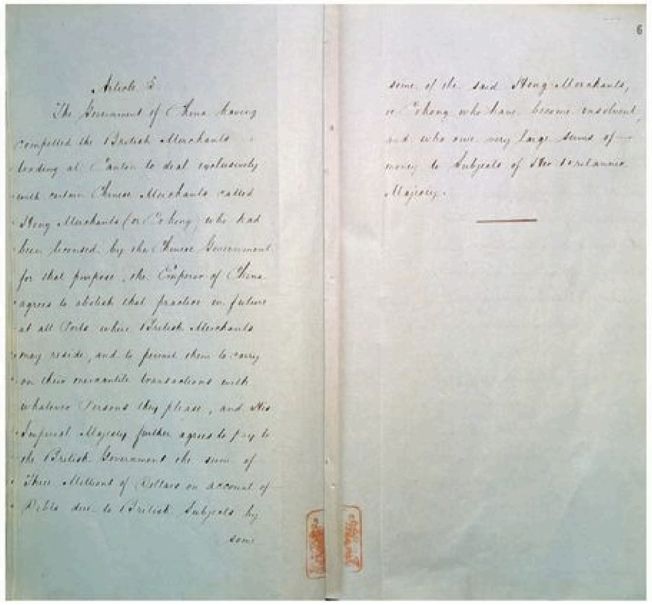
Treaty 5



一凡

大英商民在粵貿易向例全歸額設行商亦稱工行者承辦今
大皇帝准以嗣後不必仍照向例乃凡有英商等赴各該口貿易者勿論與何商交易均聽其便且向例額設行商等內
有累欠英商甚多無措清還者今酌定洋銀三百萬圓作
為商欠之數准明由中國官為償還

大英商民在粵貿易向例全归额设行商亦称工行者承办，今大皇帝准以嗣后不必仍照向例乃凡有英商等赴各该口贸易者，勿论与何商交易均听其便且向例额设行商等内有累欠英商甚多无措清还者，今酌定洋银三百万元作为商欠之数准明由中国官为偿还。



6

Article 5

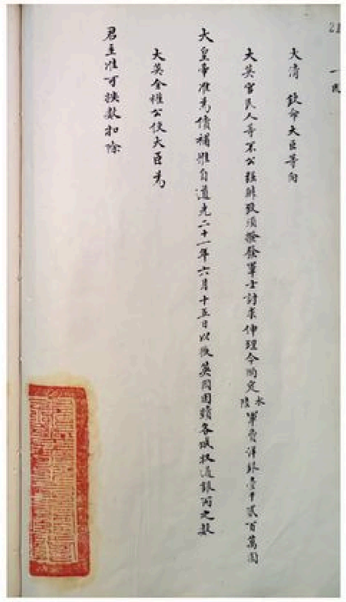
The Government of China having compelled the British Merchants trading at Canton to deal exclusively with certain Chinese Merchants called Hong Merchants (or Cohong) who had been licensed by the Chinese Government for that purpose, the Emperor of China agrees to abolish that practice in future at all Ports where British Merchants may reside, and to permit them to carry on their mercantile transactions with whatever Persons they please; and His Imperial Majesty further agrees to pay to the British Government the sum of Three Millions of Dollars on account of Debts due to British Subjects by some of the said Hong Merchants, or Cohong, who have become insolvent and who owe very large sums of money to Subjects of Her Britannic Majesty.

The Government of China having compelled the British Merchants trading at Canton to deal exclusively with certain Chinese Merchants called Hong Merchants (or Cohong) who had been licensed by the Chinese Government for that purpose, the Emperor of China agrees to abolish that practice in future at all Ports where British Merchants may reside, and to permit them to carry on their mercantile transactions with whatever Persons they please; and His Imperial Majesty further agrees to pay to the British Government the sum of Three Millions of Dollars on account of Debts due to British Subjects by some of the said Hong Merchants, or Cohong, who have become insolvent and who owe very large sums of money to Subjects of Her Britannic Majesty.

The National Archives, “Treaty: Peace and Friendship: Commerce: Indemnity. [Also Known as the Treaty of Nanking].,” The National Archives, August 29, 1842, FO 93/23/1B, Kew, London.

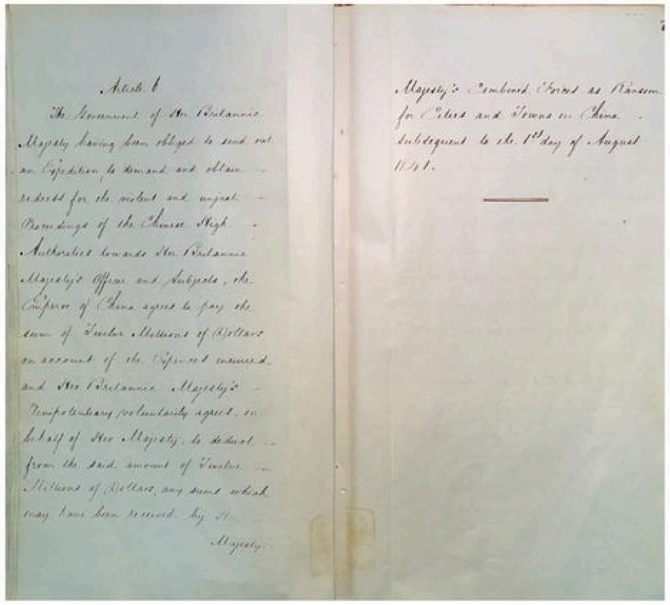
Nanking Treaty

Treaty 6



大清 欽命大臣等向
大英官民人等不公强辦致須撥發軍士討求伸
理今酌定陸水軍費洋銀壹千貳百萬圓
大皇帝准為償補惟自道光二十一年六月十五日以後英國因賊各城壯过銀兩之數
大英全權公使大臣為
君主准可按數扣除

大清钦命大臣等向大英官民人等不公强办致须拨发军士讨求伸理，今酌定陆/水军费洋银一千二百万元。大皇帝准为偿补惟自道光二十一年六月十五日以后英国因赎各城壮过银两之数。大英全权公使大臣为君主准可按数扣除。



Article 6

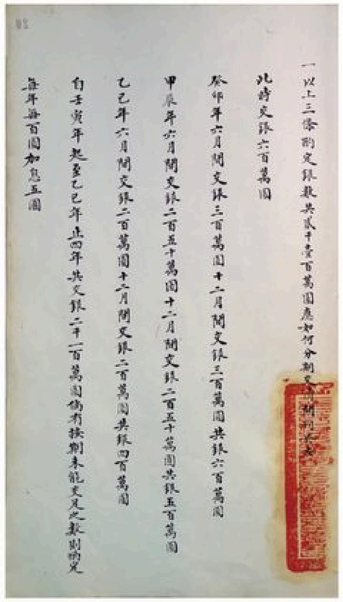
The Government of Her Britannic Majesty having been obliged to send out an Expedition to demand and obtain redress for the violent and unjust Proceedings of the Chinese High Authorities towards Her Britannic Majesty's Officers and Subjects, the Emperor of China agrees to pay the sum of Twelve Millions of Dollars on account of the Expenses incurred; and Her Britannic Majesty's Plenipotentiary voluntarily agrees, on behalf of Her Majesty, to deduct from the said amount of Twelve Millions of Dollars, any sums which may have been received by Her Majesty's Combined Forces as Ransom for Cities and Towns in China subsequent to the 1st day of August 1841.

The Government of Her Britannic Majesty having been obliged to send out an Expedition to demand and obtain redress for the violent and unjust Proceedings of the Chinese High Authorities towards Her Britannic Majesty's Officers and Subjects, the Emperor of China agrees to pay the sum of Twelve Millions of Dollars on account of the Expenses incurred; and Her Britannic Majesty's Plenipotentiary voluntarily agrees, on behalf of Her Majesty, to deduct from the said amount of twelve Millions of Dollars, any sums which may have been received by Her Majesty's combined Forces as Ransom for Cities and Towns in China subsequent to the 1st day of August 1841.

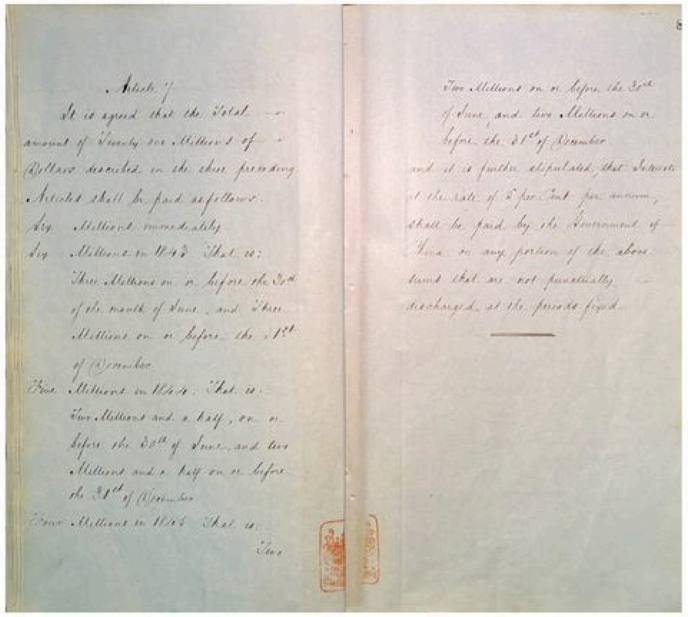
The National Archives, "Treaty: Peace and Friendship: Commerce: Indemnity. [Also Known as the Treaty of Nanking].," The National Archives, August 29, 1842, FO 93/23/1B, Kew, London.

Nanking Treaty

Treaty 7



一以上三條酌定銀數共兩千一百萬圓應如何分期交清開列于左
此時交銀六百萬圓
癸卯年六月間交銀三百萬圓十二月間交銀三百萬圓共銀六百萬圓
甲辰年六月間交銀二百五十萬圓十二月間交銀二百五十萬圓共銀五百萬圓
乙巳年六月間交銀二百萬圓十二月間交銀二百萬圓共銀四百萬圓
自壬寅年起至乙巳年止四年共交銀二千一百萬圓倘有按期未能交足之數則酌定
每年每百圓加息五圓



Article 7

It is agreed that the Total amount of Twenty one Millions of Dollars described in the three preceding Articles shall be paid as follows:

Six Millions immediately

Six Millions in 1843 That is:

Three Millions on or before the 30th of the month of June, and Three Millions on or before the 31st of December

Five Millions in 1844. That is:

Two Millions and a half, on or before the 30th of June, and two Millions and a half on or before the 31st of December

Four Millions in 1845 That is:

Two Millions on or before the 30th of June, and two Millions on or before the 31st of December

and it is further stipulated, that Interest at the rate of 5 per Cent per annum, shall be paid by the Government of China on any portion of the above sums that are not punctually discharged at the periods fixed.

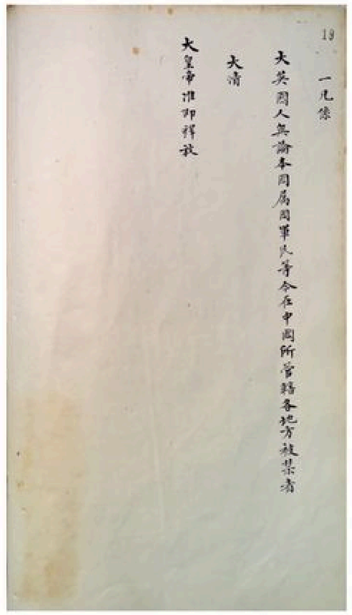
以上三条酌定银数共两千一百万元应如何分期交清开列于左：此时交银六百万元。癸卯年六月间交银三百万元，十二月间交银三百万元，共银六百万元。甲辰年六月间交银二百五十万元，十二月见交银二百五十万元，共银五百万元。乙巳年六月间交银二百万元，十二月间交银二百万元，共银四百万元。自壬寅年起至乙巳年止四年共交银二千一百万元，倘有按期未能交足之数则酌定每年每百元加息五元。

It is agreed that the total amount of Twenty one Millions of Dollars described in the three preceding Articles shall be paid as follows: Six Millions immediately Six Millions in 1843; That is: Three Millions on or before the 30th of the month of June, and Three Millions on or before the 31st of December Five Millions in 1844; That is: Two Millions and a half, on or before the 30th of June, and two Millions and a half on or before the 31st of December Four Millions in 1845; That is: Two Millions on or before the 30th of June, and two Millions on or before the 31st of December. And it is further stipulated, that Interest at the rate of 5 per Cent per annum, shall be paid by the Government of China on any portion of the above sums that are not punctually discharged at the periods fixed.
And it is further stipulated, that Interest at the rate of 5 per Cent per annum, shall be paid by the Government of China on any portion of the above sums that are not punctually discharged at the periods fixed.

The National Archives, “Treaty: Peace and Friendship: Commerce: Indemnity. [Also Known as the Treaty of Nanking].,” The National Archives, August 29, 1842, FO 93/23/1B, Kew, London.

Nanking Treaty

Treaty 8



19

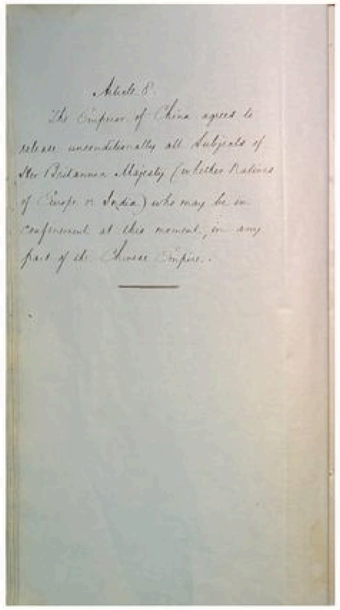
一凡條

大英國人與論本國屬國軍民等今在中國所管轄各地方被禁者

大清

大皇帝准即釋放

大英国人与论本国属国军民等，今在中国所管辖各地方被禁者，大清大皇帝准即释放



Article 8.

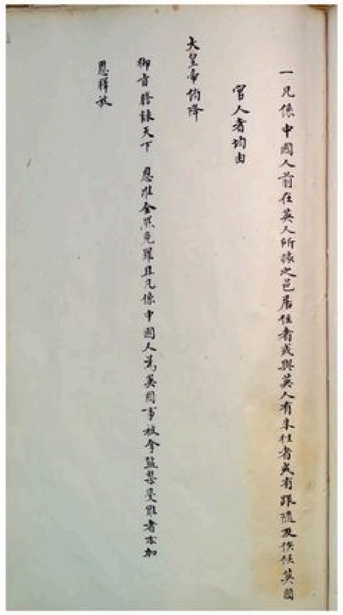
The Emperor of China agrees to release unconditionally all Subjects of Her Britannic Majesty (whether Natives of Europe or India) who may be imprisoned at this moment, in any part of the Chinese Empire.

The Emperor of China agrees to pay the sum of Six Millions of Dollars as the value of the Opium which was delivered up at Canton in the month of March 1839, as a Ransom for the lives of Her Britannic Majesty's Superintendent and Subjects who had been imprisoned and threatened with death by the Chinese High Officers.

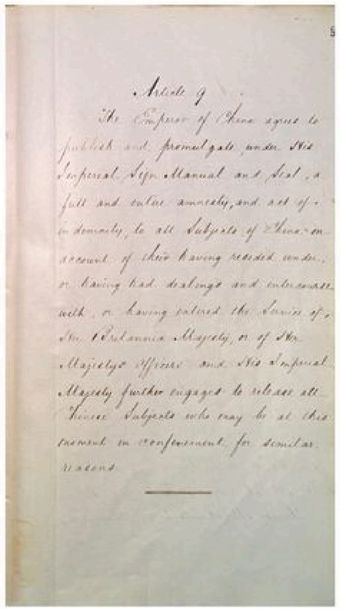
The National Archives, "Treaty: Peace and Friendship: Commerce: Indemnity. [Also Known as the Treaty of Nanking].," The National Archives, August 29, 1842, FO 93/23/1B, Kew, London.

Nanking Treaty

Treaty 9



一凡係中國人前在英人所住之邑居住者或與英人有來往者或有跟隨及候英國官人者均由
大皇帝俯降
御旨誓祿天下 恩准全照免罪且凡係中國人為英國事被拿監禁受難者亦加
恩釋放



Article 9

The Emperor of China agrees to publish and promulgate, under His Imperial Sign Manual and Seal, a full and entire amnesty, and act of indemnity, to all Subjects of China on account of their having resided under, or having had dealings and intercourse with, or having entered the service of, Her Britannic Majesty, or of Her Majesty's Officers; and His Imperial Majesty further engages to release all Chinese Subjects who may be at this moment in confinement for similar reasons.

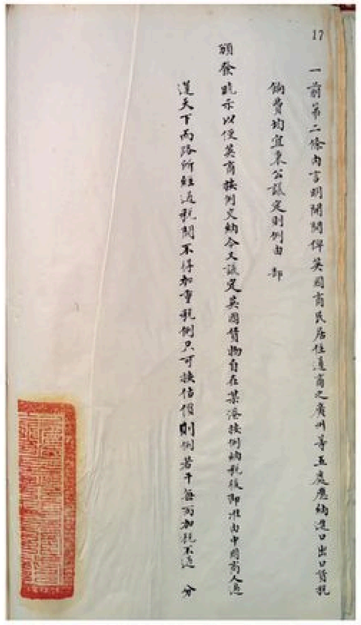
凡系中国人前在英人所尽之邑居住者或与英人有来往者或有跟随及俟候英国管人者均由大皇帝俯降，御旨誓禄天下，恩准全照免罪且凡系中国人为英国事被拿监禁受难者亦加恩释放。

The Emperor of China agrees to publish and promulgate, under His Imperial Sign Manual and Seal, a full and entire amnesty, and act of indemnity, to all Subjects of China on account of their having resided under, or having had dealings and intercourse with, or having entered the service of, Her Britannic Majesty, or of Her Majesty's Officers; and His Imperial Majesty further engages to release all Chinese Subjects who may be at this moment in confinement, for similar reasons.

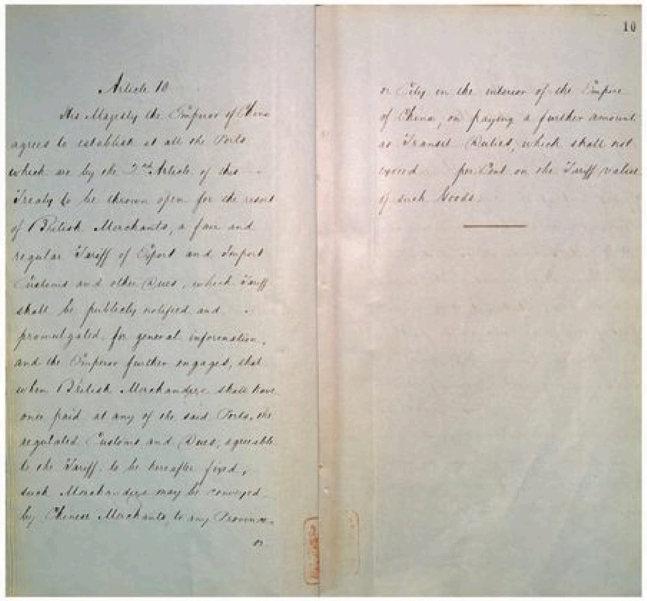
The National Archives, "Treaty: Peace and Friendship: Commerce: Indemnity. [Also Known as the Treaty of Nanking].," The National Archives, August 29, 1842, FO 93/23/1B, Kew, London.

Nanking Treaty

Treaty 10



前第二条内言明开关俾英国商民居住通商之广州等五处应纳进口出口贷税饷费均宜秉公议定则例由 部颁发晓示以便英商按例交纳，今又议定英国货物自在某港按例纳税后即准由中国商人遍运天下而路所经过税关不得加重税例只可按估价则例若干每两加税不过 分。

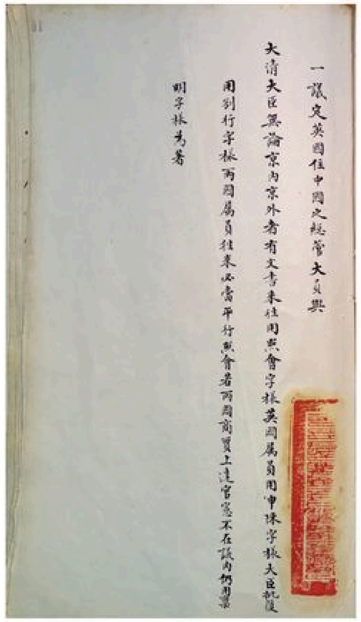


His Majesty the Emperor of China agrees to establish at all the Ports which are by the 2nd Article of this Treaty to be thrown open for the resort of British Merchants, a fair and regular Tariff of Export and Import Customs and other Dues, which Tariff shall be publicly notified and promulgated for general information; and the Emperor further engages, that when British Merchandise shall have once paid at any of the said Ports the regulated Customs and Dues, agreeable to the Tariff, to be hereafter fixed, such Merchandise may be conveyed by Chinese Merchants to any Province or City in the interior of the Empire of China, on paying a further amount as Transit Duties, which shall not exceed 10 per Cent on the Tariff value of such Goods.

The National Archives, “Treaty: Peace and Friendship: Commerce: Indemnity. [Also Known as the Treaty of Nanking].,” The National Archives, August 29, 1842, FO 93/23/1B, Kew, London.

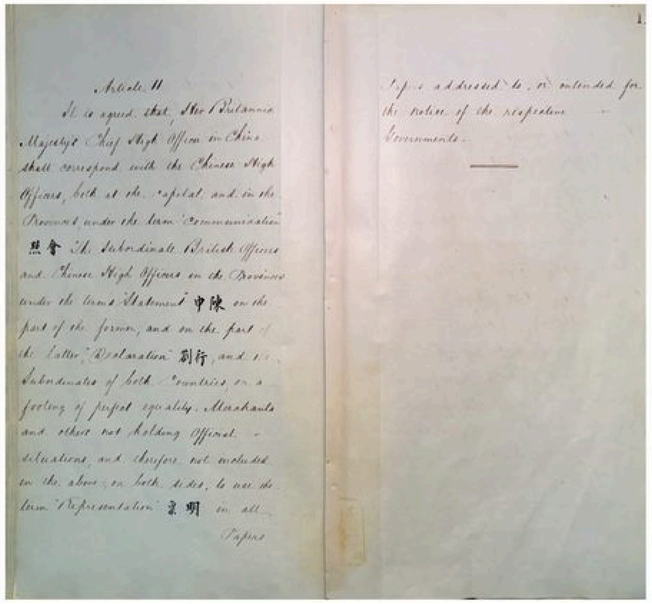
Nanking Treaty

Treaty 11



一議定英國往中國之總管大員與
大清大臣無論京內京外者有文書來往用照會字樣英國屬員用申陳字樣大臣批復
用到行字樣兩國屬員往來必當平行照會若兩國商賈上達官憲不在議內仍用禀明字樣為著

议定英国往中国之总管大员与大清大臣无论京内京外者有文书来往用照会字样，英国属员用申陈字样，大臣批复用创行字样，两国属员往来必当平行，照会若两国商贾上运官总不在议内仍用禀明字样为著。



Article II

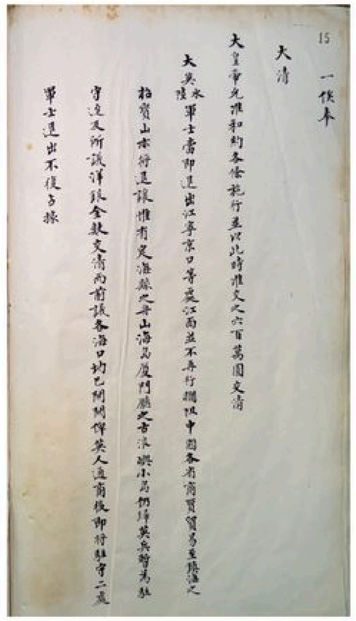
It is agreed that Her Britannic Majesty's Chief High Officer in China shall correspond with the Chinese High Officers, both at the capital and in the Provinces under the term "Communication" 照會 The Subordinate British Officers and Chinese High Officers in the Provinces under the term "Statement" 申陳 on the part of the former, and on the part of the latter, "Declaration" 創行, and the Subordinates of both Countries on a footing of perfect equality. Merchants and other not holding Official situations, and therefore not included in the above, on both sides, to use the term "Representation" 禀明 in all Papers addressed to, or intended for the notice of the respective Governments.

It is agreed, that Her Britannic Majesty's Chief High Officer in China shall correspond with the Chinese High Officers, both at the capital and in the Provinces, under the term "Communication" (咨会). The Subordinate British Officers and Chinese High Officers in the Provinces under the term "Statement" (申陈) on the part of the former, and on the part of the latter, "Declaration" (照会); and the Subordinates of both Countries, on a footing of perfect equality. Merchants and others not holding official situations, and therefore not included in the above, on both sides, to use the term "Representation" (声明) in all papers addressed to, or intended for the notice of the respective Governments.

The National Archives, "Treaty: Peace and Friendship: Commerce: Indemnity. [Also Known as the Treaty of Nanking].," The National Archives, August 29, 1842, FO 93/23/1B, Kew, London.

Nanking Treaty

Treaty 12



15

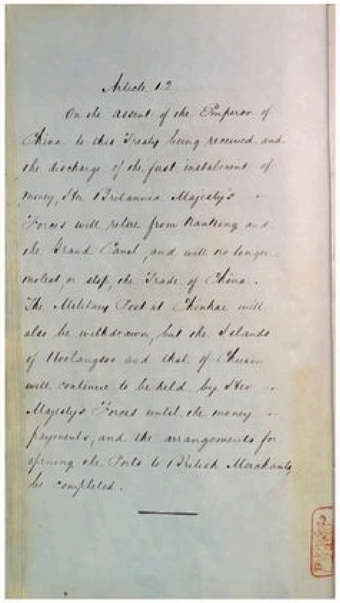
一條本

大清

大皇帝允准和約各條施行並以此時准交之六百萬元交清

大英水陸軍士當即退出江寧京口等處江面並不再行攔阻

中國各省商賈貿易至鎮海之招寶山亦將退让惟有定海县之舟山海岛厦门昕之古浪屿小岛仍归英兵暫为驻守迨及所议洋银全数交清而前议各海口均已开关俾英人通商後即将驻守二處軍士退出不復占据



Article 12

On the assent of the Emperor of China to this Treaty being received, and the discharge of the first instalment of money, Her Britannic Majesty's Forces will retire from Nanking and the Grand Canal, and will no longer molest or stop the trade of China. The Military Post at China will also be withdrawn, but the Islands of Koolangsoo and that of Chusan will continue to be held by Her Majesty's Forces until the money payments, and the arrangements for opening the Ports to British Merchants be completed.

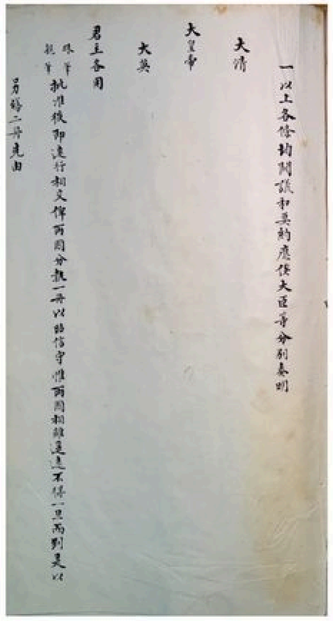
大清大皇帝允准和约各条施行并以此时准交之六百万元交清，大英陆/水军士当即退出江宁京口等处江面并不再行拦阻中国各省商贾贸易至镇海之招宝山亦将退让惟有定海县之舟山海岛厦门昕之古浪屿小岛仍归英兵暫为驻守迨及所议洋银全数交清而前议各海口均已开关俾英人通商后即将驻守二处军士退出不复占据。

On the assent of the Emperor of China to this Treaty being received, and the discharge of the first instalment of money, Her Britannic Majesty's Forces will retire from Nanking and the Grand Canal, and will no longer molest or stop the trade of China. The Military Post at China will also be withdrawn, but the Islands of Koolangsoo and that of Chusan will continue to be held by Her Majesty's Forces until the money payments, and the arrangements for opening the Ports to British Merchants be completed.

The National Archives, "Treaty: Peace and Friendship: Commerce: Indemnity. [Also Known as the Treaty of Nanking].," The National Archives, August 29, 1842, FO 93/23/1B, Kew, London.

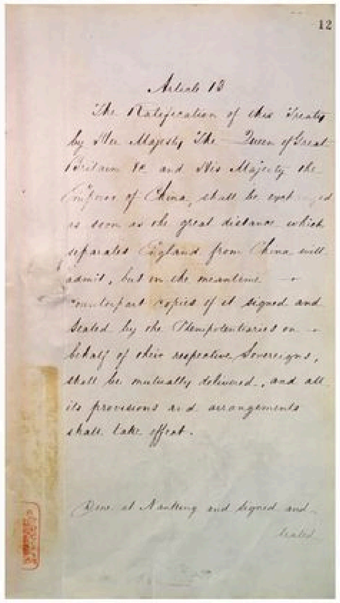
Nanking Treaty

Treaty 13



一以上各條均關議和要約應俟大臣等分別奏明
大清
大皇帝
大英
君主各用
朱筆
親筆
批准後即遠行交俾兩國分執一冊以昭信守惟兩國相離遥遠不得一旦而到是以另繕二冊先由

以上各条均关议和要约应俟大臣等分别奏明
大清大皇帝大英，君主各用亲笔/朱笔批准后
即远行交俾两国分执一册以昭信守惟两国相
离遥远不得一旦而到是以另缮二册先由



12

Article 13

The Ratification of this Treaty by Her Majesty the Queen of Great Britain &c. and His Majesty the Emperor of China shall be exchanged as soon as the great distance which separates England from China will admit, but in the meantime, counterpart copies of it signed and sealed by the Plenipotentiaries on behalf of their respective Sovereigns, shall be mutually delivered, and all its provisions and arrangements shall take effect.

Done at Nanking and signed and sealed

The Ratification of this Treaty by Her Majesty the Queen of Great Britain &c. and His Majesty the Emperor of China shall be exchanged as soon as the great distance which separates England from China will admit, but in the meantime, counterpart copies of it signed and sealed by the Plenipotentiaries on behalf of their respective Sovereigns, shall be mutually delivered, and all its provisions and arrangements shall take effect.Done at Nanking and signed and sealed

The National Archives, “Treaty: Peace and Friendship: Commerce: Indemnity. [Also Known as the Treaty of Nanking].,” The National Archives, August 29, 1842, FO 93/23/1B, Kew, London.

Nanking Treaty

Signature page

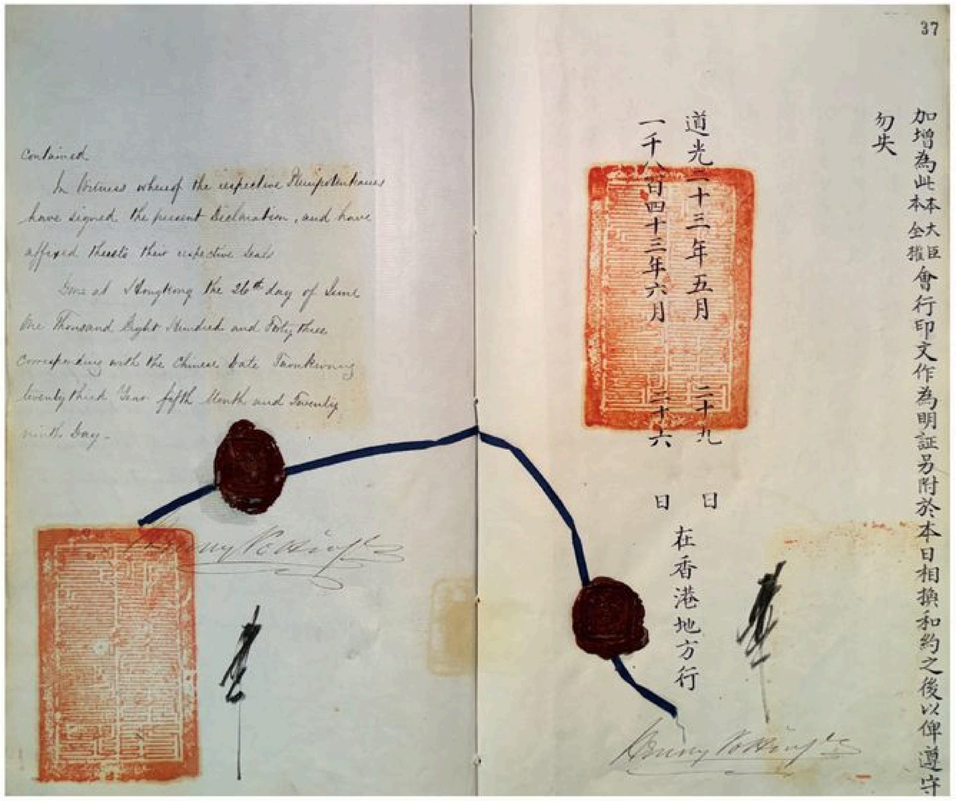
Chinese Versions, the said Exchange took place this day in the usual form.

In witness whereof the respective Plenipotentiaries have signed the present Certificate of Exchange, and have affixed thereto their respective Seals.

Done at Hong-Kong the twenty sixth day of June One thousand Eight hundred and forty two corresponding with the Chinese date twenty ninth day of the fifth month, in the twenty third year of Taoukwang.

批准遇回本大臣本日就經以禮相換恐或有求
准和約細心比對二冊如一漢英二文俱無差錯本日就經以禮相換恐或有求
無憑特此具文畫押鈐蓋關防印信為據

道光二十二年五月二十九日
一千八百四十二年六月二十六日
在香港地方行



Contained.

In Witness whereof the respective Plenipotentiaries have signed the present declaration, and have affixed thereto their respective Seals.

Done at Shanghai the 26th day of June One Thousand Eight Hundred and Forty three corresponding with the Chinese date Taoukwang twenty third Year fifth Month and Twenty ninth Day.

加增為此本大臣本日相換和約之後以俾遵守
勿失

道光二十三年五月二十九日
一千八百四十三年六月二十六日
在香港地方行

The National Archives, "Treaty: Peace and Friendship: Commerce: Indemnity. [Also Known as the Treaty of Nanking].," The National Archives, August 29, 1842, FO 93/23/1B, Kew, London.

Nanking Treaty

Signature page

In the early stages of the project, I visited London's archives and libraries, where I personally reviewed primary documents related to Sino-British trade history, colonial expansion, and the Treaty of Nanking. This process profoundly affected me. Having grown up in China, I was no stranger to this history, yet it had long existed as a "national narrative", "textbook knowledge", and "collective memory" – possessing a weight that felt both monumental and distant. We knew it, yet never truly "touched" it—the original parchments of those treaties, the handwritten annotations, the dispassionate phrasing of diplomatic texts were not part of ordinary people's direct experience.

Yet in London, I encountered them in a manner almost within easy reach. With a reader's pass, a desk, and a pair of white gloves, I could personally leaf through the historical pages that shaped modern power structures. This effortless, almost mundane process created a profound sense of dissonance: in the other historical narrative, these were weighty, painful archives steeped in national sentiment; here, they became academic resources, even cultural assets, housed within the quiet order of temperature-controlled lighting and cloth-bound volumes.

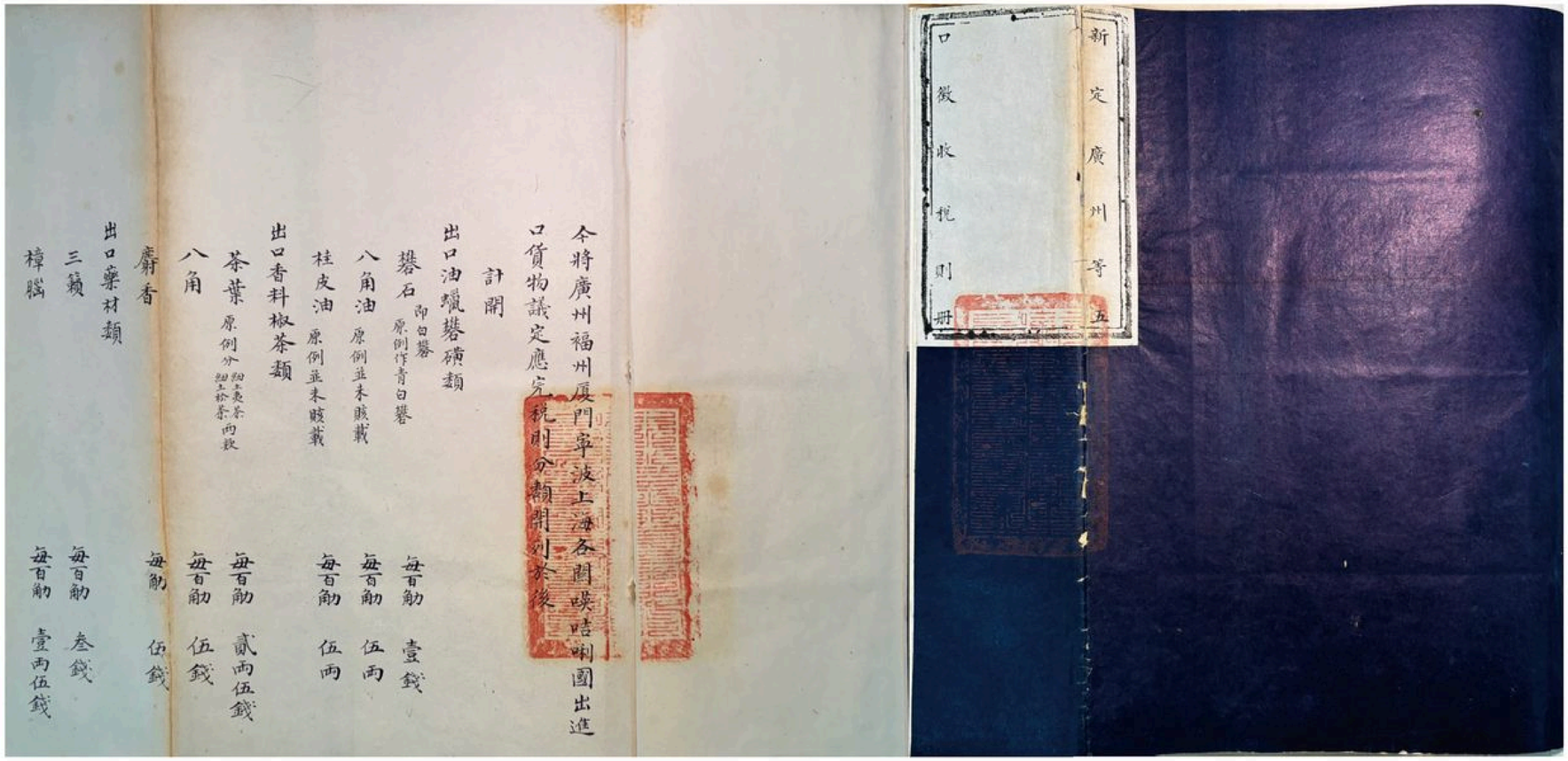
This contrast sparked my reflection: history is not singular; it manifests different temperatures, densities, and emotional structures across distinct spaces. For Britain, these archives document the logic, institutions, and administration of imperial governance; for China, they bear the emotional weight of national humiliation, forced opening, and memory mobilisation. It was precisely within this vast fault line of interpretive differences, modes of access, and emotional frameworks that I realised today's engagement with history is not a matter of "re-learning", but rather one of "repositioning".

Thus, my work begins: not merely "re-presenting history", but re-situating archives from their cool paper pages back into the wind, back to the harbour's edge, reconnecting them with bodies, environments, and perceptions. Leafing through these records revealed that history is not a static narrative, but a fluid entity shaped by diverse accounts and viewed from shifting positions. My intervention seeks to make this fluidity visible once more, allowing the text to become entangled anew with air, space, and individual experience.

The National Archives, "Treaty: Peace and Friendship: Commerce: Indemnity. [Also Known as the Treaty of Nanking].," The National Archives, August 29, 1842, FO 93/23/1B, Kew, London.

Nanking Treaty

Tariff

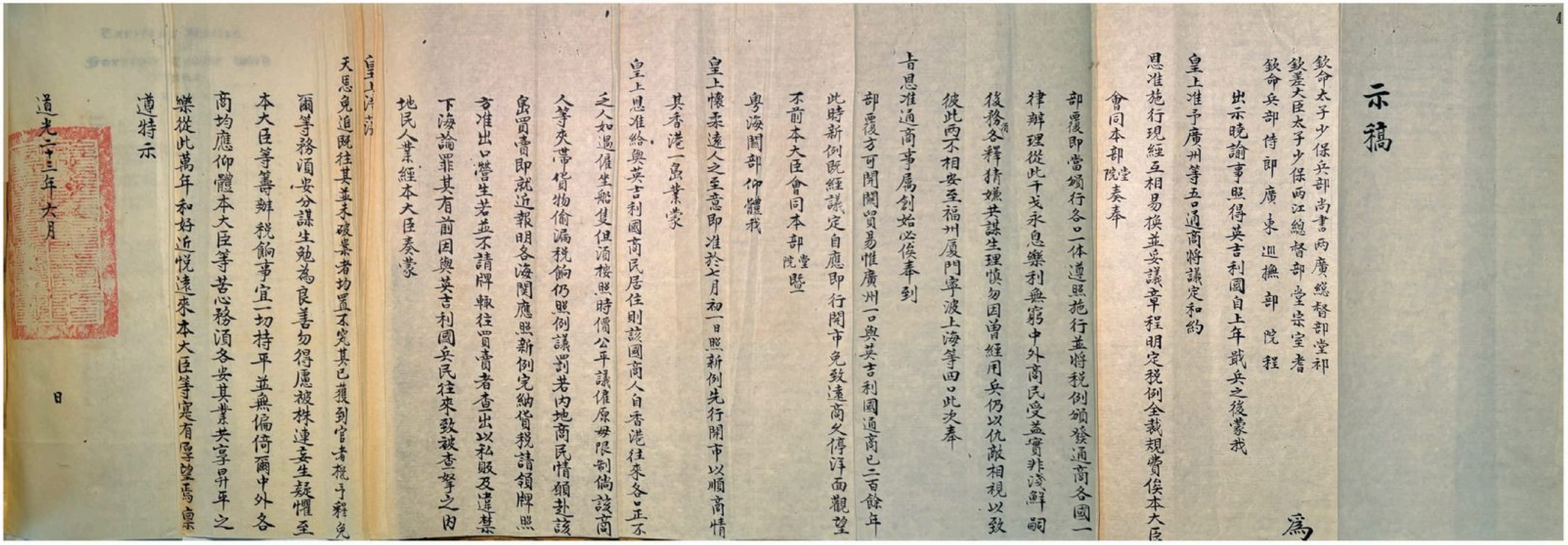

今將廣州福州厦門寧波上海各開口岸咭唎國出進
口貨物議定應完稅則分類開列於後
計開
出口油蠟礬磺類
礬石 即白礬 原例作青白礬 每百觔 壹錢
八角油 原例並未賅載 每百觔 伍兩
桂皮油 原例並未賅載 每百觔 伍兩
出口香料椒茶類
茶葉 原例分細土夷茶細土松茶兩款 每百觔 貳兩伍錢
八角 每百觔 伍錢
麝香
出口藥材類
三籟 每百觔 叁錢
樟腦 每百觔 壹兩伍錢
新定廣州等口徵收稅則冊
五

Tea: “five qian” or “one liang” per 100 jin
1 jin = 500 g
100 jin = 50 kg
So 50 kg = 1 liang (or five qian)
Around 1840, one chest of opium weighed approximately 390 liang

The National Archives, “Treaty: Peace and Friendship: Commerce: Indemnity. [Also Known as the Treaty of Nanking].,” The National Archives, August 29, 1842, FO 93/23/1B, Kew, London.

Nanking Treaty

Document



示稿

欽命太子少保兵部尚書兩廣總督部堂祁
欽差大臣太子少保兩江總督部堂宗室耆
欽命兵部侍郎廣東巡撫部院程
出示曉諭事照得英吉利國自上年戢兵之後蒙我
皇上准予廣州等五口通商將議定和約
恩准施行現經互相易換並妥議章程明定稅例全裁規費俟本大臣
會同本部堂院奏奉
部覆即當頒行各口一体遵照施行並將稅例頒發通商各國一
律辦理從此干戈永息樂利無窮中外商民受益實非淺鮮嗣
後務各釋猜嫌共謀生理慎勿因曾經用兵仍以仇敵相視以致
彼此兩不相安至福州廈門寧波上海等四口此次奉
旨恩准通商事屬創始必俟奉到
部覆方可開關貿易惟廣州一口與英吉利國通商已二百餘年
此時新例既經議定自應即行開市免致遠商久停洋面觀望
不前本大臣會同本部堂院暨
粵海關部仰體我
皇上懷柔遠人之至意即准於七月初一日照新例先行開市以順商情
其香港一島業蒙
皇上恩准給與英吉利國商民居住則該國商人自香港往來各口正不
乏人如遇催生船隻但須按照時價公平議僱原毋限制倘該商
人等夾帶貨物偷漏稅餉仍照例議罰若內地商民情願赴該
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An official notification and explanatory document of the “New Tax Rules” issued by the central government of the Qing Dynasty (the Emperor or the Prime Minister's Office), through the ministers, to the coastal ports (Guangzhou, Xiamen, Fuzhou, Ningbo and Shanghai).
Calming doubts: It was made clear that this was a product of negotiation with Britain and the United States, not a humiliation, but a reasonable measure to “facilitate trade and reduce taxes and depreciation”.

The National Archives, “Treaty: Peace and Friendship: Commerce: Indemnity. [Also Known as the Treaty of Nanking].,” The National Archives, August 29, 1842, FO 93/23/1B, Kew, London.

Material Research

Image: Four types of silk that i used in making sail

In the project's initial stages, I commenced with fundamental fabric testing: common materials such as cotton, sail, and linen became the subjects of the first round of experiments. Their affordability, accessibility, and suitability for large-scale work made them frequent choices for sail production. However, during practical trials, I gradually realised that their visual and tactile qualities failed to convey the historical texture and cultural resonance central to my project. Cotton fibres are soft and refined yet lack lustre and depth; sail is thick and sturdy, offering robust physical support but appearing overly mechanical and industrial; linen boasts natural texture but tends towards coarseness and heaviness, lacking fluidity when moved by wind. While all three possess structural integrity, their visual language leans too heavily towards modernity and functionality rather than cultural and historical metaphor.

After repeated sampling, stretching, hanging, light transmission and wind resistance tests, I turned my attention to more "flexible historical" fabrics—the silk family. Silk holds a unique position in the history of trade and cultural exchange, and its "soft yet resilient" qualities align with the concept of my work. This phase of fabric sourcing shifted towards meticulous material selection: variations in sheen, directional texture, fibre density, and the interplay between weight and airflow became key considerations. I scoured local Chinese fabric markets, discussing weaving techniques, durability, and light response with vendors, photographing samples and conducting wind tests.

Ultimately, I selected four categories of traditional silk fabrics: silk brocade, silk satin, gauze, and satin.

Touch and texture: Silk possesses a delicate, warm surface that fosters a more "embodied" labour relationship with hand movements and the sewing process; touch is not merely technique, but a dialogue with the material's history.

Weight and Response to Wind: Silk is weightless; once suspended, it enters a perpetual dialogue with the air, stirred by the slightest breeze. This soft responsiveness aligns naturally with the theme of the "sail", symbolising destinies propelled by historical currents yet capable of being redirected.

Light Transmission and Visual Layering: Silk scrolls and certain sheer silks exhibit translucency; light filtering through the fibres evokes the sensation of passing through archival pages, creating a visual metaphor of "history illuminated". Brocades and heavier silks, conversely, provide contrasting layers, offering structural stability and visual weight.

Cultural and Symbolic Significance: Silk served as an early conduit linking China to the wider world, bearing implicit connections to the histories of tea and opium trade. The selection of silk fabrics represents not merely an aesthetic choice, but a retrospective engagement with and reconfiguration of these historical trade routes.

In the final work, these four silk fabrics form a layered system: transparency and opacity, dense weave and loose weave, smoothness and texture intertwine, collectively constructing the multifaceted surfaces of history. They shift ceaselessly under the influence of light and wind, as if the past continues to flow; guided by stitches and threads, they are re-sewn into a sail bearing memories and charting a new course.

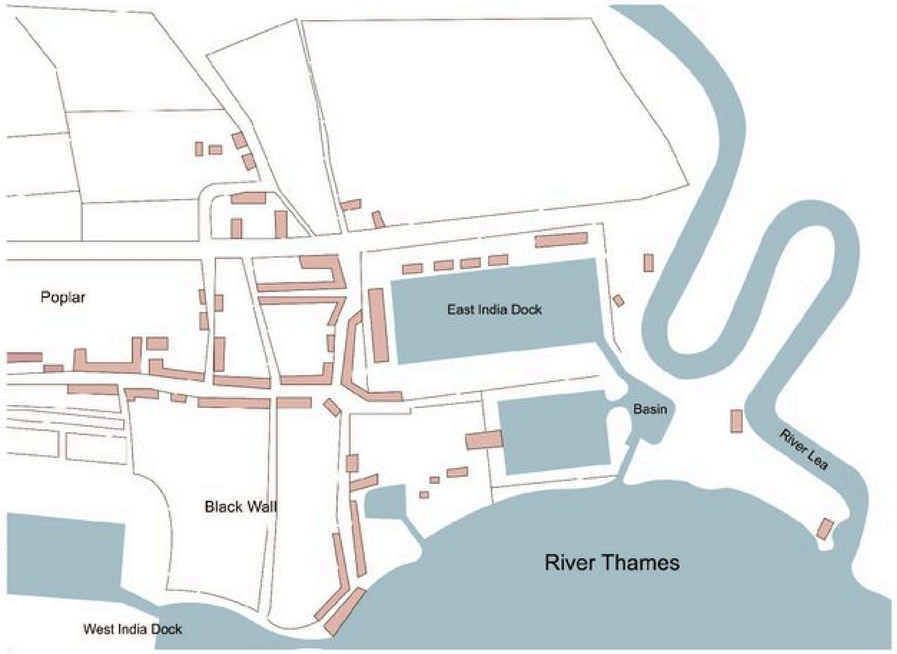
Site Research

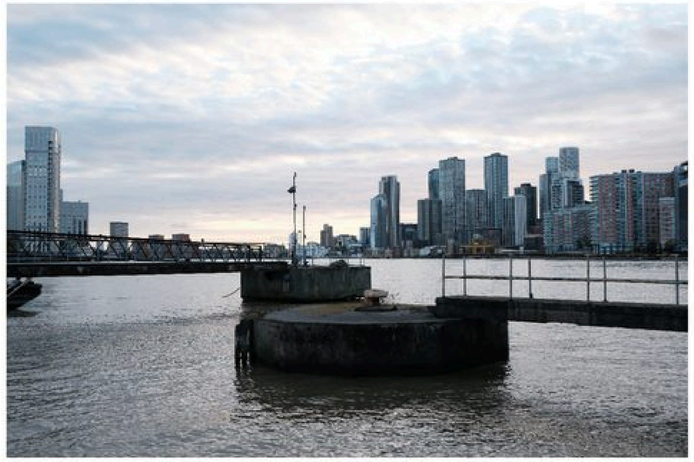
During the project's initial phase, I surveyed multiple sites in London with a connection to trade and shipping history, including the Canary Wharf waterfront, the shipyard adjacent to the Greenwich Maritime Museum, Millwall Outer Dock, and the historic Rotherhithe docklands. However, these locations presented challenges: some were too thoroughly commercialized or uniformly tidy to reveal historical fissures, while others lacked sufficient wind or were too enclosed for the sail to capture authentic wind forces. Additionally, public access restrictions prevented visitors from moving freely within the spaces.

The East India Dock Basin was ultimately selected precisely because it retains the state of a "port ruin": rust, fencing, broken bridges, dampness, and stone structures all remind the viewer that this was once a tangible conduit connecting the empire and its colonies, rather than a commodified, packaged World Heritage attraction. Compared to the "cleaner" Greenwich, this space is rougher and more authentic. It permits history to persist through decay, absence, silence, and the wind.

Across the waterfront stands London's iconic O2 Arena. Its colossal tensile membrane structure symbolises modern consumerism, entertainment, and capital dynamism, engaging in a trans-historical dialogue with the colonial trade logic embedded in silk canvas:

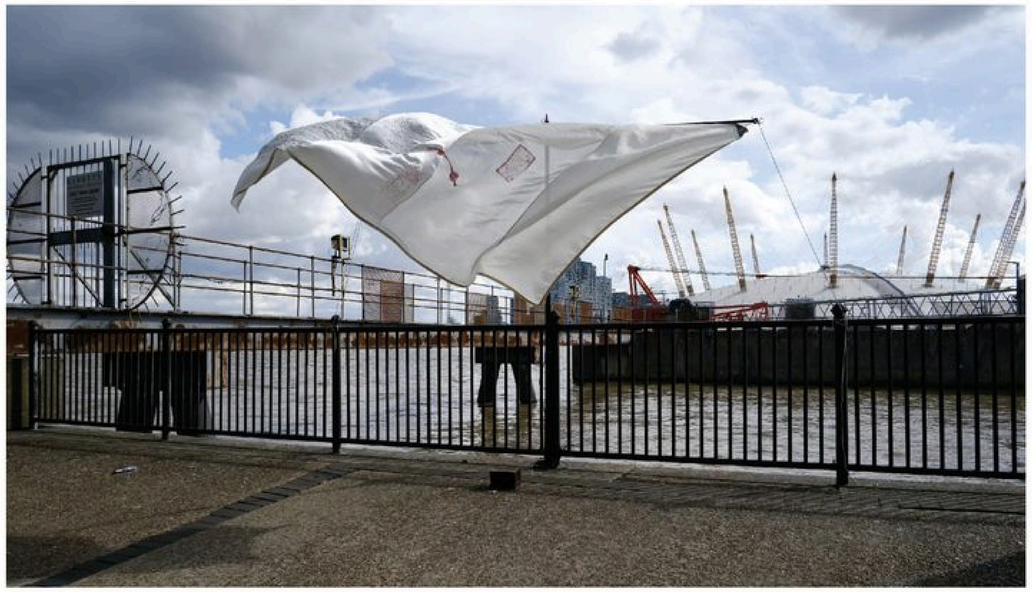
On one side, a historic port built upon global trade and resource extraction;On the other hand, a contemporary commercial landmark is centered on traffic flow, entertainment, and global branding. The steel-framed canvas establishes a visual and semantic resonance with the O2:not a return to maritime artefacts of the past, but the insertion of silk into the contemporary logic of "curtain" and "display frame"; not symbolic re-enactment, but an emphasis on continuity and transformation—the structures of colonial trade are renewed, yet the underlying logic persists.

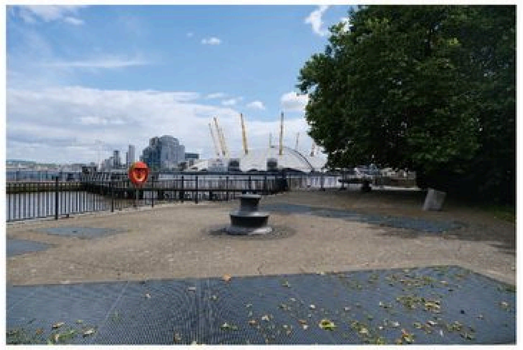




Beyond the wind, light and sound also serve as crucial indicators for spatial perception. Here, light possesses a fluid quality: in the morning, reflections from the river surface render the sail translucent with a watery sheen; come dusk, when backlit, the embroidery threads cast shadows upon the fabric, as if the text itself were speaking from within. The interweaving of wind and water sounds, occasionally punctuated by distant boat engines and the metallic clang of railings, imbues the entire experience with an aural dimension akin to an 'unfolding invisible archive'.

Environmental conditions are also decisive factors. I conducted wind power tests using silk test panels at multiple alternative sites. The wind between the high-rise buildings at Canary Wharf exhibits vertical turbulence, with unstable wind directions preventing the formation of a stable sail surface. Millwall Dock had the weakest wind, producing only slight fluttering at specific angles. By contrast, the wind at East India Dock Basin originates from open water, exhibits consistent directionality, and maintains average speeds between 3.5–5.2 m/s (as recorded through multiple field measurements). This enables the silk to unfold naturally and generate sustained fluttering.





Standing before the old wharf piers along the water's edge, the historical context of East India Dock Basin becomes tangible and palpable. As a pivotal node in the British Empire's Asian trade network, this mooring structure once anchored countless voyages and fleets laden with tea, silk, and opium. Today, it resides within a port site marginalised by urban renewal and mainstream narratives. It is precisely within this interstice—where material remnants intersect with grand historical accounts—that the work deploys its intervention strategy. Sail and wind serve as mediators, transforming archival materials from static texts back into dynamic forces that re-engage their original site, thereby re-enacting history within flow and perception.

Thus, the site ceases to serve merely as the work's backdrop, becoming an integral structural element. Wind functions as the driving mechanism, while water marks the logic of time and navigation routes. The rust on the shore embodies the materiality of imperial accumulation and erosion. The viewer's movement and pauses also constitute a path of re-reading and embodied historical experience.

On Sail is a project unfolding across two locations. I chose to bring the first part back to Shanghai's Yangpu Riverside – another space facing the water, another former industrial zone of shipping, shipbuilding, and exports. Although separated by half a globe, the two sites are connected by the same historic maritime route.

I resolved to complete the other half of the work in Yangpu—the English section with embroidery. This choice was not merely a linguistic division of labour, but a symbolic structure: the Chinese portion in London, the English in Shanghai. These two inverted actions allowed the work itself to form a mutually mirrored process. Each stitch of English text is “translated” and “rewritten” upon Chinese soil, while the Chinese text is re-stitched within the space of the former imperial centre. Their interweaving embodies the very process by which history is continually rewritten and mutually permeated.

The winds and light along the Yangpu Riverside differ from those of London's harbours. Here, the waters run deeper; former factories have been transformed into cafés, creative hubs, and art spaces where people take selfies, jog, and sip coffee—few realizing this landscape once formed a node in the global industrial system. Colonial history no longer manifests through violence here, but is instead “beautified” through urban renewal and consumerist landscapes.

For the artwork, the dual-site installation is not a repetition but an echo structure. The two ports both mirror and question each other, together forming a thread that spans time and geography —from nineteenth-century shipping routes to contemporary global trade networks, from imperial shipping ports to modern urban waterfronts.

Making Process

Concept video

I produced a concept video as a record, which includes the process of making the sail and an electronic timeline. This video briefly summarises what this project is actually about.

https://youtu.be/KaTYqFkGBkY

03

Intervention

Spatial Layout / The Sail / The Structure / Invitation / Platform / Timeline &Archive / Performance Moment / Outcome

Spacial Layout

This intervention follows an action sequence comprising 'invitation — sail — platform — timeline & archive — performance', its spatial logic designed to extract archival texts from static history and reposition them within specific geographical sites and bodily experiences. Sail, serving as the core narrative medium, is vertically suspended at the harbour's edge. Embroidered by hand onto its surface is the text of the Treaty of Nanking. This form, situated between a monument and a nautical structure, transforms the treaty from an abstract record into a tangible tension, reconfiguring its political position between history and the present. The sail faces the river channel and the opposite O2 site, creating a gaze that spans time and space. This establishes an invisible connection between nineteenth-century imperial shipping routes and contemporary global trade coordinates.

Spacial Layout

In material execution, the sailcloth is anchored to the ground via metal components and ground anchors, responding to the port's industrial heritage while emphasising a structural posture oriented towards modernity rather than retro-reproduction. The intervention commences with an invitation, guiding visitors along a precise path into the site. A platform positioned before the sail defines bodily scale and viewing rhythm, becoming a threshold for pause, contemplation, and reflection. The timeline unfolds linearly across the platform, naturally dispersing visitors as they trace its progression. Fragmented archives and pivotal years weave a "texture of history" that intertwines physical movement with cognitive shifts, transforming reading into a spatial act.

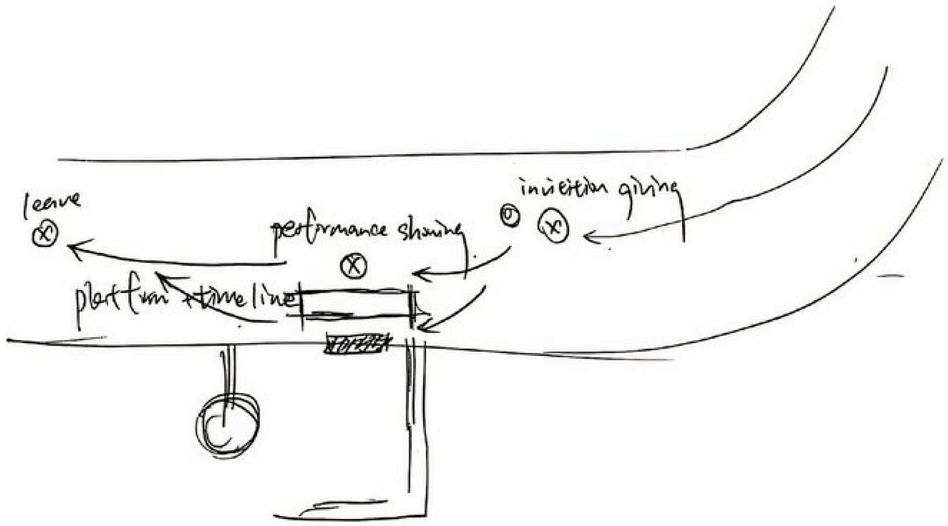


Image: spacoal layout by the author

The audience's movement follows a sequence of 'approach—circumambulate—look up—depart'. Beginning with the subtle tactile experience of fabric fibres and embroidery traces, it progresses to a distant contemplation of the installation's relationship with the harbour landscape, before returning to a reflection on individual position and temporal awareness. Thus, the site intervention transcends passive viewing to become a reactivation of historical consciousness—through walking, pausing, and gazing, archives, space, and the body collectively generate a renewed understanding of the past and a repositioning within the present.

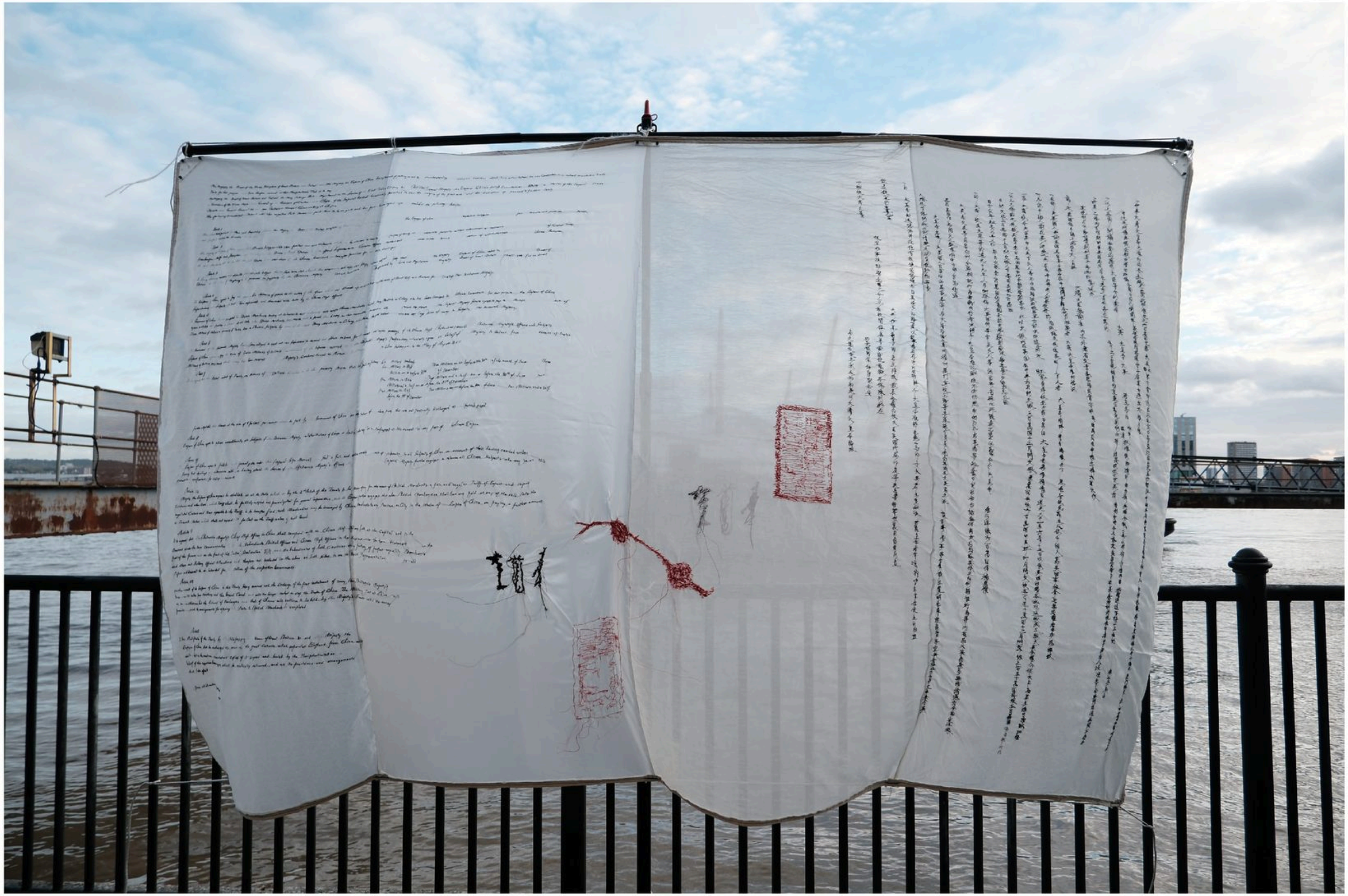
The Sail

Image: Sail Plan for 'Cutty Sark' (1869)

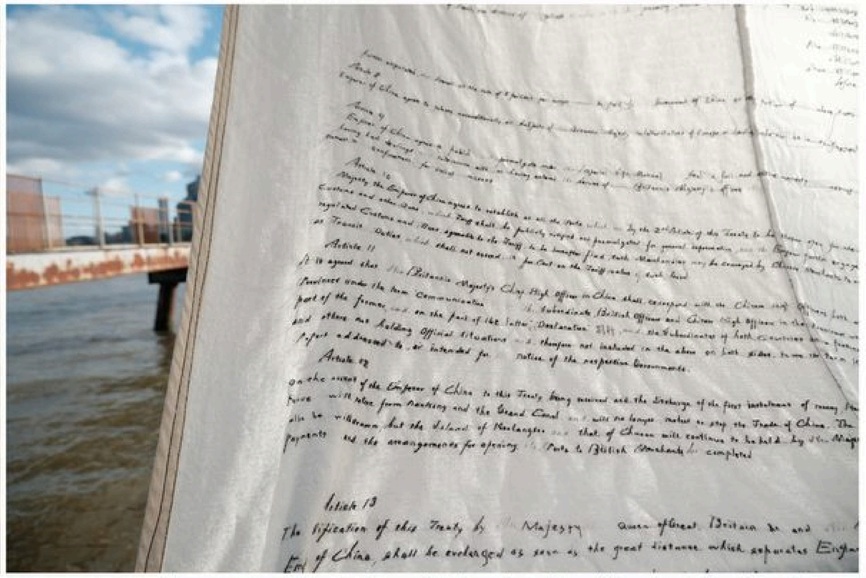
The sails in this work serve as the core visual and narrative vehicle, bearing multiple symbolisms of maritime technology, imperial trade, and historical texts. Measuring 2 metres by 3 metres, the sail dimensions are not arbitrarily chosen but are based on research into the Cutty Sark's ship archives. According to museum records, the original dimensions of the royal sail at the top of the Cutty Sark's mainmast were approximately 4 metres by 6 metres. This work reproduces it at a scaled-down proportion, rendering it closer to a display-oriented "curtain surface".

Thus, the sail transcends mere symbolic ornamentation to become a scaled translation with clear historical provenance, bridging nineteenth-century maritime engineering with the contemporary art space and rendering this work a material citation that traverses time. This is not a replica of maritime archaeology, but a deliberate shift—translating the historical vessel into a "publicly readable textual interface".

"Sail Plan for 'Cutty Sark' (1869)," Royal Museums Greenwich Prints, 2025, https://prints.rmg.co.uk/products/sail-plan-for-cutty-sark-1869-m1861.



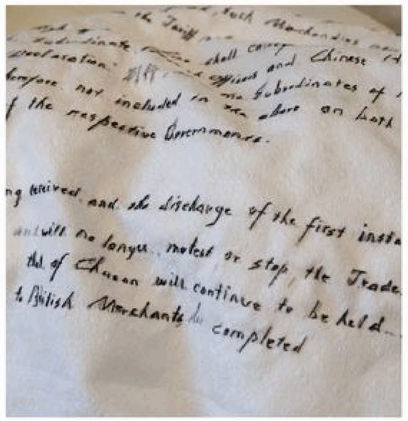
The Sail

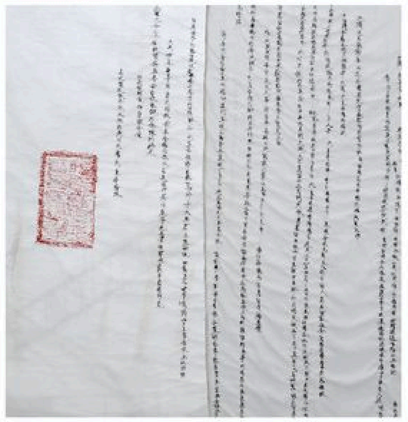


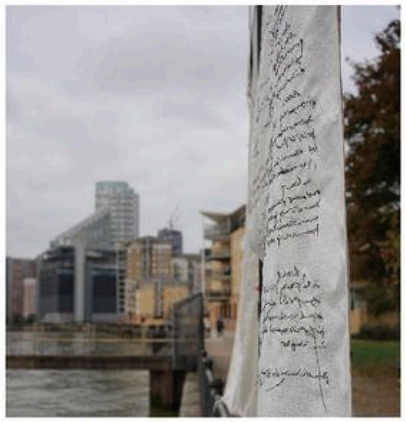
The sail surface is composed of four distinct silk textures—smooth, matte, dense, and loose—which reveal subtle, persistent variations in luminosity with the slightest shifts in light and wind direction. The stitching between fabrics remains both discernible and subtly concealed, imparting a gentle undulation and rippling to the overall surface.

Consequently, the text does not appear with absolute clarity upon the cloth, but rather weaves between light and shadow, appearing and disappearing, as if the layers, omissions, and folds of historical narrative were projected onto the fibre structure. This visual mechanism suggests that history never unfolds upon a smooth surface, but is perceived and reconstituted through material unevenness, the stitching of fragments, and the deflection of light.

The Sail







The embroidery on the sail depicts the full text of the Treaty of Nanking. The text is executed through a juxtaposition of hand and machine embroidery—the mechanical stitches, stable and regular, symbolising the cold, rigid structure of colonial law and administrative decree; the hand-embroidered sections, bearing knots, variations in tension, and minute deviations, pausing, skipping stitches, and pulling thread across the fabric like breath. Their alternation constitutes a visualised process of 'administrative language being manually deconstructed and reconstructed'. As the stitches move, fold back, and pull, they form layered paths and subtle shadows—each thread both sutures and tears; each piercing enters the fibre while also penetrating the historical record.

During production, the stitches do not merely replicate the existing text but constitute a re-reading and rewriting of the words. Precisely for this reason, my process is a crucial component of the work. The rhythm of the hand, the resistance of the embroidery, the friction of the thread liberate the treaty text from the power structures of the page, returning it to the realms of the body, time, and fibre. Each stitch constitutes a touch upon history and an intervention in the authority of narration. The cold language of diplomacy is compelled into the cadence of manual labour, thereby acquiring a faint yet persistent warmth—not gentleness, but the heat of friction, hesitation, and self-entanglement.

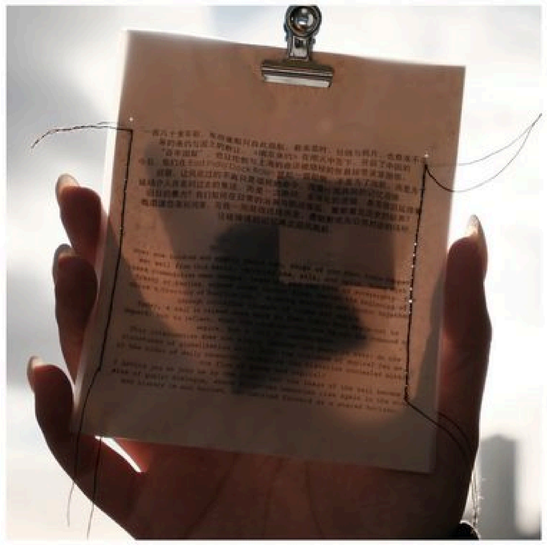
Ultimately, the sailcloth becomes a stitched history: the text is not displayed but experienced through constant traversal and displacement. As the viewer's gaze traverses silk seams, thread traces, and sheen, they do not read predetermined clauses but instead, through coexistence with the material, perceive its sedimentation, tension, and unfinished nature. The treaty ceases to be a frozen political agreement and becomes a historical entity that requires renewed understanding, renewed interrogation, and renewed consideration.

The Structure

At the structural level, the sail employs stainless steel support rods with a cross-braced fixing method. The top features horizontal rods for suspending the canvas, while the centre employs vertical rods anchored to the ground, secured to the perimeter railings via climbing ropes. Concealed counterweight bars are fitted at the base to ensure the sail maintains vertical tension in windy conditions rather than swinging uncontrollably. Connections employ industrial-grade metal fittings combined with hand-tied lashings, juxtaposing "mechanical force" with "physical labour": the structure remains stable yet bears visible traces of human intervention, symbolising the tension between institutional frameworks and individual agency.

The form-giving logic of the supporting structure draws upon contemporary tensile architectural systems visible in everyday life, with the most significant reference being the O2 structure across the river. As a landmark of London's post-industrial era, the O2's white membrane structure, steel cables, and mast system represent a contemporary architectural re-contextualisation of maritime technology. Thus, the metal framework of this work does not "mimic sailing ships" but rather forms a mirrored relationship with the O2 within a civilisational lineage: historical sails propelled warships and the opium trade, while contemporary sails underpin the consumer system and entertainment industry. Here, the sail becomes a symbolic bridge connecting imperial history with the contemporary global capitalist structure.

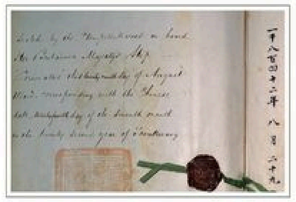
Invitation



Throughout the On Sail project, the “Tea Bag Invitation” served as an entry point and trigger mechanism, establishing the initial interface between the audience and history. Departing from the detached explanatory texts typical of conventional exhibitions, I sought to invite engagement through a tangible, aromatic, and consumable experience—allowing history to be re-encountered through taste and bodily sensation rather than existing solely on walls or within documents. Thus, I crafted handmade tea bags, presenting them as the audience's first step into the work.

Tea served as the pivotal conduit linking China and Britain, a substance that catalysed global trade imbalances, colonial expansion, and the chain of events leading to the Opium Wars. Tea was chosen as the invitation not merely for its symbolic significance, but for the shared familiarity it evoked across cultures—a vessel of history that could be lifted, inhaled, steeped, and swallowed. When the audience receives the tea bags and brews them, the flavour enters the body, and history enters the blood and breath, becoming a memory that is “absorbed”.

The vessel bearing the tea bags is a Qing dynasty tea caddy I unearthed. This nineteenth-century wooden box, originally intended for storing tea leaves, has now been repurposed as a tray for “bearing invitations”. This folding of time—an antique object serving a present-day function—transforms the piece into a bridge connecting past and present, while simultaneously enacting a gesture of “historical restitution”: tea leaves that once journeyed across oceans now return, in the guise of an invitation, to the spaces of British ports.



不管历史将作何种选择，我以为，鸦片战争留给我们首要的问题是，中国大陆与西方的差距，比起150多年前鸦片战争时，是扩大了，还是缩小了？

《大国的崛起》

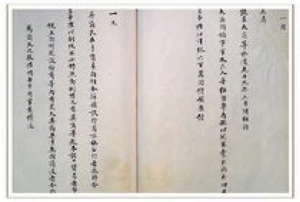
As time went on, the devastating impacts became more apparent and Chinese authors and leaders began to resist. As Unequal Treaty discourse became ingrained in Chinese mentality, a sense of victimization and resentment developed against Western powers - to such an extent that such feelings may be residual today

1842～1860年间，通过两次鸦片战争，以《南京条约》和《北京条约》为标志，中国被迫签订了一系列不平等条约，形成了束缚中国发展进步的不平等条约体系。正是这个条约体系，使中国由一个独立的封建社会逐步“沉沦”为半殖民地半封建社会。所以反帝反封建，是近代中国历史发展的基本主题。在基本上完成了反帝反封建的任务后，在人民掌握了国家的主权后，国家的现代化事业才能够比较顺利地进行。

中国编年史

“天地浩劫何时起，历劫灰洒乾坤里。
劫灰发作朝黑花，毒遍千家和万家。”

周乐《鸦片战争》

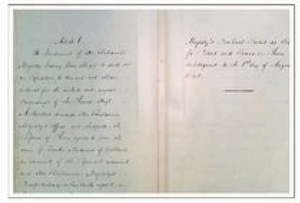


For the British, Lin's destruction of the opium was an affront to British dignity and their concepts of trade. Many British merchants, smugglers, and the British East India Company had argued for years that China was out of touch with "civilized" nations, which practised free trade and maintained "normal" international relations through consular officials and treaties. Move to the point, British representatives in Guangzhou requested that merchants turn over their opium to Lin, guaranteeing that the British government would compensate them for their losses. The idea was that in the short term, this would prevent a major conflict, and that it would keep the merchants and ship capsains safe while reopening the extremely profitable China trade in other goods. The huge opium liability (the opium was worth millions of pounds sterling), and increasingly shrill demands from merchants in China, India, and London when they discovered their profits were destroyed, gave politicians in Great Britain the excuse they were looking for to act more forcefully to expand British imperial interests in China. War broke out in November 1839 when Chinese warships clashed with British merchantmen.

Beginning in the 1700s, Great Britain made an enormous amount of money by exporting opium to China. The opium, a highly addictive drug, was made from poppy plants grown in India, one of Britain's many colonies. Chinese buyers quickly became addicted to the drug, causing the demand for opium to grow.
Widespread addiction was devastating for the Chinese people and for the country's economy. As you can imagine, the Chinese government was not happy with the British. The Chinese government got a ban on the opium trade and exclude the British from bringing it into the country in 1799.
Despite the ban, the British continued to illegally trade the drug in China. In March 1839, the Chinese government took action by destroying roughly 1,400 tons of opium; that's about 2.8 million pounds. Within a few days, tensions between British merchants and the Chinese were on the rise. To make matters worse, a group of British sailors killed a Chinese man. The British government, however, would not hand over its accused citizens. This made the Chinese government even angrier.

通常鸦片战争都指第一次鸦片战争，英国经常称其为第一次中英战争或“通商战争”，是1840年至1842年英国对中国发动的一场非正义的侵略战争，也是中国近代屈辱史的开端。

百度百科

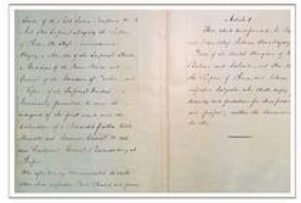


“我天朝君临万国，尽有不朝神威，然不忍不教而诛。故特明宣定例。该国夷商敬图长久贸易，必当倍道完典，将鸦片永断来源，切勿以身试法。”
“设若他国在英国贩卖鸦片，著害你国子民，尔国必深恶痛绝。”

《种族屠杀英国女王的信》

“历史的谣说夹杂着恶意。”

《天朝的崛起》

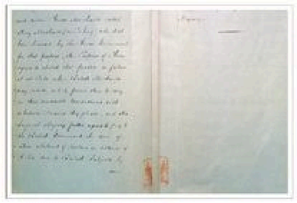


“英国用大炮强迫中国输入名叫鸦片的麻醉剂”马克思认为，鸦片战争是英国为保护鸦片走私而发动的“极端不义的战争”，是“海盗式”的侵略战争。英国资产阶级为了攫取超额利润大量推销走私鸦片是战争的动因。

广东省人民政府文史研究馆

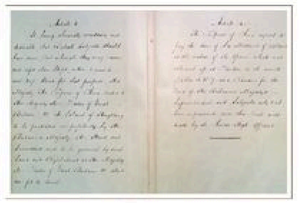
These various factors combined with a burgeoning sense of nationalism, fostered by victory over Napoleon earlier in the century, to create a strange dichotomy in which Britain desired good for its colonies and dependencies and yet felt little compulsion to work to understand their cultural differences—as tales of the first diplomatic contact between Britain and China plainly reveal.

from a greater historical distance it appears that the war was largely the result of
an attitude collision: on the one hand the cavalier indifference of British imperial officials, and on the other the cultural superiority of the Chinese government.



“中国受辱，国权分裂，皆以不知海外事也。”

魏源《海国图志》(1843)

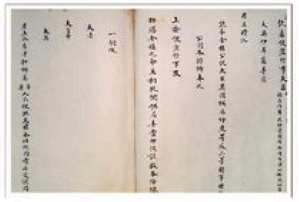


“割地赔款，事事让于夷人，国体尊严，扫地无余。”

章炳

"A treaty that changed the world"
"Few events actually change world history. But the Treaty of Nanjing in 1842 really did, it was one of the 'unequal treaties' that Britain imposed on the Chinese."

Britain faced a growing trade deficit with China… opium trade was used to offset that trade imbalance.



"Empire encouraged a sense of superiority. It also fostered racial arrogance. And yet at the same time, deeply-rooted liberal and evangelical ideals produced a powerful sense of imperial duty and mission."

Amherst was denied audience with Emperor Jiaqing and eventually returned to Britain;
the only accomplishment was the broiled eyes of both empires.
These two incidents combined were representative of the irreconcilable differences between Britain and China.

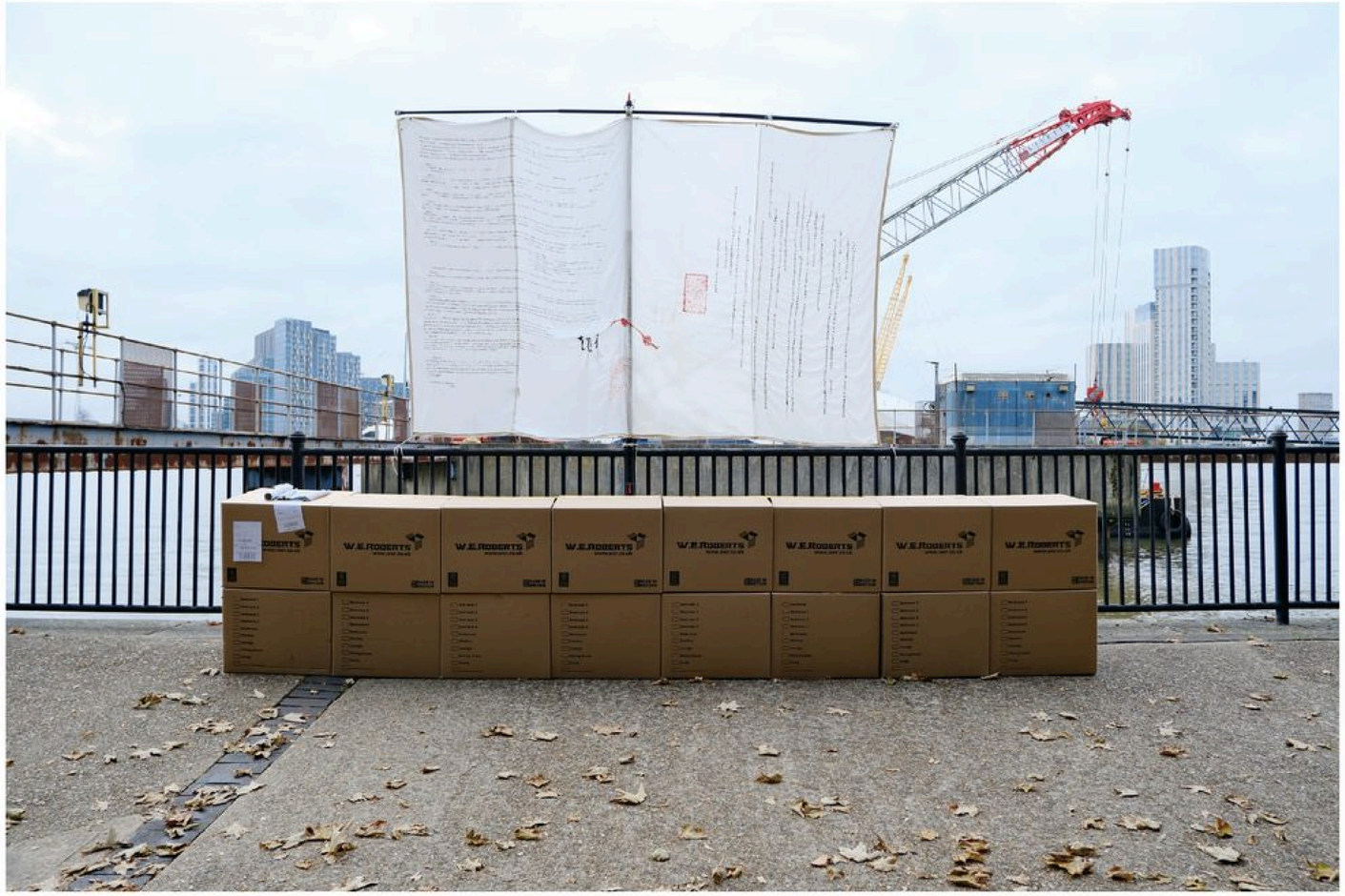
Each tea bag is encased in tracing paper, its translucent quality allowing the contents to be faintly discerned while evoking the texture of archived documents. The paper presents a brief description of the intervention, drawing viewers into the narrative as they interact with its surface and read the text. The tea bags within were hand-sewn by me and filled with tea leaves. Their labels bear the project name and the seal motif from the Treaty of Nanking—a symbol of power, ratification, and territorial cession, now reduced in scale, softened, and transplanted into an everyday object. This represents a gentle method of ‘deconstructing authority’.

Especially, each tea bag's backing is unique: featuring fragments of the Treaty of Nanking's original archives alongside news reports, historical commentaries, and textbook narratives from both Chinese and British perspectives gathered during my research. Juxtaposed upon a single small sheet of paper, they create a microcosm of cognitive dissonance and cultural tension—viewers can hold in their hands the parallel and contrasting narratives of history, rather than passively accepting a singular version of truth. In a sense, these tea bags constitute a miniature archive, each containing a fragment of historical divergence and a fissure in worldview.

The entire reception process is ceremonial yet unpretentious, gentle and deliberate: the audience picks up the tea bag, reads it, feels its texture, senses the warmth of the paper and thread, and decides whether to brew it, taste it, or take the text away. Thus, the invitation transcends mere notification, becoming a gift, an act of sharing, and a personal experience. It embodies the viewing logic of this work—not forced cognition, but self-initiated engagement, reapproaching grand history through everyday actions.

Ultimately, the tea bag invitation guides the audience from the history held in the palm to the port site, from smell to embroidered sail, from soft paper and tea fragrance to the memory of colonial routes between wind, metal, and water. It renders the entrance to history light, small—so small it fits in the palm—yet thereby closer to the body, more permeable, and harder to ignore.

Platform



Within the spatial composition of On Sail, the platform transcends its role as a mere viewing stand or stepped structure, instead functioning as a metaphorical weighty "vessel". I selected stacked modern logistics cardboard boxes as the primary material, secured with yellow packing tape—a visual language drawn from daily life. Countless parcels dispatched from China to overseas destinations arrive tightly bound and reinforced layer upon layer, bearing the traces, pressures, and expectations of cross-border transit. It serves as a visual symbol of contemporary circulation systems, embodying the intertwining of personal experience and the narrative of globalised supply chains.

The cardboard itself carries multiple connotations: it is lightweight and fragile, yet it bears the weight and risks of long-distance transport. Cheap and commonplace, it nonetheless facilitates the cross-border flow of vast quantities of goods and information. Much like nineteenth-century wooden crates laden with tea and opium crossing oceans, these boxes now carry the 'invisible flows' within today's transnational logistics networks. By stacking these boxes to create a height suitable for standing and reading, I have constructed my platform.

Yellow sealing tape carries a potent visual identity of "cross-border logistics", simultaneously evoking a sense of caution—"sealed, sealed, untouchable". Historical archives are often "sealed" and "protected" in precisely this manner—neither readily accessible nor fully interpreted. Constructing the display stand from this material translates the "sealing" logic of the archive into physical space, allowing logistics and history to overlap in their modes of packaging.

Platform

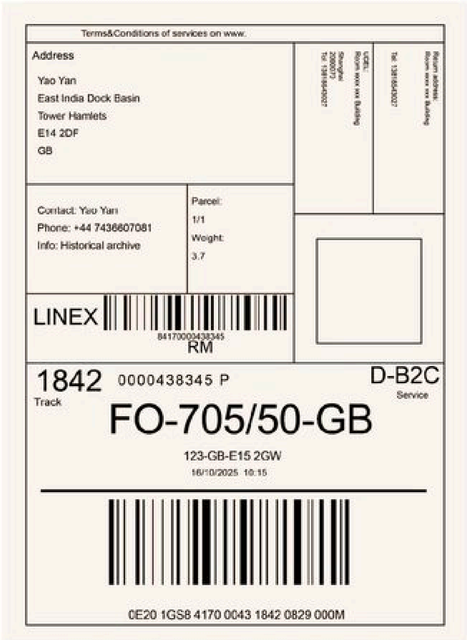


Image: Handmade delivery labels by the author

The bespoke logistics labels on the display stand further extend this narrative by integrating authentic freight codes, map coordinates, temporal markers, and treaty texts, thereby fusing historical information from the Treaty of Nanking with modern parcel tracking systems. The stand thus becomes a “historical cargo”—not static furniture, but a historical record “awaiting delivery confirmation”. As visitors read the labels, they trace a logistics route spanning centuries:
treaty port → shipping route → dock → museum → archive → intervention site.

The positional relationship between the display stand and the suspended canvas is also calculated: it supports without usurping the gaze, allowing the sail to become the visual centre while the stand becomes the ‘silent supporting logic’. In other words, the stand presents the ‘invisible forces’—the material foundations underpinning the imperial trade system, such as warehousing, transportation, tariffs, and port regulations—now re-emerging through the most ordinary yet authentic material: cardboard.

Thus, the platform in this work is not a formal display stand, but a structural entity embedding historical trade and contemporary logistics within the exhibition space. It prompts viewers to recognise that every modern cross-border shipment silently continues an ancient shipping route.

Timeline & Archive

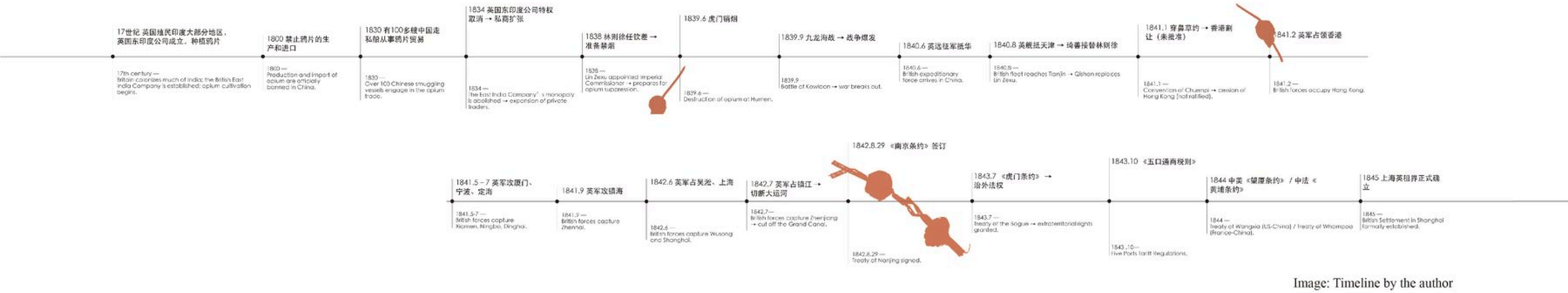


Image: Timeline by the author

At the heart of the exhibition stand, a three-metre-long roll of tracing paper unfurls slowly. It serves both as a timeline and as a tangible, tactile, and interactive fabric of history. Through tracing paper, the pattern of yellow adhesive tape at its base is clearly visible—a tape commonly used in international logistics parcels, a visible trace of the material flow between China and the world. Overlapping the horizontal lines of the timeline, it resembles quadrants and meridians, symbolising the directional coordinates of trade, imperial expansion, and capital. It also signifies that history is not static, but a path continually packaged, transported, delivered, and rerouted.
This timeline originates in the maritime trade of the 17th century, with tea, silk, and porcelain sailing eastward to Britain, and silver, firearms, and capital flowing westward in return. It then traces the formation of the opium trade system in the early 19th century, which seeped like a shifting undercurrent into the gaps between ports, driving the gears of imperial machinery. The timeline culminates in the signing of the Treaty of Nanking in 1842 and the establishment of the Shanghai Concession in 1845—two junctures that not only altered the boundaries of rivers and seas but also reshaped the structures of cities, identities, trade, and daily life. Each point along this chronological axis resembles a grain of grit that, having passed through the sieve of history, retains its sharp edges, reminding the observer: these moments continue to reverberate within our places and bodies.

1. Treaty of Nankin [Nanking] and General Affairs, FO 705/50, The National Archives, Kew.
2. Treaty: Peace and Friendship; Commerce; Indemnity [Treaty of Nanking] (29 August 1842); Declaration: Transit Dues (26 June 1843); Proclamation (Chinese): New System of Trade, Tariff of Duties, General Regulations (July 1843), FO 93/23/1B, The National Archives, Kew.
3. Long Papers, Bundle 543: Opium, T 1/4054, The National Archives, Kew.
4. Three Chinese Officials in Charge of Supervising the Tea Trade Describe the Competitive and Confused Conditions in the Tea Trade since 1843..., FO 931/967, The National Archives, Kew.

Along the timeline, I have affixed my reworked archives to their respective points in time. These are not mere reproductions, but rather a process of "rewriting" the archives: from hundreds of documents and images, I selected fragments of critical significance—details from treaty texts, customs ledgers, diplomatic correspondence—then printed them onto fabric identical to canvas. The fabric's texture blurs the archives' original rigid boundaries, extracting history from the flat plane of paper authority and returning it to tactility, fibre, weight, and warmth.

This "archival re-creation" is neither commemoration nor replication, but an act of intervention: as apparatuses of power and narrative, archives determine how the past is seen, legitimised, and interpreted through their content, format, and presentation. When re-stitched, folded, or pinned, each manual gesture re-examines the structure of history—who records? Who interprets? Who is recorded? Who remains unmarked? The timeline thus ceases to be a unidirectional narrative, resembling instead a nautical chart perpetually unravelled and re-stitched.

Transparent paper scrolls, yellow adhesive tape, fabric archives, and the act of pinning collectively form an exhibition mode where 'transparency and concealment coexist'. The juxtaposition of translucency and opacity, clarity and blur, print and fibre, temporal documentation and temporal perception transforms history from mere text and dates into a visible weight and palpable distance.

Ultimately, this timeline and archive are not intended to restate predetermined conclusions, but rather serve as an invitation for on-site reading and rereading: while witnessing history being hung, one also observes the junctions, gaps, and folds. For it is precisely within these interstices that the force of history accumulates, and it is here that the potential for future rewriting begins.

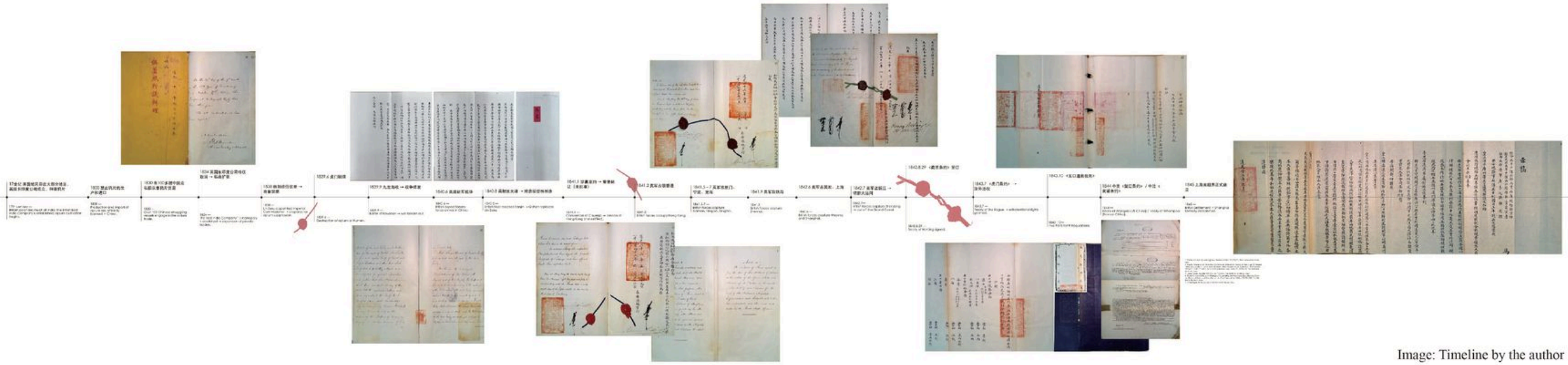


Image: Timeline by the author

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Performance Moment

Image: Performance moment in intervention day

That day the wind was fierce. The sail billowed, and the needle and thread trembled faintly in the air. As I sewed, a pair of passers-by stopped in their tracks. They asked curiously, 'What is this?' I paused, then began to explain—it was a project about the Treaty of Nanking, about tea and opium, about the wind blowing from London to that route through southern China. The lady looked down at the needle and thread in my hands and said, 'It's beautiful, but also… sad.'

In that moment, I realised that this intervention had transcended my original conception—it was no longer merely a dialogue between myself and the archives, between myself and history, but had become a performance generated in the public space by the wind and chance.

Passers-by were not "audience members"; they were merely "people passing by". Yet their pauses, their questions, their emotions formed the truly living part of this work. The wind became the rhythm of the performance, the fluttering sail like the breath of memory, while their responses resembled unexpected messages drifting in during this voyage.

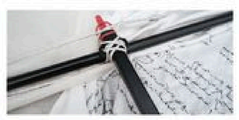
As I found myself explaining, I was also reinterpreting the work: words dispersed in the air, carried away by the wind along with the sail. That fleeting exchange proved more potent than I had imagined. It revealed to me that history is not an object to be displayed, but an experience that can be collectively revisited.

This "performance" had no plan, nor did it have an endpoint. It unfolded naturally in the harbour breeze and continued with each encounter. In that moment, I truly felt for the first time—the immediacy of art is also a re-emergence of memory.

Outcome

Outcome

04
Reflection and Conclusion



The point of departure for On Sail lies in its persistent interrogation of how history is re-narrated. The East India Dock Basin, as the site of intervention, is not merely a geographical coordinate but rather an entry point into narrative. Once the imperial gateway to Asia's maritime routes, it now lies overgrown with weeds and rust, a forgotten periphery. It is precisely within this "vacant site" that the layers of history come into focus.

Throughout the research and creative process of this project, I gradually came to realise that archives are never neutral repositories of texts, but rather power structures that construct historical narratives. Through selective preservation and concealment, they shape the forms of memory permitted to exist. The Treaty of Nanking, as the core text of this work, precisely embodies this "institutionalised memory". This document, signed in 1842 between the Qing government and the British Empire, not only signified China's military defeat but also established unequal power relations within the international order. By taking the form of a 'treaty,' it legitimised colonial logic, translating violence, indemnities, and territorial cessions into an administrative, rationalised language. It is precisely beneath this linguistic neutrality that power remains concealed, entrenched and perpetuated.

When I re-inscribed the Treaty of Nanking onto canvas through embroidery, this process was not merely a re-enactment of history but a deconstruction of the discourse of power. The intervention of manual labour compelled me to "read" this document anew at the pace of the body—each stitch, each thread re-exposing the latent tension and violence within those seemingly tranquil words. The friction of needle and thread rendered language no longer abstract, grounding it once more in the realms of sensation and labour. Thus, the historical text ceased to be a passive record, becoming instead a site that could be revisited and reimagined.

Simultaneously, I am concerned with the mutually constitutive relationship between historical narrative and geographical space. The sails and structure point towards the Thames and the O2 across the river, not only formally echoing maritime architecture but also symbolising the continuity and folding of the imperial trade system from the nineteenth century into the contemporary globalised landscape. Ports, treaties, shipping routes, commodities—these seemingly disparate elements are re-stitched within the work into a fluid system. Through this spatial rewriting, I hope viewers will not merely "see" the traces of history, but "enter" the very process by which history is produced, shifting from textual comprehension to perceptual engagement.

On a theoretical level, the work engages with discussions within postcolonial discourse concerning "the presence of the past". One consequence of colonial history is the intensification of exchanges between disparate cultures, where vast cultural differences manifest. Individuals from differing cultural backgrounds must achieve a provisional understanding and consensus through translation and negotiation. This space where cultures engage in 'negotiation' is termed the 'third space' by Homi Bhabha. Thus, history is not a sealed past but a perpetually re-enacted 'third space.' Building upon this concept, On Sail is not a re-enactment of history but a 'critique of re-enactment'—it seeks to reveal the ideological logic underlying historical narratives through material, spatial, and bodily dimensions.

When I first resolved to centre my work on the Treaty of Nanking, I actually endured a prolonged period of hesitation. It is a chapter of history that is perpetually invoked, yet remains perpetually beyond grasp. Repeatedly recounted, commemorated, and cited, the more it is written about, the more distant it seems. In China, it is proclaimed aloud yet cannot be freely perused; in Britain, it lies quietly in archive drawers, a page that can be casually leafed through. The gulf between these two attitudes left me with an indescribable sense of disconnection—I am both the subject being written about and the one rewriting the narrative.

The moment I first opened the original treaty document in the archives, I realised that history possesses warmth, texture, and a palpable tremor when touched by fingers. Thus, I resolved to “rewrite” it through embroidery—to let those cold, rigid diplomatic phrases pass once more through the fabric's weave, returning to the rhythm of body and time. Each stitch both slows the pace and draws us nearer; every thread seems to mend, yet also probes another wound.

The process of creation felt like an extended dialogue. As a Chinese student in London, I found myself perpetually caught between two narratives: both a descendant of colonial history and its scholar; both yearning for understanding and struggling to forgive with equanimity. That state of being neither fully immersed nor entirely detached became the most authentic starting point for this work. I gradually came to understand that reflection does not mean finding a stance, but learning to dwell within uncertainty—acknowledging that very oscillation and contradiction as the truest relationship between ourselves and history.

Later, when the sail was hoisted, when the breeze gently brushed the embroidered threads, and when spectators paused upon the platform, I suddenly realised that the significance of this work perhaps lay not in recreating the past, but in evoking a “way of remembering anew”. History is not merely an object to be commemorated, but an existence to be touched, perceived, and re-woven.

For me, On Sail was an attempt to measure distance with my body. The warp threads were the labour of hands, the weft threads the flow of time. What they wove together was not merely the shape of a sail, but the living seam between myself and history. Perhaps we cannot alter the wind's direction, but we can decide the posture in which we sail.