

## The Thug, the Barbarian, and the Work of Injury in Imperial Warfare

LYDIA H. LIU

IN THE MODERN ENGLISH LEXICON, THE CURIOUS WORD *THUG* IS USUALLY TRACED TO HINDI. IN THE EARLY DAYS OF THE ANTITHUG MILITARY campaign in India, William Henry Sleeman, the British architect of the campaign, brought out a thug lexicon entitled *Ramaseeana; or, A Vocabulary of the Peculiar Language Used by the Thugs* in 1836. This lexicon represents the first systematic attempt to identify who the thugs are and how they communicate with one another in secret society. It appears to provide hard linguistic evidence for a newly discovered threat to the British presence in India, cobbling together a large collection of predominantly Hindi words and phrases and building them into a coherent image of the thug that attests to the authenticity of Hindu thuggism. The graphic details of thugs' cold-blooded strangling of innocent travelers are as numerous as the amount of verbs and nouns that have found their way into the book and into subsequent embellishments by popular media. That the word *thug* is of Hindi origin (*thag*, *theg*, or *thak*) seems sufficient to prove that thugs exist and pose a threat. (Echoes of this argument can be found in the justifications for the United States–led war against the terrorist network al-Qaeda.) But as Martine Van Woerkens and other scholars have shown, thuggism was actually invented by the British who tried to seize criminal jurisdiction in areas that had been in the hands of the Mogul rulers. In the course of extending their control over a mobile population, the British used the construction of thug monstrosity to lay the foundation of “a ritual of conjuration” in the play of mirrors between them and the colonized (Van Woerkens 292).

The native words *thag*, *theg*, or *thak* and their mirror image in the English loanword *thug*, set in motion by Sleeman's lexicon, are an example of an imperial conjuration: they render a certain class of foreign lexicon suspect and thus those who speak them threatening. I want to argue, however, that there is much more to the figure of the thug than the fabrication of a pretext to justify war, as can be observed elsewhere in incidents like the Black Hole of Calcutta (Sharpe 81–85)

LYDIA H. LIU, W. T. Tam Professor in the Humanities at Columbia University, teaches in the Department of East Asian Languages and Cultures and at the Institute for Comparative Literature and Society. She also holds a joint appointment in the School of the Humanities and Social Sciences at Tsinghua University, in Beijing. Liu is the author of *The Clash of Empires* (Harvard UP, 2004) and *Translingual Practice* (Stanford UP, 1995) and editor of *Tokens of Exchange: The Problem of Translation in Global Circulations* (Duke UP, 1999).

or other hostile situations that led to military action. Antonio de Nebrija, the bishop of Ávila, has famously stated in his prologue to *Gramática castellana*, “siempre la lengua fue compañera del imperio” (“language has always accompanied empire” [5; my trans.]), a maxim known in English as “language has always been the perfect instrument of empire.” The latter view is also embraced by modern critics of empire who analyze language policies in colonial situations or language use for political control and psychological manipulation. The trouble with this instrumental view of language is that it coincides exactly with the imperial understanding of language.

Although few would deny that language has been central to war making and imperial rule in general, I think we also need to take discursive operation into account and derive a theoretical understanding about language that relates it to imperial warfare in more ways than instrumentality. Linguists and philosophers of language have shown that verbal enunciations exist in structured (and grammatical) relations and are in constant flux; their meanings are notoriously difficult to capture and instrumentalize. Two interesting questions that the discourse of thuggism may raise for us are the following: Does the conjuration of fear and disgust resonate with a coherent view of rights and privileges on the part of the British in the realm of moral reasoning? Can this reasoning shed important light on the ideas of injury, subjectivity, and sovereignty in today’s liberal discourse? Although I do not have the space needed to develop my thoughts fully here, I will sketch out the general contour of my argument below.

Before doing so, let me bring up another episode that took place in the same year as Sleeman’s publication, though the story happened elsewhere. When *Ramaseeana* first appeared in print in 1836, an equally far-reaching work—with similar imperial policy implications for the British—was published by the leading British opium dealer James

Matheson. This book, *The Present Position and Prospect of Our Trade with China*, was written to persuade the British government and the public to go to war with China. A chief complaint brought by Matheson against the Qing government was the ubiquitous presence of the written character *yi* 夷 or *ying yi* 英夷 in official Chinese documents. Matheson charged that the word *yi* meant “barbarian” and that its usage insulted the British by naming them “barbarians” or “English barbarians.” Matheson and the belligerent party in Parliament pointed to the word *yi* as evidence of Chinese xenophobia, universal contempt for foreigners, and rejection of free trade and Western civilization. He wrote: “This truculent, vain-glorious people have been pleased to consider all other inhabitants of the earth (as already intimated) as BARBARIANS,—destitute of all pretensions to civil, political, or moral excellence” (15). Matheson’s philological argument advanced an effective claim of injury as he pressed the British demands for reparation. Queen Victoria reiterated this demand in her address to Parliament on 26 January 1841, at the close of the first opium war, when she stated that her government had dispatched the naval and military forces to the coast of China to “demand reparation and redress for the injuries inflicted upon some of my subjects by the officers of the Emperor of China” (qtd. in Ensor 22).

What are the injuries the queen refers to here? They consist of not only the destruction of British opium by Imperial Commissioner Lin Zexu in 1839 but also the alleged insult of British subjects after Lord Napier’s arrival in the city of Guangzhou in 1834. Napier’s official title—chief superintendent of British trade in China—was translated as *yimu* 夷目 in classical Chinese. The literal sense of *yimu* was explained by Napier’s interpreter as meaning “the barbarian eye,” which George Staunton, a noted sinologist in Napier’s time, contested and translated correctly as “foreign principal.” The unfortunate catachresis of “the barbarian

eye” and the anger it aroused on all sides led to the earliest military clash between the British and the Qing five years before the first opium war. Finally, in 1858, the British introduced a ban in the Anglo-Chinese Treaty of Tianjin to prohibit the Chinese use of the character *yi*. By way of the most-favored-nation clause, France inserted a similar ban in the treaties they signed with the Qing government. Thus, article 51 of the Treaty of Tianjin became the first international treaty to outlaw a foreign word from its own language (*Treaties* 1: 419). What we see here is that international law is the instrument and language is the site of coercion and imperial will. Not surprisingly, the word *yi* has been chased out of the living Chinese language ever since.

In *Ramaseeana* and in *The Present Position and Prospect of Our Trade with China*, the authors are preoccupied with foreign words and the threat they pose or imply. The reified “wordness” of the concept evoked by either *thag* or *yi* obscures the enunciation of injury in translanguaging discursive situations—before and after each military action—so much that the etymology of the word itself cannot be relied on to enlighten us about its mode of signification. We need then to introduce a distinction between words and their “super-signs”—the invisible bonding of heterolinguistic elements in a single verbal unit through implicit deferral—to help bring the acts of enunciation and their historicity to light (Liu 12–13). Thus the verbal unit is internally split when the signified of the native term is deferred to a foreign sign to complete the process of signification. This semiotic movement between languages points us in the direction of heterocultural processes of meaning making that takes place both inside and outside the self-evident etymology of the reified word as a basic unit of sociolinguistic analysis.

The super-signs *thag/thug* and *yi/barbarian* straddle two languages simultaneously through repeated acts of translation and enunciation. They inhabit a world of enchanted

meanings, camouflaged traces of foreignness, and potent but disavowed forms of translanguaging speech and meaning making across languages. They also withhold their mode of signification from the sovereign gaze of each national language so that the English words *thug* and *barbarian* and the Chinese word *yi* or the Hindi word *thag* appear remarkably free of the traces of the super-signs that animate them. For us to grasp the mode of super-sign operation pertaining to the eruption of *thag* and *barbarian* on the international scene in 1836, we should not treat *thag/thug* or *yi/barbarian* as discrete words deriving from Hindi, English, or Chinese, much less evoke them as marks of authenticity and identity. We should instead open up these super-signs and analyze them in a network of interconnected super-signs across multiple temporalities. Our analysis would have to begin at the moment of enunciation of injury because the conjuration of fear and disgust by these super-signs is bound up with the legal discourse of injury and the associated rights and privileges in European colonial encounter.

When Sleeman launched his antithug campaign in India, he was acting not out of paranoid lunacy but under the full conviction of the justice of his action. The same can be said of Queen Victoria’s allegation that the Qing government had injured the British subjects before the opium war. Of course, the British authorities could not have been blind to the fact that the large quantities of opium their traders had smuggled into China caused massive damages there. To press this point, Lin Zexu addressed a letter to Queen Victoria on the eve of the war asking for her assistance in halting British drug trafficking. Interestingly, Lin’s legendary letter was made to disappear and was never delivered into the hands of the British sovereign (Liu 91–95). The letter’s disappearance should be reevaluated in proportion to the visibility of Matheson’s own open “letter” addressed to the British public in the form of *The Present Position and*

*Prospect of Our Trade with China*. This open letter, which carefully suppresses the word *opium* to condemn the offensive super-sign *yi/barbarian*, arrived at its proper destination and succeeded in persuading British parliament that the Chinese had injured the rights of the British—not the reverse, as Lin’s letter had tried to contend.

If *thag* and *yi* in their reverse trajectories and super-sign incarnations have the power to incriminate or injure someone, all are not entitled to the claims of injury; curiously it is usually the British who emerge as the injured party, who have either been attacked by thugs or injured by the enunciation of *yi* as “barbarian.” Contrary to the reiterated assertions about the resentment or vindictiveness of the weak and the oppressed, the history of modern colonialism provides overwhelming evidence to suggest that the powerful and strong have regarded injury as their own prerogative and would insist on it until certain legal and economic conditions of aggressive intent are met. Unfortunately, this imperial legacy has repeatedly been disavowed in subsequent developments of liberal notions of rights and privileges, so we have yet to recognize the work of injury as a dangerous and productive force in the modern world. The imperial legacy must be interrogated with a view to bringing the legal and ethical grounding of imperial warfare to light, recognizing that the temporalities of the colonial discourse of injury are extremely complex and can overshadow the military agendas and outcomes of the remote past.

Elaine Scarry, Wendy Brown, Judith Butler, and other contemporary theorists have given a good deal of reflection to injury as a legal and philosophical problem. They have shown that this problem dominates the liberal considerations of political rule and civil liberties. Brown, for example, points out in *States of Injury* that people who have been excluded or marginalized by the dominant power—women, people of color, Jews, homosexuals, and so on—tend to install pain and injury at

the heart of their demand for political recognition and reparation. Injury articulates and is often articulated by a condition of identity politics whereby the socially oppressed attempt to appeal to law and the state for justice. Drawing on Friedrich Nietzsche, Brown critiques this politics of resentment as an ironic act of revenge, one that is grounded on the misrecognition of the identity of the state. Her critique aptly pinpoints the impasse in the liberal conceptions of freedom and justice where law and the state are placed in the position of neutral arbiters of injury when they are actually vested with the power to injure.

I would like to push Brown’s critique in a different direction and argue that a powerful sovereign state or empire can itself be engaged in a politics of resentment with respect to other states, countries, and peoples in the global political arena. That is to say, the state or its agent is not only vested with the power to injure but is also fully capable of being injured and making claims to that effect. If there seems to be no place for this doubly perverse figure in the mainstream discussion of liberal politics, it is because one has ruled out a priori the scenario in which the strong and the powerful are the first to lay legal and moral claims of injury against the weak and the disenfranchised. This work of injury should not be reduced to ruses or pretexts fabricated by a superior power for military action. To the extent that the project of world taking cannot be engineered on the basis of military might alone, legal justification and moral persuasion are needed to bring about a consensus, or a worldview. But that consensus can be shown to be the product of a political structure of recrimination that drives the claims of injury toward acts of retaliation and moral vindication. Terrorism is born of this vicious cycle of the work of injury and cannot be eradicated if the political structure of recrimination is allowed to remain intact and spawn new mirror images of empire.

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