W. Somerset Maugham’s short story “The Taipan” concerns an English businessman living and working in China in the early twentieth century. A self-described “important person” (283), the taipan had moved to China some thirty years earlier in pursuit of the economic opportunities that China offered. The taipan certainly met with success, having become “number one in not the least important branch of the most important English firm in China” (283). However, the taipan’s success came at a price, namely the oppression of the Chinese citizens in the community where he conducts his business. Although he is not a recognized part of any active effort of the English to actually “colonize” China in a military or political sense, the taipan’s economic endeavors—along with those of the other English living there—certainly serve to oppress the Chinese in the financial interests of the English. In addition, the taipan’s attitudes regarding China, its people, and its customs, without a doubt reflect a colonial consciousness. Through his oppression, resulting from a control of resources, language, and culture, the taipan effectively “others” the Chinese, convincing himself that they are different from him, and thus allowing him to treat them differently.

The taipan’s economic oppression of the Chinese community in which he lives becomes evident early on when reading the story. Indeed, the story opens with a personal reflection of his past life in England and how his move to China had improved his financial situation and his life. “When he remembered the modest home he had come from, a little red house in a long row of little red houses […] he chuckled with satisfaction. He had come a long way since then” (283). At this point, the taipan begins his narrative chronicling his ascent from the English lower-middle class to his new position of wealth and influence in China, indeed, to becoming “the most prominent man in the community” (284). The taipan’s narrative is the prototypical western success story, in which an average, young entrepreneur pulls himself up by his bootstraps to achieve financial independence and a life of comfort, all accomplished by virtue of his own innate gifts and a little hard work. However, the taipan’s success story does not end there; his economic power in the Chinese community in which he lives soon translates to oppressive social and political power.

Following his narrative recalling his achievements since relocating from England, the taipan relays an instance in the past which resulted in his gaining control of the local consul due to his prominence and wealth. “Even the consul took care to keep on the right side of him. Once a consul and he had been at loggerheads and it was not he who had gone to the wall” (284). Thus, through his wealth and economic power, the taipan has gained political power. His great influence in the community arises not only through his political power, however, but also through his control of property, which, because of his wealth, is nicer than that of anyone else in the community. “He flattered himself that he had the finest stable in the city” (284). Without a doubt, this control of property is maintained not only by the taipan himself, but also by the entire English population of this Chinese community. This becomes evident in the story as the taipan passes by a magnificent cemetery in the community which was created exclusively for used by the English. “He paused when he came to the cemetery. It stood there, neat and orderly, as an evident sign of the community’s opulence. He never passed by the cemetery.
without a little glow of pride. He was pleased to be an Englishman" (284). Here, although the taipan celebrates the "community's opulence," he really refers exclusively to the affluence of the English community, not the Chinese. It is clear that he believes (and rightfully so) that the area would not be prosperous were it not for the English presence there. Even those buried in the cemetery are a silent testament to English "colonial" prosperity, as many of them were Englishmen who had also come to China, and naive and flush with funds, literally drank themselves to death. The taipan recalls, "it was always the same story: they had come out to China; they had never seen so much money before, they were good fellows and they wanted to drink with the rest: they couldn't stand it, and there they were in the cemetery" (285).

The taipan reflects further on the cemetery as a symbol of the control of wealth and property by the English. "For the cemetery stood in a place, valueless when it was chosen, which with the increase of the city's affluence was now worth a great deal of money. [...] It gave the taipan a sense of satisfaction to think that their dead rested on the most valuable land on the island" (284). Here, several significant colonial attitudes are being represented. First of all, the taipan's description of the land as having been "valueless" is extremely subjective. His conception of value arises exclusively from his own viewpoint as an English businessman, taking no account of the point of view of the Chinese. His calling the land "valueless" refers not to any value which the Chinese might have had for the land, only to the value which the land had at the time to the English, which, since there were no English enterprises operating there at the time, was indeed nothing. The taipan fails to consider that the land may have had value to the Chinese prior to the presence of the English. In addition, his calling the land "valueless" assumes that there is only one kind of value, which is, naturally, the value of financial gain. Another clearly Eurocentric attitude he displays is evident from the obvious pride he feels for the fact that the English own, and are buried on, the most valuable piece of land in this Chinese community. This demonstrates the power which the English have had over the local population. The English achieved great financial success in this Chinese community, thereby making property values there increase. In addition, because of their wealth, the English "colonizers" own much property there, the price of which has increased, resulting in more financial power and gain for the English. All this results in the oppression of the Chinese citizens through the control of wealth, and in turn, property, by the English.

The oppression of the Chinese by the English does not stop at economics, politics, or property, however. The English in general and the taipan in particular, through their eminence in the community, also control the very people and culture of the Chinese through their means of "othering" the Chinese. This becomes clear from the ways in which the taipan interacts with the Chinese characters in the story. For example, when the taipan passes the English cemetery and becomes curious about a new grave which is being dug, he asks the Chinese workers for information. However, he asks not in the language of the nation in which he finds himself, but rather in his own native English. "Though he had been so long in China he knew no Chinese, in his day it was not thought necessary to learned the damned language, and he asked the coolies in English whose grave they were digging. They did not understand. They answered him in Chinese and he cursed them for ignorant fools" (286). The taipan is so arrogant that he not only spoke his own language to the Chinese, but also consequently thought them "ignorant fools" simply because they did not understand what was, to them, an utterly foreign language. He assumes that, because of the power and influence of the English in the community, the English language should be understood and spoken by all people there. Thus, he callously refers to the Chinese gravediggers as "ignorant fools" simply because they didn't understand him, an "important person."

Later, when he inquires about the grave from the overseer of the cemetery, the Chinese gentleman awkwardly replies, "I no dig glave" (286). To this, the taipan impatiently replies, "What the devil do you mean by that?" (286), when, in reality, the meaning is clear; the taipan is simply mocking the uncomfortable efforts of the overseer to speak English. It certainly appears that the use of English by the taipan is a means of control; it allows him to communicate with his fellow English "colonizers" while barring the Chinese from access to the Englishmen's knowledge. It also is a means of "othering" the Chinese because, due to the English control of communication and knowledge, the Chinese are forced to attempt to speak English, making them seem inscrutable and ignorant, which is exactly how the taipan perceives them. The taipan identifies himself as the pinnacle of achievement, sophistication, and civilization, all...
of which he believes are hallmarks of the English. The taipan thinks that his way—the English way—is best, and consequently, he curses the Chinese for failing to adhere to the English way. He fails to consider, even for a moment, that the Chinese may have a way of their own which is valuable in its own right, and which is treasured by the Chinese just as the English way is treasured by the English.

Due to the fact that the taipan views the Chinese as "others," he treats them with contempt. Throughout the story, not one Chinese character is ever granted a name, likely because the taipan would never bother to try to pronounce it. Instead, the Chinese characters with whom the taipan interacts are referred to as "boys" or "coolies." The taipan's contact with these "boys" is limited exclusively to their serving his own interests, whether it be for information or for service. However, the service depicted in the story makes the Chinese characters seem less like servants and more like slaves to the taipan. For example, after attending a "capital luncheon," the taipan decides to walk back to his office. All the while, "His bearers with his chair kept a few paces behind him in case he felt inclined to slip into it [...]" (284). It is obvious that the influence of the taipan is such that the Chinese are compelled to serve him almost as if he were a king, so eager are they to share in a part of the English wealth which he represents. The taipan orders his "boys" to procure information regarding the goings on in the community, get him drinks repeatedly, and even set out his clothes for him. All the while, he treats them without any respect or appreciation. Even after the two Chinese gentlemen go to much trouble attempting to answer the taipan's questions about the mystery grave, he rudely dismisses them by saying "All right. Get out" (287) once they have fulfilled the task he assigned them.

Later, the taipan's deepest feelings of intolerance for the Chinese become truly evident, after a long night of drinking and having woken up from a disturbing dream. "He felt a horror of the winding multidudinous streets of the Chinese city, and there was something ghastly and terrible in the convoluted roofs and temples with their devils grimacing and tortured" (288). At this point, more evidence of the taipan's "othering" becomes apparent. In fact, it seems that he finds the Chinese architecture and, more importantly, the religion, to be not merely "other," but actually horrible. The story even goes on to say, "He hated the country. China. Why had he ever come?" (288). Naturally, this query elicits a response from the reader, namely that the taipan had come in pursuit of his own selfish financial gain, which has clearly been a constant truth throughout the story. The taipan then becomes consumed with paranoia regarding his own death, and he continues to reveal his contempt for the Chinese. "He could not bear to be buried among all these yellow men, with their slanting eyes and their grinning faces" (288). At this point, the taipan's "othering" of the Chinese has descended into overt racism. He is not simply puzzled by the Chinese; he has actually come to despise them. The taipan realizes that he must leave China and writes a note to the head of his firm, telling him that he plans to return to England. At this point, however, it is too late, for the taipan is found dead the next morning, having apparently fallen to the same vice which killed so many of his former English colleagues: too much drink.

The text of "The Taipan" represents several aspects of colonialism through the character of the taipan. In many ways, he seems to serve as a personal representative of the force of the "colonizer" acting upon the "colonized." The taipan controls wealth, which, in turn, allows him to control property. He also controls language and communication, assuming that everyone around him should speak his language and supposing the Chinese are unintelligent and unintelligible when their attempts to cope with his language are unsuccessful. All this contributes to the taipan's purposeful "othering" of the Chinese, leading him to believe they are somehow essentially different from (and therefore, inferior to) himself and the rest of the English "colonizers." This "othering" effectively allows the taipan to treat the Chinese as inferior or subordinate. Therefore, he has a number of "boys," as he calls them, who serve his personal interests and endure his incivility in an attempt to share in some of the prosperity which the taipan and the English represent. Although the taipan and the English in the story are not truly colonizing China in a military or political sense, their presence there, driven by their own ambitions for personal profit, certainly proves to oppress the Chinese community in which they conduct their business.

Work Cited