

Battleground Hong Kong

Duncan Jepson's conspiracy thriller set in 2017 is smart and historically aware, writes David Bartram

Emperors Once More
by Duncan Jepson
Quercus
★★★★★

In *Emperors Once More*, Hong Kong author Duncan Jepson has merged the city's past and present to create a hypothetical future in which a murky underworld threatens to rise to the surface.

It's a little surprising that thriller writers have not mined Hong Kong for more material in the past: in many ways, it's the perfect backdrop for a high-octane mystery. There's glitz and glamour, but also windy streets, dark corners and a history of organised crime.

Whether Jepson's 2017 vision of Hong Kong – where a brutal murder never seems far away – is a dystopian nightmare or a worrying prediction is for debate.

The recent brutal attack on former *Ming Pao* editor Kevin Lau Chun-to might suggest the latter; it's certainly the type of incident that wouldn't look out of place in *Emperors Once More*.

As is traditional with modern-day thrillers, it's not enough for a hero to tackle mere murderers. Any killing must be part of a global conspiracy, and Jepson does not disappoint. He has set up an intriguing backdrop in which China has bailed out a debt-ridden Europe, only for Europe to default on the loan. It's a clever set-up because it taps into the genuine fears of the West over China's rise during the previous decade.

But the focus here is on the bubbling discontent on the mainland, which evokes familiar Chinese themes such as the century of humiliation and the need for the country to reassert itself on the world stage. It's not a million miles

from what one might read on a nationalist blog, or the pages of state-run newspapers such as *The Global Times*.

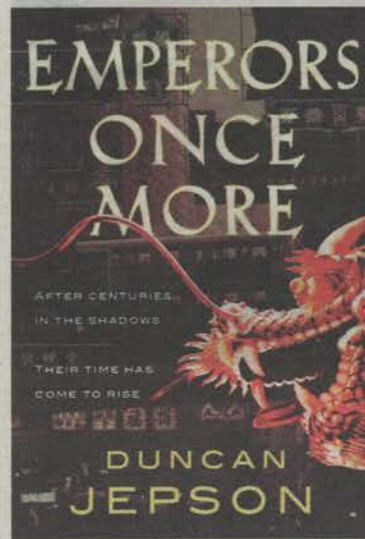
When two priests are killed by a sniper in Hong Kong, and then a container full of dead bodies is discovered, it falls upon Senior Inspector Alex Soong to investigate. Kicking off with the priests' murder is a clever touch from Jepson: it's a subtle nod to the Boxer Rebellion, the violent anti-Christian and anti-Western movement in China at the end of the 19th century and start of the 20th, which was crushed by an alliance of Western powers.

Soong is an intriguing hero who is also well versed in his country's history. Being the intuitive type, he soon suspects there may be more to the murders.

At times, Soong drifts dangerously close to the clichéd detective who must battle his own demons as well as the bad guys. But his background – an American-educated Hongkonger with mainland heritage – adds dimension to the character. Soong drives a Mustang and listens to Miles Davis; he also practises traditional martial arts. It may be a little crude, but it is



[Duncan Jepson] has set up an intriguing backdrop in which China has bailed out debt-ridden Europe, only for Europe to default on the loan



an effective way of embodying the clash between East and West which lies at the centre of the book.

Fortunately, Soong is an earnest character who becomes genuinely likable as the book progresses, particularly when dealing with a distant wife who only appears interested in buying expensive furniture. By the time the book reaches a climax – at a G8 meeting in Hong Kong, at which Soong is convinced that something terrible will happen – it's hard not to root for the police officer.

Jepson, a lawyer by day who has also worked as a writer, producer and director on films, certainly has an eye for the cinematic. The book is urgent and at times restless, much like its hero. Short chapters will keep the pages flicking, and the plot is thick enough to give the reader a working knowledge of modern Chinese history as they progress.

This is often done thrillingly, not least in a tense encounter between the detective and a mysterious villain, during which the villain seethes: "First opium, then religion, then political ideology, and now debt... must we consume every Western poison?"

It displays real confidence to take

on such a voice, boiling down 200-odd years of resentment into one well-versed putdown. But Jepson has the verve to pull it off. It's also a brave move to create baddies not too unlike the ultra-nationalists on the mainland. But he handles the characters with sensitivity, ensuring that the lines between good and evil are suitably blurred.

Emperors Once More is a dramatic change of pace from Jepson's debut novel, *All the Flowers in Shanghai*, a sweeping story set in 1930s Shanghai which was well received when it was released in 2011. Jepson has also co-written a graphic novel, *Darkness Outside the Night*, with Xie Peng, which won praise from Nobel laureate Mo Yan.

But in turning to the thriller genre, Jepson focuses on Hong Kong, where he lives and works. He has been clever to name-check many of the city's prominent streets and districts as Soong moves around trying to solve the case.

It may be an old trick, but anyone familiar with the city will nod in recognition. In one particularly evocative scene, he describes the Jockey Club in Happy Valley, which has fallen into a state of disrepair by 2017 as illegal gambling rings become more prevalent.

Jepson has also made sure to populate the city with a cast of minor characters which anyone who has lived here is bound to recognise. A particular favourite is Jenni Plum, a fashion blogger who manages to get Soong in trouble with both his boss and his wife.

Emperors Once More tackles some universal themes that should attract a following, even among those who have never visited our city. It is an ambitious and high-minded thriller that challenges the reader to consider the impact of the past on the West's future relationship with China.

As for Alex Soong, he'll be back on the case soon; Jepson is already working on a second instalment. thereview@scmp.com