

'Nepti' the Tiger's capture: from military mascot to 'wicked mother' and back again



1952



1956



2023

Abstract

My paper uses a range of archival objects to explore the characterisation of 'Nepti' the Tiger by British press outlets and museums. Nepti was originally the pet of a platoon of Gurkha troops who discovered her in the Malaysian rainforest in 1952 during a 12-year anti-colonial insurgency known as the Malayan 'Emergency'. She spent most of her life in London Zoo, where she became the focus of national media attention. In 1952, British tabloid newspapers celebrated her arrival in London but warned readers that the Nepti was losing her playful ways. Her growth was attributed to her preference for the British Army's dried milk, exemplifying its quality. When Nepti gave birth to cubs in 1956, news commentators interpreted her apathy (a common symptom of distress experienced by animals held in captivity) as a sign of her personal failure as a mother and called for foster mothers to replace her. In my paper, I situate this coverage against the backdrop of the Malayan 'Emergency' campaign. I suggest that, in the hands of British editors and news reporters, Nepti the Tiger became an allegory for the whole of Malaya and a focus for metropolitan fears that a prized colony was threatening to 'outgrow' its imperial master. In portraying Nepti as a negligent mother, defenders of the British Empire recycled an age-old colonial trope, picturing themselves as benevolent saviour figures and Malaysians as incapable of sovereignty. In my paper, I also explore the impact of imperial nostalgia on Nepti's legacy in present-day Britain. In recent years, Nepti the Tiger reappeared as the mascot of the Gurkha museum in Winchester. The museum offered young audiences a rose-tinted account of Nepti's story as part of their Gharma Siknu 'Learn at Home' animated YouTube series, released in 2022. Nepti the Tiger soft toys are available for purchase at the museum gift shop wearing a Gurkha beret adorned with the Cross Kurki badge. I conclude suggesting that a closer look at Nepti the Tiger's characterisation across time might add complexity to our knowledge and memory of the Malayan 'Emergency', a so-called 'forgotten war'.