

England and China: The Opium Wars, 1839-60

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The Opium Trade, Seventh through Nineteenth Centuries

The Anglo-Chinese Opium Wars were the direct result of China's isolationist and exclusionary trade policy with the West. Confucian China's attempts to exclude pernicious foreign ideas resulted in highly restricted trade. Prior to the 1830s, there was but one port open to Western merchants, Guangzhou (Canton) and but one commodity that the Chinese would accept in trade, silver. British and American merchants, anxious to address what they perceived as a trade imbalance, determined to import the one product that the Chinese did not themselves have but which an ever-increasing number of them wanted: opium. Before 1828, large quantities of the Spanish silver coin, the *Carolus*, flowed into China in payment for the exotic commodities that Europeans craved; in contrast, in the decade of the 1830s, despite an imperial decree outlawing the export of yellow gold and white silver, "only \$7,303,841 worth of silver was imported, whereas the silver exported was estimated at \$26,618,815 in the foreign silver coin, \$25,548,205 in sycee, and \$3,616,996 in gold" (Kuo, p. 51). although the Chinese imperial government had long prohibited the drug except for medicinal use, the "British Hong" (companies such as Dent, Jardine, and Matheson authorized to operate in Canton) bought cheaply produced opium in the Begal and Malwa (princely) districts under the auspices of the [British East India Company](#), the number 150 lb. chests of the narcotic being imported rising from 9,708 in 1820 to 35,445 in 1835. With the British government's 1833 cancellation of the trade monopoly enjoyed by the East India Company, cheap opium flooded the market, and China's net outflow of silver amounted to some 34 million Mexican silver dollars over the course of the 1830s.

67th Foot taking [a] fort. [Click on thumbnail for larger image/]



As the habit of [smoking opium spread](#) from the idle rich to ninety per cent of all Chinese males under the age of forty in the country's coastal regions, business activity was much reduced, the civil service ground to a halt, and the standard of living fell. The Emperor Dao guang's special anti-opium commissioner [Lin Ze-xu](#) (1785-1850), modestly estimated the number of his countrymen addicted to the drug to be 4 million, but a British physician practising in Canton set the figure at 12 million. Equally disturbing for the imperial government was the imbalance of trade with the West: whereas prior to 1810 Western nations had been spending 350 million Mexican silver dollars on porcelain, cotton, silks, brocades, and various grades of tea, by 1837 opium represented 57 per cent of Chinese imports, and for fiscal 1835-36 alone China exported 4.5 million silver dollars. The official sent in 1838 by the Emperor Dao guang (1821-1850) of the Qing Dynasty to confiscate and destroy all imports of opium, Lin Ze-xu, calculated that in fiscal 1839 Chinese opium smokers consumed 100 million taels' worth of the drug while the entire spending by the imperial government that year spent 40 million taels. He reportedly concluded, "If we continue to allow this trade to flourish, in a few dozen years we will find ourselves not only with no soldiers to resist the enemy, but also with no money to equip the army" quoted by Chesneaux et al., p. 55). By the late 1830s, foreign merchant vessels, notably those of Britain and the United States, were landing over 30,000 chests annually. Meantime, corrupt officials in the *hoppo* (customs office) and ruthless merchants in the port cities were accumulating wealth beyond "all the tea in China" by defying imperial interdictions that had existed in principle since 1796. The standard rate for an official's turning a blind eye to the importation of a single crate of opium was 80 taels. Between 1821 and 1837 the illegal importation of opium (theoretically a capital offence) increased five fold. A hotbed of vice, bribery, and disloyalty to the Emperor's authority, the opium port of Canton would be the flashpoint for the inevitable clash between the governments of China and Great Britain.

The Outbreak of the First Opium War

This war with China . . . really seems to me so wicked as to be a national sin of the greatest possible magnitude, and it distresses me very deeply. Cannot any thing be done by petition or otherwise to awaken men's minds to the dreadful guilt we are incurring? I really do not remember, in any history, of a war undertaken with such combined injustice and baseness. Ordinary wars of conquest are to me far less wicked, than to go to war in order to maintain smuggling, and that smuggling consisting in the introduction of a demoralizing drug, which the government of China wishes to keep out, and which we, for the lucre of gain, want to introduce by force; and in this quarrel are going to burn and slay in the pride of our supposed superiority. — [Thomas Arnold](#) to W. W. Hull, March 18, 1840

British merchants were frustrated by Chinese trade laws and refused to cooperate with Chinese legal officials because of their routine use of torture. Upon his arrival in Canton in March, 1839, the Emperor's special emissary, Lin Ze-xu, took swift action against the foreign merchants and their Chinese accomplices, making some 1,600 arrests and confiscating 11,000 pounds of opium. Despite attempts by the British superintendent of trade, Charles Elliot, to negotiate a compromise, in June Lin ordered the seizure another 20,000 crates of opium from foreign-controlled factories, holding all foreign merchants under arrest until they surrendered nine million dollars worth of opium, which he then had burned publicly. Finally, he ordered the



port of Canton closed to all foreign merchants. Elliot in turn ordered a blockade of the Pearl River. In an ensuing naval battle, described as a victory by Chinese propagandists, in November 1839 the Royal Navy sank a number of Chinese vessels near Guangzhou. By January 1841, the British had captured the Bogue forts at the Pearl's mouth and controlled the high ground above the port of Canton. Subsequently, British forces scored victories on land at Ningbo and Changhai, crushing the ill-equipped and poorly trained imperial forces with ease. Viewed as too moderate back at home, in August 1841 Elliot was replaced by Sir Henry Pottinger to launch a major offensive against Ningbo and Tiajin. By the end of June British forces occupied Zhenjiang and controlled the vast rice-growing lands of southern China.

The key to British victory was Her Majesty's Navy, which used the broadside with equal effect against wooden-hulled vessels, fortifications at river mouths, and city walls. The steel-hulled [Nemesis](#), a shallow-draft armed paddle-wheeler loaned to the campaign by the British East India Company, quickly controlled the river basins and the Pearl River between Hong Kong and Canton, regardless of winds or tides that limited the effectiveness of Chinese junks. On land, Chinese bows and primitive firelocks proved no match for British muskets and artillery. For leading the Royal Marines to victory General Anthony Blaxland Stransham was knighted by [Queen Victoria](#). His forces utterly defeated on land and sea, Lin Ze-xu in September 1840 had been recalled to Peking in disgrace, and Qi-shan, a Manchu aristocrat related to the Emperor, installed in Lin's place to deal with the foreign devils whose decisive victories were undermining the authority of the Qing Dynasty, which gradually lost control of a population of 300 million.

The Cost of Peace



Qi-shan's first major concession was to ransom Canton in the spring of 1841 from the British for six million silver dollars rather than try to defend it. By the middle of 1842, the British controlled the mouth of the Yangtze and Shanghai, and forced the Chinese to sign the first of a series of "unequal" treaties that turned control of much of the coast over to the West. While Chinese officials earnestly entreated Sir Henry Pottinger to cut the problem off at its source by recommending that the British government ban the cultivation of the poppy in India, Sir Henry argued that, as long as there remained substantial numbers of opium-addicts and corrupt customs officers in China, prohibiting the cultivation of opium in India "would merely throw the market into other hands" (cited by Ssu-Yu Teng, p. 70). Under the terms of the Treaty of Nanking (29 August 1842), signed as seems fitting now aboard a British warship at the mouth of the Yangtze, and a further "supplementary" treaty in 1843, China ceded the island of Hong Kong to Great Britain, opened five "Treaty" ports (Canton, Amoy, Foochow, Shanghai, and Ningbo) to Western trade and residence, granted Great Britain most-favoured nation status for trade, and paid nine million dollars in reparations to the merchants whose 20,000 chests of opium Lin Ze-xu had destroyed. China was compelled to abolish trading monopolies and limit tariffs to five per cent. Finally, and perhaps most important to China's loss of nationhood, the Manchu signatories accepted the principle of "[extraterritoriality](#)," whereby Western merchants were no longer accountable to China's laws, but rather to those of their mother countries. (In 1844, the United States and France extracted similar concessions from the imperial government, and the stage was set for the partition of the world's most populous nation by the numerically inferior but technologically superior Western powers.) No sooner had peace been negotiated than merchants began to hawk opium at fire-sale prices, and the conclusion of the Second Opium War (1856-58) removed all residual restraints on the trafficking of the drug as the Chinese themselves began poppy cultivation: by 1880, China was still importing 6,500 tons annually, but by 1900 it was producing some 22,000 tons itself.

The Second Opium War



The outbreak of fresh hostilities under such circumstances was almost inevitable because Chinese officials were extremely reluctant to enact the terms of the treaties of 1842-44. Since the French and Americans had extracted additional concessions since the signing of the Treaty of Nanking, including clauses about renegotiation after twelve years, Great Britain insisted upon exercising its "most-favoured nation status" in 1854. This time, the British demanded that China open all her ports to foreign trade, legalise the importation of opium from British possessions in India and Burma, exempt British goods from all import duties, and permit the establishment of a full embassy in Peking. For two years Qing court officials stalled, trying to buy time. However, events ran out of their control when on 8 October 1856 officials boarded the Chinese-registered but Hong Kong-based merchant vessel *Arrow*, which they suspected of involvement in both smuggling and piracy. The British trade officials naturally argued that as a foreign vessel the *Arrow's* activities did not fall under Chinese legal jurisdiction, and that therefore the sailors who had been arrested should be released under the extraterritoriality clause of the Treaty of Nanking.

Having dealt with the temporary distraction of the [Sepoy Mutiny](#) in India, in 1857 Great Britain dispatched forces to Canton in a coordinated operation with American warships. France, seething over the recent Chinese execution of a missionary, Father August Chapdelaine, joined Russia, the U. S. A., and Great Britain against China. However, a joint Anglo-French force, without other military assistance, under the command of Admiral Sir Michael Seymour, Lord Elgin, and Marshall Gros seized Canton late in 1857 after valiant but futile resistance by the city's citizens and Chinese soldiers. In May 1858, the Anglo-French naval taskforce captured the Taku forts near Tientsin (Tianjin), effectively ending hostilities. France, Russia, the United States, and Great Britain then forced China to agree to open eleven more major ports to Western trade under the terms of the Treaty of Tientsin (June 1858). When the Chinese once

again proved slow to enact the terms of the treaty, Britain order Admiral Sir James Hope to shell the Chinese forts at the mouth of the Peiho River in 1859. The Chinese capitulated, permitting all foreigners with passports to travel freely in China, and granting Chinese who converted to Christianity full property rights.

Since Chinese officials once again refused to enact a treaty provision, namely the establishment of Western embassies in Peking, an Anglo-French force launched a fresh offensive from Hong Kong in 1860, ultimately destroying the Emperor Xianfeng's Summer Palace in Chengde, and the Summer Palace and the Old Summer Palace in Peking amidst wide-spread looting by both troops and civilians.

Under the terms of the Convention of Peking, signed by Prince Gong, brother of the Emperor Xianfeng, on 18 October 1860, the ports of Hankou, Niuzhuang, Danshui, and Nanjing were opened to foreign vessels, as were the waters of the Yangtze, and foreign missionaries were free to proselytize. China had to pay further reparations, this time ten million taels, to each of France and Britain, and another two million taels to British merchants for destruction of property. Finally, China ceded the port of Kowloon to Great Britain, and agreed to permit the export of indentured Chinese labourers to the Americas. Arguably, without such a massive injection of cheap labour the transcontinental railways of the United States and Canada would not have been completed so quickly and economically. On the other hand, China's humiliation led directly to the fall of the Manchu Dynasty and the social upheavals that precipitated the Boxer Rebellion of 1900.

What had begun as a conflict of interests between English desire for profits from the trade in silk, porcelain, and tea and the Confucian ideal of self-sufficiency and exclusion of corrupting influences resulted in the partitioning of China by the Western powers (including the ceding of Hong Kong to Great Britain), humiliating defeats on land and sea by technologically and logistically superior Western forces, and the traditional values of an entire culture undermined by Christian missionaries and rampant trading in Turkish and Indian opium. No wonder the Boxer rebels' chief goal was to purify and reinvigorate their nation by the utter annihilation of all "foreign devils."

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