Opium Wars Information

Historical Background

## British Imperialism in the 19th Century

European imperialism in the 19th century involved territorial expansion and economic dominance. Imperialism relied upon the acquisition of cheap raw materials and secure markets overseas. Great Britain was the leading imperial power. The country profited from its relationship with territories in India, Africa, and China by maintaining a favorable balance of trade. Profits poured into Great Britain when the British sold more goods to foreign countries than they bought from them

**China and Imperialism**

In the early 19th century China was self-sufficient, reflecting its history as the dominant civilization in Asia. Chinese society had little desire, or need, for foreign goods. However, the Chinese profited from the sale of tea to Great Britain, so they allowed some British merchants access to the port of Canton.

## British Merchants in China

With the power of the British Empire behind them, British merchants in India and Africa had little concern for their safety. They enjoyed "extra territoriality," which means that they were exempt from local laws while living in a foreign country. In China, however, British merchants faced a different situation. Prior to the Opium War, the Qing dynasty believed that British merchants were required to obey Chinese law and could be arrested and detained according to Chinese legal procedures. British merchants were accustomed to the British legal system, with its limitations on search and seizure and jury trials. They grew uneasy about the strictness of Chinese imperial laws.

## Opium and the Balance of Trade

Opium is a drug derived from poppy plants. It can be used in medicine as a pain reliever. However, opium is also a narcotic that is highly addictive. The British grew opium in India and brought to China. Their purpose was to introduce a product that would allow Britain to sell more goods to China than it bought from China. Thus, the British would have a balance of trade that favored them.

The result was that by the mid-1830s, nearly two million Chinese had become addicted to opium. Realizing the dangers of this trade, the Qing dynasty outlawed the sale of opium in 1836. But through the black market, British merchants were able to sell increasing amounts of the drug. The Chinese Commissioner in Canton responded by arresting British merchants, confiscating opium, and demanding the British follow Chinese law. When Britain refused, the Chinese moved to bar all British trade. These actions led to the Opium War, and the British sent a fleet of war ships to China. Armed with vastly superior weapons, the British easily subdued Chinese forces.

Source: SAS Intitute INC. <http://www.sascurriculumpathways.com/portal/Launch?id=192>

Letter from Chinese Court to Queen Victoria of England

Source: <http://academic.brooklyn.cuny.edu/core9/phalsall/texts/com-lin.html>

[. . . ]Suppose there were people from another country who carried opium for sale to England and seduced your people into buying and smoking it; certainly your honorable ruler would deeply hate it and be bitterly aroused. We have heard heretofore that your honorable ruler is kind and benevolent. Naturally you would not wish to give unto others what you yourself do not want. We have also heard that the ships coming to Canton have all had regulations promulgated and given to them in which it is stated that it is not permitted to carry contraband goods. This indicates that the administrative orders of your honorable rule have been originally strict and clear. Only because the trading ships are numerous, heretofore perhaps they have not been examined with care. Now after this communication has been dispatched and you have clearly understood the strictness of the prohibitory laws of the Celestial Court, certainly you will not let your subjects dare again to violate the law.

We have further learned that in London, the capital of your honorable rule, and in Scotland, Ireland, and other places, originally no opium has been produced. Only in several places of India under your control such as Bengal, Madras, Bombay, Patna, Benares, and Malwa has opium been planted from hill to hill, and ponds have been opened for its manufacture. For months and years work is continued in order to accumulate the poison. The obnoxious odor ascends, irritating heaven and frightening the spirits. Indeed you, O King, can eradicate the opium plant in these places, hoe over the fields entirely, and sow in its stead the five grains [millet, barley, wheat, etc.]. Anyone who dares again attempt to plant and manufacture opium should be severely punished. This will really be a great, benevolent government policy that will increase the common weal and get rid of evil. For this, Heaven must support you and the spirits must bring you good fortune, prolonging your old age and extending your descendants. All will depend on this act.

As for the barbarian merchants who come to China, their food and drink and habitation, all received by the gracious favor of our Celestial Court. Their accumulated wealth is all benefit given with pleasure by our Celestial Court. They spend rather few days in their own country but more time in Canton. To digest clearly the legal penalties as an aid to instruction has been a valid principle in all ages. Suppose a man of another country comes to England to trade, he still has to obey the English laws; how much more should he obey in China the laws of the Celestial Dynasty?

Now we have set up regulations governing the Chinese people. He who sells opium shall receive the death penalty and he who smokes it also the death penalty. Now consider this: if the barbarians do not bring opium, then how can the Chinese people resell it, and how can they smoke it? The fact is that the wicked barbarians beguile the Chinese people into a death trap. How then can we grant life only to these barbarians? He who takes the life of even one person still has to atone for it with his own life; yet is the harm done by opium limited to the taking of one life only? Therefore in the new regulations, in regard to those barbarians who bring opium to China, the penalty is fixed at decapitation or strangulation. This is what is called getting rid a harmful thing on behalf of mankind.

Moreover we have found that in the middle of the second month of this year [April 9] Consul [Superintendent] Elliot of your nation, because the opium prohibition law was very stern and severe, petitioned for an extension of the time limit. He requested an extension of five months for India and its adjacent harbors and related territories, and ten months for England proper, after which they would act in conformity with the new regulations. Now we, the commissioner and others, have memorialized and have received the extraordinary Celestial grace of His Majesty the Emperor, who has redoubled his consideration and compassion. All those who from the period of the coming one year (from England) or six months (from India) bring opium to China by mistake, but who voluntarily confess and completely surrender their opium, shall be exempt from their punishment. After this limit of time, if there are still those who bring opium to China then they will plainly have committed a willful violation and shall at once be executed according to law, with absolutely no clemency or pardon. This may be called the height of kindness and the perfection of justice.

Our Celestial Dynasty rules over and supervises the myriad states, and surely possesses unfathomable spiritual dignity. Yet the Emperor cannot bear to execute people without having first tried to reform them by instruction. Therefore he especially promulgates these fixed regulations. The barbarian merchants of your country, if they wish to do business for a prolonged period, are required to obey our statues respectfully and to cut off permanently the source of opium. They must by no means try to test the effectiveness of the law with their lives. May you, O King, check your wicked and sift your wicked people before they come to China, in order to guarantee the peace of your nation, to show further the sincerity of your politeness and submissiveness, and to let the two countries enjoy together the blessings of peace How fortunate, how fortunate indeed! After receiving this dispatch will you immediately give us a prompt reply regarding the details and circumstances of your cutting off the opium traffic? Be sure not to put this off. The above is what has to be communicated.

## The Opium War, 1839-42

## Source: <http://www-chaos.umd.edu/history/modern.html#opium>

During the eighteenth century, the market in Europe and America for tea, a new drink in the West, expanded greatly. Additionally, there was a continuing demand for Chinese silk and porcelain. But China, still in its preindustrial stage, wanted little that the West had to offer, causing the Westerners, mostly British, to incur an unfavorable balance of trade. To remedy the situation, the foreigners developed a third-party trade, exchanging their merchandise in India and Southeast Asia for raw materials and semiprocessed goods, which found a ready market in Guangzhou. By the early nineteenth century, raw cotton and opium () from India had become the staple British imports into China, in spite of the fact that opium was prohibited entry by imperial decree. The opium traffic was made possible through the connivance of profit-seeking merchants and a corrupt bureaucracy.

In 1839 the Qing government, after a decade of unsuccessful anti-opium campaigns, adopted drastic prohibitory laws against the opium trade. The emperor dispatched a commissioner, Lin Zexu ( 1785-1850), to Guangzhou to suppress illicit opium traffic. Lin seized illegal stocks of opium owned by Chinese dealers and then detained the entire foreign community and confiscated and destroyed some 20,000 chests of illicit British opium. The British retaliated with a punitive expedition, thus initiating the first Anglo-Chinese war, better known as the Opium War (1839-42). Unprepared for war and grossly underestimating the capabilities of the enemy, the Chinese were disastrously defeated, and their image of their own imperial power was tarnished beyond repair. The Treaty of Nanjing (1842), signed on board a British warship by two Manchu imperial commissioners and the British plenipotentiary, was the first of a series of agreements with the Western trading nations later called by the Chinese the "unequal treaties." Under the Treaty of Nanjing, China ceded the island of [Hong Kong](http://www.ha.org.hk/overview/hk.htm) ( or Xianggang in pinyin) to the British; abolished the licensed monopoly system of trade; opened 5 ports to British residence and foreign trade; limited the tariff on trade to 5 percent ad valorem; granted British nationals extraterritoriality (exemption from Chinese laws); and paid a large indemnity. In addition, Britain was to have most-favored-nation treatment, that is, it would receive whatever trading concessions the Chinese granted other powers then or later. The Treaty of Nanjing set the scope and character of an unequal relationship for the ensuing century of what the Chinese would call "national humiliations." The treaty was followed by other incursions, wars, and treaties that granted new concessions and added new privileges for the foreigners.



Source: <http://oparator.com/7star/OPIUM.HTM>

 By the 1830's, the English had become the major drug-trafficking criminal organization in the world; very few drug cartels of the twentieth century can even touch the England of the early nineteenth century in sheer size of criminality. Growing opium in India, the East India Company shipped *tons* of opium into Canton which it traded for Chinese manufactured goods and for tea. This trade had produced, quite literally, a country filled with drug addicts, as opium parlors proliferated all throughout China in the early part of the nineteenth century. This trafficking, it should be stressed, was a criminal activity after 1836, but the British traders generously bribed Canton officials in order to keep the opium traffic flowing. The effects on Chinese society were devastating. In fact, there are few periods in Chinese history that approach the early nineteenth century in terms of pure human misery and tragedy. In an effort to stem the tragedy, the imperial government made opium illegal in 1836 and began to aggressively close down the opium dens.

#### Lin Tse-hsü

   The key player in the prelude to war was a brilliant and highly moral official named Lin Tse-hsü. Deeply concerned about the opium menace, he maneuvered himself into being appointed Imperial Commissioner at Canton. His express purpose was to cut off the opium trade at its source by rooting out corrupt officials and cracking down on British trade in the drug.

   He took over in March of 1839 and within two months, absolutely invulnerable to bribery and corruption; he had taken action against Chinese merchants and Western traders and shut down all the traffic in opium. He destroyed all the existing stores of opium and, victorious in his war against opium, he composed a letter to Queen Victoria of England requesting that the British cease all opium trade. His letter included the argument that, since Britain had made opium trade and consumption illegal in England because of its harmful effects, it should not export that harm to other countries. Trade, according to Lin, should only be in beneficial objects.

   To be fair to England, if the only issue on the table were opium, the English probably (just probably) would have acceded to Lin's request. The British, however, had been nursing several grievances against China, and Lin's take-no-prisoners enforcement of Chinese laws combined to outrage the British against his decapitation of the opium trade. The most serious bone of contention involved treaty relations; because the British refused to submit to the emperor, there were no formal treaty relations between the two countries. The most serious problem precipitated by this lack of treaty relations involved the relationship between foreigners and Chinese law. The British, on principle, refused to hand over British citizens to a Chinese legal system that they felt was vicious and barbaric. The Chinese, equally principled, demanded that all foreigners who were accused of committing crimes on Chinese soil were to be dealt with solely by Chinese officials. In many ways, this was the real issue of the Opium War. In addition to enforcing the opium laws, Lin aggressively pursued foreign nationals accused of crimes.

   The English, despite Lin's eloquent letter, refused to back down from the opium trade. In response, Lin threatened to cut off all trade with England and expel all English from China. Thus began the Opium War.

#### The War

   War broke out when Chinese junks attempted to turn back English merchant vessels in November of 1839; although this was a low-level conflict, it inspired the English to send warships in June of 1840. The Chinese, with old-style weapons and artillery, were no match for the British gunships, which ranged up and down the coast shooting at forts and fighting on land. The Chinese were equally unprepared for the technological superiority of the British land armies, and suffered continual defeats. Finally, in 1842, the Chinese were forced to agree to an [] peace under the Treaty of Nanking.

   The treaty imposed on the Chinese was weighted entirely to the British side. Its first and fundamental demand was for British "extraterritoriality"; all British citizens would be subjected to British, not Chinese, law if they committed any crime on Chinese soil. The British would no longer have to pay tribute to the imperial administration in order to trade with China, and they gained five open ports for British trade: Canton, Shanghai, Foochow, Ningpo, and Amoy. No restrictions were placed on British trade, and, as a consequence, opium trade more than doubled in the three decades following the Treaty of Nanking. The treaty also established England as the "most favored nation" trading with China; this clause granted to Britain any trading rights granted to other countries. Two years later, China, against its will, signed similar treaties with France and the United States.

   Lin Tse-hsü was officially disgraced for his actions in Canton and was sent to a remote appointment in Turkestan. Of all the imperial officials, however, Lin was the first to realize the momentous lesson of the Opium War. In a series of letters he began to agitate the imperial government to adopt Western technology, arms, and methods of warfare. He was first to see that the war was about technological superiority; his influence, however, had dwindled to nothing, so his admonitions fell on deaf ears.

   It wasn't until a second conflict with England that Chinese officials began to take seriously the adoption of Western technologies. Even with the Treaty of Nanking, trade in Canton and other ports remained fairly restricted; the British were incensed by what they felt was clear treaty violations. The Chinese, for their part, were angered at the wholesale export of Chinese nationals to America and the Caribbean to work at what was no better than slave labor. These conflicts came to a head in 1856 in a series of skirmishes that ended in 1860. A second set of treaties further humiliated and weakened the imperial government. The most ignominious of the provisions in these treaties was the complete legalization of opium and the humiliating provision that allowed for the free and unrestricted propagation of Christianity in all regions of China.