

The First Opium War

The Anglo-Chinese War of 1839-1842

Essay by Peter C. Perdue

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Opium clipper "Water Witch" (1831)

National Maritime Museum, London
[1831_WaterWitch_PW7719_nmm]

THE OPIUM TRADE

Introduction

The Opium Wars of 1839 to 1842 and 1856 to 1860 marked a new stage in China's relations with the West. China's military defeats in these wars forced its rulers to sign treaties opening many ports to foreign trade. The restrictions imposed under the Canton system were abolished. Opium, despite imperial prohibitions, now became a regular item of trade. As opium flooded into China, its price dropped, local consumption increased rapidly, and the drug penetrated all levels of society. In the new treaty ports, foreign traders collaborated with a greater variety of Chinese merchants than under the Canton system, and they ventured deeply into the Chinese interior. Missionaries brought Christian teachings to villagers, protected by the diplomatic rights obtained under the treaties. Popular hostility to the new foreigners began to rise.

Not surprisingly, Chinese historians have regarded the two Opium Wars as unjust impositions of foreign power on the weakened Qing empire. In the 20th century, the Republic of China made strenuous efforts to abolish what it called "unequal treaties." It succeeded in removing most of them in World War II, but this phase of foreign imperialism only ended completely with the reversion of Hong Kong to China in 1997. Conventional textbooks even date the beginning of modern Chinese history from the end of the first Opium War in 1842.

Although the wars, opium trade, and treaties did reflect superior Western military force, focusing only on Western impositions on China gives us too narrow a picture of this period. This was not only a time of Western and Chinese conflict over trade, but a time of great global transformation in which China played one important role. The traders in opium included Britain, the U.S., Turkey, India, and Southeast Asia as well as domestic Chinese merchants. The origins of opium consumption in China are very old, and its first real boom as an item of consumption began after tobacco was introduced from the New World in the 16th century and Chinese smokers took a fancy to mixing it with the drug.

The Qing court was not in principle hostile to useful trade. In 1689 and 1727, the court had negotiated treaties with Russia to exchange furs from Siberia for tea, and allowed the Russians to live in a foreigners' guest house in Beijing. Qing merchants and officials also traded extensively with Central Eurasian merchants from Bukhara and the Kazakh nomads for vital supplies of wool, horses, and meat. The court knew well the value of the southern coastal trade as well, since revenues from the Canton trade went directly into the Imperial Household department.

The Opium Wars are rightly named: it was not trade per se but rather unrestricted drug trade by the Western powers, particularly Britain, that precipitated them. As the wars unfolded, however, it became clear that far more than opium was ultimately involved. The very nature of China's hitherto aloof relationship with the world was profoundly challenged, and long decades of internal upheaval lay ahead.

Tensions Under the Canton Trade System

Under the system established by the Qing dynasty to regulate trade in the 18th century, Western traders were restricted to conducting trade through the southern port of Canton (Guangzhou). They could only reside in the city in a limited space, including their warehouses; they could not bring their families; and they could not stay there more a few months of the year. Qing officials closely supervised trading relations, allowing only licensed merchants from Western countries to trade through a monopoly guild of Chinese merchants called the Cohong. Western merchants could not contact Qing officials directly, and there were no formal diplomatic relations between China and Western countries. The Qing emperor regarded trade as a form of tribute, or gifts given to him personally by envoys who expressed gratitude for his benevolent rule.



Canton, where the business of trade was primarily conducted during this period, is depicted on this fan created for the foreign market. Seven national flags fly from the Western headquarters that line the shore.

Chinese Fan with Foreign Factories at Canton, 1790–1800

Peabody Essex Museum [cwOF_1790c_E80202_fan]

Western traders, for their part, mainly conducted trade through licensed monopoly companies, like Britain's East India Company and the Dutch VOC. Despite these restrictions, both sides learned how to make profits by cooperating with each other. The Chinese hong merchants, the key intermediaries between the foreign traders and the officials, developed close relations with their Western counterparts, instructing them on how to conduct their business without antagonizing the Chinese bureaucracy.

As the volume of trade grew, however, the British demanded greater access to China's markets. Tea exports from China grew from 92,000 pounds in 1700 to 2.7 million pounds in 1751. By 1800 the East India Company was buying 23 million pounds of tea per year at a cost of 3.6 million pounds of silver. Concerned that the China trade was draining silver out of England, the British searched for a counterpart commodity to trade for tea and porcelain. They found it in opium, which they planted in large quantities after they had taken Bengal, in India, in 1757.

British merchants blamed the restrictions of the Canton trade for the failure to export enough goods to China to balance their imports of tea and porcelain. Thus, Lord George Macartney's mission to the court in Beijing in 1793 aimed to promote British trade by creating direct ties between the British government and the emperor. Macartney, however, portrayed his embassy as a tribute mission to celebrate the emperor's birthday. He had only one man with him who could speak Chinese.

When he tried to raise the trade question, after following the tribute rituals, Macartney's demands were rejected. His gifts of astronomical instruments, intended to impress the Qing emperor with British technological skills, in fact did not look very impressive: the emperor had already received similar items from Jesuits in earlier decades. Macartney's failure, and the failure of a later mission (the Amherst embassy) in 1816, helped to convince the British that only force would induce the Qing government to open China's ports.

Opium Clippers & the Expanding Drug Trade



Opium routes between British-controlled India and China

[map_OpRoutes_BrEmpire21_234-5]

New fast sailing vessels called clipper ships, built with narrow decks, large sail areas, and multiple masts, first appeared in the Pacific in the 1830s and greatly stimulated the tea trade. They carried less cargo than the bulky East Indiamen, but could bring fresh teas to Western markets much faster. Clipper ships also proved very convenient for smuggling opium, and were openly and popularly identified as "opium clippers." Ships like the *Red Rover* could bring opium quickly from Calcutta to Canton, doubling their owners' profits by making two voyages a year.

At Canton, Qing prohibitions had forced the merchants to withdraw from Macao (Macau) and Whampoa and retreat to Lintin island, at the entrance of the Pearl River, beyond the jurisdiction of local officials. There the merchants received opium shipments from India and handed the chests over to small Chinese junks and rowboats called "fast crabs" and "scrambling dragons," to be distributed at small harbors along the coast. The latter local smuggling boats were sometimes propelled by as many as twenty or more oars on each side.



The Pearl River Delta

[map_MouthCantonRiver_p79747]

The major India source of British opium bound for China was Patna in Bengal, where the drug was processed and packed into chests holding about 140 pounds. The annual flow to China was around 4,000 chests by 1790, and a little more than double this by the early 1820s. Imports began to increase rapidly in the 1830s, however, as "free trade" agitation gained strength in Britain and the East India Company's monopoly over the China trade approached its termination date (in 1834). The Company became more dependent than ever on opium revenue, while private merchants hastened to increase their stake in the lucrative trade. On the eve of the first Opium War, the British were shipping some 40,000 chests to China annually. By this date, it was estimated that there were probably around ten million opium smokers in China, two million of them addicts. (American merchants shipped around 10,000 chests between 1800 to 1839.)

OPIUM IMPORTS TO CHINA FROM INDIA

(1 chest = approximately 140 pounds)

1773	1,000 chests
1790	4,000 chests
early 1820s	10,000 chests
1828	18,000 chests
1839	40,000 chests
1865	76,000 chests
1884	81,000 chests (peak)

Source: Jonathan Spence, *Chinese Roundabout* (Norton, 1992), pp. 233-35



"The Opium Ships at Lintin in China, 1824"

Print based on a painting by "W. J. Huggins, Marine Painter to His late Majesty William the 4th"

National Maritime Museum
[1824_PZ0240_Lintin_nmm]



In 1831, it was estimated that between 100 and 200 “fast crab” smuggling boats were operating in the waters around Lintin Island, the rendezvous point for opium imports. Ranging from 30 to 70 feet in length, with crews of upwards of 50 or 60 men, these swift rowboats could put on sail for additional speed. They were critical in navigating China’s often shallow rivers and delivering opium to the interior.

“Fast Boat or Smuggler,” from Captain E. Belcher, Narrative of a Voyage Round the World (1843), p. 238

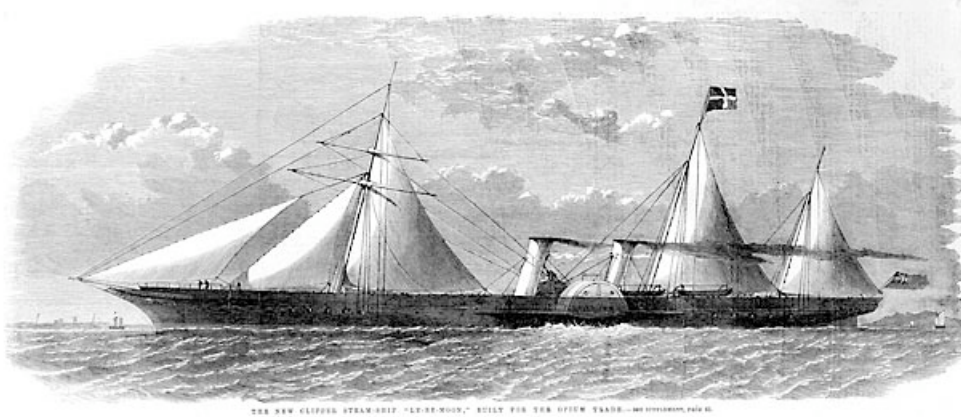
[1843_belcher_238_FastBoat]



“The ‘Streatham’ and the opium clipper ‘Red Rover’”

The Streatham, an East India Company ship, is shown at anchor in the Hooghly River, Calcutta. Near the bank, the Red Rover, the first of the “opium clippers,” sits with her sails lowered. Built for speed, the Red Rover doubled the profits of her owners by completing two Calcutta-to-China smuggling voyages a year.

[BHC3580_opiumcl_nmm.jpg]



"The new clipper steam-ship "LY-EE-MOON," built for the opium trade," Illustrated London News, ca. 1859

A quarter century after revolutionizing the drug trade, the celebrated "opium clippers" had begun to undergo a further revolution with the addition of coal-fueled, steam-driven paddle wheels. This illustration appeared in the Illustrated London News in 1859, two decades after the first Opium War began.

[1800s_LyEeMoonILN_Britannca]

Mandarins, Merchants & Missionaries

The opium trade was so vast and profitable that all kinds of people, Chinese and foreigners, wanted to participate in it. Wealthy literati and merchants were joined by people of lower classes who could now afford cheaper versions of the drug. Hong merchants cooperated with foreign traders to smuggle opium when they could get away with it, bribing local officials to look the other way. Smugglers, peddlers, secret societies, and even banks in certain areas all became complicit in the drug trade.



Chinese Mandarins, Illustrated London News, November 12, 1842

[iln_1842_174_mandarins_012b]



Three paintings of the Chinese hong merchants (details)

Left Howqua, by George Chinnery, 1830

Middle Mowqua, by Lam Qua, 1840s

Right Tenqua, by Lam Qua, ca. 1840s

Peabody Essex Museum

[cwPT_1830_howqua_chinnery] [cwPT_1840s_ct79_Mouqua]

[cwPT_1840s_ct78_Tenqua]

Opium, as an illegal commodity, brought in no customs revenue, so local officials exacted fees from merchants. Even missionaries who deplored the opium trade on moral grounds commonly found themselves drawn into it, or dependent on it, in one form or another. They relied on the opium clippers for transportation and communication, for example, and used merchants dealing in opium as their bankers and money changers. Karl Gützlaff (1803–1851), a Protestant missionary from Pomerania who was an exceptionally gifted linguist, gained a modicum of both fame and notoriety by becoming closely associated with the opium trade and then serving the British in the Opium War—not just as an interpreter, but also as an administrator in areas occupied by the foreign forces.



The missionary Karl Gützlaff (often anglicized as Carl or Charles Gutzlaff), who served as an interpreter for the British in the first Opium War, was well known for frequently pursuing his religious calling while dressed in native garb.

Portrait of Gützlaff (inscribed) on the frontispiece of his 1834 book, A Sketch of Chinese History: Ancient and Modern.

[1834_Gutzlaff_SHG_fronE38B]

*My most obedient servant
Ch Gutzlaff*

George Chinnery's sketch of "Revd. Charles Gutzlaff, Missionary," done in 1832 [right], found later incarnation in a lithograph captioned "Revd. Chas. Gutzlaff, Missionary to China in the Dress of a Fokien Sailor" (below)



Peabody Essex Museum
[1832_M976541_Gutzlaff_pem]

Wikimedia Commons
Karl_Gutzlaff.jpg
[d_1800s_KarlGutzlaff_FujianCostume_wp]



*Revd. Chas. Gutzlaff
Missionary to China,
in the Dress of a Fokien Sailor.*

The Daoguang Emperor & Commissioner Lin

By the 1830s, up to 20 percent of central government officials, 30 percent of local officials, and 30 percent of low-level officials regularly consumed opium. The Daoguang emperor (r. 1821–50) himself was an addict, as were most of his court.

As opium infected the Qing military forces, however, the court grew alarmed at its insidious effects on national defense. Opium imports also appeared to be the cause of massive outflows of silver, which destabilized the currency. While the court repeatedly issued edicts demanding punishment of opium dealers, local officials accepted heavy bribes to ignore them. In 1838, one opium dealer was strangled at Macao, and eight chests of opium were seized in Canton. Still the emperor had not yet resolved to take truly decisive measures.



“The Imperial Portrait of a Chinese Emperor called Daoguang”

Wikimedia Commons
[Emperor_Daoguang_wp]

This portrait of the Daoguang emperor Mianqing appeared as the frontispiece in volume one of John Elliot Bingham’s 1843 account Narrative of the Expedition to China. Bingham, a naval commander, fought in key battles in the first Opium War.

[Emperor_Bingham_frontis_gb]





Titled "Mien-Ning, Late Emperor of China," this posthumous depiction appeared in The Illustrated Magazine of Art in 1853, some three years after the emperor's death. Although copied from a portrait painted by a Chinese court artist, such realistic likenesses of the emperor were withheld from the Chinese public.

*"Mien-Ning,
Late Emperor of China,"
The Illustrated Magazine of Art,
Volume 1, 1853*

[1853_MienNing_EmpChina_IllMagArt_gb]

As opium flooded the country despite imperial prohibitions, the court debated its response. On one side, officials concerned about the economic costs of the silver drain and the social costs of addiction argued for stricter prohibitions, aimed not only at Chinese consumers and dealers but also at the foreign importers. On the other side, a mercantile interest including southern coastal officials allied with local traders promoted legalization and taxation of the drug. Debate raged within court circles in the early 1800s as factions lined up patrons and pushed their favorite policies.

Ultimately, the Daoguang emperor decided to support hardliners who called for complete prohibition, sending the influential official Lin Zexu to Canton in 1839. Lin was a morally upright, energetic official, who detested the corruption and decadence created by the opium trade. He had served in many important provincial posts around the empire and gained a reputation for impartiality and dedication to the welfare of the people he governed. In July 1838 he sent a memorial to the emperor supporting drastic measures to suppress opium use. He outlined a systematic policy to destroy the sources and equipment supporting drug use, and began putting this policy into effect in the provinces of Hubei and Hunan. After 19 audiences with the emperor, he was appointed Imperial Commissioner with full powers to end the opium trade in Canton. He arrived in Canton in March, 1839.

Although Lin's vigorous attempt to suppress the opium trade ultimately ended in disastrous war and personal disgrace, he is remembered a great and incorruptible patriot eminently deserving of the nickname he had enjoyed before his appointment as an Imperial Commissioner in Canton: "Lin the Blue Sky." Portraits of him by Chinese artists at the time vary in style, but all convey the impression of a man of wisdom and integrity. Today, statues in and even outside China pay homage to the redoubtable commissioner.

Right Commissioner Lin in scholar's robe

Yale University, Sterling Memorial Library
[1800s_LinZexu_yale]



*Left Lin Zexu
from Zhonggou Jindaishi Cankao Tulu*

Wikimedia Commons
[1800s_LinZexu_Zhong]



*Right Lin Zexu
painting by either Lamqua or Tinqu*

Wikimedia Commons
[d_1800s_Lin_Zexu_wm]



*Left Lin Zexu, published 1843
From a drawing by a native artist in
the possession of Lady Strange*

Beinecke Library, Yale University
[1800s_LinZexu_3454-001_yale]






Statues of Commissioner Lin can be found today in many places around the world, including Canton, Fuzhou, Hong Kong, Macao, and, pictured here, Chatham Square in New York City's Chinatown.

Wikimedia Commons
[Lin_ChathamSquare_NYC]

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