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# THE OPIUM WARS IN CHINA

In the mid-1800s, China fought and lost two wars against European powers. This defeat ushered in a “century of humiliation” that remains prominent in Chinese historical memory.

## OVERVIEW

The Opium Wars in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century were a critical juncture in modern Chinese history. The first Opium War was fought between China and Great Britain from 1839 to 1842. In the second Opium War, from 1856 to 1860, a weakened China fought both Great Britain and France. China lost both wars. The terms of its defeat were a bitter pill to swallow: China had to cede the territory of Hong Kong to British control, open treaty ports to trade with foreigners, and grant special rights to foreigners operating within the treaty ports. In addition, the Chinese government had to stand by as the British increased their opium sales to people in China. The British did this in the name of free trade and without regard to the consequences for the Chinese government and Chinese people.

The lesson that Chinese students learn today about the Opium Wars is that China should never again let itself become weak, 'backward,' and vulnerable to other countries. As one British historian says, "If you talk to many Chinese about the Opium War, a phrase you will quickly hear is '*luo hou jiu yao ai da*,' which literally means that if you are backward, you will take a beating."<sup>1</sup>

## TWO WORLDS COLLIDE: THE FIRST OPIUM WAR

In the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, western imperial powers such as Great Britain, France, and the United States were aggressively expanding their influence around the world through their economic and military strength and by spreading religion, mostly through the activities of Christian missionaries. These countries embraced the idea of free trade, and their militaries had become so powerful that they could impose such ideas on others. In one sense, China was relatively effective in responding to this foreign encroachment; unlike its neighbours, including present-day India, Burma (now Myanmar), Malaya (now Malaysia), Indonesia, and Vietnam, China did not become a full-fledged, formal colony of the West. In addition, Confucianism, the system of beliefs that shaped and organized China's culture, politics, and society for centuries, was secular (that is, not based on a religion or belief in a god) and therefore was not necessarily an obstacle to science and modernity in the ways that Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism sometimes were in other parts of the world.

But in another sense, China was not effective in responding to the "modern" West with its growing industrialism, mercantilism, and military strength. Nineteenth-century China was a large, mostly land-based empire (see Map 1), administered by a c. 2,000-year-old bureaucracy and dominated by centuries-old and conservative Confucian ideas of political, social, and economic management. All of these things made China, in some ways, dramatically different from the European powers of the day, and it struggled to deal effectively with their encroachment. This ineffectiveness resulted in, or at least added to, longer-term problems for China, such as unequal treaties (which will be described later), repeated foreign military invasions, massive internal rebellions, internal political fights, and social upheaval. While the first Opium

War of 1839–42 did not cause the eventual collapse of China's 5,000-year imperial dynastic system seven decades later, it did help shift the balance of power in Asia in favour of the West.



#### OPIUM AND THE WEST'S EMBRACE OF FREE TRADE

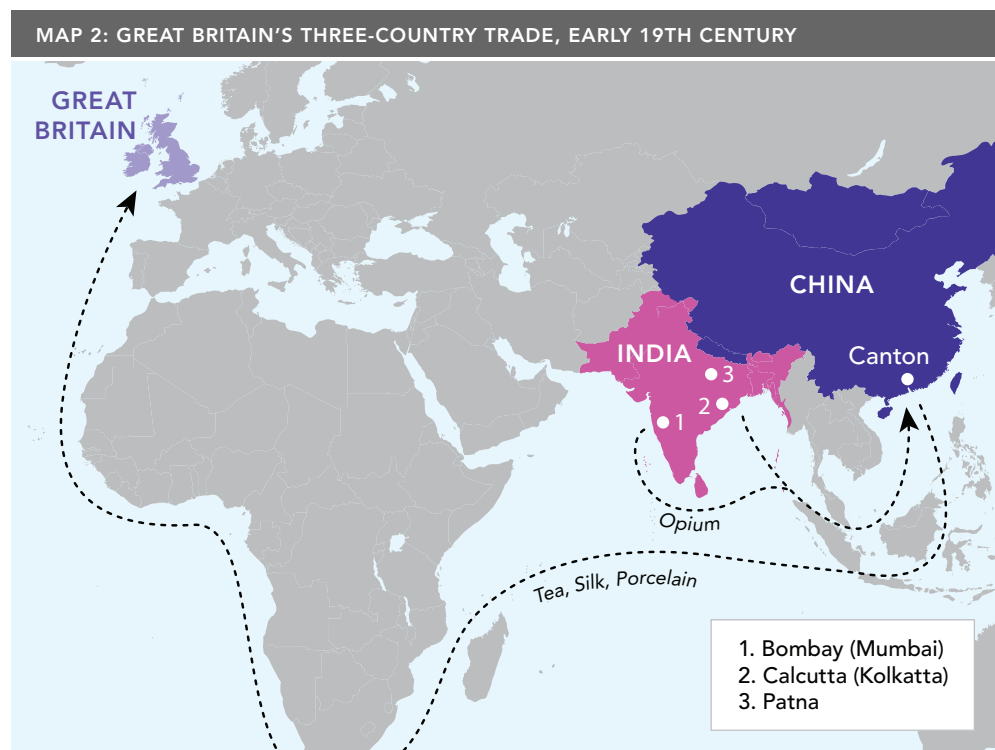
In the decades leading up to the first Opium War, trade between China and the West took place within the confines of the Canton System, based in the southern Chinese city of Guangzhou (also referred to as Canton). An earlier version of this system had been put in place by China under the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644), and further developed by its replacement, the Qing Dynasty, also known as the Manchu Dynasty. (The Manchus were the ethnic group that ruled China during the Qing period.) In the year 1757, the Qing emperor ordered that Guangzhou/Canton would be the only Chinese port that would be opened to trade with foreigners, and that trade could take place only through licensed Chinese merchants. This effectively restricted foreign trade and subjected it to regulations imposed by the Chinese government.

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#### KEY TERMS

**CANTON SYSTEM:** This system, which lasted from the 17<sup>th</sup> century to the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, restricted China's foreign trade to the southern Chinese city of Guangzhou (also known as Canton). Under this system, China subjected all trade with foreign countries to rules imposed by the Imperial Chinese government. Its ability to impose and enforce these rules reflected China's strength at the time.

For many years, Great Britain worked within this system to run a three-country trade operation: It shipped Indian cotton and British silver to China, and Chinese tea and other Chinese goods to Britain (see Map 2). In the 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, the balance of trade was heavily in China's favour. One major reason was that British consumers had developed a strong liking for Chinese tea, as well as other goods like porcelain and silk. But Chinese consumers had no similar preference for any goods produced in Britain. Because of this trade imbalance, Britain increasingly had to use silver to pay for its expanding purchases of Chinese goods. In the late 1700s, Britain tried to alter this balance by replacing cotton with opium, also grown in India. In economic terms, this was a success for Britain; by the 1820s, the balance of trade was reversed in Britain's favour, and it was the Chinese who now had to pay with silver.

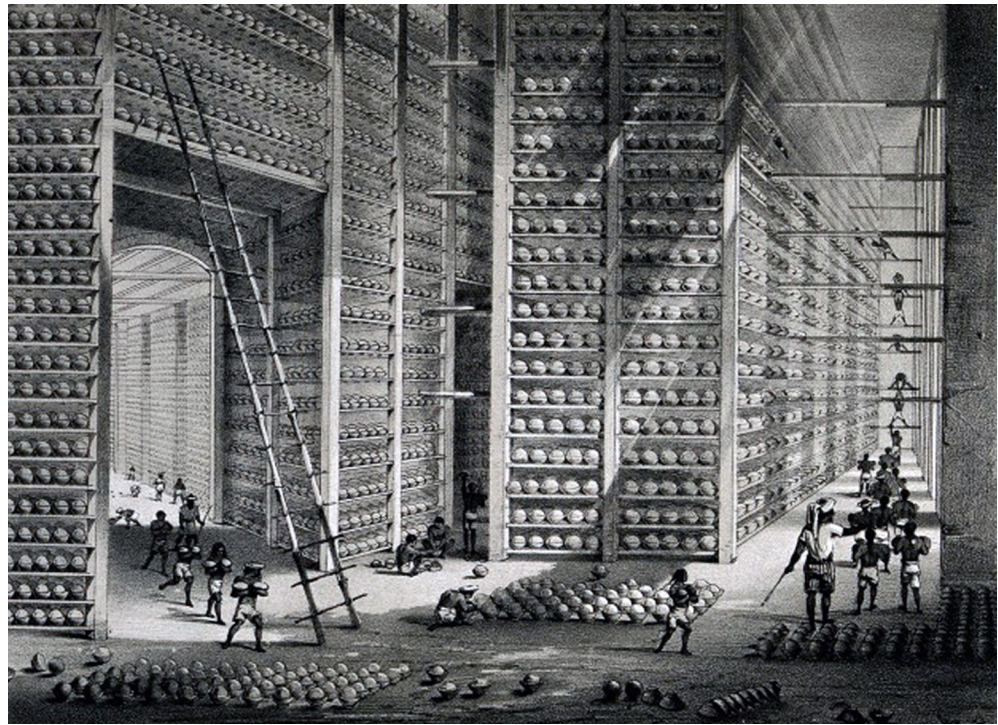


Source: Peter C. Perdue, "The First Opium War: The Anglo-Chinese War of 1839-1842," MIT Visualizing Cultures, [https://ocw.mit.edu/ans7870/21f/21f.027/opium\\_wars\\_01/ow1\\_essay01.html](https://ocw.mit.edu/ans7870/21f/21f.027/opium_wars_01/ow1_essay01.html)

### IMAGE 1

A “stacking room” in an opium factory in Patna, India. On the shelves are balls of opium that were part of Britain’s trade with China.

*Pictures from History/  
Granger, NYC*



### THE SCOURGE AND PROFIT OF OPIUM

The opium that the British sold in China was made from the sap of poppy plants, and had been used for medicinal and sometimes recreational purposes in China and other parts of Eurasia for centuries. After the British colonized large parts of India in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the British East India Company, which was created to take advantage of trade with East Asia and India, invested heavily in growing and processing opium, especially in the eastern Indian province of Bengal. In fact, the British developed a profitable monopoly over the cultivation of opium that would be shipped to and sold in China.

By the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, more and more Chinese were smoking British opium as a recreational drug. But for many, what started as recreation soon became a punishing addiction: many people who stopped ingesting opium suffered chills, nausea, and cramps, and sometimes died from withdrawal. Once addicted, people would often do almost anything to continue to get access to the drug. The Chinese government recognized that opium was becoming a serious social problem and, in the year 1800, it banned both the production and the importation of opium. In 1813, it went a step further by outlawing the smoking of opium and imposing a punishment of beating offenders 100 times.

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### KEY TERMS

**BRITISH EAST INDIA COMPANY:** The company was founded in 1600 and acted as an agent of British imperialism in the country’s trade with India and East Asia. It was known to be aggressive in dealing with China, especially in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and its actions helped to expand British influence there.



## IMAGE 2

Opium smoking  
in China

*adoc-photos/Corbis  
via Getty Images*

In response, the British East India Company hired private British and American traders to transport the drug to China. Chinese smugglers bought the opium from British and American ships anchored off the Guangzhou coast and distributed it within China through a network of Chinese middlemen. By 1830, there were more than 100 Chinese smugglers' boats working the opium trade. This reached a crisis point when, in 1834, the British East India Company lost its monopoly over British opium. To compete for customers, dealers lowered their selling price, which made it easier for more people in China to buy opium, thus spreading further use and addiction.

In less than 30 years—from 1810 to 1838—opium imports to China increased from 4,500 chests (the large containers used to ship the drug) to 40,000. As Chinese consumed more and more imported opium, the outflow of silver to pay for it increased, from about two million ounces in the early 1820s to over nine million ounces a decade later. In 1831, the Chinese emperor, already angry that opium traders were breaking local laws and increasing addiction and smuggling, discovered that members of his army and government (and even students) were engaged in smoking opium.

### THE USERS VERSUS PUSHERS DEBATE

By 1836, the Chinese government began to get more serious about enforcing the 1813 ban. It closed opium dens and executed Chinese dealers. But the problem only grew worse. The emperor called for a debate among Chinese officials on how best to deal with the crisis. Opinion were polarized into two sides.

One side took a pragmatic approach (that is, an approach not focused on the morality of the issue). It focused on targeting opium users rather than opium producers. They argued that the production and sale of opium should be legalized and then taxed by the government. Their belief was that taxing the drug would make it so expensive that people would have to smoke less of it or not smoke it at all. They also argued that the money collected from taxing the opium trade could help the Chinese government reduce revenue shortfalls and the outflow of silver.

Another side vehemently disagreed with this 'pragmatic' approach. Led by Lin Zexu, a very capable and ambitious Chinese government official, they argued that the opium trade was a moral issue, and an "evil" that had to be eliminated by any means possible. If they could not suppress the trade of opium and addiction to it, the Chinese empire would have no peasants to work the land, no townsfolk to pay taxes, no students to study, and no soldiers to fight. They argued that instead of targeting opium users, they should stop and punish the "pushers" who imported and sold the drug in China.



**IMAGE 3**

Lin Zexu

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## KEY TERMS

**LIN ZEXU:** An experienced and effective Chinese official in the Qing Dynasty who also underestimated the seriousness of British demands during the Opium War period. "The only lesson Lin drew from China's humiliation [in the period of the Opium War] was that it was necessary to learn more about these 'barbarians' and to import their technology. He could neither comprehend the implications of the European challenge nor overcome the weakness and conservative opposition of his contemporaries."

**Source:** <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Lin-Zexu>

**Note on pronunciation:** The family name/last name is Lin, pronounced "leen," and the given name/first name is Zexu, pronounced "zuh-shoe".

In the end, Lin Zexu's side won the argument. In 1839, he arrived in Guangzhou (Canton) to supervise the ban on the opium trade and to crack down on its use. He attacked the opium trade on several levels. For example, he wrote an open letter to Queen Victoria questioning Britain's political support for the trade and the morality of pushing drugs. More importantly, he made rapid progress in enforcing the 1813 ban by arresting over 1,600 Chinese dealers and seizing and destroying tens of thousands of opium pipes. He also demanded that foreign companies (British companies, in particular) turn over their supplies of opium in exchange for tea. When the British refused to do so, Lin stopped all foreign trade and quarantined the area to which these foreign merchants were confined.

After six weeks, the foreign merchants gave in to Lin's demands and turned over 2.6 million pounds of opium (over 20,000 chests). Lin's troops also seized and destroyed the opium that was being held on British ships—the British superintendent claimed these ships were in international waters, but Lin claimed they were anchored in and around Chinese islands. Lin then hired 500 Chinese men to destroy the opium by mixing it with lime and salt and dumping it into the bay. Finally, he pressured the Portuguese, who had a colony in nearby Macao, to expel the uncooperative British, forcing them to move to the island of Hong Kong.



**IMAGE 4**  
British officers in  
their tent during  
the first Opium War,  
circa 1839

*E.T. Wigan/  
Wikimedia  
Commons/  
Public Domain*

Taken together, these actions raised the tensions that led to the outbreak of the first Opium War. For the British, Lin's destruction of the opium was an affront to British dignity and their concepts of trade. Many British merchants, smugglers, and the British East India Company had argued for years that China was out of touch with "civilized" nations, which practised free trade and maintained "normal" international relations through consular officials and treaties. More to the point, British representatives in Guangzhou requested that merchants turn over their opium to Lin, guaranteeing that the British government would



compensate them for their losses. The idea was that in the short term, this would prevent a major conflict, and that it would keep the merchants and ship captains safe while reopening the extremely profitable China trade in other goods. The huge opium liability (the opium was worth millions of pounds sterling), and increasingly shrill demands from merchants in China, India, and London when they discovered their profits were destroyed, gave politicians in Great Britain the excuse they were looking for to act more forcefully to expand British imperial interests in China. War broke out in November 1839 when Chinese warships clashed with British merchantmen.

In June 1840, 16 British warships and merchantmen—many leased from the primary British opium producer, Jardine Matheson & Co.—arrived at Guangzhou. Over the next two years, the British forces bombarded forts, fought battles, seized cities, and attempted negotiations. A preliminary settlement called for China to cede Hong Kong to the British Empire, pay an indemnity, and grant Britain full diplomatic relations. It also led to the Qing government sending Lin Zexu into exile. Chinese troops, using antiquated guns and cannons, and with limited naval ships, were largely ineffective against the British. Dozens of Chinese officers committed suicide when they could not repel the British marines, steamships, and merchantmen.



**IMAGE 5**

Chinese swordsman,  
1844

*E.T. Wigan/  
Wikimedia  
Commons/  
Public Domain*

## TECHNOLOGY AND TACTICS IN THE FIRST OPIUM WAR

The First Opium War between Great Britain and China revealed the growing gap in technological and military advancements between these two empires. Despite the Qing's much larger army of approximately 200,000 troops, the British were technologically more sophisticated with better weaponry and warships which allowed them to defeat the Chinese with a smaller army of just 19,000 soldiers.

The British gained the upper hand by learning from their experiences in the Napoleonic Wars (1799–1815) and by utilizing bases in India to provide troops and supplies. The most important advancement, however, was the emergence of steam-driven vessels that became a considerable navel force. Warships such as the *Nemesis*, could easily turn its guns on uptown rivers with great accuracy. This, combined with the longer firing ranges of British rifles, gave their army several advantages.

The Chinese navy was severely disadvantaged in the battles of the Opium Wars. Chinese war junks were much smaller in nature and were intended for more close-range river combat. This led them to adopt more defensive tactics, utilizing geographical rivers and creating a defensive fortification network. Although Chinese armies had produced canons and rifles, their projectile range was much shorter and their technology was estimated to be about 200 years behind the British. Thus, although the Chinese were experts at tactical warfare, the power of Britain's naval fire was an important factor that changed the tide of the war.



The *Nemesis*

*ullstein bild/ullstein  
bild via Getty Images*

## TIMELINE OF THE FIRST OPIUM WAR

- MID 1836 As advocates for the legalization of opium are on the verge of success, a resistance movement known as the Spring Purification Circle emerges, persuading Emperor Daoguang to reject the proposal to legalize opium trade and consumption.
- MID 1838 Lin Zexu, imperial Chinese commissioner in charge of suppressing the opium traffic, writes a letter to Queen Victoria urging her to end the opium trade. (It is not known whether she received the letter.)
- LATE 1838 Lin Zexu orders all foreign traders to surrender their opium.
- LATE 1839 Fighting begins when a British ship, the Royal Saxon, attempts to sail to Canton. The incident becomes known as the Battle of Chuenpi, the first battle of the First Opium War.
- EARLY 1840 Emperor Daoguang asks all foreigners in China to halt material assistance to the British in China.
- MID 1840 An expeditionary force of British Indian army troops aboard 15 barracks ships, four steam-powered gunboats, and 25 smaller boats reach Canton from Singapore.
- EARLY 1841 In the Second Battle of Chuenpi, British launch an attack on Humen Strait in Canton (Guangzhou), capturing Chinese forts. Subsequent negotiations result in the Convention of Chuenpi whereby Hong Kong Island is ceded to the British.
- MID TO  
LATE 1841 In the Battle of Chinhai, British forces command the high ground around Canton and defeat the military divisions at Ningbo and Dinghai.
- MID 1842 British launch Yangtze River campaign, defeating the Chinese at the mouth of the river and occupying Shanghai.
- MID 1842 The Treaty of Nanking is signed between Britain and China, formally ending the First Opium War. Five new trading ports are opened.

The Treaty of  
Nanking

*Arnold Wright/  
Wikimedia Commons/  
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**IMAGE 6**  
The British  
bombardment of  
Guangzhou/Canton

*I.W. Carmichael;*  
*E. Brandard/*  
*Wikimedia*  
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## THE WAR'S AFTERMATH

The first Opium War ended in 1842, when Chinese officials signed, at gunpoint, the Treaty of Nanjing. The treaty provided extraordinary benefits to the British, including:

- an excellent deep-water port at Hong Kong;
- a huge indemnity (compensation) to be paid to the British government and merchants;
- five new Chinese treaty ports at Guangzhou (Canton), Shanghai, Xiamen (Amoy), Ningbo, and Fuzhou, where British merchants and their families could reside;
- extraterritoriality for British citizens residing in these treaty ports, meaning that they were subject to British, not Chinese, laws; and
- a “most favoured nation” clause that any rights gained by other foreign countries would automatically apply to Great Britain as well.

For China, the Treaty of Nanjing provided no benefits. In fact, Chinese imports of opium rose to a peak of 87,000 chests in 1879 (see Figure 1). After that, imports of opium declined, and then ended during the First World War, as

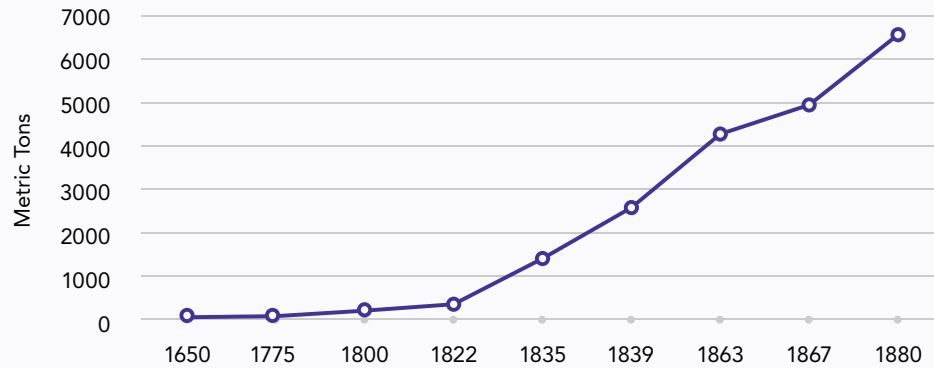
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## KEY TERMS

**EXTRATERRITORIALITY:** A concept in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries that foreigners could be exempted from the laws of the country where they were living. Several foreign countries who operated in Chinese treaty ports practised this idea.

opium production within China outgrew foreign production. However, other trade did not expand as much as foreign merchants had hoped, and they continued to blame the Chinese government for this. Among Chinese officials, the aftermath of the war led to a bitter political struggle between two factions: a peace faction, which was roughly aligned with the 'users' faction in the opium trade debate; and a 'war' faction, which was roughly aligned with the 'pushers' faction in that debate. The peace faction was in nominal control.

**FIGURE 1: OPIUM IMPORTS INTO CHINA, 1650–1880**



Source: UN Office on Drugs and Crime

In addition, the Treaty of Nanjing ended the Canton System that had been in place since the 17<sup>th</sup> century. This was followed in 1844 by a system of unequal treaties between China and western powers. Through the most favoured nation clauses, these treaties allowed westerners to build churches and spread Christianity in the treaty ports. Western imperialism and free trade had its first great victory in China with this war and its resulting treaties.

When the Chinese emperor died in 1850, his successor dismissed the peace faction in favour of those who had supported Lin Zexu. The new emperor tried to bring Lin back from exile, but Lin died along the way. The Chinese court kept finding excuses not to accept foreign diplomats at the capital city of Beijing, and its compliance with the treaties fell far short of western countries' expectations.

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## KEY TERMS

**UNEQUAL TREATY:** Series of treaties in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries that forced China to grant territorial rights and cede sovereignty to foreign powers.

## SECOND OPIUM WAR (1856–1860)

In 1856, a second Opium War broke out and continued until 1860, when the British and French captured Beijing and forced on China a new round of unequal treaties, indemnities, and the opening of 11 more treaty ports (see Map 3). This also led to increased Christian missionary work and legalization of the opium trade.



*Location of treaty port cities are approximations only. Present-day city names are used, with some commonly referenced alternative spellings/names listed in parentheses.*

Even though new ports were opened to British merchants after the first Opium War, the Chinese dragged their feet on implementing the agreements, and legal trade with China remained limited. British merchants pressed their government to do more, but the government's hands were tied because the Chinese government in the capital city of Beijing restricted who it met with.

In October 1856, Chinese authorities arrested the Chinese crew of a ship operated by the British. The British used this as an opportunity to pressure China militarily to open itself up even further to British merchants and trade. France, using the execution in China of a French Christian missionary as an excuse, joined the British in the fight. Joint French-British forces captured Guangzhou before moving north to the city of Tianjin (also referred to as Tientsin). In 1858, the Chinese agreed—on paper—to a series of western demands contained in documents like the Treaty of Tientsin. But then they refused to ratify the treaties, which led to further hostilities.

In 1860, British and French troops landed near Beijing and fought their way into the city. Negotiations quickly broke down and the British High Commissioner to China ordered the troops to loot and destroy the Imperial Summer Palace, a complex and garden where Qing Dynasty emperors had traditionally handled the country's official matters.

Shortly after that, the Chinese emperor fled to Manchuria in northeast China. His brother negotiated the Convention of Beijing, which, in addition to ratifying the Treaty of Tientsin, added indemnities and ceded to Britain the Kowloon Peninsula across the strait from Hong Kong. The war ended with a greatly weakened Qing Dynasty that was now confronted with the need to rethink its relations with the outside world and to modernize its military, political, and economic structures.

## **THINKING ABOUT THE OPIUM WAR**

In 1839, the British imposed on China their version of free trade and insisted on the legal right of their citizens (that is, British citizens) to do what they wanted, wherever they wanted. Chinese critics point out that while the British made lofty arguments about the 'principle' of free trade and individual rights, they were in fact pushing a product (opium) that was illegal in their own country.

There are different viewpoints on what was the main underlying factor in Britain's involvement in the Opium Wars. Some in the west claim that the Opium Wars were about upholding the principle of free trade. Others, however, say that Great Britain was acting more in the interest of protecting its international reputation while it was facing challenges in other parts of the world, such as the Near East, India, and Latin America. Some American historians have argued that these conflicts were not so much about opium as they were about western powers' desire to expand commercial relations more broadly and to do away with the Canton trading system. Finally, some western historians say the war was fought at least partly to keep China's balance of trade in a deficit, and that opium was an effective way to do that, even though it had very negative impacts on Chinese society.

It is important to point out that not everyone in Britain supported the opium trade in China. In fact, members of the British public and media, as well as the American public and media, expressed outrage over their countries' support for the opium trade.<sup>2</sup>

From China's historical perspective, the first Opium War was the beginning of the end of late Imperial China, a powerful dynastic system and advanced civilization that had lasted thousands of years. The war was also the first salvo in what is now referred to in China as the "century of humiliation." This humiliation took many forms. China's defeat in both wars was a sign that the Chinese state's legitimacy and ability to project power were weakening. The Opium Wars further contributed to this weakening. The unequal treaties that western powers imposed on China undermined the ways China had conducted relations with other countries and its trade in tea. The continuation of the opium trade,

moreover, added to the cost to China in both silver and in the serious social consequences of opium addiction. Furthermore, the many rebellions that broke out within China after the first Opium War made it increasingly difficult for the Chinese government to pay its tax and huge indemnity obligations.

Present-day Chinese historians see the Opium Wars as a wars of aggression that led to the hard lesson that “if you are ‘backward,’ you will take a beating.” These lessons shaped the rationale for the Chinese Revolution against imperialism and feudalism that emerged, and then succeeded, decades later.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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1. Andrew Moody, “Lessons of the Opium War,” *China Daily*, February 24, 2012, [http://usa.chinadaily.com.cn/weekly/2012-02/24/content\\_14681839.htm](http://usa.chinadaily.com.cn/weekly/2012-02/24/content_14681839.htm)
  2. See, for example, Peter Perdue, “The First Opium War: The Anglo-Chinese War of 1839-1842,” *MIT Visualizing Cultures*, p. 29, [https://ocw.mit.edu/ans7870/21f/21f.027/opium\\_wars\\_01/ow1\\_essay01.html](https://ocw.mit.edu/ans7870/21f/21f.027/opium_wars_01/ow1_essay01.html)

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