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# THE OPIUM WARS IN CHINA

Guide to Resources

Dear Teachers,

Thank you for exploring these resources on *China's Opium Wars* (1839–1842 and 1856–1860). The First Opium War in particular is useful for introducing students to two main themes in Chinese history and present politics. The first is the clash of ideas at the time between Imperial China and Imperial Britain (and the west more generally) on international trade. The second more subtle but no less important is the significance the Opium War (again, the First Opium War in particular) has taken on in recent years.

These materials were designed for use in upper-level high school courses on world history or Asian Studies. In the pages that follow, we provide a quick guide to the resources found on the Asia Pacific Curriculum website at <https://asiapacificcurriculum.ca/learning-module/opium-wars-china>, in addition to other resources that you may find helpful.

We thank **Dr. Jack Hayes**, who authored the background reading for this set of materials. Dr. Hayes received his PhD in History from the University of British Columbia and is now a professor of Chinese and Japanese history at Kwantlen Polytechnic University in Greater Vancouver. Any errors contained in the background reading are the responsibility of the Asia Pacific Foundation of Canada.

In addition, we are grateful to **Ms. Christine Paget**, a social studies teacher at West Vancouver Secondary School (BC) and a member of the BC Social Studies Teachers Association (BCCSTA) executive team. Ms. Paget designed the Activities & Assessments and Power Point Presentation that accompany the background reading.

We welcome your or your students' questions and suggestions. We encourage you to contact us at [curriculum@asiapacific.ca](mailto:curriculum@asiapacific.ca).

Sincerely,

The Asia Pacific Curriculum Team  
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## GUIDE TO RESOURCES

### OVERVIEW

- Background reading of 3,300 words (available on the webpage and in PDF), covers the years leading up to First Opium War (1839–1842) and Second Opium War (1858–1860). The reading level is appropriate for upper-level high school students.
- In China today, the First Opium War is seen as the first episode in what was subsequently known as the Century of Humiliation, which ended with the Chinese Communist Party's 'liberation' of China from imperialist powers and the Nationalist government in 1949. As Alison Adcock Kaufman notes, "this experience of subjugation and humiliation [during the First Opium War and afterwards] has become a central element of Chinese identity today," and still serves as a cautionary tale about the nature of international relations, including, and perhaps especially, with the West. "The impact of these experiences on China's self-image cannot be overestimated."<sup>1</sup>
- But Julia Lovell, professor at Oxford University and author of *The Opium War: Drugs, dreams and the making of China*, questions the effectiveness of present-day Chinese governments' attempts to cast the conflict as one clearly pitting the Chinese empire against the British/West. She says: "In the Chinese narrative of the Opium War, you might expect the line between heroes and villains to be a clear one: honourably resisting servants of the Chinese empire on the one hand, wicket British on the other. The curious thing, though, is how much of the venom in the Chinese version of these events has been reserved for characters on their own side: and in particular, for the perceived corruption, indecision and incompetence of the Qing."<sup>2</sup>
- Britain's interests were not to colonize China the way it colonized other parts of the world; rather, it wanted to get China to abide by "British ways of international contact and free trade under the rule of law, which would open the door to British commercial profit."<sup>3</sup> The Treaty Ports opened as a consequence of China's defeat were one of the main vehicles for achieving this.
- Chinese historian John King Fairbank says it is important not to assume that British superiority in naval capabilities broadly reflected levels of human development at that time in areas like "industry, transport, communications, literacy, medicine, public health, and degree of democratic participation." In fact, he says, much of the West during that time was still agricultural and 'underdeveloped,' and thus not as different from China as is often assumed.<sup>4</sup>

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1. Alison Adcock Kaufman, "The 'Century of Humiliation,' then and now: Chinese perceptions of the international order," *Pacific Focus*, Vol. XXV, no. 1 (April 2010), pp. 3, 5. Note that other scholars have suggested that at the time of the First Opium War in particular, Chinese officials did not necessarily predict that their concessions in terms of treaty rights and
  2. Julia Lovell, *The Opium War: Drugs, dreams and the making of China*, London: Picador, 2012, p. 119.
  3. John King Fairbank (Ed.), *The Cambridge History of Modern China, Vol. 10, Late Ch'ing 1800-1911, Part I*, Cambridge University Press, 1978, p. 232.
  4. Fairbank, p. 215.

## MULTIMEDIA (VIDEOS)

- “The War on Opium—Addicted to Pleasure,” *BBC Studios* (4:02): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QSEhsEfGBL0>
- “China’s Century of Humiliation,” Mitch Anderson (1:17:33, see especially Part Two, 34:57–59:33): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=boPkMCJSYSs>

## QUIZ

- The four-question quiz is based on information found in the background reading. Although it is short, the questions are challenging and require a careful reading.

## ACTIVITIES AND ASSESSMENT OPTIONS

- Five teacher-designed and teacher-tested activities that can be used to assess comprehension and build and assess core competencies.
- Links to the B.C. curricular competencies and relevant courses have been noted on each activity.

## POWER POINT PRESENTATION

- These slides are meant to reinforce, but also add to, the information contained in the background reading.
- Most of the slides are editable so that teachers can add or delete information; however, for any slides that contain images, we ask that you not remove any of the credits from the notes section. For copyright purposes, it is essential to include these.

## OTHER TEACHING RESOURCES

### LESSON PLANS AND TEACHERS’ GUIDES

- A visually rich resource for teaching about the Opium War period in China is MIT’s *Visualizing Cultures* series, which includes a large image bank and topical essays by subject experts. There is a four-part series on “The Rise & Fall of the Canton Trade System,” covering the 1700s to 1860 (the end of the Second Opium War). The series can be found here [https://ocw.mit.edu/ans7870/21f/21f.027/home/vis\\_menu.html](https://ocw.mit.edu/ans7870/21f/21f.027/home/vis_menu.html). There is also an accompanying curriculum guide with lesson plans and a separate teachers’ edition, which can be found here [https://ocw.mit.edu/ans7870/21f/21f.027/rise\\_fall\\_canton\\_01/cur\\_student/cw\\_cur\\_toc.html](https://ocw.mit.edu/ans7870/21f/21f.027/rise_fall_canton_01/cur_student/cw_cur_toc.html).
- The Garden of Perfect Brightness is another multi-part resource in the *Visualizing Cultures* series. It focuses on the Yuanming Yuan, or Old Summer Palace, located in present-day Beijing. It was almost completely destroyed by the British and French in the Second Opium War. All three modules can be found at [https://ocw.mit.edu/ans7870/21f/21f.027/home/vis\\_menu.html](https://ocw.mit.edu/ans7870/21f/21f.027/home/vis_menu.html). Of particular interest to study the Opium Wars is the third in the series, “Destruction, Looting, and Memory (1860–present),” which includes a section

on British and French plunder of precious Chinese art. (Reportedly, the plunder also included Pekingese dogs, which were unknown to the British at the time. Queen Victoria received a puppy named “Looty.” See Karl E. Meyer, “The Chinese want their art back,” *New York Times*, June 20, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/21/opinion/the-chinese-want-their-art-back.html>.) Today, wealthy Chinese with deep pockets and a taste for art have made return of these items to Chinese hands a matter of national pride.

#### RECOMMENDED READINGS

For a deeper background on the Chinese context in particular, and for more granular description and analysis of this episode and overall period of Chinese history, three excellent sources are as follows (all are available through some public libraries):

- John King Fairbanks, *The Cambridge history of modern China, Vol. 10, late Ch'ing 1800-1911, Part I*, Cambridge University Press, 1978, especially pages 194-237.
- David Kenley's *Modern Chinese History*, part of the *Key Issues in Asian Studies* series published by the University of Michigan, is an excellent and helpful resource for upper-level high school or first-year university students (and their teachers), that gives the broader context of China during this period.
- Julia Lovell, *The Opium War: Drugs, dreams and the making of China*, London: Picador, 2012.
- Jonathan Spence, *The Search for Modern China*, W. W. Norton & Co., 1990, Chapter 7, “The first clash with the West,” pp. 143-164.

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