

## **The Opium Wars:**

**Source 1:** 1840-1860: Opium Wars Trade war: Britain acquires 'a barren rock'

*At the start of the 19th century, Hong Kong was little more than a backwater in southern China, with no indication it would one day be a world trade center.*

By the middle of that century, Britain's desire to force opium on China had resulted in two wars -- and the loss of Chinese sovereignty in the territory.

In the early 1800s, Hong Kong was inhabited mostly by subsistence farmers, fishermen and pirates. At that time, China's major contact with the outside world was taking place farther north, up the Pearl River, at Canton -- or what is now known as Guangzhou. It was in Canton that overseas traders from Britain, the United States and elsewhere lived and worked in a small enclave, closely regulated by Chinese officials.

Trade had mostly been in China's favor, until the widespread introduction of opium, grown mostly in Britain's then-colony India. And it was in Canton that the illegal and highly profitable opium trade flourished. Opium addiction grew to epidemic proportions, ravaging Chinese society. The Ching emperor appointed a special commissioner in Canton, with orders to stamp out the opium trade.

A week after his appointment, Lin Ze-xu ordered his troops to surround the international enclave in Canton. He demanded the overseas traders turn over all of their opium stocks. After a six-week standoff, the traders surrendered more than 20,000 chests of the narcotic. That confrontation brought demands for action from British opium traders, including two of the biggest, William Jardine and James Matheson. It also provoked a belligerent response from the British military, and the start of the First Opium War, of 1840-1842.

During that war, on January 26, 1841, a British naval party landed on the northwestern shore of Hong Kong, raised the Union Jack, and formally occupied the island. China's antiquated navy and army were no match for the British. The First Opium War ended with the Treaty of Nanking, in August of 1842.

That treaty promised, among other things, British trading rights and privileges in five Chinese ports. It also ceded control of Hong Kong island to the British. In the words of the treaty, Hong Kong was "to be possessed in perpetuity by her Britannic Majesty, her heirs and successors." Most of official Britain was surprised and amused by the Empire's new acquisition, a seemingly worthless, virtually barren rock of an island.

Less than two decades later, a new conflict broke out between the British and China's rulers. The Second Anglo-Chinese War (1856-1860) ended with another British victory and the Convention of Peking, which gave London perpetual control of the Kowloon peninsula, on the Chinese mainland across from Hong Kong Island.

By the century's end, other European countries and Japan had demanded and received concessions from China. Professing concerns about the security of Hong Kong, the British also made new demands on the Chinese -- in particular, a 99-year lease on what is now called the New Territories -- land farther into China, beyond the Kowloon Peninsula.

That lease began in 1898, and expired on July 1, 1997.

## **Source 2:**

The Opium War, also called the Anglo-Chinese War, was the most humiliating defeat China ever suffered. In European history, it is perhaps the most sordid, base, and vicious event in European history, possibly, just possibly, overshadowed by the excesses of the Third Reich in the twentieth century.

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 ignominious 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.

### ***The Illustrated Gazetteer of Maritime Countries***

China's defeat at the hands of England led to the publication of the *Illustrated Gazetteer of Maritime Countries* by Wei Yüan (1794-1856). The *Gazetteer* marks the first landmark event in the modernization of China. Wei Yüan, a distinguished but minor official, argued in the *Gazetteer* that the Europeans had developed technologies and methods of warfare in their ceaseless and barbaric quest for power, profit, and material wealth. Civilization, represented by China, was in danger of falling to the technological superiority of the Western powers. Because China is a peaceful and civilized nation, it can overcome the West only if it learns and matches the technology and techniques of the West. The purpose of the *Gazetteer* was to disseminate knowledge about the Europeans, their technologies, their methods of warfare, and their selfish anarchy to learned officials. It is a landmark event in Chinese history, for it was the first systematic attempt to educate the Chinese in Western technologies and culture. This drive for modernization, begun by Lin Tse-hsü and perpetuated by Wei Yüan would gain momentum and emerge as the basis for the "Self-Strengthening" from 1874 to 1895.

### ***Source 3 The Opium War and Foreign Encroachment***

Two things happened in the eighteenth century that made it difficult for England to balance its trade with the East. First, the British became a nation of tea drinkers and the demand for Chinese tea rose astronomically. It is estimated that the average London worker spent five percent of his or her total household budget on tea. Second, northern Chinese merchants began to ship Chinese cotton from the interior to the south to compete with the Indian cotton that Britain had used to help pay for its tea consumption habits. To prevent a trade imbalance, the British tried to sell more of their own products to China, but there was not much demand for heavy woolen fabrics in a country accustomed to either cotton padding or silk.

The only solution was to increase the amount of Indian goods to pay for these Chinese luxuries, and increasingly in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the item provided to China was Bengal opium. With greater opium supplies had naturally come an increase in demand and usage throughout the country, in spite of repeated prohibitions by the Chinese government and officials. The British did all they could to increase the trade: They bribed officials, helped the Chinese work out elaborate smuggling schemes to get the opium into China's interior, and distributed free samples of the drug to innocent victims.

The cost to China was enormous. The drug weakened a large percentage of the population (some estimate that 10 percent of the population regularly used opium by the late nineteenth century), and silver began to flow out of the country to pay for the opium. Many of the economic problems China faced later were either directly or indirectly traced to the opium trade. The government debated about whether to legalize the drug through a government monopoly like that on salt, hoping to barter Chinese goods in return for opium. But since the Chinese were fully aware of the harms of addiction, in 1838 the emperor decided to send one of his most able officials, Lin Tse-hsu (Lin Zexu, 1785-1850), to Canton (Guangzhou) to do whatever necessary to end the traffic forever.

Lin was able to put his first two proposals into effect easily. Addicts were rounded up, forcibly treated, and taken off the habit, and domestic drug dealers were harshly punished. His third objective — to confiscate foreign stores and force foreign merchants to sign pledges of good conduct, agreeing never to trade in opium and to be punished by Chinese law if ever found in violation — eventually brought war. Opinion in England was divided: Some British did indeed feel morally uneasy about the trade, but they were overruled by those who wanted to increase England's China trade and teach the arrogant Chinese a good lesson. Western military weapons, including percussion lock muskets, heavy artillery, and paddlewheel gunboats, were far superior to China's. Britain's troops had recently been toughened in the Napoleonic wars, and Britain could muster garrisons, warships, and provisions from its nearby colonies in Southeast Asia and India. The result was a disaster for the Chinese. By the summer of 1842 British ships were victorious and were even preparing to shell the old capital, Nanking (Nanjing), in central China. The emperor therefore had no choice but to accept the British demands and sign a peace agreement. This agreement, the first of the "unequal treaties," opened China to the West and marked the beginning of Western exploitation of the nation.

Other humiliating defeats followed in what one historian has called China's "treaty century" (major aspects of the so-called "unequal treaties" were not formally voided until 1943). In 1843, France and the United States, and Russia in 1858, negotiated treaties similar to England's Nanking (Nanjing) Treaty, including a provision for extraterritoriality, whereby foreign nationals in China were immune from Chinese law. To compel a reluctant China to shift from its traditional tribute based foreign relations to treaty relations, Europeans fought a second war with China from 1858-1860, and the concluding Treaty of Tientsin (Tianjin) and Convention of Peking (Beijing) increased China's semi-colonial status. More ports were open to foreign residence and trade, and foreigners, especially missionaries, were allowed free movement and business anywhere in the country.

Conflicts for the rest of the century wrung more humiliating concessions from China: with Russia over claims in China's far west and northeast in 1850 and 1860, with England over access to the upper reaches of the Yangtze River in 1876, with France over northern Vietnam in 1884, with Japan over its claims to Korea and northeast China in 1895, and with many foreign powers after 1897 which demanded "spheres of influence," especially for constructing railroads and mines. In 1900, an international army suppressed the anti-foreign Boxer Rebellion in northern China, destroying much of Beijing in the process. Each of these defeats brought more foreign demands, greater indemnities that China had to repay, more foreign presence along the coast, and more foreign participation in China's political and economic life. Little wonder that many in China were worried by the century's end that China was being sliced up "like a melon."

**Source 4: Lin Zixu Lin Tse-Hs** Letter of Advice to Queen Victoria (1839 CE)

*By the early 1800s, the opium trade dominated by British merchants produced millions of Chinese addicts. The opium trade increased steadily; between 1800 and 1821, 4,500 chests were shipped to and sold in China a year. In 1838, the number reached 40,000 chests. The result was a serious outflow of Chinese silver. The Qing government finally decided in 1838 to ban the opium trade, and Lin Zexu was appointed as imperial commissioner to supervise the operation. Lin arrived in Guangzhou in March 1839 and soon launched strong attacks on both addicts and smugglers. He also ordered confiscation of opium in foreign merchants' possession and burned as many as 21,306 chests.*

*Lin's letter to Queen Victoria was sent during his anti-opium campaign. Lin asked Queen Victoria to stop the sale of opium from India to China. In response to British merchants' request for protection, the British fleet was on its way to Guangzhou. War was imminent.*

His Majesty the Emperor comforts and cherishes foreigners as well as Chinese: he loves all the people in the world without discrimination. Whenever profit is found, he wishes to share it with all men; whenever harm appears, he likewise will eliminate it on behalf of all of mankind. His heart is in fact the heart of the whole universe.

Generally speaking, the succeeding rulers of your honorable country have been respectful and obedient. Time and again they have sent petitions to China, saying: "We are grateful to His Majesty the Emperor for the impartial and favorable treatment he has granted to the citizens of my country who have come to China to trade," etc. I am pleased to learn that you, as the ruler of your honorable country, are thoroughly familiar with the principle of righteousness and are grateful for the favor that His Majesty the Emperor has bestowed upon your subjects. Because of this fact, **the Celestial Empire**, following its traditional policy of treating foreigners with kindness, has been doubly considerate towards the people from England. You have traded in China for almost 200 years, and as a result, your country has become wealthy and prosperous.

As this trade has lasted for a long time, there are bound to be unscrupulous as well as honest traders. Among the unscrupulous are those who bring opium to China to harm the Chinese; they succeed so well that this poison has spread far and wide in all the provinces. You, I hope, will certainly agree that people who pursue material gains to the great detriment of the welfare of others can be neither tolerated by Heaven nor endured by men. . . .

Your country is more than 60,000 li from China. The purpose of your ships in coming to China is to realize a large profit. Since this profit is realized in China and is in fact taken away from the Chinese people, how can foreigners return injury for the benefit they have received by sending this poison to harm their benefactors? They may not intend to harm others on purpose, but the fact remains that they are so obsessed with material gain that they have no concern whatever for the harm they can cause to others. Have they no conscience? I have heard that you strictly prohibit opium in your own country, indicating

unmistakably that you know how harmful opium is. You do not wish opium to harm your own country, but you choose to bring that harm to other countries such as China. Why?

The products that originate from China are all useful items. They are good for food and other purposes and are easy to sell. Has China produced one item that is harmful to foreign countries? For instance, tea and rhubarb are so important to foreigners' livelihood that they have to consume them every day. Were China to concern herself only with her own advantage without showing any regard for other people's welfare, how could foreigners continue to live? Foreign products like woolen cloth and beiges rely on Chinese raw materials such as silk for their manufacturing. Had China sought only her own advantage, where would the foreigners' profit come from? The products that foreign countries need and have to import from China are too numerous to enumerate: from food products such as molasses, ginger, and cassia to useful necessities such as silk and porcelain. The imported goods from foreign countries, on the other hand, are merely playthings which can be easily dispensed with without causing any ill effect. Since we do not need these things really, what harm would come if we should decide to stop foreign trade altogether? The reason why we unhesitatingly allow foreigners to ship out such Chinese products as tea and silk is that we feel that wherever there is an advantage, it should be shared by all the people in the world. .

I have heard that you are a kind, compassionate monarch. I am sure that you will not do to others what you yourself do not desire. I have also heard that you have instructed every British ship that sails for Canton not to bring any prohibited goods to China. It seems that your policy is as enlightened as it is proper. The fact that British ships have continued to bring opium to China results perhaps from the impossibility of making a thorough inspection of all of them owing to their large numbers. I am sending you this letter to reiterate the seriousness with which we enforce the law of the Celestial Empire and to make sure that merchants from your honorable country will not attempt to violate it again.

I have heard that the areas under your direct jurisdiction such as London, Scotland, and Ireland do not produce opium; it is produced instead in your Indian possessions such as Bengal, Madras, Bombay, Patna, and Malwa. In these possessions the English people not only plant opium poppies that stretch from one mountain to another but also open factories to manufacture this terrible drug. As months accumulate and years pass by, the poison they have produced increases in its wicked intensity, and its repugnant odor reaches as high as the sky. Heaven is furious with anger, and all the gods are moaning with pain! It is hereby suggested that you destroy and plow under all of these opium plants and grow food crops instead, while issuing an order to punish severely anyone who dares to plant opium poppies again. If you adopt this policy of love so as to produce good and exterminate evil, Heaven will protect you, and gods will bring you good fortune. Moreover, you will enjoy a long life and be rewarded with a multitude of children and grandchildren! In short, by taking this one measure, you can bring great happiness to others as well as yourself. Why do you not do it?

The right of foreigners to reside in China is a special favor granted by the Celestial Empire, and the profits they have made are those realized in China. As time passes by, some of them stay in China for a longer period than they do in their own country. For every government, past or present, one of its primary functions is to educate all the people living within its jurisdiction, foreigners as well as its own citizens, about the law and to punish them if they choose to violate it. Since a foreigner who goes to England to trade has to obey the English law, how can an Englishman not obey the Chinese law when he is physically within China? The present law calls for the imposition of the death sentence on any Chinese who has peddled or smoked opium. Since a Chinese could not peddle or smoke opium if foreigners had not brought it to China, it is clear that the true culprits of a Chinese's death as a result of an opium conviction are the opium traders from foreign countries. Being the cause of other people's death, why should they themselves be spared from capital punishment? A murderer of one person is subject to the death sentence; just imagine how many people opium has killed! This is the rationale behind the new law

which says that any foreigner who brings opium to China will be sentenced to death by hanging or beheading. Our purpose is to eliminate this poison once and for all and to the benefit of all mankind. . . .

Our Celestial Empire towers over all other countries in virtue and possesses a power great and awesome enough to carry out its wishes. But we will not prosecute a person without warning him in advance; that is why we have made our law explicit and clear. If the merchants of your honorable country wish to enjoy trade with us on a permanent basis, they must fearfully observe our law by cutting off, once and for all, the supply of opium. Under no circumstance should they test our intention to enforce the law by deliberately violating it. You, as the ruler of your honorable country, should do your part to uncover the hidden and unmask the wicked. It is hoped that you will continue to enjoy your country and become more and more respectful and obeisant. How wonderful it is that we can all enjoy the blessing of peace!