
Documents

Considering the Evidence: Voices from the Opium War



The Opium War of 1839–1842 marked a dramatic turn in China's long history and in its relationship with the wider world. It was also indicative of the new kinds of cross-cultural encounters that were increasingly taking place as Europe's global power mounted. The five documents in this section of the chapter allow us to follow the unfolding of that encounter, largely from a Chinese point of view.

By the early nineteenth century, China had long enjoyed a position of unrivaled dominance in East Asia. Furthermore, its wealth and technological innovations had given it a major role in the world economy of the early modern era, reflected in the flow of much of the world's silver into China. At the same time, the island nation of Great Britain was emerging as a major global economic and military power, thanks to its position as the first site of the Industrial Revolution and its increasingly dominant role in India.

At the heart of the emerging conflict between these two countries was trade rather than territory. From the British point of view, the problem lay in the sharp restrictions that the Chinese had long imposed on commerce between the two nations. The British were permitted to trade only in a single city, Canton, and even there had to deal with an officially approved group of Chinese merchants. This so-called Canton system meant that Europeans had no direct access to the Chinese market. Thus in the early 1790s, the British government sent a major diplomatic mission to China, headed by Lord George Macartney, to seek greater access to the Chinese market.

Document 19.1

A Chinese Response to Lord Macartney

Despite a polite reception at the Chinese court, Macartney's mission was an almost total failure from the British point of view. At its conclusion the Chinese emperor Qianlong sent a message to the British monarch George III replying to Macartney's requests.

- What reasons does Emperor Qianlong give for rejecting British requests?

- What does this document reveal about the Chinese view of trade in general?
- What does it show about China's relations with foreign "barbarians," and about China's understanding of its place in the world?
- In what historical context does the Chinese emperor understand Macartney's mission?

EMPEROR QIANLONG
Message to King George III

1793

You, O King, from afar have yearned after the blessings of our civilization, and in your eagerness to come into touch with our converting influence have sent an Embassy across the sea bearing a memorial. I have already taken note of your respectful spirit of submission, have treated your mission with extreme favor and loaded it with gifts, besides issuing a mandate to you, O King, and honoring you with the bestowal of valuable presents. Thus has my indulgence been manifested.

Yesterday your Ambassador petitioned my Ministers to memorialize me regarding your trade with China, but his proposal is not consistent with our dynastic usage and cannot be entertained. Hitherto, all European nations, including your own country's barbarian merchants, have carried on their trade with our Celestial Empire at Canton. Such has been the procedure for many years, although our Celestial Empire possesses all things in prolific abundance and lacks no product within its own borders. There was therefore no need to import the manufactures of outside barbarians in exchange for our own produce. But as the tea, silk, and porcelain which the Celestial Empire produces are absolute necessities to European nations and to yourselves, we have permitted, as a signal mark of favor, that foreign *hongs*^o

should be established at Canton, so that your wants might be supplied and your country thus participate in our beneficence. But your Ambassador has now put forward new requests which completely fail to recognize the Throne's principle to "treat strangers from afar with indulgence," and to exercise a pacifying control over barbarian tribes, the world over. Moreover, our dynasty, swaying the myriad races of the globe, extends the same benevolence toward all. Your England is not the only nation trading at Canton. If other nations, following your bad example, wrongfully importune my ear with further impossible requests, how will it be possible for me to treat them with easy indulgence? Nevertheless, I do not forget the lonely remoteness of your island, cut off from the world by intervening wastes of sea, nor do I overlook your excusable ignorance of the usages of our Celestial Empire. I have consequently commanded my Ministers to enlighten your Ambassador on the subject, and have ordered the departure of the mission. . . .

Your request for a small island near Chusan, where your merchants may reside and goods be warehoused, arises from your desire to develop trade. As there are neither foreign *hongs* nor interpreters in or near Chusan, where none of your ships have ever called, such an island would be utterly useless for your purposes. Every inch of the territory of our Empire is marked on the map and the strictest vigilance is exercised over it all: even tiny islets and far-lying sand-banks are clearly defined as part of the provinces to which they belong. Consider, more-

^o*hongs*: approved Chinese trading firms.

Source: "Edict on Trade with Great Britain," in J. O. P. Brand, *Annals and Memoirs of the Court of Peking* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1914), 325–31.

over, that England is not the only barbarian land which wishes to establish relations with our civilization and trade with our Empire: supposing that other nations were all to imitate your evil example and beseech me to present them each and all with a site for trading purposes, how could I possibly comply? This also is a flagrant infringement of the usage of my Empire and cannot possibly be entertained. . . .

Regarding your nation's worship of the Lord of Heaven, it is the same religion as that of other European nations. Ever since the beginning of history, sage Emperors and wise rulers have bestowed on China a moral system and inculcated a code, which from time immemorial has been religiously observed by the myriads of my subjects [Confucianism]. There has been no hankering after heterodox doctrines. Even the European officials [missionaries] in my capital are forbidden to hold intercourse with Chinese subjects; they are restricted within the limits of their appointed residences, and may not go about propagating their religion. The distinction between Chinese

and barbarian is most strict, and your Ambassador's request that barbarians shall be given full liberty to disseminate their religion is utterly unreasonable. . . .

[Perhaps] you yourself are ignorant of our dynastic regulations and had no intention of transgressing them when you expressed these wild ideas and hopes. . . . If, after the receipt of this explicit decree, you lightly give ear to the representations of your subordinates and allow your barbarian merchants to proceed to Zhejiang and Tianjin, with the object of landing and trading there, the ordinances of my Celestial Empire are strict in the extreme, and the local officials, both civil and military, are bound reverently to obey the law of the land. Should your vessels touch the shore, your merchants will assuredly never be permitted to land or to reside there, but will be subject to instant expulsion. In that event your barbarian merchants will have had a long journey for nothing. Do not say that you were not warned in due time! Tremblingly obey and show no negligence! A special mandate!

Documents 19.2 and 19.3

Debating the Opium Problem

With Europe engulfed in the Napoleonic wars, Great Britain made no immediate response to China's 1793 rebuff. But in the several decades following Napoleon's 1815 defeat, the issue reemerged. This time the question was not just trade in general but opium in particular. By the early nineteenth century, that addictive drug was providing a solution to another of Great Britain's problems in its trade relations with China—the difficulty of finding Western goods that the Chinese were willing to buy. This had long meant that the British had to pay for much-desired Chinese products with major exports of silver. Now, however, opium grown in British India proved increasingly attractive in China, and imports soared.

But this solution to a British problem had by the mid-1830s provoked a growing and many-sided crisis for China. The country's legal prohibition on the importing of opium was widely ignored, silver was flowing out of the country to pay for the drug, and addiction was increasing, even among the elite. This dire situation prompted the Chinese emperor Daoguang to seek advice from his senior officials. The two documents that follow illustrate the sharp division within Chinese official circles, one side advocating legalization and the other counseling suppression.

- What arguments are made for each position? On what issues did they disagree?
- How might each respond to the arguments of the other?
- What similarities and differences do you see between this debate within the Chinese court of the 1830s and contemporary discussion about the legalization of marijuana in the United States?

XU NAIJI

An Argument for Legalization

1836

Xu Naiji, Vice-President of the Sacrificial Court, presents the following memorial in regard to opium, to show that the more severe the interdicts against it are made, the more widely do the evils arising therefrom spread...

In Keenlung's reign, as well as previously, opium was inserted in the tariff of Canton as a medicine, subject to a duty... After this, it was prohibited... Yet the smokers of the drug have increased in number, and the practice has spread almost throughout the whole empire...

Formerly, the barbarian merchants brought foreign money to China; which being paid in exchange for goods, was a source of pecuniary advantage to the people of all the sea-board provinces. But latterly, the barbarian merchants have clandestinely sold opium for money, which has rendered it unnecessary for them to import foreign silver. Thus foreign money has been going out of the country, while none comes into it.

It is proposed entirely to cut off the foreign trade, thus to remove the root, to dam up the source of the evil. The Celestial Dynasty would not, indeed, hesitate to relinquish the few millions of duties arising therefrom. But all the nations of the West have had a general market open to their ships for upward of a thousand years, while the dealers in opium are the English alone; it would be wrong, for the sake of cut-

ting off the English trade, to cut off that of all the other nations. Besides, the hundreds of thousands of people living on the sea-coast depend wholly on trade for their livelihood, and how are they to be disposed of? Moreover, the barbarian ships, being on the high seas, can repair to any island that may be selected as an entrepôt, and the native sea-going vessels can meet them there; it is then impossible to cut off the trade... Thus it appears that, though the commerce of Canton should be cut off, yet it will not be possible to prevent the clandestine introduction of merchandise.

It will be found, on examination, that the smokers of opium are idle, lazy vagrants, having no useful purpose before them, and are unworthy of regard or even of contempt. And though there are smokers to be found who have overstepped the threshold of age, yet they do not attain to the long life of other men. But new births are daily increasing the population of the empire; and there is no cause to apprehend a diminution therein; while, on the other hand, we cannot adopt too great, or too early, precautions against the annual waste which is taking place in the resources, the very substance of China.

Since then, it will not answer to close our ports against [all trades], and since the laws issued against opium are quite inoperative, the only method left is to revert to the former system, to permit the barbarian merchants to import opium paying duty thereon as a medicine, and to require that, after having passed the Custom-House, it shall be delivered to the Hong merchants only in exchange for merchandise, and

Source: "Memorial from Heu-Naetse," in *Blue Book—Correspondence Relating to China* (London, 1840), 56–59.

that no money be paid for it. The barbarians finding that the amount of dues to be paid on it, is less than what is now spent in bribes, will also gladly comply therein. Foreign money should be placed on the same footing with sycee silver, and the exportation of it should be equally prohibited. Offenders, when caught, should be punished by the entire destruction of the opium they may have, and the confiscation of the money that may be found with them....

It becomes my duty, then, to request that it be enacted, that any officer, scholar, or soldier, found guilty of secretly smoking opium, shall be immedi-

ately dismissed from public employ, without being made liable to any other penalty....

Lastly, that no regard be paid to the purchase and use of opium on the part of the people generally....

Besides, the removal of the prohibitions refers only to the vulgar and common people, those who have no official duties to perform. So long as the officers of the Government, the scholars, and the military are not included, I see no detriment to the dignity of the Government. And by allowing the proposed importation and exchange of the drug for other commodities, more than ten millions of money will annually be prevented from flowing out of the Central land.

YUAN YULIN

An Argument for Suppression

1836

I, your minister, believe that the success or failure in government and the prosperity or decay of administration depend largely upon our capacity to distinguish between right and wrong, between what is safe and what is dangerous.... The prevailing evil of to-day is the excuse that things are hard to get done, and the foremost example of such hypocrisy is the proposal to legalize opium....

In my humble opinion, the proposal for legalization has overlooked the distinction between right and wrong.... Further, it fails to appreciate what is safe and what is dangerous....

The prohibition of opium is most solemnly recorded on the statute books.... The proposal to change the established law is thus a violation of an inherited institution and of the imperial edicts.

Uniformity is the most important element in the decrees of the Court. Now it has been proposed that the prohibition of opium-smoking would reach the officers of the Government, the scholars, and the military, but not the common people. But it is forgotten that the common people of to-day will be

the officers, scholars, and the military of the future. Should they be allowed to smoke at first and then be prohibited from it in the future? Moreover, the officers, scholars, and the military of to-day may be degraded to the rank of the common people. In that case, are they to be freed from the prohibition once imposed on them? Prohibition was proclaimed because opium is pernicious. It follows then that the ban should not be abolished until it ceases to be an evil. A partial prohibition or partial legalization is a confusion of rules by the government itself; consequently good faith in its observance can hardly be expected. When the law was all for prohibition, decrees had not been followed. How can the people respect the restrictions or punishments should the law be in confusion? The logical consequence will be the ruin of government and demoralization of our culture....

Even if the duties be raised to twofold, it would be only a little over 200,000 taels. Further doubled, the figure will stand at only 500,000 taels.... Hence, if our Government should seek its revenue from the duties on opium, it is to make an enormous sacrifice for a scanty profit....

The drain of silver, to be sure, arouses apprehension. But the point is whether inspection is faithfully

Source: "Memorial from Yuan Yu-lin," in P. C. Kuo, *A Critical Study of the First Anglo-Chinese War* (Shanghai: Commercial Press, 1935), 211-13.

enforced or not. Should the inspection be faithful, opium prohibition will be effective; so also will be the ban on the silver export. If it be not faithful, opium prohibition will come to naught, and so will the ban on silver export. It must not be supposed that inspection will be facilitated by relaxing opium prohibition or that it will be difficult if the prohibition is severe. . . .

It has been argued that since the imported opium costs an enormous sum of money, the cultivation of the poppy should be allowed in the interior of the country. . . . [But], the farm lands of our country are fixed in number. . . . The valuable acres yielding crops may easily be turned into a vast field of opium. This means to destroy agriculture and ruin the very foundation of the lives of the people.

If the habit of smoking secretly spreads over the country under the present prohibition, its legalization will mean greater disasters: fathers would no longer be able to teach their sons; husbands would no longer be able to admonish their wives; masters would no longer be able to restrain their servants; and teachers would no longer be able to train their pupils. The habitual smokers would continue it as a regular practice, while others would strive for imitation. The per-

petration of evils will be fathomless. It would mean the end of the life of the people and the destruction of the soul of the nation.

As a result of the smoking of opium, the soldiers of Kwangtung were enfeebled. Your Majesty admonished them on that account during the late rebellion of the mountaineers in the said province. Now should the proposal be adhered to that soldiers, but not the people, be prohibited from smoking opium, then at the future recruitment of the army it would be found that old soldiers had already been spoiled by secret smoking, while fresh recruits would be habitual smokers! . . . The very trick of the cunning barbarians is to weaken our nation with poison. If they now actually succeed in fooling our people, it means the disintegration of our national defense and the opening up of the same to their penetration. . . .

[W]hat arouses our gravest apprehension is the perpetration of an evil which might completely go out of control. Once opium is legalized, the people will flock to it. When the evil becomes alarming and when we come to repent the wrong of legalization . . . we will readily find that the country is so heavily saddled with its bad results that recovery is well-nigh impossible. . . .

Document 19.4

A Moral Appeal to Queen Victoria

The Chinese emperor soon decided this debate in favor of suppression and sent a prominent official, Commissioner Lin Zexu, to enforce it. Lin did so vigorously, seizing and destroying millions of pounds of the drug, flushing it out to the sea with a prayer to the local spirit: “[You] who wash away all stains and cleanse all impurities.”²⁰ At the same time (1839), Lin wrote a letter to the British monarch, Queen Victoria, appealing for her assistance in ending this noxious trade.

- On what basis does Commissioner Lin appeal to Queen Victoria?
- How might you compare this letter with that of Document 19.1? What similarities and differences can you notice?
- What assumptions about the West does this letter reveal? Which were accurate and which represented misunderstandings?
- Although there is no evidence of a response to the letter, how might you imagine British reaction to it?

COMMISSIONER LIN ZEXU
Letter to Queen Victoria
 1839

A communication: magnificently our great Emperor soothes and pacifies China and the foreign countries, regarding all with the same kindness. If there is profit, then he shares it with the people of the world; if there is harm, then he removes it on behalf of the world. . . .

We find that your country is sixty or seventy thousand *li*^o from China. Yet there are barbarian ships that strive to come here for trade for the purpose of making a great profit. The wealth of China is used to profit the barbarians. . . . By what right do they. . . use this poisonous drug to injure the Chinese people? . . .

Let us ask, where is your conscience? I have heard that the smoking of opium is very strictly forbidden by your country; that is because the harm caused by opium is clearly understood. Since it is not permitted to do harm to your country, then even less should you let it be passed on to the harm of other countries—how much less to China! Of all that China exports to foreign countries, there is not a single thing which is not beneficial to people: they are of benefit when eaten, or of benefit when used, or of benefit when resold: all are beneficial. Is there a single article from China which has done any harm to foreign countries? Take tea and rhubarb,^o for example; the foreign countries cannot get along for a single day without them. If China cuts off these

benefits with no sympathy for those who are to suffer, then what can the barbarians rely upon to keep themselves alive? . . . On the other hand, articles coming from the outside to China can only be used as toys. We can take them or get along without them. . . . Nevertheless our Celestial Court lets tea, silk, and other goods be shipped without limit and circulated everywhere without begrudging it in the slightest. This is for no other reason but to share the benefit with the people of the whole world. . . .

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. . . .

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? . . .

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 of a harmful thing on behalf of mankind. . . .

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.

^o*li*: approximately one-third of a mile.

^o*rhubarb*: used as a medicine.

Source: Dun J. Li, ed., *China in Transition, 1517–1911* (London: Wadsworth, 1969), 64–67.

Document 19.5
War and Defeat

While Queen Victoria and British authorities apparently never received Commissioner Lin's letter and certainly did not respond to it, they did react to the commissioner's actions. Citing the importance of free trade and the violation of British property rights, they launched a major military expedition in which

their steamships and heavy guns reflected the impact of the Industrial Revolution on the exercise of British power. This was the first Opium War, and the Chinese lost it badly. One prominent scholar has described it as “the most decisive reversal the Manchus [Qing dynasty] had ever received.”²¹ The Treaty of Nanjing, which ended that conflict in 1842, was largely imposed by the British. It was the first of many “unequal treaties” that China was required to sign with various European powers and the United States in the decades that followed. While Chinese authorities tried to think about the treaty as a means of “subduing and conciliating” the British, as they had done with other barbarian intruders, it represented in fact a new, much diminished, and dependent position for China on the world stage.

- What were the major provisions of the treaty? Why do you think that opium, ostensibly the cause of the conflict, was rarely mentioned in the treaty?
- In what respects did the treaty signal an unequal relationship between China and Great Britain? What aspects of Chinese independence were lost or compromised by the treaty?
- What provisions of the treaty most clearly challenged traditional Chinese understandings of their place in the world?

The Treaty of Nanjing

1842

I.

There shall henceforward be peace and friendship between Her Majesty the Queen of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland and His Majesty the Emperor of China, and between their respective subjects, who shall enjoy full security and protection for their persons and property within the dominions of the other.

II.

His Majesty the Emperor of China agrees, that British subjects, with their families and establishments,

shall be allowed to reside, for the purposes of carrying on their mercantile pursuits, without molestation or restraint, at the cities and towns of Canton, Amoy, Foochowfoo, Ningpo, and Shanghai....

III.

It being obviously necessary and desirable that British subjects should have some port whereat they may [maintain] and refit their ships when required, and keep stores for that purpose, His Majesty the Emperor of China cedes to Her Majesty the Queen of Great Britain, &c., the Island of Hong-Kong....

IV.

The Emperor of China agrees to pay the sum of 6,000,000 of dollars, as the value of the opium which was delivered up at Canton in the month of March,

Source: Treaty of Nanjing, in *Treaties, Conventions, etc., between China and Foreign States* (London: Statistical Department of the Inspectorate General of Customs, 1917), I:351–56.

1839, as a ransom for the lives of Her Britannic Majesty's Superintendent and subjects, who had been imprisoned and threatened with death by the Chinese High Officers....

V.

The Government of China having compelled the British merchants trading at Canton to deal exclusively with certain Chinese merchants, called Hong merchants (or Co-Hong)... the Emperor of China agrees to abolish that practice in future at all ports where British merchants may reside, and to permit them to carry on their mercantile transactions with whatever persons they please; and His Imperial Majesty further agrees to pay to the British Government the sum of 3,000,000 of dollars, on account of debts due to British subjects by some of the said Hong merchants, who have become insolvent, and who owe very large sums of money to subjects of Her Britannic Majesty.

VI.

The Government of Her Britannic Majesty having been obliged to send out an expedition to demand and obtain redress for the violent and unjust proceedings of the Chinese High Authorities towards Her Britannic Majesty's officer and subjects, the Emperor of China agrees to pay the sum of 12,000,000 of dollars, on account of the expenses incurred....

VIII.

The Emperor of China agrees to release, unconditionally, all subjects of Her Britannic Majesty

(whether natives of Europe or India), who may be in confinement at this moment in any part of the Chinese empire.

X.

... [T]he Emperor further engages, that when British merchandise shall have once paid at any of the said ports the regulated customs and dues,... such merchandise may be conveyed by Chinese merchants to any province or city in the interior of the Empire of China....

XI.

It is agreed that Her Britannic Majesty's Chief High Officer in China shall correspond with the Chinese High Officers, both at the capital and in the provinces,... on a footing of perfect equality....

XII.

On the assent of the Emperor of China to this Treaty being received, and the discharge of the first instalment of money, Her Britannic Majesty's forces will retire from Nanking and the Grand Canal, and will no longer molest or stop the trade of China. The military post at Chinhai will also be withdrawn, but the Islands of Koolangsoo, and that of Chusan, will continue to be held by Her Majesty's forces until the money payments, and the arrangements for opening the ports to British merchants, be completed.

Using the Evidence: Voices from the Opium War

1. **Defining the issues in the Opium War:** The Opium War was about more than opium. How would you support or challenge this statement?

2. **Characterizing the Opium War:** In what ways might the Opium War be regarded as a clash of cultures? In what respects might it be seen as a clash of interests? Was it an inevitable conflict or were there missed opportunities for avoiding it? (Note: You may want to consider the data in the Snapshot on p. 885 as well as Documents 19.1–19.5, pp. 905–13.)
3. **Interpreting the Treaty of Nanjing:** In the context of British and Chinese views of the world, how do you understand the Treaty of Nanjing? Which country's view of the world is more clearly reflected in that treaty?
4. **Exploring Chinese views of the British:** Based on these documents, how well or how poorly did the Chinese understand the British? How might you account for their misunderstandings?