



The Opium Wars: Sound Familiar?

The Opium Wars, or Anglo-Chinese Wars, 1839-1842 and 1859-1860, were the result of a trade dispute in the days before the WTO. China had plethora of goods that Europe wanted, especially silk, spices, porcelain and tea. Conversely, the Chinese thought that they had everything they wanted, the only exchange that the Chinese authorities would accept was silver. Nearly 30 million kg of silver were traded with China, principally from the Americas where the Spanish had an abundance. Unfortunately for Britain, having no silver mines, they had to buy the silver from other European countries. On the other hand, the Battle of Plassey, in 1757, had secured vast swathes of the Indian subcontinent for the East India Company and, more importantly as far as the China trade was concerned, a virtual monopoly on opium. It did not take long before Britain realized that opium, readily available, close at hand and highly addictive, thus ensuring a constant demand, was the ideal exchange commodity; although the importation of opium into China was illegal. To circumvent this irritant to free trade the British bought Chinese goods in Canton, a designated trading area, on credit. At the same time they purchased opium at the Bengal auctions which they shipped to the China seas where it was off-loaded onto local merchants ships to pay for the goods they had bought on credit. Apparently the British merchants were not satisfied with the level of profit and so, towards the end of the 18th century, they cut out the Bengali brokers and dealt directly with the opium farmers.

The trade burgeoned, before 1750 China was importing about 15 tons a year. By 1810 the trade had become so pervasive that the Emperor issued yet another decree. '*Opium has a harm. Opium is a poison, undermining our good customs and morality. Its use is prohibited by law*'. It had little effect! The government in Beijing, in the North, could do little to protect their southern coastline and there was already a great demand amongst the addicted people. By the 1820's China was importing (or more accurately was receiving) over 900 tons a year. The mandarins tried a number of approaches, there was a discussion as to whether to legalize the drug at one point, but instead they applied the death sentence to Chinese traffickers which momentarily slowed the trade. Demand was such, however, that by 1839, when a new commissioner was appointed to the sole trading port of Canton, the drug trade had exceeded 1400 tons per annum. Lin Zexu, a Confucian scholar, enforced the ban on opium and, when the British continued to deal in the drug, placed a trade embargo on them. The local trade superintendent, Charles

Elliot, did indeed hand over some 1200 tons to the Chinese authorities who treated it with lye and washed it out to sea. Charles Elliot had over-reached himself however; he had promised the British merchants that they would receive compensation from the government. Back in England, the Treasury was appalled and instead of paying up they sent a British Indian Army to reinforce the right of upstanding, honest merchants to deal in illegal drugs.

The British had all the latest armaments, ironclad ships with heavy guns, which steam power, enabled them to sail up and down the Yangtze River bombarding towns. Not content with this 'shock and awe' display they also stole the tax barges, river vessels laden with the years revenue and bound for the court at Beijing. Having lost both their money and the port of Canton, the Qing authorities sued for peace, which the British kindly granted in 1842, in exchange for more money, four more ports to be opened, and Hong Kong. Somewhat dismayed at the obvious advantage the British had gained the United States and France promptly demanded like treatment, which they received with treaties ratified in 1844. Satisfied with the misery they were wreaking on the Chinese population, vast fortunes were made in the following years. In 1856 a Chinese pirate ship was boarded by the Qing government and the crew arrested for smuggling and piracy. The ship was called the Arrow and had been registered in Hong Kong (the registration had expired) as a privateer, a common trick. The British consulate claimed that in the boarding the Union Jack, the British flag, had been desecrated. Of course they went to war with the Chinese, the Second Opium War. The result was much as the first except that France joined the festivities after a French missionary was killed. Fighting rumbled on for 3 years with the British threatening to burn down the Summer Palace. Eventually another Unequal Treaty was signed, 10 more ports were opened, foreigners were allowed access throughout China and the Qing government had to pay 3 million ounces of silver to Britain and 2 million to France. Throughout the 19th century abuse was heaped on abuse until the Middle Kingdom was thoroughly cowed. Have we learned anything from all this?

Sources: [The Opium War and the Opening of China](#)

[England and China: The Opium Wars, 1839-60](#)

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Modern History Sourcebook :Commissioner Lin:Letter to Queen Victoria, 1839.
www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/1839lin2.html

The Chinese commissioner, Lin Zexu, actually sent a letter to Queen Victoria asking if she could morally support the trading of illegal drugs. Her answer was the British army.