

*Center for European Studies  
Working Paper Series #136*

**China as “Victim”?  
The Opium War That Wasn’t**

by

**Harry G. Gelber**

Visiting Scholar, Center for European Studies

Harvard University

[hgelber@utas.edu.au](mailto:hgelber@utas.edu.au)

1/601 Sandy Bay Road

Sandy Bay, Tasmania 7005, Australia

Abstract

The 1840-42 Anglo-Chinese war (the so-called “Opium War”) is almost universally believed to have been triggered by British imperial rapacity and determination to sell more and more opium into China. That belief is mistaken. The British went to war because of Chinese military threats to defenseless British civilians, including women and children; because China refused to negotiate on terms of diplomatic equality and because China refused to open more ports than Canton to trade, not just with Britain but with everybody. The belief about British “guilt” came later, as part of China’s long catalogue of alleged Western “exploitation and aggression.”

China's rise in recent years has attracted intense international attention. There are many reasons. One is the ancient idea that because China has a very large population, huge territory, a fascinating record in art and literature, and a long history of East Asian dominance, it is necessarily destined to be a great modern global power. In addition, there is China's large and growing importance in international trade and finance. There is the evident energy and dynamism of China's people. But together with these comes a widespread conviction that China has been unfairly oppressed and exploited by the West, in ways that merit redress.

The origins of this notion go back to the nineteenth century, and the long decline and collapse of the last imperial dynasty, the Qing. A major item in the indictment is Britain's behavior before, during and after the 1840-42 Anglo-Chinese conflict, the "Opium War." It's a brilliantly snappy name that sneakily prejudices the issue in very simple form: while China had done Britain no harm, the British gratuitously invaded China. Britain wanted to expand its imperial power and sell more goods, especially the opium whose import the Chinese tried to ban, while the British sold or smuggled in anyway. In other words, it was a case of commercial and imperialist British greed trying to force opium on the Chinese.

The world is wrong. The British decision to go to war had quite different causes.

First, opium. In China, it was a normal item of use and trade for centuries before the 1840 war. Not until the later 1790s did the Chinese court start to worry about its growing and intensive use. In the 1820s it began seriously to prohibit opium imports, though the bans entirely failed to stop Chinese people from growing or buying it in increasing quantities. Still less did it stop Chinese citizens, merchants, gangs and hordes of officials from ignoring the prohibitions and smuggling it into the country. Even senior officials in charge of coastal protection grew very rich indeed from smuggling, or smugglers' kickbacks. In the later 1830s the emperor's most senior advisers debated whether it would be better to enforce the opium prohibitions or to legalize, regulate and tax the trade. Not until 1838-39 did the emperor finally opt for enforcement and send the admirable Commissioner Lin to Canton to see to it.

The most important official concerns were two. One was the damage done to the health and capacity for work of the people using opium, especially the addicts. The other was the economic damage done by the opium trade. Most importantly, too much silver was being paid to foreign merchants for opium, and thus leaving China. The domestic price of silver was therefore going up. But the price of everyday copper cash remained the same. So tax payments, which had to be made in silver, were effectively tax increases, causing much popular resentment and social unrest.

That assessment was almost certainly in important respects wrong. The matter cannot be proved one way or the other, but the circumstances of the time suggest the

following. We know that the 1820s and 1830s were a time of social unrest and disturbance in the Chinese empire, with various rebellious groups appearing from time to time, not least in the South. It would be normal at such times for some people to use opium to relieve stress, much as the modern world has used Valium. Such a process could help to account for the startling rate of increase in opium sales at Canton at the end of the 1820s. Furthermore, opium and general trading, or smuggling, was by no means confined to Canton (modern Guangzhou) but was happening in dozens of inlets and small places along the coast. It is beyond belief that the central Chinese authorities, who to this day do not have reliable statistics on most aspects of the Chinese economy, had more than a hazy idea of what was going on, let alone accurate statistics about the opium trade and its effects on the silver supply. What may be slightly more reliable are the numbers for opium shipments to China from India and, maybe, Turkey, and they tell an interesting tale. The available estimates suggest that, in 1800-1801, some 4570 chests of opium<sup>1</sup> were shipped from these sources to China. Twenty years later, in 1820-1821, the total was much the same: 4244 chests. Yet by 1830-1831 that had suddenly more than quadrupled, to 18,956 chests and, by 1838-1839, on the eve of the Sino-British conflict, even that had more than doubled to 40,200 chests.<sup>2</sup>

The question is: why?

It goes without saying that if such a drug is available, some people will experiment with it and a few will become addicted, but the most likely explanation for such soaring demand may well be opium's use to relieve personal and social stress of various kinds. It seems difficult otherwise to explain consumption multiplying by no less than ten in a mere twenty years.

Whether that hypothesis is correct or not, there is another and equally important factor: the tea trade. We know that much and perhaps most of the silver that the merchants earned from selling opium was immediately spent again on buying tea, for which there was a ravenous demand in England. Insofar as that was done at Canton, more or less reliable figures may be available. For the wider trades that went on along the coast, perhaps unofficially, numbers must be mere guesswork. What seems certain is that if there was indeed social disruption and even turmoil, a good deal of the silver earned by locals, whether for tea or anything else, would have immediately disappeared without being reflected in official accounts.

It was entirely normal for Chinese to bury and hide valuables and money in times of trouble. Silver would certainly be hidden in this way. Once hidden, it would be risky to bring it out, even as silver prices rose, lest neighbors and others suspected that one had hidden treasure. The phenomenon of hidden valuables has recurred many

---

<sup>1</sup>The contents of chests could vary but may have been around 130 lbs.

<sup>2</sup>The figures are from a table in Michael Greenberg, *British Trade and the Opening of China 1800-42*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press [reprint], 1969), p. 221

times: during the collapse of the Ming dynasty, during the Taiping rebellion after 1850, again during the disturbances and the Boxer rising of the 1890s, not to mention the many tales of torture of landowners in the early days of the Chinese Communists to make them reveal their hidden valuables.<sup>3</sup>

What all that suggests is that the imperial authorities may have been quite right to detect a withdrawal of silver from circulation in China, but wrong to think that all or even most of it was being exported and that foreign opium traders were therefore responsible for the larger economic consequences within China.

None of which alters the fact that the Chinese authorities, then and later, firmly believed that it was opium and the opium trade that had caused the conflict with the British. They were wrong about that, too.

Growing and selling opium was entirely legal. In 1840, and for decades afterwards, growing, selling and using opium was entirely legal in places like Turkey, Persia and (British) India. In India it was not only legal but in the 1830s and 1840s opium from the British East India Company's Bengal opium monopoly was quite normally auctioned in Calcutta and shipped to many places, for instance to the Dutch in the East Indies. Opium was legal in Britain itself, which imported some 200,000 pounds of it from India in that same year. It continued in normal use, especially in the form of laudanum, and was used by many distinguished British and European people, including Prime Minister Gladstone in Britain and Prince Bismarck in Germany, was openly sold to the families of wounded soldiers during World War I and traces of laudanum could be found in British over-the-counter cold medicines as late as the 1950s. Indeed, neither in Britain nor in America, were there laws against opium or any other drug until many decades after the 1840-1842 war.

The British position at Canton and in London was therefore complicated. There was no reason to interfere with opium growing or trading in India, or to stop exports from there. Or to stop selling it in India to private merchants who might ship it, in private vessels, wherever they pleased, including to British ships anchored beyond China's reach outside the Pearl River estuary, downstream from Canton, where the Western traders were congregated.

---

<sup>3</sup>Here, for example, is Anson Burlingame, by this time China's envoy to the U.S., speaking in New York on June 23, 1868 about the benefits of leaving China alone and not causing turmoil: "Let her alone, and the caravans on the roads of the North ... will swarm in larger numbers than ever before. Let her alone, and that silver which has been flowing for hundreds of years into China, losing itself [i.e., being hidden away] but which yet exists, will come out into the affairs of men...." The speech was reported in the *New York Daily Tribune* of June 24, 1868, with parts reprinted in Frederick Wells Williams, *Anson Burlingame and the First Chinese Mission to Foreign Powers* (New York: Scribners, 1912), p. 139. I am indebted for this reference to Dr John Schrecker of Brandeis University.

It is true that over time the opium trade acquired huge importance for the British, for two reasons. Duties and taxes on it became vital for the financing of British India. And, since there was not much that the Chinese wanted to buy from the British, opium provided much of the earnings essential for buying Chinese tea, for which Britain developed an insatiable appetite. In the 1660s Britain had imported some two pounds of it; by the 1780s that had become fifteen million pounds and by 1830 it was thirty million. However, it is also true that at no point did the British government, or its official representatives in and outside China, countenance the opium smuggling on the China coast or give it aid or comfort. Part of the trouble, indeed, was that while the Chinese expected foreign "headmen" (including British government officials) to keep their compatriots in order, Parliament in London was entirely unwilling to have them enforce Chinese laws against British citizens on Chinese soil. China's coastal protection was obviously a matter for China itself. No British Minister or official questioned China's right to control its own shores and borders, or to decide what should be imported and what excluded.

Even the enforced confiscation by the Chinese of opium stocks managed by the Canton merchants<sup>4</sup> brought no hostile reaction from London. When news of Commissioner Lin's March 18, 1839, confiscation order to those merchants reached London, there was no reaction. Only in September did London become alarmed, with the arrival of a Canton dispatch of May 29 relating China's military threats against defenseless British civilians. Only then did the great British Foreign Secretary, Lord Palmerston, begin to talk about military action. Those public feelings turned to anger and outrage at the end of 1839 when there were further reports of traders and their families having to seek refuge on board British merchant ships at sea, deprived – at least officially – of food and water supplies from shore. When somewhat embellished reports reached London of English women and children being threatened by Chinese soldiers, there was real fury. For British politics the issue ceased to be opium – about which many people sympathized with China – and became the fate of not just opium traders but innocent men, women and children threatened by armed Chinese soldiers.

It is true that there was another important factor. The British Superintendent at Canton had promised the merchants compensation for the compulsory surrender of opium to Commissioner Lin. That meant that the value of the opium was, in effect, being underwritten by the British government. Since the London cabinet could not decently disavow its own superintendent, Captain Charles Elliot, it had to try and find some two million pounds – which it did not have. Since it was also thought politically impossible to ask the House of Commons to vote funds to pay opium dealers, the solution was to get Chinese monetary compensation for seizures which had, after all, been carried out abruptly, without charge or trial of any kind. Military pressure – perhaps some kind of blockade? – would be useful.

---

<sup>4</sup>Another problem was that much of the opium at or near Canton was not actually owned by the merchants selling it; they were often just agents acting for owners elsewhere.

There were other issues that may have been for Palmerston and the London government even more important. They had, in principle, to do with state equality and sovereignty. These matters started to come to a head in 1834, when supervision of the traders at Canton was shifted from the East India Company to an official appointed by the British Crown and government. From that point on, London, very conscious of having so recently beaten Napoleon Bonaparte and owning the greatest navy in the world, flatly rejected China's insistence that the British "headman," once it was a royal official, could only communicate with provincial Chinese authorities indirectly and by way of "petition," instead of on terms of diplomatic equality.

There was also general irritation with Chinese constraints on trade and confinement of the Western traders to Canton lest, in the view of the imperial authorities, too many foreigners roaming around the empire should disturb the tranquility of Chinese life. Yet the British, like everyone else, were dazzled by the prospect of a limitless Chinese market, if only they could get there, beyond Canton. So they wanted more ports opened to trade, and proper diplomatic relations at Beijing. It was what Lord Macartney's mission to China had asked for back in 1793-1794. It would, among other things, and by increasing British earnings in China, make the opium sales much less necessary. Above all, free trade was becoming a moral imperative. A dozen years later the chief British official in China was Sir John Bowring. Passionately Christian, and well connected in radical circles in London, he coined the *dictum*: "Free trade is Jesus Christ, and Jesus Christ is free trade."

The real issues for the British therefore became not opium but jurisdiction, ultimately sovereignty, expansion of trade and by no means least the safety of British men, women and children threatened, chased away or imprisoned without charge or trial.

On February 20, 1840, Lord Palmerston wrote to the emperor and, simultaneously, to the commanders of the British force sent to Canton. While the Chinese were fully entitled to enforce their anti-opium edicts, Palmerston wrote, it was something else entirely to punish the innocent (i.e., those merchants who did not trade opium) together with the guilty and to threaten lives without as much as a trial. The force should seek reparations for the insults to Queen Victoria's officer at Canton, and to British people; to secure the opening of other ports to trade; to get agreement that the British and everyone else could trade in China; and to allow British diplomats to come to Beijing and the ports.

The various issues were aired in a full-dress three-day debate in the House of Commons in early April 1840.<sup>5</sup> The Opposition did not make an issue of opium. What it criticized was the fact that the government had allowed matters to come to this pass.

---

<sup>5</sup>House of Commons *Hansard* 7-9 April 1840

What could be Britain's justification for using force in China? It also harped – not unfairly – on the government's failure to give the Canton Superintendent legal powers. The fiercest thrusts came from young William Gladstone, destined to become Prime Minister decades later. "A war more unjust in its origins," he declared "a war more calculated in its progress to cover this country with permanent disgrace, I do not know and have not read of."<sup>6</sup> Palmerston's response was masterful.<sup>7</sup> It was obviously entirely China's business to decide what should be imported into China, and to supervise and control China's coasts. But as it was, the actions of the Chinese Commissioner had been "unjust and no better than robbery." Indeed, a joint British, American and French naval force should in future be stationed on the China coast to look after Western interests. Though a British military force was now being sent, a demonstration would probably be enough to have British grievances met without further action.

The government won its vote, and won again in the upper house, the House of Lords. There the Duke of Wellington, the victor of Waterloo and by now the "Great Panjandrum" of British public affairs, declared that in half a century of public service he had seen no insults and injuries as bad as those visited on the British at Canton. The Chinese deserved to be punished.

In the event, even before any organized military or naval task force could reach Canton, a single Royal Navy frigate arrived there to protect merchantmen and civilians, for instance from Chinese fireships. Events now became confused. Shots were exchanged, some Chinese navy junks sunk, and there were casualties. When the expeditionary force arrived, war began.

It was essentially conducted in two halves. In 1840 the British did more talking than fighting. In January 1841 the two local sides actually worked out a deal, but both governments rejected it. London thought the terms, and especially the proposed compensation, were quite inadequate. The emperor was furious about a proposal to let the British have even a tiny, barren island base, and resume trade at Canton. Then there was a pause for a change of government in London; and for the new ministry to deal first with the disaster of the British campaign in Afghanistan. There, following matchless British military and political incompetence, just one man managed to return.

Only then did the China campaign resume. This time it was the Chinese who managed the conflict with quite remarkable incompetence and British forces, often minute, won a series of victories. When the British, having advanced up the Yangzi, were on the brink of storming China's ancient capital, both sides signed the 1842 Treaty of Nanjing. In it, China agreed to open four more ports; to having foreign consuls stationed at each; and to treating British and Chinese officials as equals. The Chinese would also pay a sizeable indemnity; and the British would get the (then) barren rock of

---

<sup>6</sup>House of Commons *Hansard* 8 April 1840 cols 800-820

<sup>7</sup>House of Commons *Hansard* 9 April 1849 cols 925-948

Hong Kong, where they would be able to maintain merchants under the control of their own magistrates.

The treaty did not mention opium.

As early as 1841, while the conflict was in progress, John Quincy Adams, the former sixth President of the U.S., remarked that opium "is a mere incident to the dispute, but no more the cause of the war than the throwing overboard of tea in Boston harbor was the cause of the North American revolution ... the cause of the war is the kowtow - the arrogant and insupportable pretensions of China that she will hold commercial intercourse with the rest of mankind not upon terms of equal reciprocity, but upon the insulting and degrading forms of the relations between lord and vassal."<sup>8</sup>

So how and why did the view take hold that it had been an "Opium War"?

Commissioner Lin, and the Chinese governing groups in general, then and later totally failed to see that there could have been any cause for strife other than opium and British commercial greed and imperial rapacity. That becomes easier to understand if one recalls the astonishing degree of Chinese lack of interest and misunderstanding of what the British, and especially British law and government, were all about. Lin himself, a man of great intelligence and perspicacity, had no difficulty in managing dealings with the British at Canton. But understanding the British government, its structure or motives, or the forces that moved it, was something else. For instance, his letters to Queen Victoria (which were never delivered) are couched in terms suggesting he thought this young woman, so recently on the throne and even more recently married, actually ran British foreign policy, in much in the same way as the Chinese emperor dictated policy in Beijing.

More importantly, and also more generally, the years and decades that followed the 1840-1842 war saw, from Beijing's point of view, a long catalogue of further Western (including British) demands and interventions. There was the incursion of hordes of foreign missionaries, by no means always welcomed by the Chinese, and the natural social competitors of the Chinese gentry in their own localities. There was the spectacle of Anglo-French armies entering Beijing in 1860. After the 1860s there were foreign businesses and enterprises, such as railways or mines, disturbing the Chinese scene and its social relations. From the 1880s onwards came claims for the establishment of Western enclaves and spheres of influence in China. In that context, the 1840-1842 war became just one entry in a long catalogue of Western sins which made China an innocent victim of foreign aggression and exploitation.

---

<sup>8</sup>Chinese Repository, Vol. XI, 1942, pp 274-89



Furthermore, the whole business of China's recovery and restoration became by the second half of the century inextricably mingled with an upsurge of patriotism. Nationalism became an essential strand not just in China's restoration but in the transformation of what had become a rickety and out-of-date empire into what would be, in governmental structure and social organization, more like a modern nation state. In that context, blaming foreigners became (and, significantly, remains into the twenty-first century) an important and perhaps necessary rallying cry for the population.

In Britain, too, views not only of China, but about Britain's activities at Canton, became distorted. Both there and in the U.S. came an upsurge of moral indignation not confined to the business of China. Much more generally there was growing self-criticism about the effects of a burgeoning capitalism on workers and their families, and sympathy for oppressed "underdogs" of every kind. The spread of socialist and even early anti-imperialist ideas was also significant. Some of that was fuelled, on the issue of China in particular, by the increasing number of missionaries, especially Protestants and more especially still the non-Conformists, who wrote and spoke with passion about China's misery and the way in which opium - and alcohol - were undermining Chinese society and keeping the Chinese from Christ. This was a period, too, when the Western medical profession, with the Americans largely in the lead, was becoming a powerful social regulating force, one that, especially in conjunction with the churches, was to bring "Prohibition" to the U.S. less than half a century later. So the general anti-opium and anti-drug campaigns in the West gathered pace.

Yet the great international anti-opium conferences and arrangements of 1880-1913 were entirely futile as, indeed, America's anti-alcohol prohibitions were to be. In China itself, the issue of opium quickly changed its form. Within sixteen years of the Treaty of Nanjing, China had abolished the opium import restrictions, not least because they had become irrelevant. By 1860, and much more so by 1900, the Chinese were growing at home many times as much opium as the British, or anyone else, could import. What is more, they kept on doing it, in increasing quantities and virtually throughout all the wars and revolutions of the twentieth century.

### Brief bibliography

- Bourne, K., *Palmerston: The Early Years 1784-1841* (London: Allen Lane, 1982).
- Fairbank, John K., ed., *The Chinese World Order: Traditional China's Foreign Relations* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1968)
- Graham, Gerald S., *The China Station: War and Diplomacy 1830-1860* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978).
- Greenberg, Michael, *British Trade and the Opening of China 1800-1842* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1979)
- Hoe, Susanna and Derek Roebuck, *The Taking of Hong Kong: Charles and Clara Elliot in China Waters* (Richmond, Surrey: Curzon Press, 1999)
- House of Commons, *Hansard*, esp. April 7-9, 1840, cols. 669-951
- Hamilton, Lindsay H., *Is the War With China a Just One?* (London: James Ridgway, 1840)
- Morse, Hosea Ballou, *The International Relations of the Chinese Empire* (3 vols.): vol 1, *The Period of Conflict 1834 - 1860* (London: Longmans Green and Co., 1910)
- Platt, D.C.M, *Finance, Trade and Politics in British Foreign Policy 1815-1914* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968)
- Southgate, Donald, *'The Most English Minister...'* *The Policies and Politics of Palmerston* (London: Macmillan, 1966)
- Waley, Arthur, *The Opium War Through Chinese Eyes* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1958)