Analysis of the Opium Wars: The Event That Reversed Chinese Policy

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As the world becomes increasingly multipolar, the international stage can no longer turn a blind eye toward China. The People's Republic of China is a rising superpower with the world's number two economy, a modernized military, globalized aspirations, and the largest population. In just a generation, China has transformed form a poor, rural and agrarian society into a wealthy and urbanized manufacturing powerhouse. They have proven themselves to be worthy of international recognition for their advancements in science, technology, education, and global influence. This rapid growth supports the theory of global power shift from the West to the East—opening the door to an Asian-centric twenty-first century.

To visualize the future of China, we must understand where they are coming from. Learning Chinese history equips us with the proper knowledge to foretell the destiny of the nation. Their revolutionary progression can be traced back to an event that flipped Chinese policy upside down. The Opium Wars (1839-1842, 1856-1860) sparked the development of the modern China by awakening a sleeping giant to compete with the Western world. Defeat and humiliation would stimulate a defensive mindset, fueling a sense of solidarity and national

resolve to never fall prey again to foreign exploitation. In the context of the Opium Wars, the Chinese people were oppressed by a strong British military, multinational capitalist companies, and the destructive habit of the opium trade. Corrupted foreign influence poisoned Chinese policy and instilled a mentality to be on par with the West. As China fell victim to European imperialism, a once revered civilization found itself humiliated—setting the stage for modern China's resurgence.

The Opium Wars emerged from a complex history of unfair trade relationships between the British Empire and the Qing Dynasty. Trade between the British Empire and China was conducted unequally, inflicting great harm on Chinese society. Tensions escalated as British merchants resisted Chinese attempts to curb the opium trade, culminating in open conflict when British forces retaliated against trade restrictions. The nineteenth-century saw the expansion of the European colonial powers. The British looked to spread the Christian faith through missionaries, and the West as a collective had their eyes set on expanding their spheres of influence in China, profiting off immense Chinese wealth through their free trade networks. The British took advantage of the opium trade as a colonial tool for exploiting vast Chinese affluence, weakening Chinese society and driving the expansion of the British empire in the process. A highly addictive drug with serious health effects, the Opium trade had devastating consequences on the Chinese population: it resulted in the deaths of millions while large-scale addiction created a dependency on the British.[1] Before the utilization of opium, Sino-Western trade began as early as the sixteenth century. Yet the Chinese viewed these foreign merchants as inferior. The

[1] Paul U. Unschuld, "The British Intervention: Trauma 1," in *The Fall and Rise of China: Healing the Trauma of History* (London, England: Reaktion Books, 2013), 32-39.

Qing believed outside forces were barbaric and uncivilized.[2] This mentality headed into the opium trade would backfire immensely. From 1759, commerce between China and Britain was restricted to the confines of the Canton System.[3] The Qing Dynasty ordered that trade can only take place in the southern city of Guangzhou, commonly known as Canton. Under the Canton System, trade was subjugated to Chinese governmental regulation and only licensed merchants could take part in the exchange.[4]

Their method proved futile as colonial encroachment persisted. Initially, the British operated a trilateral international exchange system, abiding by the Canton system: Indian cotton and British silver were shipped to China in exchange for Chinese goods and tea. Throughout the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, China had the upper hand in the exchange—China had little interest in British offers, while Britain had a strong desire for Chinese products like silk, porcelain, and tea. The trade imbalance was tipped heavily in favor of the Chinese as the British paid massive trade deficits in silver. This went on until the 1820s when Britain replaced cotton with Indian-grown opium, causing the scale to completely reverse.[5] *Papaver somniferum* or the opium poppy emerged as a solution to the British trade problem. This product was grown in the Bengal province of India and sold to China under the monopoly of the British East India Company.[6] The Qing unsuccessfully attempted to limit opium consumption in 1729 by cracking down on its nonmedical uses. Despite these efforts, opium imports continued to increase. From 1800 to 1838, Chinese opium imports rose twenty-fold, and by 1838, opium accounted for more

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[2] John Powell, "First Opium War," in *Great Events from History: The 19th Century, 1801-1900* (Pasadena, Calif.: Salem Press, 2007), 625.
[3] Melvin E. Page and Penny M. Sonnenburg, "Opium Wars," in *Colonialism: An International Social, Cultural and Political Encyclopedia*, 2nd ed. (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2006), 441.
[4] Jack Patrick Hayes, "The Opium Wars in China," Asia Pacific Curriculum, https://asiapacificcurriculum.ca/learning-module/opium-wars-china.
[5] Ibid.
[6] Ibid.

than 57% of Chinese imports.[7] By the early nineteenth century, the use of opium broadened from the application of a recreational drug to a serious public health concern. Withdrawal came with side effects such as chills, cramps, nausea, and in serious cases, death. Addiction was therefore an unethical tool for British markets to reap profits.[8]

However, it is interesting to note that China had been accustomed to the use of opium well before their confrontation with the British. Medical books in China dating from the thirteenth century depict the benefits of opium as a treatment for symptoms such as diarrhea and dysentery. These records also warned of the dangers that it could cause if used in excess or an unwise manner.[9] Further, the Chinese philosophy of Confucianism strongly condemned the use of opium. Drugs were viewed as a violation of the traditional values of filial piety. This meant that the consumption of a drug such as opium was a direct act of disrespect to your ancestors. Confucianism holds the virtue of family respect to a high regard—believing that every fraction of the body, from head to toe, was given as a linkage between ancestors and descendants The destruction of one's own body through drug usage would then be seen as the denouncement of family respect and contempt toward the heritage. Confucian values shielded China from the negative effects of Opium until Western traders encouraged its recreational consumption. Historical records indicate that opium smoking did not emerge in China until the eighteenth century.[10]

As the opium trade increased in both magnitude and intensity, further foreign involvement created tensions between the British and Chinese that erupted into full-blown

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[7] Shirley Ye Sheng and Eric H. Shaw, "The Evil Trade that Opened China to the West," Library of Carleton University, 2007, https://ojs.library.carleton.ca/index.php/pcharm/article/view/1594/1438.
[8] Hayes, "The Opium," Asia Pacific Curriculum.
[9] Sheng and Shaw, "The Evil," Library of Carleton University.
[10] Ibid.

military conflict. The Qing Emperor decreed Lin Zexu to bring an end to the smuggling of opium in China, crackdown on the partial trade markets, and restore morals in a viced Chinese society. At this point, tensions between the two nations were high, and Commissioner Lin's policies were perceived as too restrictive for the British, so they declared war. The Chinese were swiftly defeated, outmatched by the superior British Navy. The Chinese came from the side of the victim. They felt the harsh cultural consequences of the trade and moved to put an end to it. The British saw the conflict from the eyes of the oppressor, viewing military action as a just response to ensure free trade partnerships across China.[11]

The First Opium War (1839-1842) not only demonstrated the superiority of the British military but also represented the conflict on a deeper, figurative level of understanding. This confrontation positioned the dynamism of the industrialized West against the traditional philosophy of the Chinese. From a social and political aspect, this war was especially monumental. Chinese society is rooted deep in ancient Confucian values. The war illustrated the wide gap between the two nations in terms of modernity and social character. The Chinese impudence and self-righteousness were shattered following the defeat of the Qing.[12] Great Britain was in a drastic rise to power during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. China was stuck in the glory of archaic times as its power became more void. A population boom in the eighteenth century would further strain the national resources, and the government ruled in unstable corruption. The peasant class leaned toward revolution that threatened their bureaucracy. The scene in the West was very different. Europe was undergoing rapid

[11] Monique Ross, "Modern China and the legacy of the Opium Wars," ABC News, September 1, 2018, https://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-09-02/modern-china-and-the-legacy-of-the-opium-wars/10172386.
[12] Bincheng Mao, "Research on the Opium War and Its Influence from the Perspective of Confrontation between Chinese and Western Culture," Proceedings of the 2017 5th International Education, Economics, Social Science, Arts, Sports and Management Engineering Conference, https://www.atlantis-press.com/proceedings/ieesasm-17/25889632.

industrialization and economic expansion, driven by the Industrial Revolution and advancements in global trade networks. China was not keeping up with that dynamic pace. China, lacking the modernity of the ever-evolving West and hindered by conservative Confucian philosophies, was unable to compete with the West, delaying its advancement into the modern age. Cultural differences meant that the Qing Dynasty did not embrace mercantilism or the economic benefits of trade—businessmen and merchants held lower social statuses than peasants, reflecting a culture that undervalued commerce.[13] The opposite would be seen in the changing scenery of capitalism in the West.

The Treaty of Nanjing (1842) created unfair disadvantages for the Chinese, opening China up to European exploitation. The treaty, which was signed after the First Opium War, did not officially legalize the opium trade. However, it was marked as the first of many unfair treaties between the two nations. The conditions laid out by the British were harsh toward the Imperial government. The island of Hong Kong was ceded to the British, as well as five more ports for trade. The treaty underlined the ability of France, the United States, and other foreign countries to claim their stake in Chinese exploitation.[14] Ten articles were issued in the treaty, further driving Chinese humiliation—the Chinese government was forced to repay twenty-one million dollars in the span of three years.[15] This was undoubtedly unfair since the opium trade itself had already drained China's finances, which was more than double the government's annual revenue of forty million ounces (taels) of silver. This outpour of silver stripped the Qing Dynasty of its old wealth, making it practically impossible to reimburse the British.[16] The British

[13] Powell, "First Opium," 625-626.
[14] Ross, "Modern China," ABC News.
[15] J. Mason Gentzler, *Excerpts from the Treaty of Nanjing, August 1842* (New York, NY: Praeger Publishers, 1977), 1-3.
[16] Sheng and Shaw, "The Evil," Library of Carleton University.

commercial industry, hungry for profits, sought to revise the treaty.

Their wish would be granted following the Arrow Incident in 1856 when the Chinese allegedly did an illegal search of a ship in Hong Kong registry. The Second Opium War (1856-1860) sparked over this event in addition to the killing of a European missionary. This time, France allied itself with the British against Imperial China. The Qing Dynasty, already immensely weak, suffered another great defeat to the Western nations. When the city of Pekin, or present-day Beijing was threatened, China was forced into signing the Treaty of Tientsin in 1858. This allowed for the permanent residence of ministers representing Western nations in Beijing, the opening of more ports, foreign travel in all parts of China, freedom of movement for missionaries, and insurance for Britain and France.[17] The Beijing Convention would finally end the Second Opium War in 1860. It brought about the terms of more indemnities to the Western nations. The British also added to their territorial possession in the east by acquiring the Kowloon Peninsula. Lastly, the most important condition that ensued from the convention was that the British hand in the opium trade was then made legal.[18] The window to Chinese exploitation was now fully exposed to the will of the British and Western powers.

The Century of Humiliation (1839-1949) is often viewed as a direct result due to the Opium Wars where China endured a loss of territory, a loss of control over its internal and external environment, and a loss of international standing and dignity at the hands of Western powers.[19] The Opium Wars served as a pivotal, epoch-defining event that brought China into the modern global order. It subjected China to Western imperial dominance, as European powers dictated trade terms and carved out spheres of influence, solidifying their economic control in

[17] Page and Sonnenburg, "Opium Wars," 442.
[18] Ibid.
[19] Alison Kaufman, "The “Century of Humiliation” and China’s National Narratives," U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, March 10, 2011, https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/3.10.11Kaufman.pdf.

Asia.[20] The legacy of the Opium Wars left China in a weakened state, launching the nation into a period of introspection that ultimately shaped its modern identity.

This era redefined the Chinese attitude and foreign policy outlook, instilling both a drive for self-strengthening and a lasting skepticism toward Western intentions. Defeat spiked humiliation and shattered previously held ignorance toward outsiders. The effects from the Opium Wars are explicitly evident in today's world. A lingering perception that the West seeks to contain China continues to influence Chinese foreign policy campaigns dictated by historical resentment and nationalism.[21] While China has since identified and adopted aspects of Western civilization necessary for national advancement, its approach remains guided by historical memory. Adhering to the traditional Chinese philosophical principle that 'the cause lies first and foremost within oneself,' China's leadership prioritized internal reform in its rise to power.[22] They have taken steps to industrialize from a backwardness in terms of technology from the Opium Wars era to lead the world in cutting-edge science and education. They have transformed a previously poor economy into the world's largest manufacturing economy and exporter of goods with the reconstruction of the silk road in the Belt and Road Initiative infrastructure project. They have amended nationwide security and built up a disciplined army. China has undergone a major transformation since the Opium Wars, emerging as a global power determined to safeguard its sovereignty and economic strength.

The Opium Wars served as the inciting event that not only led to the direct collapse of the Qing Dynasty (1911) but also resulted in the reversal of Chinese policy which has significance in the modern-day. China fell victim to European colonialism, subjugated to unfair trade

[20] Mao, "Research on the Opium," Proceedings of the 2017 5th International Education, Economics, Social Science, Arts, Sports and Management Engineering Conference (IEESASM 2017).
[21] Ross, "Modern China," ABC News.
[22] Unschuld, "The British".

practices that severely impacted its economic, social, and cultural stability. Western imperialism infringed on Chinese sovereignty, exploiting an underdeveloped state for commercial gain The British profited immensely from the opium trade while devastating China's financial stability, weakening its population through addiction, and forcing territorial concessions. The West established a foreign presence that disrupted traditional Chinese culture and shattered its national identity.

However, the importance of this event extends beyond just the fall of the Qing Dynasty, it instilled a new outlook in Chinese policy which fueled the rapid ascent to global power. The modern China prioritizes a self-reliance, carrying a mentality of never being taken advantage of again stemming from their victim history of colonial exploitation. They are now a superpower deserving of recognition on the international stage. Concurrently, recent shifts in U.S. foreign policy, characterized by reduced international engagement and a focus on isolationism, have created strategic opportunities for China. The Trump administration's retrenchment from traditional alliances and commitments has led to discussions of a potential power vacuum in global leadership. This retreat has provided China with opportunities to expand its influence, particularly in regions where U.S. presence has diminished through areas such as the Belt and Road Initiative. As the United States reconsiders its role on the world stage, China's proactive foreign policy signals a possible shift in power dynamics which proves all the more reason why it is important to understand where the Chinese are coming from to better forecast the future. The legacy of the Opium Wars continues to echo in modern global conflicts over drug trade and global economics. Just as Britain's opium exports destabilized 19th-century China, today, the United States faces its own battle against illicit fentanyl—a synthetic opioid largely produced in China and trafficked through Mexico. The fentanyl epidemic, which has contributed to over

78,000 overdose deaths annually in the U.S., has heightened tensions between Washington and Beijing, with U.S. officials citing China's role in the supply chain of precursor chemicals used to manufacture the drug.[23] This modern drug crisis, much like the Opium Wars, raises broader questions about economic coercion, state responsibility, and the unintended consequences of global trade. While historical parallels should be drawn with caution, the fentanyl crisis reflects how drug economies remain deeply entangled in geopolitical power struggles—an issue that continues to shape U.S.-China relations today.

[23] Ricardo Barrios, "China Primer: Illicit Fentanyl and China's Role," Congress.Gov, February 20, 2024, https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/IF10890

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