

# Smugglers of the Chinese Opium Wars

Commentary By Geoff Walker

The mere mention of the word “Opium” conjures up notions of China and the conflicts and military engagements experienced, mainly with the British, during the Qing dynasty in the imperial history of China. The Qing dynasty was established in 1636, and ruled China from 1644 to 1912. They adopted a policy of trying to eradicate the illegal trade in Opium which cumulated in China's official seizure of opium stocks at the Chinese port of Canton, threatening to impose the death penalty for future smugglers and offenders, despite the British government insisting on the principles of free trade and equal diplomatic recognition among nations. This stance, backing of merchants' demands, was notably that of the Honourable East India Company. These circumstances were the catalyst for the Opium Wars.

During the 18th century, the demand for Chinese luxury goods, notably silk, porcelain, and tea created a large trade imbalance between China and Britain. European wealth found its way into China through the Canton System, which confined incoming foreign trade to the southern port city of Canton.



To offset this imbalance, the **Honourable British East India Company** began to grow opium in Bengal and granted private British merchants licenses to sell opium to Chinese smugglers for illegal sale within China. The influx of the narcotics repudiated the Chinese trade surplus, drained their economy of coffers, and significantly increased the numbers of opium addicts inside the country, this outcome caused serious concerns for Chinese officials. Opium as a medicinal ingredient was documented in Chinese writings as early as the Tang dynasty, but the recreational use of opium was unknown, and at best very limited.

The British opium was produced in Bengal and the Ganges River Basin. Rather than develop the Indian opium industry themselves, the British were able to inherit an existing opium industry from the declining Mughal Empire, which had for centuries profited by selling unrefined opium domestically inside their empire.

However, unlike the Mughals, the British viewed opium as a highly valuable export, being massive and highly prized by the opium traders. The **Honourable East India Company** tightly controlled the opium industry, and all opium was considered company property until it was sold at auction. From Calcutta, the company's Board of Customs, Salt, and Opium concerned itself with quality control by managing the way opium was packaged and shipped, and the company banned private businesses from refining opium. All opium in India was sold to the **Honourable British India Company** at a fixed rate, then the company hosted a series of public opium auctions every year. The difference of the company-set price of raw opium and the sale price of refined opium at auction (less expenses) was their profit. The **Honourable East India Company** also granted a License to the

independent state of Malwa, for poppies and opium to be cultivated on their lands, which became another exclusive source for the **British East India Company**, at auctions held in Calcutta. Private merchants who possessed a company charter, allowing for Asiatic trade, which complied with the Royal Charter, bid on and procured opium at the Calcutta auctions, before loading aboard their ships then sailing to Southern China.

By the late 1820s the stocks of opium at Calcutta had greatly increased from previous years, and it was clear that the traditional single passage per year between India and China could not keep up with demand. Captain William Clifton persuaded the Governor General of India, Lord Bentick, to back his idea of constructing a fast, sleek clipper which could complete three round trips per year. The Howrah Dock Company was commissioned to construct a 255 ton, barque rigged vessel, with a flush deck with little or no sheer, so that in monsoon conditions she would encounter little wind resistance. Raked masts also lessened the strength of wind resistance.

The first true opium clipper, **Red Rover** was launched from the Hooghly River at Calcutta in December 1829. She departed that port 17 days later with 800 chests of opium, and arrived at Macau on 17th February 1830, after sailing though the northeast monsoon in the China Sea. An equally fast return passage to Calcutta resulted in a round trip of 86 days, beating all previous British records. Further rapid passages followed, and such was the vessel's suitability to the trade, that she soon came under the watchful eye of Jardine Matheson, who bought a half share in her in 1833, and on Captain Clifton's retirement in 1836, assumed full ownership. In the 1820s Singapore had become a free port and became a regular port of call between Calcutta and Hong Kong. **Red Rover** made several calls at Singapore during the 1830s and 1840s, her fastest passage being just 12 days in January 1836.

Other clippers were built or bought by Jardine Matheson, but none were as successful as **Red Rover**. Even as late as May 1850, more than 20 years after her maiden voyage, she made her fastest return passage to Hong Kong of 78 days. Her final passage departed Calcutta on 6th July 1853, but she was caught in a typhoon in the Bay of Bengal and never heard from again.

The "**Streatham**" was another ship of the **Honourable East India Company** and one of their famous purpose-built "**opium clippers**", which carried opium from India to China. She was launched in Calcutta on 12 December 1829 and ran between Calcutta and Lintin Island in the the Pearl River estuary. In 1846 she was bought by Jardine Matheson.



(Unknown artist – Public Domain)

The "**Streatham**" and the opium clipper "**Red Rover**". The "**Streatham**", an East India Company ship, is shown at anchor mid-stream in the Hooghly River, at Calcutta. Close to the riverbank is the "**Red Rover**", the first of the "opium clippers," sits calmly with her sails furled. Built for speed, the "**Red Rover**" doubled the profits of her owners by completing several Calcutta-to-China smuggling voyages per year.

British ships brought their cargoes to islands off the China coast, especially **Lintin Island**, located in the mouth of the Pearl River, quite close to Hong Kong, where Chinese traders with fast and well-armed craft took the goods ashore for inland distribution, paying for the opium with silver. The Qing administration initially tolerated opium importation because it created an indirect tax on Chinese subjects, as increasing the silver supply available to foreign merchants through the sale of opium encouraged Europeans to spend more money on Chinese goods. This policy provided the funds British merchants required to purchase tea, thus greatly increasing tea exports from China to England, delivering further profits to the Qing's total monopoly on tea exports, held by the imperial treasury.

However, opium addiction continued to grow in China, adversely affecting the entire social fabric of the nation. Societal stability started to decline. From Canton, the habit spread outwards to the North and West, affecting members from every sector of Chinese society. This spread led to the Qing government issuing an edict against the drug in 1780, followed by an outright ban in 1796, and an order from the governor of Canton to completely stop the trade, in 1799.

To counteract the increasingly stringent regulations imposed by the Chinese authorities in Canton, foreign merchants bought older ships and converted them into floating warehouse hulks. These ships were anchored off the Chinese coast, in the relatively sheltered waters at the mouth of the Pearl River in case the Chinese authorities moved against the opium trade, and since the ships of the then Chinese navy were mostly used in rivers and not adept to operating in open waters. Hence, inbound opium ships would unload part of their cargo onto these floating storage hulks, from where the narcotic was eventually purchased by Chinese opium dealers. By implementing this system of smuggling, foreign merchants could also avoid inspection by Chinese Government officials and prevent retaliation against the trade in legal goods, in which many smugglers also participated.

By 1838, the British were selling roughly 1,400 tons of opium per year to China. Legalization of the opium trade was the subject of ongoing debate within the Chinese administration, but a proposal to legalize the narcotic was repeatedly rejected, and in 1838 the government began to actively sentence Chinese drug traffickers to the death penalty. There were also other long-term factors that triggered the Chinese government into action.



Above right, Governor Lin Zexu of Canton (Unknown-Public Domain)

The social unrest and disquiet within the Qing realm, the spread of addiction, the increasing anti-foreigner sentiments, foreign refusal to accept Chinese legal regulation, changes in international trade structures, and the ending of Western intellectuals' admiration for China. So when prohibitions of 1838 began to take effect, the market diminished and dealers found themselves dangerously overstocked with the narcotic. A second factor was that the new British post of "Superintendent of Foreign Trade" in China was held by an appointee of the British crown. If the Chinese crossed the Superintendent, they would be insulting the British nation rather than just a private business enterprise. The Superintendent held the authority to call directly on the aid of British armed Forces and the Royal Navy in times of

serious trouble. In fact, there were a number of skirmishes recorded in which the Royal Navy participated.

In 1839, the then Chinese Emperor, rejected all British proposals to legalize and tax opium, and to remedy the situation, he appointed local **Governor Lin Zexu** to oversee Canton, and to put an end to the opium trade, once and for all. **Governor Lin** wrote an open letter to Queen Victoria, (which it is claimed, she never received) appealing to her moral responsibility to stop the opium trade. **Governor Lin** then resorted to using force in the western merchants' Canton enclave. He banned the sale of opium and demanded that all supplies of the drug be surrendered to the Chinese authorities. He also closed the Pearl River Channel, trapping British traders in Canton, as well as seizing opium stockpiles in warehouses and the thirteen factories, Chinese troops boarded British ships in the Pearl River and anchored storage hulks offshore, before destroying the opium on board. He confiscated all supplies and ordered a blockade of foreign ships on the Pearl River.

The British government was infuriated and responded by dispatching a military force to China and in the ensuing conflict, the Royal Navy used its naval and gunnery power to inflict a series of decisive defeats on the Chinese Heavenly Empire. This conflict was protracted, becoming the First Opium War, and ranged between 1839 – 1842.

Because of the military defeats, in 1842, the Qing dynasty was forced to sign what was to become known as the **Treaty of Nanking**—the first of what the Chinese later called the unequal treaties—which granted an indemnity and extraterritoriality to British subjects in China, opened five new treaty ports, namely; **Shanghai, Canton, Ningpo, Fuchow, and Amoy**, to British merchants, and ceding the colony of Hong Kong Island to the British Empire in perpetuity . However, the failure of the treaty to satisfy British goals of improved trade and diplomatic relations led to further conflict, the Second Opium War.

The Second Opium War, also known as the Anglo-French expedition to China, became a war pitting the British Empire and the French Empire against the Qing dynasty of China that lasted from 1856 to 1860. It was the second major conflict of the Opium Wars, fought over issues relating to the exportation of opium to China, and resulted in a second defeat for the Qing dynasty. The agreements of the **Convention of Peking** led to the subsequent ceding of Kowloon Peninsula as part of the British colony of Hong Kong.

The 1850s saw the rapid growth of Western imperialism. Britain demanded the Qing authorities renegotiate the **Treaty of Nanjing**, citing their most favored nation status. The British demands included opening all of China to British merchant companies, legalizing the opium trade, exempting foreign imports from internal transit duties, suppression of piracy, regulation of the coolie trade, permission for a British ambassador to reside in Beijing and for the English-language version of all treaties to take precedence over the Chinese language.

To give Chinese merchant vessels operating around treaty ports the same privileges accorded to British ships by the **Treaty of Nanjing**, British authorities granted these vessels British registration at the Port of **Hong Kong**. In October 1856, Chinese marines in Canton seized a cargo ship called the "**Arrow**" on suspicion of piracy, arresting twelve of its fourteen Chinese crew members. The "**Arrow**" had previously been used by pirates, captured by the Chinese government, and subsequently resold. It was then registered as a British ship and still flew the British flag at the time of its detainment. Its British captain, who was aboard a nearby vessel at the time, reported seeing Chinese marines pull down the British flag

from the ship. The British consul in Canton, contacted Ye Mingchen, imperial commissioner and Viceroy of Liangguang, to demand the immediate release of the crew, and an apology for the alleged insult to the Union flag. Ye released nine of the crew members but refused to release the last three.

On 23 October the British destroyed four barrier forts. On 25 October a demand was made for the British to be allowed to enter the city. The next day, the British started to bombard the city, firing one shot every 10 minutes. Ye Mingchen issued a bounty on every British head taken. On 29 October, the Royal Navy blasted a hole in the poorly defended and inadequate city walls. Losses were 3 killed and 12 wounded. Negotiations failed and the city was bombarded. On 6 November 23 war junks attacked and were destroyed. There were pauses for talks, with the British bombarding at intervals, fires were caused, then on 5 January 1857, the British returned to Hong Kong.

France joined the British action against China, prompted by complaints from their envoy, Baron Jean-Baptiste Louis Gros, over the execution of a French missionary, Father Auguste Chapdelaine by Chinese local authorities in Guangxi province, which at that time was not open to foreigners.

The British and the French joined forces under Admiral Sir Michael Seymour. The British army, which was led by Lord Elgin, and the French army, which was led by Jean-Baptiste Louis Gros, jointly attacked and occupied Canton in late 1857. A joint committee of the alliance was formed. The Allies left the city governor in his original post, so as to maintain order on behalf of the victors. The British-French alliance-maintained control of Canton for nearly four years. Although the British were delayed by the Indian Rebellion of 1857, they followed up the “**Arrow**” Incident in 1856 and attacked Guangzhou from the Pearl River. Viceroy Ye Mingchen ordered all Chinese soldiers manning the forts not to resist the British attacks. After taking the fort near Guangzhou with little effort, the British Army attacked Guangzhou

The capture of Canton, on 1 January 1858, a city with a population of over 1,000,000, by less than 6,000 troops, resulted in the British and French forces suffering only 15 killed and 113 wounded. 200–650 of the defenders and inhabitants became casualties. Ye Mingchen was captured and exiled to Calcutta, India, where he eventually starved himself to death.

In June 1858, the first part of the war ended with the four Treaties of Tientsin, to which Britain, France, Russia, and the U.S. were signatories. These treaties opened 11 more ports to Western trade. The Chinese initially refused to ratify the treaties. The major points of the treaty were:

- Britain, France, Russia, and the U.S. would have the right to establish diplomatic legations (small embassies) in Peking, a closed city at the time
- Ten more Chinese ports would be opened for foreign trade, including Niuzhuang, Tamsui, Hankou, and Nanjing
- The right of all foreign vessels including commercial ships to navigate freely on the Yangtze River
- The right of foreigners to travel in the internal regions of China, which had formerly been banned
- China was to pay an indemnity of four million taels of silver to Britain and two million to France

On 24 October, the emperor's brother, Prince Gong, conceded to the allied demands, the emperor having fled to Chengde on 22 September. British and French troops entered Beijing, where the Treaty of Tientsin was ratified in the Convention of Peking.

The British, French, and the Russians were all granted a permanent diplomatic presence in Beijing (something the Qing Empire resisted to the very end as it suggested equality between China and the European barbarians). The Chinese had to pay 8 million taels to Britain and France. Britain acquired the Kowloon peninsula as part of the colony of Hong Kong. The opium trade was legalized, and Christians were granted full civil rights, including the right to own property, and the right to evangelize

The Convention of Beijing included:

- China's signing of the Treaty of Tianjin
- Opening Tianjin as a trade port
- Cede No.1 District of Kowloon (south of present-day Boundary Street) to Britain
- Freedom of religion established in China
- British ships were allowed to carry indentured Chinese to the Americas
- Indemnity to Britain and France increasing to 8 million taels of silver apiece

Two weeks later, the Qing government was forced to sign a "Supplementary Treaty of Peking", which ceded the Maritime Provinces east of the Ussuri River (forming part of Outer Manchuria) to the Russians, who went on to establish the port of Vladivostok between 1860–61. The Anglo-French victory was heralded in the Britain. British merchants were delighted at the prospects of the expansion of trade in the Far East. Other foreign powers were also pleased with the outcome, since they too hoped to take advantage of the opening-up of China.

The defeat of the Qing's army by a relatively small Anglo-French military force (substantially outnumbered by the Qing army) coupled with the fleeing, and subsequent death, of the Xianfeng Emperor, and the burning of the Summer Palaces was a shocking blow to the once powerful "Heavenly Qing Dynasty". Beyond any doubt, by 1860 the ancient imperial and dynastic civilization that was China, had been thoroughly routed, defeated, and humiliated by the Western nations, a fact that was not forgotten and the travesty did not sit well with China over ensuing centuries, only being partially vindicated by the return of Hong Kong to Chinese sovereignty by the British Government, in 1997. The Portuguese enclave of Macau following suite two years later, in 1999.

End.

References: History and various published articles concerning the Opium Wars, First Opium War (wiki), Second Opium War (wiki), Anglo-French Occupation of Canton (wiki), various open sources on the Public Domain from which additional information has been sought.

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