

# The First Opium War

## The Anglo-Chinese War of 1839-1842

Essay by Peter C. Perdue

Opium  
Trade

Production &  
Consumption

Hostilities

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Treaty

War Stories

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& Credits



*Opium clipper "Water Witch" (1831)*

National Maritime Museum, London  
[1831\_WaterWitch\_PW7719\_nmm]

## THE OPIUM TRADE

### Introduction

The Opium Wars of 1839 to 1842 and 1856 to 1860 marked a new stage in China's relations with the West. China's military defeats in these wars forced its rulers to sign treaties opening many ports to foreign trade. The restrictions imposed under the Canton system were abolished. Opium, despite imperial prohibitions, now became a regular item of trade. As opium flooded into China, its price dropped, local consumption increased rapidly, and the drug penetrated all levels of society. In the new treaty ports, foreign traders collaborated with a greater variety of Chinese merchants than under the Canton system, and they ventured deeply into the Chinese interior. Missionaries brought Christian teachings to villagers, protected by the diplomatic rights obtained under the treaties. Popular hostility to the new foreigners began to rise.

Not surprisingly, Chinese historians have regarded the two Opium Wars as unjust impositions of foreign power on the weakened Qing empire. In the 20th century, the Republic of China made strenuous efforts to abolish what it called "unequal treaties." It succeeded in removing most of them in World War II, but this phase of foreign imperialism only ended completely with the reversion of Hong Kong to China in 1997. Conventional textbooks even date the beginning of modern Chinese history from the end of the first Opium War in 1842.

Although the wars, opium trade, and treaties did reflect superior Western military force, focusing only on Western impositions on China gives us too narrow a picture of this period. This was not only a time of Western and Chinese conflict over trade, but a time of great global transformation in which China played one important role. The traders in opium included Britain, the U.S., Turkey, India, and Southeast Asia as well as domestic Chinese merchants. The origins of opium consumption in China are very old, and its first real boom as an item of consumption began after tobacco was introduced from the New World in the 16th century and Chinese smokers took a fancy to mixing it with the drug.

The Qing court was not in principle hostile to useful trade. In 1689 and 1727, the court had negotiated treaties with Russia to exchange furs from Siberia for tea, and allowed the Russians to live in a foreigners' guest house in Beijing. Qing merchants and officials also traded extensively with Central Eurasian merchants from Bukhara and the Kazakh nomads for vital supplies of wool, horses, and meat. The court knew well the value of the southern coastal trade as well, since revenues from the Canton trade went directly into the Imperial Household department.

The Opium Wars are rightly named: it was not trade per se but rather unrestricted drug trade by the Western powers, particularly Britain, that precipitated them. As the wars unfolded, however, it became clear that far more than opium was ultimately involved. The very nature of China's hitherto aloof relationship with the world was profoundly challenged, and long decades of internal upheaval lay ahead.

### **Tensions Under the Canton Trade System**

Under the system established by the Qing dynasty to regulate trade in the 18th century, Western traders were restricted to conducting trade through the southern port of Canton (Guangzhou). They could only reside in the city in a limited space, including their warehouses; they could not bring their families; and they could not stay there more a few months of the year. Qing officials closely supervised trading relations, allowing only licensed merchants from Western countries to trade through a monopoly guild of Chinese merchants called the Cohong. Western merchants could not contact Qing officials directly, and there were no formal diplomatic relations between China and Western countries. The Qing emperor regarded trade as a form of tribute, or gifts given to him personally by envoys who expressed gratitude for his benevolent rule.



*Canton, where the business of trade was primarily conducted during this period, is depicted on this fan created for the foreign market. Seven national flags fly from the Western headquarters that line the shore.*

*Chinese Fan with Foreign Factories at Canton, 1790–1800*

Peabody Essex Museum [cwOF\_1790c\_E80202\_fan]

Western traders, for their part, mainly conducted trade through licensed monopoly companies, like Britain's East India Company and the Dutch VOC. Despite these restrictions, both sides learned how to make profits by cooperating with each other. The Chinese hong merchants, the key intermediaries between the foreign traders and the officials, developed close relations with their Western counterparts, instructing them on how to conduct their business without antagonizing the Chinese bureaucracy.

As the volume of trade grew, however, the British demanded greater access to China's markets. Tea exports from China grew from 92,000 pounds in 1700 to 2.7 million pounds in 1751. By 1800 the East India Company was buying 23 million pounds of tea per year at a cost of 3.6 million pounds of silver. Concerned that the China trade was draining silver out of England, the British searched for a counterpart commodity to trade for tea and porcelain. They found it in opium, which they planted in large quantities after they had taken Bengal, in India, in 1757.

British merchants blamed the restrictions of the Canton trade for the failure to export enough goods to China to balance their imports of tea and porcelain. Thus, Lord George Macartney's mission to the court in Beijing in 1793 aimed to promote British trade by creating direct ties between the British government and the emperor. Macartney, however, portrayed his embassy as a tribute mission to celebrate the emperor's birthday. He had only one man with him who could speak Chinese.

When he tried to raise the trade question, after following the tribute rituals, Macartney's demands were rejected. His gifts of astronomical instruments, intended to impress the Qing emperor with British technological skills, in fact did not look very impressive: the emperor had already received similar items from Jesuits in earlier decades. Macartney's failure, and the failure of a later mission (the Amherst embassy) in 1816, helped to convince the British that only force would induce the Qing government to open China's ports.

### Opium Clippers & the Expanding Drug Trade



*Opium routes between British-controlled India and China*

[map\_OpRoutes\_BrEmpire21\_234-5]

New fast sailing vessels called clipper ships, built with narrow decks, large sail areas, and multiple masts, first appeared in the Pacific in the 1830s and greatly stimulated the tea trade. They carried less cargo than the bulky East Indiamen, but could bring fresh teas to Western markets much faster. Clipper ships also proved very convenient for smuggling opium, and were openly and popularly identified as "opium clippers." Ships like the *Red Rover* could bring opium quickly from Calcutta to Canton, doubling their owners' profits by making two voyages a year.

At Canton, Qing prohibitions had forced the merchants to withdraw from Macao (Macau) and Whampoa and retreat to Lintin island, at the entrance of the Pearl River, beyond the jurisdiction of local officials. There the merchants received opium shipments from India and handed the chests over to small Chinese junks and rowboats called "fast crabs" and "scrambling dragons," to be distributed at small harbors along the coast. The latter local smuggling boats were sometimes propelled by as many as twenty or more oars on each side.



*The Pearl River Delta*

[map\_MouthCantonRiver\_p79747]

The major India source of British opium bound for China was Patna in Bengal, where the drug was processed and packed into chests holding about 140 pounds. The annual flow to China was around 4,000 chests by 1790, and a little more than double this by the early 1820s. Imports began to increase rapidly in the 1830s, however, as "free trade" agitation gained strength in Britain and the East India Company's monopoly over the China trade approached its termination date (in 1834). The Company became more dependent than ever on opium revenue, while private merchants hastened to increase their stake in the lucrative trade. On the eve of the first Opium War, the British were shipping some 40,000 chests to China annually. By this date, it was estimated that there were probably around ten million opium smokers in China, two million of them addicts. (American merchants shipped around 10,000 chests between 1800 to 1839.)

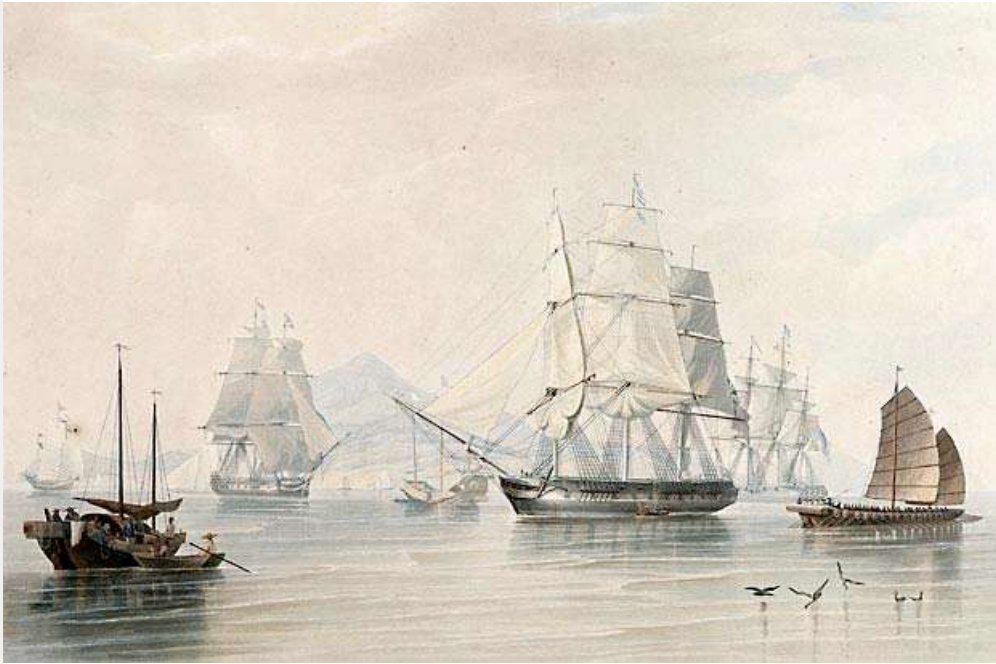


## OPIUM IMPORTS TO CHINA FROM INDIA

(1 chest = approximately 140 pounds)

|             |                      |
|-------------|----------------------|
| 1773        | 1,000 chests         |
| 1790        | 4,000 chests         |
| early 1820s | 10,000 chests        |
| 1828        | 18,000 chests        |
| 1839        | 40,000 chests        |
| 1865        | 76,000 chests        |
| 1884        | 81,000 chests (peak) |

Source: Jonathan Spence, *Chinese Roundabout* (Norton, 1992), pp. 233-35



*"The Opium Ships at Lintin in China, 1824"*

*Print based on a painting by "W. J. Huggins, Marine Painter to His late Majesty William the 4th"*

National Maritime Museum  
[1824\_PZ0240\_Lintin\_nmm]



*In 1831, it was estimated that between 100 and 200 “fast crab” smuggling boats were operating in the waters around Lintin Island, the rendezvous point for opium imports.*

*Ranging from 30 to 70 feet in length, with crews of upwards of 50 or 60 men, these swift rowboats could put on sail for additional speed. They were critical in navigating China’s often shallow rivers and delivering opium to the interior.*

*“Fast Boat or Smuggler,” from Captain E. Belcher,  
Narrative of a Voyage Round the World (1843), p. 238*

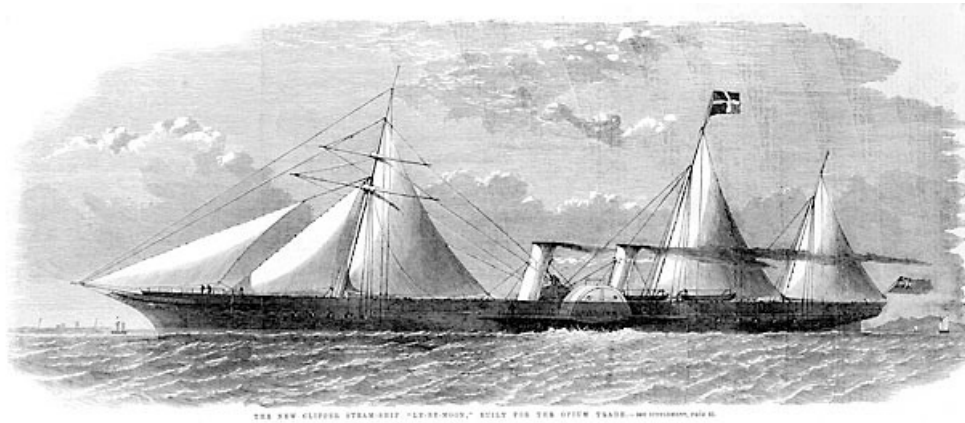
[1843\_belcher\_238\_FastBoat]



*“The ‘Streatham’ and the opium clipper ‘Red Rover’”*

*The Streatham, an East India Company ship, is shown at anchor in the Hooghly River, Calcutta. Near the bank, the Red Rover, the first of the “opium clippers,” sits with her sails lowered. Built for speed, the Red Rover doubled the profits of her owners by completing two Calcutta-to-China smuggling voyages a year.*

[BHC3580\_opiumcl\_nmm.jpg]



*"The new clipper steam-ship "LY-EE-MOON," built for the opium trade," Illustrated London News, ca. 1859*

*A quarter century after revolutionizing the drug trade, the celebrated "opium clippers" had begun to undergo a further revolution with the addition of coal-fueled, steam-driven paddle wheels. This illustration appeared in the Illustrated London News in 1859, two decades after the first Opium War began.*

[1800s\_LyEeMoonILN\_Britannica]

### **Mandarins, Merchants & Missionaries**

The opium trade was so vast and profitable that all kinds of people, Chinese and foreigners, wanted to participate in it. Wealthy literati and merchants were joined by people of lower classes who could now afford cheaper versions of the drug. Hong merchants cooperated with foreign traders to smuggle opium when they could get away with it, bribing local officials to look the other way. Smugglers, peddlers, secret societies, and even banks in certain areas all became complicit in the drug trade.



*Chinese Mandarins, Illustrated London News, November 12, 1842*

[iln\_1842\_174\_mandarins\_012b]





*Three paintings of the Chinese hong merchants (details)*

*Left Howqua, by George Chinnery, 1830*

*Middle Mowqua, by Lam Qua, 1840s*

*Right Tenqua, by Lam Qua, ca. 1840s*

Peabody Essex Museum

[cwPT\_1830\_howqua\_chinnery] [cwPT\_1840s\_ct79\_Mouqua]

[cwPT\_1840s\_ct78\_Tenqua]

Opium, as an illegal commodity, brought in no customs revenue, so local officials exacted fees from merchants. Even missionaries who deplored the opium trade on moral grounds commonly found themselves drawn into it, or dependent on it, in one form or another. They relied on the opium clippers for transportation and communication, for example, and used merchants dealing in opium as their bankers and money changers. Karl Gützlaff (1803–1851), a Protestant missionary from Pomerania who was an exceptionally gifted linguist, gained a modicum of both fame and notoriety by becoming closely associated with the opium trade and then serving the British in the Opium War—not just as an interpreter, but also as an administrator in areas occupied by the foreign forces.





*The missionary Karl Gutzlaff (often anglicized as Carl or Charles Gutzlaff), who served as an interpreter for the British in the first Opium War; was well known for frequently pursuing his religious calling while dressed in native garb.*

*Portrait of Gutzlaff (inscribed) on the frontispiece of his 1834 book, A Sketch of Chinese History: Ancient and Modern.*

[1834\_Gutzlaff\_SHG\_fronE38B]

*Yours obedient servant  
Ch Gutzlaff*

*George Chinnery's sketch of "Revd. Charles Gutzlaff, Missionary," done in 1832 [right], found later incarnation in a lithograph captioned "Revd. Chas. Gutzlaff, Missionary to China in the Dress of a Fokien Sailor" (below)*



Peabody Essex Museum  
[1832\_M976541\_Gutzlaff\_pem]



Wikimedia Commons  
Karl\_Gutzlaff.jpg  
[d\_1800s\_KarlGutzlaff\_FujianCostume\_wp]

### The Daoguang Emperor & Commissioner Lin

By the 1830s, up to 20 percent of central government officials, 30 percent of local officials, and 30 percent of low-level officials regularly consumed opium. The Daoguang emperor (r. 1821–50) himself was an addict, as were most of his court.

As opium infected the Qing military forces, however, the court grew alarmed at its insidious effects on national defense. Opium imports also appeared to be the cause of massive outflows of silver, which destabilized the currency. While the court repeatedly issued edicts demanding punishment of opium dealers, local officials accepted heavy bribes to ignore them. In 1838, one opium dealer was strangled at Macao, and eight chests of opium were seized in Canton. Still the emperor had not yet resolved to take truly decisive measures.



*"The Imperial Portrait of a Chinese Emperor called Daoguang"*

Wikimedia Commons  
[Emperor\_Daoguang\_wp]

*This portrait of the Daoguang emperor Minning appeared as the frontispiece in volume one of John Elliot Bingham's 1843 account Narrative of the Expedition to China. Bingham, a naval commander, fought in key battles in the first Opium War.*

[Emperor\_Bingham\_frontis\_gb]





*Titled "Mien-Ning, Late Emperor of China," this posthumous depiction appeared in The Illustrated Magazine of Art in 1853, some three years after the emperor's death. Although copied from a portrait painted by a Chinese court artist, such realistic likenesses of the emperor were withheld from the Chinese public.*

*"Mien-Ning,  
Late Emperor of China,"  
The Illustrated Magazine of Art,  
Volume 1, 1853*

[1853\_MienNing\_EmpChina\_IllMagArt\_gb]

As opium flooded the country despite imperial prohibitions, the court debated its response. On one side, officials concerned about the economic costs of the silver drain and the social costs of addiction argued for stricter prohibitions, aimed not only at Chinese consumers and dealers but also at the foreign importers. On the other side, a mercantile interest including southern coastal officials allied with local traders promoted legalization and taxation of the drug. Debate raged within court circles in the early 1800s as factions lined up patrons and pushed their favorite policies.

Ultimately, the Daoguang emperor decided to support hardliners who called for complete prohibition, sending the influential official Lin Zexu to Canton in 1839. Lin was a morally upright, energetic official, who detested the corruption and decadence created by the opium trade. He had served in many important provincial posts around the empire and gained a reputation for impartiality and dedication to the welfare of the people he governed. In July 1838 he sent a memorial to the emperor supporting drastic measures to suppress opium use. He outlined a systematic policy to destroy the sources and equipment supporting drug use, and began putting this policy into effect in the provinces of Hubei and Hunan. After 19 audiences with the emperor, he was appointed Imperial Commissioner with full powers to end the opium trade in Canton. He arrived in Canton in March, 1839.

Although Lin's vigorous attempt to suppress the opium trade ultimately ended in disastrous war and personal disgrace, he is remembered a great and incorruptible patriot eminently deserving of the nickname he had enjoyed before his appointment as an Imperial Commissioner in Canton: "Lin the Blue Sky." Portraits of him by Chinese artists at the time vary in style, but all convey the impression of a man of wisdom and integrity. Today, statues in and even outside China pay homage to the redoubtable commissioner.



*Right Commissioner Lin in scholar's robe*

Yale University, Sterling Memorial Library  
[1800s\_LinZexu\_yale]



*Left Lin Zexu  
from Zhonggou Jindaishi Cankao Tulu*

Wikimedia Commons  
[1800s\_LinZexu\_Zhong]



*Right Lin Zexu  
painting by either Lamqua or Tinqu*

Wikimedia Commons  
[d\_1800s\_Lin\_Zexu\_wm]



*Left Lin Zexu, published 1843  
From a drawing by a native artist in  
the possession of Lady Strange*

Beinecke Library, Yale University  
[1800s\_LinZexu\_3454-001\_yale]





*Statues of Commissioner Lin can be found today in many places around the world, including Canton, Fuzhou, Hong Kong, Macao, and, pictured here, Chatham Square in New York City's Chinatown.*

Wikimedia Commons  
[Lin\_ChathamSquare\_NYC]

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# The First Opium War

## The Anglo-Chinese War of 1839-1842

Essay by Peter C. Perdue

Opium  
Trade

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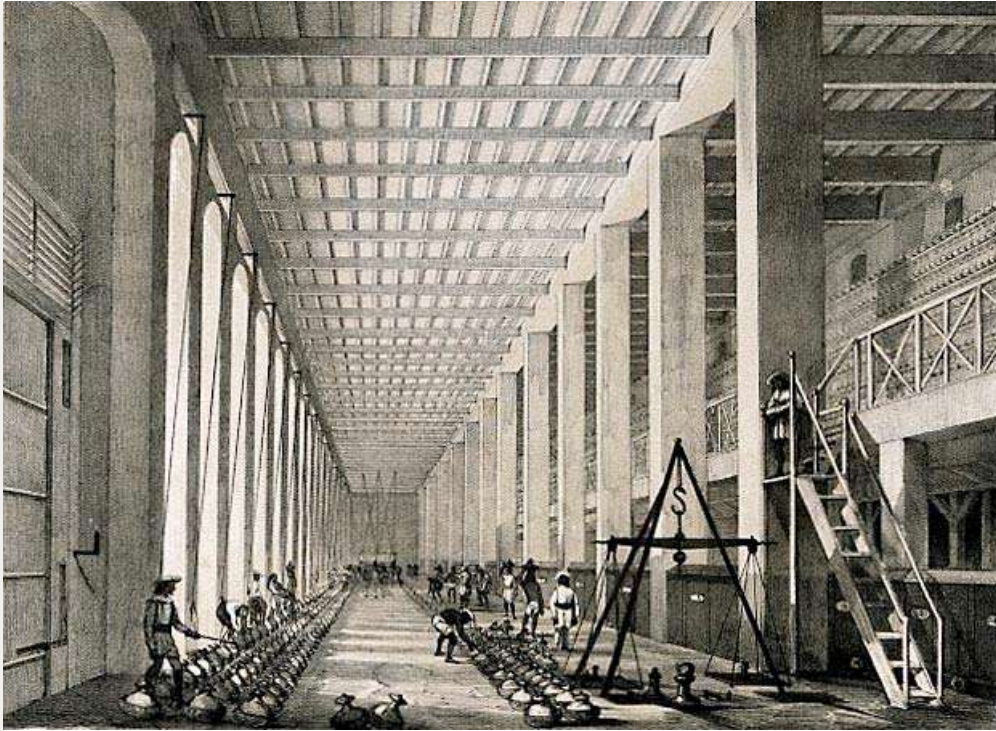
### PRODUCTION & CONSUMPTION

As the court in China debated opium prohibition, the East India Company developed opium production on an enormous scale in India. The Company established its main production center in Patna, a town in Bihar, 600 kilometers up the Ganges River from Calcutta. There, they forced Indian laborers to work in the extensive poppy fields and prepare the opium in large mixing rooms and examining halls. A skilled workman was required to produce at least 100 balls of opium per day. Then the balls were stacked to be packed in chests made of timber from Nepal. From Patna, a fleet of native boats took the product down the Ganges River to Calcutta.

Two very different runs of graphics produced by eyewitnesses in the 1850s convey a vivid sense of the production process that was followed throughout most of the 19th century. The first is a spectacular suite of lithographs based on drawings by Walter S. Sherwill, a lieutenant colonel who served as a British "boundary commissioner" in Bengal. The second rendering of different stages of opium manufacture consists of 19 paintings on mica by the Indian artist Shiva Lal. Commissioned by Dr. D. R. Lyall, the East India Company's "personal assistant in charge of opium-making," Lal's work was terminated when Lyall was killed in the 1857 Indian Mutiny.



## Opium Factory at Patna, India

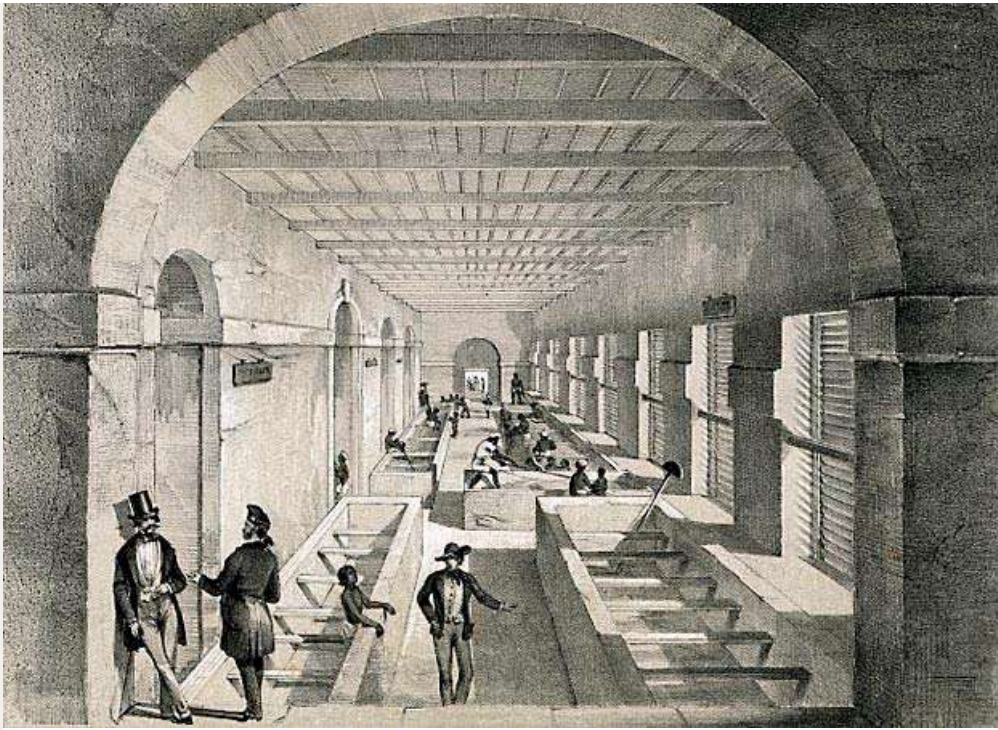


*"The Examining Hall, Opium Factory at Patna India"*

*"In the Examining Hall the consistency of the crude opium as brought from the country in earthen pans is simply tested, either by the touch, or by thrusting a scoop into the mass. A sample from each pot (the pots being numbered and labelled) is further examined for consistency and purity in the chemical test room."*

*Prose from The Graphic reproduced in The Truth about Opium Smoking, 1882  
Lithograph after W. S. Sherwill, ca. 1850*

Wellcome Images  
[1850\_Sherwill\_1\_ExamH1B828]



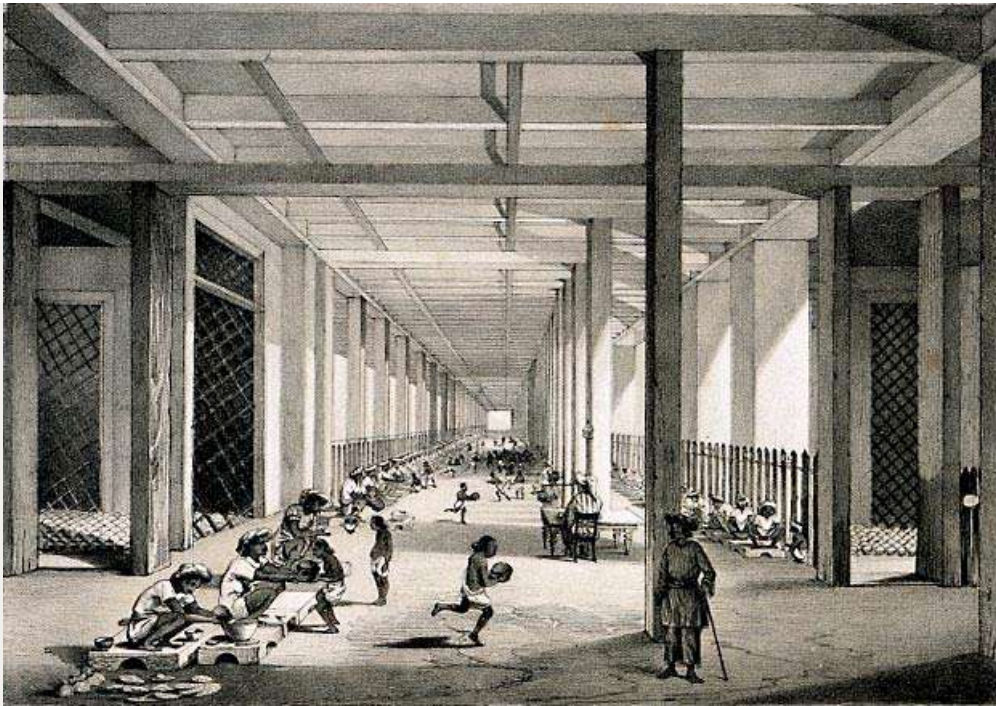
*"The Mixing Room, Opium Factory at Patna India"*

*"In the Mixing Room the contents of the earthen pans are thrown into vats and stirred with blind rakes until the whole mass becomes a homogeneous paste."*

*Prose from The Graphic reproduced in The Truth about Opium Smoking, 1882  
Lithograph after W. S. Sherwill, ca. 1850*

Wellcome Images  
[1850\_Sherwill\_2\_Mixing\_wlc]





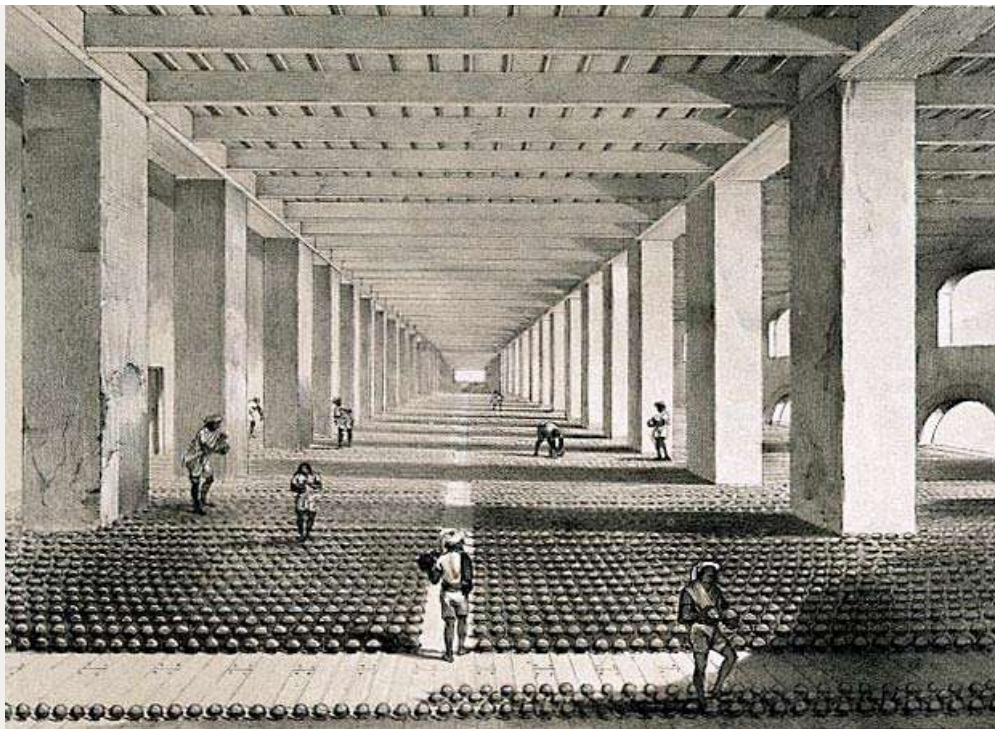
*"The Balling Room, Opium Factory at Patna India"*

*"From the mixing room the crude opium is conveyed to the Balling Room, where it is made into balls. Each ball-maker is furnished with a small table, a stool, and a brass cup to shape the ball in a certain quantity of opium and water called 'Lewa,' and an allowance of poppy petals, in which the opium balls are rolled. Every man is required to make a certain number of balls, all weighing alike. An expert workman will turn out upwards of a hundred balls a day."*

*Prose from The Graphic reproduced in The Truth about Opium Smoking, 1882  
Lithograph after W. S. Sherwill, ca. 1850*

Wellcome Images  
[1850\_Sherwill\_3\_Balling\_wlc]



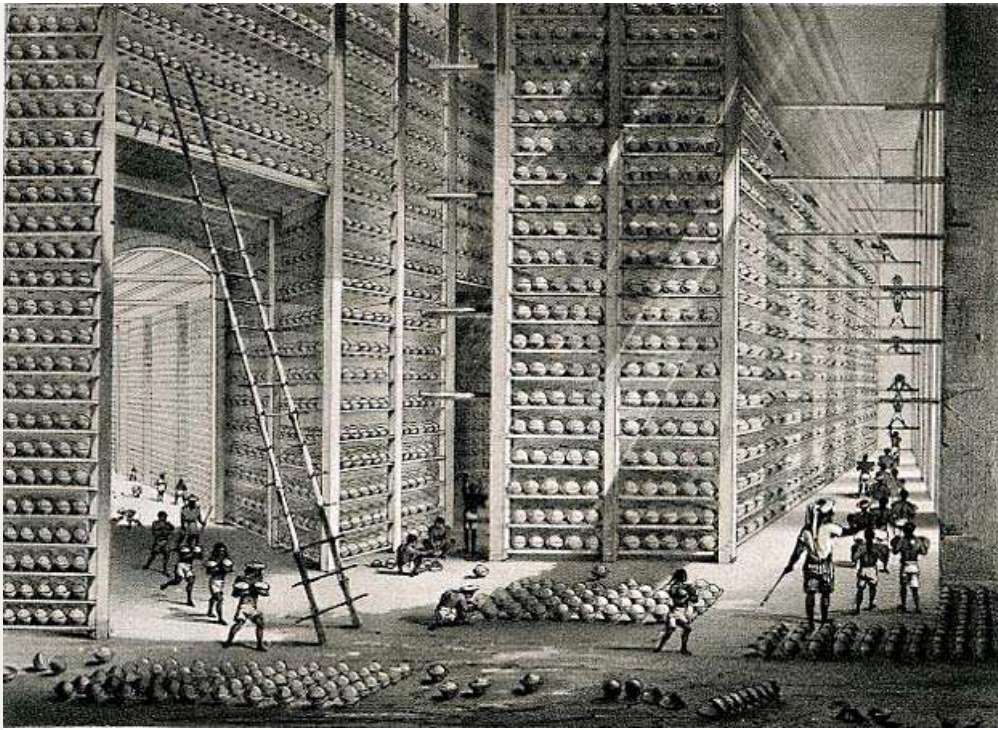


*"The Drying Room, Opium Factory at Patna India"*

*"In the Drying Room the balls are placed to dry before being stacked. Each ball is placed in a small earthenware cup. Men examine the balls, and puncture with a sharp style those in which gas, arising from fermentation, may be forming."*

*Prose from The Graphic reproduced in The Truth about Opium Smoking, 1882  
Lithograph after W. S. Sherwill, ca. 1850*

Wellcome Images  
[1850\_Sherwill\_4\_Drying\_wlc]



*"The Stacking Room, Opium Factory at Patna India"*

*"In the Stacking Room the balls are stacked before being packed in boxes for Calcutta en route to China. A number of boys are constantly engaged in stacking, turning, airing, and examining the balls. To clear them of mildew, moths or insects, they are rubbed with dried and crushed poppy petal dust."*

*Prose from The Graphic reproduced in The Truth about Opium Smoking, 1882*

*Lithograph after W. S. Sherwill, ca. 1850*

Wellcome Images  
[1850\_Sherwill\_5\_Stack1B82D]





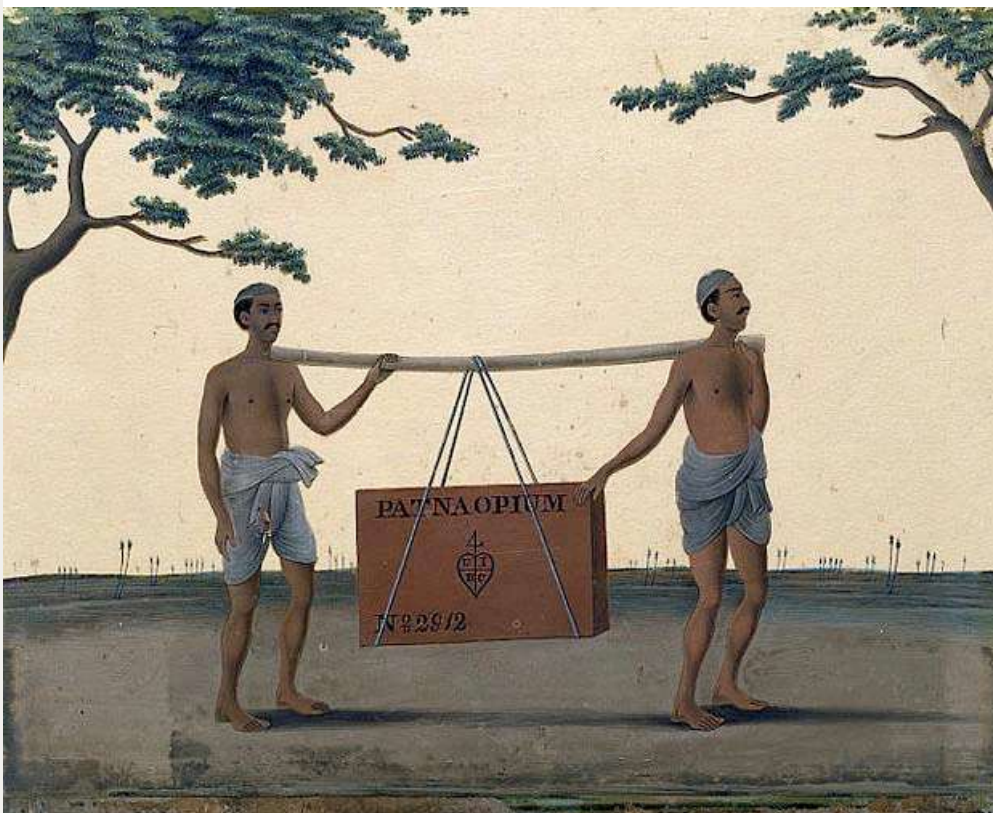
*"Opium Fleet Descending the Ganges on the Way to Calcutta"*

*"An Opium Fleet of native boats, conveying the drug to Calcutta. The fleet is passing the Monghyr Hills, and is preceded by small canoes, the crews of which sound the depth of water; and warn all boats out of the Channel by beat of drum, as the Government boats claim precedence over all other craft. The timber raft shown in the sketch has been floated down from the Nepal Forests, and will be used in making packing-cases for the opium."*

*Prose from The Graphic reproduced in The Truth about Opium Smoking, 1882  
Lithograph after W. S. Sherwill, ca. 1850*

Wellcome Images  
[c\_1850\_Sherwill\_6\_Fleet\_wlc]

### **Shiva Lal's Rendering of Opium Manufacture Commissioned by the East India Company**







*Details from an image set illustrating the manufacture  
of opium, 1857–60, by Shiva Lal*

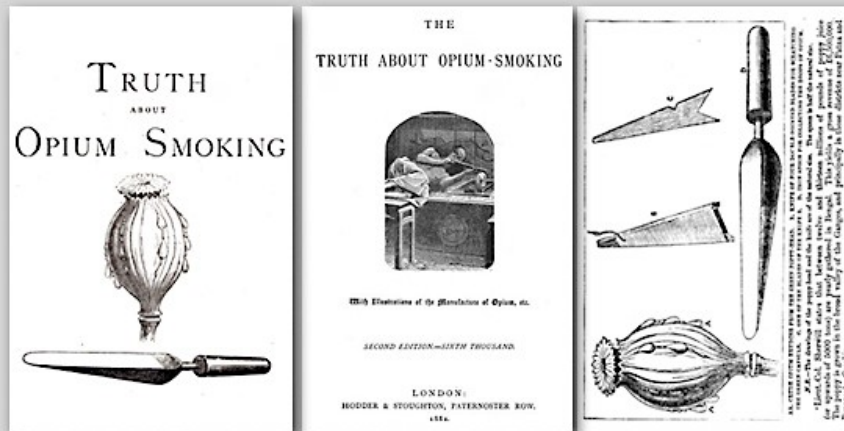
Victoria & Albert Museum

## Opium Consumption

Opium is a product of the opium poppy (*papaver somniferum*), which grows widely across the Middle East, India, and Southeast and East Asia. Chinese had known it mainly as a medicinal herb for many centuries. In the 16th century, it appeared in a new form, mixed with a new drug from the New World: tobacco. Along with maize, sweet potatoes, chili peppers, and peanuts, tobacco was one of the crops brought to China by the Spanish and Portuguese. These crops flourished in the hill country of south China, in places where it was difficult to grow rice. The Chinese quickly developed a craving for tobacco, although, as in England, critics attacked it for its addictive and wasteful qualities.

### *Opium in the West*

*The British were not forcing upon the Chinese a commodity that was prohibited in their own country. On the contrary, opium was widely used in Britain and the United States as a medical or pseudo-medical potion, provoking an “anti-opium” movement that grew intense in the late 1800s.*



The Truth About Opium Smoking was published in London in 1882 by the Society for the Suppression of the Opium Trade.

[b\_1882\_TruthPub1\_title\_gb]



THE POOR CHILD'S NURSE.

*“The Poor Child’s Nurse”*  
This graphic from an 1849 issue of the British humor magazine *Punch* addresses a common practice in 19th-century America as well as England—the widespread use and abuse of opium and opium derivatives (such as laudanum) for relieving illness and even quieting children. By one estimate, at the time of the first Opium War around 300 chests of opium were entering England annually.

Wellcome Library, London  
[k\_1849\_ChildsNurse\_Punch\_wlc]

Madak, or tobacco mixed with opium, originally arrived in south China as part of the global trade with southeast China. Chinese traders had dominated the southeast Asian seas for centuries, mixing with other maritime peoples of the region like the Malays, Arabs, Indians, and Bugis. The European newcomers, especially the Dutch and Portuguese, established fortified trading posts in India, Malacca, and Java, joining a thriving intercultural trading network. Chinese had long consumed exotic products of Southeast Asia like elephant tusks, kingfisher feathers, and sea cucumbers. In the 16th and 17th centuries, they increased their consumption of these tropical luxuries, and opium piggybacked on the expanded southeast Asian trade.

In 1835, a young official named Peng Songyu left Beijing to work in the distant province of Yunnan and was surprised to discover how widespread opium smoking had become:

*When I worked privately for Zhang, the other six colleagues of mine all lived on opium. After lunch, they would each take a lamp and lie down; and they would bring their own pipes to share in the evenings. I worked around them for almost three years, but never tasted the smoke, my hands never touched the tools. All my friends tried very hard to persuade me but I was never moved. They all laughed at me and said that I was willing to suffer.*  
(Cited in Zheng Yangwen, *The Social Life of Opium*, p.79.)





*Two 19th-century Chinese images depicting opium smokers  
wealthy (above top) and poor (above).*

*Unknown Chinese artist, gouache painting on rice-paper*

Wellcome Library, London  
[1800s\_SmokersW\_ChPaint\_wlc]  
[1800s\_Smokers\_ChPaint\_wlc]

Although opium was a familiar product in China, by the 18th century consumers looked for stronger stuff. During the 18th century, consumption of tropical, addictive, and alcoholic products increased throughout the world. Traders and producers found ways to make these seductive products cheaper, stronger, and more widely available. Vodka consumption in Russia, for example, more than doubled, becoming a cheap source of intoxication, and elites campaigned against it as a moral threat to national life. Americans, for their part, brewed large quantities of fermented apple cider. Tea, coffee, chocolate, tobacco, sugar, alcohol, and opium were some of the addictive stimulants that consumers demanded everywhere. The main British contribution to this trade was to produce opium in a cheap and purified form on plantations in their newly conquered colony of Bengal. Later, they extended production to Patna and Benares upstream on the Ganges. Patna and Benares opium became the most popular brands of this major export commodity and a mainstay of the East India Company's rule.

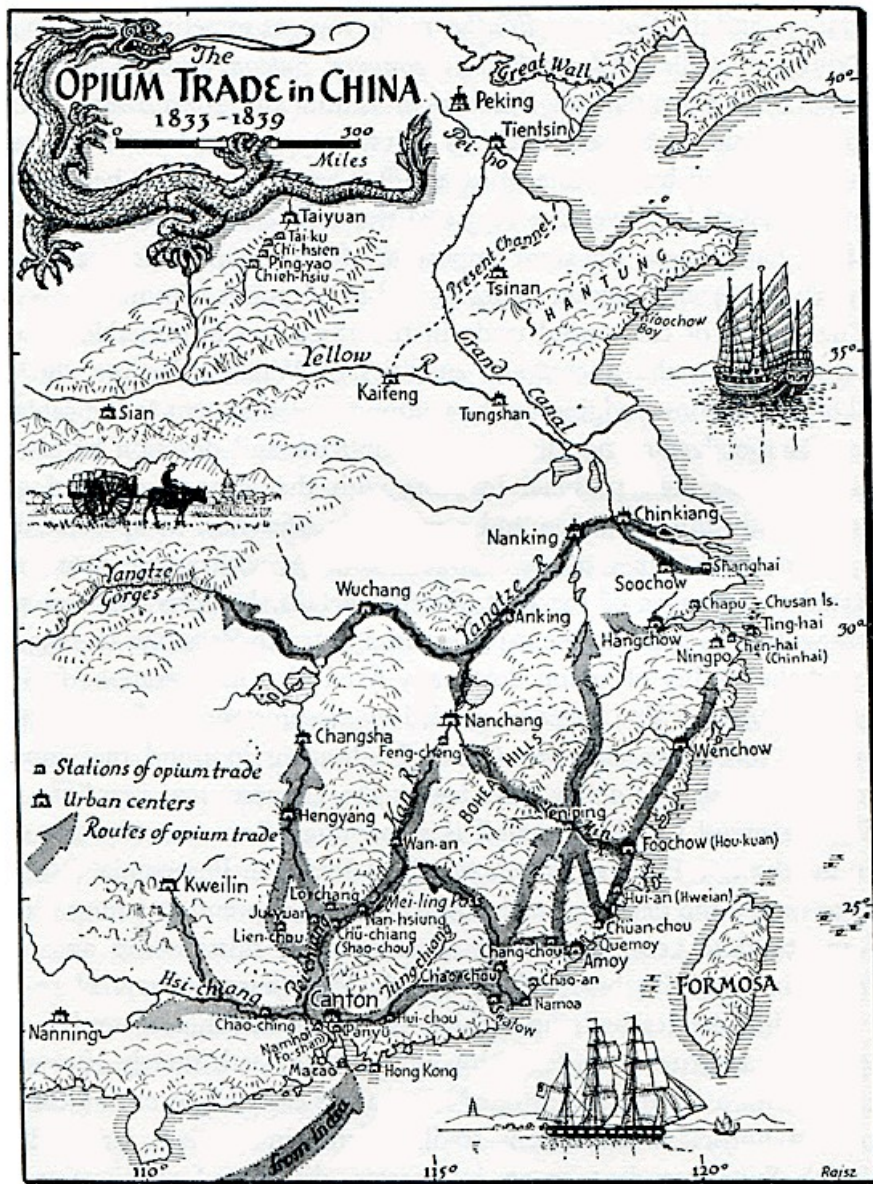
Although some opium entered China by land routes from India to Sichuan in the southwest, most of the drugs came by sea and were unloaded at the Lintin rendezvous near Canton. From there, smugglers in their "fast crabs" did not merely transport the opium to ports along the coast, but also carried it by river into the interior. It was this ever expanding corruption of a vast portion of the country that provoked Commissioner Lin's alarm and righteous indignation.



*This scene of a huge Chinese holding ship (depicted in full, upper left) depicts foreigners unloading chests of Patna opium and selling it to Chinese intermediaries. The holding ships amounted to floating warehouses, where the drug could be stored for months.*

Takao Club website  
[1800s\_SalePatnaOp\_takaoclub]





"The Opium Trade in China, 1833-1839"

Source Yangwen Zheng, *The Social Life of Opium in China* (Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 71; see also Hsin-pao Chang, *Commissioner Lin and the Opium War* (Harvard University Press, 1964), 25; also Immanuel C. Y. Hsü, *The Rise of Modern China* (Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 216.

[1839\_map\_OpTrade\_25]

### Lin's Pyrrhic Victory

Lin Zexu's reputation as a great patriot who attempted in vain to defy the Western imperialists rests largely on two striking actions. The first was a dramatic public spectacle: the destruction, in 1839, of huge quantities of opium that he demanded the British turn over to him. The second act was restrained almost to the point of invisibility: two letters Lin addressed to the then young Queen Victoria, recounting the harm caused by the "poison" of opium and urging her to put the illicit and immoral trade to an end. Lin wrongly assumed that the sale of opium was forbidden in England; and, in any case, the queen never received his fervent entreaty. One of these letters arrived in London in January 1840, carried by a British sea captain whom the Foreign Office refused to recognize. (The translated letter was later printed in the English-language press.)



The prelude to the first of these now-celebrated acts took place in March 1839, when Lin, newly arrived in Canton, demanded that the British surrender their opium stocks. He then proceeded to reinforce this demand in dramatic ways. Two leading hong merchants (Howqua and Mowqua) were arrested and threatened with decapitation; trade in Canton was ordered stopped; Chinese servants and assistants were withdrawn from the foreign factories; and some 350 foreigners were essentially consigned to tedious, uncomfortable detention for what amounted to six weeks.

In these circumstances, the chief superintendent of British trade in China, Captain Charles Elliot, took responsibility for the opium and, in mid May, surrendered 21,306 chests to Lin. Beginning in early June, the opium was destroyed in a flamboyant public spectacle.

### *Destroying the Foreigners' Opium*



*"Commissioner Lin and the Destruction of the Opium in 1839"*  
Chinese artist

Hong Kong Museum of Art  
[1839\_LinDestrOp\_165pc\_hkma]

*In May 1839, in response to Commissioner Lin's demand that the foreign traders turn over their opium for destruction, Chief Superintendent of Trade Charles Elliot intervened to comply with this demand "on behalf of Her Britannic Majesty's Government." This seemingly magnanimous gesture was, as one Western China merchant phrased it, a clever "snare," for it made the Chinese "directly liable to the British Crown." In short time, the British government would trip this snare and demand compensation for the opium that was handed over.*

All told, Elliot delivered 21,306 chests of the drug to the Chinese. This was an enormous amount: at roughly 140 pounds per chest, Lin suddenly found himself with three-million pounds of opium on his hands. This was destroyed over a period of 23 days in June 1839, at Chuanbi by the bay at Canton. The process required the labor of around 500 workers and involved three huge trenches (150 feet long, 75 feet wide, and 7 feet deep) lined with stone and timber and filled with approximately two feet of water from a nearby creek. The opium balls were broken into pieces, dumped into the trenches, and stirred until dissolved, after which salt and lime were added, creating noxious clouds of smoke. The “foreign mud” was then diverted to the creek and washed out to sea.

Lin and around 60 Chinese officials, together with foreign spectators, observed the destruction from an elaborately decorated pavilion erected nearby. In a little known coda to this famous event,

Lin also offered prayers to the spirit of the Southern Sea, apologizing for poisoning its domain with these impurities and advising the deity (as the historian Jonathan Spence has recorded) “to tell the creatures of the water to move away for a time, to avoid being contaminated.”



*The above often-reproduced woodcut of Commissioner Lin destroying the British opium at Canton was first published in 1909, in the September 22 issue of the newspaper Shishibao Tuhua, as part of a series titled “Portraits of the Achievements of Our Dynasty’s Illustrious Officials.” The Chinese text perpetuates some misinformation about this famous event, but effectively conveys both the enduring admiration of Lin’s act and the abiding sense of outrage at the ongoing opium trade. (The opium was not burned, as stated, but rather gave off toxic fumes when dissolved in a mix of water, salt, and lime; and British ships were never extensively damaged or destroyed in the manner claimed.) The full Chinese text on this image translates as follows:*

### Lin Zexu Burns the Opium

In 1839, Lin Zexu arrived as Governor-general of Liangguang, and discovered that Western merchants held opium stores of 20,283 chests. He burnt them all on the beach. Later other foreign ships secretly stole into port with more opium. Lin took advantage of a dark night when the tide was low to send crack troops to capture them. He burnt 23 ships at Changsha bay. Subsequently, because these actions caused a diplomatic incident [i.e. the Opium War], opium imports kept on growing. Now the British government agrees that we must eliminate the poison of opium. Reflecting on past events, we have turned our misfortunes into a happy outcome.

Lin’s apparent triumph of June 1839 turned out to be a delusion, for the British seized on the destruction of the opium to demand retaliation and redress. Debate in Parliament was heated and protracted. Hawks called for war against the obstructionist empire that refused to recognize the blessings of “free trade.” Doves, essentially agreeing with the Chinese, countered that the opium trade was immoral and a stain on Britain’s reputation.

When William Gladstone, the leading Tory politician, argued that opium was a pernicious commodity and hostilities against China would be “unjust” and “cover this country with permanent disgrace,” Lord Palmerston, the foreign secretary, replied that China itself had created the demand for opium, and its people were merely “disposed to buy what other people were disposed to sell them.” At the same time, however, Palmerston himself had reservations about the illicit trade, and even more pressing concerns about the practical consequences of committing forces to China. Indian troops were already preoccupied with Russian threats to Afghanistan, while the royal navy was concerned about guarding the eastern Mediterranean against Ottoman threats.

Tensions increased in July when six drunken British seamen on shore leave in Kowloon (Jiulong)—located near Hong Kong and across from Macao at the mouth of the Canton estuary—vandalized a temple and killed a local man in a brawl. When the British refused to hand over anyone for trial under Chinese justice, arguing that the Chinese would use torture to force confessions, Lin responded by stopping trade, poisoning some wells, and prohibiting sale of food to the foreigners. Rumors arose that the Chinese planned to seize British property in Macao, prompting an exodus to Hong Kong of scores of ships and around 2,000 foreigners.



All this precipitated the first skirmish of the still undeclared war. On September 4, 1839, after Captain Elliot and his interpreter Karl Gützlaff failed to persuade Chinese naval officers in the straits between Hong Kong and Kowloon to let them purchase food and water, two small British warships opened fire on war junks anchored off Kowloon. Three junks were damaged before the British ran low on ammunition and withdrew. Casualties were low, and the confrontation amounted to a stalemate.

Two months later, it became clear that all hope for a peaceful resolution of these rising tensions was out of reach.

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*On viewing images of a potentially disturbing nature: [click here](#).*

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# The First Opium War

## The Anglo-Chinese War of 1839-1842

Essay by Peter C. Perdue

Opium  
Trade

Production &  
Consumption

Hostilities

1st Unequal  
Treaty

War Stories

Sources  
& Credits

### HOSTILITIES

The ensuing hostilities lasted for about three years; went through several fairly distinct military phases; introduced "gunboat diplomacy" to Asia in raw and undiluted form; and ended in August 1842 with the first of the "unequal treaties" that England and the other Western powers expanded on and maintained vis-à-vis China until World War II, almost exactly a century later.

In viewing the contemporary "battle art" that follows here, it may be helpful to keep several things in mind. The graphics are heavily weighted toward the British side, simply because that is where the weight of the record lies. A fairly substantial body of writing about the war did emerge on the Chinese side, along with a very insubstantial number of random illustrations. (These writings quickly made their way to Japan, where they inspired publications that included lively original illustrations inspired by the textual Chinese accounts.) By and large, the Qing court had little reason to publicize its struggle and defeat, and local officials preferred to play down the foreign attacks. The vast majority of Chinese felt little immediate impact from the war. Only the Cantonese population roused its militia to fight the British, but this action was fleeting and received little recognition in the rest of the empire. China was not yet a nation, in which local actions had broad impact across its huge territory, but a dispersed empire without a unified consciousness of the foreign threat. There were as yet, moreover, no networks or mechanisms of popular mass communications.

The British graphics themselves, moreover, have many limitations. In these years before photography or the telegraph, communication in general was slow and cumbersome. Sketches and paintings done on the scene by Western observers reached audiences back home in the form of engravings or lithographs long after the events portrayed had taken place. The original artist on the one hand, and final artist, engraver, and printer on the other hand, were often continents apart, and months or even several years apart as well. "Timely reportage," including visual representation, lay decades in the future.

The Western graphics also, perhaps unconsciously, were skewed and self-censored. Usually, artists did not dwell on the war dead; and where they did do this for their own side, they looked to battlefield deaths rather than the far more common cause of British casualties and fatalities: disease. Fever, ague, malaria, dysentery, diarrhea, gangrene, sunstroke, even malnutrition all ravaged the foreign troops. Thus, for the period between July 13 and December 31, 1840, when non-combat illness and death were especially severe, official hospitalization figures recorded 5,329 admissions and 448 deaths. An English military account published in 1842 similarly observed, almost in passing, that "at one time as many as 1,100 men were in hospital; and in the 37th Madras regt. out of 560 men, only 50 were fit for duty. Many men and officers were obliged to be invalided."

As in all imperialist conflicts in this age of disproportionate military power, moreover, casualties on the Chinese side were vastly greater than those suffered by the British forces. More than a few battles amounted to massacres. A report submitted to the British government in 1847 put total United Kingdom combat casualties in the first Opium War at 69 killed and 451 wounded, for example, while estimating Chinese casualties including deaths at 18,000 to 20,000. While the popular Western war illustrations convey disparity of power, they only hint at the grim calculus of death that came with this.

The war graphics alone also tend to submerge the complexity of racial, ethnic, and social distinctions. A large percentage of the forces the British relied on, for example, was comprised of sepoys, or Muslim and Hindu recruits from India—identified in reports of the time by such phrases as “Bengal volunteers” and “Madras native infantry.” The British force also had substantial contingents of Irish and Scottish troops.

Although England established and controlled its worldwide empire everywhere by relying on subject peoples, the visual record does not draw attention to the polyglot nature of “British forces” in China. In a different direction where ethnicity is concerned, there are no graphic records at all which might confirm (or repudiate) the impression held at the time that Chinese often treated Indian prisoners more harshly than their white captives, although the latter were severely abused as well.

There is a contrary dimension to this also, however. While English writings of the time sometimes speak disdainfully of the Chinese, the ostensible “British” and “Chinese” antagonists interacted in complex ways beyond plain adversity. It is obvious that the drug trade thrived because of complicity by Chinese at every level of society, from officials to smugglers and secret societies to users. It was common practice, moreover, for the foreign forces to recruit and pay wages to local “coolie” labor as their military campaigns up and down the coast unfolded.

Additionally, both sides engaged in abuse of prisoners, wanton plunder, and other barbarous behavior. In some of the cities and towns bombarded by the British, particularly where most inhabitants fled the scene, mayhem involved both sides: Chinese mobs moved in, and competed for loot with the foreigners. On at least one occasion, the looters on each side even acted in concert. The war illustrations give only a hint of this. On other side of the coin, men of moral integrity on the Chinese side who spoke strongly but in vain against the opium trade had counterparts among politicians in London and a small number of the merchants and ship captains engaged in the China trade.

Mostly, in any case, the Western artists and illustrators—whether on the scene or imagining events back home—focused their attention on warships, naval and ground-force dispositions, and background landscapes. They often seemed inordinately attracted to sails and puffs of smoke. Yet the technology of the war, the martial nationalism of this imperialist exercise, the omissions themselves are illuminating. And occasionally—like Walter Sherwill and the “Opium Factory at Patna”—on-the-scene artists like John Ouchterlony of the Madras Engineers can still take us by surprise.

### **Phase I of Hostilities: November 1839–January 1841**

On November 3, 1839—still with no declaration of war having emanated from either side—the unresolved Kowloon incident coupled with other complications precipitated a dramatic military confrontation at Chuanbi on Canton Bay.

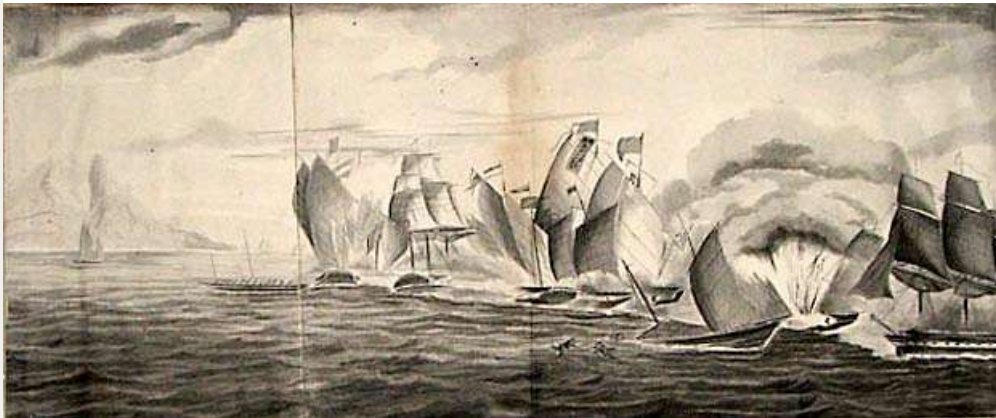
On this occasion, two British frigates—the 28-gun *Volage* and 18-gun *Hyacinth*—took on 29 Chinese vessels that were blockading the harbor (16 war junks and 13 “fire-boats,” craft packed with straw and brushwood, sometimes covering chests of gunpowder, that were set ablaze and floated toward the wooden ships of the enemy). One junk was blown to bits by a lucky shot to its magazine, several other junks were sunk or heavily damaged, and only one British sailor was wounded as opposed to at least 15 Chinese killed. Despite this humiliation, Commissioner Lin’s report to the throne gave no hint of defeat and the emperor was persuaded that the Chinese had won a great victory.





*HMS Volage & HMS Hyacinth confront Chinese war junks at Chuenpee, November 3, 1839, by Miller*

National Maritime Museum  
[1839\_ChWar\_PAF4873\_nmm]



*"The First Battle of Chuanbi, November 1839"*  
by Captain Peter William Hamilton

Wikimedia Commons  
[1839\_chuenpee\_hamilton\_wm]

In these volatile circumstances, Captain Elliot requested that reinforcements be dispatched to Canton; debate on the vice of opium versus the virtue of free trade reached a crescendo in Parliament; and Foreign Secretary Palmerston cast aside his pragmatic reservations. A formal declaration of war against China was issued on January 31, 1840—not by London, but by British authorities in India acting on behalf of the home government. In the months that followed, a large British fleet was assembled for dispatch to China.

Despite his misleading report to the throne about the battle of Chuanbi, Commissioner Lin—who simultaneously served as commander in chief of the imperial navy at Canton—was aware that the Chinese were too weak to challenge the foreign forces directly. On the one hand, he continued to attempt to suppress the opium traffic by admonishing and punishing dealers and users on the Chinese side. On the other hand—and here Lin badly misread the anger, determination, profit-seeking, and national pride of the foreigners—he still hoped moralistic arguments might persuade England to abandon the trade. Early in 1839 Lin had drafted a letter to Queen Victoria but apparently never attempted to send it. During these heightened end-of-the-year tensions, he wrote a second letter to the queen and actually dispatched it, to no avail. It never reached her hands.

In the midst of all this, the six seamen accused of murder in Kowloon were returned to England where, unsurprisingly, they all went unpunished.

### *Commissioner Lin's Letter to Queen Victoria*

*Commissioner Lin entrusted the second of his letters to Queen Victoria to the captain of the East Indiaman Thomas Coutts, who in October 1839 had defied British authorities by running the British blockade at Canton and signing a bond with Lin agreeing he would not transport opium. The owners of the Thomas Coutts were Quakers opposed to the drug trade. Upon reaching London in January, the captain turned the letter over to one of the co-owners, who in turn attempted to deliver it to Foreign Secretary Palmerston. When the foreign office refused to accept the letter, it was made available to the Canton-based missionary publication Chinese Repository, which printed it in February 1840.*



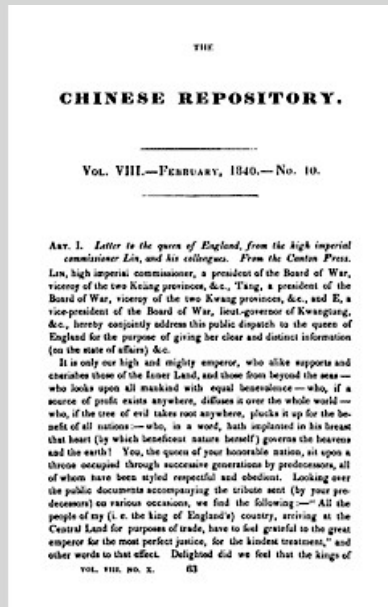
*The Indiaman Thomas Coutts carried Commissioner Lin's 1839 letter to London.*

*Painting by James Miller Huggins.*

Wikimedia Commons  
[1836\_ThCoutts\_Huggins\_wm]

*The Chinese original of Lin's letter to Queen Victoria (detail)*

Wikimedia Commons  
[1839\_Lin\_LetterQuV\_wm]



*After the British government refused to accept Lin's letter, a translation appeared almost immediately in the Protestant missionary publication, Chinese Repository.*

The forces dispatched to Canton in response to Captain Elliot's entreaties arrived in June 1840 under the command of his cousin, Rear Admiral Sir George Elliot. The fleet consisted of 48 ships—16 warships mounting 540 guns, four armed steamers, 27 transports, and a troop ship—and carried fuel for both the steamers and the troops in the form of six million pounds of coal (3,000 tons) and 16,000 gallons of rum. The fighting force numbered some 4,000 men.

As the war dragged on, these forces were increased. The first steam- and sail-powered iron warship ever built, for example, owned by the East India Company and famously named the *Nemesis*, arrived in Macao in November 1840 after a perilous voyage from England. Later reinforcements brought more iron steamers as well as sail-powered warships, and increased the total number of ground forces and seamen to around 12,000.

After the fleet's arrival, the British moved quickly to assert their authority and demand (among other things) compensation for the seized opium, abolition of the restrictive Canton trade system, and the right to occupy one or more islands off the coast. Admiral Elliot avoided confronting the Chinese forces Lin had assembled at Canton. Instead, he imposed his own naval blockade there and proceeded to move north along the coastline with a portion of his forces, accompanied by Charles Elliot, England's chief diplomat on the scene.

One objective of this push north was to find responsible officials at a major port who would agree to deliver the British government's ultimatum to the emperor in Peking (Beijing). A second, related objective was to pressure the Qing court into agreeing to negotiations by threatening to cut off north China from the resource-rich and economically critical south.



By early July—after blockading Amoy (Xiamen), where local officials refused to allow a landing party—the fleet was approaching the Yangtze River delta, some 700 miles north of Canton. On July 4, officers from the warship *Wellesley*, along with the interpreter Karl Gützlaff, met with local officials from strategically located Chusan (Zhoushan) Island in a vain attempt to persuade them to surrender peacefully. (The officials asked them, among other things, why they were being threatened because of disputes centering on Canton.)



*Conference between British and Chinese officials on board the Wellesley off Chusan, July 4, 1840. The missionary and interpreter Karl Gützlaff is seated in the center. The British bombarded and occupied the capital of Chusan the following day, after failing to persuade these local officials to surrender peacefully.*

*From a drawing by Harry Darell*

Anne S. K. Brown Military Collection, Brown University Library  
[1842\_conf\_darrell\_brown]

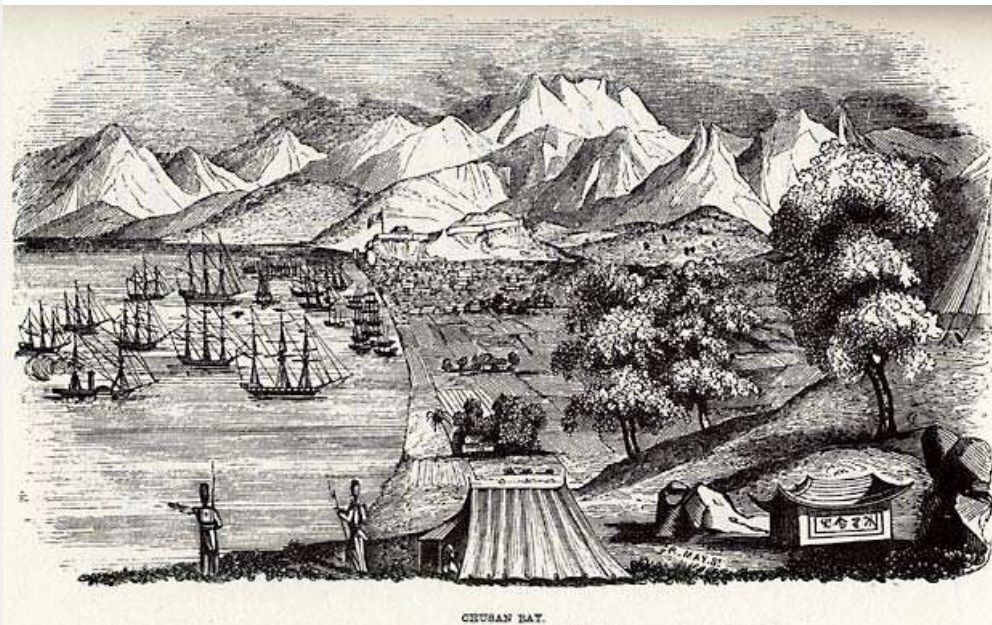


*"Taking the Island of Chusan by the British, July 5th 1840"*

*The British landing party sets out for shore under the cover of gunfire from the fleet.*

*From a drawing by Harry Darell*

National Maritime Museum  
[1840\_PAG9185\_Chusan\_nmm]



"Chusan Bay" 1840

*This depiction of the July 5, 1840 landing at Tinghai captures the distinctive eye and style of Lt. John Ouchterlony of the Madras Engineers, whose narrative, including 53 woodcuts based on his on-the-scene drawings, was published in an 1844 book titled The Chinese War: An Account of All the Operations of the British Forces from the Commencement to the Treaty of Nanking.*

[ou\_068a\_ChusanBay]

After occupying Chusan, the fleet blockaded Ningpo (Ningbo), a major port close by, after officials there refused to accept a letter setting forth the British demands. The force then headed north toward Tientsin (Tianjin) and the Pei-ho (Hai He), the strategic waterway leading to Peking.

While the expedition was advancing toward Tientsin, the British also engaged in a brief show of force in the south, known as the Battle of the Barrier. The barrier in question ran across the isthmus separating Portuguese-controlled Macao from the rest of the mainland. Commissioner Lin had mobilized forces that threatened to drive the British from Macao. In a preemptive assault that began and ended in a single day (August 19), British warships silenced the Chinese battery at the barrier; fired on the ineffective war junks anchored offshore; landed a brigade of some 380 men (of whom almost half were Bengal volunteers); destroyed the Chinese military stores; and then withdrew.

Even in this brief confrontation, the disparity in casualties was typical—and so was the manner in which Chinese officials minimized their losses. Casualties on the British side amounted to four wounded and no one killed. The Chinese, on their part, put their losses at seven or eight men killed—a figure English observers on the scene believed should be "multiplied by 10." Like the Battle of Chuanbi less than two months earlier, however, Lin's reports presented this encounter, too, as a Chinese victory.





*"Barrier Wall, Macao"*

*The barrier on the land bridge separating Macao from China is viewed here from a British encampment in Macao, with British warships to the left and Chinese war junks close to the barrier on the right.*

*From John Ouchterlony, The Chinese War (1844), p. 81*

[ou\_080a\_Macao]

At this point, Lin's days as imperial commissioner were numbered. Near the end of August, the fleet carrying the two Elliots reached the approach to Peking and succeeded in conveying the British demands to local officials at Tientsin. Finally awakened to the real nature of the foreign threat, the emperor responded with fury and Lin became transformed from hero to scapegoat. On August 21, the emperor chastised him harshly: "Externally you wanted to stop the [opium] trade, but it has not been stopped; internally you wanted to wipe out the outlaws [opium smugglers and smokers], but they are not cleared away. You are just making excuses with empty words. Nothing has been accomplished but many troubles have been created. Thinking of these things, I cannot contain my rage." Lin was stripped of his title of imperial commissioner in September, but allowed to remain in Canton that fall and winter to offer assistance to his successor.

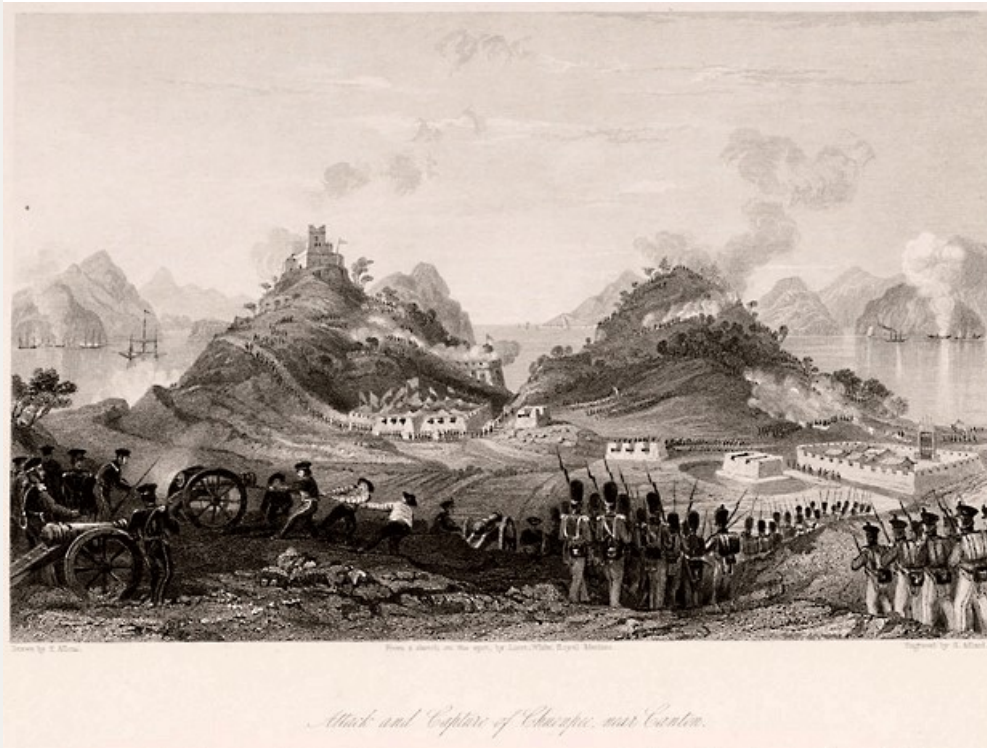
Qishan, Lin's successor as the mandarin appointed to deal with the British, rose and fell even more quickly in emperor's eyes. Lin warned the emperor that negotiating with the foreign barbarians would never work: "the more they get the more they demand, and if we do not overcome them by force of arms there will be no end to our troubles." Qishan, however, took a softer line, hoping to persuade the foreigners to withdraw simply by threatening to cut off their trading privileges and then making some concessions. He persuaded the two Elliots to return to Canton by intimating that the Chinese were prepared to engage in serious negotiations there.

By November, the British had withdrawn to Macao. The promised negotiations began in Canton in late December, with Charles Elliot as chief negotiator on the British side. Palmerston's instructions to Elliot now included these minimal conditions for an agreement: the opening of the five ports of Canton, Amoy, Foochow (Fuzhou), Ningbo, and Shanghai; cession of an island; and indemnities for both the value of the confiscated opium and costs of the military expedition. Qishan offered only a smaller indemnity than requested, and even this was done without the Qing court's knowledge.

By January 1841, the British had become aware that Qishan was not prepared to make substantial concessions. The fleet had been reinforced during this lull, and the next great show of British force was unleashed at a familiar place of battle: Chuanbi, which along with a sister fort at Tycocktow guarded the strategic Bocca Tigris strait, leading to Canton itself.



The famous “Second Battle of Chuanbi” took place on January 7, lasted but an hour, and ended with both forts captured, an estimated 500 or more Chinese killed, and perhaps half that number wounded. British casualties were 38 wounded.



*"Attack and Capture of Chuenpee, near Canton"*

1843 engraving based on artwork by Thomas Allom

*Between 1843 and 1847, Thomas Allom published close to 150 illustrations of "China," including but by no means limited to battle scenes of the Opium War. Allom never visited China, and some of his prints acknowledge being based on drawings or sketches by others. (Here, for example, the print includes a line indicating it is based on a sketch by "Lieutenant White, Royal Marines.") These illustrations are thus "imagined" scenes—and usually, even in the war renderings, highly romanticized.*

*Allom's considerable audience in England thus received a doubly deceptive impression. The war was by and large sanitized and beautified, while China itself—especially in scenes having nothing to do with the Opium War—was rendered exotic and even alluring in many ways.*

Beinecke Library, Yale University  
[Allom\_1839\_Chuenpee\_Yale]



*Color from the 1st Edition of "The Nemesis, Lieut. Wm. Hall, R.N. Destroyer, DESTROYING THE CHINESE WAR JUNKS, IN ANSON'S BAY, JANUARY 1841." The "Nemesis" and "Destroyer" of the "Nemesis" and "Destroyer" the "Nemesis" is very respectfully delivered.*

*"NEMESIS Destroying the Chinese War Junks in Anson's Bay, Jan 7th 1841"*

*This famous print of the Second Battle of Chuanbi by E. Duncan, dated May 30, 1843, records the first battle appearance of the revolutionary iron steamer Nemesis.*

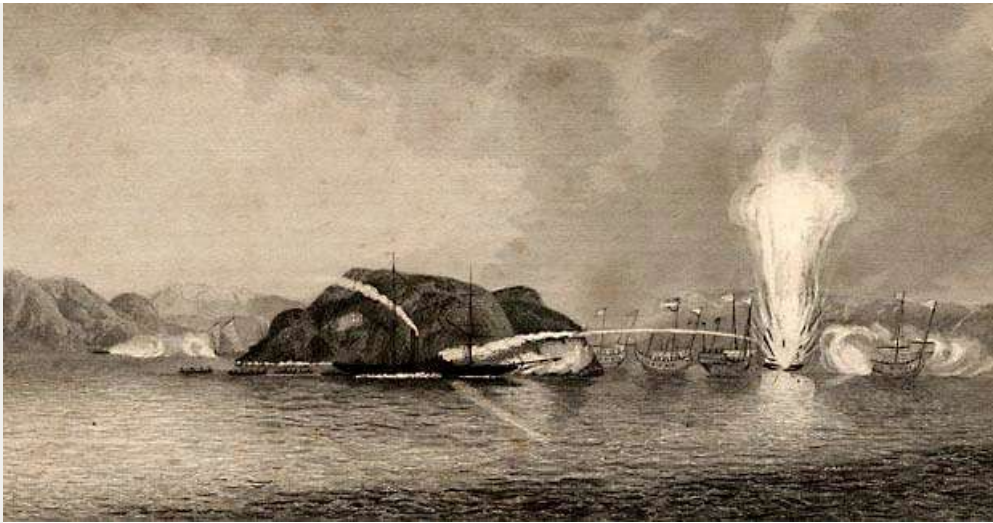
National Maritime Museum  
[1841\_0792\_nemesis\_jm\_nmm]



*"Attack on the Chinese Junks" 1841*

[1841\_AttkJunks\_Bridgeman]



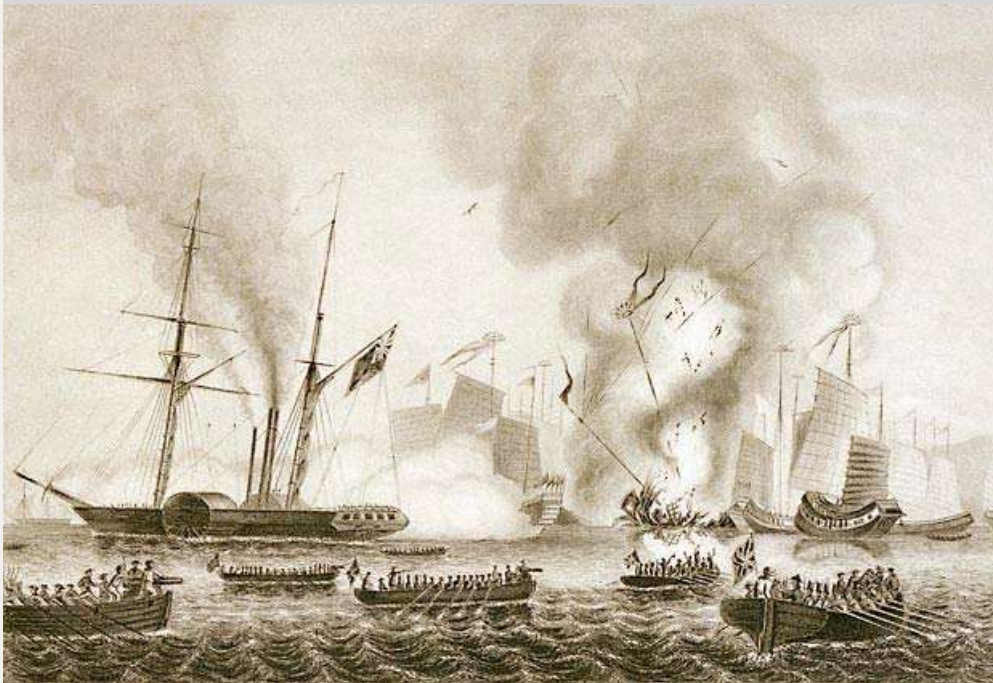


*"Attack on the War Junks at Chuenpee Creek"*

*Frontispiece to volume II of a book by Captain Sir Edward Belcher, published in 1843 with the imposing title Narrative of a Voyage Round the World: Performed in Her Majesty's Ship Sulphur, During the Years 1836-1842, Including Details of the Naval Operations in China, from Dec. 1840, to Nov. 1841.*

[1843\_belcher\_000\_Chuenpee]

## *The Iron Warship Nemesis Makes Its Debut*



*"The Hon. East India Company's Steamer "Nemesis" and the boats of the Sulphur, Calliope, Larne, and Starling destroying the Chinese War Junks in Ansons Bay. January 7, 1841"*

National Maritime Museum  
[1841\_Chuenpee\_PU5865\_nmm]

*Gunboat diplomacy attained a new level technologically in the Second Battle of Chuanbi, when the 660-ton iron steamer Nemesis entered the fray. Constructed in Liverpool for the East India Company, the Nemesis was distinctive in several ways. Driven by*



*two paddle wheels, the warship was made almost completely of iron. It was flat bottomed, with an unusually shallow draught of only six feet when fully loaded—making it particularly suitable for navigating China's shallow waters. And although its three highest officers were from the Royal Navy, the crew and the rest of the officers were civilians.*

*On January 7, seeing action for the first time ever, the Nemesis landed a force of some 600 sepoys at Chuanbi; participated in the bombardment of the fortifications; and made a particularly dramatic impression by blowing up a war junk with a Congreve rocket. An 1845 book about the Nemesis recorded that "The smoke, and flame, and thunder of the explosion, with the broken fragments falling round, and even portions of dismembered bodies scattering as they fell, were enough to strike with awe, if not fear, the stoutest heart that looked upon it."*

*This was the scene that artists predictably recorded and publishers promoted back home—albeit, as always, some time after the event.*

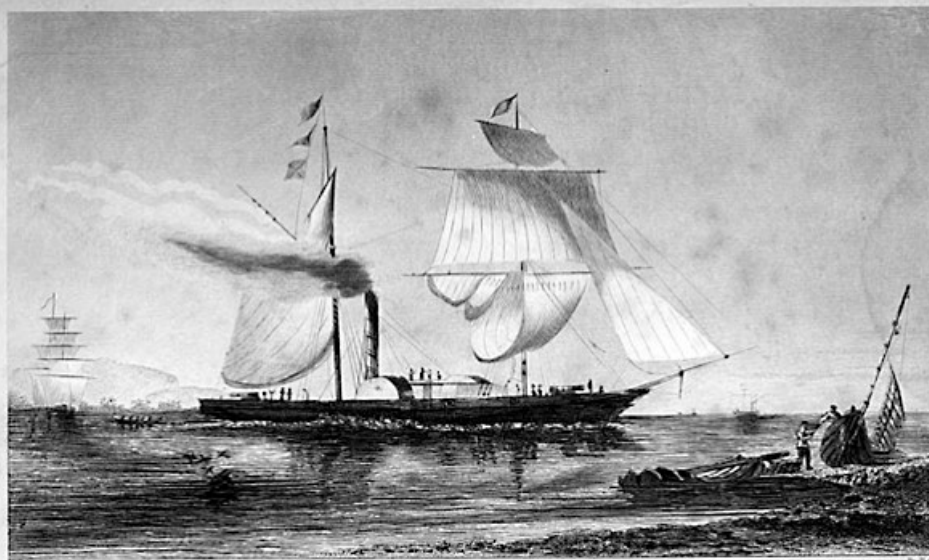
*The Illustrated London News published an engraving of the spectacular moment at Chuanbi in November 1842. The popular colored print by E. Duncan reproduced above this box appeared in 1843, while the dramatic rendering at the top of the box appears to have been issued as late as 1851.*



*"The Nemesis Steamer Destroying Chinese War Junks, in Canton River, from a sketch in the possession of the Hon. East India Company"*

*Illustrated London News, November 12, 1842*

[iln\_1842\_pg420\_nemesis\_wid]



*Like all other steamer warships, the Nemesis also raised sail in certain circumstances. This graphic appears in the 1844 book Narrative of the Voyages and Service of "The Nemesis," co-authored by the ship's commander William Hucheson Hall.*

[1847\_Nemesis\_Hall3rdEd\_gb]

*The Nemesis continued to play a conspicuous and versatile role in subsequent battles, and by war's end had been joined by a number of other iron steamers, all but one of them operated by the East India Company. In addition to firing heavy shells and rockets, along with ferrying troops, the shallow draught of the steamers enabled them to close in and grapple with Chinese war junks, while their ability to defy winds and tides made them useful for towing the big British men-of-war within firing range of coastal fortifications that were under attack.*

*The British Library possesses an unusual Chinese scroll with a rough sketch of the Nemesis and another British warship, accompanied by a 55-line poem. There is a penned-in English translation on the scroll as well, apparently dating from around the time of the Opium War.*



*Chinese scroll with illustration of the iron steamer Nemesis and a British man-of-war, along with a 55-line Chinese poem.*

[scri\_nemesis\_ID40019-04\_b]

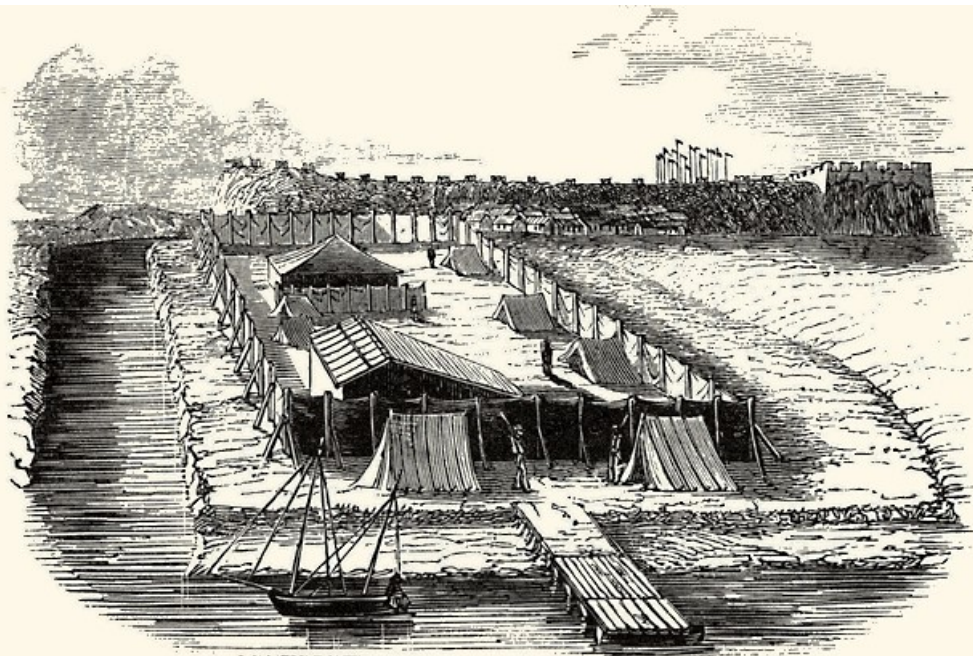
*The British Library categorizes the verse on the scroll as “doggerel.” Insofar as accuracy goes, it amounts to a poetic counterpart to the reports of imaginary victories Commissioner Lin and other Chinese officials produced in the early stage of hostilities. In vivid, almost epic language, the poem describes how the gods intervened to drive the English warships aground in a storm, after which “the foreign devils in hundreds then were put to death,” while others “fell sick by fierce disease” and perished.*

*The closing lines are devoted to the “fire ship” encased in iron with a wheel on each side “which is moved by the use of burning coal and turns around like a galloping horse.” The poet acknowledges that “Its shape and fashion astonish mankind”; but, like all the other enemy ships, the gods drove it onto the rocks.*

On January 20, confronted by the British show of force at Canton, Qishan acknowledged his helplessness and indicated that, among other things, China was willing to cede Hong Kong, pay an indemnity of six million dollars, engage in official relations on an equal footing, and reopen Canton to trade. When this so-called Convention of Chuanbi was submitted for approval, the Daoguang emperor again flew into a rage. Qishan was imprisoned and sentenced to death; his family property was confiscated; and in May 1842, after his sentence was commuted, he was banished to a remote area near the Amur River far in the north.

As it transpired, Charles Elliot, Qishan’s counterpart in the agreement, also received a stinging reprimand from *his* government. On April 21, Palmerston castigated him for having settled for the “lowest” possible terms, and stripped him of his appointment. Among other things, Palmerston was critical of Elliot’s failure to insist on compensation for the opium Lin had destroyed, as well as his agreement to withdraw British forces from strategically situated Chusan and his acceptance of less than absolute rights to Hong Kong (which Palmerston spoke of disparagingly as “a barren island with hardly a house upon it”). Given the excruciating slowness of communication, Elliot did not learn of his disgrace until late July, when his dismissal notice arrived—followed shortly by his successor, Sir Henry Pottinger.





ENCAMPMENT AT TOONG-KOO, WHERE CAPTAIN ELLIOT MET KEESHEN.

*“Encampment at Toong-koo, Where Captain Elliot Met Keeshe”*

*John Ouchterlony’s depiction conveys the rough setting in which Elliot and Qishan worked out the Convention of Chuanbi, which both the Chinese and British governments refused to recognize.*

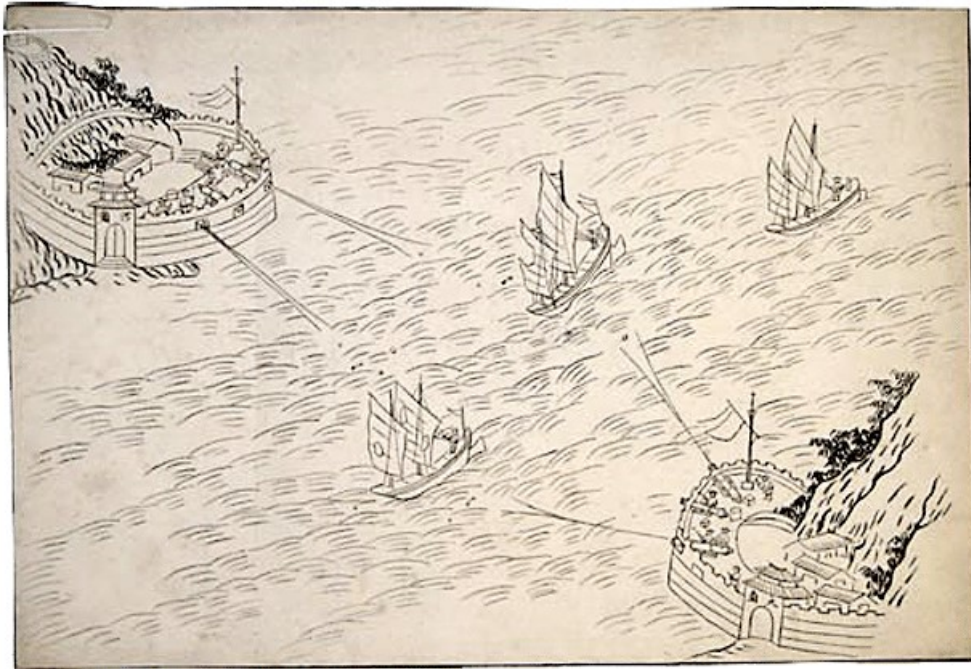
*From The Chinese War (1844), p. 65*

[ou\_064a\_Camp]

## **Phase II of Hostilities: February 1841–June 1841**

Before the news of his dismissal and replacement arrived, Captain Elliot, convinced that the emperor would not carry out the terms he and Qishan had agreed upon at Chuanbi, initiated a series of attacks that directly threatened Canton. In the last week of February and first week of March—in a succession of quick battles sometimes known as the Battle of the Bogue (also Battle of Bocca Tigris), Battle of the First Bar, and Battle of Whampoa—British warships including the *Nemesis* gained control over the Pearl River and placed themselves in position to besiege Canton.

Estimated casualties conformed to the familiar pattern: a single British soldier was killed when his gun misfired, while fatalities on the Chinese side probably numbered around 500, including an admiral whom one of the British warships honored with a cannon-salute when his body was taken away by his family.



*This Chinese sketch of defensive preparations at Anunghoy in the strategic Bocca Tigris straits leading to Canton was found by the British after they destroyed these fortifications on February 26, 1841. The Chinese had stretched iron cables, resting on junks, across the narrow channel in a vain attempt to deter the British warships.*

Wikimedia Commons  
[1841\_Feb26\_BoccaT\_1850c\_wm]



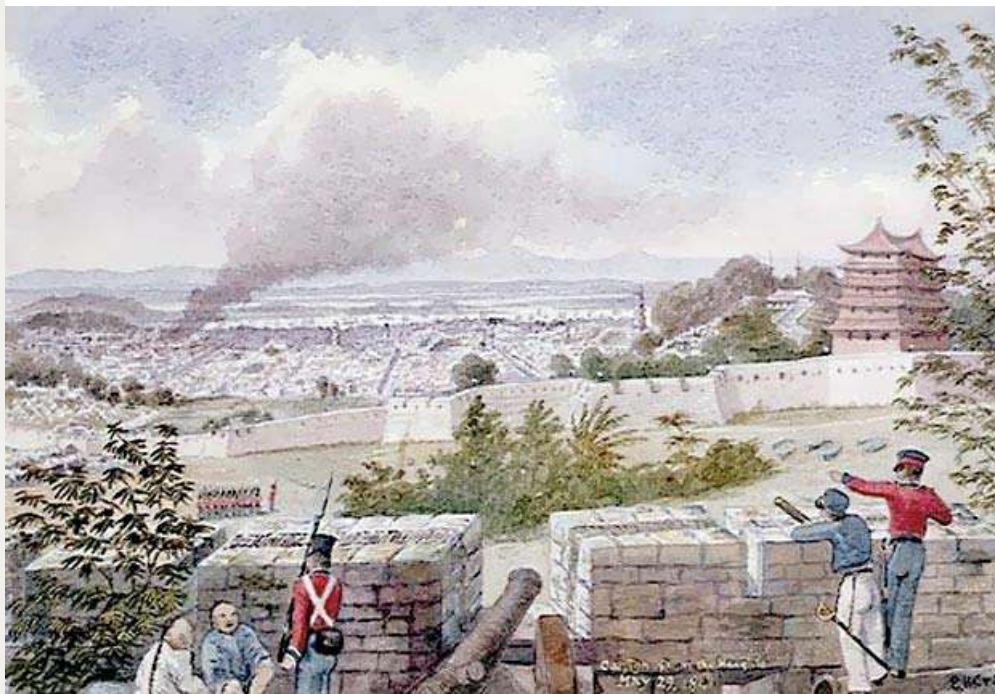
*"Attack on First Bar Battery, Canton River"*

*This rendering of a battle that took place just below Whampoa on February 27, 1841, appeared in Narrative of a Voyage Round the World by Edward Belcher, published in 1843 [vol. 2, p. 154]*

[1843\_belcher\_154a\_1stBarBat]

Control over Whampoa enabled the British to bring up a large force for an attack on Canton, which they proceeded to carry out the following May. On May 21, at Elliot's urging, British subjects still in Canton left the city—following which Chinese soldiers and mobs plundered and gutted the "factories" where they conducted business. By May 24, the British force had taken the forts protecting the city and commenced bombarding Canton itself. Local officials together with wealthy hong merchants responded quickly by offering Elliot a "ransom" of six million dollars to desist—leading to a truce agreed to on May 27.





*Dr. Edward H. Cree, a surgeon with the Royal Navy who participated in the first Opium War, maintained a personal journal illustrated with his own watercolor paintings. These impressions of the Battle of Canton depict British sailors towing the big warships toward the besieged city on May 24, 1841 (above, top), and ground forces bombarding Canton from the surrounding heights (above).*

National Maritime Museum  
[cree\_081\_HurrahCanton] [1841\_6028\_Canton\_nmm]

The truce at Canton set the stage for one of the most celebrated moments in later Chinese recollections of the war. On May 29, as Chinese troops began to withdraw from the city and British forces prepared to do likewise, local gentry in surrounding villages mobilized militia to attack the invaders. They had only primitive arms like hoes, spears, and a few matchlock guns, but were furious at the foreigners' destruction of local tombs; rape of local women; and looting of food, clothing, and valuables. In short time, the gentry gathered a civilian force that peaked at around 10,000 men from some 100 villages.



On May 30, in the midst of a torrential rainstorm near the village of Sanyuanli, this militia encountered and surrounded a detachment of Indian sepoy led by English officers. The downpour left the foreigners mired in paddy-field mud, and caused their flintlock muskets to misfire. One of the sepoys was killed and 15 wounded before British reinforcements arrived.



*John Ouchterlony's rendering of the battle in the rain at Sanyuanli was reduced to a small graphic in his 1844 book, as opposed to the usual full-page illustration. By contrast, this episode dominates many Chinese recollections of the first Opium War.*

*From The Chinese War (1844), p. 156*

Beinecke Library, Yale University  
[ou\_156\_rescue]

Fearing an attack by the main British army, senior officials associated with the Manchu court's regular military forces quickly dispersed the militia and negotiated another truce. To Elliot and British officers on the scene, the encounter at Sanyuanli was insignificant, and it received but passing notice in official military reports. On the Chinese side, by contrast, rumors soon placed the British dead at "80 or 90," with many others wounded, and claimed that the foreign barbarians would have been completely annihilated if only the local Manchu general had sent reinforcements. Sanyuanli became turned into a great grass-roots victory by the Chinese people, and local literati, villagers, and examination students castigated the corrupt imperial army and court-appointed officials for paying off the foreigners to save their city.

In present-day Chinese accounts of the Opium War, Sanyuanli still stands out as the major victory of the war, a symbol of the potential power of the unified Chinese masses. As the Chinese historian Bai Shou-yi has written, "This was the earliest known spontaneous struggle by the Chinese people against foreign aggression in modern history." Modern Chinese films of the war often stress the Sanyuanli victory instead of the humiliating defeats.



*An excerpt depicting Sanyuanli from the Chinese film "Lin Zexu," directed by Xie Jin, 1959, Shanghai.*

*The Opium War has been the subject of many Chinese feature films. This poster from 1958 advertises a movie featuring Commissioner Lin as its hero.*

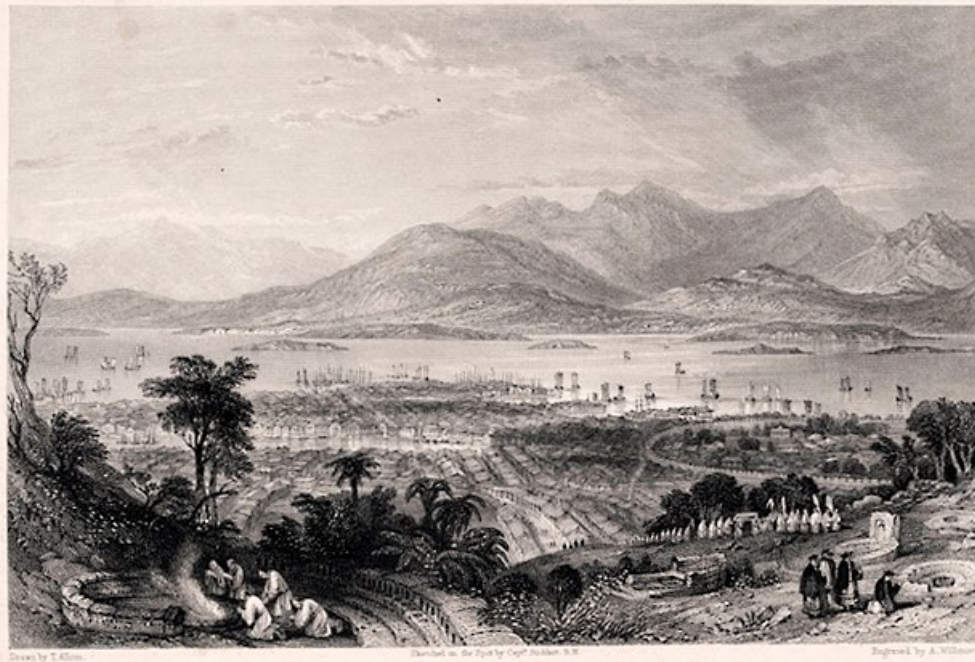
Wikimedia Commons  
[lin\_zexu\_movie\_4583\_poster08189\_wm]



### **Phase III of Hostilities: August 1841-March 1842**

Captain Elliot's willingness to withdraw from the siege of Canton reflected his conviction that England would not attain its objectives without undertaking another move north to, once again, carry gunboat diplomacy ever closer to the Qing court. Sir Henry Pottinger—Elliot's successor as diplomatic "plenipotentiary" and chief superintendent of trade—arrived in Macao in August with instructions from London to do just that.

In the later part of August, the fleet headed north with 14 warships including four steamers—quickly occupying, once again, Amoy (August 26); Tinghai, the capital of Chusan (October 1); and Ningpo (October 13). Amoy was taken with very little opposition, but this was not the case with the other two strategic locales.



*City of Amoy, from the Forts.*

*Thomas Allom's panoramic depiction of Amoy, occupied by the British on August 26, 1841, was published a few years later. An English-language account a decade later offered this description of the city "The town is large and populous, defended by stone walls and batteries, and has, from time immemorial, been a place of great trade, its merchants being classed among the most wealthy and enterprising in the Eastern world." (Julia Corner in China Pictorial, 1853)*

Beinecke Library, Yale University  
[Allom\_1842\_Amoy\_Yale]





*"The 18th (Royal Irish) Regiment of Foot, At the Storming of the Fortress of Amoy, August 26th 1841"*

*This highly imaginary rendering of the capture of Amoy picks up an earlier Western characterization of Chinese infantry as "tigers of war." The term may have been coined around the turn of the century by Christian missionaries, who described Qing soldiers as wearing striped uniforms and caps with small ears on them. It is also said that at the time of the abortive Napier mission in 1834, some Qing troops were deliberately dressed in such costumes in order to intimidate the British emissary. In actuality, after heavy naval bombardment, resistance to the British landing forces at Amoy was slight and the city was entered "without opposition."*

Anne S. K. Brown Military Collection, Brown University Library  
[1841\_IrishStormAmoy\_Brown]

The relatively easy occupation of Amoy was deceptive. By contrast, Tinghai became a "field of slaughter," in the words of John Ouchterlony, with several "mandarins of note" choosing to die by suicide rather than face the humiliation of defeat and wrath of the emperor.

The taking of Ningpo was equally grim. On this, Ouchterlony's account devotes several pages to the October 10 battle at Chinhai, a critical fortification at the mouth of the Ningpo River some 50 miles from Chusan. Chinhai, too, became "a dreadful scene of slaughter," a massacre where British officers were unable to stop "the butchery" by their own troops, a macabre spectacle where most fleeing Chinese were unable "to escape the tempest of death which roared around them."

Chinese prisoners who did escape this tempest were subjected to petty humiliation of a sort popular through the full course of the war among victorious British troops, who often "deprived" defeated foe of "their tails"—that is, cut off the queues Chinese men were required to wear under the Manchu dynasty. Typically, Ouchterlony's account of the Battle of Chinhai concludes by reporting that "On the side of the British but few casualties occurred." After the rout at Chinhai, Ningpo was ripe for the taking, and offered no resistance.



*“Capture of Ting-hai, Chusan*

*From a sketch on the spot, by Lieut. White, Royal Marines”*

*Thomas Allom’s illustration focuses on British troops being landed under the cover of heavy cannon fire from the big multi-gun warships. Two steamers are visible on the right. Chinese losses were great and ghastly at Tinghai, occupied on October 1, 1841. Temperamentally, Allom never ventured onto such gritty terrain—but neither, by its very nature, did maritime battle art of the Opium War in general.*

Beinecke Library, Yale University  
[Allom\_1841\_Chusan\_Yale]



*"Close of the Engagement at Chin-Hae"*

*The capture of Chinhai, a strategic fortification at the mouth of the Ningpo River, paved the way for easy occupation of Ningpo on October 13, 1841. John Ouchterlony's woodcut rendering of the final battle, in which retreating Chinese defenders found themselves trapped by the British landing party, captures the close-quarters nature of the fighting. It fails, however, to convey the full horror of the massacre that Ouchterlony provides in the vivid text in his book.*

*From The Chinese War (1844), p. 190.*

[ou\_190a\_ChinHae]

These battles and occupations were prelude to a lull before the final military thrust. Amoy was lightly garrisoned, while the bulk of the fleet wintered over in occupied Chusan and Ningpo. Meanwhile, to the south, British merchants and officials embarked on a construction boom aimed at turning Hong Kong from Palmerston's "barren island with hardly a house upon it" into the great commercial hub it was soon to become.

#### **Phase IV of Hostilities: March 1842–August 1842**

The winter lull in major military activities essentially ended in March 1842, when British troops suppressed two Chinese offensives in and around Ningpo. On March 10, a bold attempt of thousands of Chinese fighters to take on the foreigners within Ningpo itself ended, as so often, in one-sided carnage when the long column of Chinese, trapped in a narrow street, was mowed down by British muskets and a howitzer spraying grapeshot.

Lieutenant Ouchterlony described this as "merciless horror in the street," and capped his description with a striking vignette. "The corpses of the slain lay heaped across the narrow street for a distance of many yards," he wrote, "and after the fight had terminated, a pony, which had been ridden by a mandarin, was extricated unhurt from the ghastly mass in which it had been entombed so completely as to have at first escaped observation."



*John Ouchterlony's rendering of the "Repulse at Ningpo" on March 10, 1842, was accompanied by the observation that "While on our side not a single man had been killed and only a few wounded, upwards of 400 of the enemy had fallen, consisting, of course, of their bravest and best."*

*From The Chinese War (1844), p. 241*

Wikimedia Commons  
[ou\_240a\_Ningpo]



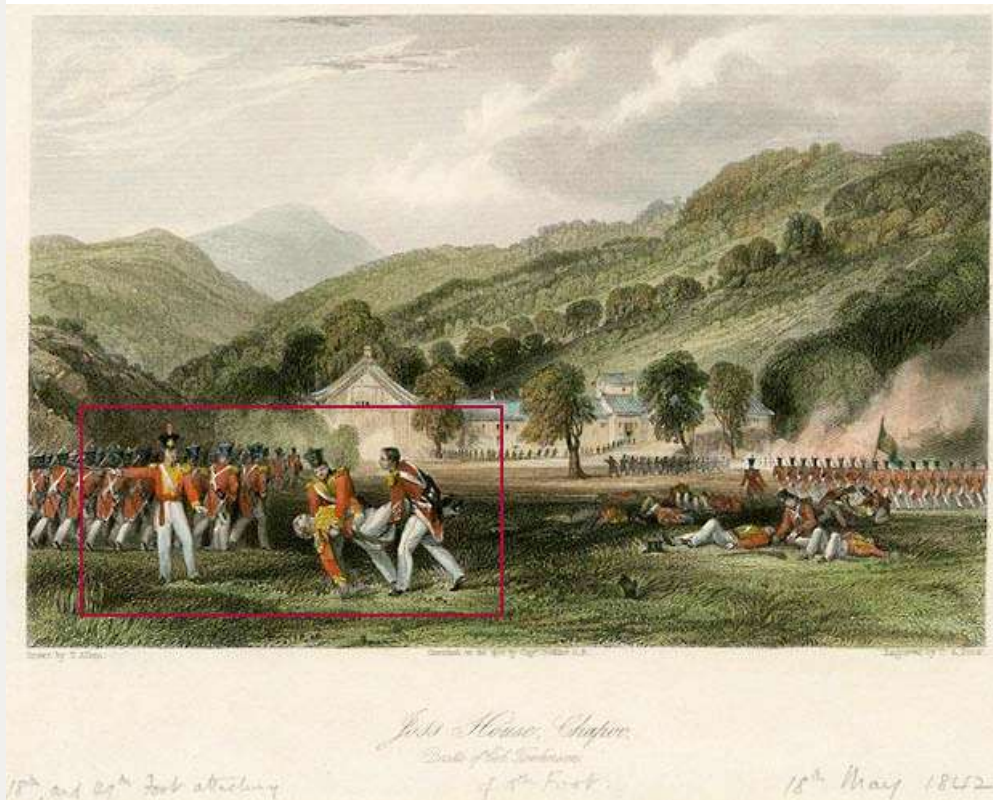
On March 15, five days after this slaughter, the Chinese suffered a comparably harsh defeat at Segao, in the countryside near Ningpo. Two months after this, beginning in mid-May, the British expedition resumed its push north, greatly replenished by reinforcements from India.

At its peak in this final stage of the war, the fighting force of the fleet (not including scores of transports) was comprised of 15 warships, five steam frigates, and five shallow-draught iron steamers. Total manpower came to 12,000 fighting men, of whom 3,000 were seamen; two-thirds of the latter were also available for deployment on shore.

The British initially intended to attack the strategic city of Hangchow (Hangzhou) in the basin of the Yangtze River north of the Ningpo-Chusan area where they had wintered over. After discovering that the bay there was too shallow to allow entry of their large warships, they turned their attention further north.

The first noteworthy battle in this final advance came on May 18, 1842, with a British victory at Chapu that provided heroes and horrors in equal measure. Located on the coast between Hangchow and Shanghai, Chapu was known as a "Tartar" city—a misleading term the foreigners commonly used to denote the multi-ethnic cadre of "bannermen"—comprised of Manchus, Mongols, and Chinese—who served as an elite military force for the Manchu rulers. This elite cadre maintained detached residences in the city—and, as it turned out, adhered to a grim, no-surrender culture.

The confrontation at Chapu gave the British a martyred officer: a Lieutenant-Colonel Tomlinson, who died instantly after being struck in the neck by a bullet. (Total British losses at Chapu were 10 killed and fifty wounded, against five to six hundred Chinese dead.) Tomlinson's fatal encounter occurred near a "joss house"—a building in which an eclectic mixture of saints and deities was venerated—that became remembered for various reasons in subsequent war stories. The colonel was killed there. A large contingent of bannermen barricaded in the building earned the admiration of their antagonists by refusing to surrender. And when the British forces took Chapu itself, they discovered that the cult of death-before-surrender was not confined to the warriors. To their horror, they came upon the corpses of women and children who had taken poison, or been given poison, or been strangled or killed in other ways by their kith and kin when news of the defeat reached town. This was the first time, but not the last, that the invaders confronted such a gruesome response to their offensive.

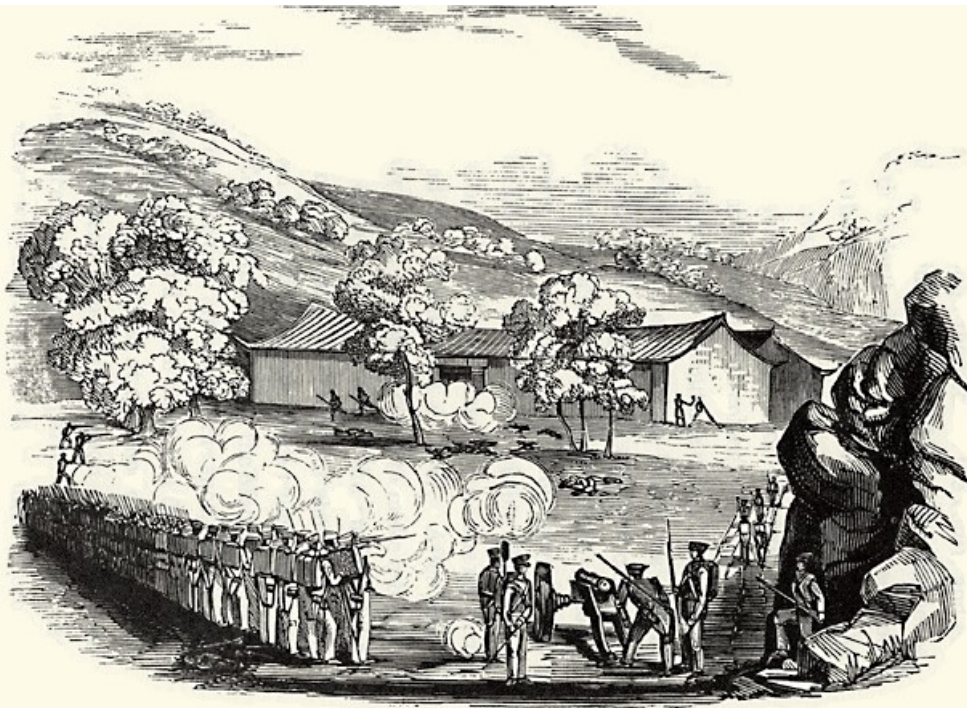


*"Joss House, Chapoo. Death of Col. Tomlinson"*

*Thomas Allom's well-known print is particularly striking because battlefield deaths and casualties were so comparatively rare among the British forces. "Col. Tomlinson" became, in effect, a heroic symbol of the civilizing mission the British had undertaken.*

Anne S. K. Brown Military Collection  
 Brown University Library  
 [1842\_JossHouse\_Brown]





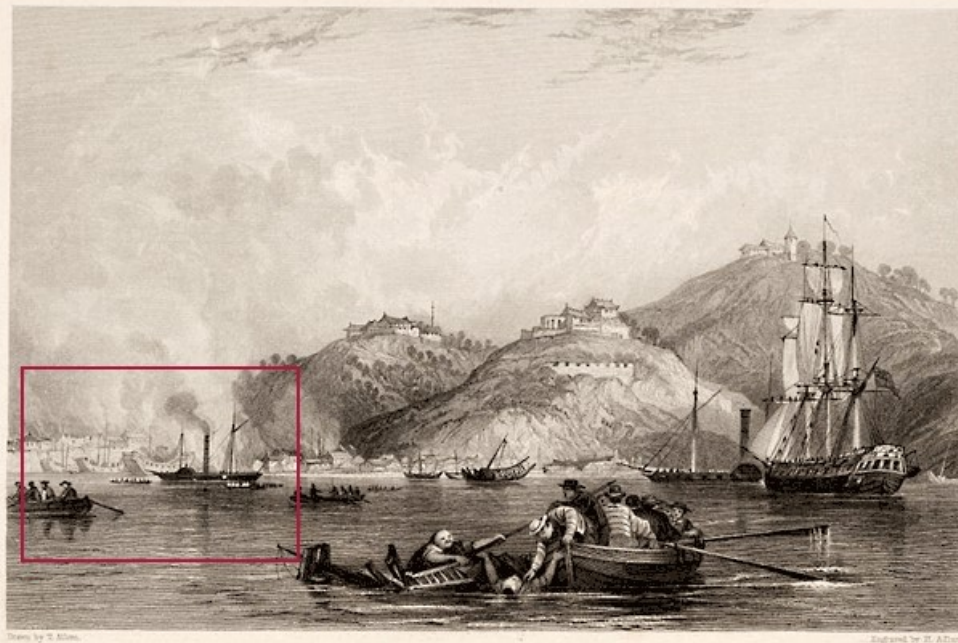
*“Engagement at the Joss-House near Chapoo”*

*After “shot, rockets, and musketry” failed, the religious building in which bannermen warriors had barricaded themselves was destroyed by setting it on fire with kindling. John Ouchterlony’s account of this May 1842 battle praises the valor of enemy soldiers who fought to the bitter end.*

*From The Chinese War (1844), p. 278*

[ou\_278a\_Chapoo]





Drawn by T. Allom.

Engraved by W. Allard.

*Close of the Attack on Chapoo—the Suburbs on Fire.*

*Fin de l'attaque de Chapoo, incendie des faubourgs.*

*Ende des Attacks von Chapoo, der Vorstadt in Feuer.*

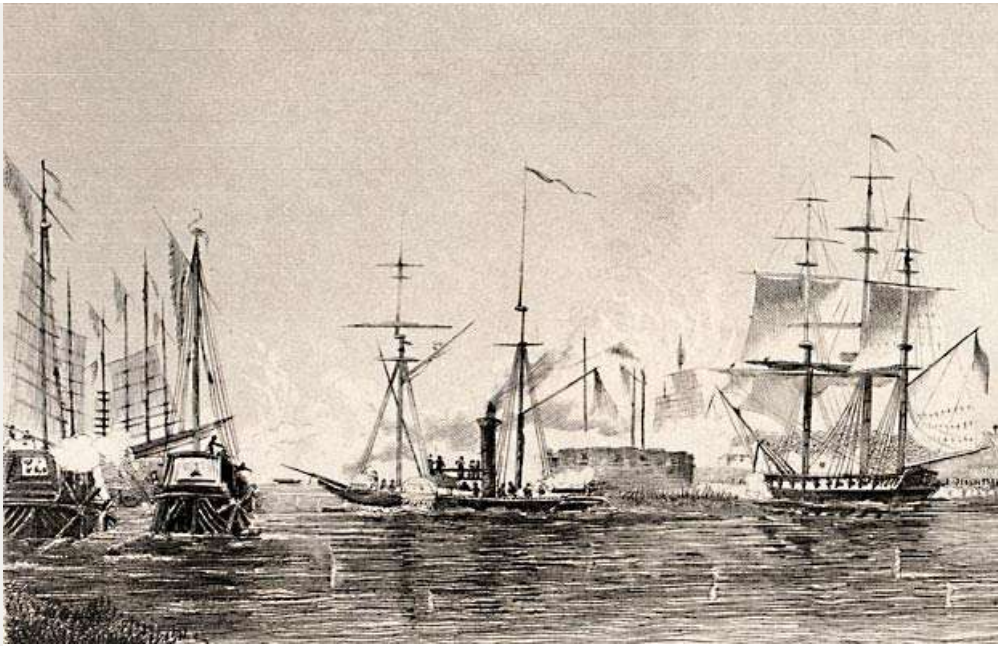


*"Close of the Attack on  
Shapoo—the Suburbs on Fire,"  
May 1842*

*Thomas Allom's depiction of the  
naval bombardment of Chapu  
reduces the burning suburbs to a  
remote and almost abstract  
detail, while focusing on the  
rescue of unidentified men in the  
harbor waters.*

Beinecke Library, Yale University  
[Allom\_1842\_Shapoo\_Yale]

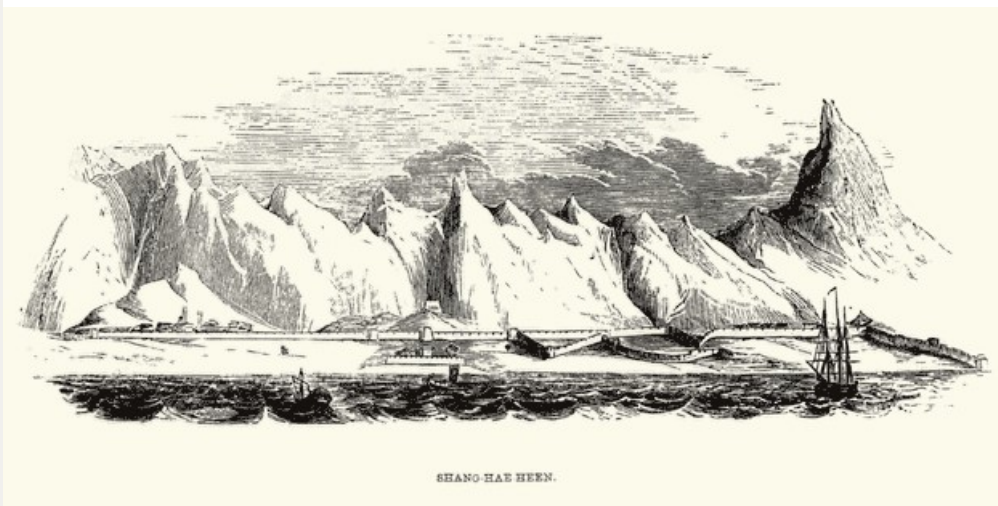
One month after Chapu, the British expedition attacked Woosong on the mouth of the Hwangpu River that flows through Shanghai (on June 16), and Shanghai itself three days later. Part of the advance on Shanghai was done on land, with British forces picking up coolie labor along the way. At that time, Shanghai was still a small town—nothing like the major metropolis it became by the end of the 19th century. As usually happened, looting by native residents broke out in Woosong and Shanghai soon after the British had wreaked their destruction.



*“Battle of Woosung”*

*From an Original Drawing by Capt. Watson, R.N.C.B., published in 1845*

Beinecke Library, Yale University  
[Woosung\_3457-003\_yale]



*“Shang-Hae-Heen”*

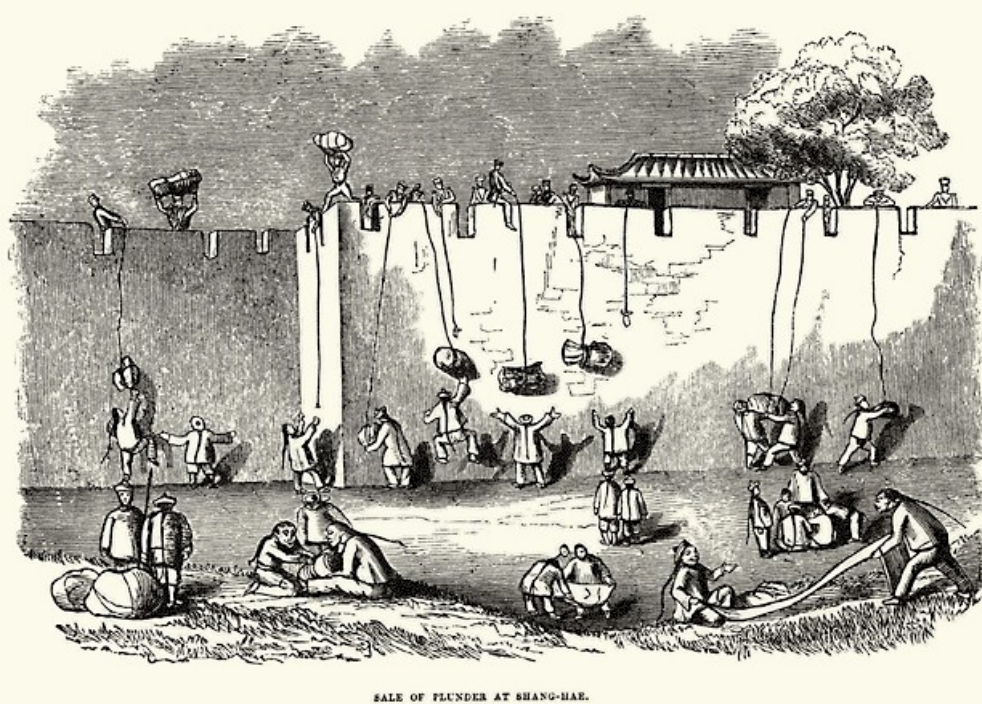
*Ouchterlony’s distinctive rendering of Shanghai in 1842 suggests how small and modest the town was at the time. No one could have guessed that in the decades that followed this would become a great seaport and one of China’s most cosmopolitan cities.*

*From The Chinese War (1844), p.305*

[ou\_304a\_ShangHaeHeen]



## *Pillage & Plunder*



*"Sale of Plunder at Shang-Hae"*  
from *The Chinese War* (1844), p. 318

[ou\_318a\_plunder]

*Everywhere the British forces attacked, plunder and pillage followed in their wake. Much of this was done by the foreigners. It was taken for granted that silver dollars in particular, whether found in public or private places, were legitimate victor's spoils; and on more than a few occasions the foreign invaders lit their cooking fires with precious books, beautiful textiles, and once-elegant, now-splintered furniture. In an interesting annotation to Chinese swords from the time now in the collection of England's National Maritime Museum, it is noted that "The world 'loot', from the Hindi 'lut', meaning to 'plunder' or 'take forcibly', became an accepted part of the English language during the First Opium War."*

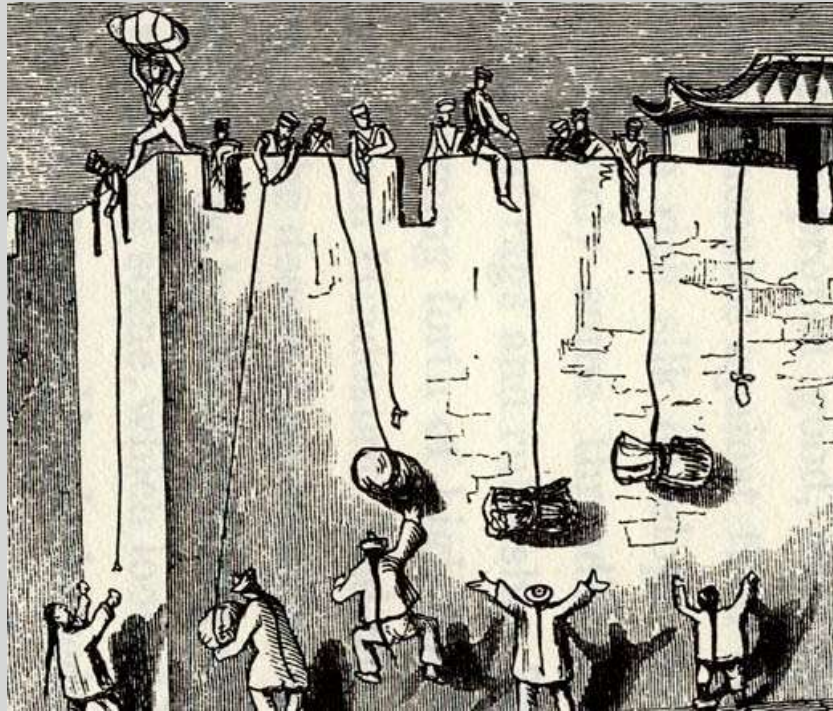
*At the same time, in almost every city the foreigners attacked, mobs of Chinese looters followed in their wake. Such lawlessness was abetted by the fact that British bombardment commonly led urban residents to flee their homes, leaving their abandoned possessions ripe for the picking.*

*Shanghai was not untypical in this regard. After the opening British cannonade, in Lieutenant Oucherlony's words, "on pushing forward, the place was found evacuated, and the column marched in without molestation. ...Quarters were assigned to the troops, and measures were promptly taken to suppress pillage, but the lower orders of Chinese, the most desperate class of men perhaps existing when excited by the prospect of plunder, swarmed over the place,*



*which had evidently been already for some time in their possession, as many of the principal habitations were found broken open, and thoroughly gutted; and it was with the utmost difficulty, and by having the streets continually patrolled in all directions by strong parties, that the town was preserved from utter ruin by fire and mob violence.”*

*As Ouchterlony’s “Sale of Plunder” graphic reveals, however, the plunder of Shanghai eventually morphed into a bizarre sort of binational and multiethnic collaboration. On close examination, the figures atop the wall lowering loot to Chinese below are clearly foreigners, and the text that surrounds the illustration paints a vivid word-picture of this raucous ad hoc “bazaar.”*



*Looters at the top dropped bundles (mostly “silk cloaks and petticoats”) just low enough for bargaining to take place. If a deal was struck, money—usually silver dollars—would flow up while the merchandise descended to ground. “The laughter and the screaming forth of high and low Chinese, of English and Hindostani, and the absurd appearance of the descending bundles of indescribables, compensated by the ascending dollars,” Ouchterlony wrote, “... looked like a fishery for men, with ropes and hooks baited with silk cloaks....”*

*Ouchterlony found this particular scene “ludicrous and amusing.” Plunder and wanton destruction in general appalled him, however; and, with the wisdom of hindsight, historians also can discern in such mayhem the seeds of chaos and civil disorder that would rock China for decades to come.*

After Shanghai, the British turned their eyes to Nanking (Nanjing), the huge former Ming dynasty capital up the Yangtze River. On July 21, Chinkiang (Zhenjiang), a large walled city at the strategic juncture of the Yangtze River and Grand Canal—150 miles from the sea and 45 miles downriver from Nanking—fell to the invaders in what turned out to be the final major battle of the war.

Close to 3,000 Manchus, Mongols, and Chinese fought stubbornly but vainly against a British force of around 7,000 men in this brief last stand by the Qing military. Much of Chinkiang was destroyed, and thousands of its fighting men and residents perished—under the assault of the foreigners; in a paroxysm of plunder and arson by Chinese mobs and marauders; and, as in Chapu two months earlier, in a frightful communal spectacle of suicide and the killing of family members.

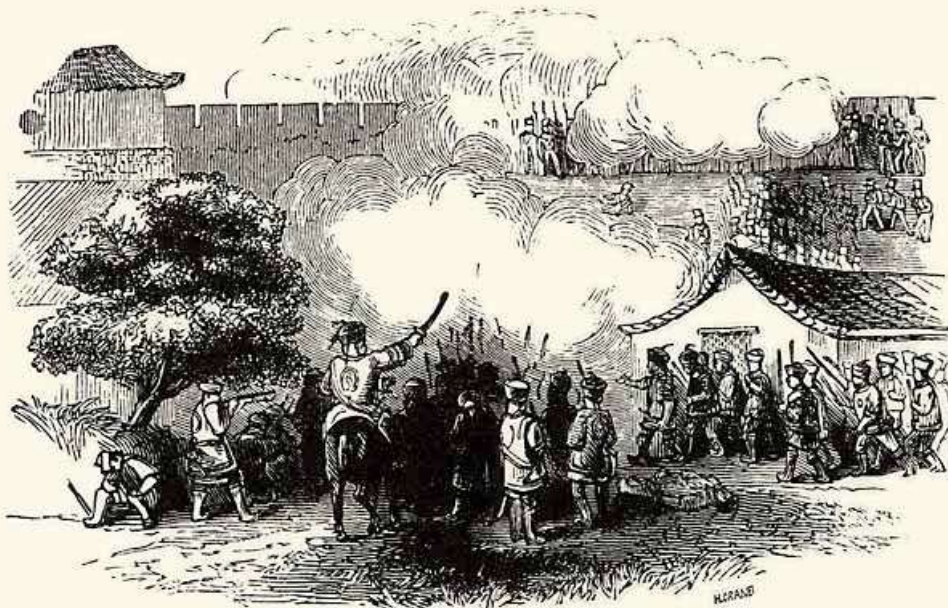


*"West Gate of Ching-Keang-Foo,  
sketched on the spot by Capt. Stoddard, R.N."*

*Thomas Allom's serene rendering of Chinkiang, the last major battle of the war—typically colorful, typically based on a sketch by a British officer, and typically published considerably after the event—also typically fails to convey the destructiveness and human costs of the battle, particularly on the city's residents.*

Anne S. K, Brown Military Collection, Brown University Library  
[1842\_GhingKeangFoo\_Brown]





RALLY OF THE TARTARS AT CHIN-KEANG-FOO.

*Ouchterlony's rendering of the battle at Chinkiang focuses on the strong Chinese resistance, but fails to convey the horrors experienced within the besieged city.*

*From The Chinese War (1844), p. 392*

[ou\_392a\_chin]

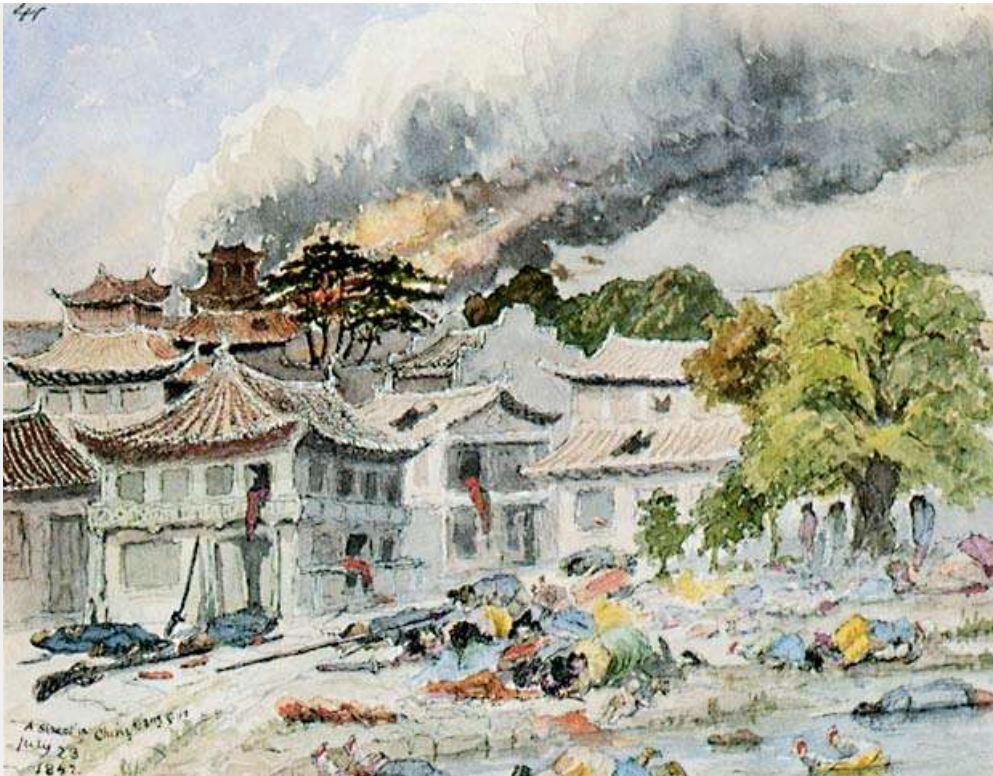


"British Troops Capture Chin-Keang-Foo"

*The Battle of Chinkiang, which took place on a scorching day in mid July, 1842, saw more British casualties than usual. The naval surgeon Edward Cree wrote in his journal that "Our loss in killed is estimated at 200, but I never knew of so many deaths from sunstroke in one day. The enemy's loss is reckoned at 2,000 out of 5,000 said to have been engaged." More official reports put the British combat casualties at 38 killed and 126 wounded. As always, the real number of dead on the Chinese side could only be guessed at.*

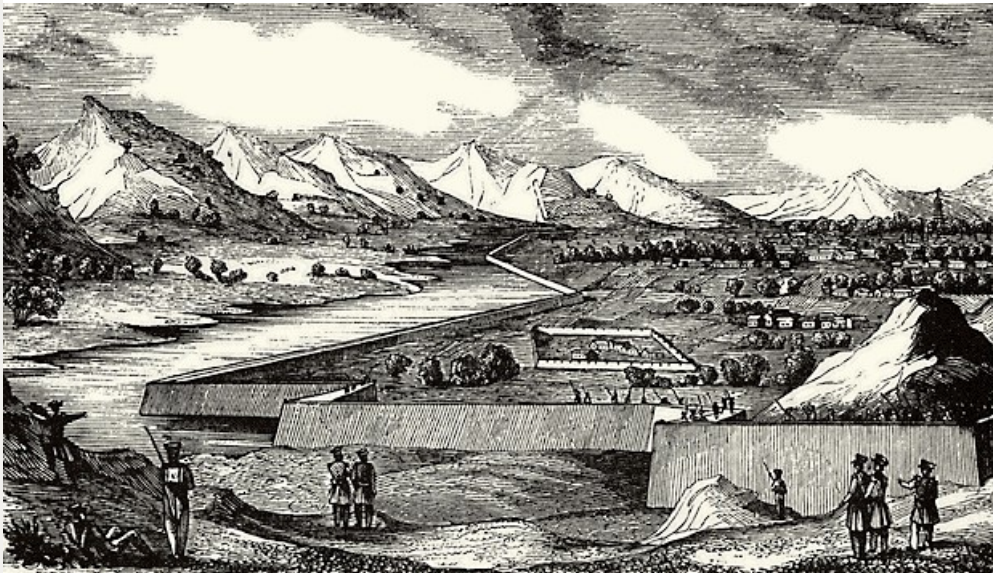
Wikimedia Commons  
[1842\_July1\_ChinKeangFoo\_wp]





*Dr. Edward Cree's unpublished eyewitness watercolor captures the horrors the victors encountered upon entering Chinkiang. Fires raged, corpses of soldiers lay in the street, and—most horrible of all—as in Chapu two months earlier, bannermen had killed themselves and their families en masse rather than face the rape, plunder, and disgrace of surrender.*

National Maritime Museum  
[cree\_104\_Chinkiangfoo\_dead]



*"Nanking from the South-East"*

*Once the British forces had established themselves outside the walls of Nanking, Qing officials finally acknowledged that they had no choice but to give in to such irresistible gunboat diplomacy.*

*From The Chinese War (1844), p. 453*

[ou\_452a\_Nanking]

With the fall of Chinkiang, the way to Nanking now lay open. By early August, the British forces were within firing range of the celebrated walls of the great city, and Qing officials finally realized the foreigners were in position to cut off all vital commerce between south China and the north. The Yangtze region was "like a throat, at which the whole situation of the country is determined," Yilibu, the viceroy of Nanking, observed. The enemy, he went on, had already cut off the transportation of salt and grain, and impeded the movement of merchants and travelers. "That is not a disease like the ringworm," he continued, carried away by his anatomical metaphors, "but a trouble in our heart and stomach."

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# The First Opium War

## The Anglo-Chinese War of 1839-1842

Essay by Peter C. Perdue

Opium  
Trade

Production &  
Consumption

Hostilities

1st Unequal  
Treaty

War Stories

Sources  
& Credits

### THE FIRST UNEQUAL TREATY

Under the Treaty of Nanking, signed on August 29, 1842, China agreed to open the five ports requested (Canton, Amoy, Foochow, Ningpo, and Shanghai), pay an indemnity of 20 million silver dollars, abolish the Cohong monopoly that hitherto had controlled trade in and through Canton, and adhere to a fixed schedule of customs duties. Additionally, the British were granted the right to occupy Hong Kong in perpetuity; this was their sole outright territorial acquisition.

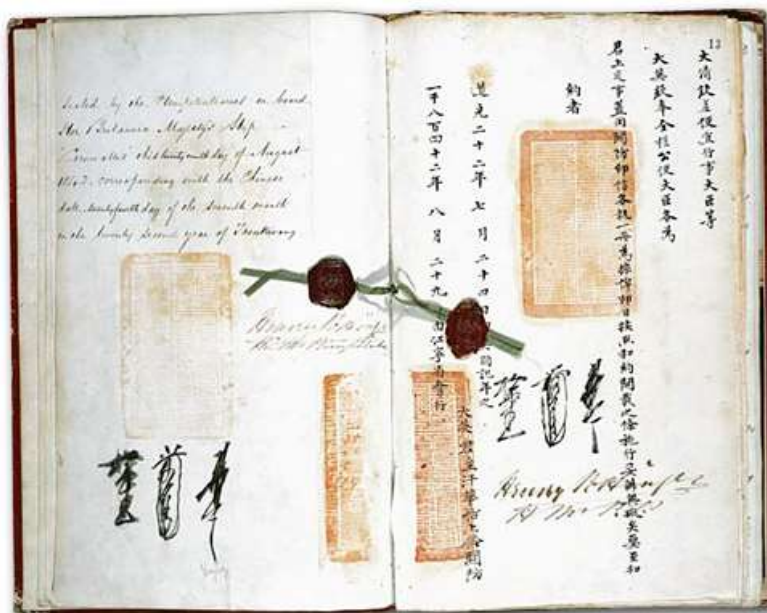


*"The Signing and Sealing of the Treaty of Nanking in the  
State Cabin of H. M. S. Cornwallis, 29th August, 1842" (detail)  
Painted by Capt. John Platt*

*This famous 1846 engraving commemorates the signing of the first of the unequal  
treaties in August 1842. In the West, this was widely heralded as a triumph of  
commerce, international law, and "civilization."*

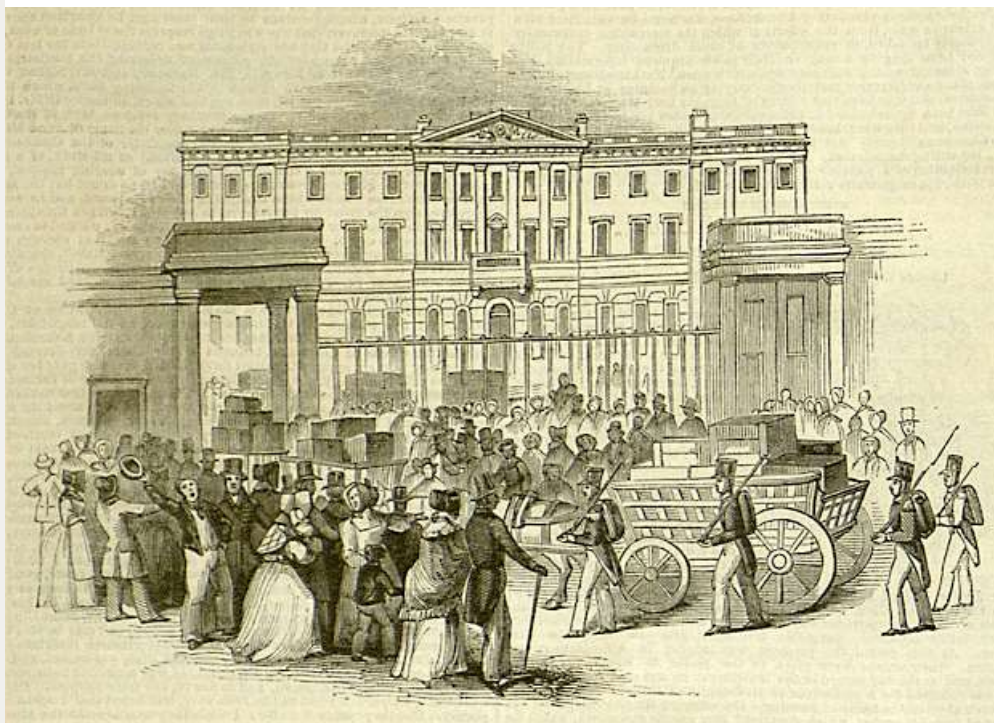
Anne S. K. Brown Military Collection, Brown University Library  
[1846\_TreatyNanking\_Brown]





*Bilingual pages in the Treaty of Nanking*

Anne S. K. Brown Military Collection, Brown University Library  
[1842\_TreatyNanking]



*"Chinese Tribute Money Entering the Mint"*  
Illustrated London News, November 12, 1842

*Among other costly and humiliating conditions inflicted on the losing side in the first Opium War, the Chinese were forced to pay a huge indemnity of 20 million silver dollars to the victors. 12 million of this sum was for covering British war costs; three million was for covering debts to English merchants; and five million was compensation for the opium stocks Commissioner Lin had destroyed in 1839.*

[iln\_1842\_174\_tribute\_012\_c]



In 1843, the London publication Saturday Magazine ran a series of feature articles on the treaty ports opened under the Treaty of Nanking, plus England's one outright territorial acquisition Hong Kong. From left to right, top to bottom, the graphics feature Amoy, Foochow, Shanghai, Hong Kong, Canton, and Whampoa (at Canton). The Ningpo treaty port is not shown.

g\_3467-001\_Amoy g\_3467-003\_FooChooFoo g\_3467-007\_Shanghai  
g\_3467-009\_Canton g\_3467-011\_HongKong g\_3467-013\_Whampoa

During the 19th century the treaty ports became the largest commercial centers in China, with Shanghai and Hong Kong leading the way. At the time the Treaty of Nanking was concluded, however, the acquisition of Hong Kong disappointed many British commentators. One of them, Julia Corner, wrote:

*A fatal and most costly mistake was made by those who managed the war and the treaty, in retaining the wretched, pestiferous island of Hong Kong, and giving up the beautiful and salubrious island of Cimsan [Chusan].... Hong Kong... is an unproductive, mountainous, lumpish isle... separated from the mainland of China only by a very narrow strait.... This proximity allows the pirates and other plunderers of the main to cross over to the isle by night, and there commit their depredations and atrocities.... The mortality of our troops has been as one in three and a half. The diseases are endemic fevers, diarrhea, dysentery, and pulmonic complaints.... The population [of Canton] is perverse, presumptuous, turbulent, and altogether the most indocile and the worst people in China.*

From these unpromising beginnings, Hong Kong rose to become the dominant commercial city in China.



Despite such minor complaints, the first Opium War was widely regarded in England as a great triumph, both for the nation and for Western notions of commercial and technological progress more generally. A good sense of this is conveyed in the gold medal the government struck commemorating “The Triumph of the British Arms, 1842.” A profile of Queen Victoria, her hair decorated with roses and other flowers, graces the front of the medal. The reverse side is given to celebration. Here the detailed relief depicts four British officers, one holding the Royal Standard, facing four mandarin officials. The two representatives in the center of the scene hold a scroll of the treaty between them. The figure of Peace looks down upon them while the angel of Victory flies above, blowing a trumpet. A pagoda stands behind the Chinese officials, symbolic of traditional China. Visible behind England’s military representatives is a ship with furled sails.



*“The Triumph of the British Arms, 1842”*

*The British government struck this commemorative gold medal in celebration of the conclusion of the first Opium War. The profile on the front of the medal is Queen Victoria.*

National Maritime Museum  
[1842\_MEC1104\_nmm]

In 1844, the United States and France rode on England’s triumph to negotiate their own treaties with the Qing government, effectively internationalizing and consolidating the basis of what became known as the “unequal treaty” system. These treaties, together with England’s, began the inexorable process of pressuring China to allow foreigners, including missionaries, traders, doctors, and travelers, to move into the interior.

Three treaty provisions in particular constituted the core of this inequitable system: “extraterritoriality” (exemption of the foreigners from Chinese law); “most favored nation” privileges (guaranteeing each nation the same rights other foreigners might be able to extract in the future); and the legal basis for imposing what turned out to be a generally low “fixed tariff” on China (which prevented China from protecting native industries that might become threatened by foreign imports).

There were, of course, no commemorative medals or official celebrations on the Chinese side. On the contrary, in the words of historian Immanuel C. Y. Hsü, the Opium War and Treaty of Nanking “introduced a century of humiliation for the Chinese people.”



The war and the 1842 treaty that ended it also, as it turned out, left unresolved the fundamental issue that had triggered hostilities in the first place. Apart from stipulating that of the huge indemnity China agreed to pay, one part (six million silver dollars) was compensation for the opium Commissioner Lin had destroyed, the opium trade itself went unmentioned.

It did not go away. In 1856, fourteen years after the Treaty of Nanking, China and England (together with France) embarked on a second Opium War.

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# The First Opium War

## The Anglo-Chinese War of 1839-1842

Essay by Peter C. Perdue

Opium  
Trade

Production &  
Consumption

Hostilities

1st Unequal  
Treaty

War Stories

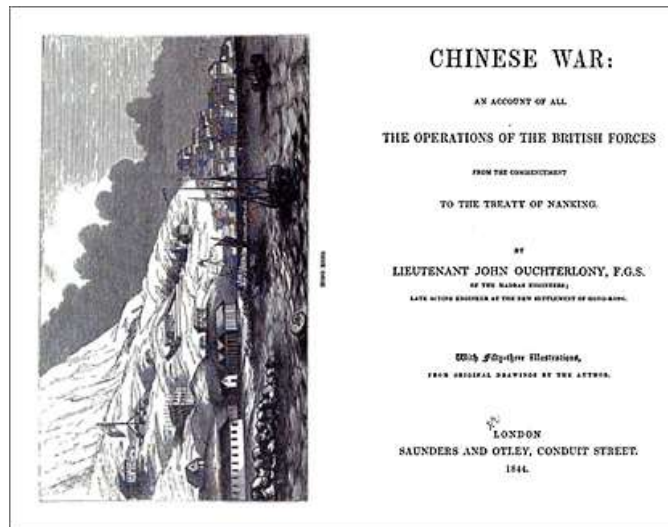
Sources  
& Credits

### WAR STORIES

The following first-hand—or close to first-hand—accounts of the first Opium War appeared during or immediately after the war and are, with a few exceptions, available online:

#### John Ouchterlony

*The Chinese War: an Account of all the Operations of the British Forces from the Commencement to the Treaty of Nanking* (Saunders and Otley, London, 1844).



*This is perhaps the single most interesting first-hand account available online, enhanced by inclusion of 53 woodcut illustrations—many of which have been reproduced in this Visualizing Cultures unit.*

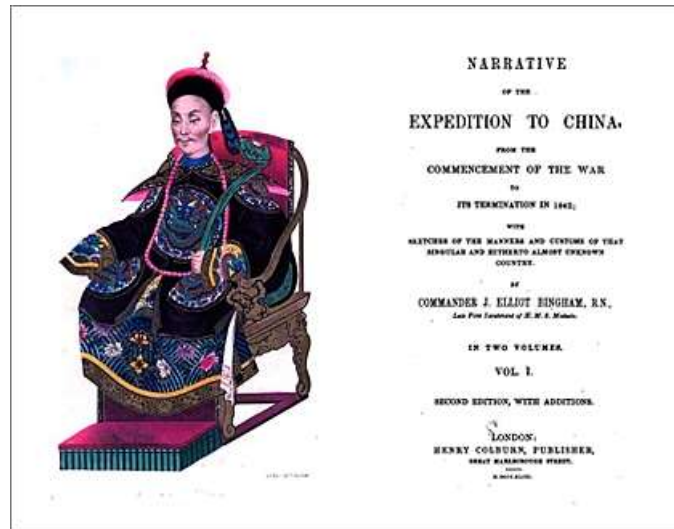
#### Keith Stewart Mackenzie

*Narrative of the Second Campaign in China* (Richard Bentley, London, 1842)



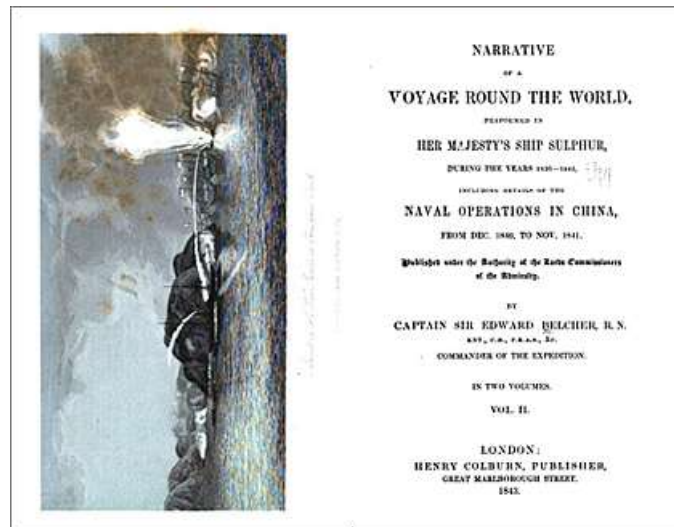
### John Elliot Bingham

*Narrative of the Expedition to China, from the Commencement of the War to its Termination in 1842, with Sketches of the Manners and Customs of that Singular and Hitherto Almost Unknown Country* (Henry Colburn, London, 1843)



### Edward Belcher

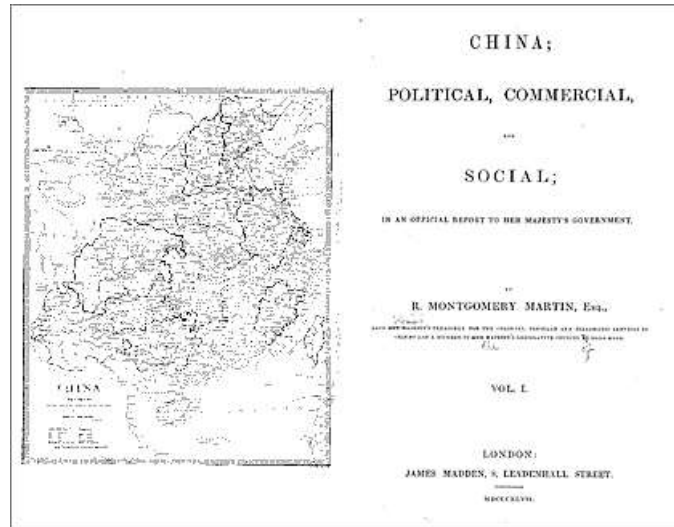
*Narrative of a Voyage Round the World, Performed in Her Majesty's Ship Sulphur, During the Years 1830-1841, Including Details of the Naval Operations in China, from Dec. 1840, to Nov. 1841, vol. II* (Henry Colburn, London, 1843)





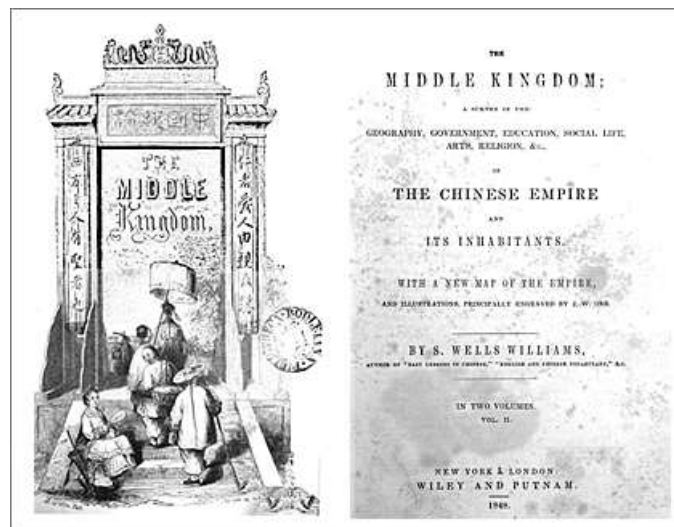
**Robert Montgomery Martin**

*China; Political, Commercial, and Social; in an official Report to Her Majesty's Government, 2 vol. (James Madden, London, 1847)*



**Samuel Wells Williams**

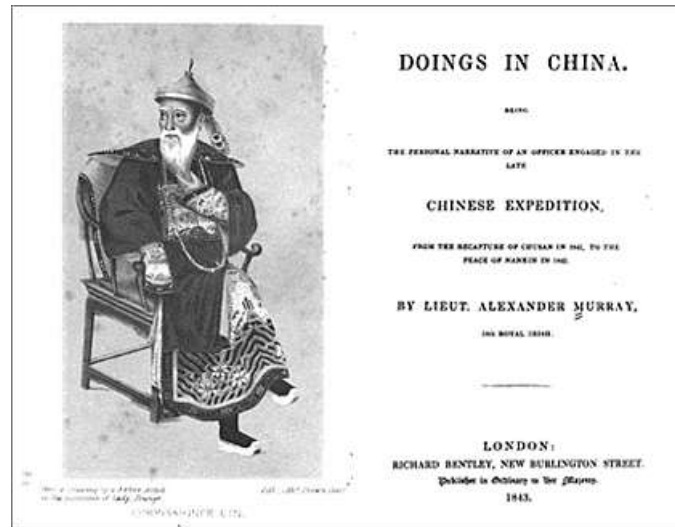
*The Middle Kingdom: A Survey of the Geography, Government, Education, Social Life, Arts, Religion, &c. of the Chinese Empire and Its Inhabitants, 2 vol. (Wiley & Putnam, 1848). See chapters 22 and 23 in volume 2 (pp. 468-604) on the first Opium War.*



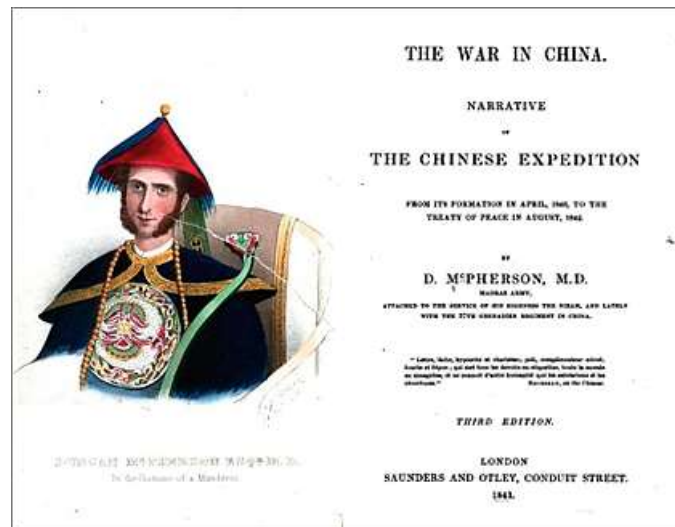
*Williams, a missionary who went to China in 1833 and became adept in the language, was not in China when the war took place but was nonetheless very knowledgeable about it. This first edition of his voluminous text was published just six years after the Treaty of Nanking.*

**Alexander Murray**

*Doings in China, being the Personal Narrative of an Officer Engaged in the Late Chinese Expedition, from the Recapture of Chusan in 1841, to the Peace of Nankin in 1842*  
(Richard Bentley, London, 1843)

**Duncan McPherson, M.D.**

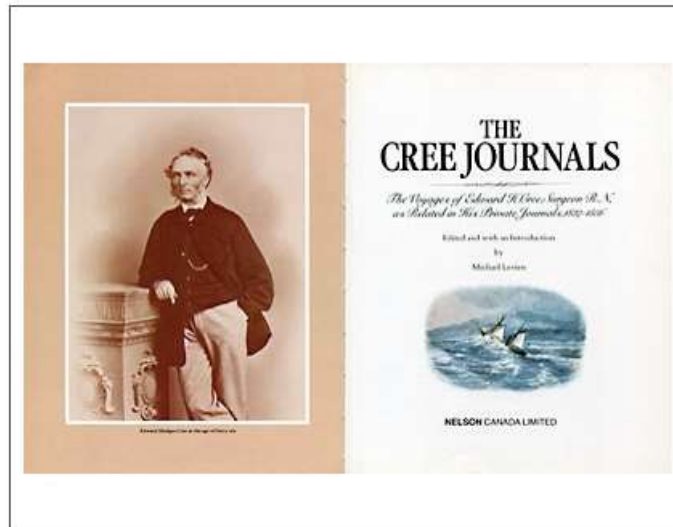
*The War in China. Narrative of the Chinese Expedition from its Formation in April, 1840, to the Treaty of Peace in August, 1842, 3rd edition* (Saunders and Otley, London, 1843)  
M.D., Madras Army



*The first edition of this book, also accessible online, was published in 1842 under the title Two Years in China.*

### Edward Hodges Cree

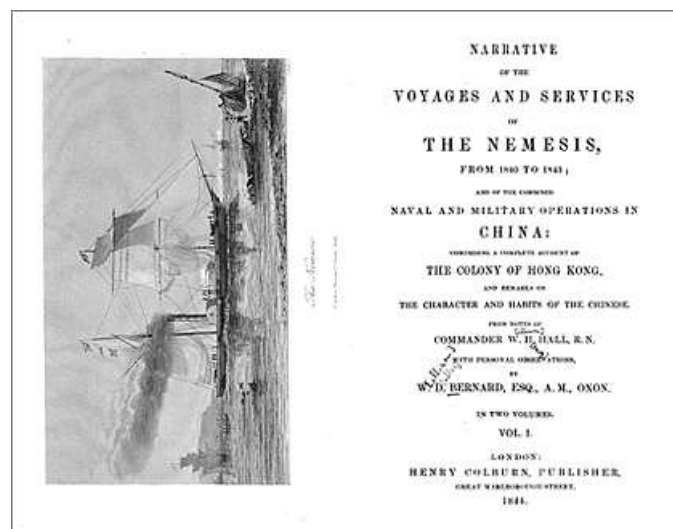
*The Cree Journals: The Voyages of Edward H. Cree, Surgeon R.N., as Related in His Private Journals, 1837-1856*, edited and with an Introduction by Michael Levien (Nelson Canada Limited, 1981).



*This publication was reissued in 1982 under the main title Naval Surgeon, and is not accessible in full online. The hard copy includes extensive color reproductions of Cree's watercolor sketches.*

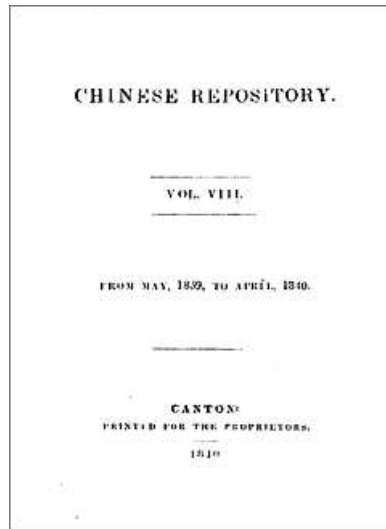
### William Dallas Bernard, Sir William Hutcheson Hall

*Narrative of the Voyages and Services of The Nemesis, from 1840 to 1843...from the notes of Commander W.H. Hall, R.N. with Personal Observations by W.D. Bernard, in Two Volumes* (Henry Colburn, London, 1844).





***The Chinese Repository, Volume VIII, from May, 1839 to April 1840***  
(Canton, Printed for the Proprietors, 1840) (one volume of many)



*This publication, published from 1832 through 1851, provides an intimate view of Protestant missionary perceptions of developments in China.*

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Essay by Peter C. Perdue

Opium  
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1st Unequal  
Treaty

War Stories

Sources  
& Credits

### SOURCES | CREDITS

In addition to the first-hand accounts presented under “War Stories” in this Visualizing Cultures unit, see the following basic sources.

#### Older Secondary Sources (Online)

William Laird Clowes, *The Royal Navy: A History from the Earliest Times to the Death of Queen Victoria* (Sampson Low, Marston and Company, 1901), vol. 6, pp. 279-304. ([complete view on Google Books](#))

This is a partisan, patriotic account—but very useful on the battles as they unfolded. Some of the military information in this Visualizing Cultures unit derives from this source.

Hosea Ballou Morse, *The International Relations of the Chinese Empire* (Longmans, Green, and Co., London, NY, Bombay, Calcutta, 1910), vol. 1, *The Period of Conflict, 1834-1860*, chapters 1 through 13. ([complete view on Google Books](#))

#### Recent Secondary Sources (Online)

*Korea in the Eye of the Tiger* at the Korean History Project website at <http://www.koreanhistoryproject.org/index.htm>

Chapters 17, 18, and 19 of this unannotated narrative account address the first Opium War in a readable way that may be particularly appealing to teachers and students.

Hsin-pao Chang, *Commissioner Lin and the Opium War* (Harvard University Press, 1964). ([preview](#))

W. Travis Hanes and Frank Sanello, *The Opium Wars: The Addiction of One Empire and the Corruption of Another* (Sourcebooks, Inc., 2002). ([preview](#))

Frederic E. Wakeman's often cited analysis of the Sanyuanli incident in his book *Strangers at the Gate: Social Disorder in South China, 1839-1861*. ([view](#))

Susanna Hoe, Derek Roebuck, *The Taking of Hong Kong: Charles and Clara Elliot in China Waters* (Hong Kong University Press, 1999, 2009). ([preview](#))

#### Basic Textbook & Scholarly Accounts

The following sources are not online, but provide solid textbook accounts of the first Opium War:

Immanuel C. Y. Hsü, *The Rise of Modern China* (Oxford University Press, 1970), ch. 8

Jonathan Spence, *The Search for Modern China* (Norton, 1999), pp. 147-64.

Jonathan Spence, “Opium,” *Chinese Roundabout* (Norton, 2003), pp. 228-56, 372-82.

John K. Fairbank, Edwin O. Reischauer & Albert M. Craig, *East Asia: Tradition and Transformation* (Houghton Mifflin, 1978), pp. 448-61.

The following monographs address various aspects of the first Opium War in detail:

Peter Ward Fay, *The Opium War, 1840-1842: Barbarians in the Celestial Empire* (University of North Carolina Press, 1998)

Arthur Waley, *The Opium War through Chinese Eyes* (Stanford University Press, 1963)

Jessie Gregory Lutz, *Opening China: Karl F. A. Gützlaff and Sino-Western Relations, 1827-1852* (William B. Eerdsman Publishing, 2008)

Jack Beeching, *The Chinese Opium Wars* (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, NY and London, 1975)

### **Wikipedia Sites for the First Opium War**

A number of sites on Wikipedia provide useful information about the first Opium War, along with graphics and helpful crosslinks. The topical list that follows here focuses on battles, is roughly chronological, and is not exhaustive. Wikipedia also contains entries on individuals involved in the first Opium War (Lin Zexu, Charles Elliot et al.), as well as a (very disorderly) assemblage of images accessible through the "Images" click-on or through Wikimedia.

"First Opium War"

"Battles of the First Opium War"

"Battle of Kowloon"

"Battle of Chuenpee"

"Capture of Chusan"

"Battle of the Barrier"

"Second Battle of Chuenpee"

"Convention of Chuenpee"

"Battle of the Bogue"

"Battle of First Bar"

"Battle of Whampoa"

"Battle of Canton"

"Battle of Chinkiang"

### **Links to Sources in Google Books Pertinent to Aspects of the First Opium War**

Excerpts from Blair B. Kling, "Partner in Empire: Dwarkanath Tagore and the age of enterprise in eastern India," (University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, London, 1976), esp. a description of the *Waterwitch*, 90-1. ([view](#))

Article from Abel Stevens, editor, "The National Magazine, devoted to Literature, Art, and Religion, Volume 5, July to December, 1854," (Carlton & Phillips, NY, 1854), esp. "The Opium Trade in the East," 335-41. ([view](#))

1882 publication *The Truth about Opium Smoking*, which reproduces Sherwill's Patna graphics on pages 112-17. ([view](#))

Julia Corner, *China: Pictorial, Descriptive, and Historical* (Henry G. Bohn, London, 1853), esp. "Reduction of Amoy" 251-2. ([view](#))

Excerpts from Hunt Janin, "The India-China Opium Trade in the Nineteenth Century," (McFarland & Company, Jefferson, NC, 1999) esp. "Chinese Ships: 'Centipedes' and Government War Junks," 94-5. ([view](#))

Excerpts from "Wrecks on the New South Wales Coast," Jack Kenneth Loney, (Lonestone Press, 1993 and 2001, Victoria, Australia), esp. "Ly-ee-moon," 88. ([view](#))

Karl Friedrich August Gützlaff, *A Sketch of Chinese History: Ancient and Modern* (John P. Haven, New York, 1834). ([view](#)) Alternate online version ([view](#))

Excerpts from Jessie Gregory Lutz, "Opening China: Karl F.A. Gützlaff and Sino-Western relations, 1827-1852," (Wm. B. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, Michigan/Cambridge, U.K., 2008), esp: "Gützlaff's Coastal Journeys: Opium Ships," "Gützlaff and the Prosecution of the Opium War, 1840-1842." ([view](#))



"The Chinese Emperor, Mien-Ning," *The Illustrated Magazine of Art*, vol. 1 (New York, 1853), 271-72. ([view](#))

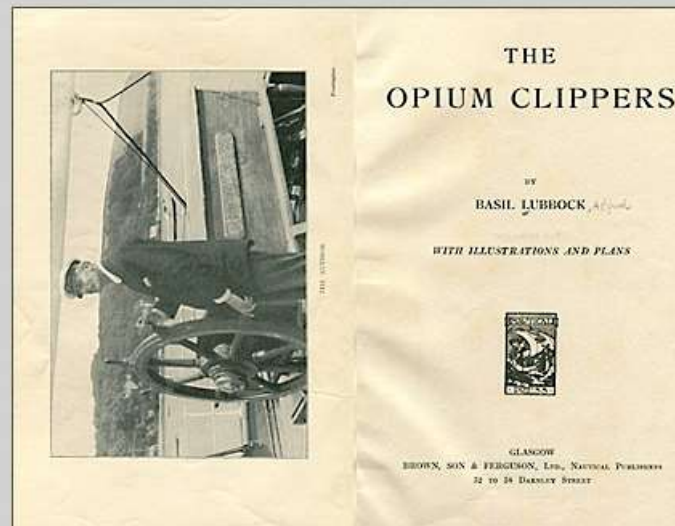
Excerpts from James M. Polachek, *The Inner Opium War* (Council on East Asian Studies, Harvard, 1992), esp. "Lin Tse-Hsu and the Anti-Opium Campaign," 141. ([view](#))

Yangwen Zheng, *The Social Life of Opium in China*, (Cambridge University Press, 2005), esp. map: "The Opium Trade in China, 1833-1839," 71. ([view](#))

Ssu-yu Teng & John K. Fairbank, *China's Response to the West* (Harvard College, 1954, 1979, 1982), esp. "Commissioner Lin's Program for Meeting the British Aggression." ([view](#))

A discussion of the parliamentary debates in W. Travis Hanes and Frank Sanello, *The Opium Wars: The Addiction of One Empire and the Corruption of Another* (Sourcebooks, Napier, IL, 1992). ([view](#))

*Click to view a Register of the Opium Fleet, 1823 - 1860  
from Basil Lubbock, The Opium Clippers (Brown, Son & Ferguson,  
Glasgow, 1933)*



## CREDITS

"The First Opium War" was developed by  
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