



'Take Away Your Opium and Your Missionaries': The Opium Wars (1839–60) and the Chinese National Psyche

This article explores a turbulent period of history that is emotionally very important for the Chinese. The two Opium Wars of the nineteenth century battered the Chinese national psyche and tainted its view of the West and of Christianity.



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'Take away your opium, and your missionaries, and you will be welcome' (*Chinese Prince Kung to Sir Rutherford Alcock, British Minister in Beijing*)

'A war more unjust in its origin, a war more calculated ... to cover this country in permanent disgrace, I do not know, and I have not read of' (*William Gladstone*)¹

Thomas Twining opened Britain's first tearoom in London in 1706. While the shop on London's Strand remained small over the centuries, British thirst for tea did not. China exported 92,000 pounds of tea in 1700, 2.7 million pounds in 1751 and 23 million pounds in 1800.² British demand for tea dwarfed Chinese demand for British goods so a balance-of-payment problem developed. Beijing required that exports be paid in silver; the British tea tab escalated to 3.6 million pounds of silver each year. Looking for a trading alternative to support the expensive demand for Chinese products, the British East India Company (BEIC) found something Chinese consumers wanted: opium. War ensued between two proud kingdoms – the Opium Wars of 1839–42 and 1856–60. Great Britain humiliated China then forced the Qing rulers to sign 'Unequal Treaties' that were just that. These treaties unlocked Beijing's shackles on foreigners, known as the Canton-system. Western missionaries – complicit in the events encompassing these wars, as we will see – began entering China in unprecedented numbers. The events of 1839–1860 battered the Chinese national psyche, tainting its view of the West and of Christianity. To understand China and its church today we must explore this knotty connection between Christian missions and Western imperialism, which is rooted in this turbulent period.

The BEIC began planting the opium poppy in India in 1757. Opium would be processed and packed into chests containing 140 pounds of opium then exported to China. Opium exports grew from 1,000 chests in 1773, 4,054 in 1790, 7,082 in 1823, to 23,570 in 1832.³ During the 1830s new vessels with narrow decks, big-sails and multiple-masts began transporting goods around the world faster than ever before. The clippers, such as the beautifully dry-docked *Cutty Sark* in Greenwich, often did double duty: serving as tea clippers between Guangzhou (Canton) and London, and opium clippers between Calcutta and Guangzhou. By 1840 the British were shipping 40,000 opium chests to China each year. (For comparison, from 1800 to 1839 American traders shipped 10,000 chests.) The booming opium trade left the Qing rulers in a quandary.

While moderate opium-use had undoubted medical benefits, excessive opium-use had devastating social costs. During this era Britain itself was no stranger to the medicinal use of opium. In the 1660s the English physician Thomas Sydenham experimented with opium and produced a medicine he lauded in its very title. Physicians prescribed laudanum for many ailments. It eased pain, suppressed coughs, induced sleep and even reduced anxiety. A bottle of the reddish-brown medicine could be found in homes throughout nineteenth-century Britain, where it was sold without a prescription. In a time when there was little escape from the pain of diarrhea, dysentery and other common illnesses, the opium poppy offered relief. However, as Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Mary Todd Lincoln could testify, the drug was addictive.

In China, where it was smoked, opium-use swept the nation like wildfire. Early in the eighteenth century, the practice of smoking a mixture of tobacco and opium entered China. Frank Dikötter challenges the historiography of opium as an irresistible drug plunging all of China into a smoky din of hopeless addiction.⁴ He describes the widespread, but moderate, use of opium as a marker of social status, as an ideal social lubricant and as a medical panacea. Smoking opium – to relieve digestive problems, ease the boredom of a job in the Qing bureaucracy, show off one's social status or deal with stress – grew in popularity. As the trade grew and prices dropped, opium became a common part of Chinese society and more people, from eunuchs to peasants, became addicted. In the 1830s up to 30 per cent of local officials used opium. By 1840, 10 million Chinese smoked opium; two million were addicts. Qing officials knew something needed to be done. But what?

The opium trade divided the Qing court. Emperor Yongzheng (1722–35) tried to limit opium use in 1729, to little effect. The first edict against consuming opium came eight decades later. In 1813, the *Decree on Punishing Officials, Soldiers, and Civilians who Smoke Opium* threatened users with 100 lashes with a bamboo cane and banned the domestic cultivation of opium. Western merchants began anchoring off China's coast and selling their cargo to Chinese smugglers. The illicit opium trade grew, making many people very rich but providing no tax revenue. Some Qing officials argued for legalisation and taxation. But others fretted over the economic and social costs. They pushed for an absolute ban with stricter prohibitions against Chinese consumers and foreign traders. By 1838, 1,400 tons of opium were pouring into China annually. The emperor sided with those opposed to the opium trade. He sent Lin Zexu, an upright official who detested the opium trade, to Guangzhou in 1839. Lin's remit was unambiguous: end the opium trade. The Qing court issued the death penalty for anyone caught trafficking opium. Now, foreigners who smuggled the drug could be decapitated. The ingredients were mixed for an explosion: British thirst for tea and Chinese addiction to opium, London's desire to access the Chinese market and Beijing's unwillingness to allow it, and the prejudices, arrogance and ethno-centrism of the agents therein. And explode they did.

In March 1839 Commissioner Lin ordered the British to surrender their opium stock. To make his intentions crystal clear he destroyed the 21,306 chests of opium in a public spectacle. He then arrested 2,200 Chinese merchants involved in the trade, detained 350 foreigners and ceased all opium trading. He even wrote a letter to the new monarch of the UK, 19-year-old Queen Victoria, complaining of the poison of opium: 'month by month, and year by year, the volume of the poison increases, its unclean stench ascends upwards, until heaven itself grows angry.' Lin's letter, later published in *The Chinese Repository* in 1840, asked the Queen to end the evil trade. The Queen never received the letter. But the seizure and destruction of three million pounds of opium got the attention of the British Parliament. Some politicians demanded retaliation to the Chinese attack

on free trade. After all, the hawks argued, the merchants were simply satisfying a Chinese demand. Others sided with the Chinese: British involvement in the immoral opium trade needed to cease. On 3 November 1839 two British frigates attacked the 29 Chinese junks that blockaded Canton Bay. Three months later the British authorities in India declared war against China. Rear Admiral Sir George Elliot arrived in June 1840 with a fleet of 48 ships and a force of 4,000 men.

With cutting-edge military technology, such as the steamship *Nemesis*, Britain's force of arms crushed the Qing response. Chinese casualties were high; British, low. The foreign invaders ventured further up the coast, eventually sailing up the Yangtze River and seizing tax barges. Humiliated, Chinese leaders cried for peace. Great Britain imposed a treaty in 1842 that forever changed Qing relations with foreign powers. In China's long history the Emperor had dictated terms to all outsiders wanting to live in or trade with his kingdom. But no more. The Treaty of Nanjing ended the Canton System, which had prevented foreigners from learning Chinese and limited them to one Chinese port since 1756. Now Britain could trade in other port cities, like Shanghai, and tariffs were set at low rates. China agreed to compensate for the destroyed narcotics and opened the door for more opium trade. And if that were not enough: China ceded Hong Kong to Britain and granted immunity (extraterritorial rights) to British citizens in China. The First Opium War (1839–42) battered Chinese attitudes to the West; the Second Opium War (1856–60) thrashed the national psyche even further. The Second Opium Wars culminated in the summer of 1860 with the total humiliation of China. An Anglo-French force took Tianjin and marched to Beijing. The emperor fled the capital as Lord Elgin's troops looted and destroyed the Summer Palaces. Like the unequal treaties before and after it, the ensuing Treaty of Tianjin provided Western nations with huge benefits and no obligations. The treaties crippled China but gave missionaries access to China: revoking the ban on Christianity and allowing missionaries to build homes, churches, schools and hospitals in China.

The opium trade conflicted the missionary community. They disliked the drug on moral grounds: the trade was illegal and consumption damaged the Chinese people physically and socially. Yet they wanted to preach the gospel anywhere and everywhere in the Chinese empire. The unequal treaties gave missionaries the access to China much prayed for. In the first decades of the nineteenth century, a small number of European Protestant missionaries dared venture to China. From 1807–39, fifty missionaries were assigned to China and only a few stayed for any length of time. The trickle of missionaries became a downpour in the last half of the nineteenth century: by 1905 there were 3,500 Western missionaries in China, up from 100 in 1860. The Unequal Treaties had pried China open. Few missionaries protested their means of access into China: lopsided wars and unfair treaties stemming from an addictive narcotic illegally smuggled into China. Daniel H Bays notes: 'It is striking how natural it was for missionaries to enlist themselves in a project that essentially put China

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1. Cited in J Beeching, *The Chinese Opium Wars* (London: Hutchinson & Co., 1975), pp. 295 and 110.
2. For a thorough yet brief account of the First Opium War see PC Perdue, 'The First Opium War: The Anglo-Chinese War of 1839–1842' MIT OpenCourseWare http://ocw.mit.edu/ans7870/21f/21f/opium_wars/ow1_essay.pdf
3. JD Spence, *The Search for Modern China* (London: Hutchinson, 1990), p. 129.
4. F Dikötter, L Laaman and Xun Zhou, *Narcotic Culture: A History of Drugs in China* (London: Hurst, 2004).
5. DH Bays, *A New History of Christianity in China* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), p. 59. Bays' recent book provides an accessible yet broad history of Christianity in China.
6. J Beeching, *The Chinese Opium Wars* (London: Hutchinson, 1975), p. 61.

permanently in a handicapped position of inequality, unable to pursue her own national goals.⁵ Missionaries not only benefitted from the opium wars; at times, they assisted in the gunboat diplomacy.

Western nations turned, naturally, to those fluent in Chinese to help as translators on the treaties: the missionaries. Robert Morrison of the London Missionary Society arrived in Macau in 1807. Morrison had studied Chinese for two years with a Chinese tutor in London. Upon arrival, he set to work compiling a Chinese–English dictionary and translating the Bible into Chinese. The BEIC eventually hired him as their official translator. In turn, the BEIC provided Morrison with a means of income and legal residence in China. Morrison died in 1834 and was succeeded by the German missionary Karl Gützlaff. In 1832 William Jardine asked the enterprising – and controversial – missionary to serve as a translator on the clipper *Sylph*. Jardine made it clear that ‘our principle reliance is on opium ... by many considered an immoral traffic’.⁶ Gützlaff confessed to being personally conflicted but, with the prospect of generous funding, he boarded the ship anyway. He went on to work as a translator and civil magistrate throughout south China. In 1842 he served as the chief interpreter of the Treaty of Nanjing. He even used the opium clippers to distribute Christian tracts. Other missionaries relied on the opium merchants for transport, communication and money trading. One of the first American missionaries to China, the physician Peter Parker, served as the Chinese interpreter to the American delegate at the Treaty of Wangxia, the first Sino-American Unequal Treaty, in 1844. Missionaries might have hated opium and its effects in China but they saw the hand of God opening China. Christian missionaries are rightfully implicated in the imperialising and humiliating Opium Wars. But how do the Opium Wars affect China’s view of Christianity today?

A visit to the National Museum of China on Tiananmen Square in Beijing answers that question. The redemptive narrative of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) makes the Opium Wars the original sin in modern Chinese history and Mao Zedong, China’s Saviour. The Christian West, especially Britain, humiliated and exploited the great Chinese empire. For a century China wallowed in the mire of imperialism until the Chinese Communist Party delivered her. In CCP historiography the Opium Wars are taken as a case in point proving Lenin’s observation about ‘The Development of Capitalism in Russia’ (1899): ‘The capitalist system cannot exist and develop without constantly extending its sphere of domination, without colonizing new countries and without drawing ancient, non-capitalist countries into the whirlpool of world economy.’ The events of 1839–60 provide CCP narrators with plenty of historical ammunition for propaganda against imperialism, against capitalism and against Christianity. Western nations and the Christian missionary movement have much to repent of regarding the Opium Wars and subsequent treaties.

But all the nation’s afflictions from 1850 onward cannot be attributed to the unequal treaties. The museum emphasises the Opium Wars’ role in collapsing China’s

last imperial dynasty but not the reality of an ineffective and corrupt Qing bureaucracy. (Nor does the museum explain that Chiang Kai Shek ended the privilege of extraterritorial rights in 1943, not Chairman Mao in 1949.) The museum does not mention the shame many missionaries felt for the evil that their countries perpetrated on China nor the role medical missionaries played in gathering data on opium use. As Kathleen Lodwick has demonstrated, missionaries to China led the campaign to stop the opium trade and condemned the British government’s role in the traffic.⁷ Some historians believe that post-imperial guilt causes us to exaggerate the Western responsibility for China’s woes. Perhaps there is some truth to this concern. However, the painful Chinese narrative on the Opium Wars is often correct. In 1990 a group of academics at the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences studied religion in China from a Marxist perspective. Looking back on the eighteenth century when imperial powers ‘made use of religion to invade China’, they conclude that ‘missionaries served colonialism, and the forces of colonialism supported the missionary work with their armed might’.⁸ Christians in England cannot wiggle away from the claim that missionaries – knowingly and unknowingly – served colonialism. Given this history, one might expect Christianity to wither and die in communist China.

The Chinese church tiptoed across a narrow bridge over annihilation throughout the Mao era: from the Resist-America-Aid-Korea Campaign (1951–52) to the Cultural Revolution (1966–76). In the 1970s some commentators declared the Chinese church dead. Yet today there are at least seventy million Christians in China, accounting for 5 per cent of the population. In the communist era, more Chinese have become Christians than in all the missionary eras combined. Perhaps Tertullian’s oft-quoted phrase from *Apologeticus* – ‘the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church’ – applies equally in twentieth-century China as it did in second-century Rome. Christianity’s painful years under Mao sent the church underground. Christianity thrives throughout China today: most especially in these unregistered house churches but also in registered churches, which are part of the Three-Self Patriotic Movement. As Chinese Christians sit on pews and sofas to worship God, what do they make of the Opium Wars? I asked a young Christian leader in China. He said that Christians of his generation do not relate the wars with Christianity. To the CCP and the National Museum, the Opium Wars primarily demonstrate the oppression of the West. Yet, from my friend’s perspective, the wars equally demonstrate the poverty and weakness of Qing China. China today is too busy getting rich to worry about the past.

The Opium Wars should remind Christians in the West and the East that expedience turns a blind eye to justice. After all, why bother doing what is right when it is costly? The love of money is, as Paul told Timothy, the root of all sorts of evil: not just personal evil, but national evil as well. When a nation idolises its economy, it tends to wander from true faith and pierce itself and others with many sorrows. Inexpensive tea – or petrol, chocolate or computers – has a high price somewhere.

7. KL Lodwick, *Crusaders Against Opium: Protestant Missionaries in China, 1874–1917* (Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 1996), ch 2.

8. Luo Zhufeng (ed), *Religion Under Socialism in China* (trans DE MacInnis and Zheng Xi’an; London: ME Sharpe, 1991), p. 42.