

The Chinese Opium Wars

by

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The start of the Qing Dynasty in China (1644-1911/12) brought many new issues to the country. The Qing empire struggled with rebellions and foreign influence. They were hesitant in the question of promoting international trade.¹ Conflicts between Britain and other world superpowers concerning Western influence lead to the Opium Wars. The conflict of the two Opium Wars from 1839-1860 was between China, Britain and partially France and it mainly concerned foreign trade and influence in China. Illegal opium trade caused disruption in the economic and social structure. Both wars ended with a compromise in the form of a treaty. The first war ended with the Treaty of Nanjing which allowed Britain more influence in China. The second Opium War ended with the Treaties of Tianjin, which opened new ports to Western trade and residence. China was treated very unfairly in these treaties. The country was manipulated and forced into the adoption of Western ideas via two one-sided treaties. All of the benefits of the Opium Wars went mainly to Britain, France, Russia and the United States, but China would not be where they are today if it were not for these wars. Although this was a main conflict during the Qing Dynasty, there is much more to know about the roots of the wars and the Dynasty itself.

The Qing Dynasty was one of the largest dynasties in China, spanning over 200 years from 1644 to 1911/12. During this time, the population rose from 150 million to 450 million.² The Qing government dealt with rebellions and foreign influence; Western powers sought out

¹ "Qing Dynasty æ, (1644-1911)." *China Knowledge*, Ulrich Theobald, www.chinaknowledge.de/History/Qing/qing.html. Accessed 13 Feb. 2018.

² The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica. "Encyclopedia Britannica." *Qing Dynasty*, Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc., 19 Jan. 2018, www.britannica.com/topic/Qing-dynasty. Accessed 7 Feb. 2018.

China's valuable resources such as tea and silk. The Qing Dynasty experienced many leaders. In 1722, Kangxi became the emperor at seven years old. He encouraged painting, porcelain making and literature. The art during the Qing dynasty was regal, colorful and extremely detailed.³

Another influential emperor was Qianlong, ruling from 1736-1796. Qianlong brought the country to its highest point; he increased wealth with foreign trade and rice production.⁴ Britain took advantage of the foreign trade with China by importing opium for tea, silk and porcelain. In time, the Chinese became addicted to the drug and it began to take a toll on the structure of the country.

The start of the opium trade heavily affected the social and economic structure. Before the trade began, China desired nothing from Britain, but the English craved Chinese tea, silk and porcelain. Foreign merchants traded silver for opium from British owned Indian plantations; the traders then sold the drugs directly to the Chinese.⁵ The trade mostly occurred in the south-east part of the country. Opium was brought from India into Canton, a major city where most trade took place. Trade routes connected all major cities in south-eastern China, but did not spread much farther than Nanking and Chinkiang.⁶ As foreign demand grew for tea, silk and other valuable Chinese goods, the opium trade grew and eventually became an issue. Qing officials became concerned with the amount of people addicted to opium and decided to do something

³ Unidentified Chinese Artist. *Emperor Guan*. 1700. *Metropolitan Museum of Art*, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Oct. 2003, www.metmuseum.org/toah/works-of-art/2001.442/. Accessed 26 Jan. 2018.

⁴ "Qing Dynasty Timeline." Soft Schools, Softschools.com, www.softschools.com/timelines/qing_dynasty_timeline/162/. Accessed 21 Feb. 2018.

⁵ Godbey, Holly. "9 Essential Facts The Dramatic British Opium Wars Which Changed The Course Of History." *War History Online*, 29 Oct. 2016, www.warhistoryonline.com/history/9-facts-may-not-know-british-opium-wars.html. Accessed 6 Feb. 2018.

⁶ Zheng, Yangwen. *The Opium Trade in China 1833-1839. Visualizing Cultures*, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, ocw.mit.edu/ans7870/21f/21f.027/

about it.⁷ In March of 1839, the Chinese government found and destroyed 20,000 chests of opium at the main trade city: Canton.⁸ Opium was becoming a real problem, but there was no sign that Britain was going to give up their power and influence. This conflict began to evolve into something bigger.

As the opium use in China heightened, conflict arose between the Qing and British empires. In 1838, a Qing official named Lin Zexu was sent to Guangzhou to put a much required end to the opium trade.⁹ Foreign traders were compelled to give up their opium and end the trade. The British then sent a batallion to force the Chinese to pay for the traders' opium. These events started the First Opium War (1839-42). The first hostility of the war was when British ships destroyed a Chinese barricade at the Pearl River (Zhu Jiang). Warships powered by the British proceeded up the river into the main trade city, Canton (Guangzhou). At Canton, the British negotiated for months; then, they attacked and occupied the city in May 1841.¹⁰ After the capture, it was decided that China would pay £60,000 in reparations and compensate for the opium lost. Britain claimed victory by capturing Shanghai on 19 June 1842 and Chinkiang on 21 July.¹¹ China suffered many more losses than Britain during the First Opium War, but their sum of losses was not quite accurate yet. The Qing Empire lost even more when the Treaty of Nanjing was introduced.

⁷ Godbey, Holly. "9 Essential Facts The Dramatic British Opium Wars Which Changed The Course Of History." *War History Online*, 29 Oct. 2016,

www.warhistoryonline.com/history/9-facts-may-not-know-british-opium-wars.html. Accessed 6 Feb. 2018.

⁸ Pletcher, Kenneth. "Opium Wars." *Encyclopedia Britannica*, Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc., 9 Mar. 2017, www.britannica.com/topic/Opium-Wars. Accessed 31 Jan. 2018.

⁹ Regan, Paula, editor. *China*. New York, DK Publishing, 2007.

¹⁰ Pletcher, Kenneth. "Opium Wars." *Encyclopedia Britannica*, Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc., 9 Mar. 2017, www.britannica.com/topic/Opium-Wars. Accessed 31 Jan. 2018.

¹¹ "The Opium War." *National Army Museum*, www.nam.ac.uk/explore/opium-war-1839-1842. Accessed 25 Feb. 2018.

On the *Cornwallis* at Nanking on 29 August 1842, the Treaty of Nanjing was written and signed. The treaty declared many profits for Britain and nothing for China; it was concluded by the Western powers. The Treaty of Nanjing was what the Qing called an “unequal treaty”; they were treated very unfairly in this specific treaty. The basis of the treaty was that Britain would claim more power and influence in China. In Article II it says that British subjects will be allowed to reside in China and in Article III, it says that Britain will claim a port specifically for them in China.¹² The Qing were also required to pay Britain millions for the lost opium and the small losses in the war. Also stated in the treaty, China was forced to cede the island of Hong Kong to the British.¹³ The war and treaty attracted the attention of other western countries and they were soon granted similar privileges. The First Opium War and the Treaty of Nanjing opened up China to the quickly modernizing world. Conflicts were not quite done yet, and, as always, Britain would find something to fight about.

The First Opium War humiliated the Qing Empire. There now were British officials in the country, a myriad of trade and influence from Western powers and the increasingly powerful Taiping Rebellion. There was not much more China could take. The Second Opium War began when both the United States and European powers became displeased with China’s inability to follow the terms of the Treaty of Nanjing. Britain took action and attacked the port cities Guangzhou (Canton) and Tianjin.¹⁴ British and French forces quickly captured Canton and

¹² "Treaty of Nanjing (Nanking), 1842." *USC US-China Institute*, <http://china.usc.edu/treaty-nanjing-nanking-1842>. Accessed 26 Jan. 2018.

¹³ Pletcher, Kenneth. "Opium Wars." *Encyclopedia Britannica*, Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc., 9 Mar. 2017, www.britannica.com/topic/Opium-Wars. Accessed 31 Jan. 2018.

¹⁴ "The Opening to China Part II: the Second Opium War, the United States, and the Treaty of Tianjin, 1857-1859." *Office of the Historian*, United States Department of State, history.state.gov/milestones/1830-1860/china-2. Accessed 2 Feb. 2018.

disposed its governor; then, they forced China into negotiations.¹⁵ The Treaties of Tianjin were reluctantly signed by the Chinese on June 26 and 27 1857. The treaties allowed even more Western port use and opened the interior of China to Christian missionaries.¹⁶ Russia and the U.S. sent neutral observers and ultimately the two countries received the same concessions as Britain. Later in the year at Shanghai, China began accepting Western importation of opium. Britain returned to China (en route to Beijing) to sign the treaties and were attacked at Dagu at the mouth of the Hai River by Chinese forces. Suffering heavy casualties, Britain resumed the battle. In August of 1860, British and French troops destroyed the forces at the Hai River and proceeded to Beijing where the Emperor's summer palace, Yuanming Garden, was burned.¹⁷ Later that year, China signed the Beijing Convention and agreed to observe the Treaties of Tianjin, officially ending the Second Opium War.

The two Opium Wars definitely took a toll on the Qing Empire and it was not something they were completely prepared for. The conflict began as problems with illegal trade arose from Britain and ended with a compromise that included two very unfair treaties and China's loss. China started to lose its ancient styles with the integration of Western powers in their country. During these wars, China partially lost its freedom and originality because of power hungry countries like Britain. The other Western powers (France, Russia and the United States)

¹⁵ Pletcher, Kenneth. "Opium Wars." *Encyclopedia Britannica*, Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc., 9 Mar. 2017, www.britannica.com/topic/Opium-Wars. Accessed 31 Jan. 2018.

¹⁶ Cavendish, Richard. "The Treaties of Tianjin." *History Today*, History Today Ltd., 8 June 2018, www.historytoday.com/richard-cavendish/treaties-tianjin. Accessed 5 Feb. 2018.

¹⁷ Pletcher, Kenneth. "Opium Wars." *Encyclopedia Britannica*, Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc., 9 Mar. 2017, www.britannica.com/topic/Opium-Wars. Accessed 31 Jan. 2018.

humiliated China by negotiating similar treaties to the Treaty of Nanjing.¹⁸ They continually gained power through trade and overall influence. Even officials in the Qing government encouraged the adoption of Western manufacturing and knowledge.¹⁹ China built ships, weapons and learned new techniques. The Qing empire came to an end in 1911 when the Republican Revolution brought Yuan Shikai into power.²⁰ The Opium Wars (in a way) evolved China into a new, modernized country that finally gave up its somewhat ancient ways and adopted Western traditions and skills. On the other hand, Britain forced China out of its old ways and into the new world by manipulation and illegal importation of a highly addictive drug. The Opium Wars may not have been the best way to evolve China, but the wars changed the country forever.

Overall, the Qing Dynasty was greatly affected by the Opium Wars. It may not have been their greatest moment, but the wars changed the country forever. Foreign influence increased greatly and China officially began to modernize and westernize. The conflict started as Britain's desire for power and influence: It evolved into illegal importation of opium which greatly affected the country's social and economic structure. A compromise was reached when Britain negotiated with the Treaty of Nanjing and the Treaties of Tianjin. The two wars thrust China into the modern world. The conflict and compromise of the Opium Wars may not have been a defining moment of pride for China, but the wars and treaties changed the country forever.

¹⁸ "The Opium War and Foreign Encroachment." *Asia For Educators*, Columbia University, afe.easia.columbia.edu/special/china_1750_opium.htm. Accessed 1 Feb. 2018.

¹⁹ Regan, Paula, editor. *China*. New York, DK Publishing, 2007.

²⁰ The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica. "Encyclopedia Britannica." *Qing Dynasty*, Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc., 19 Jan. 2018, www.britannica.com/topic/Qing-dynasty. Accessed 7 Feb. 2018.

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Primary Sources

"Treaty of Nanjing (Nanking), 1842." *USC US-China Institute*, <http://china.usc.edu/treaty-nanjing-nanking-1842> . Accessed 26 Jan. 2018.

There is no author shown on the website. From the the transcript of the Treaty of Nanjing, I learned more about the policies that were laid out and what privileges Britain was given on Chinese land and in trading ports. I now better understand the articles of the Treaty and the decisions made to end the first Opium War.

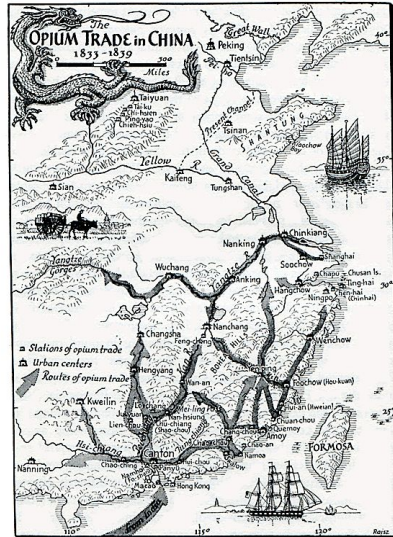
Unidentified Chinese Artist. *Emperor Guan*. 1700. *Metropolitan Museum of Art*, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Oct. 2003, www.metmuseum.org/toah/works-of-art/2001.442/. Accessed 26 Jan. 2018.

Maxwell K. Hearn wrote the article about the Qing Dynasty paintings, but the artist of the painting is unidentified. Hearn works in the Department of Asian Art at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. This painting helped me learn more about the art in the period and the Qing Dynasty itself. I wanted to choose a piece of art to further understand the time period rather than the Opium Wars. It helped me understand the kind of art from the period, how it looked and how it was done.



Zheng, Yangwen. *The Opium Trade in China 1833-1839. Visualizing Cultures*, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, https://ocw.mit.edu/ans7870/21f/21f.027/opium_wars_01/ow1_essay02.html. Accessed 26 Jan. 2018.

The author or artist of this source is Yangwen Zheng. She is a professor at the University of Manchester and received a PhD from Cambridge University. From the map, discovered where the opium came from and where it went from the trading ports on the coast. This map helps me understand the trade routes of opium and how they affected and contributed to the wars following the massive trading system.



Secondary Sources

Cavendish, Richard. "The Treaties of Tianjin." *History Today*, History Today Ltd., 8 June 2018, www.historytoday.com/richard-cavendish/treaties-tianjin. Accessed 5 Feb. 2018.

The author of this source is Richard Cavendish. He is a British historian who wrote about English history and mythology. From this source I obtained more information about the Second Opium War and the Treaties of Tianjin. I understand how the second war began and how the treaties affected the structure of the Chinese government.

Godbey, Holly. "9 Essential Facts The Dramatic British Opium Wars Which Changed The Course Of History." *War History Online*, 29 Oct. 2016, www.warhistoryonline.com/history/9-facts-may-not-know-british-opium-wars.html. Accessed 6 Feb. 2018.

The author of this article is Holly Godbey. She is an author at the website War History Online. This source showed me more about the roots of the two Wars. I now have a further understanding of important, key factors about different parts of the two wars.

Pletcher, Kenneth. "Opium Wars." *Encyclopedia Britannica*, Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc., 9 Mar. 2017, www.britannica.com/topic/Opium-Wars. Accessed 31 Jan. 2018.

Kenneth Pletcher wrote this article on the Opium Wars. He is an author. This source is where I found out the information about the start of the wars and the treaties that ended the wars. I now better understand the set up of the two Opium Wars and how they affected foreign policies in China.

"Qing Dynasty æ, (1644-1911)." *China Knowledge*, Ulrich Theobald, www.chinaknowledge.de/History/Qing/qing.html. Accessed 13 Feb. 2018.

There is no author given. From this source, I learned more about the lead up to the Opium Wars and how rebellions affect the Qing government. I understand what happened before the wars and how different events influenced the wars.

"Qing Dynasty Timeline." Soft Schools, Softschools.com, www.softschools.com/timelines/qing_dynasty_timeline/162/. Accessed 21 Feb. 2018. There is no author shown for the timeline. This timeline gave me more information about larger events that happened over the years during the Qing Dynasty. I now understand the large events that occurred during this time and how they affected the overall outcome of the Dynasty.

Regan, Paula, editor. *China*. New York, DK Publishing, 2007.

The senior editor of the book is Paula Regan. From this book I learned that opium is derived from poppy flowers and that the war began when Britain sent an expeditionary force to force the Chinese to compensate British traders for their opium. I understand how the war started and escalated into something bigger.

The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica. "Encyclopedia Britannica." *Qing Dynasty*, Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc., 19 Jan. 2018, www.britannica.com/topic/Qing-dynasty. Accessed 7 Feb. 2018.

The authors of this article are The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica. This article gave me more information about the time period and what the Qing Dynasty was like. I now better understand the empire and how the Opium Wars came into play with the time period.

"The Opening to China Part II: the Second Opium War, the United States, and the Treaty of Tianjin, 1857-1859." *Office of the Historian*, United States Department of State, history.state.gov/milestones/1830-1860/china-2. Accessed 2 Feb. 2018.

There is no author shown in the article. The Office of the Historian is run by the U.S. Department of State. This source gave me more information about the Second Opium War and the Treaties of Tianjin. I now understand the policies that the treaties enforced and the countries that benefited.

"The Opium War and Foreign Encroachment." *Asia For Educators*, Columbia University, afe.easia.columbia.edu/special/china_1750_opium.htm. Accessed 1 Feb. 2018.

There is no author shown on the site. From this source, I learned more about the actual trade of opium and how foreign trade and influence affected the Chinese government and social structure. I now understand the events that occurred before the wars and how they affected the outcome.

"The Opium War." *National Army Museum*, www.nam.ac.uk/explore/opium-war-1839-1842. Accessed 25 Feb. 2018. There is no author shown on the site.

This website gave me more information about the war tactics and events during the Opium Wars. I now better understand the inner workings of the war itself.