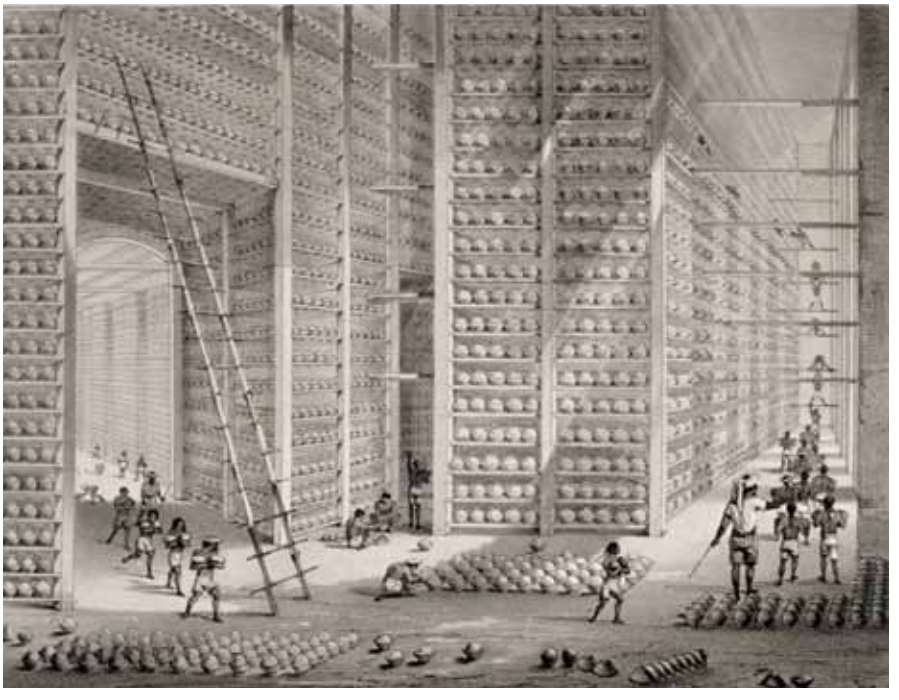
A DRUG DEAL GONE BAD

185 years later, the opium wars still shape global politics



The "Stacking Rooms" in an opium factory in Patna, India, with hundreds of opium balls prepared for use in the China trade. Lithograph, W. S. Sherwell, c.1850. —Wellcome Images

IN THE 1830s, the world's largest, richest, and most populous empire found itself, quite surprisingly, facing an existential threat, primarily from a tiny country, Britain, 5,000 miles away. Under the Qing Dynasty, which had ruled China for nearly 200 years, China had reached its largest ever territorial size 5.7 million square miles, far more than its current 3.7 million sq mi. It had the largest economy in the world and the largest population, around 400 million people. By comparison, Britain was less than one hundredth the size of China, with 6 percent as many people.

Yet, the Daoguang Emperor (1782–1850), who had inherited the throne in 1820, was facing a brewing problem on his southern coast. European powers, especially the British, were growing in influence and economic impact. The East India Company representing Britain had first set up a trading center in Taiwan (Formosa) in 1672. But as with earlier Qing emperors, Daoguang tried to isolate China from this foreign influence by limiting Europeans to a single trading port, Guangzhou (formerly Canton), and prohibiting them from learning to read and speak Mandarin. European traders were also allowed on the peninsulas of Macau and Hong Kong, about 100 miles out toward the South China Sea from Guangzhou.

Many Chinese officials were having great difficulty understanding the culture and manners of these "barbarians" from so far away. A Chinese official who visited Macau made this report:

> As soon as I entered the wall of Macao, a hundred barbarian soldiers dressed in barbarian military uniform, led by the barbarian headman, greeted me. They marched in front of my sedan playing barbarian music and led me into the city . . . On this day, everyone man and woman came out on the street or leaned from the window to take a look. Unfortunately the barbarian costume was too absurd. The men, their bodies wrapped tightly in short coats and long 'legs', resembled in shape foxes and rabbits as impersonated in plays . . . . Their beards, with abundant whiskers, were half shaved off and only a piece was kept. Looking at them all of a sudden was frightening. That the Cantonese referred to them as "devils" was indeed not vicious disparagement.

The problem facing the British was that they had very little to trade that the Chinese wanted or needed. England produced woven wools and other textiles that had a market in China, and they produced fine machinery, such as clocks and tools. They could trade such raw materials as lead and tin, but not for much profit. In general, the Chinese merchants were only interested in silver, and this caused a huge trade deficit in England. British consumers, on the other hand, desperately wanted Chinese tea, silk fabrics, and porcelain ceramics, and in each of these, China held a near-monopoly. Tea was primarily grown in China and Japan; newly established plantations in Sri Lanka, India, and Taiwan were not yet contributing much to the trade. Porcelain depended on kaolin clay, the mineral petuntse, and closely guarded ceramic methods that had developed over centuries. And although silkworm eggs had been smuggled out of China by the Byzantine Empire in the sixth century CE, Europeans could not grow enough of it, nor process the silk into fabric as well as that produced in China [see "Silk" by Aarathi Prasad, *NH*, 5/24].

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Finally, however, as East India Company officials came to know China better, they found a product the Chinese markets were willing to pay for: opium. The powerful drug had been known throughout Eurasia for over a thousand years, but it was rare and costly in China. A highly processed extract of opium [see "Opium's Human History" by Lucy Inglis, NH, 3/19] had been shipped over the Silk Road by Arab traders since around 700 CE. It was smoked by just a few in the upper classes. But British merchants began plantations of opium in India in the late 1700s, and found a growing demand in China. Realizing this, the Qing Dynasty outlawed the importation of opium in 1796. The flow of the drug continued, however, through illegal trade with Chinese merchants along the southern coast. United States traders were also involved and set up shipping centers in southeast Asia.

Commissioner Lin Zexu, from Doings in China by Alexander Murray (London: Richard Bentley, 1843) —public domain/ Wikimedia Commons

Merchants of the East India Company developed cheaper, lower grades of opium to sell to the Chinese lower classes. They also offered credit and lower prices, at first, to new traders and middlemen to encourage addiction in their target population. As a consequence, both demand and supply increased rapidly, from around 75 metric tons in 1775 to 347 tons in 1822. By the time the first Opium War broke out in 1839, English merchants were bringing in 2,553 tons, thirty times as much as had been imported just a few decades previously.

The flood of opium had a crippling impact in China because it was used by, among others, the bureaucrats, officials, and army officers that ran the empire. By some estimates, nearly half of the officials in some areas were smoking opium. The Daoguang Emperor asked his high-level officials for options and one, Lin Zexu (1785–1850), recommended forceful action against the foreign traders. He was given the authority to crack down on opium use internally, and to fight the foreigners bringing it in. Before war broke out in 1839, he wrote an elegant yet indignant appeal to Queen Victoria (1818–1901):

> Let us suppose that foreigners came from another country, and brought opium into England, and seduced the people of your country to smoke it, would you not . . . look upon such a procedure with anger, and in your just indignation endeavor to get rid of it? Now we have always heard that your highness possesses a most kind and benevolent heart, surely then you are incapable of doing or causing to be done unto another, that which you should not wish another to do unto you!

Commissioner Lin's letter also reveals the emperor's bewilderment that such a small and distant country could cause China such trouble. The Chinese elite had always seen China as the Middle Kingdom of the World and the center of civilization, surrounded by barbarism. As Lin said in his letter, "Our celestial empire rules over ten thousand kingdoms! Most surely do we possess a measure of godlike majesty which you cannot fathom!" Queen Victoria offered no response.

Commissioner Lin used his authority to seize and destroy over a ton of opium from British traders in Guangzhou. He demanded the British hand over for trial under the Chinese legal system some sailors who had killed a Chinese villager. The British sent a force of warships capable of destroying the Chinese fleet wherever they met them. Three centuries of almost constant naval warfare among the European nations had refined their maritime technologies and tactics far beyond those of the Chinese navy. The largest of the British warships carried over 100 large cannons on three decks and most of their ships were larger and more capable than the Qing ships, which had been designed primarily for coastal defense. The war progressed with the British eventually shelling the port at Guangzhou and occupying the city, forcing the Chinese to sign the humiliating Treaty of Nanking. It required the Chinese government to pay Britain 21 million silver dollars, open four additional trading ports, allow UK citizens held in China to be tried by British law, and among other unequal provisions decreed that, "the Island of Hongkong, [shall] be possessed in perpetuity by Her Britannic Majesty, Her Heirs and Successors, and to be governed by such Laws and Regulations as Her Majesty the Queen of Great Britain, etc., shall see fit to direct."

For the Chinese, this enormous affront ushered in what most Chinese citizens know as the "Century of

British attack in 1841 on First Bar Island in The Canton River during the First Opium War between Britain and China (1839–1842). From 1843 line engraving with digital color —Everett Collection/Shutterstock

Humiliation." It was not because the Chinese populace was happy under the Qing Dynasty: many Chinese at the time, especially in the south and east, considered the Qing corrupt and incompetent. They were seen as preserving the old feudal order that trapped most of the population in rural poverty, overtaxed and exploited. And while they had ruled for a long time, the Qing emperors and leadership were still Manchu, not members of the Han majority, and they were viewed by many as foreign usurpers.

IN HIS SPEECHES and writings, China's current president, Xi Jinping, often makes a point of reminding his audience of the Opium Wars and the Treaty of Nanking, when China was, in his words, "gradually reduced by foreign powers to a semi-colonial, semi-feudal society that suffered greater ravages than ever before," bringing "intense humiliation for the country" and "great pain for its people." For Xi, the "Century of Humiliation" is the reason for his "China Dream" project of national rejuvenation—his central project since becoming "paramount leader" in 2013.

From modern Chinese leaders' perspective, one of the worst aspects of the Opium Wars involves an internal revolt that took place in China at about the same time, known as the Taiping Rebellion (1850-1864). This was one of the bloodiest and destructive wars of the nineteenth century anywhere in the world. It raged for fourteen years and killed an estimated 20-30 million people. .

The Taiping Rebellion broke out in 1850 when a breakaway kingdom in eastern and southern China defied the authority of the Mongol-led Qing dynasty. The rebels wanted to completely reshape Chinese society, ending the institution of an emperor who ruled by divine right, ending feudal land-ownership patterns, and ending the high taxes and corruption of Mongol leaders. The Taiping rebels also hated the intrusion of foreigners in Chinese affairs and opposed the concessions that the Qing Emperor had agreed to. For modern Chinese politicians, another twist of the knife was that the British and Americans came to the aid of the decaying Qing Dynasty, and fought on their side against the rebels. The foreigners were seeking to maintain a status quo that, although harmful to China, was producing large profits for their countries. Thus, the "Century of Humiliation" that Xi references extends from the time of the First Opium War in 1839 to the Communist revolution in 1949, when Mao (1893–1976) declared "Ours will no longer be a nation subject to insult and humiliation."

THE POWERFUL psychoactive effects of opium have been known for at least 5,000 years (see "Why We Alter Our Consciousness", *NH*, 2/23), but in the 1960s, medical researchers discovered a way to synthesize chemical compounds—phenylpiperidines—that produce the same effects. These are the predecessors of fentanyl, the latest in a line of dangerous and deadly synthetic drugs. Making fentanyl is complicated, but the key step is to create the non-psychoactive chemical 4-anilino-N-phenethylpiperidine, or 4-ANPP. Perhaps it is historic justice that China is currently the world's largest producer of 4-ANPP, and the largest consumer is the United States, followed by Europe, Canada, and Australia.

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