



**CLASSROOM LESSONS:
China's Encounter with the West**

**The Opium War and Its Impact on
Chinese-American Relations**

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Objective: to explain the causes of the Opium War, the series of "unequal treaties" it began, and its impact on China-US economic and political relations.

National Standards in World History Era 7: An Age of Revolution (1750-1914 CE)

Background information¹

Two things happened in the eighteenth century that made it difficult for England to balance its trade with the East. First, the British became a nation of tea drinkers, making the demand for Chinese tea rise astronomically. It is estimated that the average London worker spent 5 percent of his or her total household budget on tea. Second, northern Chinese merchants began to ship Chinese cotton from the interior to the south to compete with the Indian cotton that Britain had used to help pay for its tea consumption habits. To prevent a trade imbalance, the British tried to sell more of their own products to China, but there was not much demand for heavy woolen fabrics in a country accustomed to either cotton padding or silk.

Britain's only solution was to increase the export of Indian goods to pay for these Chinese luxuries, and increasingly in the 17th-18th centuries the item provided to China was Bengal opium. With greater opium supplies had come an increase in demand and usage throughout the country, despite repeated prohibitions by the Chinese government. The British did all they could to increase the trade: They bribed officials, helped the Chinese work out elaborate smuggling schemes to get the opium into China's interior, and distributed free samples of the drug.

¹ From <http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/china/modern/opium.htm#Letter%20of%20Advice>

The cost to China was enormous. The drug weakened a large percentage of the population (some estimate that 10 percent of the population regularly used opium by the late 19th century), and silver began to flow out of the country to pay for the opium. Many of the economic problems China faced later were either directly or indirectly traced to the opium trade. The government debated whether to legalize the drug through a government monopoly like that on salt, hoping to barter Chinese goods in return for opium. But since the Chinese were fully aware of the harms of addiction, in 1838 the emperor decided to send one of his most able officials, Lin Tse-hsu, to Canton to do whatever necessary to end the traffic.

For further context, see Andrew Wilson, "China's Early Encounters with the West: A History in Reverse," at

<http://www.fpri.org/footnotes/1303.200804.wilson.earlychinawest.html>.

Students will read the 1839 Letter from Commissioner Lin to Queen Victoria (available at <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/1839lin2.html>) and answer following questions.

Para 2: What does Lin tell the Queen is responsible for Britain's wealth and success? Evaluate the accuracy of this. Why might Lin think so?

Para 3: What is being introduced into China?

Para 4: What does the Chinese government plan to do to people who bring opium to China and what is he asking the Queen to do?

Para 5: Is his appeal to Victoria based on economic, political, or moral grounds? Give examples of words he uses that demonstrate this.

Para 7: What is the legal status of smoking or selling opium in China? What analogy does Lin use in his letter to Victoria?

Para 8: How does he invoke what westerners might call "the golden rule?"

Para 9: What does he suggest the Queen do throughout her empire?

Describe what this shows about Lin's view of the relationship between the two countries.

Explain how the Queen would be likely to respond.

What might influence her response?

Assess the level of understanding between the two countries. What factors influenced this?

Consider whether the British would have been as likely to introduce opium into a culture more similar to their own.

Based on the United States' "War on Drugs," assess the morality of introducing opium into a country for economic gain.

Where in our society might we find profits made in trade at the expense of health? (This could lead to a discussion of Chinese imports.)

Students will read the following excerpt from Thomas Arnold's 1840 letter to W.W. Hull and answer the questions.

"This war with China . . . really seems to me so wicked as to be a national sin of the greatest possible magnitude, and it distresses me very deeply. Cannot any thing be done by petition or otherwise to awaken men's minds to the dreadful guilt we are incurring? I really do not remember, in any history, of a war undertaken with such combined injustice and baseness. Ordinary wars of conquest are to me far less wicked, than to go to war in order to maintain smuggling, and that smuggling consisting in the introduction of a demoralizing drug, which the government of China wishes to keep out, and which we, for the lucre of gain, want to introduce by force; and in this quarrel are going to burn and slay in the pride of our supposed superiority." — [Thomas Arnold](#) to W. W. Hull, March 18, 1840²

Describe how Arnold views the war between China and Britain.

Explain why you agree or disagree with Arnold.

Reasons countries go to war include nationalism, imperialism, imbalance of power, alliances, revenge, religious motivations. Which of these reasons apply to this war?

Discuss their relevance here.

Note: This might be an opportunity to explore the American position on poppy production in Afghanistan. Possible source, "State Department Pushing Aerial Poppy Eradication in Afghanistan," 2/29/08, at

<http://www.worldpress.org/Asia/3082.cfm>, which reviews the economic, political, and medical difficulties of eradicating drug production in Colombia and Afghanistan.

² from <http://www.victorianweb.org/history/empire/opiumwars/opiumwars1.html>

Students will read the excerpts of the Treaty of Nanjing from <http://www.exeas.org/resources/opium-trade.html> and answer the following questions:

From the articles of the treaty, do you think Queen Victoria complied with Lin's requests?

List criteria for determining who has won a war. Apply these criteria to the war under discussion.

Summarize the treaty. Consider how a Chinese official would likely feel about the treaty.

Following the defeat of the Chinese and the benefits Britain now enjoyed, the United States moved quickly to acquire similar benefits. Caleb Cushing was dispatched in 1844 to Peking to negotiate for the United States. He never set foot on Chinese soil. Despite his requests, he never left Macao during his several-months-long sojourn in the East.

Students will read the following account of U.S.-Sino negotiations from the Chinese perspective³ and answer the questions that follow each paragraph:

"Imperial Commissioner, Governor General of Liang-kuang [territory comprising the two southernmost coastal provinces of Kwantung and Kwangsi], Ch'i-ying, memorializes. On June 10, 1844, Your slave [the common form of address of Manchu officials to the emperor], accompanied by Financial Commissioner Huang En-t'ung and other officers, set out from Canton, arriving at Macao on June 20th. On the 21st and 22nd they met the barbarian envoy [Cushing] and the barbarian chiefs [his secretaries], Parker and Bridgman. They were polite and very respectful but did not mention going to Peking for an audience and the presentation of their credentials. For several days in succession Your slave has sent Huang Ent'ung, with various other officials, to explain everything clearly, to commend the envoy for having waited in Kwangtung peacefully, and also to tell him that even if he went to Peking he would certainly be ordered back, thus making the trip in vain. But the said envoy's reply was vague. Then he presented the precis of a commercial treaty. Although translated into Chinese, it was not clear and the phraseology was uncouth, but the purport was in general like the recently fixed regulations. Moreover, he said that they would not venture to follow the example of the English barbarians in appropriating islands. Your slave examined it carefully and there seemed to be nothing detrimental to the general commercial picture. Only on the issue of giving up his northern trip did he equivocate. But he urged that the trade regulations be quickly agreed upon, drawn up, sealed, and copies exchanged....."

³ from <http://web.jjay.cuny.edu/~jobrien/reference/ob51.html>

Who are the "barbarians" in this account?

What appears to be the purpose of the efforts by the "barbarians" to make a treaty? How are they different from the English?

"Inasmuch as the envoy had crossed the wide oceans, Your slave considered it reasonable to conclude negotiations, provided there were no unreasonable demands outside the trade regulations. But on examining the said envoy's first communication to the former acting governor general, Ch'eng Yu-t'sai, the purport seems to be to conclude the treaty first and then go to Peking. Now he insisted on a speedy signing of the treaty, but it was feared that after the treaty was concluded he would actually proceed to Peking. If he were not carefully blocked we should fall into his trap...."

What does this negotiator think Cushing wants to do? Why might the Chinese not want Cushing to see China?

"Your slave humbly observes that the said envoy, Cushing, in submitting these regulations, hoped to trade according to the English barbarians' new regulations; on hearing that the English barbarians had a supplementary treaty, he wanted to emulate and outdo them. This is only reasonable."

What did the Chinese see as motivating the Americans?

"But the best way to deal with barbarians is to block their presumption first and then proceed to destroy their schemes. Since the said barbarian envoy regarded the treaty as vital, its prompt conclusion was agreed to. It was only necessary to make adjustments to ensure the maintenance of fixed regulations of the Imperial Court and to accord with international convention, justly and without discrimination, thus achieving perpetual amity between China and the outside world, without any compromise to lead us into his trap...."

What words show how the Chinese view the Americans?

Is this view of westerners justified? Why or why not?

Concluding Discussion: *Why did the East and West misunderstand each other in the 19th century? Do these kinds of cultural misunderstandings occur in today's diplomacy? If so, where and how? If not, what prevents them? If misunderstandings occur and cultural differences are not the cause, what are?*

Now look at the Treaty of Wang-Hea of 1844, available at <http://www.exeas.org/resources/pdf/opium-nanjing.pdf>.

Assess reasons the Chinese were willing to negotiate with the United States.

*Identify what the United States appears to want from China.
Describe Article XXI and assess how the Chinese might respond to that.
If a Chinese citizen commits a crime in this country, where is he tried?*