

The opium war essay



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The Opium War

The Opium War, also called the Anglo-Chinese

War, was the most humiliating defeat China ever suffered. In European history,

it is perhaps the most sordid, base, and vicious event in European history, possibly, just possibly, overshadowed by the excesses of the Third Reich in the twentieth century.

By the 1830's, the English had become

the major drug-trafficking criminal organization in the world; very few drug cartels of the twentieth century can even touch the England of the early nineteenth century in sheer size of criminality. Growing opium in

India, the East India Company shipped tons of opium into Canton which it traded for Chinese manufactured goods and for tea. This trade had produced,

quite literally, a country filled with drug addicts, as opium parlors proliferated all throughout China in the early part of the nineteenth century. This

trafficking, it should be stressed, was a criminal activity after 1836,

but the British traders generously bribed Canton officials in order to

keep the opium traffic flowing. The effects on Chinese society were devastating.

In fact, there are few periods in Chinese history that approach the early nineteenth century in terms of pure human misery and tragedy. In an effort to stem the tragedy, the imperial government made opium illegal in 1836 and began to aggressively close down the opium dens.

Lin Tse-hsu

The key player in the prelude to war was

a brilliant and highly moral official named Lin Tse-hsu. Deeply concerned about the opium menace, he maneuvered himself into being appointed Imperial

Commissioner at Canton. His express purpose was to cut off the opium trade at its source by rooting out corrupt officials and cracking down on British trade in the drug.

He took over in March of 1839 and within

two months, absolutely invulnerable to bribery and corruption, he had taken action against Chinese merchants and Western traders and shut down all the traffic in opium. He destroyed all the existing stores of opium and,

victorious in his war against opium, he composed a letter to Queen Victoria of England requesting that the British cease all opium trade. His letter included the argument that, since Britain had made opium trade and consumption illegal in England because of its harmful effects, it should not export that harm to other countries. Trade, according to Lin, should only be in beneficial objects.

To be fair to England, if the only issue

on the table were opium, the English probably (just probably) would have acceded to Lin's request. The British, however, had been nursing several grievances against China, and Lin's take-no-prisoners enforcement of Chinese

laws combined to outrage the British against his decapitation of the opium trade. The most serious bone of contention involved treaty relations; because

the British refused to submit to the emperor, there were no formal treaty relations between the two countries. The most serious problem precipitated by this lack of treaty relations involved the relationship between foreigners

and Chinese law. The British, on principle, refused to hand over British citizens to a Chinese legal system that they felt was vicious and barbaric.

The Chinese, equally principled, demanded that all foreigners who were accused of committing crimes on Chinese soil were to be dealt with solely by Chinese officials. In many ways, this was the real issue of the Opium War. In addition to enforcing the opium laws, Lin aggressively pursued foreign nationals accused of crimes.

The English, despite Lin's eloquent letter, refused to back down from the opium trade. In response, Lin threatened to cut off all trade with England and expel all English from China. Thus began the Opium War.

The War

War broke out when Chinese junks attempted to turn back English merchant vessels in November of 1839; although this was a low-level conflict, it inspired the English to send warships in June of 1840. The Chinese, with old-style weapons and artillery, were no match for the British gunships, which ranged up and down the coast shooting at

forts and fighting on land. The Chinese were equally unprepared for the technological superiority of the British land armies, and suffered continual defeats. Finally, in 1842, the Chinese were forced to agree to an ignominious peace under the Treaty of Nanking.

The treaty imposed on the Chinese was

weighted entirely to the British side. Its first and fundamental demand was for British “extraterritoriality”; all British citizens would be subjected to British, not Chinese, law if they committed any crime on Chinese soil.

The British would no longer have to pay tribute to the imperial administration in order to trade with China, and they gained five open ports for British trade: Canton, Shanghai, Foochow, Ningpo, and Amoy. No restrictions were placed on British trade, and, as a consequence, opium trade more than doubled

in the three decades following the Treaty of Nanking. The treaty also established

England as the “most favored nation” trading with China; this clause granted

to Britain any trading rights granted to other countries. Two years later,

China, against its will, signed similar treaties with France and the United States.

Lin Tse-hsu was officially disgraced

for his actions in Canton and was sent to a remote appointment in Turkestan.

Of all the imperial officials, however, Lin was the first to realize the

momentuous lesson of the Opium War. In a series of letters he began to

agitate the imperial government to adopt Western technology, arms, and

methods of warfare. He was first to see that the war was about technological

superiority; his influence, however, had dwindled to nothing, so his

admonitions

fell on deaf ears.

It wasn't until a second conflict with

England that Chinese officials began to take seriously the adoption of

Western technologies. Even with the Treaty of Nanking, trade in Canton

and other ports remained fairly restricted; the British were incensed by

what they felt was clear treaty violations. The Chinese, for their part,

were angered at the wholesale export of Chinese nationals to America and

the Caribbean to work at what was no better than slave labor. These conflicts

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came to a head in 1856 in a series of skirmishes that ended in 1860. A second set of treaties further humiliated and weakened the imperial government.

The most ignominious of the provisions in these treaties was the complete legalization of opium and the humiliating provision that allowed for the free and unrestricted propagation of Christianity in all regions of China.

The Illustrated Gazetteer of Maritime

Countries

China's defeat at the hands of England

led to the publication of the Illustrated Gazetteer of Maritime Countries by Wei Yuan (1794-1856). The Gazetteer marks the first landmark event in the modernization of China. Wei Yuan, a distinguished but minor official, argued in the Gazetteer that the Europeans had developed technologies

and methods of warfare in their ceaseless and barbaric quest for power, profit, and material wealth. Civilization, represented by China, was in danger of falling to the technological superiority of the Western powers.

Because China is a peaceful and civilized nation, it can overcome the West

only if it learns and matches the technology and techniques of the West.

The purpose of the Gazetteer was to disseminate knowledge about the Europeans,

their technologies, their methods of warfare, and their selfish anarchy

to learned officials. It is a landmark event in Chinese history, for it

was the first systematic attempt to educate the Chinese in Western technologies

and culture. This drive for modernization, begun by Lin Tse-hsu and

perpetuated by Wei Yuan would gain momentum and emerge as the basis

for the “ Self-Strengthening” from 1874 to 1895.