

2 New Domestic and Global Challenges, 1792–1860

STEPHEN R. PLATT

IN the autumn of 1792 when Britain's first diplomatic mission to China set sail, the Qing dynasty was at its peak. In terms of power, stability, and extent, its empire was almost unrivalled in Chinese history. Its territory was double the size of the old Ming empire, its economy was thriving and largely self-sufficient, and it was the pre-eminent military power in Asia, facing no serious threats on its extensive borders. The visit of a British ambassador, Lord Macartney, was thus treated by officials in the Qing court as something of an amusing novelty—a chance to accept tribute from the distant British while impressing them with the grandeur and hospitality of the Qianlong emperor.

The British, however, had more concrete goals in mind. Industrialists in northern England were agitating for greater markets for their products, especially woolen textiles. But since 1760 all British trade in China had been restricted by the emperor to the southern port of Canton, which had a warm climate and little or no market for wool products. Macartney had come to ask China to open new ports for British trade, to give the British preferential tariff rates, and to allow them to station a permanent ambassador in Beijing to resolve any disputes that might come up between the two countries or their subjects. To impress the Qing emperor with Britain's newfound technological might, Macartney brought along a shipload of gifts—600 crates and packages containing cutting-edge scientific instruments, a room-sized planetarium, giant lenses, a hot-air balloon, a diving-bell, and modern weaponry including a 12-pound howitzer with ammunition.

However, much to the disappointment of the British ambassador and the 100-strong retinue of artists, technicians, servants, musicians, and various gentlemen who accompanied him, those gifts from Great Britain were marked as “tribute” when they arrived in China. Furthermore, it was made clear to Macartney that if he hoped for an audience with the Qing emperor he should show subservience in the same manner as ambassadors from other tribute states like Korea and Siam. Specifically, he would have to perform what the British called the “kowtow”—a ritual series of three kneelings and nine prostrations to acknowledge the emperor's superiority. Macartney refused to do this, reasoning that since he would never perform such abasements before his own sovereign he could not do so before the emperor of China. After some



A satirical image of Macartney kneeling before Qianlong.

negotiation he was, in the end, allowed to honor Qianlong after his own fashion—by kneeling, as he would do before his own king—and the imperial audience went on as planned. But soon afterwards, although Macartney had hoped to winter over in Beijing for sustained negotiations with the emperor, Qianlong dismissed the entire British embassy from Beijing and sent them back to England with no concessions whatsoever. He refused all of Macartney's requests for opening new ports and stationing an ambassador in Beijing. To add insult to injury, at least in the eyes of the British, he also wrote a famous edict addressed to King George III in which he even dismissed the gifts Macartney had brought, writing: "As your ambassador can see, we possess all things. I set no value on objects strange or ingenious, and have no use for your country's manufactures."

Macartney's refusal to perform the kowtow—a refusal that would be repeated, conspicuously, in another failed British embassy in 1816—became a rallying-point for the British. It was taken as proof of the Qing emperor's arrogance and Chinese ignorance of Britain's strength. As the logic went, by demanding the kowtow Qianlong had refused to acknowledge the equality of the British empire. Macartney's refusal to indulge him thus became a bold defense of Britain's national pride. For skeptics, however—such as Napoleon, who declared in 1817 that if *he* had sent an ambassador to Beijing he would have let him perform any ceremony whatsoever that was traditional to that court—Macartney's inflexibility towards Qing courtly custom was blamed as the reason the mission had failed. Both sides, however, lost track of the key fact that the Qing court had, in fact, allowed Macartney to kneel as per his own custom, and they did not refuse him an imperial audience on that basis. More importantly, those who blamed the mission's failure on the kowtow—and they would be legion by the time of the Opium War in the late 1830s—seem not to have understood that even if Macartney *had* performed the expected kneelings and prostrations, it was just as unlikely Qianlong would have granted any of Britain's unprecedented demands.

Macartney left China in anger, and later wrote in dark resentment that the power and grandeur of China was in fact nothing more than an illusion. Up close, he claimed, the façade of strength gave way to foundations that were rotting from beneath. "I often perceived the ground to be hollow under a vast superstructure," he wrote, "and in trees of the most stately and flourishing appearance I discovered symptoms of speedy decay." He predicted that the Chinese subjects of the Qing dynasty would soon rise up against their Manchu (or "Tartar") overlords. The Chinese "are awaking from the political stupor they had been thrown into by the Tartar impression," he claimed, "and begin to feel their native energies revive. A slight collision might elicit fire from the flint, and spread the flames of revolt from one extremity of China to the other."

Macartney would turn out to be more correct than he had any right to be. Quite unknown to Macartney and his entourage, the Qianlong emperor at the time of their visit was already beginning to lose control over his government. To them he appeared clear-eyed and sound of mind, but in fact he was verging on senility after nearly six decades on the throne. And though he had, in his earlier years, been a forceful and active administrator given to lavish displays of power and ego, by the 1790s Qianlong was entering his senescence and relinquishing ever more power to his advisers. Nowhere was this more apparent than in the rise of his favorite minister, a former Manchu guardsman by the name of Heshen, who had first caught the emperor's fancy in 1775 and had, by the mid-1790s, married the emperor's favorite daughter and assumed to himself a stunning level of power within the government. Heshen oversaw a vast system of patronage through official appointments that funneled huge sums of embezzled government funds into his own pockets. And though his corruption was well known to more conscientious officials at court, to attack him was to attack the emperor's own judgment in trusting him. Equally dangerous, criticizing him risked bringing to light the dangerous forces of disunity and factionalism at court, and so his critics remained largely silent and Heshen himself remained untouchable.



At the end of his sixtieth year of rule, in 1796, Qianlong formally abdicated the throne. However, the abdication was little more than an over-the-top display of filial piety, a public declaration that he would not try to outdo his grandfather, Kangxi, who had spent sixty-one years on the throne from 1661 to 1722 and was the longest reigning emperor in China's history. In reality, after the abdication Qianlong continued to wield power just as he had before, and his son—who reigned as the Jiaqing emperor (1796–1820)—lived in Qianlong's shadow for the following three years, serving in little more than a symbolic role. But Qianlong's mental abilities continued to decline as he aged. A Korean ambassador in 1794 reported that Qianlong ordered breakfast immediately after having finished it; another, in 1798, wrote that in the evening the emperor could no longer remember what had happened in the morning. As Qianlong declined, Heshen's power and corruption rose in proportion.

It was only in 1799 when Qianlong finally died that Jiaqing assumed real power and control over the administration, and one of his very first acts was to have Heshen arrested and put to death after a rapid trial in which he was found guilty of a long list of corruption-related crimes. There were many gradations of capital punishment in imperial China and Heshen, because he had been favored by Jiaqing's father, was granted the privilege of strangling himself with a silk cord. Heshen's stolen belongings were confiscated—sprawling mansions, hundreds of thousands of acres of farmland, millions of ounces of silver and gold bullion, entire storehouses of precious gems—but in practical terms his arrest and execution served mainly as a sign that the new emperor was aware of the decline that had begun in his father's final years. Slowing that decline, however, would prove far more difficult than merely punishing a corrupt minister.

China had enjoyed great prosperity during most of Qianlong's reign in the eighteenth century, a period largely free from internal wars in which China enjoyed a thriving economy underpinned by a steady supply of silver from foreign trade. By measures such as consumption of luxury goods, the wealthy regions of eastern China rivaled or surpassed the quality of life in Western Europe. But such prosperity fostered a dramatic increase in the empire's population, and by the end of Qianlong's reign the empire's population was fully double what it had been under the late Ming dynasty. The introduction of new-world crops such as corn, peanuts, and sweet potatoes helped fuel this growth in China's population, because they could be cultivated on formerly unused land such as hillsides hostile to more traditional Chinese crops. By the end of the eighteenth century there were more people in China than in all of Europe, and the overall population of roughly 300 million Qing subjects represented nearly a third of the world.

However, the government was unable to expand in kind to meet the needs of controlling such a large population. Qianlong's grandfather Kangxi, late in his reign in 1711, had issued an edict promising never to raise the land taxes that formed about

80 percent of the government's income (the rest coming primarily from a salt monopoly, mining in the southwest, and foreign trade). The decree was a sign of confidence in the dynasty's government at the time—that it *could* avoid raising the land tax—as well as a means of placating wealthy Chinese landowners and purchasing their loyalty to the Manchu rulers. But it was not beneficial to later generations. For Qianlong to overturn his grandfather's act would have been unfilial, and so the government in the late eighteenth century had to make do with a very slowly rising budget at a time of fast population growth. The result—which would hold enormous significance for the future—was that the bureaucracy could not expand as needed. The lowest level of imperial officials found themselves with larger and larger populations under their immediate jurisdictions, and it became proportionally more difficult to judge court cases, collect taxes, and mobilize labor for public works, to say nothing of providing security. The effects were particularly demoralizing for the masses of scholars who devoted their lives to preparing for the civil service exams in hopes of gaining positions as government officials, for even as their numbers grew, the quotas for how many were allowed to pass did not. By the end of the eighteenth century, there were only about 20,000 government positions available for more than a million degree-holders. Even a scholar who passed the notoriously difficult provincial-level examinations might have to wait twenty years for a position to become available.

The dilution of the empire's attention and the increasing difficulty of the landless classes of Chinese to carve out an existence amid a rising population were especially hard felt in regions of China that were late to be settled, where land rights were tenuous. In one especially mountainous region of Hubei province known as the Han River Highlands, new migrants had multiplied the local population six times over during the course of the eighteenth century, most of them refugees squeezed out from more prosperous and longer-settled regions. These transplants made their livings as hired laborers, charcoal-makers, and tenant farmers. They were by nature unsettled and transitory, and in the absence of a strong imperial presence in the region, disputes were often settled with violence. Many turned to informal groups in search of mutual protection and—in the face of a life that was difficult and held few opportunities—moral guidance.

They were ideal recruits for a new form of an old religion, the White Lotus strain of millennial Buddhism, already mentioned in passing in Chapter 1, which preached a coming apocalypse in which traditional society and the Qing government would be destroyed. Believers, especially those who helped to bring about the revolution that was to come, were told they would be rewarded in the new world. Itinerant teachers converted peasants who had little to look forward to in their precarious lives, telling them that if they believed in the White Lotus doctrines they should chant the proper sutras and begin stockpiling weapons. Those who helped overthrow the corrupt government of the Manchus, they were told, would receive great rewards in the new world that was to come. Those who did not, would be swept away in the apocalypse.

The White Lotus uprisings began in 1796, at a time when most of the local Qing military forces in the Han River Highlands had been transferred south to neighboring

Hunan province to fight a separate uprising of the Miao minority group. As the religious groups in Hubei province began to rebel—individual cells acting in almost complete independence of one another, typically numbering in the hundreds or low thousands, looting villages and setting up blockades on the roadways—most counties in the province had no more than a few dozen soldiers on hand to stop them.

Chinese governments had a long history of dealing with religious uprisings, but the White Lotus proved almost impossible to contain. By 1799 the rebellion had spread beyond the borders of Hubei and embroiled five provinces in a wildfire of sectarian violence. A confluence of factors hampered the government's attempt to stop them—a shortage of soldiers meant hasty recruitment of local militias, many of which proved even more destructive than the rebels themselves. Qianlong, for his part, refused to send the elite banner troops from the Beijing region, insisting instead that local military leaders must suppress the White Lotus with local forces. What the government *did* do, was to lavish the officers in charge of the White Lotus campaigns with nearly all the funds they asked for from the central government.

It was here that Heshen's pyramid of corruption made itself felt most severely, for he himself was in charge of the campaigns, and his chosen henchmen supervised the fighting on the ground. An unheralded level of graft entered the military campaigns. By the peak of the war, officers were reporting (and demanding salaries for) over one million militia troops, many of which didn't actually exist—their salaries were going directly into the pockets of the military leaders themselves, with hefty kickbacks to Heshen besides. Even worse, the generals in charge of fighting the White Lotus appear to have prolonged the conclusion of the war for several years after it might have otherwise have ended, allowing the fighting to go on so they could ensure a constant flow of funding from the government.

In the end it was only Qianlong's death, and Jiaqing's execution of Heshen, that allowed a new direction in the White Lotus campaign. Commanders were replaced. A new strategy of building fortified villages to protect loyal peasants and using scorched-earth to destroy the areas controlled by the sectarians finally proved effective in starving the rebels into submission. But by the time the campaigns came to an end in 1804 they had all but bankrupted the government, costing the once-flush Qing treasuries 120 million taels of silver—an amount equal to several years' worth of imperial revenue. Harsh cutbacks in military spending followed, as reprisal for the corruption of the White Lotus campaign, and China thus moved forward into the nineteenth century with a demoralized military and exceptionally stringent limits on military spending that all but ensured that the empire's soldiers would be poorly trained, underpaid, and have no new weapons or equipment. The aftermath of the White Lotus campaigns would leave the dynasty all the more vulnerable to the conflicts with European powers and even larger internal uprisings that were to come a generation later.

Separately from the ongoing issue of sectarian rebellion, the other major source of trouble for the dynasty was, at least as it appeared in the early 1800s, an unlikely one: the flourishing trade with Britain and other Western countries that went on at Canton.



“A view of the foreign trade district at Canton” by William Daniell.

It was unlikely precisely because the trade was so valuable to all concerned. Since 1760, Qianlong had restricted all Western trade with China to the southern port of Canton, where the East India Company—which the British government had granted a monopoly on imports from China to England—purchased vast quantities of tea and silk for resale back home. Second to the British were the Americans, who since 1784 had sent ships from Salem, Boston, and New York to load up on tea for their own markets.

Canton was a provincial capital city with a population of roughly one million people, where the British and other Western traders were allowed to reside during the trading season in a small district just outside the city proper, on a lot only 300 yards wide and 200 yards deep that contained the so-called “factory” buildings (which contained offices, living quarters, and warehouses, and were owned by the Chinese merchants). In the off season, the foreigners had to leave Canton and repair to the nearby Portuguese settlement at Macao. The small size of the factory district, however, belied its importance to international trade. Hundreds of thousands of Chinese were employed in various capacities growing, processing, packing, and transporting the tea, silk, and porcelain that went out from Canton to supply the needs of European and American markets. For their part, the foreign traders brought in textiles, furs, ginseng, quicksilver, sandalwood, and dozens of other minor commodities to trade at Canton. But in the end, none of those commodities could generate enough of a demand in China to offset the tea and silk that was going out, and so foreign traders had to make up the imbalance in silver. The British, at least, had Indian cotton and Lancashire textiles to make up some of the difference, while the Americans, for the most part, were reduced to sending ships to China loaded with chests of silver.

The value of this trade to both Great Britain and China was enormous. The British government’s tax on the East India Company’s tea imports ranged at various times from 12 percent to upwards of 100 percent, providing an enormous stream of reliable income to the British government that comprised one tenth of its entire yearly revenue. China likewise profited enormously from the trade at Canton, and the taxes levied on the Chinese traders made for a hefty revenue stream at a time of declining Qing government fortunes. Huge “contributions” of millions of taels were exacted from the Canton merchants to help underwrite the Qing empire’s campaigns in the far west and the suppression of the White Lotus rebellion. Meanwhile, the high tariffs imposed at Canton also formed a direct revenue stream for the emperor himself, and paid most of the expenses of maintaining his family and household. By the 1830s, one of the leading Chinese merchants at Canton, known to the foreigners as Houqua, was thought to be the richest man in the world.

Until the early nineteenth century the balance of trade at Canton favored the Chinese merchants, with a net inflow of millions of silver dollars per year coming into the country from foreign trade. Indeed, from the sixteenth century up to the nineteenth China was the largest net importer of silver in the world. But global shifts began making it more difficult for the British to continue procuring such large amounts of silver to offset their tea purchases. In 1776 the American Revolution



A silk shop c.1825.

(sparked in part by the Tea Act that allowed the East India Company to ship its tea directly to the colonies in North America) stanching the flow of new-world silver to England. Then the early nineteenth-century revolutions in Peru and Mexico, which provided most of the world's silver and gold, destabilized their mining industries and caused a worldwide shortage of silver that ultimately drove the British to settle on a different way to balance their trade in China.

The solution to Britain's trade imbalance was opium. Grown and processed under monopoly in the East India Company's territories of eastern India, the British could ship the drug to Canton (and, after its trade was banned in Canton proper, to an island

Opposite: Portrait of Houqua by George Chinnery.

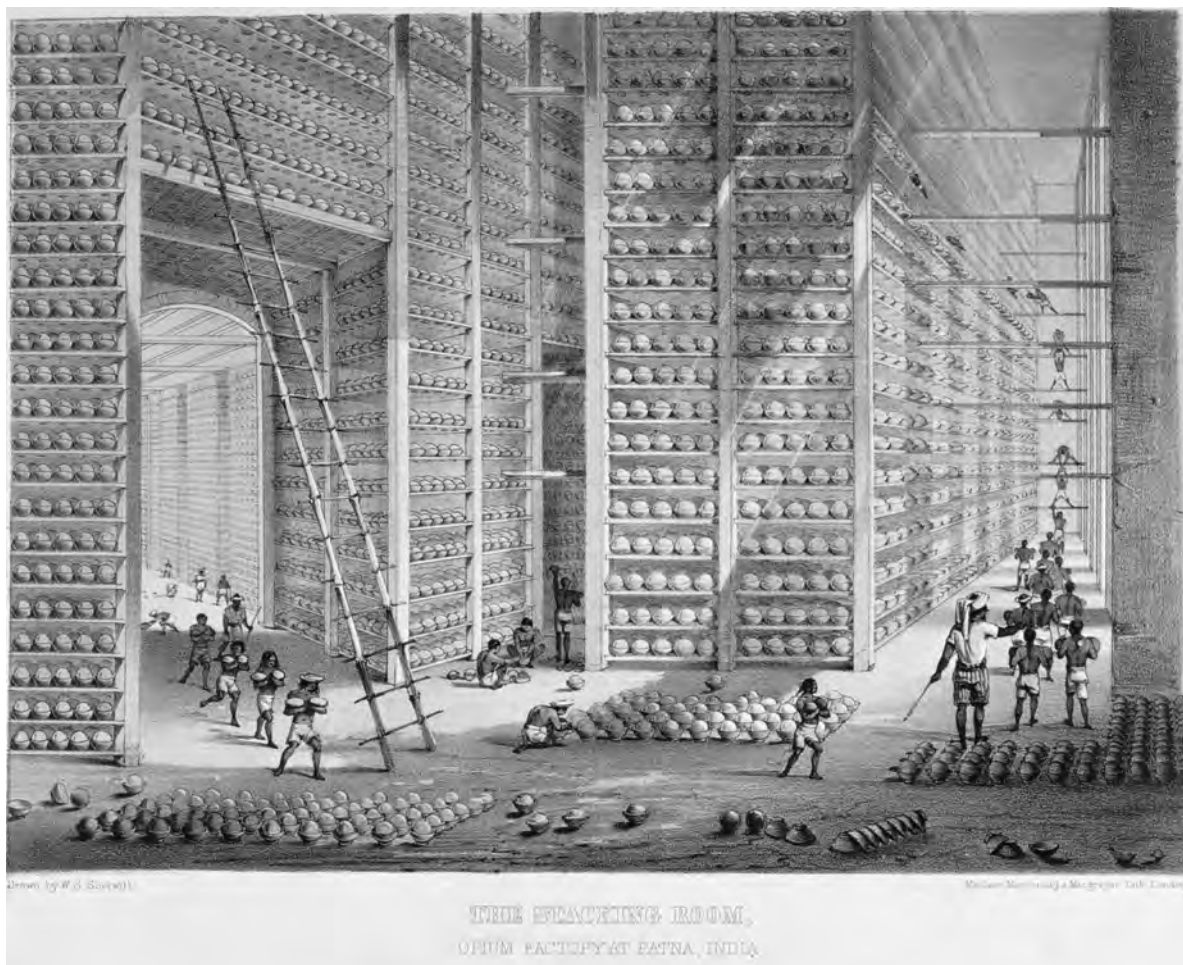


sixty miles away where Chinese smuggling ships retrieved the foreign cargo). As non-medicinal opium had been illegal in China since 1729, the Company carefully avoided carrying any on its own ships into Canton, instead selling the drug at auction in Calcutta to so-called “country” traders—Parsis and independent British merchants—who took the real risk of shipping the drug to China. When the country traders sold their opium to Chinese merchants they would receive silver in exchange (since it was a clandestine trade) which they then paid into the East India Company’s treasury at Canton to cover the original auction price of the drug or to purchase bills of exchange. The Company then had plenty of silver available in Canton to purchase its tea.

Opium in smokable form caught on in China in a way few could have anticipated. Beginning with wealthy courtiers and bored Manchus, it came down in price as the trade expanded, taking root at all levels of society—farmers, peddlers, soldiers, monks, officials, and students joined the ranks of its users. As usage spread, the wholesale demand for foreign opium at Canton increased dramatically. By 1823 opium surpassed cotton as the primary British import from India into China. By 1828 the trade reached a balance overall, with the opium and cotton from India matching the value of the tea and silk that went out from Canton. But then the balance kept shifting in Britain’s favor and China’s long-standing advantage slipped away completely. In the first decade of the nineteenth century China had still enjoyed a net inflow of 26 million silver dollars from foreign trade. But by the century’s third decade 34 million silver dollars were shipped *out* of China. Up into the 1850s, China would continue to lose an average of 8 million silver dollars per year to its foreign trade.

Even so, as long as the East India Company maintained its monopoly over British trade between China and England, as well as control over the production of opium in its Indian territories, there was at least some kind of rational accounting behind the foreign opium traffic, cold as it may have been. However, so-called “Malwa” opium shipped from Bombay, which was produced in regions of western India outside of the Company’s control, emerged as strong competition for the “Patna” variety controlled by the Company, which drove down prices overall and increased supplies. Then, in response to free-trade lobbying in England, the British Parliament terminated the East India Company’s monopoly on British trade with China in 1833. By 1834 the Canton trade was opened up as a free-for-all where any private British firm with a ship to send to Canton could claim a piece of the lucrative trade, and the market quickly became oversaturated.

Meanwhile, the less scrupulous of the private merchants, such as the Scots William Jardine and James Matheson, began sending ships secretly up the coast of China to probe for new markets where they could conduct their trade. Whereas the East India Company had overseen the import of about 4,500 chests of opium per year earlier in the early 1800s, by 1830 with aggressive smuggling by private traders the total amount had more than tripled to about 15,000 chests. After the Company’s monopoly ended in 1834, the figures continued to rise: more than 20,000 chests in 1835, then passing 30,000 in 1836–37. At 133 pounds per chest, that was 2,000 tons of the drug, enough to supply what some estimated to be more than a million habitual users.



An opium-stacking room in Patna, India.

In South China, even families that housed no opium users and had no connection to the inland smuggling trade felt severe effects from what was happening at Canton and along the coast. China had two metallic currencies: silver ingots known as taels, and copper coins known as cash. Under normal circumstances one tael of silver was worth 1,000 cash. But with the loss of silver to foreign trade, exacerbated by the global shortage of the metal, its value in relation to copper rose steeply and the exchange rate followed. By the 1830s, depending on location, it could take 1,500 or 1,600 copper cash to purchase one tael of silver, sometimes as much as 2,600. Peasants, for the most part, lived their lives in the copper currency but the land tax quotas were figured in silver. Thus, their effective taxes and rents rose as the copper coinage they possessed lost its value relative to the silver they

owed. Independently of the health or moral effects of the opium trade, the currency imbalance caused many families and landowners in south China to slip into poverty as their money became worth less and less, until it was no longer sufficient to meet their heavy tax burdens.

The British were hardly unaware of the moral implications of their illegal drug trade in China. Missionaries led the way in attacking the “accursed traffic,” which they deemed a disgrace to the very country that considered itself a beacon of freedom and humanity after banning the institution of slavery in 1834. Not all missionaries, however, were in agreement; one, a Prussian missionary named Karl Gutzlaff, worked for Jardine and Matheson as an interpreter, rationalizing that their smuggling ships were the best way to sneak Chinese-language bibles into the country. The opium traders themselves argued that the Chinese weren’t serious about the illegality of the drug—the very ease with which they could unload their cargoes, and the eagerness of Chinese buyers to make purchases from them, they pointed out, were proof enough that the trade was, *de facto*, an acceptable one in China. Some affected a stance of cultural relativism, arguing that the smoking of opium was a Chinese custom on which Westerners were not qualified to pass judgment. Others claimed that opium use in China was no more or less harmful than the scourge of gin in England.

By the late 1830s, high-level Chinese officials were entering into serious debate about how the government should address the rising tide of opium smuggling, and—at least as pressing—the drain of silver that went along with it. Some argued in favor of legalization, recommending that the government allow the trade but establish a monopoly. They reasoned that it was proving impossible to stamp out opium usage domestically, but legalization would remove the corruption that surrounded the drug trade, and, by bringing it into the open, stem the flood of silver leaving the country. Further, it could be taxed to create a new source of badly needed government revenue. From the other side, however, more militant scholars who viewed China’s position as one of relative strength *vis-à-vis* the foreign merchants argued that the emperor should take aggressive measures to shut down the traffic completely before it could cause greater harm to the country.

In the end, the Daoguang emperor (1820–50) settled in favor of suppression. In December of 1838 he sent Lin Zexu, a talented official with impeccable moral credentials and a history of anti-opium crusading, to Canton to shut down the illegal trade. Attacking the foreign trade at its source seemed the only viable strategy for controlling opium. Despite several years of high-level anti-opium campaigns and moral exhortations from the emperor and his officials, at the ground level many if not most Chinese didn’t see opium trafficking or the use of the drug as a serious crime. When officials tried to crack down, villagers tended to protect their own. Furthermore, the internal traffic of opium in China encompassed a vast network of criminal gangs, fleets of fast boats crammed with oars, corrupt officials, and bribed police. In contrast, the small foreign compound at Canton provided a conveniently focused node at which to throttle the trade completely.



4. How opium was brought into China in the nineteenth century.

Arriving in March of 1839, Lin Zexu first took action against Chinese dealers and users in the city, arresting nearly 2,000 of the former and opening sanatoria for the latter to break their addictions. Then he turned to the British traders, demanding that they hand over their opium stocks and sign a pledge never to sell the drug again. When they refused, he ordered all of the Chinese employees and servants to leave the factory district and then put it under siege. Fearing for the safety of his countrymen, the British superintendent of trade Charles Elliot (who had been stationed there to supervise the wide range of independent British traders who had come to China since the end of the East India Company's monopoly) negotiated a settlement.

In a deeply significant move, Elliot convinced the reluctant British traders to hand over all of the opium they had—more than 1,300 tons in all, packed in some 20,283 chests—in exchange for a guarantee that the British government would make good for their loss. Faced with a stagnating and oversupplied market, the merchants readily took his offer and surrendered their stores of the drug to him, which he then handed over to Lin Zexu. Over the course of twenty-three days, Lin Zexu had the entire stock of foreign opium destroyed, his workers dissolving it into a mixture of water, lime, and salt and then washing it out to sea. When the process began, Lin offered a sacrifice to the Sea Spirit and wrote a poem to apologize for contaminating the sea. He advised that the creatures of the ocean might wish to move out of the way for the time being.

Back in England, the drums began beating for war. Firms with investments in the Chinese opium market lobbied hard for compensation from the government for their lost merchandise, while others pushed the foreign minister Lord Palmerston for action to punish what they saw as Lin Zexu's reckless endangerment of British subjects in China (by laying siege to the factory district) and his insult to British national honor. Others induced him to think of the great advantages to trade that could be had if the British should win a war against China and make them sign a treaty—a feat that the war's proponents believed would be nearly effortless. Others, however, warned that even if a victory of British naval forces on the Chinese coast might be a simple matter, if it caused the Chinese government to shut down trade with Britain in retaliation and cut off all supplies of tea, the results could be catastrophic.

The moral issues were clear enough to the British public. The cynical name of "Opium War" was coined by none other than *The Times*, which initially decried the "reckless negligence and gross incapacity of the Queen's ministers" in starting it and described the situation in China as "the case of a lawless and accursed traffick [*sic*], to be bolstered up by a flagitious and murderous war." (Later, however, once the launching of the war was a fait accompli, *The Times* would come fully on board.) In a lengthy speech in Parliament denouncing those who supported what he saw as a war on behalf of drug dealers, the young William Gladstone charged that "if [the British flag] were never to be hoisted except as it is now hoisted on the coast of China, we should recoil from its sight with horror." But in the end, economic interests won over moral ones by a hair's breadth. By a margin of only nine votes, out of more than 500 cast, the House of Commons defeated a motion of censure against Palmerston

and the other ministers of government, effectively giving them a parliamentary endorsement of their war in China.

It was a one-sided war, for the Qing dynasty had always faced its most serious threats on land and it possessed no navy to speak of. A British war fleet of sixteen naval vessels, four armed steamers, twenty-seven transports, and 4,000 soldiers from Ireland, Scotland, and India arrived in the South China Sea in June of 1840. The British first blockaded Canton, then made war up the coast, capturing the island of Zhoushan and fighting their way all the way up to the Dagu Forts which guarded the way to Beijing. Blaming Lin Zexu for provoking an unwanted war, the emperor had him stripped of rank and sent into exile, replacing him with a more conciliatory negotiator who settled an initial peace agreement in January of 1841. Unfortunately, the agreement satisfied neither side—the Chinese felt they had granted too much and the British felt they hadn't demanded enough—and so the war resumed again, with 10,000 more British troops being brought in from India. In February of 1841 the British laid siege to Canton, which was ransomed for six million silver dollars (paid mostly by the Chinese merchants of the city). The British continued to fight their way up the coast, then up the Yangzi River, and finally threatened the major city of Nanjing, at which point the Chinese finally surrendered and signed a treaty on August 29, 1842 to end the war.

The Treaty of Nanjing dismantled the Canton system, opening that city along with four others (Xiamen, Fuzhou, Ningbo, and Shanghai) as “treaty ports” where the British could live year-round, rent property, build homes, offices, and warehouses, station consuls, and largely govern themselves. Britain also took Hong Kong as a full-fledged colony. Tariffs were made more consistent, and British citizens were granted extraterritoriality—that is, while in the treaty ports they would be subject only to British law. Finally, China had to pay a massive indemnity of 21 million silver dollars, both as compensation for the opium Lin Zexu had destroyed in 1839 and as payment for Britain's costs in mounting the war. Over the next few years China would sign similar treaties with the Americans and French giving them the same rights as the British in China and guaranteeing them status as most-favored nations, hoping (in vain, as it would turn out) to avoid further conflict with the Western powers.

All of the favorable terms in the Treaty of Nanjing were on the British side, with no concessions to the Chinese, for which reason it—along with the other treaties like it that were to come—would be known as the “unequal treaties.” The one conspicuous absence from the Treaty of Nanjing, however—a convenient one, given the ignominy with which the opium trade was viewed back in Britain—was that it did not legalize the selling of opium. That would come later, as a quiet supplement to a treaty in 1860 that set an official tariff rate for the drug, but in 1842 when the Opium War ended, the British side was able to claim that the war had been entirely about the ostensibly nobler issues of free trade and protection for British citizens overseas, not for the protection of drug dealers.

In the aftermath of the Opium War, it was southern China that bore the full economic brunt of the Treaty of Nanjing. Foreign firms eagerly moved much of their operations northwards up the coast to the more advantageous port of Shanghai,



A street scene in Canton around the time of the Opium War.

which stood at the mouth of the Yangzi River along which much of China's tea and silk were produced. Canton's fortunes declined once it no longer held an imperial monopoly on foreign trade, and local merchant houses began going bankrupt. Hundreds of thousands of poor laborers in south China were put out of work by the decline in foreign trade, compounded by general economic malaise and natural disasters as the region suffered floods and famine in the mid-1840s. Some southern Chinese sought their fortunes abroad, taking passage to other countries in Southeast Asia or to the west coast of America after the Gold Rush of 1849. Others remained rooted but looked to new sources of security as imperial control weakened and social disorder continued to rise.

Several different kinds of social organization competed with the empire for subjects' loyalties at this time. There were secret societies, often referred to as Triads, that were often heavily involved in opium smuggling and which promised mutual protection to their members as they traveled along rivers and between towns. Minority ethnic ties were important as well, as tensions between the majority Han and other groups became especially fierce in hard times. As neighboring villages fought over land and water rights, minority groups relied on their own family and clan bonds to provide the security that government forces could not give them. And as with the White Lotus groups in the late eighteenth century, many peasants turned to informal religious groups, led by charismatic teachers who promised their followers improved health and, in the case of the millennial sects, survival of a coming apocalypse and rewards in the new world it would usher in. All of these groups had in common that they easily drew the suspicions of imperial authorities. They also had in common that when the government acted on its suspicions, trying to suppress them or arrest their leaders, they were likely to turn against the dynasty itself. It was a vicious cycle repeated many times over in which informal social networks built on mutual aid might, under pressure from the government, metastasize into full-blown rebellions.

The largest rebellion of all, which would bring the Qing dynasty to the edge of collapse, began humbly enough with a candidate for the civil service by the name of Hong Xiuquan. He was a member of the Hakka minority, many of whom lived in south China, and he was a talented scholar who competed for years at the difficult Confucian examinations that formed the sole gateway into an official career in China. After failing the exams repeatedly in the 1830s, he suffered a nervous breakdown, from which—after reading some translated Christian scriptures prepared by foreign missionaries—he emerged with the belief that he was the son of God, brother of Jesus Christ, and sent to earth to build a new Christian kingdom in China and destroy the Manchus.

Like the White Lotus teachers, Hong Xiuquan promised his converts salvation and positions of power in a new world to come. In the early 1840s he envisioned a future Heavenly Kingdom of Great Peace in which believers who helped him destroy the Manchus and the old Confucian civilization would be rewarded. This Heavenly Kingdom would be free of oppression and degradation, and it would be morally puritanical: opium, footbinding, slavery, prostitution, and gambling would all be forbidden. Everyone's needs would be provided for, and the people would live together in communal, utopian peace, worshipping the Christian God in Protestant churches. It was a powerful message to poor, disenfranchised imperial subjects at a time of economic depression and weak government control. And when an epidemic ravaged his home province in 1850, rumors spread that those who had prayed to Hong Xiuquan's God had been spared, a rumor believable enough to convince large numbers of new recruits to join his sect.

The Taiping Rebellion, as Hong Xiuquan's uprising would be known, began formally on January 11, 1851 when he proclaimed the advent of the Heavenly Kingdom and called on his followers to make war on the Manchus. Beginning with

an army of 10,000 believers wielding homemade weapons, the rebel movement proved wildly successful at drawing in large numbers of new followers as it gained momentum and moved north, conquering a series of walled cities and collecting weapons and treasure as it went. Imperial troops were caught unprepared, in part because military budgets had been cut to the bone for nearly fifty years as a result of the corruption of the White Lotus campaigns. By January of 1853 the Taiping had captured the major Yangzi entrepôt of Wuchang—the linchpin of central China—at which point they numbered half a million soldiers and followers. That March they went on to capture Nanjing, the original capital of the Ming dynasty, where they slaughtered the entire Manchu population. Renaming the city their “Heavenly Capital,” they dug in at Nanjing for a ten-year civil war that would, by its end, kill at least 20 million people by warfare, disease, and starvation.

At first, the foreign powers kept a wary distance from the rebellion. Nanjing was only 200 miles up the Yangzi from Shanghai, where the British and other foreign traders had just moved many of their investments from Canton. With little knowledge of what was actually happening at Nanjing, the Westerners were torn between fear of a Taiping attack on Shanghai that might destroy their trade, and hope that the rebels might turn China into a Christian country that would be friendlier to the West than the Qing dynasty had been. At the outset some outsiders welcomed the Taiping as the liberators of the Chinese people from the Manchus while missionaries would eventually turn on them, charging that the rebels were merely destructive zealots who had perverted the doctrines of Christianity by presuming their leader to be the son of God.

The Taiping communal utopia never took root, and was all but abandoned by the late 1850s—it simply proved too difficult for the rebels to change habits and social practices that had been ingrained into the Chinese population for centuries. Nevertheless, the rebel movement continued to pose a grave military threat to the dynasty. By 1859 a new government was formed under Hong Xiuquan’s cousin Hong Rengan, who had lived in Hong Kong with foreign missionaries and spoke English. Among other proposals, he called for equal diplomacy with Westerners, free trade, and the development of railroads and steamship lines in China. He also launched a new offensive against Qing forces that met with remarkable success. By 1860 the vast rebel armies had surged eastward from Nanjing to conquer most of the Yangzi delta provinces, controlling a population of tens of millions. Meanwhile, in the vacuum of imperial power as the Qing tried helplessly to contain the Taiping, other rebellions broke out all over China, including a major Muslim revolt in the southwest and a bandit rebellion in north China with a roving army of 40,000 soldiers on horseback. The empire was coming apart at the seams.

Although the British initially maintained neutrality in the civil war between the Qing dynasty and the Taiping rebels, the empire’s troubles did not prevent them from making demands to revise the Treaty of Nanjing. The British wanted more treaty ports and were angry that Canton had not been opened as agreed. They therefore launched a renewed war against China right on top of all of the rebellions the dynasty was facing at the same time. Known as the Arrow War, or Second Opium War, its



The re-conquest of Suzhou from the rebels during the Taiping Civil War.

ignominious *casus belli* was that in 1856 Chinese authorities had boarded the *Arrow*, a Chinese smuggling ship flying the British flag, and allegedly struck its colors. This was taken as an insult to Britain and justification to attack Canton.

This time, Parliament staunchly opposed another war in China. Palmerston, however, simply called new elections—dubbed the “Chinese Elections” by the British press—in which the pro-war politicians were returned to power in a popular landslide. A joint expedition was launched with the French under Lord Elgin and Baron Gros, which occupied Canton in 1857. In 1858 the joint force fought its way past the Dagu Forts and to Tianjin, a stepping-stone to Beijing, where the Chinese capitulated. Among other concessions, the new treaty opened ten more treaty ports—no longer just on the coast but inland up the Yangzi as well—and it finally granted Macartney’s long-deferred request by allowing the British to station a permanent minister in Beijing.

The treaty was brought back to England for ratification, and a year later Elgin’s younger brother (who was slated to be the British minister in Beijing), returned to China to exchange signed copies with the emperor. By this time, however, the emperor had decided to refuse the treaty. Qing forces sprang a surprise attack on the British fleet when it arrived at the Dagu Forts, sinking several of the ships and killing or wounding more than 400 British marines and sailors. It was a deeply humiliating loss for the British, and surely enough, the passage of another year saw the return of Elgin himself at the head of a massive British and French fleet, one of the largest ever



WHAT WE OUGHT TO DO IN CHINA.



The aftermath of a British-French attack on the Dagu forts in 1860.

assembled, on a mission of pure revenge. The new fleet smashed its way through the coastal defenses at Dagu and its land forces swept past Tianjin, then marched on Beijing to force the emperor to sign the treaty.

As the British and French army approached, the young Xianfeng emperor (1850–61)—grandson to Jiaqing and great-grandson to Qianlong—abandoned his capital and fled north, leaving his brother behind to make peace. But by the time Lord Elgin reached Beijing, he had decided that there was far more at stake than just a treaty; the emperor needed to be taught a lesson. On the excuse of reprisal for the

Opposite: The British fantasy of teaching China a lesson.



Ruins of the Summer Palace, destroyed by British troops in 1860.



5. Uprisings and invasions during the late Qing.

Manchus having kidnapped and tortured a small band of British and French personnel during the fighting, Elgin ordered his forces to destroy the emperor's Summer Palace.

The Summer Palace of the Qing emperors was considered one of the wonders of the world in the nineteenth century, a gorgeous and sprawling 800-acre complex of ornate palaces and gardens just a few miles outside of Beijing. Macartney had stayed there during the embassy of 1793. It was in one of the Summer Palace's halls that his technician had assembled the great planetarium and lenses with which he hoped in vain to impress the Qianlong emperor. But whereas the British had come to the palace then as guests and supplicants, seeking audience with an emperor at the climax of his power, in 1860 they came instead as destroyers. Over the course of three days in October, British forces looted the buildings of the Summer Palace (uncovering, along the way, several gifts left by Macartney nearly seventy years earlier). Then they burned everything they could to the ground.

Broken by internal rebellions and now crushed decisively by European forces, the Qing dynasty at the end of 1860 was on the verge of collapse. Xianfeng, the young emperor who fled into hiding, would never return to the capital. He would die a year later, leaving a mere child, his only son, to rule in his stead. The treasuries were bankrupt, the Taiping rebels ascendant, the imperial palace a smoking ruin. When the dynasty was first founded in Beijing in 1644, there were widely publicized divinations that predicted the Qing would rule for 200 years—an optimistic figure at the time, predicting a reign to rival some of the most glorious dynasties of the past. But by 1860 even the dynasty's supporters were beginning to realize that those two centuries had now passed. "A ruling house of two hundred years, endangered in an instant," wrote the scholar Zhao Liewen, heartbroken, when he heard the news from Beijing. "I never imagined the end would come so soon."