

The Treaty of Nanking: The first Opium War

After the failure of the Macartney mission in 1793, the British continued to trade with China through the Canton system, a system which was causing the British increasing angst. There was a demand in Britain and Europe in the 19th century for products from China, in particular tea, porcelain and silk. The British found themselves having to pay for their imports in silver because the Chinese were not interested in the goods Britain wanted to trade. The payment of silver was becoming an economic burden on Britain and was driving up prices. Britain was determined to end this trade deficit with China.

The British decided to pay for the tea by selling opium to China. Opium was already known and used in China but the British trade increased its use extensively. Opium was readily available from the poppy crops in India, a British colony. Before long the Chinese found themselves facing huge addiction problems. Opium dens sprang up in China and people were selling all their possessions just to acquire opium. British merchants, however, were not the only ones to benefit from the opium trade. Chinese merchants also profited from the trade and openly flouted imperial regulations trying to control the opium trade.

Sporadic attempts by the Chinese authorities to put an end to the trade were futile. An imperial edict of 1729 was largely ignored and European traders simply continued selling opium.

The British were also keen to expand their trading ports in China. Trade between European powers and China was still conducted through one port in China, Canton (Guangzhou). Permission to trade with Europeans was still restricted to a group of Chinese merchants officially approved by the Emperor, the hong.

Matters came to a head when the Emperor appointed a Commissioner in 1838 to stamp out the opium trade completely, Commissioner Lin Zexu. Lin was a man of high moral values who abhorred opium and the destructive effects of it and considered it an evil that had to be destroyed. He was highly regarded as a competent and morally upright official who advocated the principles of Confucius. There were some imperial advisers in China who recommended legalising the opium trade and thereby gaining central control over it. Lin was one of those who preferred to address the issue through traditional Confucian morality and who focused on the destructive social and economic impact of the drug on Chinese people. He was able to persuade the Emperor that it was an evil that had to be stamped out.

Lin travelled to Canton in early 1839 and had an immediate effect. He arrested almost 2000 Chinese opium dealers and confiscated over 20,000 opium pipes. However, he realised this would be only a temporary measure if the opium was not stopped at its source. He tried to persuade the British opium traders to exchange opium for tea. When this was unsuccessful, he resorted to force.

He confined the Western merchants to their 'factories' in Canton until they surrendered their opium stocks. More than a million kilos of opium were handed over and Lin then proceeded to destroy it all by digging large trenches, filling them with water, tossing the opium in with lime and salt and then opening the trenches for the mixture to flow into the Pearl River. British merchants were outraged. Lin ordered the merchants to leave Canton and they were not permitted to return until they agreed

to sign a document promising not to trade in opium. The British authorities tried to persuade the merchants not to sign.

Lin thought that any reaction by the British could be contained and that China's vast population could meet any British threat.

A British naval force attacked Chinese war junks in Kowloon harbour in 1839 and hostilities continued until China was defeated in 1842. This was the First Opium War which ended with China and Britain signing the Treaty of Nanking in 1842.