

Justifiers of the British Opium Trade: Arguments by Parliament, Traders, and the Times Leading Up to the Opium War

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In the events leading up to the Opium War, bilateral sovereignty and diplomacy were flouted in favor of British economic imperialism. Using sources from the British Parliament, London Times, and Canton opium traders to explain arguments from both the justifiers and the opposition to the smuggling trade in the years leading up to 1840, this paper examines the relevance of imperial prestige and ethnocentricity in political debates over British foreign policy in the mid-nineteenth century.

War in Defense of Drugs

Unlawful smuggling of opium had been taking place in Chinese ports for over a century when Commissioner Lin Zexu was appointed in 1839 to eradicate the opium trade in Canton, but official tensions between the Qing government and British representatives escalated soon after Lin demonstrated serious intent to fulfill his official duties. Following several unsuccessful edicts to ban the imports 1839, Lin blockaded the Canton port, keeping foreign merchants under house arrest until they surrendered their chests of opium for destruction. British forces, directed by Foreign Secretary Lord Palmerston, responded by sending a military expedition to Canton demanding reparations for the insult to British honor and £2 million loss of property in opium chests. These events set off the first Opium War in 1840.

What were the justifications used by officials and merchants for the opium trade in China, and how did they grapple with the moral implications of declaring war to defend illicit sales of an poisonous drug in a country which forbade its importation? Members of the British Parliament, the East India Company, and British merchants who traded opium in Chinese ports were all complicit in the sale of an addictive substance, in defiance of the Qing's efforts to stop it. How did these groups

justify their roles in the opium trade, and what did these reasons show about imperialist tendencies towards China in the nineteenth century?

This paper will first outline a short history of the events leading up to the 1840 military expedition, looking at primary sources from top officials and merchants involved in the dispute. It will then examine the arguments in support of the expedition, given by British traders in Canton and the Indian opium merchants who supplied their cargo. Next, it will analyze the coverage of these issues in the London *Times* throughout this period. The *Times* was by far the most widely read newspaper in the 1840s, with a circulation of 38,100 (its five major rivals only reached a combined total of 18,000).¹ Finally, it will summarize Parliament's debates on the war with China, which took place in April of 1840. This exploration of the trade incentives, public news coverage, and government justifications of the opium trade will provide several insights on the British Empire's attitudes and approaches to economic imperialism in overseas trade.

To summarize briefly, the justifications for military action in response to Lin's destruction of opium chests fall under several broad categories:

1. Laws of the Free Market: The Chinese wanted to buy the opium

anyway, so the British could not be held morally accountable for responding to consumer demand. Even if they sanctioned themselves, the Chinese would not stop purchasing opium, and other foreign merchants would take their profits.

2. Government-Sanctioned Property Rights: Opium merchants had operated under the unofficial approval of the British government for decades without sanction, and could not be reasonably expected to assume anything other than full protection of their cargo as property. They demanded payment for their lost cargo, either from the Treasury or by force from the Qing government.

3. Threat of Economic Upheaval: Opium was one of the most lucrative exports in the British trading empire, and India depended on supplying opium to Canton merchants to sustain its economy. A ban on opium would cripple Indian trade and dry up a crucial source of colonial revenue, imposing a heavy Treasury or taxpayer burden on Britain to support India's economic stability.

4. British Honor and Prestige: The ignominy of British citizens having to suffer deprivation of their liberties under Lin's house arrest incensed many Englishmen. Restoring the prestige of the Crown in Canton, as well as redressing the insults suffered by British traders, were the primary reasons Palmerston used to justify the expedition.

5. Arrogance of the Chinese: Numerous British accounts of Lin and the Qing government expressed dissatisfaction at the conceited and overbearing rhetoric in Lin's edicts and letters, which treated Britain as an inferior power and did not pay

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full tribute to the British Crown's supremacy in the global order. Many merchants called on Britain to demonstrate its naval power in full force, teaching the 'barbarians' a lesson and dispelling Chinese notions of racial superiority.²

Subsequent sections will highlight these elements while studying the various source sets of merchant correspondence, public news, and Parliamentary debate. The next section will briefly sketch the history of official escalation leading up to Britain's military expedition to Canton.

History and Pre-1840 Imperialist Attitudes

In the decade before the war, the British sent high-ranking diplomats such as Lord Napier as envoys to negotiate around the unfavorable Canton Trade laws and "open up" Chinese ports to British trade. From 1834 onwards, the Qing government itself debated the legalization of opium, but ultimately decided against it and appointed Commissioner Lin Zexu to eliminate the trade in China completely. Lin's diplomatic counterpart was Charles Elliot, British Chief Superintendent of Trade in China, who became involved in extraterritoriality disputes and ultimately banned all trade with Guangzhou in 1839—the final escalation before the war.

In 1837, the Qing Emperor issued several commands to Superintendent Elliot to stop the opium traffic and remove ships which stored contraband cargo.³ Elliot claimed that he had neither the authority to stop opium traffic from non-British ships, nor the means to regulate smugglers in addition to his oversight of regular trade.⁴ Commissioner Lin Zexu was appointed in 1839—a vigorous administrator with a strict reputation against corruption.⁵ He was determined from the beginning to stamp out opium trade, and saw Canton as a "complete cesspool of corruption."⁶ Lin acted decisively—

within three days of giving notice by official edict, he shut down trade in Canton, closed the customs office and walled the foreign traders in the port's factories until they surrendered all their opium cargo. Under pressure from the surrounding military forces, Elliot capitulated and coordinated these efforts, thus convincing Lin that his previous protests about a lack of authority over the merchants were nonsense. Thousands of chests of opium were handed over by the merchants for Lin and destroyed.

In April 1839, the blockade was lifted and Lin commanded that bonds be signed by all merchants that they would no longer smuggle opium, on pain of execution if found with the contraband.⁷ This called into question the issue of jurisdiction, as the British citizens refused to be subject to what they regarded as barbaric Chinese law. This dilemma also drew in the broader question of whether the British regarded Chinese law as legitimate constraints on imperial trade interests at all, since the entire opium trade itself had flouted Chinese laws for decades.

After meeting with William Jardine, the top opium trader in Canton, Palmerston immediately wrote to the Prime Minister, William Melbourne, to discuss a military expedition. One historian, Brian Inglis, observed:

The way the questions were put shows that Palmerston had already pre-judged the issue. The confiscated opium was not contraband, it was 'property.' The merchants from whom it was taken were not smugglers, they were 'suffering parties.'⁸

The ethical disparities over opium smuggling presented themselves most clearly in the form of failed appeals for cooperation from the Chinese side. In 1840, Lin wrote a letter to Queen Victoria, signed by the Emperor, which was entrusted to Captain Warner of the *Thomas Coutts*:

Where is your conscience? I

have heard that the smoking of opium is very strictly forbidden by your country... Since it is not permitted to do harm to your own country, then even less should you let it be passed on to the harm of other countries—how much less to China.⁹

Lin accused the British who condoned the opium trade as "careful of [their] own lives, but careless of the lives of other people, indifferent in [their] greed for gain to the harm [they did] to others. Such conduct [was] repugnant to human feeling, and at variance with the Way of Heaven."¹⁰ Lin had attempted to send a previous letter in 1839, which was rejected by Elliot on the grounds of addressing the Queen on equal diplomatic terms. His second letter reached England, but was rejected by Palmerston in the Foreign Office, because Captain Warner had signed Lin's bond. The letter never reached the Queen or anyone in the British government.

It was evident from these events that to some extent, Palmerston already regarded Chinese laws and diplomats as subordinate to the Crown, and did not regard China as an equal diplomatic counterpart with full legal rights within its territories. The issue, then, was which British interests (trade revenues, legal jurisdiction, imperial prestige) would supersede its regard for Chinese laws enough to warrant force to ensure compliance. Historian Harry G. Gelber counted "the future arrangement of China's trade with the outside world and...the question of controlling China's coasts and borders" among the factors that Palmerston took into consideration in going to war.¹¹ These factors demonstrated that the war was not intended create an imperial relationship with China, but to validate by force what was already implicitly assumed in practice.

Opium Traders and the Imperial Distance

The merchants of Canton made it an open secret that they had been carrying cargoes of opium for decades, but staunchly avoided responsibility for opium's effects in China. They evaded ethical complications by depicting themselves as agents of government-sanctioned free trade, distancing themselves economically, culturally, and politically from the iniquities of the trade itself. William Jardine and his partner James Matheson owned the company (Matheson Jardine) that was the largest importer of opium into China. Jardine once wrote to a missionary boarding his ship:

We have no hesitation in stating to you openly that our principal reliance is on opium...[which] by many is considered an immoral traffic, yet such traffic is so absolutely necessary to give any vessel a reasonable chance of defraying her expenses, that we trust you will have no objection...¹²

A pamphlet signed by "A British Merchant," (most likely either Jardine or Matheson), argued that the sale of opium was not immoral because "the people of China were only too willing to receive it. Surely, therefore, 'no morale will be urged against it.'"¹³ Chinese people were culturally different and therefore somehow culpable for their addiction, or simply less immoral to exploit through abusive transactions.

The "merchants of death" also placed a political distance between themselves and their victims, offloading culpability to the British government and the Indian economy. The Committee of the London East India and China Association submitted a memorandum to Palmerston in 1839, pointing out that Parliamentary committees had enquired minimally into the trade, with a full knowledge of the destination and content of cargo as well as the amount of revenue it

generated, and that it seemed "most unjust to throw any blame or odium attaching to the opium trade upon the merchants, who engaged in a business thus directly and indirectly sanctioned by the highest authorities."¹⁴ British merchants in Calcutta wrote to the Privy Council, arguing that the opium trade was both "eagerly sought after by the Chinese people" and "fostered into its recent magnitude by every means that ingenuity could devise on the part of the British Government of India."¹⁵ They pointed out that the government "consulted on every occasion the wants and needs of Chinese consumers," and provided charts showing that roughly 85% of the opium shipped out from Calcutta was dispatched directly in to China.¹⁶ The contraband sale of opium, in the eyes of the traders, had always "flourished through the connivance of Government officers," and any blame on the merchants would be shared by government agents as well.¹⁷

One famous pamphlet circulated in 1840 was *The Opium Question* by literary talent Samuel Warren (to whom Matheson was a patron). In it, he argued that merchants could not be held accountable for the moral rights and wrongs of dealing the drug when the British government explicitly condoned the Company's activities.¹⁸ Warren compared opium to smuggled French brandy or lace:¹⁹

Has any British merchant engaged in the opium trade ever fancied, or had reason to fancy,--although carrying it on every moment under the eye, and paying tribute for it into the pocket of Government, that it was during these forty-three years *illegal*, except in mere name?²⁰...Do we venture to call them smugglers?...Are they not some of our most eminent British merchants—men whose names would command respect and confidence in Great Britain and in India—in short, in every quarter of the world where

commercial enterprise, honour, and good faith are known?²¹

Other merchants sent reports detailing the revenue that the opium trade brought annually to India, and forecasts of silver that would be lost to the crown if it were halted. If the opium trade dried up, "such was the dependence of the Indian economy on their efforts that commerce in general would come tumbling down in ruins... [having] a catastrophic effect on firms in Britain which had trading interests in the east." The silver bullion leaking out of Chinese coffers also purchased cargo to fuel Britain's own national addiction to tea. This elevation of the worth of profit margin to lives, where the quality of life to a British subject was more than the actual life of a Chinese addict, was only possible in an imperialist mindset buffered by a physical and cultural distance.

Richard Cobden, a critic of British imperial expansion, tried to acknowledge positive outcomes to the opium business: "[i]n a modern world of investment and trade, China and Japan could not possibly be allowed to remain isolated; and in any case, free trade was the blood-brother of international peace, welfare and virtue, even of Christian advancement."²² Yet the Opium War expedition showed that the mantra of economic imperialism was above all to maintain favorable trade relations for the empire, whether it was with a free country or one under British control.

The Public and British Honor in the *Times*

The British public had little or no awareness of the events in Canton until London newspapers began reporting events several months after they took place. Palmerston did not receive news of the March 1839 blockade until August, and the London *Times* began reporting on the events at that time as well. British opinion appeared to be split on the ethical issues,

and the opium trade was not generally a topic of great national concern. The most salient matter seemed to be that the Chinese insulted British dignity and pride by mistreating the expatriate families during the blockade. In the debate over whether to go to war, both sides of the public debate tried to claim the high ground of regaining British honor and national prestige.

In August, 1839, the *Times* focused on publicizing the factual development of events in Canton, and reprinted primary documents forwarded from the *Chinese Repository*, a merchant-funded expatriate periodical from Canton. Presumably in an effort to show both sides of the controversy, the August 7th *Times* reprinted a merchant petition to the Queen requesting compensation for their lost property on the same page as an edict from Commissioner Lin. The merchants pointed out the capital benefits derived from the opium trade to the government, and appealed for a speedy redress of their violated property rights.²³ Lin, comparing the great benefits of the tea trade to British citizens to the great harm of opium imports to Chinese consumers, argued that British conduct would “rouse[] indignation in every human heart, and [was] utterly inexcusable in the eyes of celestial reason.”²⁴ This emotional appeal was then followed by several haughty threats about how the great might of the Celestial empire, which stretched for thousands of miles, would put an end to British livelihoods.

Yet as the *Times* continued to report while events unfolded, a pattern emerged of public attention on British honor and prestige. The *Times* did print features by one or two prominent critics of opium, including an excerpt by Reverend Thelwall’s book *Iniquities of the Opium Trade With China*. Nevertheless, it seemed that the British public was most aroused not by the moralistic accounts of opium’s destructive effects in China, but by the sensational ignominies suffered by

their countrymen by the hands of the brutal and vulgar Chinese barbarians. Contrary to Lin’s mistaken belief, opium was not illegal in Britain and was commonly prescribed as a prescription drug, laudanum. Charming old ladies would take it nightly before bed, and it was seen as no worse than gin or tobacco. Lin, on the other hand, had committed an “unquestionable atrocity” by blockading and then expelling British countrymen by force, gravely insulting their honor and causing subjects of the Queen to lose face abroad.²⁵

Less than a week after the first reports from Canton, the *Times* published another detailed, more sensational account of the blockade and events on the ground. The Chinese forces were reportedly using “intimidation” tactics, “threatening the lives of the Hong merchants,” and “depriving the foreigners resident [there] of their liberty.”²⁶ The story included excerpts written by Elliot to the Canton Press from March about the “dangerous, unprecedented, and unexplained circumstance...imminent hazard of life and property, and total disregard of honor and dignity” suffered by merchant families. Readers pieced together details from the scene, recalling from the last story “the threatening language of the High Commissioner... of the most general application, and dark and violent character.”²⁷

The subsequent forced expulsion of British families from Macao did even more to stir public anger at the insult to British dignity. Readers were offended to find out about English women and children being “exposed to dark and nameless insults and dangers at the hands of dirty Chinese ruffians.”²⁸ Women were still placed on a Victorian pedestal of innocence and purity, and this above all galvanized Englishmen to call for action. Many might have echoed Samuel Warren’s sentiments in *The Opium Question*:

In the name of the dear glory and honour of old England, where are the councils which

will hesitate for a moment in cleansing them, even if it be in blood, from the stains which barbarian insolence has so deeply tarnished them?...Why are there not seen and heard there, by those incredulous and vaunting barbarians, the glare and thunder of our artillery?²⁹

The paradigm shift on the ethical grounds for war were noted and adopted by the opposition. On April 25, 1840, the *Times* reported on a Freemasons’ meeting condemning the war. The speakers attempted to shame the government for pursuing a war that bungled “a question involving the honour of the British nation and our Christian character.”³⁰ These groups opposed the war using the same language of maintaining British prestige by not fighting, as well as the religious and moral high ground of converting more Chinese through goodwill instead of violence. These sentiments were also imperialist in themselves, as they prioritized the reputation of British honor and good reputation abroad. The moral question of selling deadly drugs to Chinese addicts in contravention of jurisdictional law had been tabled and forgotten.

Skirting the Ethics: The Parliamentary Debates

After the Government sent an expedition to “obtain reparations for the Insults and Injuries offered to Her Majesty’s Superintendent and Her Majesty’s subjects,” unconfirmed news reports of military operations began trickling back into London in early 1840.³¹ By March, Palmerston had admitted to the expedition under repeated queries from the Opposition. Arguments over the war took place during three debates—all unsuccessful motions to excoriate the government’s reasons and methods for going to war. On April 7, Sir Robert Peel moved to censure the Majority’s expedition. This set off a three-day debate in the

House of Commons, which Palmerston won 271 to 261. Sir James Graham then brought a motion to ban the trade, which was again lost in the Commons. In the House of Lords, Lord Stanhope echoed the minority's condemnation, but the ensuing debate split the opposition position so that he was forced to withdraw his motion without calling for a vote.

In all these debates, the topic of opium was exceedingly awkward as both sides tried to navigate around thorny ethical issues like protecting opium production in India and British profits made from that revenue source. The Opposition focused its attacks on Government bungling its relations with Chinese officials and allowing misunderstandings to get this far, but was not opposed to fighting the war itself. Even William Gladstone, who eloquently denounced the moral vicissitudes of the opium trade, stopped short of demanding that the military operations in India come to a halt.³² These omissions made the debate focused ethnocentrically on the issue of the British countrymen's honor. Moreover, the lack of minority resistance to the war itself undercut the opposition's claims to the moral high ground and revealed the underlying imperial motive behind both sides. Why would the opposition allow a war if they truly believed that the Chinese had the moral and legal right to try to stop the immoral opium trade, and that the British Government should have cooperated more fully with them?

In the House of Commons, speakers in the minority tried to occupy the moral high ground, but fell short of trying to put a halt to the expedition even as they called it an unjust war. Sidney Herbert said that Britain was "contending with an enemy whose cause of quarrel is better than [its] own, and that it was "a war without just cause" to "maintain a trade resting on unsound principles, and to justify proceedings which [were] a disgrace to the British flag."³³ William

Gladstone further accused the entire British community of being involved in the traffic, and even pointed out how merchants and officials alike had been deceptive in saying they could do nothing about it: "Does the Minister not know that the opium smuggled into China comes exclusively from British ports, that it is from Bengal and through Bombay?...we require no preventive service to put down this illegal traffic. We have only to stop the sailings of the smuggling vessels..."³⁴ In a career-making speech, he claimed that "a war more unjust in its origins, a war more calculated in its progress to cover this country with permanent disgrace, I do not know and I have not read of."³⁵ Gladstone also appealed to the British sense of honor by rhetorically shaming the crown, calling the British flag a "pirate flag, to protect infamous traffic."³⁶ The fundamental hole in his reasoning was his omission of judgment on the treatment and jurisdiction of the British merchants in Canton. If his reasoning held true that opium trading was illegal piracy and that the Chinese had the jurisdictional right to enforce laws on their own coasts, there would be no reason to not allow them to expel criminals from their territories. By refusing to pass judgment on the value of "national honor," he left the debate open to the majority to emphasize the inherently greater value of British subjects' offended dignity, which outweighed considerations of Chinese lives or legal authority.

Along the majority bench, familiar themes of free trade incentives, unalterable addiction, and national prestige emerged in the speeches. In a three-hour opening speech, Sir James Graham reasoned that it would be unfair to bar British traders alone from participating in the lucrative business of selling opium, while other opium importers such as the Americans reaped the benefits. They would win Britain's market share in the opium business, and increase their profits by millions that would otherwise go to

the crown.³⁷ Melbourne agreed that "opium was probably less harmful than gin and anyway it was the Chinese who insisted on smoking it...unless one reduced demand, there was no point in trying to strangle only one of several sources of supply."³⁸ Palmerston distanced the British culturally from the sins of addiction, blaming the Chinese for opium demand. Why was it on the shoulders of the British to consider "preserving the morals of the Chinese people, who were disposed to buy what other people were disposed to sell them?"³⁹

The mantra of British imperial prestige emerged clearly in these debates. Sir G. Thomas Staunton cautioned the floor: "Parliament should remember that the entire British Empire was founded on prestige. If they submitted to insults from China, British political ascendancy would collapse."⁴⁰ Thomas Macaulay, the Secretary of State for War, argued that the Chinese government had the right to restrict opium but not to seize "our innocent countrymen, and insult[] the Sovereign in the person of her representative." Britain was going to war so that its subjects could "look with confidence on the victorious flag which was hoisted over them, which reminded them that they belonged to a country unaccustomed to defeat, to submission or to shame...surrounded as they were by enemies, and separated by great oceans and continents from all help, not a hair of their heads would be harmed by impunity..."⁴¹ The war in Canton was essentially a signaling ground for British supremacy, to formally assert royal control over the resources of an region informally controlled by economic imperialism, and to demonstrate the empire's treatment of subordinate races who imagined themselves equal to the Crown.

Palmerston attempted to place the expedition in a less exploitative international context. In his closing speech, he argued that Lin "put down the opium trade by acts of arbitrary

authority against British merchants—a course totally at variance with British law, totally at variance with international law...⁷⁴² The British were setting things right. It was ironic that he appealed to international law, British jurisdiction and sovereignty, because the whole incident arose precisely because the same considerations were not afforded to the Chinese. His final proposal further eroded the ground for international sovereignty: “The actions of the Chinese Commissioner had been ‘unjust and no better than robbery’. A joint British, American, and French naval force should be stationed on the Chinese coast to look after Western interests.”⁷⁴³ However thinly masked the imperial motives, they were shared by a majority of the British Parliament. The Opium War forced open Chinese ports and crippled the Qing government’s legitimacy, allowing the British to demand concession of China’s coastal territories and economic resources to the imperial economy for the next century.

Conclusion

The relationship between British officials and the Qing government was notable in that the British were dealing with a fully-formed government of a foreign state rather than a colony of a protectorate which they already controlled. Yet the British government did not view China as a real government and diplomatic equal, but rather as an informal colony whose laws were not to be taken seriously and whose demands were an affront to the Crown. For opium merchants in Canton, the laws were made to be flouted, and the British economic interests warranted a willful disregard to the human suffering inflicted by the opium trade. This was made easier by the cultural distancing tactic of devaluing the lives of Chinese addicts, as well as the abdication of culpability to instead blame British government agents, who had condoned the trade for decades. For the British public and

Parliamentary officials, the justification for war was to redeem the British reputation and prestige abroad, which had been sullied by Commissioner Lin’s audacious treatment of English subjects as criminals. The opposition’s supposed neutrality on China’s anti-opium policies and the ethics of the opium trade met with an inherent contradiction when they allowed a war that defended the opium merchants as victims instead of criminals. Ultimately, both the justifiers and the opposition to the Opium War opted for an ethnocentric presumption in the interests of their countrymen and the British reputation abroad—revealing just how deeply the vein of economic imperialism was rooted in nineteenth-century British consciousness.

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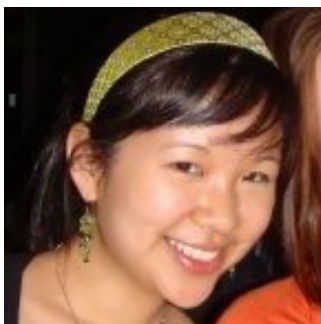
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