
UNIT 2 THE OPIUM WARS IN CHINA*

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2.0 OBJECTIVES

The aim of this Unit is to make you familiar with the dramatic events of the Opium Wars in China (1840-42 and 1858-60) and to place these events in the context of the evolution of Sino-Western relations in the 19th century.

After reading this Unit, you will be able to:

- learn about the background to, and the main events of, the Opium Wars;
- explain the nature of the Chinese response to the Western presence in China in this period; and
- assess the nature and impact of these wars and their significance in modern Chinese history.

2.1 INTRODUCTION

The Opium Wars represent the first major armed confrontation between China and the modern West. But, more than that, they were a watershed in Chinese history. This was because they exposed in a startling way the military, technological and political weaknesses of the Chinese Empire. They set off a chain of developments in China's relations with the West, in which the Western powers used their superior military strength to wrest concession after concession

from the Chinese Empire and to consolidate and expand their own interests there. In addition, they hastened the process of the disintegration of the Chinese Empire, and stimulated the forces of reform, modernization and nationalism which were to be instrumental in the shaping of a new China. In fact, it is common among scholars to date the beginning of modern Chinese history to the period of the Opium Wars. For all these reasons, it is important for any student of Chinese history to know about the Opium Wars. The following sections deal with various aspects related to these Wars.

2.2 BACKGROUND

To have a proper understanding of the Opium Wars we must look at their historical background.

2.2.1 Some Features of Traditional Chinese Foreign Relations

Some of the basic premises underlying the external relations of the Chinese Empire and the traditional Chinese world view have already been explained in Unit 1 of this course. However, it is important to go over some of these again in this Unit to understand the context in which the Opium Wars took place.

The traditional Chinese system of foreign relations was moulded by two important factors. One of these was the pre-eminent position of the Chinese Empire in East Asia — its overwhelming size, wealth, power, high cultural level and basic self-sufficiency in most material values. The other factor was the ever-present military threat from the nomadic and semi-nomadic peoples on China's northern and western borders. These two factors in combination gave rise to certain apparently contradictory features in traditional China's external relations and world outlook. On the one hand, it gave rise to a degree of complacency, self-confidence and pride bordering on arrogance in the attitude towards other people and states (sometimes termed "Sino-centrism" by modern scholars). On the other hand, it gave rise to a definite sense of insecurity, as well as to a hard-headed practicality and pragmatism in the Chinese Empire's actual dealings with foreign people and countries. Hence, the traditional Chinese system of foreign relations was a very complex and intricate mechanism, in which cultural, military, economic and political factors all played an important part.

In the course of its more than 2000 years of history, the relations of the Chinese Empire with other countries went through many vicissitudes. There were long periods of peaceful economic, cultural and political relations, in which the Chinese Empire faced no major external threat or challenge to its supremacy in the region. There were also repeated raids and incursions by militarily powerful neighbouring people, which sometimes resulted in their conquest of all or part of China. However, after several centuries of evolution, fairly well-defined and systematized methods of regular peaceful intercourse with other states and peoples came into being.

Traditional Chinese political theory did not recognize a strict distinction between "domestic affairs" and "external relations" as we understand it today. The Emperor of China was considered the ruler of "all under Heaven" (Tianxia). Therefore, the external boundaries of the Chinese Empire were not clearly defined. However, even in theory it was accepted that the fringes of the Empire

were inhabited by so-called “barbarian” people who did not follow the same cultural or social patterns as the Chinese themselves, and who had their own rulers and systems of government. Much has been said about this term “barbarian”. It has been greatly misunderstood and interpreted (especially by scholars and officials of the modern West) to be a form of slander and even hostility towards non-Chinese people. However, it would be more correct to understand the Chinese term “barbarians” to mean simply those who were different, and those who did not fully subscribe to the Chinese way of life.

While the Chinese recognized the need to devise ways to deal with these alien people, ‘the initiative to have relations with the Chinese Empire usually came from those people rather than from the Chinese Empire itself. The exceptions to this rule were those few periods in Chinese history (such as during the Han and Tang dynasties) when the rulers of China embarked on ambitious programmes of expansion and conquest. In general, various foreign people and the envoys of various states came to China:

- for the purpose of trade,
- for cultural or religious purposes, or
- to seek political recognition or legitimacy from the Emperor of China.

In the case of those who participated in border trade, as well as pilgrims, etc., they were usually dealt with by the local officials of the areas which they visited. In the case of official envoys to the Imperial Court, they were usually handled by the Board of Rites which concerned itself with matters of protocol. But it is significant that, until the later 19th century, China had no central department or ministry for foreign relations.

The point being made here is that the Chinese Empire followed a wide variety of norms and practices for dealing with the different peoples and states with which it interacted. However, mainly because of the writings of Western observers and scholars from the 19th century onwards, the traditional Chinese system of foreign relations has been portrayed as a rigid system, mainly identified with two features i.e. the presentation of tribute, and the kowtow. Tribute was the term the Chinese used to describe the gifts presented to the Emperor by official foreign delegations, while the kowtow was the ceremonial prostration they were expected to perform in front of the Emperor. It is true that both tribute and the kowtow were designed to emphasize the superiority of the Emperor of China, and that this superiority was not acceptable to most Western powers and their envoys. However, the Chinese did not insist that all foreigners who came to China must present tribute or perform the kowtow, but only insisted on it from those envoys who wanted to be received by the Emperor himself. They did not make it a pre-condition for all those who wanted to engage in trade or other activities. The treatment of Arabs who conducted a lucrative trade at Canton for centuries, as well as of the Russians who resided in Peking from the 17th century, are examples of the flexibility of the Chinese in such matters. It was not so much the tribute system or the kowtow, but other pressing economic and political matters that made Britain and other Western powers go to war with the Chinese Empire in the mid-19th century and force it to change its system of dealing with foreign countries.

2.2.2 Early Contact between China and the West, and the Canton System

A sea-going trade between China and Europe had been conducted ever since the Portuguese arrived off the South China coast in the early 1500s. A full century later, the Portuguese were joined by the British and the Dutch, who were both emerging as major maritime powers. British trade with China was the monopoly of the East India Company.

The period from the mid-17th to the mid-18th century saw many ups and downs in the fortunes of this sea-going trade. In the first place, this was related to domestic political developments within China. In 1644, the Ming dynasty which had ruled for nearly three centuries was overthrown and the forces of the Manchus, a non-Chinese people from beyond the north-eastern borders, swept over North China. The Manchus succeeded in setting up their own dynasty, the Qing, with its capital at Peking very rapidly. But it took nearly two decades of bloody civil war to establish their complete supremacy over the whole of China. Since the main centres of resistance to the new rulers lay in the coastal provinces of South and Central China and in the Island of Taiwan, it was not unnatural that coastal trade was severely disrupted in this period. In fact, the Manchus took the extraordinary step of evacuating the entire population among a 25 km. wide belt of the south-central coast for an eight year period, from 1661-1669. Even after these measures were lifted, and the resistance to the Qing dynasty ended, the Qing rulers maintained their suspicion of maritime activity, and in particular of any dealings between the local Chinese population of the coast and foreigners. They also regarded the sea, not unjustifiably, as a nest of pirates and smugglers. In spite of their suspicion and fear of the sea, the Manchus did not build or maintain a strong navy. They relied mainly on coastal fortifications and other defensive measures to deter trouble makers from the sea and maintain order in the coastal areas.

However, this did not mean that the Qing rulers were hostile to a controlled trade and other relations with the Europeans. Several ports were open to trade with the foreigners. Under the reign of the Kangxi Emperor the Europeans, and particularly the Jesuits, were welcomed. However, following a bitter controversy with the Pope at Rome in 1718, the attitude of the Qing Government towards the Europeans changed dramatically. They were evicted from even the port of Canton, where they had been residing in great numbers. They were allowed to carry on trading, but were allowed to reside thereafter only at the island of Macao. The efforts of certain British traders and adventurers, like Commodore Anson and James Flint, to challenge these limitations by show of force did not help matters at all. The Qing Government reacted sharply to such evidence of “trouble-making” on the part of the foreigners, and in 1757 closed all ports to foreign trade except for the port of Canton. Thus came to be established the “Canton System”, which was to be the only recognized form of commercial intercourse between China and the West until the Opium Wars.

The Canton System is the term used to refer to the entire set of trading arrangements available to the Westerners between 1757 and 1842. The foreign traders maintained warehouses-cum-trading establishments at Canton (called “factories”). They resided most of the year at Macao, but every year when their ships arrived from their home countries, the traders would sail up from the mouth of the Pearl River to Canton and remain for the duration of the

trading season from August to March. They were not permitted to bring their families with them, and they had to restrict their movements to within the trading quarter.

At Canton, all the business transactions of the Western traders were conducted through the Cohong, a guild of prominent local merchants whose monopoly of the trade was recognized by the Qing Government. In return for this official recognition, the Hong merchants handled all the arrangements of the trade, provided the necessary facilities to the foreign traders and stood surety for their 'good behaviour'. They were collectively responsible to the imperial government authorities, of whom the most important were the Viceroy of Liangguang (in which Canton or Guangzhou as it is now known was situated), and the Superintendent of the maritime customs (known as the "Hoppo") who collected the revenue from the Canton trade and remitted it to the Imperial Government at Peking.

The Western traders were not permitted to directly approach the imperial authorities for any reason, but were obliged to route all their requests, grievances, etc., through the Hong merchants.

Apart from the Hong merchants, the only other Chinese with whom they directly interacted were those who provided them with necessary services — such as their household servants, the linguists (interpreters and escorts), and the all-important compradores who handled all the local side of the business for the foreign firms.

Much has been written about the restrictive nature of the Canton System:

- about the limitations on the freedom of movement and activities of the foreign traders,
- about the harshness of the taxes and fees imposed on the foreign charges,
- about the extent of corruption, and so on.

But it is important to view these complaints in their proper perspective. Although Canton was the only port opened to foreign trade, it was nevertheless a well-developed port with all the infrastructure and facilities necessary for the conduct of the trade and with good lines of supply and communication with the interior. Even when other ports had been open to foreign trade (before 1757), the foreign traders themselves had found these to be nowhere near as suitable as Canton, and had tended to concentrate all their activities around Canton. Moreover, even though the trade was a monopoly trade from the Chinese side, it must be remembered that from the British side too, the China trade was the monopoly of a single company. The East India Company's monopoly in China only ended in 1834. Similarly, even restrictions imposed on the Europeans (such as on their freedom of movement, on their ability to communicate directly with Chinese officials, and so on) may have been considered humiliating, they did not significantly hamper the conduct of the trade. The various tariffs and levies imposed on the trade by the Chinese also did not prevent the foreign firms from making huge profits which brought them back to Canton year after year.

However, there was one factor that was undoubtedly disturbing to the Western traders: there were very few goods that they could offer that were in demand among the Chinese. While the Westerners purchased large quantities of tea,

silk and other items from China, they were compelled to pay for these mainly with gold and silver. It is estimated that 90% or more of the East India Company's shipments to China consisted mainly of gold. However, the situation began to change dramatically in the mid-1820s, when the Western traders hit upon one commodity that met with a rapidly increasing demand from the Chinese. That commodity was opium.

2.2.3 The Opium Trade

Opium, a narcotic substance derived from the poppy flower, was known to the Chinese from the late 7th or early 8th century, when it was introduced by the Arabs and the Turks. Initially used mainly as a medicine or a pain-reliever, opium-smoking for pleasure began to spread among the Chinese from the 17th century. This kind of opium intake used to lead to a rapid deterioration in the physical and mental condition of those who indulged in it. Opium smoking was highly addictive, and those addicts who were deprived of opium for even a short period of time used to undergo real torment. They would become nauseous and restless, suffer from aches, muscle twitches, chills and hot flashes, insomnia and so on. As the opium habit spread among the people, the imperial government was forced to sit up and take note. In 1729, the sale and smoking of opium was prohibited, while in 1796, its importation and cultivation also were prohibited.

Despite these prohibitions, the import of opium into China grew rapidly in the late 18th and especially in the early years of the 19th century. While in 1729 the annual importation of opium was 200 chests, in 1767, it was 1000 chests. Between 1800 and 1820 this amount rose to 4,500 chests, and between 1820 and 1830 to over 10,000 chests. In 1838-39 just before the outbreak of hostilities between China and Britain, it reached the stupendous figure of 40,000 chests. In this period, it has been estimated that there were as many as 10 million Chinese addicts of the drug, accounting for 10 to 20 per cent of the central government officials, 20 to 30 per cent of local government officials, and a large proportion of the Manchu military forces.

The leading importers of opium into China were the British. But the British opium trade was conducted in a peculiar convoluted manner. The opium was grown in India, and the entire process of cultivating and processing was a monopoly of the British East India Company. However, because of the Chinese official prohibition on the import of opium, the East India Company did not want to be directly associated with the import of opium into China, for the fear that this would jeopardize its overall trade with China. Therefore, opium was carried to China from India by private traders (also known as "country traders") operating under license from the East India Company. A sophisticated network of Chinese and foreign smugglers and their collaborators ensured that the opium was distributed in China. The country traders deposited their opium consignments in "receiving ships" that were anchored off the coast of China around Lintin (Lingding) island. From there, Chinese opium dealers would lift the opium in small, well-armed and fast moving boats that were adept at dodging official Chinese patrols. These boats would deliver their goods to the waiting opium dealers at various points on the China coast, from where they would be distributed in the interior.

There is no doubt that the illegal opium trade could not have flourished as it did without significant local collaboration in China. The inefficiency of the Chinese

naval forces and customs service on the one hand facilitated the task of the smugglers, making it possible for them to violate the prohibitions on the opium trade with impunity. But on the other hand, there was active collaboration as well. A whole network of people, ranging from boatmen and coolies to prosperous bankers and opium den owners, profited immensely from the trade and had a vested interest in keeping it going. But even more important was the collaboration of officials at various levels who turned a blind eye to what was going on, or who assisted in even more direct ways, in return for a share of the profits.

Apart from the harmful effects on the physical well-being of opium consumers, the opium trade also had serious economic consequences. There was an overall depression in domestic trade in the worst affected areas. This was because a large share of the meagre incomes of labourers and others was diverted to the purchase of opium instead of the purchase of other commodities. But an even greater economic crisis was precipitated by the outflow of silver on account of the trade. Opium, unlike other items of foreign trade, was paid for mainly in silver. As the import of opium grew rapidly, the balance of trade in terms of the flow of silver turned against China. Combined with low domestic reserves of silver, this led to a serious monetary crisis. The exchange rate between silver and copper was upset, affecting the remittance of taxes to the imperial treasury.

By the 1830s, the imperial government was seriously alarmed over the uncontrolled growth of the opium trade and its harmful consequences. Among the Emperor and his high officials there was serious discussion on how to handle this growing menace. This culminated in the great opium debate of 1838-39 in which the Emperor sought advice from all the governor-general's of the Empire as well as other high officials. Although the idea of legalizing the opium trade, as a way to regain some degree of control over it, was briefly considered, ultimately the opinion that prevailed was that the ban on opium must be strictly enforced. The noted official Lin Zexu was dispatched to Canton as Imperial Commissioner with a specific mandate to put a stop to the opium trade. The stage was thereby set for a direct confrontation between the Qing Government and the Western powers.

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) Explain the Canton system in five lines.

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- 2) What were the economic consequences of Opium trade on China? Answer in about 100 words.

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2.3 THE FIRST OPIUM WAR AND THE TREATY OF NANKING

Even before the outbreak of the First Opium War, the Canton System had come under severe strain because of various factors:

- the first factor was the vigorous growth of opium smuggling outside the bounds of this system,
- the second factor was the ending of the East India Company's monopoly of the British trade with China in 1834, and
- the resultant problem of how the Qing Government was to deal with the new situation.

When the Qing Government was informed about the impending end of the East India Company's monopoly, it requested that a new British manager or *taiban* (conceived of as a kind of head merchant) be appointed to oversee the activities of the British traders. However, the Superintendents, of Trade who were appointed by the British Government and sent to China, beginning with Lord Napier, were not traders but representatives of the British Government who were not reconciled to being dealt with as mere merchants. Thus, the period from 1834-1839 saw constant friction between these British officials and the Qing authorities, as the former sought to deal directly with the Qing officials on equal terms — some (like Napier) in a very belligerent manner, and others (like J.F. Davis and Capt. C. Elliot) in a more peaceable fashion. Although this tension did not directly lead to hostilities, it had its own fall-out:

- i) Firstly, it led to increased irritation and suspicion on both sides, including the consolidation of "hard line" factions advocating strong action against each other, both among the Qing officials as well as among British traders and officials.
- ii) Secondly, on more than one occasion, British warships were sent to the Chinese waters. They tested the vigilance and preparedness to fight of the Qing authorities.

Thus, by the time Commissioner Lin arrived in Canton (in March 1839) to implement the anti-opium regulations by force, the atmosphere there was more charged than it had been for a long time.

On his arrival, Lin sought to take action simultaneously against the British traders involved in the opium trade as well as against their Chinese collaborators. He issued an ultimatum to the foreign traders under the leadership of Capt. Elliot, demanding that they surrender the opium in their possession and sign a bond promising not to trade in opium thereafter. When the British did not respond in the given time, Lin ordered the withdrawal of all Chinese working for the foreigners, and placed the British traders at Canton under siege. This measure placed the British in a desperate position, and they surrendered approximately 20,000 chests of opium. Lin proceeded to publicly burn the confiscated opium and to throw the ashes into the sea. However, despite the surrender of the opium, the struggle over other issues, like the signing of the bond, continued, resulting in a deadlock and mounting pressure on the British trading community at Macao. In early 1840, the British Government headed by Palmerston decided to send an expeditionary force to China under the command of Admiral Elliot.

This force arrived in Chinese waters in June 1840, marking the beginning of hostilities. Here we must note that though opium appeared to be the cause of the war there were certain other contending aspects too. For example there always had been a conflict over criminal jurisdiction — who will try and punish a Westerner for the offence he committed against Chinese, the Chinese authorities or the Westerners themselves.

The Opium War was a peculiar war, in the sense that there was no continuous engagement of the two opposing forces. On the contrary, it consisted of a series of naval engagements lasting from November 1839 to August 1842, punctuated by negotiations and aborted treaties and agreements. Some kind of trade continued throughout this period, and the channels of communication between the leading figures on both sides were never completely disrupted. One reason for the sporadic nature of the war was the long time it took for messages and supplies to reach the main theatre of action around Canton. For instance, the sea journey from England to China took several months. Another reason was the frequent changeover in the leading personalities on both sides, as the Qing Government and the Palmerston Government sought to replace those whom they were dissatisfied with. On the Chinese side, the stern Lin was replaced by Qiying. On the British side, Admiral Elliot was replaced as the commander of the British forces by the Superintendent of Trade, his cousin Capt. Charles Elliot. Capt. Elliot in turn was replaced by Sir Henry Pottinger in August, 1841.

It is not possible to discuss in detail each and every event during the War. However, in brief the main events of the First Opium War were as follows:

- 1) The arrival of the British expeditionary force in the waters off Bei-ho in the north, directly threatening the capital and the imperial court at Peking. This led to the dismissal of Lin and his replacement by Chi Ying who managed to persuade the British forces to return South.
- 2) The Chuan Bi, convention negotiated in January 1841. This called for cessation of Hong Kong; 6 million dollar indemnity; Canton trade on equal terms, official interaction on equal basis by Chi Ying and the British, which was then repudiated by both governments.
- 3) The siege of Canton by British forces from February to May 1841, leading to the “ransom” of Canton by its merchants and officials through the payment of \$6 million.
- 4) The last stage, from August 1841 to August 1842, when the British forces again moved north as far as the Yangtze River, occupying several ports on the way. This resulted in negotiations leading to the signing of the Treaty of Nanking (Nanjing).

The main clauses of the Treaty, signed on August 29, 1842, provided for:

- 1) an indemnity of 21 million silver dollars to the British,
- 2) abolition of the Cohong monopolistic system of trade,
- 3) the opening of the ports of Amoy (Xiamen), Fuzhou, Ningbo and Shanghai, in addition to Canton, for trade and residence to British traders and their families,
- 4) the cessation of Hong Kong,
- 5) equality in official correspondence, and
- 6) a fixed tariff.

This last point was actually decided in the supplementary treaty of the Bogue signed on October 18, 1843, which fixed the import duty at 5 per cent and the export duty between 1.5 to 10.75 per cent. This treaty also gave the British the right to be tried for offences under their own laws and by their own consuls — the right of extra-territoriality. It also stipulated that whatever other concessions the Chinese Government may grant to other powers in the future would be enjoyed by the British also — the “most-favoured nation” clause. Close on the heels of this humiliating defeat, the Qing Government was besieged with demands from the Americans and the French for similar treaties. Deciding that it would not be wise to refuse such demands, the Qing Government signed the Treaty of Wangxia with the United States on July 3, 1844, and the Treaty of Whampoa with France on October 24, 1844. [For more details on the treaties and their implications, see Unit 3.]

The most ironic feature of this whole war and the resulting treaties was that opium, the most immediate cause of the war, was barely mentioned anywhere.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) Discuss in about ten lines the causes of the First Opium War?

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- 2) Write a brief note on the Treaty of Nanking.

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2.4 THE CHINESE RESPONSE TO THE WESTERN PRESENCE

The outbreak of the First Opium War and the humiliating defeat of China changed the whole tenor of relations between China and the West. This change was reflected at two levels:

- i) at the level of official policy,
- ii) at the level of popular attitudes towards the Westerners.

At the official level, we can see that the problem of the Westerners and how to deal with them became a major pre-occupation of the Qing Government instead of a marginal problem of local officials that it had been before. At the popular level, it gave rise to a new trend which was to become very important in the following decades. This was the trend of popular hostility to the Western intruders — a forerunner to the rise of a new Chinese nationalism from the late 19th century.

2.4.1 Vacillating Official Policy

The Opium War brought to the fore the rift between the so-called “hard-liners” and “conciliators” (or compromisers) among high Qing officials. Commissioner

Lin was the earliest among the “hard-liners”. He believed in dealing sternly with the Westerners in accordance with the laws and regulations of the Qing Empire. It was not surprising that his failure led to the rise of the other faction, that is, the “conciliators”.

In keeping with time honoured Chinese methods of dealing with “barbarians”, the conciliatory officials like Qishan, Yishan, Qiyong and Muzhang believed in not taking an openly confrontationist attitude towards the Westerners. This did not necessarily mean that they were in sympathy with the Westerners and their aims. But, recognizing the military superiority of the West, they felt that the Qing Government could not afford to challenge them directly. Their policy was based on the premise that if the Westerners were given some of the things that they demanded in a gracious way, then they would not make any further trouble, and the Qing Government would be spared of more humiliating defeats and losses. However, there were two fatal flaws in the thinking of the conciliators:

i) In the first place, they did not correctly assess the demands and objectives of the Western powers in China. These were not limited to the rectification of a few grievances against the Canton System, nor even to the legalization of the opium trade. Events proved that the Western powers had larger ambitions of opening up China more fully to their trade and other forms of penetration. The more the Qing Government showed its weakness and placated them, the more these powers were emboldened in their quest for more concessions. ii) The other flaw in the thinking of the conciliators was that it did not take into account the growing popular Chinese hostility to the Western presence. Because the majority of the leading conciliators were Manchu officials, while the majority of the leading hard-liners were Chinese officials, it increased the rift between the Manchus and the Chinese. The Manchu rulers eventually came to be perceived as traitors who were selling out the country to the foreigners. Thus, although the policy of the conciliators was aimed at protecting the authority of the Manchu Qing dynasty, in the long run it contributed to undermining its support and legitimacy among the Chinese.

The period from 1849 to the outbreak of the Second Opium War in 1858 can be broadly termed as the period of the rise of the hard-liners. This coincided with the accession to the throne of a new, more anti-foreign, emperor in 1850 upon the death of his predecessor. The hard-line faction was represented by the officials Xu Guangjin and Ye Mingchen in the South, and Su-Shun at the Imperial Court at Peking. A major victory of the hard-line faction in the period between the two Opium Wars was the successful resistance it maintained to the British drive to enter the city of Canton. However, in the face of the overwhelming ambition and military superiority of the West, and gravely hampered by the turmoil within the Chinese Empire (especially with the spread of the great Taiping Rebellion in South China after 1850), the hard-line policy could not remain successful for long.

2.4.2 Popular Chinese Resistance

The First Opium War and the strengthened Western presence around Canton gave rise to a significant new phenomenon — active popular resistance to the foreigners. Until this time, most sections of Chinese society that were directly involved with the Westerners were not hostile to them. In fact, for many of the local businessmen, boatmen, coolies, smugglers, etc., the trade with the West meant increased profits or earnings.

However, beginning in 1841, when the British forces laid siege to Canton and began to roam around the local countryside, popular hostility, based mainly on the peasantry and local gentry, arose. It took the form of irregular militia units which undertook to defend their areas from the depredations of the foreign troops. In comparison with the sluggishness and demoralization among the official Qing troops, this popular militia showed high morale and fighting spirit. Their most celebrated encounter with the British forces took place at the village of Sanyuanli near Canton in May 1841. Armed only with wooden rods and spears, several thousand peasant militiamen routed a British expeditionary force at Sanyuanli.

The exploits of the local militia were repeated in 1849, when combined action by village and urban militia forces prevented British troops from forcing their way into the city of Canton. This time, the militia action was supported by the local officials under the leadership of the “hard-liner” Governor of Canton, Ye Mingchen, as well as by the former Cohong merchants who had lost their privileged position after the signing of the Treaty of Nanking in 1842.

While the popular resistance did not eventually succeed in expelling the foreigners from Chinese soil, it nevertheless had an important fall-out. Popular hostility to the foreign presence and disgust with the spinelessness of the Qing forces was at the base of the great rebel movement for the overthrow of the Qing dynasty that was taking shape in this period.

2.5 THE SECOND OPIUM WAR AND THE TREATY OF TIENTSIN (TIANJIN)

In the eyes of the British, many of the contentious issues between the Chinese and themselves remained unresolved even after the Treaty of Nanking. For example they felt that:

- the opium trade was still not legalized,
- the city of Canton was still closed to them, and
- they did not have the right of dealing directly with the government at Peking on equal terms.

Along with these, a more profound cause of dissatisfaction was the failure of the trade with China to expand as they had expected. The British believed that this could be solved by the opening of more ports for trade in the north and in the interior of China.

All these factors prompted the British, in alliance with the French, to renew hostilities with China in 1858. After the suppression of the Rebellion of 1857 in India, the British could spare some of their forces for China as they no longer would have to fight on two fronts simultaneously. They were also aware of how weakened the Qing Empire had become after several years of coping with major rebellions in different parts of the country.

In 1858, the Anglo-French forces attacked and captured Canton. Following this, they moved north, and for the first time launched an assault on Beijing itself. The capital, including the beautiful imperial summer palace, was ravaged, and the Emperor was forced to flee. This led to the abject surrender of the Qing Government and to the signing of the Treaty of Tientsin. This Treaty gave

the Western powers many new advantages. Eleven more ports were opened and Western ships were allowed freedom of movement on the inland waterways. Western goods were exempt from the likin (or lijin) tax on goods circulating within the country. Westerners were given the right to reside and acquire land anywhere in the country. They were allowed to set up diplomatic missions in Peking. They received handsome sums as war indemnities. And, not the least significant, all prohibitions on the opium trade were finally lifted. The conclusion of the Opium War marked another — but not the final — chapter on the opening of China to Western expansionism.

2.6 CONFLICTING INTERPRETATIONS OF THE OPIUM WARS

Naturally, to the Chinese of that time, the Opium Wars appeared to be an unprovoked aggression by the West to assert their right to trade in a harmful drug, opium. On the other hand, the British and their Western allies presented these as wars fought in the interests of “free trade”, of intercourse between nations on the basis of equality, and so on. This controversy has continued to haunt the presentation of the Opium Wars by scholars right down to the present day, even if in slightly different forms.

Today, few scholars would deny that opium was the immediate factor triggering hostilities in 1839. It is fairly evident that had the Qing Government not decided to enforce its prohibition of the opium trade in the manner that it did, the British Government of Palmerston would not have dispatched its expeditionary force when it did. In that sense, the First Opium War was indeed an Opium War.

However, scholarly debate has for long been centred primarily around two questions:

- 1) Whether or not war between the two sides would have been inevitable at some point of time, even if the opium factor had not been present?
- 2) Whether the onus for the war rested with the Western powers, which launched a war on another country on its own territory, or with the Chinese Empire which, allegedly steeped in its own traditional world outlook, refused to recognize such things as the so-called inherent right of nations to engage in free trade and to have diplomatic intercourse on equal terms.

These and other questions posed by the continuing debate over the Opium Wars are useful, in the sense that they help the student of modern Chinese history to probe into the deeper forces underlying the dramatic events of the period. They also help to underscore the relevance of the events of those times to what is going on today, because today too, the interests of national sovereignty and the independence of countries and states are often pitted against the assertion of so-called “universal” principles, such as “free trade” “democracy”, “human rights” and the principles of international law.

However, it would not be mature historical scholarship to merely limit the presentation of the Opium Wars to proving that it was or was not a war fought over opium alone, to proving which side was “right” and which side was “wrong”, and so on. The causes and events of the Opium Wars must be studied in their entirety and for the sake of acquiring a clearer understanding of all the complex forces at work.

However, it is worth mentioning here that the defeat at the hands of Westerners made some officials examine the question of Chinese relations with other countries. For example Commissioner Lin sought information about foreign countries and what views were held there about China; he also organized translations of foreign books and newspapers. Wei Yuan, following the tradition of “stressing the practical application of learning”, propagated the idea of “learning from the foreigner to restrain the foreigner”. Voices were also raised to protect the northern borders and Russia was mentioned as a future threat.

The Opium Wars left their mark on Chinese literature. Many works condemned the Qing Government for their surrender to Westerners and praised the struggles of the people for resisting them. For example, Zhang Weiping praised the practical struggle of the peasants in his poem **Sanyuanli**.

Check Your Progress 3

- 1) What were the flaws in the thinking of the conciliatory officials? Answer in ten lines.

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- 2) What do you understand by popular Chinese resistance to foreigners? Answer in five lines.

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- 3) Mention the various interpretations of the Opium Wars. Answer in about ten lines.

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2.7 LET US SUM UP

The First Opium War (1839-1842) and the Second Opium War (1858-1860) represent the first major armed confrontations between China and the Western powers. There were to be many more such confrontations, but these two wars are linked together, firstly, because the opium trade was a major (though not the only) factor in both, and secondly, because some of the unresolved issues from the First War were directly carried over in to the Second War.

Both wars represented a convincing defeat of the Chinese Empire at the hands of a militarily far superior West. This military and technological gap was never successfully bridged by the Chinese Empire, and for this reason it remained highly vulnerable to Western pressures until its final collapse in 1911.

An immediate and direct consequence of the Opium Wars was the reorganization of China's relations with the Western powers on the basis of the treaties that

concluded them. However, the Wars also had long term consequences, in terms of weakening the Chinese Empire, dislocating China's traditional economy, and giving rise to varied movements for the regeneration of China — ranging from those which sought to reform a few of her traditional institutions, to those which sought to dismantle the entire traditional system and replace it with a modern nation-state.

2.8 KEY WORDS

Indemnity: A sum exacted as a condition of peace.

Kowtow : In the traditional Chinese system this denoted a ceremonial prostration that all were expected to perform in front of the Emperor.

Nomadic: A way of life based on the raising of herds of animals (sheep, horses, cattle etc.), and involving periodic movement of the population. Usually contrasted with a settled way of life based on agriculture.

Pirate: One who robs at sea.

Sino-centrism: A concept which holds that the Chinese believed that they were at the centre of the world and hence superior to other peoples.

2.9 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) This is a term used to refer to the entire set of trading arrangements available to the Western traders in China between 1757-1842. For details See Sub-section 2.2.2.
- 2) Earlier the East India Company bought Chinese goods by paying in silver and gold. The illegal opium trade shifted this balance in favour of East India Company because of the outflow of bullion. Another impact was the over-all depression in domestic trade. See Sub-section 2.2.3.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) Base your answer on Section 2.3.
- 2) List the clauses mentioned in Section 2.3.

Check Your Progress 3

- 1) Base your answer on Sub-section 2.4.1 mentioning the two major flaws mentioned there. .
- 2) This was a new development that the peasants took to arms against the Westerners while the official Qing troops were losing ground. This brought about popular hostility to foreign presence and disgust with Qing forces. See Sub-section 2.4.2.
- 3) Base your answer on Section 2.6