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ADDICTION, ARROGANCE, AND AGGRESSION: THE QUESTION OF ATTITUDE IN THE FIRST OPIUM WAR

By C. Claire Summers

“We [Britain] seem, as it were, to have conquered and peopled half the world in a fit of absence of mind.” –J. R. Seeley, 1883¹

The nineteenth century was an era of resurgent expansion for Britain. The development of the British Empire was once again in full force, and this was one of the most influential factors in the formation of the British cultural mentality during this time. This neo-imperialism in Britain created a sharp increase in patriotic and apparently benevolent sentiment—the idea that the British Empire was the pinnacle of modernity, and that it could be only generous to spread its rule to other parts of the world. The British extended the reach of their Empire in the nineteenth century not only through military conquest, but through trade as well. One of the areas that fell under British influence during this period was China, whose isolationist foreign policy differed dramatically from Britain’s. The British inserted themselves into the Chinese economy by means of the opium trade, which served to support the British addiction to that coveted Chinese substance, tea. The meeting of these two cultures created a dangerously charged political situation that culminated in violence with the beginning of what has become known as the First Opium War in 1839. Historical interpretations of this conflict’s origins varied considerably throughout the decades since its occurrence, and many focused on the development of the opium-tea trade as the primary cause. To grasp the story in its entirety, however, it is necessary to widen the historical scope beyond the influence of opium itself. While the opium trade was both the immediate cause and primary catalyst of the First Opium War, from a greater historical distance it appears that the war was largely the result of an attitude collision: on the one hand the cavalier indifference of British imperial officials, and on the other the cultural superiority of the Chinese government.

¹ J. R. Seeley, *The Expansion of England*, 1883 (Reprint, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971): 12.

Lawrence James, a historian of the British Empire, neatly summarized the paradox of their imperial mindset in his *Rise and Fall of the British Empire*: “[Empire] encouraged a sense of superiority... It also fostered racial arrogance. And yet at the same time, deeply-rooted liberal and evangelical ideals produced a powerful sense of imperial duty and mission.”² These various factors combined with a burgeoning sense of nationalism, fostered by victory over Napoleon earlier in the century, to create a strange dichotomy in which Britain desired good for its colonies and dependencies and yet felt little compulsion to work to understand their cultural differences—as tales of the first diplomatic contact between Britain and China plainly reveal.³

The first British ambassador to China was Lord George Macartney, an experienced and distinguished young diplomat who had recently completed a successful term as the governor of Madras in British India.⁴ His posting in China, however, would not prove so effective. He arrived in 1792 on a mission to initiate diplomatic contact between the two countries, and the sign affixed to his boat by his Chinese escorts clearly illustrated the fundamental misunderstanding between these two countries. It read, in effect: “Tribute-bearer from England.”⁵ China was not accustomed to negotiating with foreign nations; rather, they were used to accepting tribute from the other Asian countries that rested in their enormous shadow.⁶ The British, however, clearly had a very limited knowledge of Chinese culture and anticipated no such thing. British tradition involved presenting gifts to a foreign prince, but always with the understanding that the gifts were offered as a sign of respect and not as a way of paying homage to a superior power. Tensions increased during Macartney’s audience with the Emperor, particularly over what would become one of the primary illustrations of the British-Chinese culture clash: the *kowtow*.

² Lawrence James, *The Rise and Fall of the British Empire* (New York: St. Martin’s Griffin, 1994), xiv.

³ W. Travis Hanes III and Frank Sanello, *The Opium Wars: The Addiction of One Empire and the Corruption of Another* (Naperville: Sourcebooks, Inc., 2002), 13-16. See pages 3-4 for additional explanation.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁵ “The Reception of the First English Ambassador to China, 1792,” ed. Paul Halsall, *Internet History Sourcebook: Modern*, (Accessed April 11, 2015).

⁶ Hanes and Sanello, 15.

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Any foreign visitor to the Chinese court, upon arrival, was required to perform the *kowtow* before the emperor—that is, to bow, kneel, and place forehead to floor nine times. It seemed that Macartney would have readily performed this ritual, but only if the emperor made the same gesture in return before a portrait of King George III. In the end, neither party conceded and the visit drew to a close. Although this incident caused no major repercussions, the British envoy returned from China without making any real diplomatic progress. This alone would probably have been forgotten as a simple misunderstanding, were it not for the second British attempt a few decades later that proved even less productive and generated more tension than the first. Lord Amherst, the British ambassador to China sent in 1816, flatly refused to *kowtow* and apparently offered no potential solutions to this quandary. Although the Chinese government worked to come up with a compromise, they could not seem to find a remedy that satisfied both sides and the situation ended in a stalemate. Amherst was denied audience with Emperor Jiaqing and eventually returned to Britain; the only accomplishment was the bruised egos of both empires.⁷ These two incidents combined were representative of the irreconcilable differences between Britain and China. The problems could likely have been averted if the British had put forth more effort to understand the mindset of the Chinese, or if the Chinese had been able to step back and meet with the British ambassadors as equals rather than tribute-bearing barbarians.⁸

China and Britain both exhibited a similar cultural arrogance that accompanied the development of a stable empire. China, however, had solidified their empire much earlier (many historians agree that Imperial China began with the Qin dynasty in the third century BC) and had established themselves as the peak of civilization in the Far East.⁹ As a result of this cultural superiority, the Chinese government generally viewed foreigners as barbarians.¹⁰ China had shut down foreign trade in an attempt to keep Chinese society pure. This perturbed the British, who had developed a love for tea (at that point only available in China) and a belief

⁷ Summary of these diplomatic meetings drawn from Hanes and Sanello (14-24) and “The Reception of the First English Ambassador to China, 1792.”

⁸ Toby & Will Musgrave, *An Empire of Plants: People and Plants that Changed the World* (London: Cassell & Co, 2000): 123.

⁹ C. P. Fitzgerald, *The Chinese View of Their Place in the World* (London: Oxford University Press, 1964): 1-2.

¹⁰ Hanes and Sanello, xii.

that they had a “right to conduct unrestricted trade throughout the world.”¹¹ Indeed, John Quincy Adams, still not far removed from the British Empire himself, called the Chinese system “churlish and unsocial.”¹² Their divergent mentalities seemed diplomatically irreconcilable, portending Kipling’s words from 1889: “Oh, East is East and West is West, and never the twain shall meet.”¹³ Cultural attitudes planted the seed for the nineteenth-century trade conflict that eventually sparked the First Opium War.

India was, without doubt, the largest supplier of opium for the Chinese. By the 1800s, however, the title “India” as an administrative term referred for all practical purposes to the British East India Company. This meant that the true regulation of the opium trade rested not with the native government of India, but with the British. This opium traffic began as a gradual trade process not unlike that of any other commodity, such as tobacco. China’s appetite for opium grew exponentially with the discovery that smoking the leaves produced a more intense hallucinogenic experience than alternate methods of consumption.¹⁴ This newly developing method of opium consumption rendered the user almost completely inert while under the influence and provoked higher addiction rates with much more debilitating withdrawal symptoms than eating or drinking the drug.¹⁵ Naturally, as Chinese dependency on the drug grew in the early nineteenth century, demand for the product increased rapidly and the East India Company rose to the occasion with enthusiasm.

¹¹ James, 236.

¹² John Quincy Adams, “Lecture on the War with China, delivered before the Massachusetts Historical Society, December 1841,” in *The Chinese Repository* vol. XI (Canton: Printed for the proprietors, 1842): 277.

¹³ Rudyard Kipling, 1889. Reprint: *The Collected Poems of Rudyard Kipling* (London: Wordsworth Editions Limited, 1994): 245. This quote is taken out of context of the spirit of Kipling’s poem, but the idea is useful in this instance.

¹⁴ In both Western and Eastern countries opium was frequently prescribed as a medical aid to treat nervous disorders, general pains, and really almost anything. In the West it was generally administered as part of a mixture of medicines; laudanum was one of the most common forms of an opium remedy. The use of opium in a restorative capacity led to many instances of both inadvertent addiction and exacerbation of medical issues. [Peter Ward Fay, *The Opium War 1840-1842: Barbarians in the Celestial Empire in the Early Part of the Nineteenth Century and the War by Which They Forced Her Gates Ajar* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1975): 7-8.]

¹⁵ Fay, 8-10.

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Tea was the other essential component of the Chinese-British trading relationship. Britain had first been exposed to this drink in the mid-seventeenth century, and by the nineteenth century tea consumption in Britain had increased dramatically.¹⁶ At that point China was virtually the only source of these leaves to which the British had become so attached.¹⁷ In fact, by the late eighteenth century China was supplying Britain with fifteen million pounds of tea each year,¹⁸ creating a significant trade imbalance since the British had very little to offer that the Chinese desired. China would only accept payment in the form of silver, placing enormous strain on the British economy as the government and merchants worked to keep their citizens supplied with their beverage of choice. China's growing dependence on opium proved to be the answer to their economic woes, since Britain had gained control of the opium industry through the incorporation of India into the Empire.¹⁹ Opium seemed the most workable solution to the trade impasse: the British would export the drug from India to China, sell it for silver, and use their profits to purchase tea from China. This triangular trade that developed between Britain, India, and China set the stage for the Anglo-Chinese conflict, further illustrating how the countries' attitudes toward each other were the underlying causes of the open warfare that was to come.

Although the East India Company initially wanted to avoid engaging in illegal trade in China, by the end of the eighteenth century the economic pressures proved too great for them to continue ignoring such a large potential for profit.²⁰ The Company began selling opium outright to the Chinese but soon realized that, as an official agency of the British government, it was bad foreign policy for them to directly contravene the Chinese government's 1799 opium ban.²¹ The British found a morally dubious technicality that allowed them to circumvent this prohibition. The Company began auctioning off the opium to private British merchants in Calcutta with, in the words of Roy Moxham, "no questions asked as to its

¹⁶ Hanes and Sanello, 20.

¹⁷ Roy Moxham, *Tea: Addiction, Exploitation, and Empire* (New York: Carroll and Graf Publishers, 2003): 64.

¹⁸ Hanes and Sanello, 20.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 20.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 20.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 21.

final destination.”²² The independent traders would then transport the opium to China for illicit sale and use the profits to bring precious tea back to England. Placing the responsibility of the actual buying and selling in the hands of private citizens essentially absolved the British government of any technical liability. This trade situation was a clear example of Britain’s cavalier attitude toward imperialism. They did not maliciously plan to create a nationwide addiction to a hallucinogenic drug; the trade developed as a matter of expediency, and they allowed it to happen as they followed opportunities to achieve their economic ends without any in-depth consideration of the human cost. This method worked for several decades, and as addiction levels in China swiftly rose, so did the concern of the Chinese government.

Serious misgivings about the growth of the opium trade developed in the Chinese government several decades before the issue came to a head in military conflict. Already dubious about permitting interaction with foreign traders, the Chinese government had restricted external merchant access to the city of Canton by the time the British paid their first official diplomatic visit.²³ Beginning in 1760, Chinese officials established an official trading season from October to May every year, prohibited foreigners from interacting with Chinese citizens without official supervision, and forbade all foreign merchants from learning Chinese.²⁴ This “Canton System” remained in place until the end of the First Opium War, but had little effect on the influx of the drug into Chinese society; merchants had only to bribe the Chinese trade administrators and the trade continued to flourish, worsening diplomatic tensions.²⁵

As the British rashly pressed their trade advantage, China still refused to engage with the world around them, which was evolving into a progressively more globalized society. Chinese officials could not, however, ignore the negative effects of the foreign opium trade on their society. Opium had become so popular that by the early 1800s the 1760 government ban on its trade had almost no effect.²⁶ In 1820 Chinese opium

²² Moxham, 67.

²³ Musgrave, 123.

²⁴ Immanuel C. Y. Hsu, *The Rise of Modern China* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970): 120.

²⁵ Musgrave, 126.

²⁶ Carl A. Trocki, *Opium, Empire, and the Global Political Economy: A Study of the Asian Opium Trade 1750-1950* (New York: Routledge, 1999): 92-97.

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imports reached a level of 4,000 chests a year (over 350,000 pounds) and a decade later that number increased to 18,000 chests (2.5 million pounds) at an annual cost of £2.2 million.²⁷ This soon prompted drastic action from the government, especially after another, more severe prohibition edict failed to effect any noticeable change. The conflict began in earnest in 1838 with the appointment of Imperial Commissioner Lin Zexu (or Tse-Hu).²⁸

Commissioner Lin was under strict orders from the Emperor to find a way to curtail the opium problem.²⁹ In the years before his appointment the government had waved aside suggestions to appeal directly to the British Crown, but by 1839 the problem had grown bad enough that Lin decided to try.³⁰ He wrote a letter to Queen Victoria stating in no uncertain terms how much the Chinese government detested the opium trade and admonishing Victoria to cease immediately or risk severe consequences.³¹ Lin's language in this letter exhibited a good deal of the cultural superiority typical of imperial China, referring to China as the "Inner Land" or "Center Land" and saying, "Our celestial empire rules over ten thousand kingdoms! Most surely do we possess a measure of godlike majesty which ye cannot fathom!"³² He also, however, made some comments that directly struck the heart of the matter:

We find that your country is distant from us about sixty or seventy thousand miles, that your foreign ships come hither striving the one with the other for our trade, and for the simple reason of their strong desire to reap a profit. Now, out of the wealth of our Inner Land, if we take a part to bestow upon foreigners from afar, it follows, that the immense wealth which the said foreigners amass, ought properly speaking to be portion of our own native Chinese people. By what principle of reason then, should these foreigners send in return a poisonous drug, which involves

²⁷ Trocki, 94; Moxham, 69.

²⁸ Arthur Waley, *The Opium War Through Chinese Eyes* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1958): 12.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 12.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 27-28.

³¹ Lin Zexu, "Commissioner Lin: Letter to Queen Victoria, 1839," ed. Paul Halsall, *Internet History Sourcebook: Modern* (accessed 25 April 2015).

³² *Ibid.*

in destruction those very natives of China? ³³ Without meaning to say that the foreigners harbor such destructive intentions in their hearts, we yet positively assert that from their inordinate thirst after gain, they are perfectly careless about the injuries they inflict upon us!³⁴

Commissioner Lin voiced within these lines his own view of British imperial haphazardness: that the British had, in their pursuit of economic gain, inadvertently created an addiction that crippled an entire country. China had become a branch of Britain's informal economic empire. Lin went on to inform the Queen that new severe penalties had been attached to the trafficking of opium: foreign merchants caught selling opium would be beheaded, and all property aboard their ships seized. These new terms did offer a period of grace during which any merchants who voluntarily surrendered their illicit cargo would be spared the death penalty.³⁵ Common historical agreement indicates that although Queen Victoria never received Commissioner Lin's letter, the British were made aware of the Chinese government's new terms through other outlets.³⁶

Commissioner Lin resolutely implemented his new policies. He immediately confiscated and destroyed any opium or drug paraphernalia found in China and arrested hundreds of Chinese users and dealers in the Canton area.³⁷ Eventually, after the attempted arrest of several prominent British merchants (one of whom he planned on beheading to serve as an example), Lin blockaded the British into their factories at Canton. Only after the British merchant ships off the coast of Canton surrendered all their contraband opium did Lin finally allow them to leave the city and return home. This hostage situation and temporary surrender dealt a severe blow to British pride. The incident, combined with Lin's use of tactics Britain considered underhanded such as poisoning wells and cutting off

³³ Lin also mentions later in the letter that the British should not sell a substance in China that is illegal in their own country. In fact, though this was difficult to research, it does not seem as though there were any laws prohibiting opium in Britain at this time. It is likely that this was because smoking opium was uncommon there during this period. Most people took it medicinally, as mentioned earlier. This is not to say that the British did not have an opium problem; addiction and overdoses were very common.

³⁴ Lin Zexu, "Letter to Queen Victoria."

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ Hanes and Sanello, 40-41.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 41.

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food supplies, eventually led to the opening shots of the First Opium War in September of 1839.³⁸

The conflict began as a direct result of Lin's attempted arrest of British citizens and his refusal to allow British ships to access food and supplies. After warning the Chinese that they would attack if not allowed to resupply, the British fired on the Chinese war junks that were blocking access to Hong Kong.³⁹ This first minor battle resulted in a dubious success for the Chinese—they far outnumbered the British, and were therefore able to fend them off long enough to put an end to the brief confrontation. The Chinese government, however, received a dramatically exaggerated account of this battle as a wondrous victory over the barbarians.⁴⁰ Jack Beeching, author of *The Chinese Opium Wars*, commented that this kind of hyperbole both exemplified China's superior attitude and hindered the Chinese government from receiving reliable information about the war. Beeching observed, "The passionate anti-foreign sentiment being aroused in Canton by the scholars who followed Lin's lead was from now on to hail any major setback to the foreign devils as a Smashing Blow."⁴¹ The war had finally begun in earnest, and due to China's inward focus government officials had no idea of the damage the British were capable of inflicting.

Although the decision to force open Chinese trade was met with substantial debate, Foreign Secretary Lord Palmerston largely quashed British concerns in Parliament.⁴² Palmerston, who had been instrumental in the development of trade with China and in the unfolding of the opium conflict, was adamant that China should open its gates to foreign nations. He employed his skills as a politician and orator to rally the support of the Parliamentary majority, and soon raised the necessary support to send a British Navy force to Canton in response to these perceived injustices.⁴³ Before long the British had taken Hong Kong and mounted a campaign up the Yangtze River, ultimately capturing Shanghai.⁴⁴ China's outdated

³⁸ Summary of Lin's response taken from Hanes and Sanello, 41-66.

³⁹ Jack Beeching, *The Chinese Opium Wars* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975): 90-91.

⁴⁰ Beeching, 92.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 92.

⁴² One of the most vocal opponents to not only the war but the opium trade as a whole was William Gladstone, who would later become Prime Minister several years after Palmerston himself.

⁴³ Beeching, 108-111.

⁴⁴ James, 237.

military technology was far inferior to Britain's, and after three years the Chinese were forced to surrender.

The Treaty of Nanking (Nanjing), signed to bring the hostilities to a close, was a humiliating blow for China, who was forced to fully cede Hong Kong to the British, as well as open five other "treaty ports" where Western merchants could trade freely. The treaty also abolished the Canton System and required China to pay full reparations for the opium that had been confiscated or destroyed. Britain did not push for the legitimization of the opium trade; at that point popular objections in both China and Britain were vocal enough to prevent this. The treaty, however, was disingenuous; in fact, even the continued ban on opium facilitated British interests since they retained a monopoly on the illegal opium trade in China.⁴⁵

The crux of the conflict between Britain and China was evident in the terms of the Treaty of Nanking. The catalyst of the war—the regulations on the opium trade—technically did not change as a result of the treaty. Although British opium sales continued to flourish, more importantly Britain had accomplished the greater goal of undermining Chinese isolationism and autonomy. The imperial edicts forbidding opium had clearly not been a problem for the British when they could be subverted; Britain had been more concerned with loosening the regulations on foreign trade in general. Now, with Hong Kong a fully British port and five more cities open to Westerners, China was truly part of the informal empire. Through casually unleashing a destructive substance on a sequestered population, Britain had drawn the attention and retribution of the Chinese government. Now, with their victory in the lopsided war, Britain forced China into an economic relationship with them and expanded the Empire even further.

Historiography reveals a distinct rift in opinions surrounding the causes of the First Opium War during its immediate aftermath and into the early twentieth century. Dr. Tan Chung attests to this in his book *China and the Brave New World*, stating: "Controversy on this conflict had started even before the war ended."⁴⁶ Most of the debate centers on the

⁴⁵ Summary of the terms of the treaty drawn from Gregory Blue, "Opium for China: The British Connection," in *Opium Regimes: China, Britain, and Japan, 1839-1952*, ed. Timothy Brook and Bob Tadashi Wakabayashi (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000): 34-35.

⁴⁶ Tan Chung, *China and the Brave New World* (Durham: Carolina Academic Press, 1978), 1.

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nomenclature; many of those writing at the time of the war, including both British and American scholars, disliked the term “Opium War.” They believed the war resulted largely from the culture clash between imperialistic Britain and reclusive China, saying that China’s ingrained feeling of cultural superiority made them antagonistic to British traders and explorers.⁴⁷ Some were disinclined to identify the introduction of the opium trade by the British as the cause of the conflict on any level. As studies regarding the war progressed, scholars began developing a more balanced perspective. Many modern authors began condemning the work of the earlier writers as Eurocentric and revisionist, saying they were simply trying to justify British exploitation of the Chinese. In all of these works, the question of opium and where it fit in the causation of this conflict was one of the predominant questions.

In a lecture to the Massachusetts Historical Society in 1841, John Quincy Adams pinpointed the *kowtow* specifically as one of the chief causes of the war. In his words, the issues were primarily caused by the Chinese view that “in all their intercourse with other nations... their superiority must be implicitly acknowledged, and manifested in humiliating forms.”⁴⁸ In a brief historiographical essay, Far East scholar Tan Chung identified Adams as the initiator of the academic controversy surrounding the causes of the Opium Wars.⁴⁹ Adams certainly stated his opinions concerning the origin of the conflict in no uncertain terms:

It is a general, but I believe altogether mistaken opinion, that the quarrel is merely for certain chests of opium imported by British merchants into China, and seized by the Chinese government for having been imported contrary to law. This is a mere incident to the dispute; but no more the cause of the war, than the throwing overboard of the tea in Boston Harbor was the cause of the North American revolution.⁵⁰

Although perhaps overstated, Adams’s point merits consideration, particularly considering the extent of the obvious cultural and political

⁴⁷ Ibid., 1

⁴⁸ Adams lecture, 281.

⁴⁹ Chung, 1.

⁵⁰ Adams lecture, 281.

conflicts between China and Britain from the beginning of their diplomatic interactions.⁵¹

The debate continued in the decades following the First Opium War, varying in conclusion but always revolving around the opium issue. Chung's *China and the Brave New World* provided a historiographical essay in which he discussed the causes of the war. He presented three existing theories regarding the nature of the war: a cultural war, a trade war, or an opium war.⁵² Chung himself wrote in order to "revitalize the opium-war perspective" and provide a rebuttal against the other two theories, in direct contrast to Adams's cultural theory.⁵³ Carl Trocki's *Opium, Empire, and the Global Political Economy* examined the economic consequences of the opium trade and argued that, rather than extending the reach of the British Empire, opium made the Empire possible. This represented the "trade war" perspective of the three outlined by Tan Chung. Among Trocki's many emphatic statements concerning the issue of opium trafficking, this may have been the boldest: "I argue here that without the drug, there probably would have been no British Empire."⁵⁴ He suggested that without the revenues from the opium trade the British would have been unable to finance their colonial ventures. As evidenced by the body of scholarship surrounding this conflict, researchers have often disputed the true cause of the First Opium War.

The war left an undeniable mark on Chinese society, particularly through the terms of the Treaty of Nanking and the development of their foreign trade. For the British, however, it was simply another chapter in the development of Empire. Nothing significantly changed for the ordinary British at home; they continued to drink their tea as China's foreign policy was being turned upside down. This could have influenced Britain's casual imperialistic attitude: their various spheres of influence lay so far removed from everyday life that it became easy to approach these foreign interactions in a more cavalier manner than they otherwise might have, had they taken place closer to home. Indeed, the war began primarily because the British felt that their pride and supremacy had been challenged. They

⁵¹ Adams's ideas were met with some uncertainty and opposition even in his own time (Josiah Quincy, *Memoirs of the Life of John Quincy Adams* (Boston: Crosby, Nichols, Lee and Company, 1860): 336.

⁵² Chung, 3.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁵⁴ Trocki, xiii.

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believed China had encroached on their jurisdiction by attempting to administer justice on British citizens, while China believed the British were trespassing foreign barbarians who should have been kept out of the country. Both sides had become too blinded by both perceived and genuine wrongs to attempt diplomatic reconciliation any longer. Through an examination of these factors it becomes clear that, although the opium trade was indeed the catalyst for the war, the true causes ran much deeper than the opium problem in itself—deeper, in fact, than economics in general. This was a collision of ideologies and attitudes, caused at its true roots by the relentless nationalism of one country, which blinded them to the human cost of their actions; and by the obstinate isolationism of the other in a world that was rapidly becoming more internationally connected than it had ever been before.