

SSALMUN'25

HCC

The Opium Trade: Protection of the British interest during the conflict and preserving British political advantage



Letter from the Under-Secretary-General

Dear delegates of the First Opium War Committee (HCC), My name is Duru Er, and

I am honored to serve as the Under-Secretary-General of the HCC for this year's SSALMUN'25. It is with great excitement that I introduce to you the topic of the **First Opium War** (1839–1842), a conflict that shaped the trajectory of Chinese history and global geopolitics.

In this committee, we will delve into the complexities of the First Opium War, exploring its causes, developments, and far-reaching consequences. The First Opium War was a clash between the British Empire and the Qing Dynasty, highlighting the intersection of trade, sovereignty, and cultural differences. As delegates, I encourage you to examine not only the military and political dynamics of this war but also the broader historical context and its lasting impact on both China and the world. Our discussions will challenge you to think

critically about imperialism, economic exploitation, and the legacy of foreign intervention. This study guide will provide an essential foundation, but I urge you to conduct further research to fully appreciate the multi-faceted nature of the conflict.

I am confident that this topic will inspire thoughtful, engaging, and respectful debates. I look forward to the opportunity to work with each of you as we explore the profound implications of the First Opium War and its place in the broader narrative of international relations.

Kind regards,

Duru Er
Under-Secretary-General of HCC
SSALMUN'25

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INTRODUCTION TO THE COMMITTEE

The HCC (Historical and Contemporary Conflicts) Committee is a platform dedicated to the in-depth examination of historical and contemporary conflicts. This committee engages in discussions aimed at understanding key turning points in global history and politics. This year, we will focus on the First Opium War (1839–1842), a conflict of significant historical importance.

The First Opium War was a clash at the intersection of trade, sovereignty, and cultural differences between the British Empire and the Qing Dynasty. The war not only shaped China's future but also fundamentally altered the balance of power between the East and the West. In this committee, we will explore the causes, developments, and global impact of the war, shedding light on the profound changes in the relationship between China and the West.

Delegates will have the opportunity to better understand the dynamics behind the conflict and explore how historical events continue to influence contemporary international relations.

INTRODUCTION TO THE TOPIC

The First Opium War (1839–1842) was a pivotal conflict that shaped the trajectory of Chinese history and global geopolitics. It involved a series of disputes between the British Empire and the Qing Dynasty of China, rooted in complex economic, political, and social factors. While its immediate cause was the British opium trade into China, the war's underlying causes lay in the tensions over trade imbalances, sovereignty, and the unequal power dynamics between the industrialized West and the traditional empire of China. The outcome of the war fundamentally altered the power relations in East Asia and set the stage for the broader patterns of imperialism that would unfold in the 19th and 20th centuries. This guide seeks to provide a deeper exploration of the historical context, causes, events, and long-term consequences of the First Opium War, helping readers understand the multi-faceted nature of this conflict and its far-reaching impacts.

Historical Context

In the early 19th century, China was a self-sufficient empire under the Qing Dynasty. The empire had little interest in foreign trade, as its economy was primarily agrarian, and it relied on a traditional Confucian worldview that emphasized stability, hierarchy, and internal harmony. The Qing government controlled foreign trade through the Canton System, a policy that limited interactions with Western merchants to a single port, Guangzhou (Canton), under strict supervision. This system was intended to protect China's economy and preserve its social order. While China's economy flourished in isolation, it created frustration among Western powers, particularly Britain, which sought to trade more freely and redress its growing trade deficit with China.

Britain's Trade Imbalance and Opium

The Industrial Revolution in Britain heightened its demand for Chinese goods such as tea, silk, and porcelain, but China's demand for British goods was minimal. This created a significant trade imbalance. Britain found itself in the undesirable position of having to send silver to China in exchange for these luxury goods, which weakened its own economy. To address this imbalance, Britain turned to a lucrative and illegal trade: opium. By the early 19th century, British merchants had started smuggling opium into China, primarily from British-controlled India. Opium quickly became a highly profitable commodity, despite being illegal in China, and was sold in exchange for Chinese tea, silk, and other goods. The growing addiction to opium among the Chinese population began to have devastating social, economic, and political consequences, affecting both the health of the population and the stability of the empire.

British-Chinese Relations Before the War

The relationship between Britain and China prior to the First Opium War was marked by mutual misunderstandings and conflicting worldviews. China, under the Qing Dynasty, viewed itself as the “Middle Kingdom,” superior to all other nations, and engaged with foreign powers from a position of cultural and political dominance. Britain, on the other hand, was emerging as a global industrial and colonial power, seeking to expand its influence and markets. Trade relations were one-sided, with Britain importing vast quantities of Chinese goods but struggling to export its own products to China due to minimal demand. Efforts by British envoys, such as Lord Macartney in 1793, to negotiate more equitable trade arrangements and establish diplomatic relations failed, as the Qing court dismissed British overtures. The Canton System, with its restrictive policies, further exacerbated tensions. The introduction of opium as a trade commodity shifted the dynamic. While initially reluctant, British merchants increasingly relied on opium smuggling to balance trade deficits. This illicit trade undermined China’s economy and sovereignty, while British officials defended it under the guise of free trade and commercial rights, setting the stage for conflict.

General Situation of China

In the early 19th century, China under the Qing Dynasty was an ancient and vast empire, rich in culture and history. Despite its size and immense resources, the country was facing numerous internal and external challenges.

Internal Challenges

Domestically, China was suffering from significant population growth, which strained its agrarian-based economy. This rapid increase in population led to widespread poverty, exacerbating the already difficult living conditions for many citizens. The government struggled to manage the social order, with increasing tensions between the elite ruling class and the peasantry.

This, in turn, contributed to widespread social unrest and uprisings, as frustrated citizens began to challenge the existing political and economic structure.

The Qing Dynasty was increasingly seen as ineffective in managing the empire's complexities. Corruption within the bureaucracy was rampant, and officials often exploited their positions for personal gain rather than addressing the needs of the population. The lack of a coherent and efficient central administration meant that regional governors held considerable power, often undermining the authority of the imperial court. These decentralized power structures made it difficult for the central government to maintain control over far-flung territories, let alone respond effectively to external threats.

Military Weaknesses

In terms of military power, the Qing Empire had a traditional military that was reliant on outdated tactics, equipment, and strategies. Its army and navy were built around the imperial tradition of using large numbers of troops but with limited technological advancements. The Qing military had not adapted to the rapidly modernizing world, making them vulnerable to the industrialized and technologically advanced Western forces. This technological gap became a key factor in China's inability to effectively resist the British during the Opium War. The Qing's reliance on wooden ships and outdated firearms proved no match for the advanced steam-powered vessels, cannons, and precision artillery used by the British.

Isolation and Economic Pressures

The Chinese military's poor preparedness for modern warfare was compounded by a society that had grown somewhat insular. The Qing Dynasty's policies, particularly the Canton System, limited trade with foreign powers, creating an environment where China remained largely isolated from the rapid technological and industrial changes occurring in the West. The Qing leadership's reluctance to engage in open diplomatic or economic exchanges with foreign powers contributed to China's growing isolation. In addition, the Qing government's inflexibility in adapting to new challenges, both domestically and internationally, left it ill-equipped to deal with the challenges posed by Western imperialism.

As China grappled with these internal issues, the opium trade further exacerbated the country's plight. The influx of opium, smuggled into the country largely by British merchants, created a public health crisis, fueled addiction, and drained China's silver reserves. The economic and social damage from opium addiction spread throughout the population, weakening the fabric of society and further undermining the authority of the Qing government.

General Situation of Britain

In contrast to China, Britain in the early 19th century was an industrial and colonial power at the height of its global influence. The Industrial Revolution had transformed the country's economy, society, and military, giving Britain unprecedented technological, economic, and naval power. Britain's factories churned out goods for both domestic consumption and international trade. The country had become the world's leading industrial producer, and its economic growth was driven by innovations in manufacturing, transportation, and communication.

Colonial Expansion

One of the most significant aspects of Britain's rise was its expansion as a colonial power. The British Empire had established colonies and trading posts around the world, from India and Africa to the Americas and the Pacific. This global empire not only provided Britain with valuable resources and wealth but also served as a means to exert political and economic control. By the early 19th century, Britain had cemented its status as the world's most powerful imperial power, driven in large part by its formidable navy. The British Royal Navy dominated the world's oceans, ensuring that British goods and influence could spread across the globe.

Political and Economic Systems

Britain's success was also due to its political and economic systems. Although not a fully democratic society at the time, Britain had a relatively stable political structure with a strong parliament and a market-oriented economy. Capitalism thrived, with private merchants and corporations such as the British East India Company driving trade

in goods such as tea, textiles, and opium. The success of British trade and commerce was intertwined with the expansion of imperialism, as Britain sought to maintain control over lucrative markets and trade routes.

Trade Imbalance with China

The British were particularly interested in China because of the country's vast demand for British goods, especially tea, silk, and porcelain. However, China's refusal to engage in free trade or accept British goods created a trade imbalance. While Britain was importing vast quantities of Chinese goods, it had little to offer in return that met Chinese demand. This created a growing trade deficit, and the British sought ways to balance their trade with China.

Opium Trade as a Solution

The introduction of opium into the Chinese market was a response to this imbalance. British merchants, particularly those working with the British East India Company, began smuggling opium from British-controlled India into China. The trade quickly became highly profitable for Britain, but it also created significant moral and ethical concerns. The Chinese government's resistance to the opium trade, which it viewed as harmful to its people, was seen by British officials as an unacceptable interference in the rights of British merchants. For the British, the issue of maintaining trade rights and commercial interests in China became a central point of contention, leading them to view the opium trade as essential for their economic prosperity.

Military Superiority

Britain's military and technological superiority also gave it the confidence to challenge China's resistance. The Industrial Revolution had not only transformed the economy but also revolutionized military technology. Britain had the advantage of steam-powered warships, modern artillery, and professional military forces that were vastly superior to China's outdated military infrastructure. The British military's ability to quickly mobilize and deploy advanced weaponry in China made it clear that military force could be used to enforce trade demands.

Geopolitical Motivations

Furthermore, Britain was motivated by the broader geopolitical context of the 19th century. As European powers competed for colonial dominance and economic influence, Britain sought to secure favorable trade arrangements with China to extend its imperial control in Asia. The Opium War was, therefore, not just a dispute over trade but a larger part of Britain's quest to assert its dominance on the global stage, expanding its influence in the East at the expense of China's sovereignty.

Causes of the First Opium War

Opium Trade and Economic Pressures

The British were not only motivated by the desire for economic balance but also by the financial profits they gained from the opium trade. British merchants, particularly from the British East India Company, saw China as a captive market. Opium smuggling intensified as the demand for the drug grew, and this illegal trade caused vast quantities of silver to flow out of China, weakening the Chinese economy.

China's Opposition to Opium

Recognizing the growing social, economic, and political damage caused by the opium epidemic, the Qing government, under Emperor Daoguang, began to take action against the trade. Lin Zexu, a prominent official, was appointed in 1839 to take aggressive action against opium smugglers. Lin was tasked with eradicating the opium trade, and his efforts included burning massive quantities of opium in Guangzhou and enforcing stringent laws. Lin's campaign was framed not only as an effort to protect the health and welfare of the Chinese people but also as a moral crusade against the harmful foreign influence.

Lin Zexu sent a famous letter to Queen Victoria in which he appealed to her sense of morality, asking her to end the opium trade. However, this diplomatic gesture failed to sway Britain's policy. British merchants saw the destruction of their valuable opium stocks as a severe affront to their economic interests, providing them with a pretext for military retaliation.

Britain's Commercial Interests

The British government, led by Prime Minister Lord Palmerston, framed its response to China's actions as a defense of free trade and the protection of British economic sovereignty. The destruction of opium stocks was portrayed as an unlawful attack on British commerce and property. For Britain, the Opium War became a battle to preserve its lucrative trading rights, particularly the

opium trade, which had already become a critical part of British economic interests in Asia.

The First Opium War

Qing's Anti-Opium Policies

By the late 1830s, the Qing government could no longer ignore the destructive impact of opium on Chinese society and its economy. Addiction rates were soaring, and silver reserves, once a pillar of China's wealth, were rapidly depleting due to payments for opium imports. Lin Zexu, appointed as the Imperial Commissioner in 1839, spearheaded a campaign to eliminate the opium trade. His measures included public education on the dangers of opium, enforcement of anti-opium laws, and the destruction of opium stocks seized from smugglers.

The climax of Lin's efforts occurred in Humen, near Guangzhou, where he oversaw the public destruction of over 20,000 chests of opium. This event symbolized China's resolve to resist foreign exploitation but was perceived by Britain as an affront to its economic interests. Lin Zexu's bold stance exemplified the Qing government's struggle to assert its sovereignty and moral authority in the face of mounting foreign pressure.

British Military Intervention

The British response was swift and calculated. Leveraging their superior naval power, the British launched a series of military campaigns designed to cripple China's defenses and secure advantageous terms. The conflict began with the deployment of the Royal Navy to blockade key Chinese ports, disrupting trade and exerting economic pressure on the Qing government.

British forces utilized advanced technology, including steam-powered warships such as the HMS Nemesis, which proved devastating against China's antiquated wooden junks. The disparity in military capability was stark, as British forces employed precise artillery bombardments and coordinated amphibious assaults to capture strategic locations. The introduction of steam-powered vessels like the Nemesis not only revolutionized naval warfare but also highlighted the transformative impact of industrialization on military strategy. The Qing forces, bound by traditional approaches and lacking comparable technological advancements, found themselves overpowered at every turn.

Key Battles and Escalation

The Battle of Kowloon (1839):

One of the early skirmishes, this engagement demonstrated British naval superiority and set the tone for the rest of the conflict. Qing forces, reliant on outdated cannons and poorly trained troops, were swiftly defeated.

Capture of Canton (1841):

A major turning point, the occupation of Canton showcased the inability of the Qing military to defend even its most critical ports. British troops secured the city with minimal casualties, further demoralizing Qing forces.

Yangtze River Campaign (1842):

As the British advanced inland, they targeted the Yangtze River, a vital artery for China's economy. The capture of key cities such as Ningbo and Zhenhai disrupted trade and logistics, forcing the Qing court into negotiations.

The psychological impact of these defeats was profound. The Qing leadership, already plagued by internal divisions, faced mounting pressure to end the war. For the British, the campaign was a demonstration of industrial and military dominance, underscoring the transformative power of the Industrial Revolution.

Diplomatic Stalemates and the Push for Resolution

Despite the military setbacks, the Qing government initially resisted British demands, hoping to preserve some semblance of sovereignty. However, as British forces closed in on Nanjing—one of China's most important cities—the Qing court recognized that continued resistance was futile. Diplomats from both sides met to negotiate terms, culminating in the Treaty of Nanjing in 1842.

This treaty marked the beginning of a new era in Sino-British relations, characterized by unequal treaties and further encroachments on Chinese sovereignty. For Britain, the First Opium War was not only a commercial triumph but also a precedent for asserting dominance in Asia through force. For China, the war exposed the vulnerability of the Qing dynasty and set the stage for a long struggle with internal and external challenges.

Outcomes of the First Opium War

The Treaty of Nanjing (1842)

The war concluded with the signing of the Treaty of Nanjing on August 29, 1842, which imposed harsh terms on China:

Territorial Concessions:

Hong Kong was ceded to Britain, marking the beginning of its colonial rule there.

Trade Liberalization:

China was forced to open five treaty ports—Canton, Xiamen, Fuzhou, Ningbo, and Shanghai—to British trade, and Britain was granted extraterritorial rights for its citizens.

Indemnity Payments:

China was required to pay large reparations to Britain, covering the costs of the war and compensation for the destroyed opium. Additional Consequences The Treaty of Nanjing not only undermined China's sovereignty but also paved the way for further foreign intervention.

The war revealed the Qing Dynasty's military and administrative weaknesses, encouraging other Western powers to demand similar concessions. This marked the beginning of the "Century of Humiliation," a period characterized by successive defeats, unequal treaties, and internal upheaval.

Weakening of Qing Authority

The erosion of Qing authority had profound effects on Chinese society and governance. The empire faced a surge in internal revolts, such as the Taiping Rebellion, fueled by widespread discontent and perceptions of a weak central government. The loss of territorial integrity and economic autonomy further delegitimized Qing rule, setting the stage for eventual reforms and revolutions in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Conclusion

The First Opium War was a defining moment in Chinese history, marking the beginning of a long period of foreign domination and internal turmoil.

It revealed the vulnerabilities of the Qing Dynasty and highlighted the broader dynamics of imperialism and global trade. For China, it was a painful step toward modernization and reform, but also the beginning of a century-long struggle to regain sovereignty and dignity in the face of Western powers. For the world, it serves as a poignant reminder of the complexities and costs of colonial expansion, and the lasting impacts of trade imbalances and cultural conflict. Beyond its immediate outcomes, the war's legacy continues to resonate.

It serves as a case study in the consequences of aggressive economic policies and the dangers of exploiting trade as a tool of power.

The lessons of the First Opium War remain relevant, providing historical insights into the intersection of commerce, ethics, and geopolitics.

Key Questions for Delegates

- What were the primary motivations behind Britain's involvement in the opium trade, and how did they justify it?

- How did the Qing Dynasty's internal challenges contribute to its inability to resist British forces effectively?
- What role did technological and military advancements play in determining the outcome of the war?
- How did the Treaty of Nanjing set the stage for further foreign intervention in China?
- In what ways did the First Opium War shape China's "Century of Humiliation" and its later efforts at modernization?