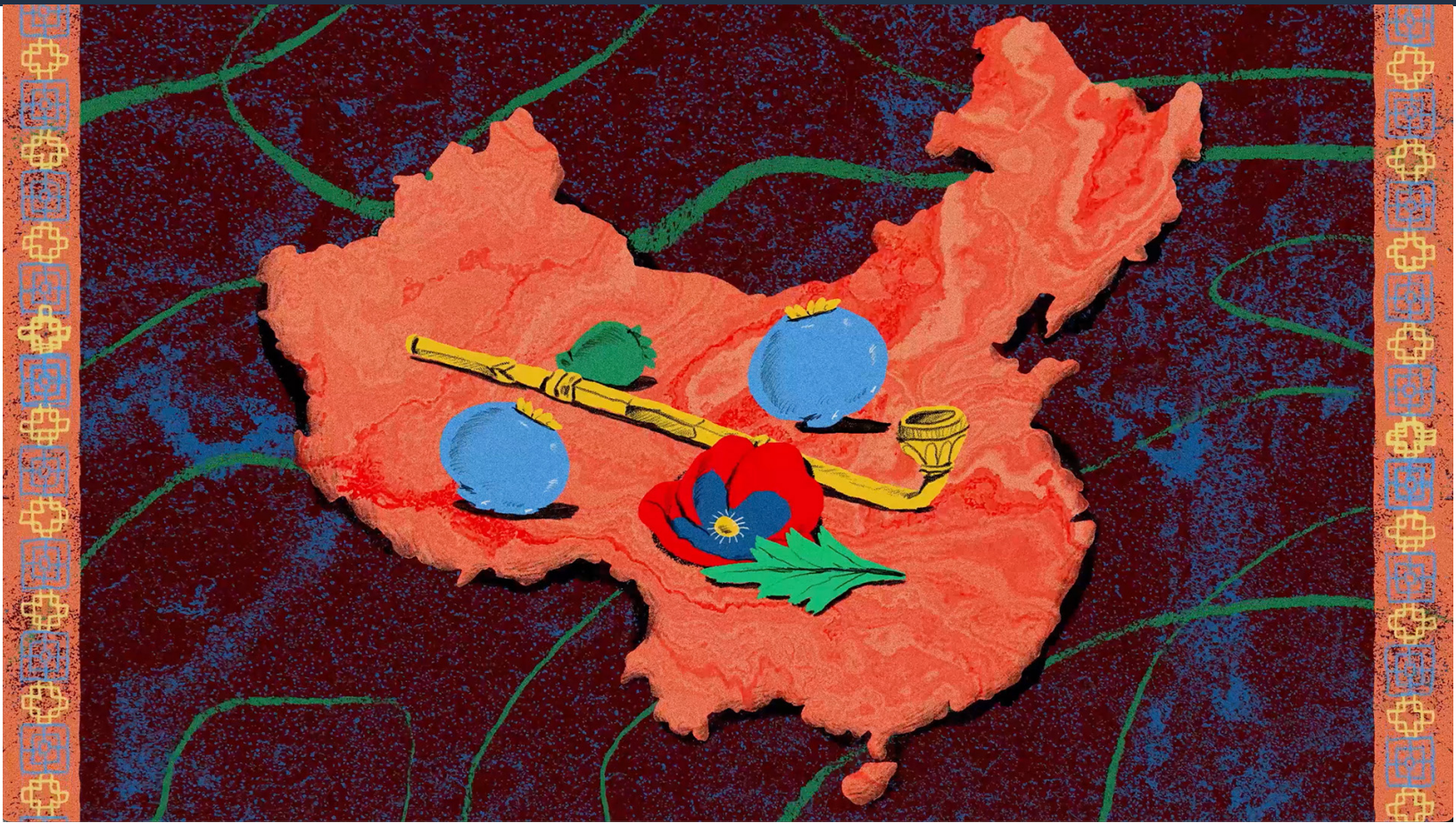




The Opium Wars: How Drugs Were Used as Trade Policy

Imagine if an empire acted like a drug cartel. It sounds more like a tabloid headline than history, but in 1839, that's exactly what the British Empire did. To gain access to Chinese trade goods, the British took opium from India and sold it in China. Millions became addicted, and the Qing Dynasty wasn't happy about that. The result was two deadly wars and a century of humiliation for China.

**0:00**

Illustration of bamboo stalks overlaid with a Chinese dragon, Chinese symbol, and the year 1839; small figures in red, yellow, and blue robes use long poles to stir a mixture in large pits; closeup of the mixture with vapors rising from it; newspaper headline from China Trade News regarding the opium trade; stylized illustration of Lin Zexu with the narrated text overlaid; political cartoon depicting conflict between Great Britain and China; ticking clock with rapidly moving hands.

On June 3rd, 1839, behind a bamboo fence, five hundred Chinese workmen began filling three stone-lined pits with seawater, quick lime, and opium. The mixture bubbled and boiled, dissolving the highly addictive drug that was destroying China. For twenty-three days, they destroyed 20,000 chests, nearly 300,000 pounds of opium. At the end of each day, as the slurry was dumped into the sea, Commissioner Lin Zexu, China's drug czar, begged forgiveness from the spirit of the southern sea and asked, "tell the creatures of the water to move away to avoid being contaminated."

This fiery act ignited a war with Great Britain. British merchants, angered at their loss of property, used their connections to convince Parliament to attack China and preserve the crown's honor and prestige. But before we get to the war and its importance in history, we need to rewind the clock.

1:00

Illustration featuring Queen Elizabeth, the year 1600, and the coat of arms for the East India Company; luxury good items; rows of large sacks of tea leaves with the year 1721 overlaid; cups of tea with the year 1750 overlaid; several wooden sailing ships with raised British flags; stylized red map of Guangzhou in the top corner is the coat of arms for the East India Company, on the bottom is a dragon; an emperor making halt gestures toward British ships.

It's the last day of 1600, Queen Elizabeth gives a group of London merchants, the East India Company or EIC, exclusive power to trade in Asia. Their mission, bring back luxury goods like silk, porcelain, and most importantly, tea, the British couldn't get enough of it. In 1721, the East India Company shipped over a million pounds of tea to Britain. By 1750, that number had quadrupled. Tea wasn't just a drink anymore, it was an obsession, and this is precisely how British merchants became drug dealers.

The EIC had two big problems, first, China limited British trade to one port, Guangzhou, keeping prices artificially high. Second, Britain had little that China wanted, the Chinese insisted on being paid only in silver, creating a massive trade imbalance. Britain's government tried to convince China's emperor to open up his country to more British trade, to no avail.

2:04

Artistic depiction of a map of India featuring blue poppies and the State Emblem of India; animation of a boat traveling on a map along a red dotted route from India to China; backdrop of silver coins with a China Trade News headline reading 'The EIC Turns Drug Dealing into a Business Plan' and image of the British flag; patterned background of poppy buds with a large downward trending arrow; two drug addicted figures with text 'Foreign Mud' overlaid.

When diplomacy didn't work, the EIC, unfortunately, found a solution in India. Farmers there grew opium poppies, Indian laborers then processed mountains of this collected poppy sap into uniform balls of smokable opium. The company shipped the opium to an island near Guangzhou, and sold it to Chinese smugglers for silver, then used that same silver to buy tea. That's right! The Chinese spent their own silver to buy opium from the British, and the British then turned around and gave the Chinese back that silver for tea. The EIC had essentially turned drug dealing into a business plan.

Corrupt Chinese officials took bribes to look the other way. When the EIC lost its monopoly on Chinese trade in 1833, the situation went from bad to worse. More merchants meant more opium and lower prices. Imports of foreign mud, the Chinese term for opium, nearly doubled in just five years; Chinese addicts numbered in the millions.

3:10

Illustration of an emperor pointing and waving their finger at two officials; stylized image of an emperor in traditional headwear

Outraged, the Chinese emperor met with his advisers, one group advised him to legalize and tax the opium trade. But Minister of Rites, Huang Juezi, argued that because opium was poisoning China, it had to be banned. Swayed by Juezi's moral argument, the emperor banned opium in 1838. He declared, "any foreigner bringing opium into China would be



with a graphic of a blue poppy crossed out with a red 'no' symbol and the year 1838; newspaper headline with a red hand giving a pipe to a blue hand; stylized portrait of Lin Zexu with Chinese dragons around it; pipes and poppy buds scattered on a surface.

4:17

Newspaper heading titled 'The Opium Times' illustrating ships on sea with a large British flag in the background; red stylized portrait of Charles Elliot; large blue graphic of Lin Zexu's head with shooting cannons surrounding it; illustrations of opium flowers and pipes and silver and gold coins; split image of the Palace of Westminster and Big Ben on the left, and six figures dressed in Victorian era clothing on the right.

5:13

Newspaper heading titled 'The Reformers Mail' with a blue stylized portrait of William Gladstone and British flag with the skull and crossbones symbol on it; stylized portrait of Lord Ashley with a floral background and a quote of his; newspaper heading titled 'News of China' with the central text 'For Sir Walter Medhurst, opium isn't the problem', graphics of two red figures seated across a desk and gold coins are set around the cover.

6:16

Stylized portrait of Lord Palmerston with two large gold coins on each side followed by a quote of his with a royal badge beneath it; map of China filled with rows of blue buds, in the bottom corner is a Chinese seal; map of China with shooting cannons on the left side and sail ships on the right; graphic titled

beheaded. Any Chinese who help foreigners in their illegal trade would be strangled. All property on board shall be confiscated." He warned anyone involved in the trade to hand over their opium within one and a half years or face the consequences.

Enter Lin Zexu, remember him? He oversaw the opium burning at the beginning of the video, he'd been appointed drug czar to enforce these new laws. Addicts were rounded up and forced to give up their opium habits cold turkey. Chinese dealers faced execution. He demanded that foreign merchants turn over their supply and leave the country.

A year passed, no British merchants complied; Commissioner Lin asked again. In the meantime, uneasy with the situation, Britain's Superintendent for Trade in China, Charles Elliot, ordered all British ships to Hong Kong Island. He raised the British flag and extended Queen Victoria's protection to all foreigners. Angry Chinese soldiers quickly confined the remaining British merchants to their warehouses. Lin threatened to starve out the foreigners and refused to let them leave until they turned over their opium. Elliot promised the merchants that the British government would pay them for their lost property. Reluctantly, they handed over their valuable stash of opium.

When word of what happened reached London, Parliament and public opinion was divided. Reformers and humanitarian-minded Britons viewed a war to protect the opium trade as shameful.

William Gladstone lectured the pro-war faction, "the Chinese had every right to take the actions they did. Going to war was not only unjust, but was bound to cover the country with a permanent disgrace. The Union Jack would become a pirate flag to protect an infamous traffic." Lord Ashley, an important figure in ending slavery, echoed Gladstone's argument. He wanted China to open its doors to Christian missionaries. But he argued that, "our encouragement to this nefarious traffic has slowed the progress of Christianity and impeded the civilization of mankind." For others, like Sir Walter Medhurst, opium wasn't the problem, China's hostility to free trade was. "In spending millions for opium, the Chinese show they have money to spend. If we can only induce them to take our cotton and woollens instead of our opium, we shall be blessing them and ourselves." War with China might be what was needed to convince China to change its ways.

Lord Palmerston, then British Foreign Secretary, was even more sanguine. Britain's finances depended on opium revenue, and ending trade would require Britain to spend money on something the Chinese were unable to do themselves. "Parliament would have laughed me out of court. Imagine, if I had petitioned them to pay for British Navy patrols to end the smuggling, and preserve the morals of the Chinese people." Given that it was impossible for the government to prevent smuggling in Britain itself, how could they possibly succeed in China with its huge appetite for opium? Palmerston's side narrowly won the debate. Britain sent a



'First Opium War' featuring the British and Qing dynasty flags on either side of text '1839-1842', below is the text 'HMS NEMESIS' next to a steam-powered iron ship.

7:19

Graphic titled 'Treaty of Nanking' alongside the British flag and a floating Christian emblem; graphic titled 'Second Opium War' featuring the British and Qing dynasty flags on either side of text '1857-1859' below is the image of Chinese architecture engulfed in flames; 'Century of Humiliation' overlaid with the Qing Dynasty flag and flower buds; map of China filled with flower buds and a pipe; teapot filling a cup with tea.

military force to punish China for its arrogance, insolence, and outdated economic ideas. China, not British taxpayers, would pay the merchants for their lost property.

The first Opium War began in 1839. China's wooden junks were no match for Britain's steam-powered iron ships, like the HMS Nemesis.

By 1842, China was forced to sign the Treaty of Nanking, ceding Hong Kong, opening several ports to British trade, granting legal immunity to British citizens, and allowing Christian missionaries into the empire. But the British weren't finished. After a second Opium War and another set of unequal treaties, the Chinese economy was devastated. Opium became legal and much of China's economy came under foreign control. This would mark a period remembered as the "Century of Humiliation." In just a few decades, the world's oldest and once most powerful civilization was humbled. Not by armies seeking conquest, but by something as simple and as powerful as a cup of tea.