

Opium Wars and Economic Imperialism

By Bennett Sherry

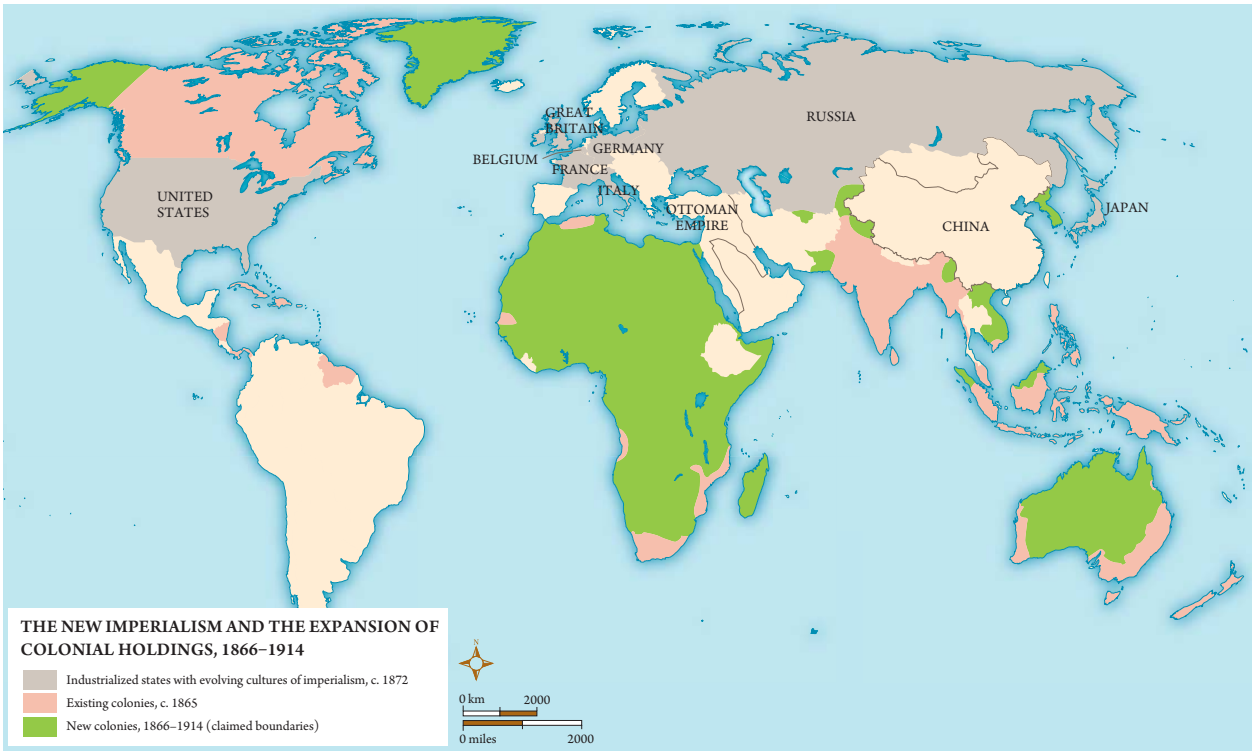
The Opium Wars pitted the world's two strongest economies against each other: the British Empire and the Qing Dynasty of China. The results transformed the global economy.

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Economic imperialism is when an empire has *indirect* control over another country. An economy is how a country earns and spends money. Economic imperialism is usually related to control through trade. Empires did this to protect themselves or to grow their own wealth. Often, it would have been difficult to conquer other countries by force. Instead, they took them over indirectly through trade.

On the map below, you can see lots of areas in pink and green. Those areas were controlled directly by empires. People in Africa and Australia, for example, were colonized by foreign governments. However, a lot of places on the map below aren't green or pink. These lands experienced colonialism indirectly through economic imperialism. Examples include the Ottoman Empire, China, and most of Latin America.

Let's explore economic imperialism in the British and Qing empires.



This is a special map—one that doesn't show different empires. Instead, it shows the growth of empires overall in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, something we call the new imperialism or economic imperialism. By WHP, CC BY-NC 4.0.

A tale of two drugs

In the early nineteenth century, Britain was a global empire. It had a powerful navy. The country also had gone through industrialization. Britain built many factories and produced goods more quickly after industrialization. It also ruled much of India, which made it very wealthy. However, China was the world's strongest economy. This is where we meet caffeine, a mild drug that is found in tea.

Chinese tea was popular in Britain in the early nineteenth century. This created a large trade imbalance with China. (A trade imbalance is when a country imports, or brings in, more than it exports, or sends out.) From 1821 to 1830, the British East India Company (EIC) spent over 19 million pounds on Chinese goods. Almost all of this money was spent on tea. The EIC was a British trading company based in India.

In contrast, the British had almost nothing the Chinese wanted. China was only interested in British silver. The Chinese made coins and paid taxes using silver. Soon, Britain began to run low on its silver supply. In the 1750s, the Qing Emperor restricted foreign merchants, making it difficult for Europeans to buy Chinese products. From about 1760 to 1842, foreign merchants were only allowed to do business in the port city of *Canton*, or Guangzhou.

But in the late eighteenth century, the EIC found something that Chinese people did want. It was a dangerous, highly addictive drug known as opium.

The business of addiction

Opium is a dangerous drug made from the seeds of the poppy plant. The British grew poppy plants in India. In the 1700s and 1800s, opium began to destroy Chinese society. One in 10 people were using the drug. The Chinese government outlawed opium. However, the British had finally found something they could trade with China, and they weren't willing to stop just because it was against the law and hurting people.

The EIC secretly brought Indian opium into China and sold it for silver. It then used this silver to buy tea to sell in Britain. This quickly reversed the trade imbalance between China and Britain. By the 1820s, silver was flowing *out* of China as the British smuggled *in* more opium. Between 1730 and 1830, the amount of opium entering China increased by 200 times.

The Opium Wars

By 1838, the Qing Emperor told Lin Zexu, one of his top officials, to end the opium trade. Punishments were tough, and many opium sellers were killed. Around 20,000 chests of British opium were destroyed. China refused to pay for the destroyed opium. Fighting started in September 1839 and the British government sent ships to China in 1840.



Lin Zexu ordering the destruction of opium by having laborers mix it with caustic lime and throw it into the sea. © Getty Images.

The First Opium War lasted from 1839 to 1842. Industrialization had made Britain stronger. It had powerful new weapons and steam-powered ships. Many Chinese soldiers were armed only with bows and old muskets. The British won many battles and by the summer of 1842, the Chinese had to accept a treaty to end the war.

The Treaty of Nanjing began the "unequal treaties" era. Chinese lawmakers would call it China's "century of humiliation." The treaty forced China to allow Britain to trade through its ports. It also had to pay the British for the cost of the war and the destroyed opium. The British took control of the island of Hong Kong, which they ruled until 1997. After the war, British ships took Chinese workers to British colonies. Chinese migrants often took over work done by enslaved people.



A painting of the British steam-powered warship Nemesis (in the background on the right) destroying Chinese warships in the Second Battle of Chuenpee, 1841. © Getty Images.

From 1856 to 1860, Britain and France fought a second Opium War against China. China lost this war, too. Afterward, the United States, Russia, and Japan all increased their presence in China. These countries also made China sign unequal treaties.

A century of humiliation

The opium trade marked a turning point in world history. This was the first time that a European empire was able to reverse a trade imbalance with China. Why did this happen and why did China enter its "century of humiliation"?

In the eighteenth century, the Qing Dynasty had been incredibly powerful. It traded with neighboring regions and expanded China's rule to the max. By 1800, however, China had been weakened by isolationism. Isolationism is when a country avoids interacting with other countries. The opium trade and wars made these weaknesses worse. From 1850 to 1864, the Taiping Revolution sent China into civil war and killed 20 million people. The revolutionaries demanded an end to the opium trade. As the Qing state became weaker, it became harder to keep other countries out.



The bilingual Treaty of Nanjing, featuring the seals of the British and Qing governments. © Getty Images.

The people involved in the Opium Wars knew that it was wrong. Many critics said the opium trade was as bad as enslavement. British lawmaker William Gladstone would later become Britain's prime minister. In 1840 he said: "A war more unjust in its origin, a war more calculated to cover this country with permanent disgrace, I do not know, and I have not read of."

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Bennett Sherry

Bennett Sherry holds a PhD in History from the University of Pittsburgh and has undergraduate teaching experience in world history, human rights, and the Middle East at the University of Pittsburgh and the University of Maine at Augusta. Additionally, he is a Research Associate at Pitt's World History Center. Bennett writes about refugees and international organizations in the twentieth century.

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This is a special map—one that doesn't show different empires. Instead, it shows the growth of empires overall in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, something we call the new imperialism or economic imperialism. By WHP, CC BY-NC 4.0.

A painting of the many European trading outposts in a neighborhood of Guangzhou, China. Philadelphia Museum of Art, public domain. https://philamuseum.org/collection/object/320039

An illustration of a British opium factory in India in the mid-nineteenth century. Lithograph after W. S. Sherwill, c. 1850. Wellcome Collection, public domain. https://wellcomecollection.org/works/xz7s9dx6/items

Lin Zexu ordering the destruction of opium by having laborers mix it with caustic lime and throw it into the sea. © Pictures from History/Universal Images Group via Getty Images.

A painting of the British steam-powered warship Nemesis (in the background on the right) destroying Chinese warships in the Second Battle of Chuenpee, 1841. © Pictures from History/Universal Images Group via Getty Images

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