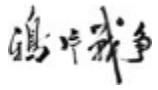
Chapter Eighteen

COMMUNIST CONSPIRACIES



The 1850s were a trying decade for Karl Marx. Expelled from three countries (and barred even from Switzerland), in 1849 he had settled in London with his family. Not long after their arrival, however, the Marxes were evicted from their lodgings and their few possessions confiscated by bailiffs. In the next ten years, three of his children died, most probably from the strains of destitution, as Marx stumbled between financial crises, squandering his journalistic income and handouts from his friend Engels on maintaining a respectable middle-class facade (a useless personal secretary, seaside holidays, ball-gowns for his would-be debutante daughters), all the while agitating for the overthrow of capitalism by the global proletariat.

Despite the chaos of his own circumstances, Marx retained a robust belief in his ability to pronounce on the affairs of the world. And through the decade, his attention turned sporadically to China. The series of articles on the subject that he composed for the *New York Daily Tribune* had little good to say about Palmerston and his 'Christianity-canting and civilisation-mongering' government,[1] or about the merchant interests who were, by 1857, driving the two sides towards 'this most unrighteous war' that will lead the Chinese 'to regard all the nations of the Western World as united in a conspiracy against them.'[2] For China, Marx decided, the first Opium War had been an epochal catastrophe: 'The tribute to be paid to England after the unfortunate war of 1840, the great unproductive consumption of opium, the drain of the precious metals by this trade' had broken the country.[3] Worse than that, the British had calculatingly poisoned an empire, for 'the opium seller slays the body after he has corrupted, degraded and annihilated the moral being of unhappy sinners, while every hour is bringing new victims to a Moloch which knows no satiety, and where the English murderer and

Chinese suicide vie with each other in offerings at his shrine.'[4]

Yet at the same time, Marx was unable to muster much admiration for China, this 'giant empire,

> containing almost one-third of the human race, vegetating in the teeth of time . . . contriving to dupe itself with delusions of celestial perfection . . . Before the British arms the authority of the Manchu dynasty fell to pieces; the superstitious faith in the eternity of the Celestial Empire broke down; the barbarous and hermetic isolation from the civilised world was infringed . . . That isolation having come to a violent end by the medium of England, dissolution must follow as surely as that of any mummy carefully preserved in a hermetically sealed coffin, whenever it is brought into contact with the open air.[5]

The inevitable result of this clash was 'one formidable revolution . . . afforded by the English cannon forcing upon China that soporific drug called opium . . . It would seem as though history had first to make this whole people drunk before it could rouse them out of their hereditary stupidity.'[6]

There was little that was original in Marx's conclusions about China and its Opium Wars. Key elements of his analysis – in particular, his scorn for the decadence of the Chinese empire – are to be found scattered across previous China-watchers' accounts. Heavily influenced by earlier European sinophobes of the nineteenth century, Marx propounded a vision of China that stripped it of both complexity and agency: that saw it as an inert empire capable only of being 'woken' by the West in the Opium War. The one novelty that Marx added to the standard racist repertoire of Victorian commentaries on China was a similarly intense disgust for Western imperialism.

By 1860, Marx had moved on from China, to concentrate instead on failing to complete Volume 1 of *Capital*; he seems never to have returned seriously to the subject. Less than a century later, however, his views would become enshrined in Chinese nationalist thought as the definitive account of 'the Celestial Empire' and the Opium Wars. This account would become the founding myth of Chinese nationalism: the beginning of the Western imperialist conspiracy against a rotting 'semi-feudal, semi-colonial' China, from which only communism could save the country. At the heart of anti-Western Maoism, therefore, lies a profound reverence for European opinion.

And to tell the strange story of how the opinions dashed off by a bourgeois from the Lower Rhine became holy writ in China, we must first return to the labours of another financially challenged chancer of the late-nineteenth century (and the architect of a one-party Chinese nation-state): Sun Yat-sen. It was Sun's late, ambivalent decision of the 1920s – taken in

desperation to win Soviet funding for his faltering revolution – to name imperialism as the cause of all modern China's problems that transformed the Opium War into the inaugural trauma of Chinese history, and into a vital ingredient of twentieth-century patriotic propaganda.

Born in 1866 into a peasant family a little north of Macao, educated in Hong Kong and Hawai'i thanks to the generosity of a brother who had sailed off to make his fortune overseas, Sun was the archetypal product of China's forced opening to the West. By his late twenties, he had competent English, had graduated from a Hong Kong college with rudimentary knowledge of Western medicine and had converted to Christianity.

In 1894, he made a brief attempt at a more conventional career in the imperial bureaucracy, travelling north to deliver to the Qing head of state, Li Hongzhang, a long petition that offered his services to modernizing China. Preoccupied by war with Japan, Li did not make time to see him. This snub seems to have been enough to convince Sun that he must concentrate his energies on bringing down the entire edifice of Qing rule, and before the year was out he had founded a secret revolutionary cell in Hawai'i, the Revive China Society, dedicated to overthrowing the Manchus. After his first planned uprising in 1895 failed disastrously, he fled China with a price on his head and began a career as a professional itinerant revolutionary. Through this dispossessed period, Sun would develop his vision of a republican, nationalist state that would in later decades help win him a place in modern Chinese history as 'father of the nation'.

Over the course of the next sixteen years, Sun flitted between countries (Britain, France, Japan, the United States) and social groups (bandits, pirates, monarchists, anarchists, foreign ministers, missionaries, overseas Chinese businessmen, American mercenaries), begging for money and help for his anti-Manchu revolution, artfully telling each constituency what they wanted to hear. In London one season, he would extol the virtues of the British legal system; in Japan the next, he would excoriate the horrors of Western colonialism to Pan-Asianists. A year later, he would be wooing China's secret societies with toasts in pigeon's blood, while offering parts of south China to French imperialists if they first pledged to finance his 'federated republic'.

After a decade of failed rebellions, he read in October 1911 – in a newspaper, while breakfasting at the foot of the Rocky Mountains – that a string of revolutionary uprisings, beginning with a botched bomb explosion in central China, had brought down the Qing dynasty. (Sun was in the United

States to work out the details of an anti-Qing conspiracy with a hunchbacked adventurer called Homer Lea, who was offering $3.5 million worth of soldiers and weapons in exchange for full economic control of the republic that would ensue.) Rather than rush straight back to China, however, Sun booked a ship ticket to London, where he promised the British government that in return for their support of the new regime he would appoint British officers to the command of the Chinese navy and enthrone a British official as his 'political adviser'.[7]

Finally returning to China on Christmas Day 1911, he accepted the presidency for thirty-four days, before handing over the infant republic to a former Qing general, Yuan Shikai, whose personal command over the Beiyang army in the north-east – the country's largest, most modernized military force – had enabled him to dominate negotiations between the Qing and the revolutionaries over the preceding weeks. In 1913, Sun found himself on the run again after Yuan had ordered the assassination of a newly elected prime minister, thereby destroying the new government's shaky democratic structures.[8] For the next decade, Sun returned to frequenting the drawing rooms of the international rich and powerful, offering slices of his future Chinese republic to the highest bidder.

But despite his promises to would-be foreign friends, he made little progress in finding funding for his republican dream. Following Yuan Shikai's death in 1916, his subordinates divided the country into personal enclaves and began battling each other for overall control. In 1917, after the warlord fashion of the day, Sun headed for his native Canton and, decked out in plumed helmet, fringed epaulettes and white gloves, proclaimed himself Grand Marshal of a cash-starved military government that existed principally on paper – he could muster, at the peak of his command, some twenty battalions and one gunboat. By 1922, even by the standards of his career to that point, Sun's position was looking precarious. On 16 June, his headquarters in Canton were bombarded by a former ally, Chen Jiongming, a Cantonese commander who objected to Sun's schemes to force Guangdong to pay for a northern expedition to reunite the country under his leadership. In the fire that resulted, Sun was forced to flee his house pursued by rifle shots and shouts of 'Kill Sun! Kill Sun!' He spent the next seven weeks sweltering on board a gunboat, waiting in vain for reinforcements to restore him to his seat of power, while his old friends the British did nothing except send a ship to taxi him to Hong Kong.[9]

Impelled at least partly by hopelessness, around this time Sun began to give thought to overtures from the Soviet Union. The Russians, it emerged,

were willing to provide his fractious Nationalist Party (Guomindang or GMD – the organization that he had founded in 1912, to replace his similarly fractious Revolutionary Alliance of the 1900s) with funding, arms and political and military training. Sun, in return, would allow members of the young Chinese Communist Party (CCP), founded in 1921 with help from the Comintern, into the ranks of the Nationalists, to form a United Front. Sun hoped that the Soviets would make him a Chinese Lenin, injecting the cash, weapons and discipline necessary to turn the Guomindang into a force that could reunite the country by defeating the warlords who had carved up China. The Russians planned to further their long-term aim of world revolution by advancing in China the primary political stage – national bourgeois revolution assisted by Chinese Communists – from within which, they hoped, communist revolution would spring.

But to secure Soviet money, Sun had to make a stand on a handful of key Communist policies. Displaying solidarity with the proletariat was one: organizing strikes, reducing rents, redistributing land and so on. In theory, this step made good sense, promising to turn Sun's Nationalist Party into a genuinely mass organization. In practice, it would prove problematic, for Sun had little stomach for class struggle. Since 1905, Sun's political manifestoes had glibly called for the 'equalization of land rights', while failing to acknowledge the social and economic conflict this process would necessarily bring with it. As a man permanently short of funds, Sun was naturally drawn to the rich and powerful, within and without China: to politicians, merchants, industrialists and wealthy landlords.[10]

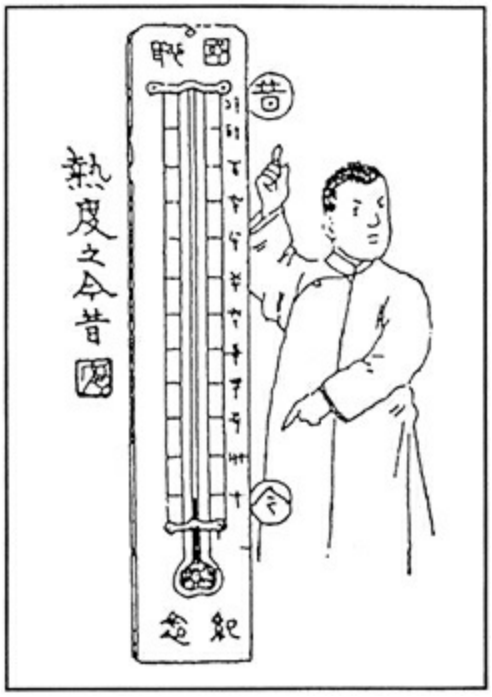
Resisting 'the world-suppressing yoke of imperialism' was a second important Soviet principle with which Sun needed to concur – for imperialism, Marx had upheld (and Lenin agreed), was the highest stage of capitalism.[11] Again, in theory, this stipulation should not have posed any great difficulty for a Chinese political movement aspiring to mass popularity. By the 1920s, China had been suffering from foreign aggression for some eighty years; the past decade alone had been studded with new outrages. Taking advantage of China's post-revolutionary chaos, the Japanese government had in 1915 served Yuan Shikai with their Twenty-One Demands, asserting economic and political sovereignty over slices of Manchuria and Mongolia. Four years later, the British, French and Americans at Versailles had rewarded Japanese naval assistance in the First World War with another large portion of north-east China. Indignant Chinese youth had responded by plunging into the protest of the May Fourth Movement – a surge of radical nationalism named after the violent anti-imperialist demonstrations of 4 May 1919.

Again, in reality, mobilizing and harnessing anti-imperialist zeal in Republican China was not so straightforward. Assuredly, certain groups in Chinese society were prone to fury about foreign aggression: in particular, the students, teachers and writers who, through articles, demonstrations and petitions, drew attention to the country's mistreatment at the hands of the Powers. They filled journals and newspapers with appalled editorials about China's international predicament; they voted to brand shop signs, textbooks, flags and packaging (for cigarettes, wine, straw hats, stockings) with the words 'National Humiliation'; they commemorated traumatic anniversaries as 'National Humiliation Days'. There was money to be made from the Humiliation industry, too. To celebrate the tenth anniversary of the Demands, one newspaper advertised a special souvenir product: 'National Humiliation' towels, to help remind the Chinese people (through daily ablutions) that the shame of foreign aggression had to be wiped away. Another company six years later tried a similar pitch for tooth powder: 'you will naturally associate this in your mind with the great "national humiliation" and ponder ways to brush it clean.'[12]

But this anger was mixed with fear that, without the vigilance of the nation's intellectual leaders, ordinary Chinese would easily forget the horrors of foreign oppression. The Chinese, editorialists complained through the 1910s and 1920s, had a serious national humiliation attention deficit disorder: 'an enthusiasm for things that only lasted five minutes'.[13] Fulminations against external aggression in early Republican newspapers frequently veered into denunciations of popular indifference. 'There are a great many Chinese citizens', one commentator of the early 1920s worried, 'who do not appreciate the seriousness of the current national crisis and their responsibility to do something about it. This is a new national humiliation and also a great crisis.' One newspaper cartoon from 1922 pictured a disapproving-looking individual standing by an enormous thermometer showing that the country's 'National Humiliation Commemoration Fever' had dwindled to almost nothing.[14]

Even China's most passionate anti-imperialists – those who threw themselves into the May Fourth Movement – were inconsistent in their attitudes to the West. On the one hand, the protests – which quickly developed into strikes and boycotts of foreign goods across China's cities – decried the Great Powers' partition of China. But on the other, May Fourth nationalists (just like their radical predecessors from the turn of the century) worshipped Western 'civilization': its science, its democracy, its literature and culture. The basic task, proclaimed Chen Duxiu, one of the movement's

intellectual leaders, ‘is to import the foundation of Western society, that is, the new belief in equality and human rights.’ For people like Chen, the real enemy was not the West, but China’s own Confucianism: ‘We must be thoroughly aware’, he reminded his readers in 1916, ‘of the incompatibility between Confucianism and the new belief, the new society and the new state.’[15] All that these nationalists could agree on was that something was intrinsically wrong with China and the Chinese – the country’s sufferings at the hands of imperialism were consequences of this more fundamental malaise. ‘The majority of our people are lethargic,’ Chen worried in 1917, ‘and do not know that not only our morality, politics and technology but even common commodities for daily use are all unfit for struggle and are going to be eliminated in the process of natural selection.’[16]



China’s National Humiliation commemoration fever dwindles.

Sun Yat-sen had as much trouble turning on the imperialist powers as the next cosmopolitan patriot. This was partly for pragmatic, financial reasons: since he had fled China for his life in 1895, his revolutionary hopes had been kept alive by dollars, francs, pounds and yen. Sun owed the West not only an intellectual and emotional debt, but also his life. In London in 1896, he had been kidnapped by the Qing legation and threatened with deportation to China (and certain death), until a British media campaign on his behalf surrounded the embassy with crowds threatening to demolish the building unless the prisoner was released. (In Beijing in 1984 for fraught

negotiations over Hong Kong, Mrs Thatcher took care to remind her Chinese counterparts of this merciful British intervention.) But his ambivalence also sprang from a realistic assessment of the relative importance of internal and international politics, and from a matter-of-fact refusal to blame foreigners for most of China's difficulties.

For most of his career, Sun was necessarily more preoccupied by his domestic political opponents than by foreign threats. Through the 1900s, he was careful to avoid open criticism of Western imperialism: his public statements always attributed the root of China's problems to the dictatorship of the Manchus (whom Sun excoriated for having failed to build a Western-style democracy).[17] In 1912, even as he declared opium prohibition to be one of the most urgent tasks of the new republic, he observed that 'Lin Zexu's burning of the opium generated unprecedented calamity for the country . . . it did not conform to treaties; it was uncivilized, illegal behaviour.'[18] To the end of his life, he considered his greatest mistake to have been to cede the presidency to Yuan Shikai in 1912 – rather than to have offered repeatedly to hand over large portions of the Chinese republic to would-be foreign backers. (In 1913 alone, he volunteered Manchuria to the Japanese government in exchange for 20 million yen and a couple of army divisions.) In 1923, Sun objected to a student slogan that exhorted the Chinese to 'Resist the Great Powers abroad and overthrow the warlords at home'. 'These two problems cannot be discussed in the same breath', he reprimanded the sloganeers. 'If the home government is good then foreign relations present no problem.'[19]

If, in the early 1920s, China's old Opium War adversary Great Britain had produced backing as substantial as that promised by the Soviet Union, Sun's budding agreement with Lenin might well have come to nothing. In February 1923, a mere month before the USSR pledged $2 million to his revolutionary government, Sun was taking tea in well-heeled Hong Kong drawing rooms and proclaiming that 'we must take England as our model and must extend England's example of good government to the whole of China.'[20]

But by 1924, his ongoing financial and political crises had persuaded Sun to complete the intellectual journey dictated by Soviet backing, and in a series of lectures on his *Three Principles of the People* – the text that would become a major part of his political legacy after his death the following year – he began to identify imperialism as Republican China's greatest enemy. By wresting control of Customs from the Qing, the first Opium War had left China with a severe 'economic disability', resulting in

the annual loss of $1.2 billion. ‘China has suffered at the hands of the Great Powers for decades . . . [It] has become a colony of the Great Powers.’[21] In fact, China was far worse than a colony, he told his listeners – it was, he extemporized, a ‘hypocolony . . . not the slaves of one country but of all.’[22] The ‘historic task’, he decided, must now be to unite for ‘the overthrow of the intervention of foreign imperialism in China’, for ‘China’s disintegration is not the fault of the Chinese, but, instead, is caused exclusively by foreigners.’[23] Through his lectures, Sun painted a simplistic picture of a peaceable, virtuous China surrounded by rapacious foreign powers eager ‘to destroy a nation in one morning.’ In order to rescue the country, he concluded, his Nationalist Party was duty-bound to ‘acquaint our 400 million people with our present position. We are just now at the crisis between life and death.’ If the Chinese did not – under the leadership of the Nationalist Party – recover their sense of nationalism and ready themselves to fight imperialism, ‘our nation [will] be destroyed [and our] race will be exterminated.’[24] The Nationalists, in other words, were China’s only chance of salvation.

Once Sun’s Nationalist Party had finally vowed to rally the Chinese to the cause of anti-imperialism, however, it still had to find the means to impress this new orthodoxy on the minds of its citizens. By the early 1920s, it was clear to aspiring political elites that for decades anti-Western feeling had ebbed and flowed in response to particular crises, without coalescing into a unified political force. A strong, cohesive nation required a one-party nation-state. The problem with the Chinese, the supposed republican democrat Sun Yat-sen concluded in 1924, was that they had too much freedom. ‘We have had too much liberty without any unity . . . [B]ecause we have become a sheet of loose sand . . . we must break down individual liberty and become pressed together into an unyielding body like the firm rock which is formed by the addition of cement to sand.’[25] The Chinese people, in the estimation of the newly reformed Nationalist Party, needed discipline. ‘The masses’, in an Orwellian phrase of the early 1920s, needed to be ‘partified’, Lenin-style; they needed a pervasive, unified national language of anti-imperialist slogans and symbols, clearly identifying the country’s enemies (imperialism and its lackeys) and its saviours (the Nationalists and their sometime allies, the Communists).[26] At the First Congress of the reorganized Nationalist Party in 1924, anti-imperialism became one of the basic criteria by which Chinese citizens would be given membership of the national revolution to come: ‘Those who betray the nation, those who give their loyalty to the imperialists or to the warlords,

will be permitted neither freedom nor rights.'[27]

The task would prove beyond Sun Yat-sen. Soon after he had travelled north in 1925 to conduct talks with the warlord government in Beijing, he succumbed to liver cancer. Almost instantly, though, his successors embarked upon modern China's most humourlessly committed attempt at nation-building: 'with the president dead,' the Nationalists' Central Executive Committee quickly concluded, '*party discipline* is the only thing that can protect . . . us.'[28] Sun's survivors began by reinvigorating its Propaganda Bureau, ensuring that a party line actually existed, that it was disseminated to all party branches, and that newspapers, magazines and public lectures toed it.[29] (This was a major achievement: as late as 1924, the newly appointed editor of the Nationalist Party newspaper had to work on ensuring that it stopped at least *openly* insulting Sun Yat-sen.) While Nationalist armies – trained and supplied by the Soviets – pushed up through the country between 1926 and 1928, fighting or bribing warlords into submission, Sun's successors (led by Chiang Kai-shek, the man who took over the helm of the party) deified their late, flawed leader as the political sage of a Nationalist Party that aspired to monopolize all claims to represent the 'Chinese nation'. As they surged north, fighting to reunify the country, Nationalist forces showered the country with tens of thousands of slogans, leaflets, images of the Great Leader and new blue-and-white Nationalist flags. Sun's anti-imperialist *Three Principles of the People* and last testament (drafted by subordinates desperate for a legacy and merely signed off by the semi-comatose dying man) became the soundtrack to public life in the Nationalist state founded in 1928. Every Monday, in offices, schools and garrisons, employees, students and soldiers would gather to bow three times to his portrait, to listen to a reading of his Testament and to contemplate silently for three minutes.[30]

But if the Nationalists were serious about engineering a nation out of anti-imperialist feeling, tampering with history books was an obvious step to take. 'Who controls the past, controls the future', as Ingsoc put it in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. 'Who controls the present controls the past.' And it was thanks to the propaganda drive of the 1920s and 1930s that the events of 1839–42 stopped being a quarrelsome side-story (a 'dispute' or 'expedition') of the nineteenth century and became instead the aggrieved, unprecedented national tragedy that the 'Opium War' remains in China today.

A touching illustration on page four of the sixth issue of *Children's Magazine* (*Ertong Zazhi*) from 1936 shows two plump little brothers, one a head taller than the other, standing with their arms around each other, the older presumably imparting some fraternal wisdom to the younger on the subject of the article's title: 'A Chat about the Opium War'. The following dialogue between the two boys ensues. 'What was the Opium War about?' the little one wants to know. Well, his big brother explains, it all started with Lin Zexu trying to stop British opium imports.

> 'So they attacked Dinghai and Tianjin, and the Qing emperor was so useless he blamed Lin Zexu for causing the war, dismissed him and appointed Qishan instead to negotiate for peace.'
>
> 'What a silly emperor!'
>
> 'And because Qishan was so clueless, the English took Wusong and Nanjing. The Qing emperor was so surprised that he signed the Treaty of Nanjing that destroyed our sovereignty and humiliated the nation.'
>
> 'Those horrible fierce imperialists!'

The younger one – probably around seven years old – responds to a description of the clauses of the Treaty of Nanjing with word-perfect political correctness. 'Oh, I'm so angry I could die! The emperor and his ministers were so stupid! I could kill them all! They deserve to die!' 'Don't get angry,' counsels his sage brother. 'Just remember everything that I told you – you'll take revenge when you get older.' 'Of course,' chirps the seven-year-old. 'This blood debt has to be repaid.'[31]

This exchange sums up what every schoolchild in Nationalist China was supposed to know about the Opium War: that it was a tale of evil imperialists and foreign poison humiliating China; and that all right-thinking Chinese people, of all ages, should be inspired to take revenge for it. Two or three decades earlier, what Chinese people today now know as the Opium War ('Yapian zhanzheng') remained an event in China's long, difficult nineteenth century, buried beneath the more general subheadings of 'Internal and External Troubles of the Nineteenth Century' or 'the Western Migration East', and sandwiched between difficulties in Xinjiang and the sprawling violence of the Taiping Rebellion. An average history textbook would run through a handful of factual details – the growing Chinese fondness for opium; the crackdown of 1839; the arrival of gunboats; the main battles; the treaty and the size of the indemnity – then move on to the next unpleasant nineteenth-century occurrence (usually domestic rebellions; occasionally sheep banditry in Mongolia).[32]

Through the 1920s, though, the historiography of the Opium War acquired

a fresh sense of resentment. By the end of this decade, the conflict and the first 'Unequal Treaty' that Qiying and Yilibu had signed off with such careless haste had become the turning point in a modern history dominated by imperialist aggression. It was (ahistorically) named the 'beginning of China's diplomatic defeats' after '5,000 years of isolation' from the outside world; 'a humiliation to the country – the greatest ever in our history' that 'brought dishonour to countless descendants'.[33] 'The Opium War, for the first time, branded the iron hoofprint of imperialism on the bodies of our people', pronounced one history textbook.[34] 'From this time on,' observed another, 'the invasions and oppressions of the imperialists would daily encroach further on the Chinese people.'[35] 'The Opium War is intricately linked with the national fate of modern China', commented a 1931 tract on the conflict. 'At last, foreigners were able to realize their old dream of looting China; how furiously we sigh to remember it now. This book offers a warning to you all, to incite bitter hatred of the common enemy.'[36] 'Since the Opium War,' a magazine editorial analysed, 'international imperialism has forced opium on our country, miring our great rivers and mountains in black fog . . . we have been massacred, robbed of our sovereignty – we've become worse than a colony. We've become a poisoned people.'[37]

The aim was to persuade the populace to blame all China's problems on a single foreign enemy: to transform the Opium War and its Unequal Treaty into a long-term imperialist scheme from which only the Nationalists could preserve the country, thereby justifying any sacrifice that the party required of the Chinese. 'From the Opium War . . . the unanimous demand of the people has been to avenge the National Humiliation', Chiang Kai-shek informed his subjects. 'The success of the Nationalist Revolution [and] China's destiny depends upon the efforts of my countrymen.'[38] If something is not done, another essayist proclaimed, 'generation upon generation of our children will be enslaved for ever.'[39] Reassessment of the Opium War coincided with other anti-Western commemorations introduced after 1924: week-long anti-imperialism fiestas (orchestrated by the new Grand Anti-imperialist Alliance) protesting acts of foreign violence – such as the shooting of eleven Chinese protestors by British-led constables in Shanghai on 30 May 1925. Enlisted Nationalist soldiers were educated by four-hour lectures on the past and present oppression of imperialism: 'England imports opium into China', ran the official script for these talks. 'The British bombarded Canton, demanded indemnity and, moreover, occupied and still occupy Hong Kong.'[40] 'With their thirteen million square miles of

colonies, the British imperialists are the leaders of world imperialism', exclaimed a party weekly in 1930. 'They've oppressed every small race to death . . . Because of British imperialism, our nation is neither free nor equal . . . if you want proof, just remember how the British have invaded us for the last eighty years . . . Let us lift the curtain on evil British imperialism, and reveal its viciousness.'[41]

Yet however hard Nationalist China's pedagogues tried to turn the Opium War into a monument to China's victimization by the West, the old self-disgust of earlier patriots crept back in. Reminders of British wickedness were accompanied by references to the war's 'failures' and 'defeats', caused by the 'arrogance', 'stupidity' and 'indecision' of the Qing government, by the 'slumbering, ancient, declining' and 'undisciplined' masses, and by the treachery of the 'bad merchants'. 'We weren't ready,' one 1936 analysis of the war concluded, 'we were divided . . . we were suspicious of each other . . . the responsibility lies, for the most part, on our shoulders . . . the Opium War is more useful than harmful to us – it can transform our thinking and correct our mistakes.'[42] 'It marked the beginning of our period of transformation and enlightenment', agreed *Drug Prohibition Monthly* in the same year. 'English imperialism was the induction injection for the reform of Chinese society.'[43] 'European and American imperialists invaded China,' an article commemorating the centenary of the war lamented, 'but the Chinese people were responsible for their own weakness – we can't blame other people.'[44]

In 1943, Chiang Kai-shek completed his own judgement of the Opium War, denouncing in his book-length manifesto *China's Destiny* the 'heartbreaking' and 'limitless evil effects' of the country's 'First National Humiliation', which 'cut off the lifeblood of the state' and 'threatened our people's chance of survival.'[45] Throwing off the enslavement of the Unequal Treaties was 'the most important objective of the Chinese Nationalist Revolution.'[46] In these same pages, though, he also made plain his contempt for the 'stupidity' of the Manchus and for the 'decadent habits and evil practices' of the ordinary people. 'The country was subjected only because it had subjected itself . . . Must we not tremble? Must we not be ashamed and disturbed?'[47] (His Western-educated wife, Song Meiling, took care to ensure that the government did not translate her husband's great work into English, for fear that its anti-Western message would alienate the Americans and British from whom the Nationalists desperately needed military aid to fight the Japanese.[48])

Coexisting with this still ambivalent vision of the Opium War was a set of similarly undecided attitudes to opium itself. In Nationalist declarations, opium was legally and morally beyond the pale: in 1928, Chiang's new government announced a 'total prohibition' (*juedui jinyan*). Unofficially, however, the Nationalists – like the warlord regimes they fought through the 1920s and 1930s – needed the opium trade for revenue. Between 1927 and 1937, the Nationalist government strove (often with surprising success, given appalling obstacles such as Japanese invasion and worldwide depression) to transform an impoverished, fragmented country into a modern unified state: creating national ministries, commissions, academies; building roads, railways, industries, dams.[49] In the absence of crucial resources such as income tax, opium duties would have to do instead. For the creative tax-collector – and Republican China was full of them – there was a wealth of surcharges to be extracted from opium: in duties on the drug itself (plus its transport and retail); and licences to sell and smoke it. The state even maintained a monopoly on opium-addiction cures.[50] The citizens of the republic dodged these taxes with comparable ingenuity: one filial individual smuggled opium between west and east China by concealing it not just inside his father's coffin, but inside his father's skull inside the coffin.[51]

In 1928, drug revenues helped keep the country's armies – at a total of 2.2 million, the largest in the world (costing $800 million a year) – standing. A 1931 cartoon entitled 'Shanghai business' pictured three figures: to left and right two dwarfs labelled 'industry' looked skyward at the towering colossus between them – Opium. In 1933, the size of the opium traffic in China was estimated at $2 billion annually (5.2 per cent of the country's gross domestic product). In many regions and contexts, opium was as good as, if not better than, money, and an essential commercial and social lubricant – 'light the lamps' was standard Chinese for 'let's talk business'; opium pipes were offered at weddings as conventionally as wine. The country literally reeked of the stuff, thanks to the vats of the drug publicly boiled in the streets of towns and cities: by the 1930s, China may have had as many as 50 million smokers (around 9 per cent of the population).[52]

Through the 1920s, concerned civilians organized themselves into a National Anti-Opium Association, launching special Anti-Opium Days, then Anti-Opium Weeks, and a monthly periodical *Drug Prohibition*, on whose covers righteous, muscular Chinese thwacked and thumped hideous tar-black monsters named Opium. (Four and a half million signatures were collected for anti-opium petitions in 1924 alone.) 'Why aren't our nation's merchants content with engaging in legitimate business activities?' the

Association wanted to know in 1927. 'Why are they so willing to serve as the slaves of foreigners? As the running dogs of warlords? As those who injure both the people and the nation? . . . They curry favour with imperialists and warlords, and entice our male and female countrymen to smoke opium with devastating consequences.'[53] In the meantime, the Nationalist government identified offices for collecting opium tax as 'opium suppression bureaus', while opium merchant guilds could be euphemistically labelled 'medicinal merchants' friendship associations'.[54] 'Millions have been raised out of opium', remarked the International Anti-Opium Association in 1928. 'Nationalist Government monopolies exist in every large centre, and are so efficiently organised that enormous revenues result. And although the evil of the so-called "Opium Wars" has invariably been referred to on every Nationalist platform and in every proletarian demonstration, the Government is raising the very last cent out of the cultivation and use of opium.'[55] Not for nothing did the Cantonese have the saying, 'Opium addiction is easy to cure; opium tax addiction far harder.'[56]

Anti-opium activists reviled the government's pragmatic efforts to generate useful, state-building money out of the drug: 'As we look around at the conditions within China, opium is everywhere, how sickening! HOW SICKENING! We truly hope that the government authorities will . . . completely prohibit opium, and earnestly eradicate it in order to save the tarnished reputation of our country and forever consolidate the foundation of this nation.'[57] The government gave earnest public pledges that it 'will absolutely not derive one copper from opium revenue. If anything of this sort is suspected . . . we can regard this government as bankrupt and place no confidence in it.'[58] 'If we want to save China,' Chiang Kai-shek added, 'we must begin with prohibiting opium, and that prohibition must begin with the highest echelons of the leadership . . . Prohibit the poison if you want to save the country, the people, yourself, your sons and grand-sons.'[59] 'The opium evil', he explained elsewhere, 'constitutes a greater menace to the nation than foreign aggression, because the former leads to self-degeneration and self-suicide, whereas the latter is invited by mutual dissension, weakness and degeneracy.'[60] In private, the regime did its best to silence inconvenient opponents by frightening off their sponsors, by smearing them with accusations of drug-smuggling, by sending them death threats; or simply by planting bombs in their houses. In 1931, the government was buffeted by one of its biggest drug scandals, when a group of Shanghai constables intercepted an opium shipment that a company of

Nationalist soldiers were busy unloading. The men of the law were promptly taken prisoner until the precious drug had found its way to its gangland destination.[61]

In 1934, the government began to execute relapsed users of opiates, informing opium-smokers that they would 'be shot without further ceremony' if they returned to the habit after treatment. In 1936, nine such individuals were paraded through the streets of Xi'an then killed in front of thousands of spectators.[62] 'Opium is good for curing minor sickness, for dealing with boredom, and for helping you think', one of Chiang Kai-shek's 'opium-suppression' officials flagrantly contradicted government policy in 1940. 'Just light a pipe and you will be happy . . . your mind will open like a flower and you will be able to clearly distinguish things.'[63] 'In the country all that one can see is poppy growing everywhere,' observed a newspaper in 1932, 'in the cities there are opium dens along every street, government offices openly collect taxes on opium, and citizens openly smoke it . . . the whole of China depends upon opium . . . This condition is far more lamentable than the Opium Prohibition Memorial Day.'[64]

In the early 1940s, the north-eastern city of Mukden – the old Manchu capital – retained at least a touch of its old dynastic grandeur. In 1625, when the Qing were still only aspiring rulers of China, they had built themselves there a miniature replica of the Forbidden City (a diminutive seventeen acres, to the original's hundred and seventy) in which to perfect their practice of imperial rituals. Outside its palace complex, though, Mukden was heavily marked by the Japanese invasion of Manchuria. In 1942, the north-eastern edge of the city (just outside a thick, crenellated wall of Ming vintage) had acquired a prisoner-of-war camp, housing around 1,200 American, British, Dutch and Australian soldiers taken since the fall of Singapore; almost 40 per cent of them would be dead of malnutrition and ill-treatment by the time of the Japanese surrender. Along the grey streets of the city itself, a scattering of smarter establishments – newly, attractively spruced up in red and white paint – might have stood out. Their fronts proclaimed they were selling a mysterious substance called 'Official Paste' – opium. Elsewhere, a casual observer might have spotted a number of shacks – perhaps 200 – receiving dozens of visitors per day. These were, an eyewitness from 1931 had noted, 'dope huts . . . In a single shop, about forty to fifty persons come to receive [morphine] injections every day'.[65]

By 1942, the Second World War was going badly for Chiang Kai-shek

and his government. In 1937, a Japanese move against Shanghai and Nanjing had driven the Nationalists from their seat of power on the east coast. As Chiang and his followers retreated into the hinterland, his armies destroyed Yellow River dykes to halt the Japanese advance – an act that caused at least half a million civilian deaths by drowning and disease. By the close of that year, Chiang had lost his industrial base and, four long years before the Americans joined the war effort, began struggling to reconstruct his regime in impoverished Sichuan. But as the Nationalists tried to build roads and rationalize taxes, they also found time to fight a new war of words on opium. In 1938, Madame Chiang Kai-shek accused the Japanese of a 'diabolically cunning' plot to 'drench' China with opium, with a view to 'demoralising the people until they were physically unfit to defend their country, and mentally and morally so depraved that they could easily be bought and bribed with drugs to act as spies when the time came in order that their craving might be satisfied.'[66] 'The Japanese are many times worse than the British ever were!' agreed a journalist two years later. 'Even at the time of the Opium War, some Britons criticized it, like true English gentlemen. The Japanese, by contrast, are trying to poison our people, to annihilate our race.'[67] Foreign correspondents in China through the 1930s denounced the 'ash heap of Mukden', littered with moribund drug fiends. The Japanese occupation government apparently encouraged opium use in Beijing by telling its police to turn a blind eye to proliferating dens in the former capital. Unpassported Korean and Japanese gangsters were, these same observers noted, busily peddling opium and heroin 'to the degradation of thousands of Chinese . . . sowing seeds of bitterness and hatred, which it will take years to eradicate.'[68]

The horror of the Japanese invasion and allegations of Japanese attempts to stupefy the country with opiates brought a new resonance to the imperialist conspiracy theories spun about the Opium War. (Whether or not Japanese-controlled regimes cynically pushed drugs to the Chinese to break their spirit of resistance, they certainly profited from them. The puppet state of Manchukuo in the north-east drew a sixth of its revenue from opium sales and exports.[69]) But the occupying Japanese and their Chinese collaborators also made use of the Opium War as a rhetorical tool to distract attention away from Japanese atrocities. In August 1939, by which point millions of Chinese had been killed or wounded in the war with Japan, Beijing's puppet government convened 'Down With Britain' rallies against the Opium War, arguing that they were merely giving an outlet to Chinese outrage that 'had been boiling since the Opium War'.[70] Stop fighting Japan, one Pan-Asianist

editorial urged its Chinese readers the following year. ‘Europe’s disarray is Asia’s opportunity . . . We’ve seized the opportunity for revenge. We should expunge the bloody humiliation [of the Opium War] with all determination! . . . We must recognize our true enemies and kill them with all our strength. Every Chinese person has the responsibility to commemorate the centenary of the Opium War and to remember that Asia is for the Asians!’[71] Meanwhile, occupied Shanghai – the headquarters of the Chinese film industry – planned an all-star-cast blockbuster about the war to ‘encourage all Chinese people to oppose Britain and America.’[72]

Between 1925 and 1926, a tall, confident figure with a mop of black, swept-back hair sat in the director’s chair of the newly reorganized Propaganda Bureau of the Nationalist Party, combing piles of newspapers for deviations from party orthodoxy. Mao Zedong did not have long in the job. Within another two years, there would be no place for a Communist like him anywhere in the Nationalist Party organization. On 12 April 1927, after months of secret negotiations with Shanghai’s wealthiest financiers and their private underworld enforcers, the Green Gang, Chiang Kai-shek set an armed force of some 1,000 gangsters at the city’s labour unions, the hubs of Communist activity; 100 unionists were gunned down at a single protest rally alone. Forces rallied by the Communists were similarly massacred in Changsha, Wuhan, Nanchang and, finally, Canton, where leftists were quickly identified by the dye marks left round their necks by their red kerchiefs and drowned in bundles of ten or twelve in the river by the city.

Over the next two decades, the civil conflict between the Nationalist and Communist Parties would dominate political and military life in China – sometimes to the extent even of sidelining the war with Japan. The Japanese invasion was, Chiang Kai-shek declared in the early 1930s, merely ‘external . . . like a gradually festering ulcer on the skin. The [Communist] bandit disturbance is internal. It is . . . a disorder of the heart. Because this internal disease has not been eliminated, the external disorder cannot be cured.’[73] Violence would climax in the final stages of the civil war between 1945 and 1949, during which hundreds of thousands of civilians would perish; perhaps 650,000 died of starvation in the Communist siege of a single north-eastern city alone.

Despite their vicious political rivalries, China’s new political parties concurred perfectly on how China was to be manipulated into an effective nation-state: through ideological discipline and unity. As Propaganda Chief Mao barked in 1925, ‘either step right, into the counter-revolutionary

faction, or step left, into the revolutionary faction . . . There is no third route . . . Anyone who offers support for counter-revolutionary actions . . . shall be counted as our enemy.'[74] And their populist rhetoric notwithstanding, at base both held similarly dismissive views of the Chinese people, and of their need for reprogramming with one-party nationalism. China, the Nationalist Party's first director of propaganda judged in 1925, was a 'blank sheet of paper. Colour it green, and it is green; colour it yellow and it is yellow.' Mao Zedong, his successor, agreed: the Chinese, he believed, were 'poor and blank. A clean sheet of paper has no blotches and so the newest and most beautiful words can be written on it.'[75]

Although, after 1949, the victorious CCP would expend much energy in excoriating the 'reactionary idealist, mechanical materialist, feudal, comprador, fascist ideology' of their old Nationalist enemies, both parties shared almost identical views of China's modern history.[76] The job of demonizing the Opium War was completed by the Communists, once most of the early work had been done for them by the Nationalists' official history industry. Many elements in the Communist version plagiarized earlier Nationalist models, portraying the war as the start of the plot by foreign imperialism ('the foremost and most ferocious enemy of the Chinese people') to 'impoverish . . . suppress . . . and poison the minds of the Chinese people', leaving them 'hungry and cold'.[77] But once Mao was done with it (going back to it in at least fifteen separate essays), the Opium War was no longer just a turning point in modern Chinese history; it was its inaugural event: 'the first lesson' of the Chinese revolution, and the start of a century of capitalist-imperialist oppression.[78] China's modern history now became, quite simply, 'a history of struggle by the indomitable Chinese people against imperialism and its running dogs'; the Opium War – this strange, ambivalent story of collaboration and civil war – became the 'people's unrelenting and heroic struggle', 'a national war' against imperialism.[79] 'For a whole hundred years,' a 1951 history recycled Mao's views, 'imperialism trampled our Chinese people underfoot. After 1842, China sank into a tragic state of slavery, and was transformed into a semi-colony by every imperialist country. The founding of the People's Republic in 1949, by contrast, is the most glorious achievement of this century; our will has been forged by the painful wound of suffering.'[80]

The point of remembering past bitterness was to remind the populace to savour the sweetness of the Communist present – even as the government itself caused tens of millions of deaths in man-made famines, in purges of

counter-revolutionaries and in the civil war manufactured by Mao's Cultural Revolution. 'A young Chinese person in new China', explained a 1950 textbook in the preamble to its Opium War chapter, 'must have a basic understanding of modern history . . . and of the particular principles that governed the revolution . . . We must understand what our predecessors have suffered to establish the People's Republic so we love the motherland all the more, so we can contribute everything we have to the future of the motherland . . . We have to understand why Mao's thought is the only truth able to point out the way to revolutionary victory.'[81] By insisting on the malevolence of China's foreign antagonists, Mao's Communist Party legitimized its own use of violence, against both imperialists and their alleged Chinese allies (Nationalists, capitalists, landlords and anyone suspected of sympathizing with them): 'In the face of such enemies', Mao dictated, 'the Chinese revolution cannot be other than protracted and ruthless . . . In the face of such enemies, the principal means or form of the Chinese revolution must be armed struggle.'[82]

But Mao was as willing to profit from opium as the next warlord – even though he had officially banned opium production in Communist-controlled areas in 1939, asserting that it 'sickens the country and harms the people'.[83] Two years earlier, the Communists' finances – stretched by Mao's ambitions to expand militarily through the north-western province in which they had settled in 1935 – had briefly stabilized. That year, Chiang Kai-shek had called a second United Front – this time against the Japanese. Over the next four years, the Communist economy survived on annual handouts from the Nationalists and the Soviet Union.[84] After 1941, however, when relations between the two parties deteriorated back into effective civil war, the Nationalists severed their funding and blockaded the edges of the Communist zone, preventing essential imports from getting in. By the end of the year, the region's finances were millions of Nationalist dollars in the red.[85]

For decades, Communist propaganda held that the Maoists worked their way out of their predicament through frugality and popular democracy (by introducing rent reduction and cooperative farming practices), until a historian called Chen Yung-fa noticed at the end of the 1980s that account books for the period were scattered with references to a 'special product' that rescued the Communists from their trade deficit of the early 1940s and that, by 1945, was generating more than 40 per cent of the state's budget. A little more detective work revealed that this was opium, processed in 'Special Factories' and transported south and west to generate export

revenue for Communist armies. ('Since opium entered China', a Communist editorial of 1941 explained, 'it has become the greatest source of harm to the Chinese people, inseparable from imperialist invasion . . . Imperialism has used opium to enslave and oppress the Chinese people. As the Chinese people have become ever weaker, ever poorer, opium has played a most detestable and poisonous destructive role.'[86]) But in 1945, as an American mission flew in to inspect Mao's kingdom, it found itself gazing over nothing more controversial than swaying fields of sorghum and wheat. The opium poppies had been uprooted just in time to maintain – for the next forty years at least – the propriety of the Chinese Communist wartime image.

After 1949, the new People's Republic declared a total rupture with the corruption and hypocrisy of Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalists and their opium policy. 'It has been more than a century since opium was forcibly imported into China by the imperialists', ran a General Order for Opium Suppression. 'Due to the reactionary rule and the decadent lifestyle of the feudal bureaucrats, compradors, and warlords, not only was opium not suppressed, but we were forced to cultivate it . . . Now that the people have been liberated, the suppression of opium and other narcotics is specifically stipulated to protect people's health, to cure addiction, and to accelerate production.'[87] In mass rallies and public trials, smokers were rehabilitated; thousands of pounds of opium were publicly burned; traffickers were imprisoned, dispatched to labour camps or executed. Only Western fellow travellers to Communism were welcome in China; foreign businessmen – seen as hangovers of the bad old Unequal Treaty days (the treaties themselves had been mostly revoked in the Second World War) – were harassed and even imprisoned, and their assets nationalized.

Popular enthusiasm could still have its old limits, though. Local government in the north-east remarked in the early 1950s that lecturing on 'the history of the Opium Wars or the opium policy of the imperialists was not an effective way to reach the masses.'[88]