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02.102 World Since 1400

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**Q8. Compare and contrast the British and Chinese perspectives on the scourge that was the Opium Trade. What was the significance of the differences?**

Essay Assignment

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The Opium Wars led to the collapse of the Manchurian Qing Dynasty, and with that, more than two thousand years of empire. The Opium Wars had also made it clear that China had fallen behind the West – not just technologically, but economically and politically. The opium trade started in the mid-eighteenth century and continued up till the middle of the twentieth century. Conflict between the British and the Chinese stemmed from the economic conflict of interests between the Eastern and Western ideologies, going on to shape the future diplomatic relations of China. In this essay, I shall argue that the different perspectives that the two countries had been instrumental in the trade wars, before coming to the modern twentieth century’s attitude on the opium trade.

The opium trade was vital to the economy of Britain. Britain and China had a long history of trade with each other[[1]](#footnote-1) (Morse, p. 245); and in exchange of Chinese goods, the British had paid in silver bullion. Thus, Britain had a trade deficit with China as China “was not an eager buyer of anything English.” (Fay, p. 22) and was facing a silver shortage. Furthermore, Britain was reliant on China to produce tea and other goods (Pomeranz & Topik) as it could not produce the quality that Chinese goods had in their own colonies. In order to sustain its overall global trade deficit, the British started importing opium into China, creating a 13 million pounds surplus between Britain and China[[2]](#footnote-2). (Pomeranz & Topik, p. 92)

The British needed to ensure that this trade continued. There had been outright bans placed against the import and domestic production of opium in China[[3]](#footnote-3) (Blue. p. 32). Despite the prohibition, opium “traffic grew more than twenty fold between 1729 and 1800” (Pomeranz & Topik, p. 91). Britain continued to import opium into China, employing illicit methods such as bribing local officials as well as forcing private merchants ships to carry opium in their cargo holds.[[4]](#footnote-4) (Blue, p. 34) They were clear as to how important the trade was to maintaining India as a colony;[[5]](#footnote-5) (Blue, p. 32) taking over large opium producing parts of India to monopolize opium production.[[6]](#footnote-6)(Blue, p. 32) By controlling production, they deliberately reduced the supply of opium produced by non-British means to increase the revenue that they received by making opium a scarce commodity.[[7]](#footnote-7) (Blue, p. 32) With opium becoming harder to acquire, the price of opium increased, contributing to British coffers. To add to injury, Lord Macartney’s instructions revealed that the British wanted a small trading port with extra territorial rights to allow greater trade volume with China and less Chinese intervention there.[[8]](#footnote-8) (Morse p. 237-238) This reflected the desire to increase British revenues from the Chinese trade, and to ensure that the goods that they were importing in would be less scrutinized. The opium trade was vital for making up for the deficit in Atlantic Trade, [[9]](#footnote-9)(Blue, p. 92) and any stop would lead not only to financial ruin for the East India Company, but a breakdown in British finances due to the rising cost of maintaining a global empire with military force.

On the other hand, there existed opposition to the opium trade in Britain.[[10]](#footnote-10) (Blue, p. 37) British manufacturers feared that the Chinese would consume more opium and thus spend less on their goods.[[11]](#footnote-11) (Blue, p. 38) More importantly, missionaries lobbied for a reduction in the opium trade as well, as their efforts have been hampered by the Chinese associating the opium trade with Christianity.[[12]](#footnote-12) (Blue, p. 38) Onsite evangelists reported the harmful effects of opium hand in hand with the locals’ resistance to conversion, adding credibility to the anti-opium movement.[[13]](#footnote-13) (Blue, p. 38) The anti-opium movement reached its turning point when it was brought into British parliament as a topic for discussion. Doing so brought opium to the minds of the greater British public due to parliamentary discussions. The Society for the Suppression of the Opium Trade was formed in 1874, voicing against the India-China opium trade as well as increasing awareness of the harmful aspects of opium.[[14]](#footnote-14) (Blue, p. 38) Once the Liberals returned to power in 1905, the anti-opium movement gained traction, and there was a shift towards outright condemnation in the early 1900s. [[15]](#footnote-15) (Blue, p. 41) In conclusion, the opium trade did have its detractors even in Britain, and there was a greater number of British who were willing to denounce the trade.

The Qing government differed not in their perspective of the opium trade, but in their responses towards the malevolence of the trade. The Qing government felt that the trade was terrible for their economy[[16]](#footnote-16) (Cheng and Lestz, p. 110) as well as for maintaining societal stability.[[17]](#footnote-17)(Cheng and Lestz, p. 117) The Qing government saw that it was making the people “feeble and enervated”, (Cheng and Lestz, p. 117) and opposed the silver drain due to the purchase of the drug. Concerns of the trade were aired in the form of memorials towards the emperor as to the appropriate response. In a memorial in 1836, four years before the start of hostilities, Xu Naiji suggested the legalization of opium as “the more severe the interdicts against it (opium trade) are made, the more widely do the evils arising from the spread”. (Cheng and Lestz, p. 111) Xu felt that as many people were already dependent on the trade despite the ban,[[18]](#footnote-18) (Cheng and Lestz, p. 113) it was better to target the silver drain first by allowing barter trade for opium with other Chinese goods,[[19]](#footnote-19) (Cheng and Lestz, p. 113) reducing the outflow of hard currency which hurt the Qing economy. The immorality of the drug would be fought with increased severity against those who promoted the trade, such as the corrupt officials who turned a blind eye to imports.

Xu’s superior in the Board of Rites (as the imperial sacrificial court was part of the Board of Rites), Zhu Zun, felt that a direct ban would be more ideal.[[20]](#footnote-20) (Cheng and Lestz, p. 114) Zhu suggested the eradication of the trade through a ban on opium imports and extended the ban to local production.[[21]](#footnote-21) (Cheng and Lestz, p. 116) Zhu disagreed with Xu as he felt it would be an insult to the Qing Dynasty to invite the merchants that they had banned[[22]](#footnote-22) (Cheng and Lestz, p. 115) and that previous domestic production had not seen a shortfall in the silver drain. Furthermore, the production of opium required soil that would better serve the nation by producing staple goods instead.[[23]](#footnote-23) (Cheng and Lestz, p. 116) This was more palatable to the Qing government due to their Confucianist beliefs, and they enforced the ban.[[24]](#footnote-24) (Cheng and Lestz, p. 119) We can see that both officials believed that the opium was weakening the empire’s foundations and sought to increase the severity of selling the drug on Chinese soil, albeit through different means. However, further analysis would prove that Zhu’s idea was a blunt weapon that saw little adoption as the British continued to successfully increase their imports into China despite the severity of the bans.

The insistence of the Qing government to proscribe British opium trade as well as the British efforts to ensure their financial cash cow would only fatten further made the Opium War inevitable. The letters addressed to both King George and Qian Long reflected the differing cultural beliefs that provoked the war. King George was implicit in his aggression, telling his counterpart “we granted to our enemies, after obtaining victories over them in the four quarters of the world the blessings of peace.” (Morse, p. 244) This reflected the pride that King George had in the superiority of his army and their technology, as he was talking of war when the two countries had yet to initiate hostilities. Qian Long detected the superior attitude and responded with disappointment and incredulousness towards Lord Macartney’s requests.[[25]](#footnote-25) Both countries were overlords in their political spheres of influence; with Britain being an industrial empire and Qing China having had a long history of success with border clashes as well as billing itself as the Celestial Empire of East Asia. It was unlikely that one would be willing to subordinate to the other. Once Lin Zexu confiscated the twenty thousand chests of opium and arrested 1700 foreign merchants, the British responded by declaring war on China for the insult to its citizens and the compensation of British goods, leading to the ‘century of humiliation’ that culminated in the breakdown of the Qing Dynasty, the replacement of monarchy with warlord rule and the arrival of communism in China. [[26]](#footnote-26)

Now, we shall talk about Western views in the twentieth century. Opium, in John Fairbank’s view, was not the true cause of the war.[[27]](#footnote-27)(Pomeranz and Topik, p. 90) Peter Fay agreed and felt that the war was fought not over opium, but the confiscation of chests which later demanded compensation, as well as the arrest of British merchants on Chinese soil.[[28]](#footnote-28) (Fay, p. 27) To Fay’s mind, the British had every right to pursue a ‘just war’ as the British needed to punish the Chinese for disrespecting the right for the British to handle its own citizens. Fay raises the point that Viscount Palmerston, Foreign Secretary at the time, did not mention the topic of opium to Charles Elliot, chief superintendent of trade in China at the time, despite it being a private letter.[[29]](#footnote-29) (Fay, p. 21) Fay then concluded that Westminster did not consider opium an addictive drug[[30]](#footnote-30)(Fay, p. 26) and was more interested in maintaining their share of opium trade and its revenue, rather than opening up the market to third parties.[[31]](#footnote-31) (Fay, p. 24-25) In fact, Fay argues that the opium trade was not “vital” to British finances; but that a war was fought to assert British superiority over China in a knee-jerk response. Frank Dikötter argued that rather than an addiction, opium played a social role, as a form of exchange between people of the same class.[[32]](#footnote-32) (Dikötter, p.11) Dikötter opined that opium was but an excuse for Chinese nationalists “to find a scapegoat in imperialism by emphasizing the catastrophic results of the opium trade”.(Dikötter, p. 2) Opium served a medical purpose as well,[[33]](#footnote-33) (Dikötter p. 5) and the shift to heroin and other more addictive drugs had led to more deaths after the ban on opium[[34]](#footnote-34). (Dikötter, p. 18) Both their arguments reflected the general Western view that opium was not the true cause of the ‘Opium War’, and this use of the commodity-war theory had been supported by observers at the time such as John Quincy Adams, sixth president of the United States.

Chinese nationalists saw the Opium War as a stain upon Chinese history, with China as the victim of Western imperialism.[[35]](#footnote-35) Chiang Kai-Shek led to the reassessment of the Opium War as “a monument to China’s victimization by the West” (Lovell, p. 299) Mao Zedong turned the Opium War as a “national war against imperialism” (Lovell, p. 305) upon coming to power.[[36]](#footnote-36)(Lovell, p. 305) which was colored by how Marx’s view on the decadent Qing bureaucracy.[[37]](#footnote-37)(Lovell, p. 288) Opium, in the general Chinese mind, was the source of China’s great humiliation by Western powers, and fueled anti-Western propaganda. This in turn united the common Chinese populace under the current party, be it Chiang’s Nationalists or Mao’s Communists as it was easy for them to revise history, carefully revising history. Instead, it was a reminder of the Qing government’s “rotten” nature (Lovell, p. 299) and together with the Unequal Treaty, created discontent with the West. The fact that this antipathy against the West was used by the Japanese in their invasion to gain support from civilians shows us how deeply-rooted the idea that the West had leveraged their technological superiority to gain economic control had been such that the Japanese thought it was a valid tactic.

In an ironic twist, both the Communist and Nationalist Party benefited from the opium trade. Chiang had needed the tax revenue[[38]](#footnote-38) (Lovell, p. 300) from the opium trade to finance the war against the Japanese as well as conflicts with other warlords. The Nationalist government created government-run opium addiction treatments[[39]](#footnote-39)(Lovell, p. 300) while at the same time setting up opium tax collection offices as “opium suppression bureaus”, disguising their dependence on opium as a source of revenue with further rhetoric on the addictive properties of opium. Despite the obvious contradiction, the hypocritical nationalist government proceeded to execute relapsed users of opium despite officials “flagrantly contradicting government policy”. (Lovell, p. 302) Mao’s government exploited the opium trade as it made up for forty percent of the state’s budget. (Lovell, p. 306) Communist China maintained the edifice of being against the opium scourge to maintain their wartime image of being against Nationalist opium policy, claiming that their finances were due to “frugality and popular democracy” (Lovell, P. 306) Both sides made use of the opium trade to fund their respective bureaucracies.

We can therefore meld the two perspectives together: Opium is an addictive drug, but the war was ignited by the drug’s implications towards the economies of both societies. So long as it did not conflict with one’s interests, both nations were happy to avoid war[[40]](#footnote-40). (Tan Chung, p. 39) We see that opium was detrimental to British financial interests to stop the trade[[41]](#footnote-41).(Tan, p. 44) Further opium imports reflected the Qing government’s weakening control over its territory. The Qing was unable to enforce its laws, nor prevent the silver drain. It can be reasoned that since the Qing government did not gain from the opium trade, they sought to oppose it, and could not succeed with their technological and military weaknesses, thus exposing themselves to further predation by other European nations.

In the twentieth century, there was opposition towards the trade in Britain, followed by the Western view that opium was not the threat that Chinese nationalists characterized. However, the Opium War reverberated throughout subsequent Chinese governments on the threat of narcotics, leading to high penalties[[42]](#footnote-42). Opium had been used to increase government revenue by both the Communists and Nationalists. But the opium war had also created a shift towards further expansion on coastal regions rather than on ‘barbarians in the north’, leading to the ongoing South China Sea dispute. Now that they have the necessary know-how to fight their rivals, their focus has shifted towards the expansion of soft and hard power overseas, making them a rival to the current super-power in the Asia Pacific region.

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1. *“Many of Our subjects have also frequented for a long time past a remote part of Your Majesty’s dominions for the purpose of Trade.”* [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *“The empire (not including India) had a 13 million-pound surplus with China...manufactures contributed less to this surplus than did farm products, including non-Indian opium.”* [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *“…the Yongzheng emperor’s 1729 edict banning its sale.”* [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *“To protect its legal forms of trade, the company devised the subterfuge of issuing ships’ orders that on paper forbade the licensed private traders from smuggling opium to China, while at the same time the company administration at Calcutta secretly required those traders to carry Indian opium precisely to that market.”*  [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. “*Lord Macartney…revealed himself to be quite informed about the quantity and value of what he called the ‘contraband trade’ in opium”* [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. (EIC) *“succeeded in gaining increasing control over the hitherto competing supply of ‘Malwa’ and Persian opium”* [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. *“By restricting and regulating production, the company was able to keep opium prices on the Chinese market high, while reversing the tendency under the contract system to debasement of the product”* [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. *“requires a place of security as a depot for such of our goods…a grant of a small tract of ground or detached Island”* [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. *“By 1910 Britain’s deficit with the Atlantic world was so large that even doubling British exports to the United States and industrial Europe would not quite have balanced the books.”* [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. *“Despite such justifications, criticism of the opium trade continued to be voiced, and indeed, to grow in both China and the west in the last decades of the nineteenth century”* [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. *“From among British manufacturers, for example, concern was repeatedly expressed that opium was soaking up Chinese demand.”* [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. “*However, the most consistent and ultimately the most influential source of opposition… was missionary objections to the opium trade and to the British government’s role in it...frustrated by the Chinese perception that the British opium trade demonstrated the immorality of Christians.”* [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. “*As more and more medical missionaries reported back from China with evidence of the harms of addiction, however, the missionary case against opium gained increasing credibility in Western public opinion.”* [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. *“This society acted as an umbrella for promoting the increasingly effective opposition to the India-China trade…"* [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. *“The result was the 1907 Sino-British agreement in which the British government promised to reduce the export of Indian opium to China by 5,100 chests per annum provided that native Chinese production be stopped first.”* [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. *“The loss of silver specie paid for the drug was already a source of deep concern for the Qing court.”* [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. *“…but when regarded as hurtful to the people, it demands most anxious consideration: for in the people lies the very foundation of the empire.”* [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. *“Besides, the hundreds of thousands of people living on the seacoast depend wholly on trade for their livelihood”* [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. *“It shall be delivered to the hong merchants only in exchange for merchandise, and that no money be paid for it.”* [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. *“increasing the severity of certain prohibitory enactments, with a view to maintain the dignity of the laws, and to remove a great evil from the people”* [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. (Upon poppy having been cultivated in various provinces such as Guangdong, Zhejiang and Yunnan) “*And yet we do not see any diminution in the quantity of silver exported as compared with any previous period… the lack of the metal in Yunnan is double in degree to what it formerly was.”* [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. *“This would be, indeed, a derogation from the true dignity of the government”* [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. *“If all the rich and fertile ground be used for planting the poppy… where will flax and the mulberry tree be cultivated, or wheat and rye be planted”* [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. *“…to search for… apprehend all those traitorous natives who sell the drugs, the hong merchants who arrange the transactions in it, the brokers who purchase it by wholesale…”* [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. *“the above proposals have been wantonly made by your Ambassador on your own responsibility, or peradventure you yourself are ignorant of our dynastic regulations and had no intention of transgressing them when you expressed these wild ideas and hopes.”* Qian Long: Letter to George III, 1793, at *https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/mod/1793qianlong.asp* [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. The War that made Asia: How the Opium War crushed China, Sebastien Robin, at *https://nationalinterest.org/blog/the-buzz/the-war-made-asia-how-the-opium-war-crushed-china-19476* [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. *“it was an accident of history that the dynamic British commercial interest in the China trade was centered not only on tea, but on opium… had war not broken out over opium, it could as easily have happened over cotton or molasses.”* [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. *“England went to war to protest the arbitrary confiscation of, and recover the value of, certain goods the private property of British subjects.”* [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. *“Yet if England knew the opium traffic was vital, it is hard to see why this concern did not figure in the instructions Palmerston sent Elliot.”* [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. *“They had a drug problem… on the whole they did not know they had it.”* [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. *“But the ready availability of opium in places other than Bengal and the existence of abundant tonnage not under British service was sure to reverse that decline before long unless a preventative service was put down.”* [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. *“Either in opium houses or at home, opium would be smoked by friends while enjoying leisurely conversations or in groups where the pipe was passed around.”* [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. *“while countless others smoked no more than a dozen grams a year strictly for medical purposes.”* [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. *“The link between anti-opium policies and the increased use of semi-synthetics was noted by the National Anti-Opium Association of China in 1929”* [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. *“By the end of this decade, the conflict and the first ‘Unequal Treaty’… had become the turning point in a modern history dominated by imperialistic aggression.”* [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. *“The job of demonizing the Opium War was completed by the Communists”* [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. *“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’”*  [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. *“In the absence of crucial resources such as income tax, opium duties would have to do instead.”* [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. *“The state even maintained a monopoly on opium-addiction cures.”* [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. *“Cultural differences might create difficulties in international contacts, but seldom ignite an international war, which results from a clash of interest, not that of cultures.”* [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. *“The consequence of this ‘war’ was the total collapse of the opium trade, which in turn threatened to deprive the British of the valuable instrument in creating and remitting ‘surplus’ Indian revenues for Britain as well as offsetting the multiple advantages of the China trade.”* [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. *“The history with opium also has led China to adopt a particularly harsh anti-narcotics policy with the death penalty applicable even to mid-level traffickers.”* (Robin) [↑](#footnote-ref-42)