

The Gentleman's Speculation:
Merchants, Opium, and the Birth of Capitalism in Asia

by

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Class of 2012

A thesis (or essay) submitted to the
faculty of Wesleyan University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
Degree of Bachelor of Arts
with Departmental Honors from the College of Social Studies

“Oh! A dreadful man! A Scotchman, richer than Croesus, one McDruggy, fresh from Canton, with a million of opium in each pocket, denouncing corruption, and bellowing free trade.”

—Benjamin Disraeli, *Sybil*, p. 54

Acknowledgements

In the completion of this thesis I am indebted to a number of people, without whom, I would have never come this far. First and foremost, I must extend my thanks to my advisor, Professor Tony Day. Without his guidance and stern encouragement, I would have succumbed to the temptation of a Senior Essay long ago.

Next, a thanks is due to Richie Adelstein, whose sage advice first led me to reach out to Professor Day. You have been a source of constant reassurance through this process. Thank you Richie. I'd further like to extend a thank you to all of my professors within the College of Social Studies, whose advice and support have guided me to this thesis topic. A special thank you is also due to Cecilia Miller as well as the members of the Clee Scholar Selection Committee, for helping support my travels to Oxford and Hong Kong, during which the beginnings of this thesis were formulated. Finally, thank you Professor David Schorr for recommending Baskerville as a topic appropriate typeface.

I owe a great deal to those among my peers who worked tirelessly to proofread this work, especially Emma Paine and Clément Guerner. A thank you is due to the residents of Shaqapulco for their support during the many late nights spent on this project.

Most importantly, thank you Mom and Dad for all of your support. I wouldn't be here without you.

—E.R., 2012

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1. Introduction

Beginning in the mid-sixteenth century, the Portuguese became the first of many European nations to engage in trade with China. Of the many nations to follow, Britain had, by the mid-eighteenth century, become the major European trading partner of the Chinese. Originally this trade was largely the domain of the British East India Company, a crown-chartered but privately owned trading company that served British political and economic interests in Britain's colonial holdings in India. Tea and Chinese handicrafts such as Chinese porcelain and silk were initially the impetus for the British foray into the China trade. As these items, especially tea, were introduced to European markets and demand began to grow exponentially, British trade with China acquired new scale, become one of the key drivers of the East India Company's success in business.

As British trade with China began growing, an imbalance in demand became increasingly evident; although the East India Company traders found many interesting Chinese goods which they were certain they could sell at home, the Chinese had little interest in most of what they offered. There was little craftsmanship done elsewhere in the world that approached the quality of the best Chinese goods. Certainly, Britain's famous fabric mills produced better fabrics, but even in the colder winter months, most Chinese were content to pad their cotton jackets with domestically grown materials rather than purchase the English-made woolens peddled by merchants. The opposite, however, was not true. Beyond significant demand in Europe for Chinese art, china, and silk, there was a growing global

infatuation with tea. American China historian Peter Ward Fay notes the monopoly on tea production China enjoyed as the global demand grew: “And at the heart of the trade was tea. It came from no other place. India did not then produce any, nor Ceylon, Java, or Formosa; Japan was inaccessible; the world perforce drank China teas. Above all, the English drank them.”¹ Indeed, China was in a very peculiar position at the beginning of the nineteenth century; foreign merchants were clambering for their products, but had little of interest to the Chinese.

Furthermore, the rulers of the Qing Empire were, to say the least, suspicious of foreign merchants, the goods they brought into China, and the political ramifications of allowing these merchants access to China. Effectively ruling an empire the size of China was no easy task, and the added variables of unfamiliar foreigners who, for the most part, did not speak any dialect of the Chinese language did not make administrators’ jobs any easier. In response to their unease and the lack of demand for Western goods, the Chinese government had since 1760 mandated all outside trade enter the kingdom through a guild of merchants in a few restricted ports. Because the vast majority of the traffic passed through the many ports of Canton, a province in Southern China near the Portuguese semi-colony of Macau and many of the other major trading centers of South East Asia, this system was called the Canton system. A guild of merchants, called the Cohong (public company in Cantonese), and made up of thirteen “Hong” merchants who served as a buffer between the foreigners and the non-coastal Chinese, was at the core of this system.

¹ Peter Ward Fay, *The Opium War, 1840-1842: Barbarians in the Celestial Empire in the Early Part of the Nineteenth Century and the War by Which They Forced Her Gates Ajar* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1975), 17.

These merchants held a monopoly on the Chinese side of any trade between foreign merchants and Chinese. The system, with its many traditions and bureaucracy, managed nearly every aspect of trade in the region and was the only way foreign traders were permitted to communicate with Qing officials: “Purchases and sales, transit taxes, complaints, customs tariffs—everything was to go first through the Hong, who might pass outstanding queries on to the local official in charge of trade.”² Furthermore, the Qing government expected the Hong merchants to act as a barrier, controlling the Western traders and keeping them at arm’s length from mainstream Chinese society. The Cohong system would prove to be quite frustrating for many of the traders, especially considering demand for their goods did not reflect the sheer size of the Chinese market. As their trade interests in the region developed, the British traders began to particularly resent having to communicate through these merchants. Before long, this region would be awash in Indian-grown opium, a product that would forever alter the economic and political landscape of Asia.

While Western influence was instrumental in growing the Chinese opium trade, medicinal opium use had existed in China since the 1600s. Jonathan Spence, one of the pre-eminent Western China scholars notes that this tradition of opium primed China for an expansion of recreational use: “Opium was highly regarded in China, both as a medicinal drug (that checked diarrhea and served as a febrifuge), and as an aphrodisiac. Therefore, people might become addicted either because they took opium intensively during an illness—for instance, in the great cholera epidemic of 1821—or because they had vigor, leisure, and money and wanted to make the best

² Lovell, Julia, *The Opium War: Drugs, Dreams, and the Making of China* (Gardners Books,

of it.”³ What started as middling medicinal oral consumption of opium gradually transitioned to widespread recreational opium smoking.

British traders were intimately linked to nearly every step of this transition. Merchants quickly realized that unlike the other goods they were bringing to China, domestic demand for opium was significant and growing. Furthermore, the British recognized that they had a distinct advantage in this trade; the British colonies in India—especially following the annexation of Bengal in 1757—were the world’s primary opium production regions. The East India Company moved to take advantage of this situation by applying for and, in 1793, receiving a monopoly on the Indian opium trade that would last until 1833. The East India Company would make use of a fleet of private traders, called “country traders,” to ferry its opium supplies from India to China.

It is worthwhile at this point to note that opium had been prohibited in China to varying degrees since 1729, when China’s Yongzheng Emperor penned an edict aimed at fighting opium distribution and use.⁴ This was far from effective and, at the dawn of the eighteenth century, opium use was more prevalent than ever in China. It was not until 1813 that Chinese officials would begin the process of combating opium use in earnest. By then, opium use was beginning to pervade nearly every stratum of Chinese society, from the court in Peking to the most rural peasants, and prohibition had become a nearly Sisyphean task. This situation would come to a head under the rule of the Daoguang emperor. The Daoguang Emperor was the eighth Qing

2011), 2.

³ Spence et al., “Conflict and Control in Late Imperial China,” in *Opium Smoking in Ch’ing China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975), 144.

emperor, ruling from 1820 to 1850. It was under his rule that China saw the enormous increase in opium consumption that was one of the major contributing factors to the outbreak of the Opium War. The task of fighting the opium trade, started by his great grandfather, the Yongzheng Emperor, fell upon the Daoguang Emperor's shoulders.

Further complicating the Chinese movement to prohibit the opium trade were the developments to the British position in China. In 1792, in response to the increasingly important intercourse between the two nations, Britain sent George Macartney, First Earl Macartney on a diplomatic mission to China. He was charged with improving the conditions of trade in China for British merchants, many of whom were beginning to grow frustrated by the restrictions they faced under the Canton system. Specifically, Macartney was to ask for the establishment of a British embassy in Beijing, to facilitate diplomatic relations between the two countries. Macartney was an accomplished colonial leader, having served most recently as the Governor of Madras in India prior to his appointment to the peerage. Arriving in China in 1793, he met with the Qianlong Emperor to discuss his mission. This part of the embassy did not quite go as planned. A series of successive Chinese dynasties had developed a unique system of international diplomacy, which John K. Fairbank, one of the founders of modern American historical scholarship on China, named the "tributary system." In this system, foreign envoys would travel to Peking to meet with, and grant gifts to, the Emperor or other officials. Fairbank argues that it was through this system that Han Chinese were able to establish their superiority over other ethnic groups. At

⁴ Ibid., 148.

the center of this ceremony was the Kowtow, a series of choreographed supplications directed towards the Emperor or his representatives. Macartney, it seems, was hesitant to perform the Kowtow, especially as the Chinese rulers were unwilling to bow to a portrait of George III, which, as Fay snidely puts it, “he had thoughtfully included in his baggage.”⁵ Reports vary on the degree to which Macartney was willing to take part in the ritual, as well as the success of the mission, with some scholars suggesting Macartney did indeed perform Kowtow but was hesitant to speak of it afterwards.⁶ While relations between China and Britain were not formally improved in the wake of the Macartney embassy, with a few accounts maintaining that British merchants enjoyed better conditions in the wake of the visit, James Hevia, a historian of empire and imperialism in Asia, notes a much more important legacy of the visit in his book on the Macartney embassy, *Cherishing Men from Afar*: “There was general agreement that one of the major lessons learned was that Chinese officials would abandon their unreasonable practices and demands when faced with firmness and reasonableness and if those failed, with force.”⁷

The next major development in Anglo-Chinese diplomacy occurred just following the abolition of the East India Company’s monopoly on trade in China in 1833. Foreseeing the dramatic increase in British merchants trading in Canton, Lord Palmerston, the British Foreign Secretary, appointed William John, ninth Lord Napier, the first Chief Superintendent of Trade at Canton, a position meant to

⁵ Fay, *The Opium War, 1840-1842*, 32.

⁶ Chung Tan, *China and the Brave New World: a Study of the Origins of the Opium War (1840-42)* (Durham, N.C.: Carolina Academic Press, 1978), 127.

⁷ James I Hevia, *Cherishing Men from Afar: Qing Guest Ritual and the Macartney Embassy of 1793*. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995), 230.

replace the para-governmental leadership of the company with a more formal representative of the crown. The story of Lord Napier is emblematic of the effect cultural misunderstandings had on Sino-British relations. Unlike Macartney, Napier was qualified more by birth than his accomplishments as a colonial leader. Already under-qualified to govern the increasingly tense interactions in Canton, upon arrival he was faced with a difficult decision. Palmerston had instructed Napier to both “conform to the laws and usages of China and to impress on all his countrymen the necessity of doing the same,” and to “announce...[his] arrival at Canton by letter to the Viceroy.”⁸ These two instructions presented Napier with a challenging choice, as announcing his arrival would be a violation of the Chinese law stipulating that all communication between the foreign barbarians and the Chinese government go through the Hong intermediaries. Napier chose to deliver a letter announcing his arrival directly to the Governor-General, whose representatives refused to receive it. As tensions surrounding this standoff increased, the Chinese suspended all trade until Napier left Canton.⁹ After brief fighting between British frigates and Chinese junks near the Canton port of Whampoa indicated trade might be stalled for a while yet, British merchants began to take action. William Jardine of the powerful trading house Jardine, Matheson, and Company persuaded Napier, who was already in poor health, to return to Macao to recover, thereby reopening trade. Napier passed away from malaria while on the way back to Macao, ending the incident. Sir John Francis Davis, who would go on to become the second governor of Hong Kong, filled the vacancy created by his death.

⁸ Fay, *The Opium War, 1840-1842*, 69.

After the reopening of trade following Napier's death, the opium trade continued to grow in Canton. On the Chinese side, the Daoguang Emperor began searching for a solution to the ever-increasing rate of opium addiction among the Chinese. He found what he believed to be a solution in Lin Zexu, the Governor-General of the Hunan and Hubei provinces. Lin was born to a well-educated family of good reputation but of little means. He quickly distinguished himself and, through his success in the civil service examination system, began a career characterized by a meteoric rise through the ranks of the Chinese government. For the male progeny of the Chinese elite, the civil service examination system, a tiered series of tests challenging candidates' knowledge of traditional Confucian teachings, was the road to societal success within the Chinese bureaucracy. Not only was this path expensive—Ichisada Miyazaki, in his survey of the Chinese examination system, estimates that the cost of preparing and sitting for the examinations cost enough to send a couple on an around-the-world trip in 1976—and cheating rampant, but the chances of success were also quite slim, leading to a large number of aimless wealthy men: "those who succeeded all the way to the chin-shih degree were delighted, naturally, but inevitably the system also produced a large number of men who experienced the bitterness of repeated failure and spent gloomy lives in hopeless despondency."¹⁰ As this passage suggests, the price paid by those unable to pass the system was substantial, with many sinking into despondency and addiction in the wake of their repeated failures. Even those who succeeded in this system tended to be polarized by it; some would become

⁹ Ibid., 73. The opium market, Fay notes, was distressed at this time as well.

¹⁰ Ichisada Miyazaki, *China's Examination Hell: the Civil Service Examinations of Imperial China* (New York: Weatherhill, 1976), 119–121.

strict moralists, adhering to the Confucian codes they had spent so much of their lives memorizing, while others would use their position to accumulate wealth. During his government service, Lin developed a reputation for the former. When the Daoguang Emperor solicited plans for how to face the threat of foreign opium in China, Lin's plan was chosen as the most robust, and he was sent to Canton in 1838.

Lin's arrival in Canton was highly anticipated by all those involved in the opium trade, as his reputation for firm rule and incorruptibility was unlike that of any Chinese official previously encountered in Canton. After a few days spent growing acquainted with the Cantonese economic power structure, Lin began his efforts to cut off the flow of opium. He stopped all foreign trade and demanded that all foreign merchants forfeit any stock of opium they might have on hand. When the merchants hesitated to obey his order, he upped the stakes, informing the merchants of the Cohong that, should the foreign merchants not turn over their stocks by a given date, they would be held liable. The lives of the Hong merchants, Lin proclaimed, hung in the balance. When even this measure did not persuade the Western merchants, Lin had troops barricade the merchants inside of the foreign enclave of Canton. While the merchants were supplied with adequate provisions, it was made clear that they would not be permitted to leave until Lin's demands had been accepted.

It was at this point that Captain Charles Elliot, the serving Chief Superintendent of Trade, heard of the happenings in Canton. Elliot had first come to China as part of Lord Napier's staff and had worked his way up. He had cut his teeth in various British imperial outposts around the world before coming to Asia. Upon hearing of the increasingly tense situation in Canton, he left his office in Macau and sailed for Canton. As soon as he arrived in May 1839, he made for the British factory

where the British Merchants were barricaded, and took charge. After some pontification as to how best to protect British trade interests while placating Lin, he commanded the British merchants surrender their opium. In doing so, he also guaranteed that the British government would repay the merchants for their surrendered product, a pledge that finally and irreversibly involved the British government in the conflict. From this point onwards, history has not been kind to Elliot. He had made it very clear prior to the arrival of Lin in Canton that he was vehemently against the opium trade, but when Lin barricaded British subjects, Elliot's hand was forced, as this was now an issue of national sovereignty. His guarantee over the seized opium is thought by many scholars to have been the tipping point that finally forced the British into war. Once war was on, Elliot was criticized for being too easy on the Chinese.

Following Elliot's guarantee, Lin's men seized the opium and, mixing it with salt and lime, destroyed it in the ocean. Lin would, in this single seizure, ultimately destroy some three million pounds of raw opium.¹¹ Given the huge amount of opium seized, Elliot had assumed a massive debt on behalf of the British government. In late 1839, William Jardine sailed for England with a letter for Lord Palmerston, then Foreign Secretary under Whig Prime Minister William Lamb, from Captain Elliot regarding recent events and promises made in China.

Henry John Temple, Third Viscount Palmerston was born to a noble family and, after a rather unimpressive start to his career as a Tory minister, would rise to prominence as a Whig politician, eventually serving two terms as Prime Minister after

his stint as Foreign Secretary. Palmerston had strongly held liberal beliefs, in support of which he was not afraid to recommend the use of force. In the case of China, he was already a strong supporter of free trade: “When the British opium trade was facing the Chinese challenge in 1837, Palmerston promptly asked the commander-in-chief of the British navy in the Pacific, Rear Admiral Maitland, to lead a fleet and sail to China to deter the Chinese officials.”¹² Thus, when he heard of the Chinese seizure of British merchants’ opium, it is little surprise that he moved quickly. Without consulting Parliament, or even bothering to respond to Elliot, Palmerston ordered a British military force from India to head immediately to Canton.

The force arrived in Canton in June 1840, commanded by Charles Elliot’s cousin George Elliot. Rather than attack, the British simply blockaded strategic points around the region and began to move north. While the emperor originally lauded Lin Zexu for his success in the opium prohibition movement in Canton, at this point, the Daoguang Emperor realized the temporary nature of his methods and angrily had him banished to Xinjiang in far western China. In 1841 Elliot and a senior Manchu official named Qishan agreed to a treaty wherein Hong Kong was ceded to the British along with \$6 million to pay for the seized opium (an amount that would cover only a fraction of the amount forfeited). Spence notes how angry leaders on both sides were at this agreement. The Daoguang Emperor condemned Qishan to death, although

¹¹ Jonathan D Spence, *The Search for Modern China* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1999), 154.

¹² Tan, *China and the Brave New World*, 12.

this sentence was later commuted. Palmerston dismissed Elliot and named Sir Henry Pottinger his replacement.¹³

Pottinger was decidedly unlike Elliot. He held little sympathy for the Chinese and was of a distinctly warlike demeanor. He blazed a trail north, until August of 1842, when the Qing authorities decided that they could not match the military power of the British and signed the Treaty of Nanjing, ending the war. This treaty ended the Canton system, opening five ports to unrestricted trade, ceding Hong Kong to the British as part of the bargain. Additionally, a charge of \$21 million was to be paid by the Qing Government in installments. This was the first of what the Chinese have called the “unequal treaties,” as the British sacrificed little to nothing in them. Over the course of the next few decades, China would sign treaties with many other Western trading powers, continually compromising its sovereignty until the end of the Qing dynasty in 1912.

Yet another war broke out between China and Western trading powers from 1856 to 1860. This war, which mainly involved the British and French, has been called the Second Opium War. For the purpose of this project, I will be focusing on the First Opium War, as the second war was essentially an aftershock of the first conflict.

The opium war is significant for England as it represents the apogee of its imperial and capitalist ambitions. Under Palmerston’s guidance, the nation went to war to protect the right to trade in a commodity many citizens strongly disapproved of. In doing so, they challenged the sovereignty of China, and set the stage for a new

¹³ Spence, *The Search for Modern China*, 158.

global capitalist system. While Britain never attempted to colonize China as they had India, the Opium Wars were a clear sign that the British were ready to force the opening of new markets. The Opium Wars still stand as one of the starkest instances of aggressive liberalism in history. The British actions during the wars proved that the age of global capitalism had come, and that the British would be the enforcers of this change.

For the Chinese, the significance of the Opium Wars was decidedly different than its importance for the British. For the Chinese, this conflict was the ultimate civilizational embarrassment; foreign forces had come on to Chinese territory and proven that the Chinese were unable to defend themselves. Furthermore, this had all been in defense of the trade in a substance that had been clearly illegal in China for centuries and that was quickly creating an addiction problem for a significant portion of the Chinese populace. The Treaty of Nanjing would immortalize this embarrassment, requiring not only a huge payment to the British, but granting the British the territory of Hong Kong, an act unprecedented during the Qing Dynasty.

As the opium trade would only increase in scale following the Opium Wars and China would repeatedly find itself on the wrong side of treaties granting further privileges to foreign trading nations, some Chinese unsurprisingly began to see the increasing economic and social maladies as the direct result of Western capitalist domination, and the Opium Wars as the key moment when this domination was cemented. In this vein, the wars have taken on a heightened significance since 1949 when Mao's government assumed control of China. Since then, the Opium Wars have been used as a rallying cry for generating both nationalism among the Chinese in resistance to any foreign challenge and obedience to the communist state.

In this thesis, I will attempt to show that the true legacy of the opium trade and Opium Wars extends well beyond the significance it has assumed in the national historiographies of Great Britain and China. By focusing on the merchants involved in the opium trade, who, it bears mention were of many different nationalities, not just Chinese and British, and on the capitalistic nature of their trading endeavors, one begins to see why opium as such was so attractive to merchants of that time and why it was the primary vehicle for the introduction of capitalism to Asia. It becomes clear that opium was a highly unique commodity due to its addictive nature: having already been introduced into Chinese society for medicinal use, a pathway existed for its steady penetration of Chinese society until it became the first major consumer product in the region. Opium would stimulate the creation, not just of China's, but also of most of Southeast Asia's culture of mass consumption, paving the way for capitalism to take hold in the region. Ultimately, it would be the opium trade that would not merely end the Cohong monopoly in China, but simultaneously allow the creation of a capitalist class across Asia, by allowing merchants of many ethnicities to begin the process of pooling capital.

It was Amitav Ghosh's historical novel *River of Smoke* that would originally start me down the path this thesis has taken. His novel is exceptional in a few ways. First, Ghosh approaches the research for his book as a historical anthropologist. Many of the dialogue and details in the book are lifted directly from historical sources. This allows the book to be read with a critical eye, as an ethnography of sorts. Second, by narrating his characters voyages from India to China, Ghosh draws a connection between the two regions that is all too rarely encountered in scholarly sources. Finally, the crucial significance of *River of Smoke* for this thesis is how the novel personalized

the merchants of the opium trade and, in doing so, opened my eyes to the wider significance of the events.

2. Country Traders and the “Clash of Civilizations

John Quincy Adams, in an address to the Massachusetts Historical Society delivered in December 1841, discards the notion that the Opium War was fought to protect the opium trade: “The few thousand [chests of opium]...[were] ‘no more the cause of war, than the throwing overboard of the tea in the Boston harbor was the cause of the North American Revolution.’”¹⁴ Adams instead suggests that it was the demands the Chinese government placed upon foreign diplomats that were so disagreeable as to sow the seeds of war. Through a review of the standard Western historiography of the Opium Wars following Adams’ address and the careful examination of sources that illustrate the role of country trader merchants in the years leading up to and immediately following the Opium War, I will show that the role of private traders, known as “country traders,” in the conflict has been underemphasized. An examination of the roles played by these traders allows us to move beyond British imperial and diplomatic views of the conflict and leads to the understanding that it was profit-seeking individuals who were responsible for the Wars.

While there was significant scholarship on the standard British portrayal of the Opium Wars prior to the appearance of John K. Fairbank’s *Trade and Diplomacy on the China Coast: The Opening of the Treaty Ports, 1842-1854* in 1969, this book was

¹⁴ Adams, John Q., Address to the Massachusetts Historical Society, December 1841., quoted in Chung Tan, *China and the Brave New World: a Study of the Origins of the Opium War (1840-42)* (Durham, N.C.: Carolina Academic Press, 1978), 1.

the first to fully encapsulate the version of the events that blames the Opium Wars on insurmountable cultural differences between the British and the Chinese. Although the subtitle of the book suggests that the book will begin with the end of the First Opium War, the first half actually centers on Sino-British interactions and how they gave rise to conflict. Fairbanks's book is a tale of two countries, so dissimilar in a number of crucial facets that with the growth of trade, war was all but inevitable.

At the crux of Fairbank's argument is his concept of the tributary system, and how Chinese rulers used it. Fairbank explains how this system developed over a number of different Chinese dynasties, many of which were so-called conquest dynasties, where non-ethnically Han groups took control of China. This trend of repeated invasion by different ethnic groups caused the Chinese to develop a method of cultural resistance to invasion: "From their age-long contact with the barbarians roundabout...the Chinese developed one major belief: that their superiority was not one of mere material power but of culture. Such things as the Chinese written language and the Confucian code of conduct were visible signs of this culture."¹⁵ The belief that the culture developed by the Han throughout many dynasties was far more sophisticated and civilized than any other cultures with which they would clash allowed them to steel themselves for the possibility of being conquered without feeling inferior. The Chinese considered anyone with whom they came into contact to be culturally inferior, and applied to these people the label of "barbarian."

Although barbarian groups would, from time to time, manage to conquer China, they would soon face a serious governmental problem: "The barbarians'

power in China was limited, however, by another constant factor—that they lacked the clerical personnel and local roots necessary to conduct the bureaucratic administration of populous Chinese territory once they had conquered it, and so had to rely upon Chinese assistance or partnership in government.”¹⁶ Herein lies the ingenuity of the tributary system: although foreign groups might surpass the Chinese in military power, when it came to the administration of the empire, the Chinese were essential to successful rule. Many had conquered the Chinese military; none had conquered the Chinese culture.

One of the most severe mistakes perpetrated by the Chinese, Fairbank argues, was their assumption that the British were just like all other barbarian groups. He goes on to suggest that this mistake colored the Chinese response to the British: “If the British barbarians had been an entirely unprecedented phenomenon in Chinese life, the Manchu rulers of the day might easily have formed a fresh and realistic view of them. Unfortunately, this was impossible because the British were the unwitting inheritors of the status which had been reserved for barbarians in Chinese.”¹⁷ In order to understand this, it is important to consider what exactly about the British made them so unique.

The first major characteristic, which is a very important one indeed, is the military prowess of the British, especially in naval affairs. The British Empire derived much of its strength from the dominance of the British Navy. Although China had a

¹⁵ John King Fairbank, *Trade and Diplomacy on the China Coast: the Opening of the Treaty Ports, 1842-1854* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Pr., 1969), 26.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 25.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 7.

large coast, its traditional focus had been on Inner Asia, the source of prior threats.¹⁸ The British had a well-trained, equipped and disciplined fighting force that relied on its Naval superiority. Emblematic of this was the *Nemesis*, “[An] armed steamer which could go anywhere, against the wind and in shallow water, to reconnoiter, carry dispatches, or effect troop landings...and appeared invulnerable.”¹⁹ The Chinese had no defenses available that could compete with this pinnacle of British naval technology or with British military discipline and firepower and were routed in nearly every engagement of the Opium War.

The second major difference, according to Fairbank, between the British and the barbarians previously faced by Chinese rulers was due to changes taking place in England during the late eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries. On the heels of the industrial revolution liberalism was taking form. Led by thinkers like Adam Smith and Jeremy Bentham, and later James and John Stuart Mill (both of whom spent large portions of their working lives in the service of the British East India Company), this liberalism movement was strongly in support of the rule of law and *laissez-faire* economics. Fairbank directly relates these developments to the ideology of those involved in diplomacy and trade with China. He quotes Sir John Bowring, who would in 1849 become the Superintendent of Trade in China, on the free trade values held by early liberals: “That which nations have most earnestly to entreat from governments is, that the latter would cease to honor them with any officious interference: ‘their tender mercies,’ however well intended, ‘are cruel.’ The best boon they can give is to let the stream of commerce flow as it will; its tide is strong enough

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 42.

to bear away all impediments.”²⁰ It is little surprise, then, that the British in China were so unwilling to accept the government’s prohibition of trading in any commodity, even opium. Fairbank emphatically concludes his discussion of the rise of liberalism with this ominous declaration: “No philosophy could have been more antithetic to the fundamental beliefs on which the Confucian monarchy and its foreign relations were founded, nor less conducive to Anglo-Chinese harmony.”²¹

In Fairbank’s telling, when British liberalism met the Chinese tributary system, tension quickly appeared. As this tension grew, British frustration would ultimately lead to the use of their superior military ability to coerce the Chinese into signing treaties granting free trade. More broadly, Fairbank’s reading of Chinese history pits Chinese antiquity against British modernity and finds that the outcome of the war was the triumph of modernity:

Neither the scientific method nor the rule of law, the inventor or the entrepreneur, have yet had their heyday in this strangely different society. Perhaps the very maturity and stability of Chinese social structure and political institutions have proved a handicap. Their dissimilarity to the West was so deep and ingrained that adjustment to the modern world has been possible only through the break-up of the old order.²²

Fascinating, given this line of reasoning, is Fairbank’s ultimate conclusion: that the series of treaties including the Treaty of Nanjing and those following it created a mechanism that supplanted the tributary system “as a device for incorporating the foreigner into the universal state presided over by the Confucian monarchy of the Son

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 81.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 73.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*, 4–5.

of Heaven.”²³ This is fascinating because it supposes that the British, and Western trading nations more generally, were yet another foreign conqueror of China whose contribution to Chinese society was the introduction of capitalism. Later in this thesis, I will argue that this conclusion is in many ways correct, even though greater emphasis must be paid to the merchants and opium itself in order to fully understand how it came to be. In doing so, I suggest that it was the unique commodity of opium that was finally able to succeed where all “barbarians” had failed in opening China to the modern world.

Twenty-two years after the publication of *Trade and Diplomacy on the China Coast*, historian Peter Ward Fay released his *The Opium War: 1840-1842*. Fay intended this book to become a complete scholarly narrative of the Opium Wars. According to him, existing scholarly works focused too narrowly on arguments concerning specific details of the war, and the existent popular accounts neglected to go into appropriate detail for such an important event in world history.²⁴ Although he is limited by his inability to read Chinese, Fay’s book is an important contribution to the study of the Opium War because of its comprehensive nature and narrative strength. It begins the process of expanding the narrowly diplomatic view of the Opium War espoused by Fairbank while staying true to the core beliefs of the standard Western version of the events.

Fay’s entire first chapter is an in-depth description of Indian opium production, which is a significantly new scholarly development in itself. This important step in linking the history of China and India in considering the opium

²³ *Ibid.*, 464.

trade and wars, an all too rare juxtaposition despite the intimate link between the two regions in regards to this event, is certainly a result of the fact that Fay was a historian of both India and China. Sadly, Fay's linking of the two is more a description of where opium came from and how it made its way to China than an exploration of how both regions helped shape and were shaped by imperialism, capitalism, and the opium trade. The separate treatment of the two is underscored by his rather abrupt transition between the first chapter and the second, which focuses on Canton and Macao, and does not contain a single mention of opium.

While Fay's account strives to offer a more complete narrative of the Opium War, its description of the contrast between the Chinese rulers and the Europeans does not draw from his broader foundation to reach a better understanding of the forces at play in the years leading up to the Opium War, and instead mirrors Fairbank's understanding of the event. Of China he writes: "her invaders were almost always the crude and unlettered barbarians of Inner Asia...[who] invariably discovered that while they could conquer China easily enough, to change and reshape her in any significant way was quite beyond their primitive capacities. If they wanted to enjoy her, they had to take her over as she was, mandarins, classics, and all."²⁵ Clearly, Fay subscribed to Fairbank's view of Chinese foreign relations.

In his description of the British, Fay also supports Fairbank's thesis regarding the intellectual trends in Europe and how they predisposed British merchants to react to Chinese cultural responses to the British. The problem, he argues, "was that Europeans did not admit to being just another barbarian breed. They did not see

²⁴ Fay, *The Opium War, 1840-1842*, ix.

themselves as bearers of tribute to anyone; and at the end of the eighteenth century the English, for one, deliberately attempted to repudiate that role.”²⁶ Again, it was the emerging ideology of liberalism, as well as the cultural superiority of a European society on the eve of the industrial revolution, that made bearing tribute so repulsive to the British.

While Fay’s rendition leans heavily on Fairbank’s, it is a step in the right direction. In order to satisfy his goal of comprehensivity, Fay builds out Fairbank’s account of the Opium Wars by completing some important gaps in the narrative. Beyond his discussion of Indian opium production noted above, Fay also comments on the power wielded by merchants, in China, India, and in London, in the weeks surrounding Lin’s opium seizure:

The imperative was money. A great many men would suffer in their pocketbooks if England persisted in ignoring what had happened in Canton. English merchants doing business in Bombay had been distressed that winter and spring, as opium sales steadily declined along the coast of China, by the gradual contraction of credit and the drying up of silver. They had conveyed their distress loudly to their friends in England.²⁷

This is significant because it personalizes and commercializes what, in *Trade and Diplomacy on the China Coast*, was a story of the actions of governments very much in the vein of Samuel Huntington’s now famous article entitled “The Clash of Civilizations?” The article does an excellent job of summarizing Fairbank and Fay’s view of Sino-British relations and generalizing this view to apply to the entire world: “The fundamental source of conflict in this new world will not be primarily ideological or primarily economic. The great divisions among humankind and the

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 30.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 31.

dominating source of conflict will be cultural.”²⁸ While Huntington’s article is primarily concerned with International Relations in the post-Cold War world, his argument is incredibly similar to Fairbank’s beliefs about eighteenth and nineteenth century China. During the months leading up to the Opium Wars, many individual merchants were watching as their livelihood was put in jeopardy by the Chinese anti-opium campaign. Rather than helplessly allow this to happen, they responded in the most effective manner possible, which, in this case, was currying any favor they had within the British government. As I will argue below, the actions of individual merchants, especially those present in Canton, were one of the primary causes of the Opium War. Ultimately, the completeness of Fay’s work, along with the nuanced treatment of the British merchant class on the eve of war, and description of the opium production process make *The Opium War* a standard Western interpretation of the Opium Wars that still manages to stimulate its reader to keep looking for alternate understandings of this historical event.

Julia Lovell’s *The Opium War: Drugs, Dreams and the Making of China*, published in 2011, continues Fay’s task of fleshing out the many characters and events surrounding the opium trade and wars, while still staying faithful to Fairbank’s rendition of the source of the conflict. Lovell is a professor of Modern Chinese history and a well-respected translator of Chinese works. She brings this facility with the Chinese language to her work, crafting a narrative that details the incompatibility of the two sides. Gradually, a comedy of errors emerges as a result of the ineptitude

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 189.

²⁸ Samuel P. Huntington, “The Clash of Civilizations?,” *Foreign Affairs* 72, no. 3 (July 1, 1993): 22.

pervading both the British and Chinese governments in which rulers know next to nothing about what is actually occurring and those on the ground use vague notions of philosophy to mask their true motives.

The Opium War develops the understanding of the Opium Wars in two significant ways. The first is in its thorough detailed discussion of the histories and personalities of the most influential country traders in Canton as well as how they used the opium trade to their personal betterment. Of Jardine and Matheson, whom I will discuss in more detail below, she writes,

In the end, though, opium money did make them gentlemen: Jardine first, returning to London in 1839, where he served as military advisor on China to Palmerston, then in 1841 took an unopposed seat in the House of Commons...[and then] Matheson, who then retired from the trade, bought the Hebridean island of Lewis for half a million pounds and reinvented himself as a laird of good works.²⁹

Lovell's book allows the reader to progress past the understanding of the role of the merchant gained in Fay's work and begin to see how specific merchants were responsible for specific developments on the road to war as well as how this involvement was often with a specific goal in mind. Yet while Lovell covers the Chinese Hong merchants of Canton, whom I will examine in the next chapter, in far more detail than her predecessors, her book does not manage to explain the nuances of their involvement to the same degree to which it covers the country traders.

From Fairbank to Fay to Lovell a picture of the standard western interpretation of the Opium Wars begins to emerge. This interpretation revolves around the notion that these wars were a clash between two entirely different civilizations, and that China, stuck in the antiquity of its traditions, was simply

unprepared for the realities brought about by the industrial revolution and the resultant changes in ideology. This interpretation has evolved in a way that obscures, if not excludes from adequate consideration, an examination of the key components of the opium trade, namely merchants and opium itself, and has incorporated Chinese sources into its canon, but still downplays the role of the merchants and the result of their involvement on the growth of capitalism in China.

In a lecture delivered at Wesleyan University on April 3, 2012, Ghosh mentioned a rather striking facet of his novel *River of Smoke*: that its climactic passage is set inside a chamber of commerce. In this passage, the Canton Chamber of Commerce has called an emergency meeting to respond to Lin's demand that Western merchants surrender their opium and that Hong merchants pay for their disobedience to the edicts of the Emperor with their life. Two distinct factions begin to form at the meeting. One, angered by Lin's heavy-handed tactics and unwilling to suffer the economic damage that would accompany the surrender of the opium, is willing to put the Hong merchants' lives in jeopardy in order to force Lin's hand:

'What I propose,' said Slade, 'is that we stand fast and show that we are not to be budged. Once they understand this, Howqua and Mowqua will sort out the matter soon enough. They will dole out a few cumshaws and grease a few palms and that will be the end of it. Their heads will remain on their shoulders and we shall still be in possession of our goods. If we show signs of softness we will all lose: this above all is a moment when we must cleave to our principles.'

'Principles?' retorted Mr. King in astonishment. 'I fail to see what principle can underlie the smuggling of opium.'

'Well then, you have chosen to blind yourself sir!' Mr Burnham's fist landed loudly on the table. 'Is freedom not a principle as well as a right? Is

²⁹ Lovell, Julia, *The Opium War: Drugs, Dreams, and the Making of China*, 26.

there no principle at stake when free men claim the liberty to conduct their affairs without fear of tyrants and despots?³⁰

Here the second faction, led by Mr. King, argues that the Hong merchants are their close friends and long-time business partners, and that one cannot place any monetary value on the life of a friend. The debate between these two factions rages on, with Mr. Burnham going as far to suggest that it is the Chinese “effeminate” nature which makes them so weak as to be susceptible to opium addiction and unable to appreciate the importance of free trade.³¹ This passage is especially illustrative of the unique circumstances in Canton that allowed the merchants to play such an important role in the opium war.

Ghosh uses the juxtaposition of the values of free trade and the supposition that the Chinese lack masculinity to show how the Canton merchants were able to use prominent European ideological movements to serve their purposes. The comment on masculinity is largely reflective of the nature of the nearly all-male world inhabited by the country traders in Canton, a theme Ghosh expounds upon throughout *River of Smoke*. The presence of female foreigners in the small region outside of Canton proper to which the foreigners were relegated, called Fanqui town (or foreigner town), was strictly forbidden. In such a society, masculinity became the paradigm through which power was expressed, the most powerful members of this society assuming the status of a “man among men.” Given that it was a merchant society, power accompanied a man’s success in business and success in business came from the

³⁰ Amitav Ghosh, *River of Smoke* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011), 433. Most of the merchants believed that either Howqua or Mowqua, two of the most successful Hong merchants, would be punished first.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 437.

opium trade. When this success was challenged by the Chinese suppression of the opium trade, then, these merchants found it beneficial to espouse the rhetoric of free trade. Thus, it becomes easy to see how, when these the Chinese blocked these merchants' opium business, they suddenly became some of the staunchest supports of free trade within the British Empire. What I am suggesting, but cannot prove, is that the issue of "free trade" during the First Opium War took on a local meaning that was colored by the special circumstances in which Western traders found themselves in Canton at that time.

The fact that they were willing to risk the lives of their business partners further suggests that they were primarily concerned with their own enrichment rather than some deep-seated ideological commitment to the morality of "free trade. This supposition is further supported by the beliefs of the second faction which— led by Charles King, a representative of the non-fictional American firm Olyphant & Co. which never traded in opium due to their moral objection to that commodity—is never blinded by the promise of opium-related profits and argues passionately to not risk the lives of the Hong merchants.

Ultimately, even with the support of the committee's chairman, Mr. Wetmore, Mr. King's faction is unable to curry the support of the other members. Unofficially, the deciding vote is cast by Bahram Modi, Ghosh's Parsi opium trader protagonist, who chooses to align himself, and therefore the large and diverse constituency of India-based traders, with those who refuse to respond to Lin's demands. In making this decision, Bahram relies on a type of clan morality: "He had to think first of those who were closest to him, did he not? And what conceivable good could result for them if he brought ruin upon himself?...Indeed he could think of no duty more

pressing than this, even if it meant that the bridge to heaven would forever be barred to him.”³² He weighs the potential that his decision will mean the death of one of the Hong merchants against the possibility of failing to provide for those closest to him and chooses to hold onto his opium.

In the end, it is Elliott’s promise to indemnify, in the name of the British government, the entirety of the British traders’ opium, which leads to the country traders surrendering their opium in the novel. Bahram’s choice to hold on to his opium is proven wrong, as the British government offers no guarantee over the opium of non-British citizens and it is too late for Bahram to repair his broken conscience. Elliot’s decision to guarantee the opium, and later the British entry into the war, are all direct consequences of the discussion between the country traders who made up the chamber of commerce. Therefore, the importance of the country traders, a group who were primarily interested in enriching themselves at nearly any cost, in the larger discussion of the causes of the opium war is central to Ghosh’s depiction of the causes of the war. Following Ghosh’s lead, I want now to turn to an examination of three non-fictional country traders and their involvement with the opium trade in order to understand more about the economic dimension of the war.

Students at Wesleyan University will no doubt be familiar with the Russell House. Its portico is one of the most recognizable landmarks on the campus. What they may not know is that Samuel Wadsworth Russell, the man who commissioned the building of the house and for whom it was named, was the founder of Russell and Company, one of the largest American opium trading houses of the nineteenth

³² *Ibid.*, 438.

century. Russell was born in Middletown to a family whose men had traditionally attended Yale before being ordained as ministers. More recently, the Russell men had gravitated towards nautical pursuits. Indeed, the Russells, along with other Middletown residents, had made this region one of the major shipping hubs on the East Coast: “By 1810, the aggregate tonnage of the shipping in the Middletown District had easily surpassed that of New London, New Haven, and Newport, with about 17,000 tons.”³³ Russell would have grander ambitions than his immediate ancestors, sailing abroad, first to Europe and later to Canton multiple times. He first traveled to Canton with the vessel “Fame” in 1818, when he was 29 years old as the representative of four Providence, Rhode Island based merchants. Early on in his career, Russell would take Samuel Wetmore on as his partner. This is the same Mr. Wetmore who would later preside over the chamber of commerce described by Ghosh.

While Russell was not yet involved in the opium trade on his first foray to Canton, he clearly encountered it when he was there. He lived with a Mr. Phillip Ammidon of Providence who, records show, lost a ship carrying a substantial amount of opium as early as 1812.³⁴ Furthermore, he expressed frustration at the financial support he was receiving from the Providence merchants in his trade of tea, silk, and other organic goods such as ginseng, observing that those merchants who traded in opium had no such financial problems.³⁵

³³ Alain D. Munkittrick, “Samuel Wadsworth Russell (1789-1862): A Study of Ordered Investment” (Honors Thesis, Wesleyan University, 1973), 10, Wesleyan University Special Collections.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 55–56.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 81.

In 1823, Russell would break his ties with the four Providence merchants he had previously represented and begin, in concert with Mr. Ammidon, to dip his toes into the opium trade: they noticed that there was “a dissatisfaction among some of the ‘principal’ Indian ‘native houses’ with the British agents of the East India Company in India, who bought the opium from these houses. It was from these houses that Russell and Ammidon would seek consignments of opium.”³⁶ When Russell returned to Canton in 1825 he was no longer financially handcuffed. With the backing of a consortium of New England families called the “Boston Concern,” he was able to expand his opium trading activities until he was one of the largest American opium merchants. While Russell would return to Middletown in 1836 and in doing so, distance himself completely from the affairs of Russell and Co., the company itself would go on to become the third largest opium merchant house behind only the large British firms of Jardine and Matheson and Dent & Co.³⁷

Beyond its connection to Wesleyan University, Russell’s story is significant for two reasons. First, Russell’s biography is a great example of the trajectory of the men who eventually became country traders. He built upon his birth to an entrepreneurial New England family and, by adventuring further abroad than any of his ancestors had before, was able to become highly successful by joining in what was clearly a highly profitable trade. Just as it is clear how profits would motivate such a man, it is equally clear that he was by no means a belligerent, evil warmonger, but rather a normal merchant who did business in order to improve his own lot in life. Second, although Russell’s premature exit from Russell & Co. prohibited him both from

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 110–111.

gaining sufficient wealth to be considered among the great merchants of the early-nineteenth century and from being involved in the negotiations on the eve of war, he was still able to amass enough wealth to be one of the richest people living in the state of Connecticut and to commission the Russell House. The grand mansion now serves as a testament to the many merchants whose fortunes were made in the Canton opium trade.

David Sassoon, my second example, patriarch to one of the world's great trading dynasties, was able to leverage the Chinese opium trade to cement his family's position globally. Sassoon emigrated from Baghdad to Bombay in 1830 and promptly set up a trading house. He would come to be the center of a large community of Baghdad Jews living in India, which would become the main rival of, and eventually surpass, the Zoroastrian Parsi community of traders that included Ghosh's fictional character Bahram Modi

Early involved in the Indian side of the Chinese opium and cotton trade, in 1842 and 1845 David Sassoon's son Elias David Sassoon established trading offices in Hong Kong and Shanghai respectively. Around the same time, they together founded a number of firms that would grow into a trade empire. Especially in Shanghai, the Sassoons transformed the ethnic composition of the foreign merchant community. Chiara Betta, one of the few scholars who has written extensively on the early years of the Sassoon family, maintains that "if the Sassoon firms had not expanded their business to Shanghai, very few Baghdadi Jews would have had any incentive to seek their fortune in the city. The early Baghdadi community was indeed formed almost

³⁷ Ibid., 148.

exclusively by employees of the Sassoon firms and their spouses.”³⁸ One practice that helped the Sassoon family become particularly successful, Betta argues, is their participation in the British trading world as if they were British citizens: “the benefits of receiving British protection were especially evident in relation to the opium trade. The Baghdadi commercial elites, in fact, together with the Parsis and Ismailis, lodged protests and memoranda with the British consular authorities whenever their commercial interests in the trade were at stake.”³⁹ In the wake of the Opium War, if these merchants were able to get the British government on their side in trade disputes, they were nearly assured of the protection needed to pursue trade successfully. By the turn of the twentieth century, as the opium trade began to fall out of fashion in Europe, the Sassoon family and other Baghdadi elites controlled the majority of the India-China opium trade.⁴⁰ The Sassoon family became so much a part of the British merchant sphere that one of his sons was able to move to England, where he was made a Baronet. Stanley Jackson, the Sassoon’s biographer notes that they were spared racial prejudice and snobbery that plagued the other prominent family of Jewish merchants, the Rothschilds, as, “Opium trading was still considered unexceptional and apparently less noxious socially than vulgar profit-making on the Stock Exchange.”⁴¹

³⁸ Chiara Betta, “From Orientals to Imagined Britons: Baghdadi Jews in Shanghai,” *Modern Asian Studies* 37, no. 4 (October 1, 2003): 1003.

³⁹ Chiara Betta, Robert Bickers, and Christian Henriot, *Marginal Westerners in Shanghai: The Baghdadi Jewish Community, 1845-1931*, New Frontiers : Imperialism’s New Communities in East Asia, 1842-1952 (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), 44.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ Stanley Jackson, *The Sassoons*, Second Printing. (E. P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1968), 68.

Back in Shanghai, the Sassoon family and their employees exhibited typical behavior for successful merchants at the time, exploring diverse investments: “By the 1920s the Baghdadis had diversified their commercial interests. The Sassoon firms, for example, held extensive shipping interests and numerous agencies and rated among Shanghai’s main landowners.”⁴² The capital amassed in the opium trade allowed the Sassoons and other merchants to begin diversification of investments, which in turn fueled the engines of capitalism anywhere these investments were made. This is one of the most important legacies of the opium trade. In the case of David Sassoon and his progeny, he was able to realize the goal of nearly all merchants involved in the China opium trade of entering nobility through economic means and was able to build a family that would represent the growth of capitalism in much of the world.

William Jardine, of the firm Jardine, Matheson & Co., is my last example. He was one of the most successful and influential of all the country traders. In *The Opium War* Lovell describes Jardine and his trading partner James Matheson as, “the two doyens of the Canton opium trade (and leading Sinophobe warmongers of the 1830s).”⁴³ Before examining Jardine’s hand in causing British involvement in the Opium War, it is worth looking at his background so as to better understand his motivations.

Jardine was born to a Scottish farming family of little means in 1784 and in his teens received a medical education at Edinburgh. It was through practicing medicine that Jardine would gain his introduction to the China trade, serving as a ship’s doctor

⁴² Betta, Bickers, and Henriot, *New Frontiers*, 42.

on East India Company trading vessels. This position was considered an officer level appointment and, as such, allowed Jardine to invest alongside the East India Company. Using the unparalleled access to the opium trade enjoyed by those employed by the East India Company, officers could pool their money to buy opium and ship it on Company ships to China. This practice would make many officers quite wealthy. As Lovell notes, Jardine had significant faith in the opium trade and recommended others follow his example: “Invest in opium, warmly suggested William Jardine to a friend in Essex, as [it is] the ‘safest and most gentlemanlike speculation I am aware of.’”⁴⁴ His suggestion also exposes a goal held by many opium traders: to use wealth derived from the opium trade to become gentlemen. Jardine used the money made from these investments to ascend the social ladder, taking on a management level position in the East India Company in 1818, around the same time Samuel Russell was first heading to Canton. Just a year later, Jardine had cemented his position in the Canton opium trade. He soon was hired as a partner in the venerable British firm Magniac & Co., which he, along with Matheson, would soon take control over, changing the firm’s name to Jardine, Matheson, & Co. It was through this firm that Jardine would grow fabulously wealthy, and assume a position which, as described in *River of Smoke*, bordered on nobility: “There are even Royals of a sort [among the Canton merchants], or at least there is an uncrowned King: he is Mr William Jardine, a great Nabob of Scottish origin.”⁴⁵

⁴³ Lovell, Julia, *The Opium War: Drugs, Dreams, and the Making of China*, 24.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 24.

⁴⁵ Ghosh, *River of Smoke*, 200.

In 1839 Jardine took leave of Canton, returning to London. The reason for this decision is unclear; perhaps it was a result of the fact that Jardine sensed imminent danger following Lin's arrival, or perhaps because Jardine simply was ready to settle down. A farewell dinner was held to celebrate the career of a merchant who had emerged as the leader of all foreign merchants in Canton. In *The Fan Kwae at Canton*, a first-hand account of the opium trade in Canton written by William C. Hunter, a partner in Russell & Co, describes the affair and its effect on the merchant community:

The entire foreign community entertained him at a dinner in the dining-room of the East India Company's Factory. About eighty persons of all nationalities, including India, were present, and they did not separate until several hours after midnight. It was an event frequently referred to afterwards amongst the residents, and to this day there are a few of us who still speak of it.⁴⁶

Jardine, and the trade to which he owed his prominence, united the entire Canton merchant community on the eve of the war. With Lin's arrival and Jardine's departure, it was clear that there would be a dramatic change in the lives of all those gathered. Jardine's speech given at this occasion, used by Ghosh, provides a clue to how his departure would affect the trade:

I hold, gentlemen, the society of Canton high, yet I also know that this community has often heretofore and lately been accused of being a set of smugglers; this I distinctly deny. We are not smugglers, gentlemen! It is the Chinese government, it is the Chinese officers who smuggle and who connive at and encourage smuggling, not we; and then look at the East India Company: why, the father of all smuggling and smugglers is the East India Company!"⁴⁷

⁴⁶ William C Hunter, *The "Fan Kwae" at Canton Before Treaty Days, 1825-1844*, (Shanghai, China: Oriental affairs, 1938), 83.

⁴⁷ Ghosh, *River of Smoke*, 379.

This speech is one of the best examples of the beliefs of nearly every member of the merchant community except, perhaps, those aligned with Charles King in the aforementioned debate. Although the merchants were involved in an illegal trade, they did not see themselves as criminals. Rather, they were profit-seekers who disregarded Chinese law, instead choosing to follow the examples set by the Chinese and British governments and their representatives. Jardine's involvement in the Opium War did not end with his departure: this speech would presage his later actions.

Jardine did not return to London empty handed. Prior to his departure he had collected some \$20,000 from Canton merchants to establish a merchant lobby in England that would argue strongly for British military involvement in China. Thus would Jardine reach the zenith of his role as a "Sinophobe warmonger." Zhang Xinbao, a Chinese historian educated both in China and in the United States, and who studied under Fairbank, makes an important point about Jardine's transition to lobbyist that is illustrative of the power wielded by the leading Canton merchants: "Even before his return to England, Jardine's influence on the Foreign Office had been exerted through his London agent, John Abel Smith, for Palmerston depended almost exclusively on Smith for intelligence from Canton."⁴⁸ The combination of Jardine's fervent belief in the mistreatment of the Canton merchants, his sterling reputation, the significant financial support his lobbying efforts received, and his unparalleled access to Palmerston make it unsurprising that the ultimate terms of the Treaty of Nanjing echo the recommendations made by Jardine to Palmerston,

notably payment for the seized opium and the opening of additional treaty ports.⁴⁹ Jardine still stands as the ultimate example of socio-economic ascendancy facilitated by the opium trade and the direct influence merchants were able to exert on the British government. He, more so than nearly any other individual involved, was responsible for the Opium Wars.

In a letter to Lord Palmerson dated May 23rd, 1839 and signed by nearly all of the prominent merchant residents of Canton who fell within the British economic sphere (excluding, for example Russell & Co.), the merchants echo the grievances aired by Jardine and call for British government assistance. The signature of Jardine, Matheson, & Co. is strangely missing, although perhaps they trusted Jardine to deliver their message. At the conclusion of this message, they write,

The high commissioner has expressed an intention of opening the legal trade, under new regulations, but circumstances do not justify us in entertaining the expectation that these regulations will afford any security for our life or property.

We therefore think your lordship will be convinced that some serious alterations in our relations with this empire are indispensably necessary; and that British commerce can never safely be carried on, and certainly can never flourish in a country, where our persons and property are alike at the mercy of a capricious and corrupt government.⁵⁰

This short passage perfectly encapsulates the role played by the “country traders”—American, Indian, and British—in this conflict. It was not, as they suggest, a fear for the security of their life and property that motivated their writing, but rather that they feared that the highly profitable opium trade would be brought to an end. In order to

⁴⁸ Hsin-pao Chang, *Commissioner Lin and the Opium War* (New York: Norton, 1970), 193.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ E. C. Bridgman and S. Wells Williams, eds., “Letter to Lord Palmerston from Canton Merchants,” *The Chinese Repository*. 8 (1851 1832): 35.

avoid this outcome, the merchants utilized the free trade rhetoric that accompanied the rise of liberalism in Britain and exaggerated the risks they faced. As the histories of Russell, the Sassoon family, and Jardine show, the men drawn to the opium trade were highly motivated and pragmatic entrepreneurs. They realized that the opium trade was a uniquely profitable form of commercial activity and did everything in their power to protect it. Through their influence with the British government, these merchants were able to obtain official support of the trade, and initiate the Opium Wars. It was the personalities, motives, and influences of a small group of newly crowned merchant “nobility” that caused the conflict, not the clash of two disparate and incompatible civilizations as suggested by Fairbanks et al.

3. The Cohong and the Opium War

The standard Chinese interpretation of the Opium Wars ultimately rejects the notion that this conflict was about anything other than the opium trade and the violation of Chinese national sovereignty. In this chapter I will trace the development of this argument and discuss the implications it has both in terms of understanding the causes of the Wars and in modern China. Given that the Opium Wars were fought on Chinese territory, the emotional impact of the Wars is far more apparent in China than elsewhere. As such, this Chapter will explore the emotional legacy of the Wars and show how the government of the People's Republic of China has politicized this legacy to serve various ends. Finally, I will argue that the role of the Hong merchants has, to a surprising degree, been neglected in histories of the Opium Wars. I suggest that developing a better understanding of these merchants shows them to be more like the Western merchants than other Qing officials and, surprisingly, that these similarities were both an important cause of the Wars and a source of the anger and disgrace that characterize the War's legacy.

In constructing and contrasting the Chinese historiography of the Opium Wars with the standard western version of the events, Chang Hsin-Pao's book *Commissioner Lin and the Opium War* is an excellent place to start. Chang was educated in both China and in the United States before receiving his Ph.D. from Harvard where he studied under Fairbank. In *Commissioner Lin and the Opium War*, he draws from numerous sources by both Chinese and non-Chinese to craft an interpretation of the Opium Wars that serves as a bridge between Western and

Chinese perspectives. As the foreword by Fairbank suggests, the book relies on the tributary system framework to a certain degree, but aims to move beyond this model, stressing that, “It was commerce which brought the English and the Chinese together, and the most important aspect of that commerce in the decade prior to the war was the opium trade.”⁵¹ Along the way, Chang fleshes out Lin’s character, presenting a version of history that is kinder to both him and the Chinese government as a whole than many others.

Chang’s adherence to Fairbank’s paradigm is evident in his emphasis on the differences between Chinese and Westerners and how they influence the build-up to the Opium Wars. He writes: “In the nature of things, cultural intercourse could not be prevented. And Chinese and English values, stemming from totally different traditions, could hardly have made a sharper contrast. This was obvious in government structure, law and ideas of justice, social organization, economic thought, political institutions –indeed, in every facet of human activity.”⁵² He reflects on this point, and largely suggests ways in which the Chinese were not up to the bar set by their western counterparts in terms of understanding British cultural traditions and innovations. While there was ignorance on both sides, the British recognized that it would be to their benefit to understand the circumstances surrounding trade in China. The Chinese, however, were more concerned with pursuits of culture than pursuits of profit and were not interested in learning about the world of the British merchants. Chang goes as far as to argue “the whole Canton system was built on a

⁵¹ Chang, *Commissioner Lin and the Opium War*, ix.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 9.

central theme of contempt for foreigners and disdain for merchants,”⁵³ the unfortunate result of ignorance perpetuated by tradition.

Chang breaks from Fairbank’s version of events by focusing on British commercial expansion as the main catalyst of conflict between the two nations: “The friction that arose in the realms of diplomacy, law, and government was merely symptomatic of the basic problem—expansion versus containment. The opium trade was an indispensable vehicle for facilitating this expansion and the two could not be separated.”⁵⁴ By thus framing his argument, Chang softens Fairbank’s clash of civilizations view and is able to bring the importance of the opium trade itself into the equation. Still, his argument centers on the differences between the two sides of the conflict.

Significantly, although he chronicles how the opium trade affected China, he is ultimately dismissive of the uniqueness of opium. He maintains: “Had there been an effective alternative to opium, say molasses or rice, the conflict might have been called the Molasses War or the Rice War.”⁵⁵ Later contributors to the standard Chinese interpretation of the wars challenge this, as I will discuss later in this chapter, but this claim is especially interesting for this thesis, as I will use an examination of the similarities and differences between opium and sugar in the third chapter to illustrate the unique properties of opium and its effect on Asia.

Chang makes two important points on the importance of the opium trade. The first, which was covered in the previous chapter, is that nearly everyone in

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

Canton, from the British merchants to the Chinese officials, was, to varying degrees, invested in the opium trade. This, in concert with growing drug use, made the prospect of ending the opium trade increasingly challenging: “A few honest and industrious statesmen could not be expected to win a quick victory over widely ramified and obstinate vested interests and over the urgent needs of the large number of addicts.”⁵⁶ An important corollary of this argument is that there was widespread corruption among the Chinese government, both in relation to the opium trade and outside of it. Disgust over this official corruption is an important thread within the standard Chinese portrayal of the opium wars, which I will cover later in this chapter.

The second important point he makes concerns the effect of the opium trade on China’s trade balance. As noted in the introduction, when the British first arrived in China, they were hardly able to find goods other than silver for which there was Chinese demand. With the opium trade, this situation was reversed, and silver began flowing out of China. This outflow increased as the opium trade grew; even in the early 1800s, when the Daoguang emperor was beginning his efforts to end the opium trade in China, the trade with other countries, especially America, was making up the deficit: “From 1818 to 1834, for instance, British ships brought away \$50 million worth of silver while the Americans were carrying in upwards of \$60 million. But the situation began to change after 1826-27; as the American traders became more and more involved in the opium trade, their vessels shipped in less and less silver.”⁵⁷ Given the striking correlation between the expansion of the opium trade and contraction of Chinese silver reserves, many scholars have suggested that it was the outflow of silver

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 48.

that ultimately galvanized the Chinese into attempting to put a stop to the opium trade.

Further exacerbating the issue of silver outflow was the increased smuggling that accompanied the opium trade. As trading in opium had been officially prohibited since 1729, a smuggling system existed whereby foreign ships would never come ashore, but would have local traders meet them in the harbors of islands off the China coast. Frank Welsh, in his history of Hong Kong, notes that many tariff-averse traders preferred to deal with all of their products in this manner: “As smuggling opium was so widespread, traders saw little reason to import even legitimate cargoes through the Guangdong customs; they might just as well also be offloaded in the estuary and the customs duty saved.”⁵⁸ Not only were these smugglers able to avoid paying their taxes (in silver), they would often only accept payment in silver as it was liquid, nearly universally accepted, and, except for its weight, easy to transport.

China’s negative balance of trade caused two distinct issues for the Qing government. First, silver was flowing out of China in exchange for opium, a commodity that once consumed held no economic value. The decrease in productivity that resulted from opium addiction likely compounded this issue. Put simply, China was growing poorer. Chang highlights the second issue caused by the silver outflow: “The outflow of silver precipitated a severe economic crisis. The market values of the two mediums of payment—silver and copper—deviated greatly from the official exchange rate.”⁵⁹ In Qing China, government taxes had to be paid in

⁵⁷ Ibid., 42.

⁵⁸ Frank Welsh, *A History of Hong Kong* (London: HarperCollins, 1997), 78.

⁵⁹ Chang, *Commissioner Lin and the Opium War*, 39.

silver, but everyday payments were generally made in copper. Although there was an official exchange rate between gold, silver, and copper of 1:10:1000, the outflow of silver caused copper to depreciate relative to silver (in 1838, for example, the rate between silver and copper was 1:1,650).⁶⁰ Thus, the effective taxes paid in China increased dramatically due to the outflow of silver. The combination of a nation growing poorer and rapidly increasing taxes clearly warranted the attention of the Qing government.

In the concluding paragraph of his book, Chang reappraises the degree to which Lin Zexu succeeded in his mission and, in doing so, provides an unusually nuanced portrayal of the challenges Lin faced. Although Lin was, in the wake of the Opium War, banished to Xinjiang, he was later recalled. In the standard Chinese rendition of the Opium Wars, Lin has been portrayed as a principled administrator who, charged with the nearly impossible task of stopping the Canton opium trade, did the best he could. Chang challenges this: “He [Lin] went to Canton to formulate a new foreign policy, to lay the foundation for the transformation of the Canton system into a more modern institution, and, most importantly of all, to make preparations for an unavoidable increasing contact with the West. In this broad sense, Lin did not really fail in his mission. The roaring guns of the Opium War awakened the empire from centuries of lethargy.”⁶¹ While this representation of Lin’s mission falls back upon Fairbank’s notion of pitting the modern West against the pre-modern East, its broadening of Lin’s mission is significant because, in acknowledging Lin’s tripartite goals, shows how impressive an administrator Lin was. This suggest, I think, that a

⁶⁰ Ibid.

lesser man, were he to have shouldered Lin's burden, may have prevented the war, but only because he would have been unable to move beyond the status quo of the Canton opium trade.

Although Chang's interpretation straddles portions of the standard Western and Chinese versions of the Opium Wars, it represents a thorough introduction to some of the more prominent features of the Chinese interpretation. It opens the door to the notion that the opium trade, so profitable for the British and so ruinous to the Chinese, may have been more than just tangentially related to the war. Furthermore, it touches on the sense of humiliation and disgust that has become an important emotional legacy of the Opium War. Finally, his reconsideration of Lin's success is an important step towards humanizing a figure whose legacy is forever tied to the Opium Wars.

Seven years following the release of Chang's book, Chung Tan responded to Commissioner Lin and the Opium War with his *China and the Brave New World: A Study of the Origins of the Opium War, 1840-42*. Tan, one of the foremost figures in the field of Chinese Cultural Studies and the father of the field in India, spent the first twenty-five years of his life in China before moving to India. *China and the Brave New World* is a radical refutation of the standard Western interpretation of the Opium Wars, and the most complete and detailed version of the standard Chinese interpretation I encountered. Tan argues that the opium trade was more than just the economic framework that accompanied the wars. Rather, it was the British *casus belli*. He further posits that this interpretation has heretofore had insufficient

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 217.

academic support: “Though the opium-war perspective enjoys the advantage of conventional legitimacy in the name of Opium War, the scholarly efforts supporting it are far from adequate in establishing it as a sound academic proposition.”⁶² Thus, Tan intends his book to provide the academic support for this interpretation, an endeavor in which he succeeds handily.

Tan’s first step in supporting his interpretation of the Opium War is engaging and refuting the Western understanding of the tributary system. He does so in two steps: first addressing the misunderstandings that underlie Fairbank’s description of the tributary system and then by addressing the misinterpretation of the action held by proponents of the standard Western interpretation to be at the center of the tributary system: the kowtow. Tan argues that the Chinese had two different systems through which they dealt with outsiders. For their neighbors, who could be perceived as a threat, they used the tributary system to exert dominance. The other system was used for distant countries and was not focused on dominance: “With her distant neighbors China had no fear of external threat, and hence did not need any tributary system to maintain a stable relationship.”⁶³ Tan dismisses the fact that Britain was listed alongside other more proximate countries as a “tributary state” in *The Qing Statutes of 1815* as being a direct result of the Macartney Embassy having been a tributary mission, rather than an indication of how Britain was viewed by the Qing government.⁶⁴

⁶² Tan, *China and the Brave New World*, 12.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.* He goes on to note that he believes, at the time of the book’s release, that Fairbank would agree with this notion

Of course, this argument raises the question of why the Qing government encouraged the tributary system by suggesting foreign diplomats make tribute to Beijing. Tan believes the system's longevity was two-fold: "It provided a convenient supply of luxuries to the extravagant inmates of the imperial palace. But more important was its psychological impact—every present, howsoever small its size and insignificant its value, served as a reminder of the Son of Heaven's unchallengeable supremacy over Chinese soil."⁶⁵ This is perhaps the least convincing of Tan's arguments. Surely, the Emperor of China expected more out of the system through which China dealt with its foreign relations than luxuries and trinkets. Furthermore, if the gifts provided through tribute missions were a reminder of the Emperor's power over Chinese soil why would this not extend to the gift givers and their home countries? More convincing is his argument that China had a genuine demand for foreign trade, even if it was not in the products in which British merchants traded: "Under the existing social and economic conditions of the time, it was hardly possible to increase the area of arable land and enhance agricultural yields as fast as the population growth. China thus became deficient in both raw cotton and foodgrains, and had to import both in large quantities during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries."⁶⁶ This is a significant point because it refutes the notion that China was anti-trade or commerce and instead reveals the Chinese objection to British trade to be about opium itself.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 27.

Finally, Tan attempts to debunk the Western interpretation of the kowtow, suggesting that the ritual was one of respect and honor rather than an expression of subservience. He cites the history of the kowtow to support his understanding:

There was a time when people lived on the floor, without the use of tables, chairs, cots, etc. To them, a shift of posture from sitting to kneeling and prostration did not cause much inconvenience. The ceremony of prostration was developed by the Chinese when they were living on the floors....To an Englishman whose pants are tight, and whose manners are up-and-straight, kowtow appears to be abominable. This probably was the feeling of Lord Macartney.⁶⁷

This explanation speaks to Tan's expertise in cultural studies; although the prostration of the kowtow does indeed seem gratuitous, the suggestion that with a different cultural background it could be seen as a standard gesture of respect performed, for example, from student to teacher or child to parent, is a strong one.

In examining the importance of the opium trade, Tan stresses that it was opium that was the only way to satisfy British merchant interests in India in a sustainable manner. Britain's vast Indian holdings presented both great opportunity for profit and competition for domestic industries. Those in charge of India, essentially the management of the East India Company and their friends and relatives, were interested in using their status to enrich themselves to the greatest degree possible. To do so, they had to find a market for Indian-produced goods other than Britain. This was especially true for cotton, which, although produced cheaply in India, would never be an economically intelligent import due to the developed Lancashire cotton industry, in which those involved in the India-China trade would also likely have had investments, and in opium, due to its destructive nature. Through

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 123.

the Britain, India, China “triangle trade,” the British merchants were able to solve this problem, Tan posits: “There was no better vehicle than opium which could transmit British fortunes homeward from India and simultaneously replenish the sources of these fortunes. In this regard, Indian opium had a greater strategic importance in the trade triangle than Chinese tea or British textiles.”⁶⁸ In opium, the East India Company (and therefore British merchants) had a commodity which they could employ their Indian subjects to farm, sell to China, and remit the profits back to England. As an added bonus, they would receive part of the salary paid to their Indian workers back in the form of taxes, which would also be remitted. This ingenious system was the solution to the problem of how to extract as much profit as possible out of Britain’s colonial holdings in Asia without damaging the market for British made goods, and it all depended on opium.

Rather than increase control over China following the ratification of the Treaty of Nanjing, the British allowed the Qing government to maintain their rule as long as they complied with the terms of the treaty. Tan argues that this was intentional and indicates the importance of the opium trade, as the status quo was highly beneficial for British commercial interests.⁶⁹ Thus, Tan shows how both before and after the Opium Wars opium was the key ingredient to British Empire in Asia. It was to protect this important trade that Britain went to war in 1839. “That in this context” Tan concludes, responding directly to Chang’s suggestion that any other commodity might have taken the place of opium, “opium cannot be transformed into an algebraic X is because of its special nature as a narcotic, completely different from

⁶⁸ Ibid., 89.

other ordinary commodities. No other commodity could replace a narcotic in its role of profit-creation, as a source of huge revenues to the Indian interests.”⁷⁰

With the release of *China and the Brave New World*, Tan provided a study of the standard Chinese interpretation of the Opium Wars that was comprehensive in nearly every respect. One area where his study is incomplete is the emotional legacy of the Opium Wars, especially in modern China. Since the founding of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, two major films on the Opium Wars have been made in China that allow us to learn something about the lasting impact of the Opium Wars on popular consciousness. The films, Zheng Junli’s *Lin Zexu* (1959) and Xie Jin’s *The Opium War* (1997) both chronicle the years leading up to the war and the war itself.⁷¹ A comparison of the two films, which are strikingly similar in some respects, exposes the lasting emotional legacy of the Opium Wars in China and allows an excellent window into how this emotional legacy has been exploited to serve various political ends. I will also show how the films serve as significant examples of the politicization of the Opium Wars. Film is the perfect medium in which to make this comparison, as directors have a wide variety of cinematic and narrative tools at their disposal, which they can use to convey emotional messages. Furthermore, both of these films are designed for mass consumption, making them an especially effective barometer of mass emotion.

Immediately apparent (especially to a non-Chinese viewer) in both films is the portrayal of the Western merchants as evil, money hungry imperialists, a stereotype

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 225.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 227.

that draws on Qing stereotypes of Westerners as invading barbarians that have been updated and augmented in terms of Maoist communist invective against Americans during the Cold War. A voice-over during the credits of *The Opium War* states: “To create imperialism, the British instituted economic invasion. They imported opium to addict hundreds of thousands of Chinese people.” In both films the portrayals of the British official Charles Elliot and Lancelot Dent, who was the most prominent British opium trader after Jardine and Matheson, epitomize this stereotype. Surprisingly, in both films, Jardine and Matheson are absent, while Dent assumes some aspects of their historical identity.⁷² In *Lin Zexu*, Dent, fearing for his safety after Lin’s demand that the British surrender their opium and on Elliot’s suggestion, tries to sneak out of Canton with the assistance of one of the Hong merchants and his men. He nearly makes it until his hat falls off and a local boatman recognizes him, raising the alarm. The Hong merchant gives Dent his hat, but it is already too late; after a short boat chase, the people of Canton apprehend Dent. Upon his capture, Dent shouts, “I’m a foreigner!” His exclamation is met with a slap by a local boatwoman, to which Dent responds, “I’m Chinese!” Dent’s response is clearly absurd: the costume does little to disguise his face, which is clearly not Chinese. However, by so quickly lying about who he is, the Dent character shows the audience that he is willing to say anything to benefit himself. His protests are unsuccessful, and he is brought to Lin who later uses him and the plot to help him escape against Elliot. In *The Opium War*, Dent’s

⁷¹ Junli Zheng, *Lin Zexu*, Drama, History, War, 1959; Jin Xie, *The Opium War*, Drama, History, War, 1997.

⁷² I am curious to know if this is due to the fact that Jardine, Matheson, & Co., today called Jardine Matheson Holdings Ltd., holds significant power in Asia and indeed in much of the world, while Dent & Co. has long since folded.

character is much more sinister. In the opening scene of the film, he shoots a seagull, exclaiming “Its only a game.” He goes on to consort with a prostitute in an opium den and abandon his own daughter for months on a British ship near Canton while he returns to England to lobby for military intervention in China. Most indicative of Dent’s evil nature in the film is Elliot’s response when Dent speaks out against his command to hand over all British opium: “Well, well, if it isn’t Mr. Dent, risen from the gutter from lying, cheating, swindling, and tax evasion. Need I continue listing your crimes?” Dent does not respond.

While Dent personifies the evil British merchant, it is Elliot who represents imperialism in both films. In *Lin Zexu*, the public in Canton palpably hates Elliot. Soon after Lin’s arrival in Canton, he and the local boatman who will go on to ruin Dent’s escape spy Elliot lounging on a balcony from a boat. The boatman, unable to restrain himself, curses at Elliot, calling him a “wang ba dan”, the meaning of which is similar to the English “son of a bitch.” Before Lin’s men seize the British opium, Elliot has already penned a letter to Palmerston that explicitly encourages war. In *The Opium War*, Elliot’s imperialist leanings become evident in his discussion with the British merchants of Canton regarding how to respond to Lin’s demands. He chastises them: “Trade is booming here; Don’t lets kill the goose that lays the golden egg. (sic)” Xie Jun goes as far as to suggest, in a private conversation between Elliot and Dent, that when Elliot offers the guarantee over the merchant’s opium, he is already plotting to bring the two nations to war. The portrayal of Elliot and Dent in these two films emphatically shows that the Western merchants and governmental representatives are one of the major villains of the popular Chinese representation of the Opium Wars.

The Hong merchants assume the role of secondary villain in both films. In *Lin Zexu*, their portrayal is subtler than in *The Opium War*, in which the Hong merchants are shown, in an unfavorable though not necessarily incorrect portrayal, to be the proprietors of large opium dens rife with prostitution. Throughout *Lin Zexu*, Hong merchants are shown sipping coffee, emphasizing their western nature in contrast to *Lin Zexu*, who instead drinks tea. In *The Opium War*, Lin jails the Hong merchant with whom Dent does business for his involvement in the opium trade. In an effort to gain Lin's favor, the jailed merchant has his son blackmail a courtesan to attempt to assassinate Elliot. Both the plot and the attempt to sway Lin fail. Zheng Junli not only emphasizes the Hong merchants having taken on Western habits and their villainy, but also the degree to which they are deferent to the western merchants. When the Hong merchant (most of whom were low-level Qing officials) who is helping Dent escape offers his hat to Dent, the subservience of the Hong merchants to the westerners is strongly suggested, as Qing officials' hats were signs of their rank. Through this simple action, the merchant has figuratively bestowed his status upon the evil Dent. Although the Hong merchants are clearly obstacles to Lin achieving his goals in both films, unlike the Western merchants they are portrayed not as outright evil, but simply as weak.

Both directors, use Lin, and especially other officials' treatment of him, to incite the audience's anger at the corruption and ineptitude Qing officials. Lin's seizure and destruction of the opium is treated as a major cause célèbre in both films and represents the triumphant zenith of Lin's career. Sadly for Lin, it is shortly followed by his career's nadir, when he is banished to Xinjiang. *Lin Zexu* shows the emperor's favor turning against Lin in meeting with his advisors. The two advisors

hurl insults at Lin, criticizing his leadership and blaming him for the sad state of Chinese sovereignty following the signing of the Treaty of Nanjing. The emperor, briefly asking a group of performers entertaining him to stop so that he can discuss with the advisors, dismisses Lin. As the two advisors leave, the emperor asks the performers why they are not already singing once again. Similarly, at the end of *The Opium War*, Lin, on his way to exile, gives a globe map to his successor who is on his way to meet with the emperor. He implores the man to give the map to the emperor, so that he may learn about the rest of the world to avoid another shameful defeat. The film concludes with a title, which reads: “The Chinese army and people heroically resisted, but their efforts failed because of a corrupt government and military inferiority.” It is likely that the audience of these films knows that after the war Lin’s name was largely cleared. Even if they are unaware, his portrayal as one of the heroes of both films demonstrates that those who insult and challenge him are incorrect to do so. In *Lin Zexu*, the audience, indignant as Lin’s mistreatment quickly grows angry with the officials condemning him. In *The Opium War*, however, the emotions are more complex. While the film highlights the incompetence of the officials, Xie Jun is able to elicit not just anger, but a distinct feeling of sadness from the audience, who are left to wonder what might have been had there been less ignorance among the administrators.

These two films saliently elucidate the emotional legacy of the opium wars in Chinese popular culture. Clearly, discussion of the Opium Wars brings out complicated feelings for many Chinese. Disgust, anger, and sadness unite against the administrators of the Qing Empire, imperialism, capitalism, and most strongly of all, against the West. A history of the Chinese response to the Opium Wars must address

this xenophobia, which has become increasingly politicized since 1949. Perhaps due to her professional focus on the history of Modern China or even the vast transformation China has undergone since the publishing of Fay's book (not to mention Fairbank's), Lovell's work also does an excellent job of examining these modern ramifications of the Opium War. She quotes Humiliation and Resistance, a book which was born out of a "commemorative symposium" held during 1989, the hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the Opium War: "The Opium War...was the great event in China's modern history: not only the beginning of China's modern history of humiliation, but also the first glorious chapter of the Chinese people's struggle of resistance against foreign invasion."⁷³ Thus, Chinese politicians have recycled the Opium War into an accelerant with which they fuel the flame of Chinese nationalism. This is significant both because it shows how the events of the first Opium War are still relevant in China today and, more importantly, it represents a revision of Fairbank's hypothesis regarding incorporation of western rule through treaties. If this theory was ever correct, it seems it is no longer so, and that the same event that was thought to have been the introduction of imperialism to China is now being used to incite anti-imperialist fervor.

The year 1959, when Lin Zexu was released, was the tenth anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China. China was in the midst of a severe famine caused by the diversion of labor from agriculture to steel production during Mao's Great Leap Forward. If the Chinese people ever needed a movie that reminded them of the power of the proletariat, it was then. In Lin Zexu, there are

⁷³ Lovell, Julia, *The Opium War: Drugs, Dreams, and the Making of China*, 343.

numerous instances where the film is designed to serve this political purpose. Throughout the film, the boat people of Canton assume the role of the powerful proletariat. They capture Dent when he is trying to escape, hoist massive cannons up steep hills to defend Canton, and the film largely skips over the ineptitude of the Chinese army, which is the ultimate symbol of the power of the Chinese masses. By casting the proletariat as the hero of the film, Zhang Junli captures the strong feelings surrounding the events of the Opium Wars and directs them towards the Chinese political ends of 1959.

Released in 1997 just following the expiry of Britain's ownership of Hong Kong granted in the Treaty of Nanjing at the end of the Opium Wars, *The Opium War* is also highly politicized. The director's emphasis on the immorality of the western traders is especially topical, given Hong Kong's position as the gateway through which many foreign businesses enter China and thus as close to early-nineteenth century Canton as any city in the world today. By reminding the audience of the connection between the Opium War and Britain's control of Hong Kong, the film makes the return of Chinese control of the city a righting of the wrongs committed in the War and a triumph of Chinese nationalism. This highly successful politicization of the film indicates just how powerful and relevant to modern China these feelings are.

The above discussion of the role of the Hong merchants in *Lin Zexu* and *The Opium War* mentions how they have been villainized in popular Chinese accounts of the Opium War. In an article published in 2010 in the Social Sciences Edition of the *Journal of Wuyi University*, authors Wu Yanmin and Hong Wenjie, discuss the relationship between the Hong merchants and the Opium War. Before delving into

their argument, the authors note that, although there has been significant scholarship on the Opium Wars in general, very little of it has been focused on the Hong merchants themselves. In doing so, they highlight one important aspect of the history of the opium war that, when not neglected, has been handled with too little care and attention. This is very interesting, as one would expect that, given that the Hong merchants were at the epicenter of this conflict both geographically and economically, their role would have been carefully scrutinized. After a discussion of how the Qing government's goals for the Hong merchants, essentially to keep the foreign merchants at a distance, were directly in opposition to the goals of the foreign merchants themselves, who hoped to expand contact and trade in China, the authors conclude that, "were one to investigate the causes of the Opium Wars, one would find that the fault lies, to a large degree, upon the foreign trade system of the Qing dynasty, and specifically on the Hong system."⁷⁴ This is significant not only because it breaks from the majority of Chinese scholarship by suggesting that the conflict was due to systemic incompatibility, couching it within the standard Western interpretation rather than the Chinese, but also because it focuses on the role of the Hong merchants and the Canton system in bringing about the war. Further examination of the circumstances of the Hong merchants and the role they played in Canton merchant society reveals why they were such an important contributor to the escalation of war

The Hong merchants were uniquely situated within the Qing government structure. Like the East India Company administrators, they were expected to juggle

⁷⁴ Guo, Hua-Qing and Zhu, Xi-xue, "十三行贸易体制与鸦片战争的关系 (The Connection Between the Hong Merchants and the Opium War)," *五邑大学学报(社会科学版)* 12, no. 4 (November 2010): 49.

the roles of merchant and government official. Unlike most Qing officials, the Hong merchants secured their status not through success in the Civil Service examination system, but rather through buying the position. This was not unprecedented: Tan recalls the so-called “Perfume Governor,” a Sung dynasty official who, “manoeuvred in the imperial court with generous bribes of imported perfume which he had bought from foreign traders, and triumphantly reversed his dismissal from office into reinstatement and dramatic promotion to the governorship at Canton, (sic).”⁷⁵ Still, the fact that the Hong merchants bought their positions is a sign of the stark difference between the path taken by Hong merchants and other Qing officials. An examination of the early nineteenth century Hong merchants reveals that they shared many similarities with their Western merchant counterparts, perhaps more so than with other Chinese government officials.

There is little scholarship indeed on all of the Hong merchants save Howqua (1769-1843), the wealthiest of them. The task of assembling a biography is further complicated by the fact that the names by which the Hong merchants are known are not their given names, but rather names that indicated their title as the representative of a given firm. Once a position as a Hong merchant had been purchased, it could be passed down through the generations of a family. Thus there was, as long as the firm they represented remained in business, for example, a Howqua with whom the Canton merchants could do business. The Howqua who rose to prominence was from the Fukien province, a region famous for its tea to the Northeast of Canton. He inherited his business and his name from his father, who was the first Howqua.

⁷⁵ Tan, *China and the Brave New World*, 33.

Portraits of Howqua show him to have been a slender, bald man with a sharp nose, clothed in robes. Although most accounts of Howqua's business dealings mention his shrewdness—clearly he was a very successful businessman; his wealth at the time of his death was estimated at \$26 million, a number Lovell contextualizes, noting Howqua to be “ten times wealthier than Nathan Rothschild—just as prevalent are accounts of his generosity, especially in matters concerning his friends.⁷⁶ In *The “Fan-Kwae” in Canton*, Hunter, the partner in Russell & Co. who wrote at length about his time in China, recalls a significant debt owed by a “Mr. W,” a very successful American trader in Canton, who had a string a bad luck in his dealings, resulting in his owing Howqua \$72,000. Mr. W wanted to return to America but was unable to leave until this debt was settled. Howqua, knowing this debt was keeping Mr. W in Canton called him into a meeting. In this meeting, Howqua, using the pidgin English that became the region's lingua franca, forgave the debt: “You and I are No. 1, 'olo flen;' you belong honest man, only no got chance.’ He then tore the note up, and throwing the fragments into the waste-paper basket, added, 'Just now hav settee counter, alia finishee; you go, you please.’ That is to say, 'Our accounts are now all settled, you can leave when you like.’”⁷⁷ It is in such examples of Howqua's dealings with his foreign business partners and friends that one begins to sense possible similarities between the Western and Hong merchants. Upon Samuel Russell's final

⁷⁶ Chang, *Commissioner Lin and the Opium War*, 5.; Lovell, Julia, *The Opium War: Drugs, Dreams, and the Making of China*, 51.

⁷⁷ Hunter, *The “Fan Kwae” at Canton Before Treaty Days, 1825-1844*, 26–27. Mr. W, the “olo flen” (old friend) described in this passage is likely to have been Mr. Wetmore, Russell's early partner and the head of the President of the Canton Chamber of Commerce.

return to Middletown, Howqua penned him a letter providing closure on their years of business dealings:

I have heard of your withdrawal from your China connection with a good deal of regret, for your name is connected with the origin of the house and has been associated with it during the whole course of its existence. However, as you have a competent fortune there is no reason why you should not retire if you feel so disposed; and I can only add my congratulations on your success in life, and my sincere wish that you may live long to enjoy the fruit of your industry.⁷⁸

Howqua, and indeed, all of the successful Hong merchants, had grown wealthy with the Western merchants. Along the way, he had become close friends with a number of the prominent members of the Canton merchant community. This letter suggests more than just the respect Howqua held for Russell, it shows that he held Russell's accumulation of fortune to constitute success in life, a decidedly capitalist notion.

Howqua's prominence among the Hong merchants meant he was one of Lin's primary targets upon his arrival to Canton. Lovell mentions that Howqua tried to bribe Lin: "The richest of them all, Howqua, promptly tried to buy Lin's acquiescence. 'The Great Minister does not want your money', Lin told him. 'I want your head.'"⁷⁹ The incorruptible Lin recognized Howqua's position as a keystone of the Canton trade along with Dent, Jardine, and Matheson. When Lin issued his ultimatum regarding British opium, there was little doubt that Howqua, in comparison to the other Hong merchants, was in significant danger. Even following the British surrender of opium, Howqua would continue to play a central role in the

⁷⁸ Munkittrick, "Samuel Wadsworth Russell (1789-1862): A Study of Ordered Investment," 151–152.

⁷⁹ Xiao Zhizhi, *Yapian zhanzheng* (History of the Opium War) Fujian: Fujian renmin chubanshe, 1996), Volume 1, 194. quoted in Lovell, Julia, *The Opium War: Drugs, Dreams, and the Making of China*, 60.

events surrounding the Opium Wars; he would contribute over \$1 million to the indemnities paid after the war, some of which came in the form of endorsed debts owed to him by Jardine, Matheson, & Co. and Dent & Co.⁸⁰

Howqua would have a second chapter of his career following the abolition of the East India Company's monopoly in 1833 during which he would largely divorce himself from the business of a Hong merchant and focus on private international trade. After 1833, Howqua exclusively dealt with Russell & Co: "His yearly shipments to London of those celebrated Chops of Congo, grown on his family estates in the Woo-E country, were well known and appreciated in the English market. His transactions were on a very important scale, and he entrusted them to his Canton agents, through whom they were carried out, with the well merited confidence which they inspired."⁸¹ In this late stage in his career, it seems that Howqua decreased his dealings in opium and instead focused on the export of tea from his home province. The opium trade had made him a very wealthy man. He was able to use his fortune to engage in trade on his own behalf, even making large investments in American railroads.⁸²

The records about other Hong merchants almost universally corroborate the two salient points suggested by Howqua's history: first, that the Hong merchants were well ensconced in the Canton merchant society which held success in business, and the opportunities for upward mobility offered by this success, as their primary goal,

⁸⁰ Hunter, *The "Fan Kwae" at Canton Before Treaty Days, 1825-1844*, 28.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 30.

⁸² William Travis Hanes and Frank Sanello, *The Opium Wars : the Addiction of One Empire and the Corruption of Another* (Naperville, Ill.; Bath: Sourcebooks ; Manning Partnership [distributor], 2007), 42.

and second that the Hong merchants were at the epicenter of the growth of capitalism in China, and were the foremost beneficiaries of this growth.

A significant part of participating in the upper echelons of Canton merchant society was behaving as wealthy gentlemen, a role the Hong merchants assumed with great enthusiasm. They lived in lavish estates with many servants: “Their private residences, of which we visited several, were on a vast scale, comprising curiously laid-out gardens, with grottoes and lakes, crossed by carved stone bridges...The number of servants in these private ‘palaces,’ as they would be called elsewhere, was very great, comprising, with those ordinarily in attendance, doorkeepers, messengers, palankin bearers, and choice cooks.”⁸³ Ghosh, seems to be expanding on Hunter’s description of a banquet at the Hong merchant Punhyqua’s estate when he writes: “The banquet of that night was to be held in a pavilion with tall windows and a roof that had the profile of bird in flight. It overlooked a lotus pond that was illuminated by paper lanterns that glowed like dozens of little moons.”⁸⁴ Although Jardine’s reference to the “gentlemanly” nature of the opium trade referenced in the previous chapter is often taken ironically, the Chinese merchants, like their British counterparts, used the opium trade to assume the role of gentlemen capitalists.

Through the opium trade, both the Hong and British merchants were able to enjoy a social status that bordered on that of nobility even though they had no claims to the aristocracy other than wealth. While in England the merchants were gradually incorporated into the aristocracy, as in the case of Jardine and Matheson, in China there was more conflict in the interactions between the two groups. The Qing

⁸³ Hunter, *The “Fan Kwae” at Canton Before Treaty Days, 1825-1844*, 24.

government expected the Hong merchants to put their role as governors first, but the merchants, both because of their businesslike nature, as evidenced by the fact they were willing to buy their positions to take part in the Canton trade, and by the expectations put upon them by Canton merchant society, viewed their role as merchants as their primary one. Naturally, this led to a situation in Canton where the rulers in Beijing were able to exert only a modicum of control and trade grew unabated. By the time Lin arrived in Canton, the Hong merchants were only officials in the loosest sense, instead they functioned largely as trading counterparties with the Western merchants and as intermediaries between Western traders and diplomats and Chinese government officials.

Understanding the entrepreneurial role and culture of the Hong merchants fills in the piece that has been missing from the standard Chinese interpretation of the Opium Wars. It helps to explain how the opium trade grew so quickly in China and why the Qing government did not act in earnest until it was too late for Lin's attempt to cauterize the wounds dealt to China by the opium trade to have much effect. Understanding the system that was in place to regulate Western traders in China and why it failed also helps to explain the source of the painful emotional legacy of the Opium Wars in China; the careers of the Hong merchants served as a warning of the disastrous effects the further development of capitalism would have on Chinese society. Finally, the emotional legacy of the Opium Wars and the history of the Hong merchants, when viewed together, bolster Tan's argument regarding the centrality of opium in the conflict. Without opium, the Hong merchants would have had less

⁸⁴ Ghosh, *River of Smoke*, 268.

financial incentive to neglect the administrative component of their duties. Similarly, that so much of China became addicted to opium so easily, and the deleterious effects of this addiction, serve to amplify the embarrassment and anger that surrounds this issue today in China. In order to complete one's understanding of the role merchants and trade played in this conflict, one must turn to the enigmatic commodity of opium, the product around which the Opium Wars revolved.

4. Opium, Sugar, and Capitalism in Asia

As the previous two chapters have shown, although the British were by far the primary benefactors of the India-China opium trade, Indian and Chinese merchants were both able to utilize the opium trade to begin amassing capital. This is a part of a larger idea that is missed by most Western and Chinese scholarship on this period: that the opium trade birthed the practice of mass consumption in China and much of Southeast Asia, creating an fertile environment in which the roots of world capitalism took hold. Understanding the roles played by merchants uncovers this line of inquiry, as they were the agents involved first hand in bringing about this change.

Works that address the role of opium in the Opium War tend to separate the discussion of opium into two parts: a discussion of the economics of the silver flows that resulted from the opium trade and the moral issues of trading opium. The economic impact on Chinese silver holdings has been covered in the previous chapter. Arguments regarding the moral issues inherent to the opium trade generally center upon the destructive effects of the drug on addicts and on British awareness of these effects. This is typified in a scene in *Lin Zexu* where Lin gives some money to a street performer. The performer's husband quickly takes the money and runs to a nearby opium den, reclining on his hip and inhaling. The performer is left sobbing in front of Lin, who appears to be saddened by the state of his country.⁸⁵ Instead of focusing on these two threads, Carl Trocki, a professor of Asian Studies at the Queensland University of Technology, builds upon Tan's argument in his book *Opium, Empire*

and the Global Political Economy to shift the focus to the effects of opium's inherent qualities on the Chinese opium trade.

In *China and the Brave New World*, Tan suggests that, due to opium's addictive properties, the opium market in China was unsaturatable. Unlike the situation with other trade commodities, and even addictive substances like alcohol and tobacco, those who bought opium would forego other products to feed their addiction: "The peculiarity of opium consumption is the dominating influence of the drug in the addict's life. Even if one's purchasing power is limited, one's demand for opium can increase by decreasing one's consumption of other commodities, including food and clothing, and other living necessities."⁸⁶ Addicts would continue to purchase opium until they died or somehow were able to overcome their addiction, regardless of punishment. The large population and immense wealth of China must have been very attractive to the British. Due to the factors detailed above, opium use within this population was increasing quickly. With opium, the British now had a commodity where the demand for the good would increase to keep pace with increases in supply. Through the productive capacity of their Indian holdings, the British were able to produce massive amounts of opium. Thus began the ramping up of the British India-China opium trade, leading to the ruinous addiction of numerous Chinese. In describing this system, Tan draws an interesting parallel to modern day narcotics traffic: "China was a huge country. It had one-fourth of the world's population, and the largest social wealth among all countries (at least, before 1860). For similar reasons

⁸⁵ Zheng, *Lin Zexu*.

⁸⁶ Tan, *China and the Brave New World*, 150.

China was singled out as the ideal destination for shipping narcotics, as the U.S.A. is today.”⁸⁷

Trocki takes Tan’s argument’s one step further, exploring the systemic effects of opium’s unique nature. He suggests that opium belongs to a rarified category of commodity, whose members are powerful enough to significantly alter the economic and political fabric of the world. Along with opium, he suggests this category contains tobacco, alcohol, coffee, tea, and sugar.⁸⁸ Among these, opium is unique because of its highly addictive nature as discussed above. These properties led to opium becoming the first object of mass consumption in Asia, which in turn caused the development of capitalism in the region. Trocki pushes this line of reasoning even further, drawing conclusions about the role of drugs in Asia:

It is possible to suggest a hypothesis that mass consumption, as it exists in modern society, began with drug addiction...Something was necessary to prime the pump, as it were, to initiate the cycles of production, consumption and accumulation that we identify with capitalism. Opium was the catalyst of the consumer market, the money economy and even of capitalist production itself in nineteenth-century Asia.⁸⁹

This chapter describes the way in which opium was responsible for the development of the three characteristics of capitalism mentioned by Trocki: production, consumption, and accumulation. It will focus on consumption, as the connection between opium and the growth of mass consumption is strongest.

Contrasting the changing role of sugar in Britain with the growth of opium in China sheds some light on the effect opium had on accumulation and consumption.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 148.

⁸⁸ Carl A Trocki, *Opium, Empire and the Global Political Economy : a Study of the Asian Opium Trade* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 6.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 172.

Sidney Mintz offers an interesting examination of the history and effects of sugar in his book *Sweetness and Power*. He explains that in the decades following the introduction of sugar to Britain, it was almost exclusively used by elites. Until the eighteenth century, they primarily used it, “as a medicine, as a spice, or as a decorative.”⁹⁰ Although sugar had little effect on the national diet of Britain, through its use by the elites, it began to assume a cachet: the working class had taken note of sugar and it became a desirable symbol of social status.

Gradually, the process of sugar production modernized and, perhaps in response to the increasing demand that came with its cachet, the supply of sugar available to British consumers increased dramatically. Accordingly, while demand still outstripped supply, the price of the commodity began to decrease until it was increasingly within reach for those living on a worker’s budget. Workers were asked to labor for increasingly long hours on menial tasks in poor conditions. As much of the work was not specialized, there was immense competition to meet the demands of these jobs in order to avoid losing one’s job. Sugar, in combination with coffee and especially tea, two stimulant laden drinks that could help people work for longer hours and sleep fewer, became integral parts of the industrial revolution system. Ironically, tea became associated with the work break, even though its consumption was used to allow workers to continue working. Of course, the increase in tea consumption directly affected China, as it was primarily the British thirst for tea that the profits from the opium trade were used to quench.

⁹⁰ Sidney Wilfred Mintz, *Sweetness and Power: the Place of Sugar in Modern History* (New York; London: Sifton, 1985), 45.

The significance of sugar to the British elites transformed as it became increasingly available to the working class and accordingly lost much of its social cachet. It went from a novel luxury substance to an object of mass consumption. In reaction to this change, the elites changed how they interacted with the substance: while they still consumed it, likely in increasing amounts, they also began to profit from it: “In the eighteenth century, producing, shipping, refining, and taxing sugar became proportionately more effective sources of power for the powerful, since the sums of money involved were so much larger...later, making sugar available in ever-larger quantities to the poor became patriotic as well as profitable.”⁹¹ Once mass consumption of sugar was the norm, the elites, eager to take advantage of the money to be made off of the large and growing demand of the working classes, threw themselves into the business of sugar. Mintz summarizes the effects of sugar on Britain: “Over the course of less than two centuries, a nation most of whose citizens formerly subsisted almost exclusively on foods produced within its borders had become a prodigious consumer of imported goods.”⁹² Even though he is discussing the role of sugar in Britain, were one to remove “foods” from his statement it could just as easily apply to opium in China.

There are records of middling opium use in China centuries prior to the Opium War: however, it was only in the late-eighteenth century that its use began to proliferate. The growth of opium use in China mirrors the growth of sugar in Britain in a number of significant ways. Traditionally, the Chinese had ingested opium rather than smoking it, largely using it as a painkiller rather than as a recreational substance.

⁹¹ Ibid., 95.

This was also the main mode of opium use in Europe and the United States long after the popularization of opium smoking in Asia.⁹³ Trocki explains how Europeans helped to effect this transition: “particularly in Southeast Asia, the Dutch seem to have been the first to make it a ‘little’ luxury, rather than an exotic medicine...the most important element in this was the Dutch role in changing the manner in which opium was consumed. The Dutch seem to have been instrumental in bringing the habit of smoking opium to the Chinese.”⁹⁴ Opium smoking entered the Chinese social repertoire gradually. It was first smoked in Madak, or tobacco soaked in opium syrup. Tobacco was also a foreign import, introduced by Portuguese traders in the 1600s. Spence notes the original Portuguese plan for tobacco in China and why it failed: “Tobacco grew so luxuriantly in China that it rapidly became an important domestic cash crop, dashing the Portuguese hopes for developing an oriental outlet for their Brazilian tobacco.”⁹⁵ The adoption of tobacco smoking and the domestication of the production were so quick that they preempted the Portuguese plan. This would not be the case with opium. Searching for a stronger drug than Madak, people began smoking raw opium. While smoking raw opium was far stronger than Madak, it was much safer than ingesting opium; even though smoked opium enters the user’s system more quickly than when ingested, the efficacy of the method of delivery is lower, making overdose less likely.⁹⁶

⁹² Ibid., 151.

⁹³ Trocki, *Opium, Empire and the Global Political Economy*, 91.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 35.

⁹⁵ Spence et al., “Conflict and Control in Late Imperial China,” 147.

⁹⁶ Lovell, Julia, *The Opium War: Drugs, Dreams, and the Making of China*, 23.

The habit of opium smoking was quickly adopted by Chinese elites, who were attracted by both the social ritual and cachet of opium smoking and its analgesic properties. Lovell details some of the reasons Chinese elites took to opium smoking: “Smoking was sociable, skilled and steeped in connoisseurship (with its carved, bejeweled pipes of jade, ivory and tortoiseshell, its silver lamps for heating and tempering the drug, its beautiful red sandalwood couches on which consumers reclined).”⁹⁷ Opium use permeated many of the leisure-time activities of the wealthy including prostitution and dim-sum brunches, and came to be seen as an essential ritual of good hospitality.⁹⁸ Like with sugar use in Britain, opium smoking became a way for Chinese elites to signify their status and wealth: “A way of burning money, smoking was the perfect act of conspicuous consumption.”⁹⁹ It is easy to understand why upper-class Chinese men would be drawn to opium use, especially in a recreational fashion; those who failed in the civil service examination system were marginalized by society, it is little wonder many of them fell into opium addiction. Women were not exempt either: they too were marginalized in elite Chinese society, and as noted by Trocki, analgesic opium was likely common among upper class Chinese women as a remedy for the chronic pain from bound feet.¹⁰⁰ As recreational opium usage besieged the upper class, members of Chinese society’s lower stratum began to take notice. As opium became a symbol of social status, demand began to increase, and usage moved down the social ladder.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 22–23.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 23.

¹⁰⁰ Trocki, *Opium, Empire and the Global Political Economy*, 91.

As with the elites, members of the Chinese working class found many reasons to use opium. As a painkiller, smoking or eating opium reduced the agony of backbreaking labor. Furthermore, it reduced appetite, allowing the calorie deficient poor to forget their hunger temporarily. Most importantly, perhaps, smoking allowed poor Chinese to briefly escape from reality. As the British working class had adopted sugar and tea to address the demands from increasingly inhumane working conditions, so too did the Chinese working class turn to opium use. It is crucial to note, however, that opium did not mirror the productivity enhancing effects of tea and sugar. Instead, it decreased productivity and the overall health of the Chinese workforce. The Chinese poor were comparatively exempt from punishment for their opium use because the minimal they held in government limited the damage their opium use could do to Chinese society. Still, addiction would take a heavier toll on them than the elites: “for the poor, addiction was a serious health hazard...since scarce cash resources were put to opium rather than food purchases.”¹⁰¹ Highly addicted poor Chinese would replace meals with opium, using any money they had to buy more of the drug. Eventually, starvation would take their lives if the drug did not.

Through widespread tobacco use and existent trade networks, opium was able to quickly enter nearly every corner of the Chinese market. Years of medicinal use meant that the drug was familiar to Chinese consumers and had broken down many barriers to widespread use that the substance would have otherwise faced. After opium became a status symbol, its use proliferated among elites, many of whom were soon addicted. From there, it spread downward as prices decreased due to increasing

¹⁰¹ Spence et al., “Conflict and Control in Late Imperial China,” 146.

supply, just as sugar had in Britain. All that was left to the British merchants in charge of the East India Company was to recognize increasing Chinese demand, and to increase company production accordingly. This effort was incredibly successful, so successful in fact that in 1832, almost a decade before the first Opium War, a Manchu commander mentioned the effect opium use was having on the Chinese army: “Six thousand combat troops were sent [from Canton], but they were not used to the mountains; and many of the troops from all the coastal garrisons were opium smokers, and it was difficult to get any vigorous response from them.”¹⁰² Spence further argues that by the early-twentieth century, addiction had reached epidemic proportions owing to increases in both foreign opium imports and domestic production: “By 1902 one could find entire rural communities that were in desperate straits because addiction had become almost total.”¹⁰³

As with sugar, the growth of mass opium consumption was accompanied by a transformation in the role of Chinese elites. Once the Qing government began combating opium addiction in earnest, officials were much more likely to be punished for use than members of the working class. Peasant use, especially early in the eighteenth century, was seen as little cause for concern, as it had far less potential to negatively affect the nation’s trajectory. The elites were split into three constituencies: user-criminals, who had to fear severe punishment for their ongoing opium use; moralists, who were staunchly against opium and helped efforts to eradicate its use; and opium entrepreneurs, who took advantage of the opportunities that accompanied

¹⁰² Biography of Li hung-pin in *Ch’ing-shih lieh-chuan* [Biographies of the Ch’ing dynasty] (Taipei: Chug-hua shu-chü, 1962), 36, quoted in *ibid.*, 150.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 146.

the opium trade to enrich themselves. Lin Zexu and the Daoguang emperor fell within the moralist camp while the Hong merchants are the most prominent example of opium entrepreneurs.

Adding to this process, notes Trocki, was a developed economic trading infrastructure that was successfully used to distribute the drug inwards from the ports beginning in 1780.¹⁰⁴ Various opium entrepreneurs, who built upon the existent trade and mass-migration routes in China to develop this infrastructure, were the agents through which the opium trade caused accumulation of capital in Asia. So common were these entrepreneurs, notes Lovell, that even the civil service system, intended to instill Confucian morality among China's leaders, was involved in the distribution of opium:

From its southern point of entry, Canton's opium made its way to the northernmost edges of the empire: on the carrying poles of small-time peddlers and the backs of domesticated camels; in the caravans of Shanxi and Shaanxi merchants who shifted it into Xinjiang; in the luggage of candidates for the fiercely competitive metropolitan civil-service examinations in Beijing. Almost everywhere that subjects of the emperor traveled, they brought opium with them, if they had a bit of capital to spare.¹⁰⁵

A class of entrepreneurs developed around the vast profits of the opium trade. These entrepreneurs used capital accumulated from the opium trade to finance the further expansion of the trade. While the most successful of these entrepreneurs were the elite Hong merchants discussed in the previous chapter, as indicated above, the growth of opium entrepreneurs was not limited to the elites as was the case with sugar in Britain. The ubiquity of opium in nineteenth-century China is a testament to the degree to which this class developed.

¹⁰⁴ Trocki, *Opium, Empire and the Global Political Economy*, 92.

That the opium trade resulted in increased consumption in China is rather clear. Tan and Trocki's discussion of the unique properties of opium strongly suggest that opium is one of the commodities that best creates consumption. The similarities between opium in China and sugar in Britain further corroborate Trocki's assertion that opium was responsible for birthing mass-consumption in China. Sugar was one of the early objects of mass-consumption in Britain. That the opium trade in China was characterized by the commodity moving down the social ladder as it became more available and as its social status was cemented, along with the changes in the roles of elites caused by the trade, are indicative of the growth of capitalistic behavior. Production is the only one of Trocki's characteristics of capitalism left to address. In order to do so, one must first consider the changes opium caused in India, as domestic production did not reach a meaningful scale until after the Opium Wars.

India had the distinction of being both the largest of the British colonial holdings and the source of nearly all of the opium consumed in China. As such, it was the area most directly shaped by opium production. Trocki argues, "Opium seems to have supplied an irresistible incentive to produce, or at least to make others produce."¹⁰⁶ This was especially evident in India. When the British first began to express their colonial ambitions in India they ran into a problem: subsistence level farmers and crops other than opium poppies inhabited a significant portion of the land. In order to get over this hurdle, the government devised a series of laws and regulations that gradually moved production towards opium: "[The government] required that opium land should remain opium land, thus, if the cultivator did not

¹⁰⁵ Lovell, Julia, *The Opium War: Drugs, Dreams, and the Making of China*, 30.

wish to grow opium, he would often be forced off his land.”¹⁰⁷ Although there were certain growing pains to this policy—the shift between subsistence and non-subsistence crops was usually rapid, and many farmers did not have adequate food reserves to provide a buffer against poor weather conditions—still, this policy quickly changed the agricultural and political landscape in India. As a result, Indian farmers no longer could support themselves with what they had grown; they were forced to enter a trade economy. Thus, the East India Company stimulated capitalist production in India to provide for the India-China opium trade. After this there was no turning back. Opium production would increase, supplanting other, more traditionally traded commodities. By 1820, Chinese opium production was also in full swing, and serves as another example of the growth of production caused by the opium trade.

Finally, the discussion above can also be extrapolated to much of Southeast Asia as China was not alone in its involvement with foreign opium merchants. Trocki considers the choice that befell rulers of nearly every Southeast Asian country: when foreign merchants began to introduce capitalist market economy principals and the flow of exotic goods that followed them rulers could either choose to participate in the trade, upending their country’s traditional economic paradigm, or try to keep trade as distant as possible for as long as possible. In the case of Southeast Asia, both choices seem to have roughly the same results: “Virtually all of the countries of Southeast Asia that came under European domination or influence during the nineteenth century were required to accept the opium trade and at least to allow its legalization for

¹⁰⁶ Trocki, *Opium, Empire and the Global Political Economy*, 167.

consumption by Chinese immigrants so that a revenue could be collected.”¹⁰⁸ Burma, Siam, and Vietnam all followed paths similar to those pursued by the Chinese and in turn either lost sovereignty to western trading powers or were forced to sign a treaty analogous to the Treaty of Nanjing. The difference between these countries and China is largely one of scale, suggests Trocki: “even at the end of the nineteenth century, all of the countries of Southeast Asia combined never imported more than 20 percent of the output of Indian opium.”¹⁰⁹ He further states that this figure may even be misleadingly high as some of the opium that entered these countries likely continued on to the Chinese market. As discussed in previous chapters, a combination of factors made China a far more attractive market for opium and likely explains why the Chinese voice is the most prominent Asian voice in the history of the opium trade as well as the country where the growth of capitalism as a result of the opium trade is most evident.

Across Asia, the production, accumulation and consumption of opium created the requisite conditions for capitalism to take hold. Wherever opium went, these three followed. These conditions, the legacy of the opium trade, are often ignored or downplayed in comparison to the war itself, and yet it is this legacy, not the war, that, in catalyzing the growth of colonial capitalism, has had the largest effect on Asia. The merchants involved in the opium trade aligned themselves with this growth, and in doing so were able to amass vast fortunes and play a transformative role in the history of China. As the early harbingers of capitalism in Asia, these merchants faced a rocky

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 66.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 89.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 90.

road, which their association with opium did nothing to help. However, it was ultimately the unique properties of opium that endowed those who traded in it with so much power. This power was strong enough to bring war to the region in a series of events that remain relevant today, over a century and a half after its conclusion.

5. Conclusion

In the preface of *The Opium War*, Julia Lovell describes an incident that perfectly elucidates the continued relevance of the events of the Opium Wars. She describes how, on November 8th, 2010 British Prime Minister David Cameron embarked on an embassy to China with the intention of formalizing business relations between the two countries. On the second day of the visit, however, a strange conflict occurred that was directly related the events of 1839 to 1842. The British officials were all wearing red Remembrance Day poppies on their lapels to commemorate the fallen soldiers of the First World War. Although the Remembrance Day poppies are not the type of poppies used to make opium, a Chinese official allegedly asked the British officials to remove the poppies from their jackets and, in doing so, ignited controversy in the two countries. Apparently, for the Chinese official, the combination of Britain, business, and poppies was too evocative of the civilizational humiliation the Chinese had faced at the hands of the British. Lovell quotes Chinese ‘netizens,’ who supported the Chinese official’s action: “Whose face is the English prime minister slapping, when he insists so loftily on wearing his poppy?”¹¹⁰ British citizens, in turn, urged their politicians to hold onto their principles. As this incident demonstrates, especially in China, the Opium Wars have not been forgotten. Although both Western and Chinese scholars have generally agreed that the Opium Wars

¹¹⁰ Lovell, Julia, *The Opium War: Drugs, Dreams, and the Making of China* (Gardners Books, 2011), viii.

inaugurated the era of Modern China, there is little else regarding the wars on which the two sides see eye-to-eye.

My thesis suggests that the role of merchants, Chinese, British, and other ethnicities has been underemphasized in nearly every account of the Opium Wars. An examination of the significant roles played in the conflict by prominent merchants refutes the standard Western view of the Opium Wars as a “clash of civilizations,” instead finding the standard Chinese focus on the importance of opium to be more convincing. This perspective suggests that the opium trade was responsible for creating capitalism in Asia and that the structure of the opium trade and the unique nature of opium have had a far greater effect on Asia than has the Opium War itself. There are a number of interesting implications that follow from this suggestion. Here I will separate them into the political and economic spheres.

The second chapter explains how the Opium Wars have been used in modern Chinese politics to invoke feelings of anti-western nationalism. There is confusion about the political future of China: Lovell argues, “China in the third millennium possesses (as it did in the nineteenth century) about as many reasons to fall apart as it does to stick together ... There is general agreement that the country has grown extraordinarily, and with relative ease, over the past three decades. Consensus on what will come next is non-existent.”¹¹¹ Thus, the future politicization of the events of the Opium Wars is hard to predict. Given that *The Opium Wars* was released just fifteen years ago suggests that within the quiver of Chinese mass political communication, the Opium Wars are still a prominent weapon. If the government of

¹¹¹ Ibid., 359.

the People's Republic of China seeks to maintain its tight hold over its population, a hold which has gradually decreased since 1949, the ability to generate strong feelings of nationalism will no doubt be in high demand. Hopefully, this will not come at too high a cost in terms of China's relations with the West.

The argument of this thesis calls for a reconsideration of the economic legacy of the Opium Wars. In the years following the ratification of the Treaty of Nanjing, the opium trade grew exponentially. Spence estimates that at the turn of the twentieth century, Chinese domestic agricultural trade figures were as follows: "rice, 100 million taels; salt, 100 million taels; opium 130 million taels. Undeniably, opium was being smoked in China on a gigantic scale."¹¹² Amazingly these figures were just domestic production. Internationally, non-European traders largely took control of the opium trade. By 1871, the Sassoon family "[was] acknowledged to hold 70 percent of the total of all kinds of opium both in India and China. It was the end of the opium trade for Jardine Matheson."¹¹³ One need not, however, fear for the economic health of the British Empire or the premier Western opium trading firms; many of the prominent non-European traders eventually were able to enter British society. Of these, the Sassoons were the most prominent example. Thus, the British government was able to continue to profit off of their trade through taxes. The large Western trading firms used their significant capital and influence to enter into lines of trade other than opium in the cities newly opened by the Treaty of Nanjing, a business some of them

¹¹² S.A.M. Adshead, *The Modernization of the Chinese Salt Administration, 1900-1920* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970), p.13, quoted in Spence et al., "Conflict and Control in Late Imperial China," in *Opium Smoking in Ch'ing China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975), 154.

¹¹³ Trocki, *Opium, Empire and the Global Political Economy*, 114.

are still in today. For example, Jardine, Matheson, & Co.'s website reads: "Founded as a trading company in China in 1832, Jardine Matheson is today a diversified business group focused principally on Asia."¹¹⁴ The website offers a brief history of the firm, which does not mention the opium trade.

Outside of the opium trade, China has also undergone a significant economic transformation characterized first by a descent into extreme poverty before and during the early years of the People's Republic of China, and later by an amazing period of economic growth and relative prosperity following the institution of Deng Xiaoping's Reform and Opening policy in 1978. A resurgence of Chinese capitalism has accompanied this recent growth, which brings to mind some interesting lines of questioning regarding this thesis. Perhaps further study of the effects of the opium trade on mass-consumption and capitalism in China would reveal the opium trade to not merely be a source of national humiliation, but also the seed of China's recent economic success.

Finally, two further lines of research exist which, though unfortunately beyond the purview of this thesis, would contribute significantly to the state of this field. The first is an examination of the Asian heroin trade. As heroin is a derivative of opium that has been produced and traded from the epicenter of the opium trade, an exploration of the political and economic effects of the heroin trade could help further establish the manner in which the drug trade and addiction have shaped Asian capitalism. The second line of exploration, suggested by political economist Giovanni Arrighi in his book *Adam Smith in Beijing: Lineages of the Twenty-First Century*, is

¹¹⁴ "Home | Jardines", n.d., <http://www.jardines.com/>.

an examination of Asian human labor trafficking in the early-twentieth century: “The greatest opportunities arose in the ‘coolie trade’—in the procurement and transshipment overseas of indentured labor and in the financial transactions associated with remittances back to China. The coolie trade made the fortunes, not just of individual merchants, but of the port-cities of Singapore, Hong Kong, Penang, and Macao.”¹¹⁵ Arrighi suggests that the “coolie trade,” perhaps a trade even more morally objectionable than the opium trade, was its economic descendant, in that it provided opportunities for budding capitalist entrepreneurs to realize immense profits. A consideration of how the families of the Hong merchants or other early Chinese merchant elites were involved in this trade would no doubt be illuminating.

¹¹⁵ Giovanni Arrighi, *Adam Smith in Beijing: Lineages of the Twenty-first Century* (London; New York: Verso, 2007), 337.

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