[The First Opium War 1839-1842 (Is it good or bad?)](http://blogs.saschina.org/pudongtok/2011/03/11/the-first-opium-war-1839-1842/)

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As a born-and-raise Hong Kong-er (if you can even phrase it that way) I was well aware how the city was first cut away from China after the First Opium War.  I grew up hearing stories from teachers, parents and relatives about how we were cheated and wrongfully stolen from our motherland.  They would say that it was the British’s fault for luring us with opium.  Clearly it is a topic people felt strongly about.

Since 1820, Great Britain had been exporting opium from India into Qing Dynasty China.  This had a profoundly negative affect on Chinese society because so many people became addicted to the drug.  The economy was bruised and corruption became an increasingly serious issue ([Hooker](http://www.wsu.edu:8080/~dee/CHING/OPIUM.HTM)).

Tensions skyrocketed between China and Great Britain when Lin ZeXu, an official during the period started a radical campaign against opium.  He closed down all trades in opium and destroyed all existing stores of opium in the country at the time.  He even went as far as to write a letter to Queen Victoria herself, demanding her to cease all opium trafficking ([The Opium Wars and the opening of China](http://historyliterature.homestead.com/files/extended.html)).

Failing to reach an agreement, the two countries declared war on each other in 1840.  Much less technologically developed than Great Britain, China was easily defeated.  After the war, the Treaty of Nanjing was created to ensure Great Britain’s position in trade with China.  Hong Kong was also lost to the British in the process ([Hooker](http://www.wsu.edu:8080/~dee/CHING/OPIUM.HTM)).

Coming from the Chinese point of view, my interpretation of the event becomes heavily influenced by the emotions of frustration and shame.  The actions of the British were hard to justify.  First they introduce to us an addictive drug and exploit us financially.  They then take territory and continue exploiting.  It was also not faire that the English had much better weapons.

However if one examines the issue from a different angle, there may be an alternative explanation.  Before the war, China had reached a plateau where there wasn’t much innovation.  The country, while self sufficient, was very isolated.  Meanwhile countries in Europe were quickly rising to power with technological and economic development.  The war, as humiliating as it was, forced China to finally open its doors to international trade (The Opium War and the Opening of China).

There is no dispute that the defeat of the Chinese in this war is one of the saddest moments of Chinese history.  I do not believe what the British did was ethical, however I also acknowledge that the war may have its own positive effect on China’s status as a world nation.

[](http://www.portcities.org.uk/london/server/show/conMediaFile.6440/Destroying-Chinese-war-junks-by-E-Duncan.html)

This is a picture of an HEIC Nemesis destroying Chinese war junks at sea during the war.

Sources

Hooker, Richard. “Ch’ing China: The Opium Wars.” *Washington State University – Pullman, Washington*. 1996. Web. 10 Mar. 2011. <<http://www.wsu.edu:8080/~dee/CHING/OPIUM.HTM>>.

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“The Opium War and the Opening of China.” *HistoryLiterature*. Web. 11 Mar. 2011. <<http://historyliterature.homestead.com/files/extended.html>>.

Images

Duncan, E. *Destroying Chinese War Junks*. 1843. Naitonal Maritime Museum, London. *PortCities UK*. Web. 11 Mar. 2011. <<http://www.portcities.org.uk/london/server/show/conMediaFile.6440/Destroying-Chinese-war-junks-by-E-Duncan.html>>.