

Asian-Americans—An Interpretive History
By Sucheng Chan

Great Britain led the Western powers in “opening” China to trade and Christian proselytizing. Initially, the trade balance between Britain and China was in the latter’s favor. The chief item that the British purchased was tea, but the amount they bought far exceeded in value the woolens and other merchandise they offered the Chinese, who demanded payment in silver bullion. In an attempt to reverse the trade balance, the British imported increasing amounts of opium into China. As more and more Chinese became addicts, the balance of trade reversed. To pay for the rising volume of opium imports, silver started flowing out of China into British coffers. In the late 1830s, to curb the influx of this drug—grown in India, by then the “crown jewel of the British Empire”—Lin Zexu (Lin Tse-hsü), a Chinese official, confiscated and destroyed thousands of chests of opium stored in the English merchants’ warehouses in Canton. To avenge England’s honor, London sent a naval squadron to China. The war that ensued is known as the first Opium War (1839–42), which China lost.

The Treaty of Nanjing (Nanking), which ended the war, forced the Chinese to open five ports to foreign commerce, abolish the cohong system, sharply limit the amount of customs duty they could charge, pay an indemnity of 21 million silver dollars, cede the island of Hong Kong to Great Britain, allow Christian missionaries to preach in various localities, get rid of certain diplomatic protocol that had irked the Europeans, and most damaging of all, grant not only Great Britain, but also its allies, extraterritoriality, which made Westerners immune to Chinese law.

These terms affected the common people adversely. Porters and dockhands lost their jobs as Canton lost its trade monopoly. Cottage industries, unable to compete against the imported factory-manufactured piece goods, declined, depriving many peasant households of an important source of supplementary income. Taxes soared as the government tried to raise sufficient funds to pay the indemnity. And as opium continued to pour into the country, the number of addicts multiplied.

To make matters worse, the Treaty of Tianjin (Tientsin), which ended the Anglo-Chinese war (1856-60), wrung further concessions from China. The conflict had begun after Chinese soldiers arrested some pirates on a Chinese-owned boat that flew the British flag and had an English captain. The alleged affront to Britain’s honor provided England with a pretext to attack China. The war was fought in two phases, with French troops joining the English ones during the latter. When the Chinese lost this war also, they had to open more ports to trade, legalize opium, pay an additional indemnity, cede Jiulong (Kowloon)—territory on the Chinese mainland opposite Hong Kong—to Britain, and allow missionaries to proselytize in the interior of China. Moreover, English and French soldiers occupied Canton between 1858 and 1861. Their presence made it far easier for labor recruiters to lure peasant boys aboard foreign ships, thus circumventing the central government’s ban on emigration.