

Opium Trade Debate

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Note: This unit grew out of a World History workshop attended by my colleague and co-editor, Tony Snyder, Brookdale Community College, and Kevin Reilly, Raritan Community College. It has been modified by Tony and me over the years.

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Student Readings:

- Looking at China
- Becoming “Chinese”
- Qianlong’s Letter to George III
- Treaties of Nanjing and Wang-hea
- The Morality of the Opium Trade: An American Merchant in Canton and A British Merchant’s Answer
- Commissioner Lin’s Letter
- The “Self-Strengthening” Movement in China, 1898
- Lord Palmerston

Sample Worksheet for Student Debate

1. Themes and Goals

Through an examination of the 19th-century England-China opium trade, this unit introduces students to the encounters between China and the West as China and England sought to resolve a range of issues relating to trade, diplomatic relationships, and intercultural communication. By assigning students a particular side in the dispute over the opium trade,

the exercise will encourage them to speak from another’s perspective, enhance critical thinking skills, and be active participants in class discussions.

The unit addresses themes including the nature of imperialism and its impact on China and the conflict between Chinese and English conceptions of trade, morality, diplomatic relations, political systems, legal customs, and the rights of the individual. The unit can also be used to explore the connections between the historical conflicts over the drug trade and other cultural issues and contemporary examples involving globalization, legal and diplomatic rights, human rights, and cultural encounters.

2. Audience and Uses

This unit can be used in secondary school and undergraduate classes, both in class and in online teaching in the following disciplines:

- World History
- Political Science
- Asian History
- International Relations
- Economics

3. Student Readings and Films

The following readings are taken from a variety of primary and secondary sources. They can be found compiled in print in:

Readings in Global History, Vol. II, Revised 2nd Edition. Edited by Anthony SNYDER and Sherri WEST. Dubuque, IA: Kendall-Hunt, 1997. Pages 149-188. The readings are presented here by permission of Kendall-Hunt.

The readings are divided into three sections: A) Secondary Resources and Historical Background, B) “Pro-China”/Chinese Point of View, and C) “Pro-West”/Western Point of View. See the classroom activity section below for further instructions on selecting readings. Films are listed in section D.

A. Historical Background

- Looking at China
Brief summary of an English view of dynastic China.
- Becoming “Chinese”
Highlights the differences between Chinese and Western culture.
- Qianlong’s Letter to George III (Full text of the letter is also available online at <http://academic.brooklyn.cuny.edu/core9/phalsall/texts/qianlong.html>.)

The translated text of two letters sent from Emperor Qianlong to the King of England, written before the onset of the Opium Wars

- Treaties of Nanjing and Wang-hea
Excerpts from two treaties signed following the Opium Wars. The treaties are extremely favorable to the Western parties and detrimental to Chinese sovereignty.

B. “Pro-China” / Chinese point of view

- Qianlong’s Letter to George III
The translated text of two letters sent from Emperor Qianlong to the King of England, written before the onset of the Opium Wars.
- The Morality of the Opium Trade: A British Merchant’s Answer
The British merchant points to the hypocrisy of allowing opium to be traded in China while it is illegal to do so in Europe and deplores the poisonous effects of opium smoking on Chinese society.
- Commissioner Lin’s Letter
A letter written to Queen Victoria by Chinese customs inspector LIN Zexu urging the Queen to end the opium trade.
- The “Self-Strengthening” Movement in China, 1898
A memorial written to the emperor advocating change and reform in the wake of numerous military defeats abroad and societal uprisings at home.

C. Pro West / Western point of view

- Looking at China
Brief summary of an English view of dynastic China.
- Becoming “Chinese”
Highlights the differences between Chinese and Western culture.
- The Morality of the Opium Trade: An American Merchant in Canton
The American account is favorable to the opium trade, stating that opium has no ill effect on its users.
- Lord Palmerston
A brief letter written in 1841 by the British Foreign Secretary to the British envoy in China urging the envoy to convince Chinese officials to legalize the sale of opium.

D. Suggested Videos for use if Time Permits

Dealing with the Demon Directed by Chris HILTON and David ROBERTS. 165 minutes. VHS. Available for rental (\$150) and sale (\$385) through First Run Icarus Films in New York City (http://www.frif.com/new97/dealing_w.html)

There is a 10 minute clip from Episode 1 (“The Seeds of War”) that works well as a complement to readings and lecture. The clip provides general background and explains the nature of the opium trade in a short, visual segment. The segment is about 15 minutes into the program, just after a segment on Afghanistan and American heroin users. Begin the segment when you see a black and white opium poppy, which is part of a propaganda film. This segment is followed by a brief history of opium, opium in China, its “industrial” production in India, the triangular trade that developed, and a brief discussion of the Opium Wars. Stop the film after the narrators discuss the irony that today’s smuggling trade is a reverse of that of the 19th Century.

“China: The Mandate of Heaven,” Video 3 in the 6-part Series *Legacy: The Origins of Civilization*. Producer: Central Television. 60 minutes. VHS. Available for purchase (\$99.95) through Ambrose Video (<http://www.ambrosevideo.com/displayitem.cfm?vid=293>). Note: This video series may be difficult to find, as it does not appear to be in the holdings of many university and public libraries.

A 10-minute clip of this program works well to highlight China’s dominant role up to the Opium War, beginning with their role in the Indian Ocean during the Ming. It also briefly covers some of the basic aspects of Chinese culture. The narrator, historian Michael WOODS, comments that the Chinese placed a premium on an orderly, cultured life and argues that this led to important technological and cultural developments that made China the envy of its neighbors. This clip can also be used to open a discussion of China in 1800. Ask students how Woods characterizes China and how this brief episode compares with their readings.

5. Classroom Activity

This assignment can be completed in two split classes (80 min. periods each) or can be spread over one week (5 sessions.) If it is necessary to cover this in one three hour class, provide students with sufficient background in a prior class, and give them time to read and prepare the written worksheet before the three-hour class.

A. Student Readings and Background Lecture (1-1 ½ hours)

Assign students background readings on China during the Ming or Qing from your textbook, from section A of the Student Readings above, and/or from section A of Instructor Resources and Further Reading below.

In lecture, provide a brief overview of China’s history since 1500, focusing on the wealth of the Qing dynasty, China’s role in the global economy, the Chinese government attitudes towards trade, government, diplomacy, and Chinese philosophical beliefs.

Background videos: If you have time, show the recommended short segment from the “Legacy” series. Explain the Chinese view of trade by focusing on trade at the port of Canton. This could be followed by the recommended 10-minute clip from *Dealing with the Demon*.

Assign students a role— Chinese or English—for a debate to take place in the next class (if this is a secondary school setting, have students work on their assignment for several days, with the debate scheduled to extend over 2 classes at the end of the week). For a class of 30, you can break the class into six groups of five students each, so that all can participate actively within their group. You can also assign specific roles within each category. For example, have students take the role of a Chinese or English merchant, official, diplomat, missionary, or average person, and ask students to speak from that particular view in the debate. Most of the assigned readings provide specifics to enable students to do this, with the possible exception of the missionary and the ordinary person, but the supplementary readings have primary reading selections from which to choose.

B. Preparation for Student Debate

Assign students a point of view in the opium dispute — Chinese (see section B of Student Readings) or English (see section C of Student Readings). Provide students with a “worksheet” that includes the following questions. Ask them to answer the questions from their assigned perspective, using the assigned readings. Answers should be recorded on the student worksheet. An adequate written answer to each question is a paragraph or two. (See below for a sample student response.) Encourage students to be detailed in their written responses so they can speak from their worksheets during the debate. The questions will not be covered systematically during the debate; instead the worksheet will serve as a reference for students.

If you are grading each student for this assignment, you can ask students to make a copy of their worksheet and collect them at the beginning of the class. You can also assign a group grade based on their collective work during the debate. If the class is very large, you can also create a group of judges — the judges can discuss the worksheet questions as the “Chinese” and “British” are meeting and then pass judgment on the merits of each side’s arguments.

Questions for Student Worksheet:

1. What are the best arguments for your side in the Opium Trade? Explain each briefly. You may want to add brief quotes from the readings that capture the essence of the argument.
2. What ideals and values does your country promote that will be affected by the tensions that presently exist? Briefly describe and be prepared to defend your views in the class debate.
3. What is the best argument for the other side and what do you think is their hidden agenda or real motives?

4. What similarities and differences do you see between the drug war in China in the 19th century and ours today?

C. Student Debate in Class or Online

Divide students into groups of 4-6, depending on the size of the class. Give them 15-20 minutes to discuss their findings with the goal of selecting the five best arguments for their side, along with the reasons for their choice(s).

Group Presentations. 15 minutes. Select one group to begin. Give each group approximately five minutes to present the arguments for their side. List the arguments for each side on the board. Depending on the size of the group, it is possible to incorporate questions and a group discussion into these presentations. It often becomes chaotic, but is more spontaneous and generates more excitement. Try it both ways.

Discussion/Debate. 30 minutes. Students can ask questions and debate/rebut any point listed on the board. What usually follows is a spirited discussion where even the most reticent students become involved. The instructor acts as recorder and moderator, though a student could also do this.

Summary/Debriefing. 15-20 minutes. With the remaining time, cover the outcome of the first Opium War by examining the terms of the Treaties of Nanjing and Wang-Hea and explain Chinese reactions to the War by looking at reform and rebellion. Throughout the debriefing discussion, introduce references to today's war against drugs (the last worksheet question) or other contemporary issues to enliven debate.

D. Student example

The following is a sample of particularly good student responses to question one.

1. What are the best arguments for your side in the Opium Trade? Explain each briefly. You may want to add brief quotes from the readings that capture the essence of the argument.

Student Example: English Perspective

The Hong merchants are clearly negligent with regards to "free trade," the very basis of which our great nation has flourished and expanded. They regard our tributary gifts as mere toys, with absolutely no concept of the level of mathematics, science, and precise craftsmanship needed to produce such finery. Yet they have the audacity to call us "barbarians." Our technology is superior, our weaponry is superior and our knowledge of the world is superior. Then how can they call us barbarians? Particularly when we know that the white race is superior. Quote from the reading, #40: "The Hong merchants are extortionate in their demands for tariffs on our cotton, and various excise tax on goods we buy. Since they have a monopoly on all trade with China, there is no way to lower their prices through increased competition.

Student Example: Chinese Perspective

The opium trade is something that is very hazardous to our country and needs to be put to an end. His Majesty the Emperor is furious about the situation at hand. He has decided that no more opium will be allowed to enter our country. The barbarians that bring it over to China are seducing our people and poisoning them with it. "Such persons who only care to profit themselves, and disregard their harm to others, are not tolerated by the laws of Heaven and are unanimously hated by human beings." There is not one export that China distributes to other countries that are harmful. All are beneficial. Why should we continue to trade with them if they are doing nothing but hurting our country? We can get along fine without trading with your barbarians, but will they survive without our trade?

5. Instructor Resources and Further Reading

A. Historical Overviews

The Opium War and Foreign Encroachment

Asia For Educators, Columbia University <http://afe.easia.columbia.edu> (Select Economy and Trade > China > Teaching Units > The Opium War and Foreign Encroachment)

See the short background reading by the East Asian Curriculum Project of Columbia University. This teaching unit also includes two primary sources and discussion questions.

DE BARY, Wm. Theodore, Richard LUFFRANO. *Sources of Chinese Tradition*. 2nd ed. Vol. 2. New York: Columbia University Press, 2000.

The section titled "The Western Intrusion Into China" (Pages 199-205) gives a brief but detailed history of events leading up to the Opium War. At the end of this section, the authors remark that "we shall concern ourselves less with the merits of the issues over which the war eventually broken out than with the Chinese understanding of them and the effect on Chinese thinking of the events that followed" (200). Several primary documents follow, including LIN Zexu's "Letter to the English Ruler."

SCHIROKAUER, Conrad. *A Brief History of Chinese Civilization*. Harcourt Brace: New York: Harcourt Brace, 1990.

"The Intrusion of the West" is the first section in Part IV "China in the Modern World" (pages 253-264) This section provides a good historical overview of the events leading up to the Opium War, with details about the opium trade, the war, and the resulting treaties imposed on China by the West.

SCHOPPA, R. Keith. *The Columbia Guide to Modern Chinese History*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2000.

Pages 13-21 (“The Faces of Western Imperialism”) offer a good narrative historical overview of the events surrounding the Opium War and China in the aftermath. This selection includes three sections: “Evolution of the Canton System,” “The Opium Problem,” and “The Unequal Treaty System.”

B. Supplementary Resources

Internet East Asia History Sourcebook

<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/eastasia/eastasiasbook.html>

The section titled “China’s Disaster: 1840-1949” contains links to images and primary documents related to the Opium War.

BAUMLER, Alan, ed. *Modern China and Opium: A Reader* Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001.

A great volume of primary sources, though many cover the period after the events in the exercise. The Introduction and Reading #1 are good for background and for a discussion of the Qing government’s debates over the legalization of opium. Readings #3 and #4 are good examples of the cultural attitudes of Westerners.

BOOTH, Martin. *Opium: A History*. New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1998.

Chapter 7 and part of Chapter 8 (pp. 103-149) deal with the 19th century trade in opium and the conflicts that resulted, along with the impact on the Chinese people and government. The rest of the book contains interesting details about opium around the world both in historical and recent times.

BROOK, Timothy, Bob Tadashi WAKABAYASHI, eds. *Opium Regimes: China, Britain, and Japan, 1839-1952*. University of California Press, 2000.

This work focuses on the opium trade from a variety of perspectives (“The International Context,” “Distribution and Consumption,” “Control and Resistance,” “Crisis and Resolution”), and includes its impact on the region, not just China. The introduction, “Opium’s History in China,” is a good background reading for students as well as instructors.

FAIRBANK, John King. *The Great Chinese Revolution: 1800-1985*, New York: Harper Collins, 1987.

The section titled “Traditional China at Its Peak: Achievements and Problems” offers background on some key developments in China, including its role in trade, role in East and Southeast Asia, and in its relationships with the West.

Empires in Collision: The Genius That Was China. [Film] Production of Film Australia in association with WGBH, Boston for NOVA Publisher. Northbrook, IL : Coronet Film & Video, 1990. 58 min. Producer & writer, John MERSON; producer & director, David ROBERTS, Narrated by Richard KILEY.

Comparing Europe with China, this film traces the development of each from the 15th to the 18th centuries. NOVA’s synopsis of the film states that the video “examines the extraordinary transformation that propelled Europe outward into the world from the 15th to 18th centuries, while China remained the insular middle kingdom.” Even though this is a biased description and the video itself is rather slow and lumbering, it does provide good background for instructors. The instructor should carefully edit before using the video the video in the classroom.

PERDUE, Peter. “China in the Early Modern World: Short Cuts, Myths, and Realities.” *Education About Asia* 4, no. 1 (1999): 21-26

Providing demographic, legal, and economic statistics, the author provides a corrective comparative explanation that argues against a “traditionalist” China and a “modernist” West. Assign this reading to students in order to provoke them to think about 19th Century China in new ways.

ROWE, William T. “*China and the World, 1500-1800.*” In *Asia in Western and World History: A Curriculum Guide*, edited by Ainslee T. EMBREE and Carol GLUCK, 466-473. New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1997.

There are several articles in this helpful volume that provide background to instructors on a variety of historical topics in Asian history. Here Rowe presents a brief picture of the Chinese economy and society in comparative perspective that helps to paint a fuller picture of developments leading up to the dispute with the West. The next article in this volume by Madeleine ZELIN, “China’s Economy in Comparative Perspective, 1500 Onward,” (pp. 474-493) is a more detailed addition for instructors who seek background on changes taking place in China. Zelin places these changes in comparative perspective with developments in Japan. (Two additional readings in this volume, “State and Society During the Qing Dynasty, 1644-1911, by Myron L. COHEN, (pp. 523-560), and “Modern China, 1840-1990,” both highlight this period and later developments in Chinese history.)

WATT, John. "Qianlong Meets Macartney: Collision of Two World Views." *Education About Asia* 5, no. 3 (2000): 6-18. (<http://www.aasianst.org/EAA/watt.htm>).

This article is a teaching unit that presents background in the form of a play about the confrontation between the Chinese and the English prior to the Opium Wars. I have assigned this to students when I have had them adopt specific roles in the debate, described in detail above.

Historical Research on Drug Policy 1800-1850, Schaffer Library of Drug Policy.
<http://www.druglibrary.org/schaffer/history/1800.htm>

This section of the Schaffer Library of Drug Policy's website provides a timeline of opium events in China along with primary documents on opium addiction. The homepage of the website has information on drug policy today, and would be helpful if the focus of the lesson is to compare past and present drug use and policy. Note: Instructors and students should be aware that the materials on this site are biased, as the Schaffer Library is active in promoting drug law reform.