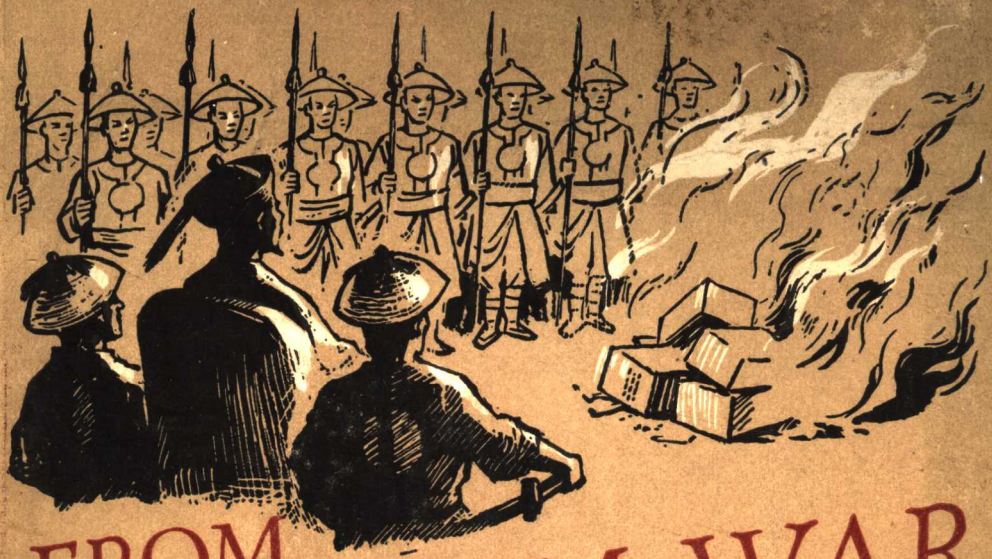
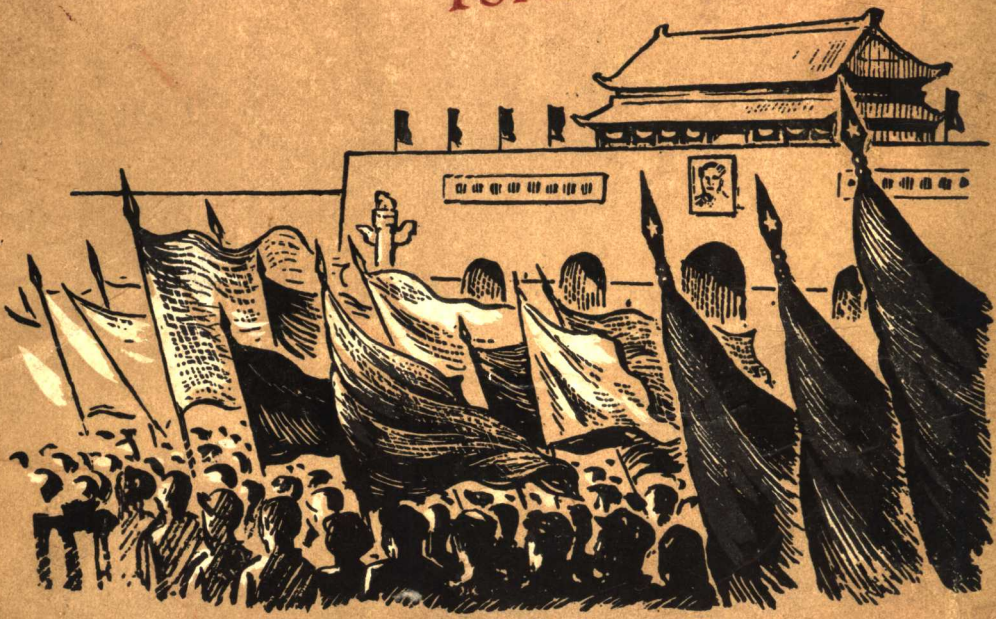


FROM OPIUM WAR TO LIBERATION

Israel Epstein



FROM OPIUM WAR TO LIBERATION

ISRAEL EPSTEIN

NEW WORLD PRESS
PEKING

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I

OLD CHINA

The Chinese state, and Chinese civilization, have existed for thousands of years. In the course of their long history, the Chinese people produced some of the world's greatest statesmen, philosophers, poets and military strategists. They were one of the first nations to advance material culture to a very high level. Their inventions included paper, silk, gunpowder, porcelain, printing, the seismoscope for detecting earthquakes, the maritime compass, and probably the rudder in navigation. Medieval travellers like Marco Polo praised their achievements as far beyond those of contemporary Europe. They also described such evidences of advanced economic organization—then unknown elsewhere—as the use of paper currency. All visitors up to the end of the eighteenth century spoke of China in the same admiring tone.

But China was socially stagnant. For some 2,500 years she remained under the rule of feudal landlords. Among the reasons that this lasted such a long time were the following:

The peasants produced not only grain but most of the handicraft articles they used;

Commodities did not circulate on a sufficient scale;

The huge rents collected by the landlords were mainly consumed directly; there was no significant investment in production or trade;

The centralized state, with the emperor at its head, took form very early as an instrument of landlord power on a countrywide scale. The royal power was not maintained and developed by an alliance of the monarch and the city merchants, as was the case in some European countries.

A commercial class appeared early but never rose to a decisive role in the economy, or acquired corresponding political status. It is true that the first emperor, Chin Shih Huang (221-209 B.C.) builder of the Great Wall, unified China with the support of, and in alliance with, big merchants in iron and salt. But the subsequent Han dynasty made these major articles of trade a state monopoly, and purposely degraded the merchants in the social scale.

The oppressed peasantry fought heroically against feudal rule. Mao Tse-tung, in his work *The Chinese Revolution and the Chinese Communist Party,* enumerated eighteen great revolts ranging over 2,000 years. He has pointed out that "the gigantic scale of peasant uprisings and peasant wars in China is without parallel in the world". The reason these struggles did not succeed was that new productive forces and relations had not emerged to a sufficient degree to bring about a change in the basis of society. As history has proved, the peasants cannot build their own lasting state power. In China, in those times, there was no capitalist class strong enough to establish its supremacy. Nor was there a working class to lead the people in ridding themselves of all exploiters of their labour. Consequently, while dynasties were overthrown and replaced by others, and though there was considerable progress in many fields, the social order remained feudal.

The walls of Chinese feudalism were finally breached by foreign, nor Chinese, capitalism. After the middle of the eighteenth century, the British East India Company, fresh from the subjugation of India, became the leader in the lucrative "China trade".

In this commerce, at the outset, China was the supplier of manufactures. She exported not only tea but silk, cotton textiles (nankeen cloth), porcelains and other finished goods. In return, she imported little—mainly such things as raw furs, medicinal roots and some choice foodstuffs for rich men's tables. There was a good deal of truth in the message which the Emperor Chien Lung sent, in 1796, to King George III of England in reply to a proposal for wider trade relations. "We possess all things. I set no value on things strange or ingenious and have no use for your country's manufactures." The feudal power in China was also fearful of change and of new ideas that might come from outside contact. It was entirely blind to the military and economic

power which the industrial revolution was beginning to unleash in the West, and to the consequent necessity of modernization if an adequate national defence was to be created.

In these circumstances, the British merchants of the time could sell very little in China. For most of what they bought, they had to pay in solid silver. The silver had a blood-stained history. Mined by American Indians working under the lash in Mexico and Peru, much of it had been paid to British slave-traders by the Spaniards for the purchase of Negroes kidnapped from the African coast. Then it had been used by the British to buy fine cloths and spices in India. And finally, after the conquest of India, it had been squeezed back out of her people in enforced tribute. Thus, in the onward march of colonialism, the robbery and enslavement of one people was providing the means for the robbery and enslavement of others.

II

OPIUM, WARSHIPS AND MISSIONARIES (1840-1849)

Because the supply of silver was not inexhaustible, the East India Company was looking for another way to pay for Chinese goods. It hit on opium. How it got its stocks was described by a contemporary eyewitness in India:

> In all the territories belonging to the Company the cultivation of the poppy, the preparation of the drug, and the traffic in it until it is sold at auction for exportation are under a strict monopoly. . . . The cultivation of the plant is compulsory. . . . Vast tracts of the very best land in Benares, Bahar and elsewhere in the northern and central parts of India are now covered with poppies; and the other plants used for food or clothing, grown from time immemorial, have nearly been driven out.*

In 1781, after systematic preparation, the Company made its first big shipment of Indian opium to China where the drug had previously been little known. After this, the trade grew by leaps and bounds. Soon China's exports of tea, silk and other goods were not enough to pay for the imported opium, and silver began to flow out of the country instead of in.

In 1800, the Emperor Chia Ching, seriously disquieted by both the physical and economic effects of opium, banned it from China. But by this time too many people had formed the habit and too many merchants and officials had been corrupted by the profits from their partnership in the traffic. So smuggling and bribery virtually nullified the ban.

**Chinese Repository*, Vol. V (1837), p. 472, quoted in S. Wells Williams, *The Middle Kingdom*, New York and London, 1848.

The annual import of opium grew from some 2,000 chests (of 140 to 160 lb. each) in 1800 to 40,000 chests in 1838. One may note that American ships very early joined the British in the nefarious trade. They brought Turkish opium (loaded in Smyrna) to supplement the Indian. Several mercantile fortunes, which later formed the basis of U.S. industrial development, were made in this way.

The outflow of silver from China increased to a torrent. In 1832-35 alone, 20 million ounces were shipped abroad. The price of the metal inside the country rose sharply. The burden fell on the peasants since grain prices became lower, while landlords and tax-collectors took a greater portion of the crop so their income, in silver, would remain as great as before. This added to the strains on the feudal society of China, which were already so great that a new cycle of peasant revolts had begun in the middle of the eighteenth century. From 1810 on, risings against the Manchu dynasty became more frequent and widespread. In 1813, one group of rebels penetrated into the imperial palace in Peking itself.

In the interests of self-preservation, the Manchu rulers in Peking had to act. After issuing a sterner decree on the suppression of the opium trade, they appointed a resolute and patriotic Chinese official, Lin Tse-hsu, as special commissioner to Canton to put it into effect. Supported by the people, Lin blockaded the section of the city in which British and American merchants had been allowed to set up their establishments. In this way he forced them to surrender the opium they had on hand—over 20,000 chests. On June 3, 1839 he publicly destroyed the whole lot.

The result was the First Opium War, in which both the predatory aims of the leading "civilized" states of the West and the backwardness and weakness of the outwardly majestic Chinese feudal empire were exposed to the Chinese people and the whole world. Between 1839 and 1842, British troops landed at various points along the coast, occupied Canton, Shanghai, Amoy and Ningpo—and penetrated inland to cut the Grand Imperial Canal, the chief artery of trade between North and South China. Their advance was marked, at each step, by robbery and slaughter of civilians.

The defenders fought with great courage. But the historical lagging behind of China doomed them to defeat. Tragedy followed

tragedy. Hundreds of officers and men, refusing to surrender but unable to counter the superior weapons of the British, committed suicide after first destroying their own families. The British forces suffered about 500 killed; the Manchu-Chinese army lost 20,000.

The defeat of China was accelerated by the incapacity and wavering shown by the imperial government. In 1840, when the British fleet sailed to a point on the seacoast only 90 miles away from Peking, the government took fright. It began to negotiate with the invaders—at the same time removing and banishing the patriotic Lin Tse-hsu because his opium-burning had "brought on the war". Later, it reversed its policy once more and arrested the corrupt Manchu official Chi Shan (called Kishen in western literature) who had negotiated with the British.

It is indicative of the way the feudal mandarins robbed the people that Chi Shan's fortune, when confiscated by the Treasury, was found to include some 11,000 ounces of gold, 17 million ounces of silver, many cases of precious jewels and about 427,000 acres of land. In the same period the average farm tilled by a tenant or small owner-cultivator was less than two acres. And Chi Shan was by no means the richest of the dynasty's bureaucrats.

As a result of the war, the feudal rulers of China signed the first of the humiliating "unequal treaties" which were to lead her to the brink of national extinction. The Treaty of Nanking (1842) and its supplementary protocols (1843) provided for:

An indemnity for the opium seized and burned by Lin Tse-hsu, thus giving all further traffickers in the poison an assurance of safety;

The surrender of Hongkong to the British who from then on used it as a base for military, political and economic penetration of China;

The opening of five major ports to British trade and settlement, which soon led to establishment of territorial enclaves under the British flag, the embryo of the so-called "concessions", in China's port cities;

Exemption of British nationals from Chinese law thus permitting the extraterritorial operation of foreign law on China's soil;

The principle of "most favoured nation" treatment which was claimed by other powers and thus gave all foreigners the "privileges" extorted by the British;

An undertaking by China not to charge more than 5 per cent import duty on foreign goods. This sabotaged, in advance, the development of her own home industry.

Seeing China's weakness, the envoys of other foreign powers sailed in on their naval vessels to impose similar treaties. The first was Caleb Cushing of the United States, who blusteringly informed the Chinese, reeling after their defeat at British hands, that refusal to negotiate would be regarded as "an act of national insult and a just cause for war". Cushing managed to extort the Treaty of Wanghsia (1844) by which, in addition to the privileges granted to the British, the feudal rulers of China conceded more far-going extraterritorial rights, a reduction of tonnage duties, and the right of internal navigation within Chinese waters. "This treaty", boasts the American historian Tyler Dennett,* was "so superior that it became immediately the model for the French treaty". Under the "most favoured nation clause", the British too enjoyed its additional benefits.

One further point may be noted in connection with the Opium War and its aftermath: This was the role which the missionaries, with their knowledge of China and her language, played in the humiliation of the country to which they had come ostensibly with no other object than to preach Christianity.

One of them, Dr. Gutzlaff acted as a go-between for the British opium firm of Jardine's, and received a subsidy for his religious magazine as a reward. Though a Prussian, not an Englishman, he was interpreter for the British forces during the fighting and at the negotiations for the Nanking Treaty.

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*Dennett, Tyler, *Americans in Eastern Asia*, New York, 1922, p. 160. This author is so enthusiastic about the treaty that he forgets all editorial restraint and entitles two successive sections of his book "Superior Advantages of the Cushing Treaty". He worshipfully calls its negotiator "clever", and extols his "profound and brilliant legal mind". One of the superior points he lists is that "the Cushing Treaty was, in practice, the smugglers' delight. . . ."

In the American Treaty of Wanghsia, it was the American missionaries Williams, Bridgman and Parker (later American Minister to China) who advised the U.S. diplomat Cushing to take the stand that China must "bend or break"*—and conveyed his menaces, in Chinese, to the officials with whom he dealt.

Sickening hypocrisy, then as now the unblushing handmaid of colonial policy, also characterized the pronouncements of the governments which invaded China at that time. During the war, the British assured all and sundry that the fighting was not about opium at all, but to teach the Chinese not to oppose progress and free trade. At its end the Chinese negotiators at Nanking asked the British envoy, Sir Henry Pottinger, according to his own report, "why we (the British) would not act fairly toward them by prohibiting the growth of the poppy in our dominions, and thus effectively stop a traffic so pernicious to the human race." Pottinger replied that, filthy though he admitted the trade to be, the British government could not stop it—because that would be "inconsistent with our constitutional system"!

Such were the spiritual blessings of capitalist free institutions—to western businessmen on the one hand and to their Asian victims on the other. The material blessings followed the same pattern. By 1850, profits from the opium trade, which enfeebled and impoverished China, accounted for fully 20 per cent of the revenue of the British government of India.

Lest the reader think that we have given the Opium War, which after all happened a long time ago, too close attention, it is necessary to say how far forward its consequences went into time:

"Legal" import of opium into China continued until 1917. The limit of 5 per cent on import tariffs for all foreign goods was not abolished until 1928.

Extraterritoriality for foreign nationals in China lasted *de jure* until 1942. In practice, Chinese law was never applied to foreigners until the liberation in 1949.

The alien administrative concessions on Chinese soil served as springboards for further expansion and aggression.

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*Dennett, *op. cit.*, p. 146, quoting *Chinese Repository*, May 1840, p. 2.

The privileges granted to foreign merchandise exempting it from secondary taxation after transport inland gave a kind of "protected" status to Chinese merchants acting as agents for European and American firms anywhere in the country. Such merchants and agents were among the first representatives of the "compradore class" that was to play such an important part in subjecting China's economy to imperialism.

These are some reasons why a clear idea of the Opium War is still necessary to the understanding of events in our own day.

III

THE TAIPING REVOLUTION (1850-1865)

The Treaties of Nanking and Wanghsia began both the century of the subjugation of China and the century of the struggles of the Chinese people to regain their independence. From the moment they were signed, the Chinese people, to save their birthright, had to fight and defeat two enemies, not only the foreign invaders but also the feudal rulers who were neither willing nor able to defend the country.

Socially and economically, the most significant provision of these treaties was the 5 per cent maximum import tariff. Imposed at the instance of British millowners, this showed vividly that the supremacy of the manufacturer over the merchant, the new feature of European society, had also become the dominant factor in colonial expansion in Asia. The chartered monopoly of the mercantile East India Company in the China trade had been ended by Britain's Parliament, at the instance of British industrialists, in 1834. On the Chinese side, defeat in the Opium War put an end to the monopoly of the emperor's chartered merchants in Canton, who alone had been authorized to deal with the foreigners. Their place was taken by the compradores, who owed their status not to Chinese imperial charter but to their selection by foreign capitalism as its chosen servants and instruments.

After the war, the opium trade kept on growing. In 1850 it reached 52,000 chests. In 1853 it was up to 80,000. But the import of British and American cotton goods grew even faster. From becoming an exporter of textiles, China became an importer. Exploitation by European industrial capital was added to exploitation by European mercantile capital. It proved an even greater shock to China's economy.

With the indemnity China had to pay to England, the new imports increased the outflow of silver still more. A high Chinese official, reporting to the emperor on the result, wrote in 1852:

> In former days a tael (Chinese ounce) of silver was worth 1,000 cash (copper coins). . . . Nowadays one tael of silver is worth 2,000 cash. In former days to sell three *tou* (40 lb.) of rice could pay the land tax for one *mou* (1/6 acre) of land and have something left over. Nowadays to sell six *tou* is still not enough to pay the tax. The court naturally collects the regular amount but the small people actually have to pay double. Those who have no power to pay are innumerable. . . . Soldiers and government servants are sent out pursuing and compelling them day and night, whipping them all over the houses so their blood and flesh are scattered in disorder. . . .*

The influx of cheap foreign textiles ruined millions of weavers and other handicraftsmen—not only through direct competition in the market but also by drying up their sources of operating capital. Merchants and money-lenders, who used to finance the artisans, now put their money into foreign goods.

The enforced opening of new ports to foreigners superseded the old inland transport system which used to carry all goods for foreign trade to Canton, when it was the only open port. Thousands of boatmen and porters in South China could no longer find work.

This aggravated the crisis in China's feudal society. Increased popular outbreaks against the dynasty coincided with continued patriotic battles of the people against the British. After the Opium War, the peasants around Canton fought on, despite the government's capitulation, and much more successfully than the imperial army had done. A local saying arose: "The people fear the officials, the officials fear the foreign devils, and the foreign devils fear the people."

Obviously, in this situation, the people would not fear the officials much longer.

Only seven years after the humiliating Treaties of Nanking and Wanghsia, China was engulfed by the tremendous Taiping

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*Memorial from Tseng Kuo-fan to the emperor, February 7, 1852 (cited by Ssu-yu Teng, *New Light on the History of the Taiping Rebellion*, Harvard University Press, 1950), pp. 44-45.

Uprising, which was at the same time the last of her old-style peasant wars and the first great democratic fight of her people in the modern period. This revolutionary movement began in the province of Kwangsi, near the Viet-Nam border, drawing its recruits not only from the exploited and insulted masses of the Chinese people but also from the national minorities who suffered from barbarous discrimination. Gathering force rapidly, it cut across the huge country like a sword of flame, approaching Peking in the north, Shanghai in the east and the Tibetan mountains in the west.

Showing more maturity than any of the earlier revolts it resulted in the setting up of a plebeian revolutionary state, the Taiping Tien Kuo ("Heavenly Kingdom of the Great Peace"). The kingdom lasted for fifteen years (1850-65) and established its capital at Nanking, the very city where the Manchus had begun to sign away the country to the British.

The Taipings had an organized and disciplined military system. They passed land laws which struck at the very basis of feudalism. They challenged the basic ideas of the feudal Confucian culture. They developed a truly national foreign policy in the face of external intervention.

Hung Hsiu-chuan, the inspirer and supreme leader of the uprising, was a poverty-stricken schoolteacher who had been ill-treated by the corrupt Confucian scholar-bureaucracy that served the Manchus. A native of Kwangtung, the province of which Canton is the capital, he had been deeply influenced by the oppression suffered by the people, and inspired by the effective battle of the Cantonese peasant detachments against the British invaders. At the same time, he came into contact with the Christianity preached, but rarely practised, by the missionaries. Calling himself the "younger brother of Jesus", he opposed to Confucianism a religio-social doctrine in the tradition of the Christ who "drove the money changers out of the temple". In this he was akin to such leaders of European anti-feudal struggles, centuries earlier, as John Ball in England, Thomas Muenzer in Germany, and Jan Hus in what is now Czechoslovakia.

Hung's earliest colleagues in the leadership reflected the class basis of the movement. One was the landless charcoal burner

Yang Hsiu-ching, later to become the extremely able premier of the Taiping state and commander-in-chief of its forces. A second was the land-poor peasant and woodcutter, Hsiao Chao-kuei; a third, the village teacher, Feng Yun-shan. There were also representatives of a small section of relatively well-to-do scholar gentry who were opposed to the dynasty for national, not social reasons. These did not prove stable. Shih Ta-kai, though he fought to the end as a courageous military officer, developed separatist tendencies which helped dissipate the forces of the movement. And the self-seeking landlord and pawnbroker Wei Chang-hui played a great part in the final collapse of the Taiping cause.

The beginning of the Taiping movement almost coincided, in time, with the democratic storm that shook Europe in the year 1848. This did not pass unnoticed at the time. The Bible-and-opium missionary Gutzlaff, a Christian of a very different kind from Hung Hsiu-chuan, returned from China to Germany in 1849. Alarmed by what he found, he cried out that the socialist ideas of the European working class, then appearing for the first time as an independent political force, seemed much like those propagated "by many among the mob in China".

This drew keenly penetrating comment from Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. Written during the opening period of the aggression of western capitalism against China, it was the first manifestation of that solid friendship of the most advanced working-class elements in Europe and the rising peoples of the oppressed and "sleeping" East that was to develop, in our own time, into the central force of socialism as a fact on a world scale. Marx and Engels wrote, in the *Neue Rhenische Revue* of January 31, 1850.

> The socialism of China may have the same relationship to that of Europe as that of Chinese philosophy to the Hegelian. It is nonetheless to be rejoiced at that the most ancient and stable empire in the world, acted upon by cotton goods of the English bourgeois, is on the eve of a social upset which, in any case, must have extremely important results for civilization. When our European reactionaries, in the flight to Asia that awaits them in the near future, come at length to the Great Wall of China, to the gates which lead to the stronghold of arch-conservatism, who knows if they will not find there the inscription:
>
> "REPUBLIQUE CHINOISE
> LIBERTE, EGALITE, FRATERNITE."