

William Jardine: Architect of the First Opium War

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History often overlooks the first Opium War, which was fought from 1840-1842.¹ Not only did this war mark a major transition in Chinese history, opening up the isolated empire to foreign markets, but it also gives insight into the foreign policy of the British Empire during the nineteenth century. Most historians who have written on the subject, however, focus largely on the controversy surrounding the opium trade, instead of on the war itself. Some have even labeled the British Empire of this period as drug pushers, and blame them for the opium addiction of millions of Chinese. John K. Fairbank, a renowned scholar on the war, referred to the British opium trade as, “the most long-continued and systematic international crime of modern times.”²

Opinions like these do not look favorably upon the actions taken by the British Empire, and begs an obvious question: why would the British involve themselves in such a controversial trade, and why would they go to war for it? Historians differ on why Britain went to war in China. Some believe Britain waged war in China to preserve and expand its trading privileges there. Others theorize that the war was a result of the British wishing to defend their honor after Lin Zexu, the Imperial Commissioner, destroyed 20,000 chests of British opium.³ While each of these theories has an element of truth, neither takes into account the role played by the man who, in a real sense, was the driving force behind the war: William Jardine, a British opium merchant. First, along with his

¹ The first Opium War was a conflict between the British Empire and the Qing Empire in China from 1840-1842. The war was fought as a result of the Chinese officials attempt to suppress the opium trade within their borders.

² John K. Fairbank, ‘The Creation of the Treaty System’ in John K. Fairbanks, ed. *The Cambridge History of China* vol. 10 Part 1 (Cambridge University Press, 1992), 213; quoted in John Newsinger, “Britain’s Opium Wars,” *Monthly Review* (October 1997): 35.

³ 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* (New York: Norton, 1976), 160.

partner James Matheson, Jardine owned the company that was the largest importer of opium into China, thus supplying the catalyst for the war. Also, after amassing a large fortune from the opium business, Jardine used his wealth and influence to sway the opinion of both the public and the government towards war. And finally, through meetings and correspondence with Lord Palmerston, Jardine masterminded the military strategy that would be used in a successful campaign against China. He even helped determine some of the demands that were to be met by the Treaty of Nanking. Despite this evidence, some historians maintain that Jardine's role in the war has been exaggerated. Perhaps this is because they believe the Opium War would have been fought in a similar manner without Jardine's influence, or simply because they overlooked the details of his involvement. Whatever the reasons, a close examination of William Jardine's actions leading up to the first British-Chinese Opium War shows that not only has his role been far from exaggerated, but in fact not has not been emphasized enough.

William Jardine was born in Lochmaben, Dumfriesshire, Scotland in 1784. Coming from a wealthy family, he was fortunate enough to attend Edinburgh Medical School where he studied to be a doctor. After he graduated in 1802, he took a job with the British East India Company as a ship surgeon. Besides adhering to his medical duties, Jardine engrossed himself in the trade business. Taking advantage of one of the East India Company's policies, which allowed its employees to trade in goods for their own profit, Jardine eventually learned the trade business well enough to attain a job as junior partner for several different merchant houses. By 1820, Jardine decided to go into business for himself and settled in Canton⁴, committing himself to trade in China. A shrewd businessman, Jardine indicated how precious his time was by not having any available chairs in his office for visitors.⁵ His partner James Matheson, also a Scot, had entered in to the Canton trade around the same time as Jardine. Both men were staunch supporters of free trade and wanted the monopoly the East India Company had enjoyed over the Eastern market to end. In 1828 the two men joined

⁴ City in southern China that served as the premiere port for Sino-European trade since the early sixteenth century. Many European factories and agency houses were built in Canton and served as permanent residences for European merchants.

⁵ Edgar Holt, *The Opium Wars in China* (Chester Springs, PA.: Dufour Editions, 1964), 37.

forces, and by 1832 they had founded Jardine & Matheson Co. The men quickly engaged in the lucrative, though illegal, opium trade and began importing the drug into Canton. In the season of 1820-1821, 4,224 chests of opium were shipped from India into China. By 1830-1831, the year Jardine and Matheson entered into the trade, the total chests shipped increased to 18,956. Jardine and Matheson alone had disposed of more opium than the entire import of 1821 in their first year.⁶

In 1833, Jardine and Matheson got their wish when the British Parliament abolished the East India Company's monopoly. The following year, 40 percent more tea was shipped to Britain than the year before, and as expected the sale of opium continued to soar. Between 1830 and 1836 the amount of opium chests shipped into India went from 18,956 to 30,302.⁷ Certainly Jardine and Matheson profited considerably from this growing demand for opium. This huge influx of opium into China, however, did not go unnoticed by the Chinese Emperor, and in 1836 he issued an edict banning both opium importation and use. That same year the governor of Canton, Deng Tingzhen, arraigned nine prominent merchants on drug trafficking charges, William Jardine was among them.⁸ Jardine simply ignored the order and went unpunished. A conflict between the British merchants and the Chinese government was beginning to heat up. Jardine continued adding fuel to the growing crisis with his involvement in what came to be known as "Napier's Fizzle."

To replace the Old Select Committee, which oversaw trade in Canton during the East India Company's monopoly, the British government appointed Lord William John Napier as Chief Superintendent of Trade. In 1834 he set out for China with instructions to directly communicate with Chinese officials. Upon his arrival in Canton, Napier was immediately met with suspicion. When he requested to meet with the Viceroy, Lu Kun, he was told he could only deal only with the Cohong, a group of Chinese merchants who dealt with all foreign traders. This treatment was not surprising since the Chinese viewed the British as barbarians, and unworthy of directly communicating with high Chinese officials. Lu Kun saw this refusal as a victory over the barbarians, and later issued

an edict demanding that Napier leave Canton for Macao.⁹ Upon hearing of Napier's dismissal from Canton, William Jardine advised resistance, believing an open affront to the Crown's representatives was likely to anger the public and sooner bring about military action.¹⁰ Jardine even persuaded Napier to write a letter to Lord Palmerston, the Foreign Secretary requesting, "three or four frigates and brigs, with a few steady troops."¹¹ Palmerston ignored his request, and while in Canton, Napier contracted a very high fever. Listening to doctor's orders he sailed back to Macao where he died only a few days later. After Napier's death, Jardine, along with eighty-five other merchants, wrote a petition to the newly appointed king, William IV, demanding that military action be taken in response to Napier's humiliation.¹² By the time the petition had reached home, the Duke of Wellington had replaced Lord Palmerston in the Foreign Office. Wellington, somewhat of a pacifist and an isolationist, disregarded the petition and showed no inclination toward using force in China. Though no military action ever convened in response to "Napier's fizzle," as early as 1834 Jardine's intentions to push Britain towards a war with China were made clear.

John Francis Davis replaced Napier as Chief Superintendent of trade. This appointment did not last long however, as Davis resigned after only a few months. His resignation most likely had to do with the fact that he did not want to deal with British merchants, like Jardine, whom he thought were trying to goad Britain into a full-scale war.¹³ Davis's replacement, Sir George Robinson, also detested the British merchants. He even tried to halt the opium trade, and recommended the British stop cultivating the drug in India. For what seemed to be a noble effort, Robinson was fired in 1836 and replaced with Captain Charles Elliot. Like his predecessors, Elliot also despised the opium trade but never openly expressed his feelings. His only concern was to make sure that the tea, for which the British were trading opium, made it successfully out of China and into Britain. Despite his best efforts to keep the peace and

⁶ Jack Beeching, *The Chinese Opium Wars* (London: Hutchinson, 1975), 38.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 42.

⁸ W. Travis Hanes III, Ph.D. and Frank Sanello, *The Opium Wars: The Addiction of One Empire and the Corruption of Another* (Naperville, IL: Sourcebooks, 2003), 33.

⁹ Small peninsula located on the southern coast of China, colonized by the Portuguese in the 16th century, but also served as the British base for trade

¹⁰ Beeching, *The Chinese Opium Wars*, 48.

¹¹ Quoted in *Ibid.*

¹² Hanes, *The Opium Wars*, 32.

¹³ *Ibid.*

maintain a steady trade, it was under Elliot's watch that the crisis went from conflict to war.

By 1837, it was clear to the Chinese government that Jardine was prominently involved in the opium trade, and they took measures to expel him and other unnamed "barbarians" from Chinese soil¹⁴ Tang, the governor of Kwang tung and Kwangse, Ke Lieut, governor of Kwangtung, and Wan, Commissioner of Maritime Customs at the Port of Canton, issued an edict ordering that "Jardine and others" be expelled from the country.¹⁵ Though the Chinese officials recognized that other merchants had contributed to the opium importation, and wished for their expulsion as well, they apparently saw Jardine as the biggest threat, and therefore the only one worth naming.

The Chinese government's struggle to suppress the importation and distribution of opium within their borders continued in 1838. At the time Elliot was appointed, the number of Chinese addicts was estimated to be anywhere from four to twelve million.¹⁶ Some officials even began to recommend legalizing the drug, arguing that it would be profitable if it could be taxed. The Emperor took a different route, deciding that the opium trade should be completely stopped, and any offenders severely punished. To enforce this edict the Emperor appointed Lin Zexu, a well respected scholar and government official, as Special Imperial Commissioner. One of the first things Lin did following his appointment was to write a letter to Queen Victoria in an attempt to appeal to her moral responsibility in controlling her subjects' activities.¹⁷ Lin seems to directly attack Jardine and the other British merchants when he writes:

There appear among the crowds of barbarians both good persons and bad...there are those who smuggle opium to seduce the Chinese people and so cause the spread of Poison to all provinces. Such persons who only care to profit themselves, and disregard their harm to others.¹⁸

¹⁴ "Barbarians" here refers directly to the British merchants.

¹⁵ *Canton Free Press*, 14 February 1837; reprinted in *Times* (London), 31 March 1837.

¹⁶ Hanes, *The Opium Wars*, 34.

¹⁷ Richard Lim and David Kammerling Smith, *The West In The Wider World: Sources And Perspectives*, vol. 2: *From Early Modernity To The Present* (Boston: Bedford / St. Martin's, 2003), 210.

¹⁸ Lin Zexu, "Letter to Queen Victoria" (1839); quoted in Ssu-yu Teng and John K. Fairbanks, *China's Response to the West: A Documentary Survey* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1965), 24-27; quoted in *Ibid*.

Unfortunately, the Queen never received Lin's letter because it was lost in the mail. *The Times of London*, did find it, and printed it, but to no avail.¹⁹ After receiving no response to his letter Lin decided to take more drastic measures. In March of 1839, while in Canton, Lin demanded that the European merchants hand over all of their opium and cease in trading it. When the merchants refused, Lin quarantined the foreign communities and had all of their factories surrounded by troops. Later that month Elliot arrived in Canton in possession of 20,283 chests of the British Merchants' opium valued at 2,000,000 pounds.²⁰ The merchants had given Elliot the opium under the assumption that he intended to safe guard it, and were appalled when they soon learned he had surrendered it to Lin. Elliot insisted he had acted on the behalf of the British community quarantined in Canton. After Lin had confiscated all of the opium, he ordered all of the merchants who had engaged in the trade to leave China. Complying with Lin's wishes, the merchants left Canton along with Captain Elliot. Once they had left, Lin had all of the confiscated opium destroyed by dumping it into Canton Bay.

After the opium had been destroyed, Elliot promised the merchants that they would be compensated for their losses by the British government. Parliament, on the other hand, never agreed to these measures, and thought that if any reparations were paid to the merchants it was the Chinese government's responsibility to do so. Frustrated with the reality that any repayment for the lost opium seemed unlikely, the merchants turned to William Jardine. Jardine, who had left Canton just prior to Lin's arrival, had been developing a plan since he received word of Lin's actions: to force compensation from China with open warfare. For his plan to succeed however, Jardine would have to sway the opinion of both the public and the British government.

Among the public, some of the biggest opponents of the war in China were the Chartists, whose movement for social reform in Britain coincided with the first Opium War.²¹ The Chartist strongly

¹⁹ Hanes, *The Opium Wars*, 41.

²⁰ Glenn Melancon, "Honor in Opium? The British Declaration of War on China, 1839-1840," *International History Review* 21, no. 4 (1999): 859.

²¹ Workingmen's political reform movement that was started in the 1830's. "Chartist" is a name derived from *The People's Charter*, a document written in

opposed any military intervention in China, and even commended the response of the Chinese government toward the illegal opium trade.²² Chartists printed articles in pamphlets and newspapers to inform the public of the injustices of the British foreign policy in China. Taking up the cause in Parliament was Sir Robert Peel. Peel, who was the leader of the Tory opposition to the war, attempted to gain support for his position by reminding Parliament of the fiasco created by Lord Napier, as well as criticizing Lord Palmerston, who by this time had returned to his duties in the Foreign Office, for his mismanagement of the situation in China thus far.²³ With strong opponents to the war influencing both the public and the government Jardine's plan would not go unchallenged. To successfully combat these anti-war factions Jardine would have to carefully formulate a plan that would make a war in China appear to be both just and beneficial to the British Empire.

Aware of this strong opposition, Jardine would first attempt to get the ear of the Foreign Office. To accomplish this he needed the help of John Abel Smith, a MP for Chichester. Smith, who had done banking in London for Jardine & Matheson Co., happened to be close friends with Lord Palmerston. Jardine wrote to Smith asking if he could set up a meeting with the Foreign Secretary upon his arrival home. Smith contacted Palmerston and he agreed to the meeting telling Smith that, "he was desirous of seeing Mr. Jardine, as he had many questions to ask." In reference to Jardine he also added, "I suppose he can tell us what is to be done."²⁴ In October 1839, Jardine met with Palmerston and presented his ideas on the actions he felt should be taken in China. First, he suggested the blockade of all the principle ports along the Chinese coast. Once this was done the British could dispatch their fleets, which would easily put down any Chinese resistance to the blockade. After an easy victory the British could then force the Chinese government to sign a treaty that would ensure the repayment for the destroyed opium, as well as guarantee the opening of additional ports for foreign trade. The ports Jardine suggested to Palmerston were Foochow, Ningpo, Shanghai, and Kiaochow. Jardine also supplied Palmerston with a

1938, which called for universal male suffrage, no property requirements for members of Parliament, equal electoral districts, and secret ballot.

²² Shijie Guan, "Chartism and the First Opium War," *History Workshop Journal*, n.s., 24 (1987):

²³ Beeching, *The Chinese Opium wars*, 108.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 96.

memorandum that outlined the size of the force that would be needed to enforce these demands.²⁵ The following month several influential merchants, along with Abel Smith, sent a letter to Lord Palmerston elaborating on the details that had been already presented by Jardine. Every detail on the proposed expedition into China had been worked out, only an okay from parliament remained.

After having expressed his ideas to the Foreign Office, Jardine then turned some of his efforts toward presenting his case to the British public. After all, the sentiments felt by the people regarding the situation could directly effect how parliament would vote on the matter. Seeing how successful the Chartist had been in presenting their views, James Matheson wrote to Jardine suggesting that he, "secure the services of some leading newspaper to advocate the cause," as well hire some "literary men" to write up "the requisite memorials in the most concise and clear shape."²⁶ Jardine took Matheson's advice and immediately had his views expressed in many British newspapers. These articles told a much different story than those supplied by the Chartist newspapers, claiming that the Chinese had wrongfully destroyed property which was not theirs, and in the process had directly insulted the British Crown. Further acting on Matheson's advice to hire some "literary men", it was probably Jardine himself who commissioned Samuel Warren, a best-selling British author, to compose a pamphlet in favor of the British merchants.²⁷ In early 1840, Warren produced *The Opium Question*, in which he criticized both the Chinese emperor and Commissioner Lin, and threatened that after the Naval and military force of Great Britain crushes the "Ancient Fooleries" of their nation the Emperor would have a "new and astounding view of the petty barbarians, whom he has insulted, oppressed and tyrannized over so long."²⁸ The tone in both the newspaper articles and *The Opium Question* clearly show the manner in which Jardine intended to present his side of the argument to the public. Unlike the Chartist, Jardine steered clear on discussing the actual morality of the opium trade

²⁵ Hsin-pao Chang, *Commissioner Lin and the Opium Wars* (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 1964), 193.

²⁶ Matheson to J.A. Smith, 6 May 1839 (enclosing Matheson to Jardine, 1 May) *James Matheson Private Letter Books*, vol.4, JM; quoted in Peter Ward Fay, *The Opium War*, 191.

²⁷ Lim and Kammerling Smith, *The West In The Wider World*: vol. 2, 214.

²⁸ Samuel Warren, "The Opium Question", London: *Ridgway*, (1840), 61, 64, 72-77, 114 -15, 117-18; quoted in *Ibid.*, 217.

when presenting his side of the debate. Instead he attempted to appeal to people's sense of patriotism, and called them to rally around the British flag in retaliation for the injuries that had been inflicted by the Chinese. The impact this technique would have on the public, however, remained to be seen.

In March, Parliament met to debate the question of whether or not to send a naval force to China. During the next few days, both sides of the debate clearly outlined their stance on military intervention. Those opposed to war continued to bring up what had happened during "Napier's Fizzle" as well as discussing the moral ramifications that accompanied the illegal importation of harmful drug into China. Those in support of war presented their case in much the same manner as Jardine, insisting that it was Britain's patriotic duty to defend her honor against the insults perpetrated by China. The debates closed with Lord Palmerston reading a petition that had been signed by representatives of important British trading firms in China. In the petition the merchants declared that, "unless measures of the government are followed up with firmness and energy, the trade with China can no longer be conducted with security to life and property, or with credit or advantage to the British nation."²⁹ This petition, not surprisingly, was headed with the signature of William Jardine. In the end patriotism defeated isolationism and the proponents of sending a naval force to China won with a vote of 271 to 262.³⁰ Jardine's efforts had no doubt contributed to this decision and he had finally gotten the war he had spent so much time promoting.

The war that ensued flowed with little difficulty for Britain. Closely following Jardine's suggested strategies, and armed with overwhelming technological superiority; the British military easily turned the war into a one-sided affair. They effortlessly captured the port of Tin-hai in October of 1841, in a battle in which they lost only three men compared to the Chinese's loss of over 2,000.³¹ Other battles with similar outcomes followed as the British systematically massacred the Chinese army in route to victory. Final death tolls at the end of the war have been estimated at only 500 for the British and over 20,000 Chinese troops.³² One British officer

²⁹ Beeching, *The Chinese Opium Wars*, 111.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Newsinger, "Britain's Opium Wars," 38.

³² Foster Stockwell, *Westerners in China: A History of Exploration and Trade, Ancient Times Through the Present* (Jefferson, NC.: McFarland & Co., 2003), 75.

remarked on these lopsided numbers, "The poor Chinese had two choices, either they must submit to be poisoned, or must be massacred by the thousands, for supporting their own laws in their own land."³³

In 1842, the Chinese were forced to sign the Treaty of Nanking. Some of the stipulations included in the treaty were the cession of the island of Hong Kong to the British, the opening of several ports for foreign trade, (including Amoy, Foochow, Ningpo, and Shanghai: the exact ports Jardine had suggested to Palmerston) and finally the payment to the British government for the cost of fighting the war, and the price of seized opium.

The signing of the treaty of Nanking concluded the first Opium War, but continued tensions between the British and Chinese would lead to war further down the road. The second Opium War, fought in 1856, was another British victory and further opened China to foreign markets. William Jardine, who died in 1843, was not around to see the results of the second Opium War. An outcome he likely would have deemed satisfactory.

Though it is hard to ignore the fact that William Jardine played at least some role in the first Opium War, historians have differed on how much of an impact he actually had. In J.W. Wong's, *Deadly Dreams: Opium and the Arrow War (1865-1860) in China*, Wong gave a detailed account of the second Opium War. However, Wong also briefly mentioned the causes of the first Opium War and in reference to Jardine wrote that, "he [Jardine] saw Palmerston and literally masterminded the government's approach towards China and the Opium War, down to the details such as the size of ships to be deployed and the terms of the treaty to be proposed to China,"³⁴ Hsin-pao Chang, author of *Commissioner Lin and the Opium War*, also feels that Jardine greatly influenced the British decision to go to war, but points out that it was Lord Palmerston who had the final say.³⁵

Other historians, however, would disagree with both Wong and Chang's assertions claiming the decision to go to war was not influenced by the British merchant's, but was solely a decision to defend national honor. For example, in his article *Honour in Opium? The British Declaration of War on China 1839-1840*, Glenn Melancon writes, "the influence of William Jardine and James Matheson on

³³ Newsinger, "Britain's Opium Wars," 38.

³⁴ J.W. Wong, *Deadly Dreams: Opium and the Arrow war (1856-1860) in China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University press, 1998), 311.

³⁵ Chang, *Commissioner Lin and the Opium War*, 194.

British policy has been exaggerated.”³⁶ Melancon even directly criticizes Chang in his article for placing too much emphasis on the recommendations Jardine made to Palmerston and writes that, “Palmerston had developed his plans for China before he had met with Jardine.”³⁷ In fact, according to Melancon, Palmerston was already openly in favor of forcing compensation from the Chinese with open warfare by September 1839, the month before he had even met with Jardine.³⁸ His reasons for wanting the war, however, were not economic, but were instead driven by the desire to defend Britain’s honor in the face of defeat, and to regain its moral and military superiority over China after the embarrassment of “Napier’s Fizzle” and Commissioner Lin’s edict. Though Palmerston likely did wage war for these reasons, completely ignoring Jardine’s role in the matter seems short sighted. In fact, when Melancon states that Palmerston had already developed a plan before meeting with Jardine he seems to overlook how closely Jardine’s suggestions corresponded with the actual events of the war. Though Palmerston may have already been in favor of the war, and may have even had a rough idea of the military strategy to be used, the evidence shows that he must have at least incorporated some of Jardine’s suggestions into his plan. Not only did the British blockades match Jardine’s plan, but also the actual size of the military force sent closely matched his suggestions as well.³⁹ Melancon also seems to have thought it just a coincidence that many of the stipulations written out in the Treaty of Nanking had been presented to Palmerston by Jardine three years before the actual treaty was even written. Though this evidence does not prove Palmerston relied only on Jardine’s advice, it shows that he at least found his recommendations valuable enough to write John Abel Smith:

To the assistance and information which you and Mr. Jardine so handsomely afforded us it was mainly owing that we were able give our affairs naval, military and diplomatic, in China those detailed instructions which have led to these satisfactory results . . . There is no doubt that this event, which will form an epoch in the progress of the

³⁶ Melancon, “Honour in Opium?,” 856.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 868.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ Beeching, *The Chinese Opium Wars*, 105.

civilization of the human races, must be attended with the most important advantages to the commercial interests of England.⁴⁰

In this letter Palmerston himself clearly acknowledges that Jardine supplied him with some useful information that was incorporated into the naval and military strategy that was successfully executed in China.

Beyond Jardine’s role in developing some of the military strategies used during the first Opium War, it is also important to understand his role as an opium importer. Since the early 1830’s Jardine & Matheson Co. had made a fortune as one of the premiere opium smugglers into China. The perfect way to expand the already growing trade was to have more Chinese ports opened, and therefore accessible, to the highly addictive drug. With the Chinese hesitant to open their Empire to further foreign influence an open affront was the only way to increase the expansion of free trade. Recognizing this, Jardine began pushing for war as early as 1834. By the late 1830’s he was a huge contributor to a media campaign that promoted the war, and by 1839 he had met with Lord Palmerston, and made his suggestions to the Foreign Office.

So what was William Jardine’s role in the First Opium War? Was he only a wealthy merchant whose influence in the matter has been exaggerated, as Melancon asserts? Or was he one of the main forces in promoting the war, whose role has not been emphasized enough? When looking at how closely his recommendations on foreign policy and military tactics were followed it is hard to accept it as only a coincidence. Couple this with how much Jardine stood to benefit from the war and his impact seems undeniable. Though it is true that British motivations to go to war included a significant component of national honor, that honor would never have been threatened had it not been for the actions of the British “barbarians,” especially the actions of Jardine, who forced the Chinese to expel him for drug trafficking, and then played on British honor to restore his business. As the Chinese implicitly stated with their expulsion edict, without Jardine, and the lesser merchants who took their lead from him, there would have been no need for war.

⁴⁰ John K. Fairbank, *Trade and Diplomacy on the China Coast, 1842-1854* (Cambridge, Ma.: Harvard University press, 1964), 83; quoted in Hsin-pao Chang, *Commissioner Lin and the Opium War*, 194.