

THE QING AND THE FIRST OPIUM WAR

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The First Opium War marks a pivotal point in China's history. It begins the "Century of Humiliation" which spans the time roughly one hundred years from the Qing defeat in the First Opium War to the rise of the Communist Party. It is frequently cited as "Exhibit A" of the evils of British colonialism, in which a more powerful British military forced opium into a hapless empire by use of force. In other words, it is often called a war in defense of narcotics. Typically, the British and their overwhelming military power are placed at the center of the story, clearly superior to their unlucky opponents. But this generates an obvious question: why did the Qing lose? It does not seem natural for a vast empire of over 400,000,000 people to be defeated by a comparatively small island nation boasting an expeditionary force of merely a few thousand men. The mainstream narrative would indicate that external factors are primarily at fault, but an examination of the Qing reveals a number of internal factors that are worthy of consideration. Several historians have brought new voices to the conversation, indicating a potential change in the historical current. These experts claim that the iconic defeat of the Qing in the First Opium War can be attributed chiefly to chronic problems within the Qing bureaucracy, social structure, and military.

ADMINISTRATIVE DECAY

One set of glaring issues which requires treatment is the decay of the civil service. *China from the Opium Wars to the 1911 Revolution* by Jean Chesneaux, Marianne Bastid, and Marie-Claire Bergère provides an excellent primer on this topic. Originally published in 1972 in French, this manuscript spends its first two chapters laying out chronic issues of the Qing state. This book calls our attention to the fact that the civil service was far more corrupt in reality than it was on paper. According to these authors, the civil service was meant to be "flexible, stable, and balanced in its distribution of power. All

officials were appointed by the central government. They could not hold the same job for more than three years, and they could not be assigned to their native provinces.”¹ Officials were also forced to observe three years of mourning when a close relative passed away, while imperial censors were to be omnipresent, keeping potentially wayward civil servants in line.² In reality, the system was not the well-oiled machine it was intended to be. “Fraud was common; so were inflated reports exaggerating local difficulties and overstating the official’s need for troops and money. The mandarins’ salaries were very low, and it was accepted practice for them to ‘live off the land’ and off ‘presents’ from officials below them in the hierarchy.”³

Thus the ideal of the Qing’s altruistic best and brightest faithfully serving the Son of Heaven was susceptible to corruption and actually encouraged the less scrupulous to amass embarrassing fortunes. A common saying during this period in southern China encapsulates this indifference of the officials to their imperial fidelity, “Heaven is high, and the emperor is far away.”⁴ The most famous case is that of Heshen, the late-18th century Manchu official who maintained the Qianlong Emperor’s favor for 24 years and is frequently held as the prime example of corruption in the late-Qing.⁵ The wealth which he accumulated included two residences with over 600 rooms and a total net worth of roughly 80 million taels of silver, enough to make him roughly as wealthy as the Son of Heaven, the Emperor himself.⁶ Heshen was not an anomaly in the system, however, but a product of it. Reliance on patronage was systemic, and mandarins routinely lied to their superiors. As will be shown later, this corruption also polluted the tax system, causing deep hardship to farmers in the Empire. This corruption had a severe impact on the lives of the average Qing peasant. Both coastal pirates and White Lotus rebels cited the

¹ Jean Chesneau, *China from the Opium Wars to the 1911 Revolution* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1976), 16.

² Chesneau, *China from the Opium Wars*, 16.

³ Chesneau, 16.

⁴ Stephen R. Platt, *Imperial Twilight: The Opium War and the End of China’s Last Golden Age* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2018), 71.

⁵ Wook Yoon, “Prosperity with the Help of ‘Villains,’ 1776-1799: A Review of the Heshen Clique and Its Era,” *T’oung Pao* 98, no. 4-5(2012): 479-527.

⁶ Platt, *Imperial Twilight*, 102-103.

oppression of the people by Qing officials, particularly those of the lower level, as reasons for their insurrections against the Empire.⁷

The civil service was also systematically challenged by the rising population because it naturally led to a rise in men sitting for the famous Confucian examinations. The *pax sinica* that the Qing oversaw produced an army of men aspiring to achieve civil service degrees. The Qing instituted quotas on degrees awarded to keep taxes low, and, while this did limit the number of officials the state had on its payroll, it did nothing to limit the growing number of men attempting the exam.⁸ These quotas meant that as the population skyrocketed, the percentage of men who could obtain degrees plummeted. This left an army of men well-educated, disaffected, and underemployed. These men were often politically active, agitating against the established order which had spurned them. According to Jones and Kuhn, quotas also had the effect of inadvertently stagnating social mobility, “the general trend, especially in the rich and populous south-east, was a decline in mobility rates.”⁹ One result of such stagnation was that local clerks became increasingly abusive, a trend that late-Qing scholar Hong Liangji noted in his works. “Out of a hundred yamen clerks, not even one has advanced to become a [regular] official. Since there is no channel for promotion [to become regular officials], they concentrate on the pursuit of profit.”¹⁰ These yamen clerks were feared by everyone in the community, and were the backbone of local corruption. Hong even makes the claim that “of the amount then extracted from the people, 30 percent may go to the officials, but 50 percent will have gone to the yamen clerks.”¹¹

Failed examination-takers were a critical cog in the late-Qing corruption machine. As men began to realize the futility of sitting for the examinations in the face of astronomical odds, the corrupt patronage system became more influential. Illegitimate routes to

⁷ Platt, 116.

⁸ William T. Rowe, *China's Last Empire: The Great Qing* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 158.

⁹ Susan M. Jones and Phillip A. Kuhn, “Dynastic Decline and the Roots of Rebellion” in *The Cambridge History of China: Late Ch'ing 1800-1911, Part 1* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 114.

¹⁰ Hong Liangji, “Yamen Clerks” in *Sources of Chinese Tradition: From 1600 Through the Twentieth Century*, 2nd ed., ed. Wm. Theodore de Bary and Richard Lufano (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 177.

¹¹ Liangji, “Yamen Clerks,” 178.

power, such as bribery and nepotism, became more socially acceptable. “Problems in the education and in the civil service system-enhanced the appeal of illegitimate routes, particularly among men of wealth and influence.”¹² Thus relationships between superiors and inferiors were infused with a social hierarchy, “the patronage network, in which patron-client relationships were made to bear more than their usual burden in the workings of the government.”¹³ As a result of the increase in applicants, the Confucian examination system began to break down, and illegitimate paths into the elite became more mainstream. Jones and Kuhn assert that “bribery, favoritism, nepotism, and all kinds of gift-giving and tipping were endemic in Chinese bureaucracy, and this fact was accepted and even condoned in some situations.”¹⁴ The overpopulation of the empire confronted the Qing examination system; that system’s inflexibility, inability to divert educated men to alternative career paths, and educational systems created with the sole aim of producing government officials would ultimately prove costly.¹⁵

The Qing emperors were not always blind to this rampant abuse, but the vastness of the web of bribes, money laundering, and patronage made corruption difficult to root out. Rowe writes that both Jiaqing and Dauguang “followed up with attempts at solutions that, invariably, did not go far enough.”¹⁶ For example, the Jiaqing Emperor attempted an anti-corruption campaign in 1799 after the execution of Heshen but essentially stopped pursuing the idea after the mandarin’s execution. Platt writes, “he knew how easily an anti-corruption campaign could lose control and become a general purge, for almost nobody was innocent. Officials would readily testify against their personal enemies, turning them in for any number of crimes.”¹⁷ By the turn of the 19th century, corruption and fractiousness were so ingrained in the Qing civil service that a purge would likely not have left enough honest, competent men to run the Empire. There was also the fear that the lack of open and honest communications between the throne and civil servants would reach an even greater state of

¹² Jones and Kuhn, “Dynastic Decline,” 114.

¹³ Jones and Kuhn, 114.

¹⁴ Jones and Kuhn, 115.

¹⁵ Jones and Kuhn, 110.

¹⁶ Rowe, *China’s Last Empire*, 158.

¹⁷ Platt, *Imperial Twilight*, 103.

disfunction if the bureaucrats were intimidated by harsh punishments. This strain of thought was compounded by the somewhat naïve hope that eliminating Heshen would go much farther to solve the issue than it did in reality: “He [Jiaqing] preferred to assume that many were honest officials who had been led astray who, with the proper leadership, could be rehabilitated.”¹⁸ The emperors of this time-period were not afforded the luxury of initiating a focused anti-corruption campaign, at least partially because there were myriad other quandaries vying for their attention.

FINANCIAL CRISES

The economic challenges facing the empire in the first half of the 19th century were severe. As Rowe explains, “there seems to have been a widespread perception, at home and abroad, that by the 1840s economic depression had brought the Qing empire perilously near the point of collapse.”¹⁹ A piece of this was worldly civil servants pocketing funds from the tax system. The basis of Qing taxes was the land tax, which drew 75 percent of the central government’s revenue, and a rice tax on the lower Yangzi River valley to feed the Imperial palace. Salt and customs taxes were also sources of considerable state income. It was common practice for this rice tax to be made payable in silver, set at a fixed rate which had been determined in the early 1700s. Unfortunately for the Qing, even this positive sign of the development of a cash economy became a negative, “by the 19th century the ‘substitution rate’ fluctuated so much that the agents of the yamen often manipulated it as they pleased. Similar oscillations in the conversion rate between copper cash and silver also made it easy to cheat the peasants.”²⁰

There were countless additional methods of extortion put in place by officials. Their prevalence only increased in the first two decades of the 19th century, when the central government became more strict in forcing local officials to account for shortages in funds; rather than curtail their spending, civil servants increased their abuse of the peasants.²¹ These mandarins then skimmed off of the top of the collected funds, resulting in only approximately one-third to one-fifth

¹⁸ Jones and Kuhn, “Dynastic Decline,” 108.

¹⁹ Rowe, *China’s Last Empire*, 158.

²⁰ Chesneau, *China from the Opium Wars*, 43.

²¹ Jones and Kuhn, “Dynastic Decline,” 128.

of collected taxes reaching government coffers. The central government was hemorrhaging funds to its civil servants when taxes were desperately needed for repairing dams and transportation networks. More often than not, officials were the reason there were shortages, as they were responsible for paying not only for their extravagant entourages but also gifts for their patrons.²²

By the 1800s, the problem with the tax system had become egregious. The rise of the money economy allowed officials to commute grain and labor debts to the state in exchange for silver, which allowed civil servants to charge multiple times more than what the state was entitled to.²³ The rate of one silver tael to 1,000 copper coins was disregarded, and some peasants were charged at a rate of upwards of 4,600 copper coins to a silver tael.²⁴ Granaries became dilapidated and held only fractions of their full capacities in food supplies. Public services deteriorated, especially in the Yellow River valley. Dikes fell into disrepair, worsening the hardships of flooding even while the monstrously large bureaucracy, charged with overseeing such problems, consumed 4.5 million taels of silver by the 19th century, a full tenth of the central government's revenue.²⁵

This overspending and corruption contributed to the financial crisis that gripped Qing China in the early 19th century. The early 19th century saw a steep decline in Yunnan copper production, and this was combined with a large circulated quantity of bad money due to poor management of the mints and other financial services.²⁶ During the 17th century, Spanish silver from the new world had begun appearing on Qing China's southeastern coast.²⁷ But the Qing court cannot be seen merely as a victim of circumstance. In regards to the decline in copper, Rowe writes, "in copper mining, the Qing state had a policy of demanding a certain percentage of each mine's output for state purchase, at set prices, to be used for minting coins."²⁸ As the market price of copper rose, the Qing ignored their local officials petitioning for the state to raise their price and continued to buy

²² Jones and Kuhn, 128.

²³ Jones and Kuhn, 129.

²⁴ Chesneaux, *China from the Opium Wars*, 43

²⁵ Chesneaux, 44.

²⁶ Chesneaux, 45.

²⁷ Chesneaux, 45.

²⁸ Rowe, *China's Last Empire*, 151.

copper at well under the market value. Copper mines lost money, and many were forced to close due to central government fiscal policy.

Another factor which upset the Qing financial system was, of course, opium. The Qing had been conducting foreign trade before opium's rise by exporting tea and silk for silver from the western traders. The balance of trade favored the Qing, so foreign merchants were forced to make up the difference in silver. The British, with ideas of trade based in mercantilism, were concerned as increased amounts of silver left their coffers and poured into Qing China. By the 1780s, 16 million taels of silver were lost by Europeans to the Qing in the course of trade, a disaster for economic experts who believed that negative trade balances were unacceptable.²⁹ However, as the Qing demand for opium increased, the balance of trade shifted, meaning that the Qing had to export silver because tea and silk were not sufficient to cover the cost of imported opium.³⁰ This was merely another factor contributing to the scarcity of silver in Qing China.

The result of these converging factors was that the peasants' copper coins became less valuable. Since most peasant farmers paid their taxes in copper coins, the majority of the population was losing money. The financial crisis, worsened in the 19th century by constant rebellion, forced the Jiaqing Emperor to slash funding for the military; as Platt explains, "such measures would stanch the dangerous bleeding of government funds, but they also ensured that the Qing dynasty's military would in the future have less funding, wield older weapons, and suffer from lower morale than when Qianlong was in his prime."³¹ The financial squeeze that the Qing court was feeling was directly linked to the military ineptitude which was on global display in the First Opium War and indeed throughout the last century of its existence.

THE MILITARY

Many historical investigations conclude that Qing military ineptitude led to their demise. While it is clear that the Qing military was far from the only factor contributing to the resounding British victory of the First Opium War, it is undeniable that the Qing armed

²⁹ Jonathan D. Spence, *The Search for Modern China* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1990), 129.

³⁰ Rowe, *China's Last Empire*, 157.

³¹ Platt, *Imperial Twilight*, 124.

forces were in a pathetic state of disrepair and unable and unwilling to handle trained British regulars. The most frustrating aspect of this is that it was both absurd and entirely preventable. But the military's record had been poor since the mid-Qianlong era; catastrophic failures were recorded in Burma in the 1760s and Vietnam in the 1780s.³² The British military was not inherently superior, and the Qing weren't predestined to be rolled back at nearly every encounter. Unfortunately for the Dauguang Emperor, the military system had deteriorated and the Manchu troops which overthrew the Ming, "had lost all fighting spirit by the nineteenth century."³³ Luckily for the Qing, that left the Chinese Army of the Green Standard, certainly large enough to deal with uprisings and easily outnumbering the British by an astronomical figure. Unfortunately, these troops were scattered around the country to avoid a concentration of overwhelming power.³⁴

There were additional kinks in the system: as Chesneau writes, "inevitably their commanders were jealous of each other, and the units worked badly together. In general, the army officers neglected discipline, allowed the soldiers to maraud, and grew rich by sending in false duty sheets."³⁵ Platt notes an example of this during the White Lotus Rebellion, "it would later turn out that a substantial portion of the hundreds of thousands of militia soldiers who had been recruited to fight the White Lotus did not in fact exist."³⁶ Not only were fraudulent soldiers created, but officials siphoned off death benefits meant for the families of those who died in battle, creating a macabre incentive for officials to have their own men killed in action.³⁷ As with most of the problems in the Qing system, the problem of poor discipline and widespread corruption among officers developed gradually. An excellent case study can be found in the Qing handling of the 1795 White Lotus Rebellion. Stephen Platt notes, "the governor-general of Sichuan province reported with disgust that when government soldiers went into battle they made the militia charge in ahead of them and then hung back where they would be safe. If the

³² Odd Arne Westad, *Restless Empire: China and the World Since 1750* (New York: Basic Books, 2012), 21.

³³ Chesneau, *China from the Opium Wars*, 18.

³⁴ Chesneau, 19.

³⁵ Chesneau, 19.

³⁶ Platt, *Imperial Twilight*, 69.

³⁷ Platt, 69.

militiamen got turned back by the rebels and started to run away, the government soldiers just ran after them.”³⁸ In reality, the Qing troops were often more rapacious than the rebels themselves, with the moniker “Red Lotus” denoting their infamy.³⁹ It is worth noting that these were not the Qing’s elite Manchu Bannerman, as Qianlong denied local officials’ requests for these units, instead sending generous financial aid.⁴⁰ However, ordinary soldiers were already displaying characteristics that would later be maligned for decades when the Qing met the British military. Not only were the general soldiers too weak to face a disciplined fighting force by the mid-19th century, but the generals were also of subpar quality, “Those in the younger generation were comparatively soft from having grown up in such a prosperous age. Among them were a great number tainted by association with Heshen and his network of patronage, who couldn’t be fully trusted.”⁴¹ Incompetent generalship haunted the Jiaqing and Dauguang Emperors’ reigns, and when combined with the cowardice and undisciplined soldiers they commanded, it led to the catastrophic losses at the hands of Great Britain in the First Opium War. It is clear that the Qing Army’s failings were ripe to be exploited by an experienced and organized opposing force.

However, the status of the Qing Navy and coastal defenses must be examined, as Great Britain was a predominately naval power, and launched their campaigns on the Qing’s coastal frontier. The Manchus, being a nomadic dynasty with a military based almost entirely on land warfare, had far less experience with naval engagements. In the early 19th century, the Qing faced a pirate armada of nearly 150,000 sailors under Shi Yang, a threat that the Empire had not faced since the 1660s.⁴² The Qing navy at the time was in a deplorable state, “Its [the Qing navy’s] forces had little funding and morale was low. Commanders could not coordinate with one another, the skills of the sailors and captains were amateurish, and payrolls were usually in default. Ships that were lost in battle or wrecked in storms generally couldn’t be replaced.”⁴³ The Qing did invest more in their navy and

³⁸ Platt, 68.

³⁹ Platt, 68.

⁴⁰ Platt, 67.

⁴¹ Platt, 106.

⁴² Platt, 113.

⁴³ Platt, 114.

coastal defense and constructed new fleets to counter this threat after the White Lotus Rebellion was crushed in 1805.⁴⁴ However, these improvements were moderate at best. By offering amnesty, the Qing were able to diplomatically bring the pirates back under their control and even recruited some of them into their navy.⁴⁵ This is a brilliant and classic piece of Chinese diplomacy; settling a frontier conflict that cannot be solved by force of arms with an offer of peaceful absorption. It was also only a temporary solution to the Qing's naval woes, as the pirates that were recruited would be too old or deceased by the time of the First Opium War, and this same strategy could not be repeated against the British for various reasons. Aggravating this was the use of opium among the rank and file by the 1830s, "imperial troops transferred inland to pacify them turned out to be such heavy users of opium themselves that they could barely fight."⁴⁶ This left the Qing woefully unprepared when war erupted in 1839.

SOCIAL ISSUES

Administrative corruption, economic problems, and military weakness were compounded by troubling social realities that struck at the foundation of Qing rule. The Qing were Manchus, foreigners to China and the Han Chinese. Though the Manchus were a minority, they held a privileged position due to their power. Chesneaux writes, "Manchu dignitaries and nobles were in the majority at court, and Manchus outnumbered Chinese proportionally in the leading state offices. It was easier for a Manchu to gain promotion, even though there were rules providing for equal distribution of government posts among Manchus and Chinese."⁴⁷ Manchu became a second official language, and Manchuria, though possessing fertile farmland aplenty, was off-limits to Chinese peasant farmers.⁴⁸ The Manchu elite simultaneously attempted to retain their legitimacy while remaining apart from the dearth of subjects which they lorded over. Complicating social matters further was the existence of dozens of ethnic minorities within the Empire, people groups who were neither Manchu nor Han Chinese. These included the Zhuang, the Yi, the Miao,

⁴⁴ Platt, 110.

⁴⁵ Platt, 122.

⁴⁶ Platt, 303.

⁴⁷ Chesneaux, *China from the Opium Wars*, 19.

⁴⁸ Chesneaux, 19.

the Dungans, the Mongols, the Uighur Turks, and the Tibetans, among others.⁴⁹ Indeed, this is still a complicated issue causing trouble today. These regional conflicts show the fragmented nature of Qing Chinese society in the nineteenth century. Recent studies into these regional conflicts have produced theories regarding “macroregions.” These macroregions disregard traditional provincial borders, based on a “core” and a “periphery.”⁵⁰ Spence defines a core as an area displaying “heightened economic activity in major cities, high population density, and comparatively sophisticated transportation networks for conveyance of food and merchandise.”⁵¹ A periphery is the less developed, more rural region surrounding the core, which separates the core from the core of other macroregions and was generally poorly policed.⁵² Spence identifies nine macroregions, with examples including the northern microregion and its core of Peking, the middle Yangzi region centered at Hankou, and the lower east coast region, with the port of Amoy as its commercial center.⁵³ These macroregions serve to show just how disjointed the Qing empire was; all of these regions had vastly different social realities and economic systems. The northern region was based on small landholders producing cash crops, while the lower east coast region held many tenant farmers and merchants trading with Taiwan and southeast Asia.⁵⁴ The middle Yangzi region was dealing with a massive inflow of immigrants with loyalty to various home areas, while crime was common in the north and the lower east coast dealt with frequent blood feuds.⁵⁵ These regions possessed their own social structures and economic logic, often having very little to do with many of the other regions. These economic, social, and cultural differences posed a clear and present danger to the Qing, “If the centralizing state proved unable to mediate or control these conflicts, the result might be fragmentation or civil war.”⁵⁶ There were numerous cases of this in the 17th century, such as the Three Feudatories crisis. These macroregions, when combined with the economic disintegration of the periphery and the shift of

⁴⁹ Chesneau, 20.

⁵⁰ Spence, *Search for Modern China*, 91.

⁵¹ Spence, 91.

⁵² Spence, 91.

⁵³ Spence, 92.

⁵⁴ Spence, 91-92.

⁵⁵ Spence, 91-92.

⁵⁶ Spence, 93.

coastal regions' trade with southeast Asia as opposed to interior Qing China, facilitated uneven economic growth.⁵⁷ The coastal regions became richer, while the periphery and interior regions became poorer, making them more susceptible to the conflicts that ravaged the empire in the 19th century.

Another example of the social diversity of the Qing is the widespread existence of secret societies, with the Triads being the most well-known among them. "Basically they were organizations of political opposition to the Manchu dynasty. They swore loyalty to the Chinese Ming dynasty dethroned in the seventeenth century."⁵⁸ While secret societies in other nations have been benign, secret societies in the late-Qing were capable of dealing great blows to the established order. A famous instance of this is the White Lotus Rebellion, which raged for 8 years in the western region of the Empire, and an attempt within the palace itself was made a few short years later.⁵⁹ Sometimes these groups were comprised of religious dissidents, worshiping in popular, traditional rites. Many embraced feminism among other positions as a revolt against Confucian values. These groups demonstrate the discontent felt by many ruled by the Qing. These societies were often, but not always, involved in the many uprisings of the late-Qing dynasty, as Chesneau explains, "The secret societies were extremely active during this period, particularly the Triad and its branches in South China. They set themselves up as leaders of discontented peasants, organized attacks on *yamen* and official transport, defied the authorities, and terrorized all who refused to pay them tribute."⁶⁰ These groups have been compared to prates on numerous occasions, and while there are many similarities, a more timely example would be cartels or gangs in present-day North America. Many rebellions were centered on specific ethnic or religious minorities, who abhorred the mandarins' policies of assimilation and repression.⁶¹ Hong, a scholar who witnessed many rebellions during his time as a scholar-official, wrote that officials in areas where rebellions occurred were typically guilty of appropriating taxes, military funding, and court relief aid for

⁵⁷ Westad, *Restless Empire*, 25.

⁵⁸ Chesneau, *China from the Opium Wars*, 38.

⁵⁹ Chesneau, 38.

⁶⁰ Chesneau, 46.

⁶¹ Chesneau, 42.

themselves.⁶² In Hong's eyes, officials bore the blame for these outbreaks, "The county officials were not able to prevent the spread of heterodoxy by exerting good influences on the people, and when sectarianism spread, the officials would use the pretext of investigating heterodoxy to make demands on the people and threaten their lives, until the people joined the rebels."⁶³ Chesneaux argues that other forms of oppression were rampant, such as when mandarins' and traders colluded, "Officials who governed minority peoples were in league with Chinese traders who paid a low price for rare products (oils, minerals, furs, wool) and charged high for basic necessities like salt and tea."⁶⁴ This meant that the minorities on the Empire's fringes were constantly festering and on the verge of rebelling. Between 1820-1836, the southern and western regions of Qing China revolted in nine of those years to some capacity.⁶⁵

All of these chronic and systematic problems were compounded by the stressors of a massive population boom. While the statistics which we have provide only a rough estimate, there was a population increase of about 200,000,000 people between 1770-1840.⁶⁶ This was evident to scholars at the time, and is far from a construct created as a later explanation for weakness. Hong Liangji, writing in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, wrote, "But in the matter of population, it may be noted that today's population is five times as large as that of thirty years ago, ten times as large as that of sixty years ago, and not less than twenty times as large as that of one hundred years ago."⁶⁷ Hong suggests some potential solutions, such as migration and better grain storage, but ultimately writes, "after a period of peaceful rule, the ruler and the ministers cannot stop the people from reproducing, yet what the ruler and ministers can do for the people is limited to the policies above."⁶⁸ Hong acknowledges that food will run out and stops

⁶² Hong Liangji, "Memorial on the War Against Heterodoxy," in *Sources of Chinese Tradition: From 1600 Through the Twentieth Century*, 2nd ed., ed. Wm. Theodore de Bary and Richard Lufrano (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 179.

⁶³ Liangji, "Memorial on the War Against Heterodoxy," 178.

⁶⁴ Chesneaux, *China from the Opium Wars*, 42.

⁶⁵ Chesneaux, 45.

⁶⁶ Chesneaux, 47.

⁶⁷ Hong Liangji. "China's Population Problem," in *Sources of Chinese Tradition: From 1600 Through the Twentieth Century*, 2nd ed., ed. Wm. Theodore de Bary and Richard Lufrano (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 174.

⁶⁸ Liangji, "China's Population Problem," 175.

writing ominously, “the food for one person is inadequate for ten persons; how can it be adequate for a hundred persons? This is why I am worried about peaceful rule.”⁶⁹ This was one of the late-Qing’s many ominous questions.

Throughout Chinese history, population increases typically corresponded to an increase in crop yields. According to William Rowe, however, the boom of the Qing was different. “Throughout most periods of imperial history prior to the nineteenth century, increased population density per unit of land had led to higher rather than lower food yields, since labor, not land, was in relatively short supply.”⁷⁰ The empires occupying modern-day China had always been underpopulated, with only 100 million people living in the area in 1400.⁷¹ However by around the year 1800, the agrarian land available was at maximum capacity, and an ever-increasing amount of people exhausted an already limited resource.⁷² The Qing alleviated this by militaristic expansion. From the early years of Qing rule to the mid-1700s, Qing armies pushed north into Mongolia and west into Central Asia, opening vast swaths for cultivation. In the mid-18th century, this expansion stagnated. Spence notes that rough figures indicate that from the mid-Kangxi years to the late Qianlong, the population triples while available land only doubled.⁷³ According to Chesneau, government figures indicate that the amount of land under cultivation decreased slightly, from 741 million mu in 1766 to 737 million in 1833.⁷⁴ Taken together, these numbers seem to indicate a severe slowdown in acreage made available in the mid to late 18th century from a rate that was already unsustainable. Some have postulated that there was a source of relief, “The effects of demographic pressure were no doubt partially allayed by the introduction of crops from America. The arrival of the sweet potato and corn enabled peasants to bring large new areas into cultivation in the hills of Central China, in the mountainous borderlands of the West and Southwest, and especially in Yunnan.”⁷⁵ This may have allowed more food to be grown in certain regions, but that is not to say that there weren’t

⁶⁹ Liangji, 176.

⁷⁰ Rowe, *China’s Last Empire*, 150.

⁷¹ Rowe, 150.

⁷² Rowe, 150.

⁷³ Spence, *Search for Modern China*, 95.

⁷⁴ Chesneau, *China from the Opium Wars*, 47.

⁷⁵ Chesneau, 47.

consequences. For example, growing corn in the Southwest eroded the soil and caused floods.⁷⁶ Spence also argued that though new land could be opened, these new crops paradoxically inflamed the demographic problem, “because the crops all grew well in poor, hilly, or sandy soil, they enabled the population to rise rapidly in areas of otherwise marginal productivity, where alternate sources of food or gainful employment were rare.”⁷⁷ The fact of the matter remains that by 1812 acreage per capita was down to less than half an acre per person.⁷⁸ Coupled with population growth was increased unemployment, and the rice-producing regions struggled to meet their own needs, let alone that of the less fertile provinces.⁷⁹

While the population boom was certainly responsible for pushing people down in late-Qing society, it was also responsible for pushing them out. Sichuan, a province on the outskirts of the Han cultural core areas located to the east, saw mass migration to its fertile regions. Indicative of the pressure of the uncontrollable population growth is that even far less productive land was desirable. “Even its eastern border mountains were filling up with refugees.”⁸⁰ Han and Hakka competed for scarce land in the Guangxi river valleys while waves of Han migrants to Hunan triggered violent confrontations with the Miao.⁸¹ The Yangzi river valley, which would become the heart of the Taiping rebellion just years after the First Opium War, was among the most crowded areas. In short, there was a trend toward underemployment, impoverishment, and starvation. The horrendously violent revolts of the nineteenth century took place against this backdrop, providing reasonable cause to popular discontent.

OPIUM

Opium could certainly have been covered in a previous section, but the importance that it plays in the historical narrative is great, and it is thus deserving of its own treatment. Firstly, it is important to establish that opium had been present in mainland Asia for centuries,

⁷⁶ Chesneau, 48.

⁷⁷ Spence, *Search for Modern China*, 95.

⁷⁸ Rowe, *China's Last Empire*, 150.

⁷⁹ Chesneau, *China from the Opium Wars*, 48.

⁸⁰ Jones and Kuhn, “Dynastic Decline,” 109.

⁸¹ Jones and Kuhn, 110-111.

and was not forced on the Qing by European merchants. Opium was in considerable demand in the early 19th century, and the region was no stranger to the substance. There are records of poppy cultivation as far back as the 8th century Tang Dynasty.⁸² The Ming and early Qing Dynasties taxed opium as a legitimate medicinal product, and doctors praised its ability to ease a wide range of ailments, from intestinal distress to a bad cough.⁸³ The smoking of opium was introduced via Taiwan in the early 18th century and promptly banned by the Yongzheng Emperor.⁸⁴ However, from that to the early 19th century, there is no evidence of a crackdown by the Qing on opium traders or smokers.⁸⁵ This is likely due in part to the fact that during that time the supply of opium had not yet exploded, so the drug was essentially confined to the wealthy. Indeed, multiple British officials were approached in the late 18th and early 19th centuries by their Chinese counterparts attempting to obtain the drug. To British observers, there seemed to be no stigma against the drug among the elite, as it was considered a luxury and sign of high social status.⁸⁶

The drug began its meteoric rise in Qing China in 1820, and by 1830 over 18,000 130 to 160-pound chests of opium were being imported into Canton yearly.⁸⁷ Even in 1820, enough opium was already being imported to satiate the habit of over one million addicts.⁸⁸ This did not include the domestic opium market, a much smaller but not insignificant supplement to the foreign trade. Opium grown domestically or obtained from, the Silk Road was cheaper than that brought from India to Canton, but the Qing upper class was seeking a status symbol. Qing China has been stereotyped by many Western academics as an isolationist, backward, and overall closed off society. In flagrant contradiction to these stereotypes, the wealthy were eager for foreign items, meaning that the demand for British opium was much higher than the demand for more local supplies of the drug.⁸⁹ This in spite of the fact that opium trading and use were technically illegal under the Qing legal code. The opium trade could

⁸² Platt, *Imperial Twilight*, 223.

⁸³ Platt, 223

⁸⁴ Platt, 224.

⁸⁵ Platt, 224.

⁸⁶ Platt, 195.

⁸⁷ Platt, 199.

⁸⁸ Spence, *Search for Modern China*, 129.

⁸⁹ Platt, *Imperial Twilight*, 227.

not have grown as rapidly as it did without the help of unscrupulous officials, who accepted bribes routinely from Chinese traders.

Use of the drug penetrated all levels of society, with many eunuchs in the Forbidden City likely to have been addicted.⁹⁰ Even Jiaqing's heir, Prince Mianning was a smoker. He wrote, "I ask the servant to prepare smoke and a pipe to inhale. Each time, my mind suddenly becomes clear, my eyes and ears refreshed. People in the past said that wine is endowed with all the virtues, but today I call smoke the satisfier."⁹¹ Jiaqing became more concerned as the second decade of the 19th century wore on, writing, "before long, it will steal their life and kill them."⁹² The main problem facing the Jiaqing Emperor was that because opium had been used by Qing elites for decades, it was becoming a respectable pastime. This combined with the rapidly increasing supply meant that opium was potentially on the verge of a massive boom. In 1820, Prince Mianning, the embodiment of Qing imperial privilege, became the Daoguang Emperor, and despite his personal habit, he would carry forth his father's work on what was perceived as a critical threat to his already fragile empire. In the early years of his reign, the Daoguang Emperor called officials who took bribes from opium smugglers "traitors." He also declared opium, "a great harm to the morals and customs of the people."⁹³ This moralizing is unlikely to have been effective, especially as the Qing continued to lose prestige, and at least in his early years, Daoguang was unwilling to act swiftly and harshly in his southern provinces.

This changed as opium began to tighten its grip throughout the first decade of Daoguang's reign, launching him into a heightened state of concern by 1830, "opium is flooding the interior. The multitude of users expands day by day, and there are more and more people who sell it; they are like fire and smoke, destroying our resources and harming our people."⁹⁴ Realizing the extent of the problem, especially among bureaucrats, Daoguang attempted a crackdown in 1831, only to find that the most important traders and den operators were protected by their connections, stymying his ability to intervene. Daoguang adopted a policy of lenience toward the

⁹⁰ Platt, 224.

⁹¹ Platt, 222.

⁹² Platt, 225.

⁹³ Platt, 225.

⁹⁴ Platt, 229.

common opium addict, hoping to show that he truly cared for his subjects and didn't want to compound the hardships that they faced.⁹⁵ This hands-off approach did little to halt the narcotics tide flooding in from the South Sea. But why did opium smoking become so rampant in late-Qing society? With no literature on the subject surviving, historians can only raise educated guesses. One theory is that opium appeals to those who are attempting to manage intensely stressful situations.⁹⁶ In an overcrowded, politically corrupt, financially troubled society, many would have found comfort in an escape from harassment from civil servants or their lack of economic opportunity. Perhaps mandarins with wasteful jobs or wealthy women trapped in their compounds abused the drug due to boredom. Laborers may have smoked to numb the pain of long, brutal workdays. It seems that opium was not a primary problem, but a symptom of the wider issues facing the Qing at a more fundamental level. Regardless, it did contribute to the Qing's steep decline of the 19th century.

DISSENT

Naturally, there is no true consensus on these matters. Odd Arne Westad, a professor at the London School of Economics and Political Science, makes an argument that foreign factors, not domestic, were primarily responsible for Qing weakness. This is predictable, as the author in question is an expert on international history. This school of thought challenges the importance and often the existence of some of the domestic issues that have received much credence in the past. For example, Westad writes, "In terms of population growth, fertility rates in China seem to have increased in ways comparable to European populations."⁹⁷ Additionally, Westad argues, "By the early 19th century, the Chinese economy was stable but not flourishing."⁹⁸ Unfortunately, it isn't clear what statistics are being used to derive these revisionist assumptions, and thus difficult to reconcile them with the numerous sources emphasizing the matters Westad downplays. The problems that Westad sees as the most relevant to 19th century Qing weakness are misrule, foreign invasion, wars, and

⁹⁵ Platt, 232.

⁹⁶ Spence, *Search for Modern China*, 131.

⁹⁷ Westad, *Restless Empire*, 24.

⁹⁸ Westad, 24.

rebellions.⁹⁹ Interestingly, while he claims to be arguing that foreign causes were primarily responsible for Qing weakness, at least two of the causes which he lists are primarily internal. Obviously, both foreign and domestic factors played significant roles, and Westad concedes that concerns were mounting by 1800. At the same time, he introduces internal concerns yet to be extrapolated here, such as the loss of prestige suffered under the reigns of the Emperors Jiaqing and Daoguang. “Jiaqing’s role had diminished the stature of the Emperor, and the weakness of the office haunted his son and successor, Daoguang, during his thirty-year reign.”¹⁰⁰

In conclusion, it seems that the position that the Qing were defeated in the First Opium War due to outside factors is taken only when ample evidence to the contrary is disregarded. By the 19th century, the Qing civil service had grown corrupt and based on patronage to such a degree that the Emperor himself considered it to be irreparable. A financial crisis, developing from a combination of incompetent policy, a woefully inefficient tax system, and the trend of global markets brought predictable hardship. A military that had fallen into disrepair due to a prolonged peace, the vastness of the land it was expected to protect, lack of financial support, inept leadership, drug addiction, and lack of discipline proved itself ineffective decades before the British campaign commenced in 1839. The social order was dynamic, composed of many groups with varying and often competing interests. Complex social issues such as overpopulation, massive internal migration, regional isolation, frequent rebellions, and the multiethnic nature and religious diversity of the peoples under Qing rule complicated governance. Adding to all of these problems was opium, infecting all levels of the social hierarchy exploiting the disaffection and futility already experienced by millions. Imposing order in such a chaotic environment was challenging in times of peace and prosperity and proved nearly impossible in the middle of a prolonged and steady imperial decline. Given all of these complications, it becomes clear that the British victory was made possible by internal crises and incompetence, with British military might playing a much less significant role than previously assumed.

⁹⁹ Westad, 25.

¹⁰⁰ Westad, 23.

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