

ENGLISH LEARNING FOR CURIOUS MINDS



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Episode #093

The Opium Wars

29 Sept, 2020

[00:00:00] Hello, hello hello, and welcome to English Learning for Curious Minds, by Leonardo English, the show where you can listen to fascinating stories, and learn weird and wonderful things about the world at the same time as improving your English.

[00:00:21] I'm Alastair Budge and today we are going to be talking about The [Opium¹](#) Wars, the conflict mainly between China and Britain in the mid-19th century that all started because of drugs.

[00:00:35] It's an amazing story, not many people in Britain, or in Europe for that matter, know much about it, but it is incredibly important when it comes to understanding China, the Chinese [mentality²](#), and China today.

¹ a powerful drug made from poppy seeds

² a way of thinking about things

The Opium Wars

[00:00:50] So, without further ado, let's get started.

[00:00:55] Let's [wind the clocks back](#)³ 200 years or so, to the start of the 19th century.

[00:01:01] It's almost the height of the British empire. India is under British control, trade is [flourishing](#)⁴, or rather, British merchants are getting incredibly rich through [exploiting](#)⁵ the natural resources of British colonies, and purely from a '[world standing](#)⁶ point of view, there aren't many better times to be a Brit.

[00:01:22] China, although it may not have had colonial [ambitions](#)⁷, is still the world's biggest country by a long way, and in 1800 about 1 in 3 people on the planet were Chinese, or rather, fell under the authority of the Qing emperor, the Chinese emperor.

[00:01:42] Partly because it was such a large, varied country, and partly for cultural reasons, China didn't trade with the rest of the world in the same way that Britain did.

[00:01:53] Britain was, and I should say, still is, a small, quite crowded, island without an [abundance](#)⁸ of natural resources. It did need to trade, and grew fabulously wealthy through trade enabled by its colonies.

³ to go back in time

⁴ growing and succeeding

⁵ using something in a way that helps you

⁶ how a country is viewed in the world

⁷ wishes to do or achieve something

⁸ large quantities

The Opium Wars

[00:02:10] And people in Britain, the middle and upper classes in Britain at least, had started to develop quite a taste for several goods that China had [in abundance](#).

[00:02:22] Specifically, [silk](#)⁹, tea, and [porcelain](#)¹⁰, or [china](#)¹¹ with a small C.

[00:02:29] At the end of the 18th century, British merchants were buying an increasing amount of goods from China, but the Chinese weren't buying anything from the British.

[00:02:41] This caused a big trade [imbalance](#)¹², so there was a lot of silver [flowing out](#)¹³ of Britain to China, and only tea, [silk](#) and [porcelain](#) flowing back to Britain.

[00:02:52] Now, a trade [imbalance per se](#)¹⁴ isn't a terrible thing, but it looked like this addiction to Chinese goods was [draining](#)¹⁵ the British supplies of silver, it was running out of silver because it was all being sent to China.

[00:03:09] So the British needed to find some way of getting the Chinese to buy something of theirs.

⁹ a delicate, soft cloth made from a thread produced by silkworms

¹⁰ a hard but delicate white substance, often used for plates and cups

¹¹ see 'porcelain'

¹² a situation where two things are unequal

¹³ going out

¹⁴ by itself

¹⁵ using up, using all of

The Opium Wars

[00:03:15] One **logistical**¹⁶ problem with this was that there technically weren't diplomatic relations between the Qing emperor and the British empire, so there was no **basis**¹⁷ on which to trade. The Qing emperor was used to a **tribute system**¹⁸, where people would come to him bringing **tribute**¹⁹, bringing gifts, and acknowledging the fact that the emperor was the **superior player**²⁰. This wasn't a relationship of equals.

[00:03:45] The British had tried to take part in this system, and in 1793 they had sent a diplomat called Lord George Macartney to try to build relations with the Qing emperor.

[00:03:58] Unfortunately he failed miserably, and the emperor wrote a letter back to the King of England saying:

[00:04:06] "Our **celestial**²¹ empire possesses all things in **prolific**²² **abundance** and lacks no product within its borders. There is, therefore, no need to import the **manufactures**²³ of outside **barbarians**²⁴ in exchange for our own produce."

¹⁶ related to how something is practically done

¹⁷ facts or ideas from which something can be developed

¹⁸ a system where gifts are presented to a leader

¹⁹ gifts

²⁰ the more powerful of two or more people

²¹ relating to the skies or gods

²² very large

²³ products

²⁴ members of a group from a different country

The Opium Wars

[00:04:25] So, there you go, quite a [put-down](#)²⁵, right?

[00:04:29] The Chinese didn't want to buy anything that the British were selling, everything they needed existed [in abundance](#) inside China, so it looked like the British were going to need to try something else.

[00:04:42] And you can probably guess what that something else was, given the title of this episode.

[00:04:48] [Opium](#). The drug that can be extracted from [poppies](#)²⁶.

[00:04:53] In the early 1800s, the British East India company started exporting [opium](#) from Bengal, in India, to China.

[00:05:02] This wasn't the first time that [opium](#) had been brought to China, but the quantities in which it was imported were like nothing before.

[00:05:12] Sure enough, the trade [imbalance swung](#)²⁷ the other way, and instead of it being Britain that was sending silver to China, it was Chinese silver that was flowing back to Britain in order to pay for all of the [opium](#) that its people were smoking.

[00:05:28] The Chinese knew the problems that [opium](#) could cause, and it had been banned in China since 1729.

²⁵ something said intended to make someone feel stupid or small

²⁶ a plant with brightly coloured, usually red flowers

²⁷ went

The Opium Wars

[00:05:37] However, although China did have one of the world's oldest and largest bureaucratic systems, it often didn't work very well, especially the further away you got from Beijing.

[00:05:49] There's a Chinese saying that goes Tiān gāo, huángdì yuǎn, which is typically translated as "Heaven is high and the emperor is far away".

[00:06:00] The only open port to foreigners was Canton, modern day Guangzhou, right to the south of China, in the Pearl River Delta, close to Hong Kong, and thousands of kilometres away from Beijing.

[00:06:14] The British would [smuggle](#)²⁸ the [opium](#) into Canton, and even though [opium](#) was technically illegal, the profits to be made were too hard to ignore for local merchants and bureaucrats.

[00:06:28] The south of China was flooded with [opium](#), and it's estimated that around ten million people were using the drug, of whom around 2 million were [addicts](#)²⁹.

[00:06:41] The [sheer](#)³⁰ numbers certainly suggest that the demand was there: from the year 1810 to 1839 the amount of [opium](#) imported to China jumped from 10,000 [chests](#)³¹

²⁸ to take things from one place to another secretly (and often illegally)

²⁹ people who cannot stop using something

³⁰ used to emphasis how great or important something is

³¹ large containers

The Opium Wars

, which is about 600 tonnes to 40,000, so almost two and a half thousand tonnes of [opium](#) every year.

[00:07:03] The emperor wasn't initially sure what should be done to combat this, and you can probably recognise the thought process that countries and governments are still going through today.

[00:07:14] Should he punish the dealers, the people selling the drugs or the [users](#)³², the people using the drugs? What was the most effective way to get rid of this drug that was causing huge problems in large parts of Chinese society, turning bureaucrats and soldiers into [drug addicts](#)?

[00:07:32] In the end, he decided to punish the dealers.

[00:07:37] He sent a capable and ambitious government official, a man named Lin Zexu to Canton, to the south of China.

[00:07:45] Lin Zexu was not good news for the British [opium](#) dealers. He ordered the British [opium](#) merchants to hand over to him their supplies of [opium](#), so that he could destroy them.

³² people who use something, e.g. drugs

The Opium Wars

[00:07:58] After some [tense](#)³³ weeks of negotiations, and [assurances](#)³⁴ from a top British diplomat that the British merchants would be [compensated](#)³⁵ for their [opium](#) by the British government, the merchants handed it over to Lin, and it was then destroyed, it was burnt by the Chinese.

[00:08:17] This was a big problem for the British government. The official who had promised the traders that they would be [compensated](#) didn't really have the authority to do it, and now the government was [on the hook](#)³⁶ for today's equivalent of tens of millions of pounds, for drugs, remember.

[00:08:36] Plus, it was a huge insult to Britain. It wasn't used to being [pushed around](#)³⁷ and told what to do. Normally it was Britain that [pushed other people around](#).

[00:08:47] So Britain responded in its tried and tested way. Force.

[00:08:53] In early 1840 it sent a force up the Pearl River, towards Canton, towards Guangzhou. The Chinese forces were no match for the British, who had faster boats with more powerful weapons, and they were swiftly defeated.

³³ worrying, making you anxious

³⁴ promises

³⁵ given money in exchange for something that has been lost or damaged

³⁶ if you are on the hook for something, it means you need to do it. It's usually used for paying a debt.

³⁷ tell someone to do something in an impolite or bullying way

The Opium Wars

[00:09:11] But the British didn't stop at Canton. Subsequent [campaigns](#)³⁸ went further north, using the Chinese canal network, and they even captured Nanjing, the southern capital of China.

[00:09:24] By 1842 the [campaign](#) was over, and Britain decided it was [payback time](#)³⁹, it wanted [compensation](#)⁴⁰ for the lost [opium](#), it wanted [compensation](#) for the cost of the war, and while it was at it, it wanted to get as much out of China as it possibly could.

[00:09:43] And China wasn't really in any position to argue with the British demands, and a treaty was formed.

[00:09:51] This gave Britain the deep-water port at Hong Kong, a big [compensation payout](#)⁴¹, five new ports that it could use to trade, something called [extraterritoriality](#)⁴², so that British [expats](#)⁴³ in these ports would be under British, not Chinese law, and finally, a 'most favoured nation' clause, which meant that if China did any further deals with any other countries, these rights would automatically apply to Britain as well.

³⁸ planned military activities

³⁹ time for revenge

⁴⁰ money that is given in exchange for something that's been lost

⁴¹ see 'compensation'

⁴² the right of foreign citizens to be under the laws of their own country, not the laws of the country they are in

⁴³ people who do not live in their own country

The Opium Wars

[00:10:22] And what did China get in return? Nothing. The only thing that they didn't [concede](#)⁴⁴ to Britain was that [opium](#) still wasn't legalised.

[00:10:32] This was the first of what has come to be known as the 'unequal treaties'. You can see where the name comes from.

[00:10:39] Britain got a [foothold](#)⁴⁵ into China, and continued to [flood](#)⁴⁶ the country with increasing amounts of [opium](#), even though it was still illegal. But given the British presence in the ports, and the fact that they had seen what the British were capable of, there wasn't a huge amount that the Chinese could do to stop them.

[00:11:01] It wasn't to be the end of the fighting though.

[00:11:04] Just 15 years later, in October 1856, the Chinese arrested the crew of a British ship, and Britain saw this as an excuse to put more pressure on China to open up to British trade.

[00:11:20] British forces attacked Canton, but this time they were joined by the French, who had used the execution of a French Christian [missionary](#)⁴⁷ as an excuse to join the campaign and see what [concessions](#)⁴⁸ they could also extract from the Chinese.

⁴⁴ admit, given in

⁴⁵ a position from which you can make progress

⁴⁶ fill

⁴⁷ someone who has been sent to live in a foreign country to teach their religion

⁴⁸ things that are given up

The Opium Wars

[00:11:37] The French and the British fought a series of battles against the Chinese for the next 4 years, [culminating](#)⁴⁹ in the burning of the emperor's summer palace just outside Beijing, which was ordered by a British diplomat called Lord Elgin.

[00:11:54] Now, on the subject of British diplomats called Elgin, if you recognise the name and are thinking about the Elgin marbles, the marble statues from the Parthenon, these were actually bought by his father, another Lord Elgin. So one is responsible for taking the marbles away from Greece, the other is responsible for the burning of a beautiful summer palace. This family's record isn't looking too great, is it?

[00:12:20] OK then, I [digress](#)⁵⁰.

[00:12:22] On the 18th of October 1860, the Treaty of Beijing was signed and the second [Opium](#) War was over.

[00:12:31] This handed over even more rights to the British and the French, including giving the British Kowloon, the part opposite Hong Kong island, as well as official legalisation of the [opium](#) trade and the right for Christian [missionaries](#) to have the same rights as ordinary Chinese citizens.

[00:12:49] So, that's what happened, but where it really gets interesting is what this actually means.

⁴⁹ finishing, ending up

⁵⁰ move away from the main point

The Opium Wars

[00:12:56] Firstly, the story of the [Opium](#) Wars is something that isn't well known at all in the UK. It's not taught in history classes, it's not something that's in popular culture, people just don't really know about it.

[00:13:11] In China, everyone knows about it. Children are taught about it in school, it's often referenced by government officials, and it has most certainly not been forgotten.

[00:13:23] You might think that this is strange - normally the [victors](#)⁵¹ in any battle or war are the ones more likely to continue to talk about it, not the party that came off worse.

[00:13:37] For China, the point is to never forget this humiliation, never forget how a once great country was forced to give in to these unequal demands, and forced to do something against its will.

[00:13:52] This was the first time that China had been conquered, it was the end of ancient China, and it was hugely embarrassing. All Chinese should know about this so that it can never happen again.

[00:14:06] There's a saying that Chinese students still learn today about the [Opium](#) Wars, and that's Luòhòu jiù yào āidǎ - literally it means something like "if you fall behind, you will be beaten".

⁵¹ winners

The Opium Wars

[00:14:20] In the case of the [opium](#) Wars, China did fall behind, and it was beaten. The British were superior militarily, and that was in a large part because the country had got rich through empire, and through trade.

[00:14:37] China was closed off, closed to outsiders, and hadn't modernised in the same way as European powers had. It's estimated that the Chinese military was about 200 years behind the British, which explains why it was defeated so quickly.

[00:14:55] That must never happen again.

[00:14:58] The impact that these unequal treaties had on China was huge, and the first [Opium](#) War was the start of what China called its century of humiliation, before the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949.

[00:15:14] Arguably the fact that China was so weakened after these treaties led it to be such a [fertile](#)⁵² ground for the ideas of two foreigners, a German and a Russian, Engels and Lenin, and ultimately the fact that China became a communist power.

[00:15:32] It certainly wasn't destined to be, as up to 1912 it had had a monarchy since prehistoric times.

[00:15:41] In a strange twist of fate, while it may have been the Westerners who were the terrible drug producers, flooding the streets of China with cheap [opium](#) back in the 19th century, in 2020 at least, the tables have somewhat turned.

⁵² easy for something new to develop

The Opium Wars

[00:15:58] The [opioid⁵³](#) epidemic is causing havoc on the streets of the United States, and the majority of the fentanyl, the [synthetic⁵⁴](#) opioid, that arrives in the US, it comes from China. Although it would be easy to draw parallels with The [Opium](#) Wars, and it's certainly an easy headline, it's not a full, state-sponsored war in order to push drugs on a population.

[00:16:24] And this, for me, is one of the strangest things about the [Opium](#) War, that it was a full, state-sponsored drug war, really, fought to protect the rights of British drug dealers. There is some debate about whether the war was fought really just for [opium](#), or rather it was for trade in general, but whatever the reason actually was, [opium](#), a drug, was the ingredient that [sparked it all off⁵⁵](#).

[00:16:53] And when you now think that there is a war on drugs, a war on the drug producers, it's strange to think that not too long ago one of the most powerful countries in the world went to war when another country took its drugs away.

[00:17:10] OK then, that is it for today's episode on The [Opium](#) Wars. If you're Chinese, you probably know all about this already, but if you're not Chinese, well I hope you've learned something new.

[00:17:23] As always, I'd love to know what you thought of the episode.

⁵³ a class of drugs that includes heroin, fentanyl, and OxyContin

⁵⁴ made of artificial substances

⁵⁵ caused it to happen

The Opium Wars

[00:17:27] The place to go for that now is our lovely new community, which is community.leonardoenglish.com. There's a section on that called 'Podcasts', so head on in and ask any questions you might have. I'll be there.

[00:17:41] You've been listening to English Learning for Curious Minds, by Leonardo English.

[00:17:45] I'm Alastair Budge, you stay safe, and I'll catch you in the next episode.

[END OF PODCAST]

Key vocabulary

Word	Definition
Opium	a powerful drug made from poppy seeds
Mentality	a way of thinking about things
Wind the clocks back	to go back in time
Flourishing	growing and succeeding
Exploiting	using something in a way that helps you
World standing	how a country is viewed in the world
Ambitions	wishes to do or achieve something
Abundance	large quantities
Silk	a delicate, soft cloth made from a thread produced by silkworms
Porcelain	a hard but delicate white substance, often used for plates and cups
China	see 'porcelain'
Imbalance	a situation where two things are unequal
Flowing out	going out

The Opium Wars

Per se	by itself
Draining	using up, using all of
Logistical	related to how something is practically done
Basis	facts or ideas from which something can be developed
Tribute system	a system where gifts are presented to a leader
Tribute	gifts
Superior player	the more powerful of two or more people
Celestial	relating to the skies or gods
Prolific	very large
Manufactures	products
Barbarians	members of a group from a different country
Put-down	something said intended to make someone feel stupid or small
Poppies	a plant with brightly coloured, usually red flowers
Swung	went
Smuggle	to take things from one place to another secretly (and often illegally)

The Opium Wars

Addicts	people who cannot stop using something
Sheer	used to emphasis how great or important something is
Chests	large containers
Users	people who use something, e.g. drugs
Tense	worrying, making you anxious
Assurances	promises
Compensated	given money in exchange for something that has been lost or damaged
On the hook	if you are on the hook for something, it means you need to do it. It's usually used for paying a debt.
Pushed around	tell someone to do something in an impolite or bullying way
Campaigns	planned military activities
Payback time	time for revenge
Compensation	money that is given in exchange for something that's been lost
Compensation payout	see 'compensation'
Extraterritoriality	the right of foreign citizens to be under the laws of their own country, not the

The Opium Wars

laws of the country they are in

Expats

people who do not live in their own country

Concede

admit, given in

Foothold

a position from which you can make progress

Flood

fill

Missionary

someone who has been sent to live in a foreign country to teach their religion

Concessions

things that are given up

Culminating

finishing, ending up

Digress

move away from the main point

Victors

winners

Fertile

easy for something new to develop

Opioid

a class of drugs that includes heroin, fentanyl, and OxyContin

Synthetic

made of artificial substances

Sparked it all off

caused it to happen

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