Why did the British start the Opium War?

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The Opium War of 1840-42 remains a significant development in Sino-Western relations, such that a large part of scholarship surrounding the conflict, to date, seeks to ascertain its causes. This essay specifically aims to determine why the British started the Opium War, and utilises two broad categories to discuss the range of arguments that make up the debate. These concern the "traditional": honour, cultural/progressive, and economic/trade arguments, as well as more "critical" perspectives considering: domestic political crises of Britain and Qing China at the time, opium itself as a commodity in Sino-British trade, and the actions of private merchants as part of the Warlike Party in Canton and Britain. These categorical frameworks take directly from those outlined by scholars such as Chen Song-Chuan, and James L. Hevia.[1] Overall, I hope to demonstrate that while traditional arguments no longer hold much credence, critical perspectives provoke continued analysis – with the aforementioned political crises providing some support as factors; the opium trade and the Warlike Party possessing the most convincing arguments as perhaps equal and direct causes of the Opium War, due to both having engineered pivotal moments of confrontation from which conflict was inescapable.

Firstly, in review of the "traditional" arguments for why the British started the Opium War, it is important to note that its three dominant strains have been organised here under self-created, broad, umbrella terms – whereby each perspective can encompass a number of smaller arguments. To being with, one criticism asserted by James Hevia is that each of the "traditional" arguments have suffered from their tendency to over-generalise the realities of Sino-Western relations.[2] The honour argument itself, as posited by the likes of Glenn

[1] Song-Chuan Chen, *Merchants of War and Peace: British Knowledge of China in the Making of the Opium War* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2017), pp. 6-8; James L. Hevia, 'Opium, Empire, and Modern History', *China Review International*, 10:2 (2003), 307-326 (308; 323-324).
[2] Hevia, 'Opium, Empire, and Modern History', p. 311.

Melancon and Harry Gelber, conveys this sense of naivety in asserting that the upholding and defence of values can be taken at surface-level as the sole reason why Britain went to war when confronted by the Qing in Canton.[3] Even where this argument does receive support from Hevia, his emphasis on the importance of examining primary sources ultimately backfires – instead highlighting true, hidden, intentions linked to honour driving action towards warfare.[4] James Matheson, as a prominent member of the Warlike Party of private-merchants (who consistently lobbied the British government to pursue warfare) is a good point of reference here – with Hevia detailing Matheson's belief that 'honour was fused with national and individual commercial interests' in his 'jeremiad' following the Napier incident (1834).[5] Michael Greenberg's research similarly extracts, in Matheson's own words, that 'the grand cardinal point of the expedition' concerned the 'future mode of conducting the foreign trade in China'.[6]

In this sense then, the honour argument loses credibility due to the underlying desires of the private-merchant class in Britain – but quite importantly, these incentives were not always in adjunction to the motivations of defending honour, but also entirely displaced them, as Greenberg shows. Indeed, this is strengthened by Chen Song-Chuan, who asserts the more sophisticated argument that the actions of the Warlike Party were directly responsible for the Opium War – whereby their intentions were purely to expand British trade networks in China, with honour acting as a convenient justification for action.[7] Taking into account the acknowledgement amongst scholars, such as Hevia, Chen, and Hao, that the British government's own domestic political crises also gave them reason to initiate warfare in order

[3] Hevia, 'Opium, Empire, and Modern History', pp. 308-309; Chen, *Merchants of War and Peace*, p. 6.
[4] Ibid., pp. 309-311.
[5] Ibid., p. 309; Chen, *Merchants of War and Peace*, pp. 3-4; Gao Hao, 'Prelude to the Opium War? British reactions to the 'Napier Fizzle' and attitudes towards China in the mid eighteen-thirties', *Historical Research*, 87:237 (2014), 491-509 (492-493).
[6] Michael Greenberg, *British Trade and The Opening of China, 1800-42*, digital edition (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 212.
[7] Chen, *Merchants of War and Peace*, pp. 1-6.

to relieve the cabinet of pressure – which they could similarly silence by 'raising the banner of national honour' – thus underlines this twofold.[8] Ultimately, attempts to attribute war to one given value, and generalise in doing so, prove to be problematic – Melancon's own subtle admittance of this signifies this.[9] Such analysis portrays the honour argument as largely diminished; other factors such as the Warlike Party, and British political crises, instead positing more convincing explanations of the Opium War.

Reviewing the cultural/progressive and economic/trade arguments against Hevia's overgeneralisation issue leads in a similar direction. A large part of this issue stems from a related overarching problem with the "traditional" arguments – the concept of inevitability, which tends to originate from the theory surrounding these perspectives.[10] The cultural/progressive argument, for instance, is mostly characterised by 'modernisation' theory and thus consists of many variations on the theme of an enlightened Britain coming into confrontation with an 'insular' and 'benighted' China.[11] By virtue of its supposed superiority, Britain therefore proceeds to "modernise" China through the Opium War – hence assertations about clashes between cultures, as posited by the likes of John K. Fairbank and Li Chien-nung, and those about modernity clashing with a less progressive or "backward" Country.[12] The economic/trade argument has a similar narrative, whereby Britain's globally expanding trade network reaches a deadlock when confronted by China's restrictive and thoroughly regulated Canton system, and turns to conflict in order to overcome this.[13] What is observable

[8] Hevia, 'Opium, Empire, and Modern History', pp. 309-310; Chen, *Merchants of War and Peace*, pp. 7-8; Hao, 'Prelude to the Opium War?', p. 491.
[9] Hevia, 'Opium, Empire, and Modern History', pp. 309-311.
[10] Ibid., pp. 308-311, 323; Chen, *Merchants of War and Peace*, p. 6.
[11] Ibid., p. 6; Hevia, 'Opium, Empire, and Modern History', pp. 308-311.
[12] Chen, *Merchants of War and Peace*, p. 6; Hevia, 'Opium, Empire, and Modern History', pp. 308-311, 323; Tan Chung, 'Interpretations of the Opium War (1840-1842): A Critical Appraisal', *Ch'ing-shih wen-t'i*, 3:1 (1977), 32-46 (32-33).
[13] Chen, *Merchants of War and Peace*, p. 6; Hevia, 'Opium, Empire, and Modern History', pp. 308-311; Chung, 'Interpretations of the Opium War', p. 41.

in both cases then is the idea that not only was conflict naturally occurring due to fundamental differences, as highlighted by Hevia, but that Sino-Western relations were inherently negative and their cultures diametrically opposed to one another – a picture that does not give any consideration to further nuances.[14] Thus, Britain was either fulfilling "naturally" occurring economic expansion, as per Michael Greenberg and Hsin-pao Chang in following the logic of the economic theory underpinning their respective works, or the proliferation of its cultural norms over a stagnant civilisation.[15] Most important here between the "traditional" perspectives is how the concept of inevitability falters in each given scenario. For instance, the work of Chen nullifies the inevitability of warfare even in relation to the honour argument by discussing the Pacific Party, who countered the campaigns of the Warlike Party in Canton, alongside similar expressions of anti-war sentiment being voiced in Britain itself. Consequently, "knowledge production" in Canton is shown to be not an entirely one-sided affair, and the lobbying of the British government by the private merchant class as one in competition with other perspectives – not least considering debates within the cabinet revolving around the war question.[16]

In dismantling inevitability in relation to cultural/progressive arguments, the work of Tan Chung is particularly critical of the arguments posited by John King Fairbank and Li Chien-nung amongst others supporting 'cultural conflict theory'.[17] The misunderstanding and misinterpretation of Sino-Western relations seems to form the basis of the critiques presented by Chung – whether unintentionally by scholars, or willingly by proponents of warfare campaigns such as the Warlike Party, who were then able to weaponize this.[18] Thus, there is an irony to cultural/progressive arguments that misunderstandings fuelled the Opium War as

[14] Hevia, 'Opium, Empire, and Modern History', pp. 308-311.
[15] Chen, *Merchants of War and Peace*, p. 6; Hevia, 'Opium, Empire, and Modern History', pp. 308-311; Chung, 'Interpretations of the Opium War', pp. 32-33, 41-43.
[16] Chen, *Merchants of War and Peace*, pp. 3-6.
[17] Chung, 'Interpretations of the Opium War', pp. 32-33.
[18] Ibid., pp. 32-33; Chen, *Merchants of War and Peace*, p. 9.

this contradicts the errors originating within the discourse itself. Perhaps the clearest example of this is the debate over meanings assigned to the term *yi*, which occupied a very crucial position in 19th century Sino-Western correspondence as the title of address used by the Qing to refer to, in this case, Britain.[19] The subject of this debate specifically concerned the confusion surrounding the correct ways in which to translate and understand *yi* – whereby its meanings encompassed the neutral 'foreigner', compared to a much more problematic 'barbarian'.[20] This controversial topic links back to the idea previously presented by Melancon that it was the disrespect of Britain and its values, such as honour, that prompted conflict to emerge in its defence.[21] The 'barbarian' debate is thus no different in that it is portrayed as having been one such precursor to the Opium War – particularly by the likes of Fairbank.[22] In reading Chung's critiques, however, the aforementioned arguments are effectively diminished by the revelation that *yi* was predominantly understood for the majority of discourse with the Qianlong Emperor as having had no derogatory connotations – with the examples of how Jesuits and the Macartney mission both felt 'welcomed' in their reception in China underlining this more positive experience.[23] In fact, the only instances where Fairbank's propositions are actually entertained, according to Chung, are in the late 1820s – emerging from Britain's own falsely planted rumours and doubts.[24] With translation abuse supposedly originating from their own imagination, an assessment of British actors at the time can therefore point us, yet again, towards the Warlike Party in Canton, and thus the arguments of Chen. Indeed, as the powerhouse behind the *Register* publication being indirectly referred to by Chung, the private merchant class maintained good reason to incite such controversy as previously discussed – and this manipulative strategy seems to be exactly

[19] Chung, 'Interpretations of the Opium War', pp. 34-35; Chen, *Merchants of War and Peace*, p. 9.
[20] Chung, 'Interpretations of the Opium War', p. 35.
[21] Hevia, 'Opium, Empire, and Modern History', pp. 308-309.
[22] Chung, 'Interpretations of the Opium War', pp. 34-35.
[23] Ibid., pp. 34-35.
[24] Ibid., p. 35.

what was employed, with *yi* going from a simple form of address to an insult to British pride.[25] Put best by Chung: 'cultural differences might create difficulties in international contacts, but seldom ignite an international war, which results from a clash of interests'.[26]

This demonstrates the ways in which misinformation can wrongly guide proponents of the cultural/progressive argument towards suggesting an idea of inevitability, when in actuality there appears to be a complete lack of it due to the reasons they suggest. Conversely, any such guarantee of conflict arose specifically due to actors with the ill-intentions of engineering this discourse, and thus warping the picture of Sino-Western relations. There are numerous critiques made by Chung that link to this, and if not at the fault of any such actors, ones that stem from mis-readings by scholars themselves. To name a few, Li Chien-nung's assertations of China's 'antipathy' towards foreign trade, and of its impression of cultural and political superiority over the West, only showcase failures in accurately translating original Chinese sources.[27] Fairbank is therefore not alone in his misunderstandings, nor is the *yi* debate his sole instance of error. Overall, the unfeasibility of the cultural/progressive arguments for the Opium War's inevitability is illustrated here – whereby the overgeneralisation of Sino-Western relations is linked to this through the aforementioned misunderstandings and use of modernisation theory. The motivations of private merchants prove much more pivotal.

The economic/trade arguments' similarities to the cultural/progressive, in relation to the issues of overgeneralisation and inevitability, serve to diminish this factor from the outset of its evaluation. The most crucial factor here becomes the Canton System implemented by the

[25] Chen, *Merchants of War and Peace*, p. 9.
[26] Chung, 'Interpretations of the Opium War', p. 39.
[27] Ibid., pp. 32-38.

Qing – as this regulated trading relations with the British, and thus should serve as the focal point for economic/trade arguments.[28] However, the inevitability posited by proponents Michael Greenberg and Hsin-pao Chang can be put to test by seeking to answer two questions: how restrictive actually was the Canton system on British trade with the Qing, and what were the Qing court's motivations in restricting trade to this degree? In evaluating the degree to which the Canton system was restrictive, it is firstly important to acknowledge that, as Hevia outlines, many Chinese scholars have themselves held the view that cracking down on trade caused the war to start.[29] This would then support the arguments of Greenberg and Chang in that whilst war is not seen as inevitable due to naturally occurring processes, it was at the very least the inhibition of trade from which it arose. Perhaps even by virtue of focussing on the economic as motivation for the Opium War the arguments posited here gain credence. However, whilst the critical arguments of scholars such as Chen may match this in asserting that material gain and trade expansion formed the basis of the drive behind warfare, the fact remains that a restrictive Canton system alone was not enough to prompt conflict to ensue.[30] The Warlike Party and their campaigns, as previously discussed, demonstrate that whilst trade restrictions may have helped create the circumstances for war, it was ultimately the work of British private merchants that pushed both nations against each other; war, yet again, not inevitable.

In furthering this point, the actual nature of restrictions are not nearly as severe as would be suggested by the theory which underlines the economic/trade arguments. The work of Chung has already conveyed this previously, concerning Li Chien-nung's misguided arguments for China's aversion to foreign products.[31] Here, Chung conveys the breadth of trade that was

[28] Greenberg, *British Trade and The Opening of China*, p. 196.
[29] Hevia, 'Opium, Empire, and Modern History', p. 308.
[30] Chen, *Merchants of War and Peace*, pp. 7-8.
[31] Chung, 'Interpretations of the Opium War', p. 37.

still possible under the Canton system – with raw data indicating the critical role of wool, tea, cotton and opium in the Britain-China-India trade triangle that expanded remarkably in the last 20 years of the Canton period.[32] Any deviation from this trend is further justified – with the wool trade only suffering due to domestic issues in Britain.[33] The particularly rapid expansion in British tea consumption also 'defies the logic of Industrial-Revolution-made-British-commercial-expansion-in-China-inevitable'.[34] Thus, it appears that not only were Sino-Western trading relations agreeable – with the Canton system's 'loopholes' allowing especially for the growth of the Opium trade – but they were coveted by the British.[35] Indeed, Chung highlights the ability of the trade to 'neutralize antagonistic forces in all the tensions areas' with the exception of the Opium issue, and that many attempts by the British to gain a foothold in China were dropped from their agenda once London became aware of sensitivity over 'territorial integrity'.[36] In review of the above findings, it is therefore clear that the Canton system was not restrictive of trade to the point of warfare being the only available option – negating the claims made by proponents of the economic/trade arguments about the war's inevitability.

However, seeking to answer why restrictions were enacted in the first instance can also offer alternate explanations for why the Opium War began. Here, Chung's critique of Chien-nung's mistranslation of a traditional Chinese maxim elucidates the 'triple fear' the Qing were facing in the 1840s: a strong aversion to 'collusion between the rebellious elements of the Chinese and the European trouble-makers through the opportunity of trade contacts'.[37] In light of this then, it is likely that any trade restrictions enacted by the Qing court would have been motivated by a fear rooted in domestic issues, and not the ideas of cultural and

[32] Chung, 'Interpretations of the Opium War', pp. 40-43.
[33] Ibid., p. 42.
[34] Ibid., p. 42.
[35] Ibid., pp. 40-41, 43.
[36] Ibid., pp. 40, 44.
[37] Ibid., pp. 37-38.

economic superiority that the "traditional" arguments have so far understood.[38] This is particularly significant in that it ties in with the arguments of scholar James Polachek, who has written on the 'inner opium war' fought between factions at the Qing court over whether to legalize or ban opium.[39] As detailed by Chen, the consequent retaliation of the hardliners, led by proponent Lin Zexu, had disastrous results which 'played into the hands of the Warlike Party in Canton and helped create the conditions for war'.[40] Therefore, the triple fear concept stands as one such example of the consequences of the Qing political crises – a more dire consequence being the destruction of British possessions in Canton under Lin Zexu, serving as yet another antagonism alongside the presence of restrictions, regardless of their severity.[41] Ultimately, this can all be seen to set up the ideal circumstances in which the Warlike Party could act – demonstrating the importance of the Qing political crisis, as well as the previously discussed British political crisis, in tandem with the private merchant class's campaigns.

Although the "traditional" arguments may appear to have been collectively disproven at this point, in further developing our perspective on why the British started the war it is also possible to shift our focus to a related issue, and one of the defining features of the war: opium itself. Whilst many scholars, as Chen details, only choose to recognise opium as 'a trigger, not the war's origin', the assertation made by Hevia that 'Opium regimes challenge as facile the explanations of colonial bureaucrats, merchants, and others that purport to account for "Western" superiority and "Eastern" backwardness on the basis of morality' strongly counters this.[42] This is especially the case in review of Chung's support for this idea, which

[38] Chung, 'Interpretations of the Opium War', pp. 36-38.
[39] Chen, *Merchants of War and Peace*, pp. 6-7; James M. Polachek, *The Inner Opium War* (Cambridge, Massachusetts; London: Harvard University Asia Center, 1992).
[40] Chen, *Merchants of War and Peace*, pp. 6-7.
[41] Greenberg, *British Trade and The Opening of China*, pp. 202-204.
[42] Chen, *Merchants of War and Peace*, p. 6; Hevia, 'Opium, Empire, and Modern History', p. 323.

their work had built up to in dismantling each of the perceived problems in John King Fairbank and Li Chien-nung's writings. With the support of Chung, we are thus able to develop a much more sophisticated picture by interlinking the opium trade with the respective retaliations of the Qing court, and empirical data surrounding Sino-British trade that contrasts with proponents of the economic/trade argument.[43]

Here, the actions of Lin Zexu in confronting the British in Canton were of course propelled by the Qing domestic political crisis as previously discussed. However, in considering that the triple fear concept stemmed from concerns over conflict caused by trade-contacts, alongside the growth of the opium trade towards the end of the Canton period as proven by Chung, these fears may have been rooted in the presence of an overarching narcotic problem to begin with.[44] Considering the idea of a regime, this becomes clear – establishing a long-term problem in China that affected social, political and economic attitudes, creating hostility, and thereby necessitating action due to strong repulsion to the drug.[45] Thus, opium can be traced back as a root cause in the outbreak of war – not as a short-term trigger, and not just as an insignificant commodity in an expanding trade network, but one that carries equal significance to the actions of the Warlike Party and builds alongside it on the groundwork provided by the British and Qing political crises.

In Conclusion, the analysis conducted in this essay has therefore shown that the arguments of more "critical" scholarship on the causes of the Opium War take precedence over those of the "traditional" category – whereby each of the latter can be deconstructed and disproven due to the collective issues of overgeneralisation and inevitability. This is demonstrated throughout

[43] Chung, 'Interpretations of the Opium War', pp. 41-44.
[44] Ibid., pp. 38, 43-44.
[45] Hevia, 'Opium, Empire, and Modern History', p. 318.

– whether it be in the abuse of honour as a justification to cover up latent motivations behind warfare, in the accidental and/or intentional mistranslations of Chinese sources and correspondence to "create" cultural clashes, or in the overreliance on economic theory and the ignorance of raw data to suggest trade restrictions made war inevitable. Ultimately, it is instead due to the foundations laid by the British and Qing domestic political crises that the opportunity for war became available – with the campaigns of the private merchant class via the Warlike Party working alongside the deep-rooted ills of opium in Qing China to cause the outbreak of the first Opium War.

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