THE PAST
I

THE BRITISH ASSAULT

The first British ships to reach Chinese waters, a squadron of four, trading under licence from the Governor of Goa, arrived at the coast in 1637. The Chinese authorities placed difficulties in the way of their onward journey up river to Canton. And when they began nonetheless to enter the river, shore batteries opened fire on them. The British ships returned the fire, silenced the guns, and, sailing up to Canton, exchanged their cargoes and departed.

This first contact between the two countries was symbolic of all that was to follow. From the first it was the British who initiated dealings, while the Chinese remained sullenly indifferent, if not hostile. And from the first it was the British who eventually, if only by force, achieved their purpose. Britain, already beginning to displace the other European nations as the foremost maritime power, was gradually expanding her commercial activity, in Far Eastern waters as elsewhere. The Chinese believed they had little to gain from the trade the Western powers offered. They had already been made wary of European traders by the occasional acts of violence of which these had sometimes been guilty. Europeans were classed with other “outer peoples” as barbarians. There thus began a ceaseless contest between British commercial zeal on the one hand, and the dilatory, often obstructive, always extortionary, tactics of Chinese officialdom on the other.

A number of further engagements followed, in which each combatant occasionally emerged triumphant. In 1685 an imperial edict opened all Chinese ports to foreign trade. But in practice trade became increasingly centred at Canton. In 1689 the East India Company for the first time established a factory at that port. In 1715 this was placed on a more permanent footing, with regular annual visits. And in 1731 the British supercargoes, or company agents, began to stay on at Canton between the voyages of the vessels they represented. As in India at that stage, the Company’s policy was to set up such trading posts for commercial purposes only, and to avoid
as far as possible more far-reaching involvements. The responsibility for dealing with the Chinese authorities was placed in the hands of a committee of supercargoes.

Thus for long all contacts remained, by mutual consent, on a purely informal basis. The British Government in the early days made no attempt to intervene on behalf of the merchants in their dealings with Chinese officials. For their part neither the Chinese imperial court, nor the Chinese officials, nor the mass of the Chinese people, had any inclination to know more of the lands from which the Western traders had sailed. Indeed they scarcely distinguished between the different peoples involved. All were equally “ocean people”, strange creatures from the sea, who, like the Arabs at Canton a thousand years earlier, or the Central Asian merchants of the silk route, emerged briefly from unknown regions to purchase the products of Chinese civilization, but who could themselves be of little concern to the Celestial Empire. All the Emperor and his officials asked was that such people should disturb as little as possible the harmonious ordering of their realm.

During the course of the eighteenth century the Manchu Emperors became, for this reason, more and more concerned to restrict all contacts between those they ruled and the outside world. Chinese subjects were forbidden to emigrate. They were not allowed to travel on foreign ships. They were not allowed to become Christians. To teach foreigners the Chinese language was punishable by the direst penalties. Despite all such efforts, as the trade increased, the foreign traders inevitably impinged increasingly on the life of the Empire. And as the contacts grew, various sources of conflict emerged, each stemming from the divergent world-views of the two peoples.

The first concerned the conditions under which the foreign merchants were permitted to live and trade. As a result of the policy of insulation these had been made increasingly difficult. From 1757 foreign trade was by decree explicitly confined to Canton. The foreign merchants were allowed to live in Canton only during the trading season. After this they had to leave for Macao. They were not allowed to bring their wives with them to China. They were not allowed to learn the Chinese language. They were not allowed to ride in a sedan chair. Nor to row in the river. Nor to walk in the streets. Indeed they were confined almost entirely to the narrow limits of their factories. Within the factories they were free to
behave exactly as they chose. All that was asked of them in return was that they should bother the Chinese inhabitants as little as possible. To allow foreigners to mix freely with the Chinese might be not only inconvenient but dangerous. Thus the foreigners, an imperial edict declared, must not "presume of their own accord to go out and in, lest they should try to carry out clandestine dealings with traitorous Chinese". Impatience with such restrictions slowly aroused among the merchants the aspiration for an assurance of such treatment as they were accustomed to receive in other parts of the world.

The second cause of difference was the radically conflicting tradition and outlook of the two peoples on questions of crime and punishment. From very early days the Chinese had evolved for their own people a system of collective responsibility for criminal offences. A family or clan, a group of householders, or a village, were made to accept responsibility for all breaches of the peace committed by any of their members. When a crime occurred the group was made responsible for finding the culprit. If they failed, punishment might be executed on the entire group, or selected members of it. But once a victim had been produced the procedure of investigation and trial might be a mere formality. And in such investigations consideration of the intention of the accused was of the smallest consequence. The Chinese authorities naturally thought it normal to apply similar principles in dealing with the foreign communities who resided within their frontiers. They expressed no concern over any crime in which foreigners alone were involved. But if, as occasionally occurred, Chinese suffered injury at the hands of a foreigner, the foreign community was held collectively responsible. Officials would not concern themselves in investigating the circumstances themselves. This was for the foreigners to undertake. What they did demand was a victim, a ransom, a scapegoat, so that there could be assurance that the crime should be avenged; and be seen to be avenged.

The British had been brought up on different concepts. The ancient procedures of trial by ordeal, by compurgation, by jury, had been devised to ensure, not merely that for every crime committed somebody should be punished, but that the particular individual responsible should be identified. Equally important, it was essential to ensure, by the strict observance of common and case law, by the rigid adherence to established rules and procedure, that
no man should be condemned without the most careful and pain-
staking investigation of the circumstances, in proof of the indict-
ment. Finally it was from very early times accepted that the guilt of
the accused lay not merely in the fact that he had performed a
certain action, but that he did it with a particular intention or frame
of mind. Thus when the British discovered, in a series of incidents
in which Chinese subjects were killed and a foreign seaman
accused, that the Chinese authorities were little interested whether
the accused person was himself guilty of the deed in question, that
the procedure of inquiry was frequently of the most perfunctory,
and that no account was taken by the Chinese magistrates of
whether the crime was the result of accident or intention, they
became increasingly reluctant to commit themselves to a system of
justice which appeared to them barbarous and revolting. And after
a British seaman responsible for the discharge of a salvo of salute,
which by mischance caused the death of a Chinese citizen, had been
reluctantly handed over to a Chinese magistrate and, after a purely
nominal investigation, strangled at his orders, mistrust hardened
into defiance. The revulsion that was set up on the British side as a
result of such incidents was a major cause of the subsequent British
exaction of extra-territorial rights of jurisdiction in cases where
British subjects were involved.

The third source of contention concerned the heavy and appar-
ently quite arbitrary levies placed on the trade by Chinese officials
at different levels. The British were quite used to customs duties.
But they were accustomed to a system in which these were exacted
at a regular and unvarying rate in accordance with the prescribed
tariff. The capricious way in which the demands of the Chinese
officials were imposed aroused first bewilderment, finally resent-
ment.

In China traditions were different. Local officials had always had
wide powers in the levying of taxation. One of the most important
sources of revenue for provincial administrations was the levy im-
posed on inter-provincial trade. The exaction of locally determined
duties on foreign trade was equally legitimate. And as the distinc-
tion between public revenues and private incomes was even less
clear-cut in China than in eighteenth-century Europe there was
nothing untoward in the highly personal method of assessment
adopted by the various authorities in Canton.

Finally, many British merchants were aggrieved at the fact that
they were not able, as in other countries, to deal freely with any of the Chinese dealers who chose to do business with them, but only with the Co-Hong, an association of officially approved merchants that they regarded as monopolistic. The grounds for this complaint were perhaps questionable. The merchants of the Co-Hong were probably no more and no less monopolistic than were those of the East India Company. There is indeed a curious parallelism between the two institutions. In each case individual merchants undertook transactions with other individual merchants. They were free to bargain without reservation over prices, quality, or quantity, without any overriding control from above. Yet those who engaged in such dealings were in each case members of a trade association possessing a strangely ambivalent status, half-private, half-official; half-exclusive, half-open; half-independent, half-government controlled. And in each case this association was itself assured of an official monopoly, explicitly recognized and established by Royal Charter.

Within this framework the merchants of both countries were able for long to establish personal relationships that were both friendly and enduring. These were reinforced by the scrupulous integrity of both parties in all their commercial dealings, and by the readiness of each for this reason to be generous in the granting of credit, even on occasion to cancel altogether the debts of a partner who was in difficulties. With all the difficulties that came between them there emerged a sentiment of genuine respect on both sides.

It was in the hopes of remedying some of the grievances harboured by the British trading community that the first diplomatic contacts between the two countries took place. Lord Macartney succeeded, in 1793, in securing an audience with the Chinese Emperor, but did not manage to evoke the slightest response to the various requests which he had been sent to put forward. Lord Amherst, in 1816, managed to reach Peking, but his mission had to be abandoned as a result of differences over questions of protocol. Finally in 1834, Lord Napier, appointed Chief Superintendent of Trade at Canton on the abolition of the East India Company's monopoly, failed, after a prolonged contest, even to obtain an audience of the Viceroy of Canton. This last incident brought to a head the final issue on which the differing British and Chinese viewpoints were producing increasing friction.
One of the principal aims of the Macartney and subsequent missions had been to obtain the consent of the Chinese court to the dispatch to Peking of a permanent British envoy, who might be able to regulate some of the questions at issue between the two governments. After the East India Company’s monopoly was finally abolished in 1834, the British Government, in despair of securing this aim, appointed Lord Napier as “Chief Superintendent of Trade”, whose function it was to deal on an official basis with the Chinese provincial authorities at Canton. His duty was, in the words of Lord Palmerston, “to place himself in direct communication with the local authorities at Canton in order to offer protection to British subjects, and to be the organ of communication between the British and the Chinese Governments.”

The Chinese had no interest in such contacts. They considered that all commercial matters that might arise as a result of the Emperor having permitted foreigners to come to Chinese ports, should be settled with the Chinese merchants of the Co-Hong with whom they had to deal. Mandarins had more important things to do. Thus, in the words of the Viceroy of Canton writing to the Co-Hong merchants on the occasion of Lord Napier’s visit, “the Empire of Heaven appoints officials, civil to rule the people, military to control the wicked. But the petty affairs of commerce are to be directed by the merchants themselves. With such matters officials are not concerned.”

Within a year or two of the British Government’s appointment of the new superintendent the various sources of conflict that had developed between the two countries began to come to a head. At one time the merchants trading with China and the directors of the East India Company had shown themselves surprisingly sensitive to Chinese susceptibilities on many matters, and had been ready to concede much for the sake of securing their position in China. When during the Napoleonic Wars the British Government appeared to be about to occupy Macao, the Select Committee at Canton believing, probably with great exaggeration, that recent British territorial expansion in India had “more or less tended to produce in the mind of the Chinese a dread of the English nation and inspired them with an idea of their aiming at universal conquest in the East”, advised the utmost caution. And the Select Committee of Supercargoes, writing in 1831, declared that in earlier days the Chinese officials and merchants “seemed to have been aware that
any degradation would be submitted to for the preservation of trade". The British Government themselves had often been ready to show consideration. The official instructions to the new chief superintendent specifically laid down that he was to avoid any conduct, language or demeanour, which might "revolt the opinions or prejudices" of the Chinese people or Government, and to "study by all practicable methods to maintain a good and friendly understanding".

But when the monopoly of the East India Company was abolished in 1834, the new merchants who seized the opportunity to develop the trade between India and China thus opened, were of an altogether different mind from the old China hands of Company days. They were anxious to make this trade as profitable as possible as quickly as they could, and were not at all disposed to be so patient as their predecessors with the various difficulties that Chinese administrative methods placed in their way. The British Government as well, increasingly conscious of its new power and increasingly assertive in its relations with foreign states, became, especially under the forceful Foreign Secretaryship of Lord Palmerston, more and more impatient of Chinese methods and manners. As they began to take on themselves greater responsibility for promoting the interests of British traders in the East, they were less and less prepared to tolerate what they regarded as the humiliations and insults heaped on British subjects—and so on the British crown—by the Chinese Government. For, as Lord Amherst irascibly declared, after he had been carefully kept waiting for two hours by Chinese officials before being refused an audience, China was now dealing with "the officers appointed by His Britannic Majesty, who was by no means inclined to submit to such indignities".

Meanwhile, too, a new issue had emerged to intensify the misunderstanding between the two countries. Towards the end of the eighteenth century the East India Company had assumed a monopoly of the sale of opium in most parts of India, and had established regular auctions of the drug. The auctions became an important source of revenue for the Indian Government. To most people in the West at this time, the habit of smoking opium seemed, like the wearing of strange clothes, the binding of feet, child marriages, pigtails and concubines, merely another quaint and exotic oriental habit. It was different from the practice of the West, certainly; but
not necessarily wrong for that. Precisely because the opium habit was scarcely known in the West, little thought was given to the social problems it presented, and there had been no occasion for the hardening of any stereotyped moral attitude towards it. Consequently there was scarcely more revulsion in England at the institution of public auctions of opium in India, or its subsequent sale in China, than there was over the publication in Britain of the unabashed confessions of an English opium-eater.

The merchants who bought the opium traded it to different parts of the East. But during the early part of the nineteenth century it came increasingly to be shipped to China. The West had traditionally had an adverse balance of trade with China. As a result traders had been obliged to export bullion to pay for what they bought there. The voracious demand for opium in China and the existence of convenient sources of supply in the Government of India's auction-sales offered an ideal method of remedying the deficit. Between 1795 and 1834 the total shipments of opium from India rose from less than two thousand chests to about twelve thousand.

Yet again, the viewpoint of the Chinese Government was different. For them the problem of opium addiction had become a grave one. In 1800 an imperial edict had forbidden the import of opium. But the edict was little regarded, either by the ordinary citizens of China, or by the officials whose duty it should have been to prevent the traffic, but who found the drug could in practice serve as a useful source of revenue. And though as a matter of form the East India Company forbade the carriage of opium in its own ships, the British and other foreign merchants, finding Chinese officials so amenable, had neither difficulty nor compunction in carrying on the trade. Both British merchant and Chinese official equally found it convenient to shed his conscience on to the other; each feeling, no doubt, that any responsibility for breaking the Emperor's injunction was not his own.

To the Chinese Imperial Government it was bad enough that their own officials were so venal as to flout the Emperor's edicts. But that the foreign merchants should abuse the privileges they had been granted by evading the laws of the Empire, was intolerable. And when, in 1839, the Imperial Government at last made a determined effort to suppress opium-smoking all over the country, one of the first steps taken was to send an imperial commissioner to
Canton to put a stop to dealings in the drug. For it was generally considered that opium-smoking in China was purely the responsibility of the foreigner. And indeed, principally, of Britain. For as the new commissioner informed Queen Victoria, in a letter which he addressed to her on the subject in 1839, the Chinese official world had "reflected that this noxious article is the clandestine manufacture of artful schemers under the dominion of your honourable nation".

The British Government and merchants, on the other hand, would not accept that the prevalence of opium-smoking in China could be attributed to the foreign traders. And they were by no means persuaded that the Chinese Government, even now, were seriously concerned to stamp out the habit of opium-smoking. They believed, or convinced themselves, that the new measures which the commissioner instituted against them were yet another example of the indefensible and arrogant discrimination of the Chinese Government against all foreigners. And so Lord Palmerston, in a dispatch to the Minister of the Emperor of China, setting out the British complaints against the Imperial Government, declared that the Chinese Government had "left untouched their own officers who were most to blame, and had used violence against foreigners, who were led into transgression by the encouragement and protection offered to them by the Governor of Canton and his inferior officers".

The British certainly never consciously had the intention of imposing the opium trade on China by force. In 1837 the Government warned the British merchants that they could "not interfere for the purpose of enabling British subjects to violate the laws of the country to which they trade". Captain Elliot, the British Superintendent, agreed, under duress, to the destruction of all British stocks of opium at Canton, valued at £2 ½ million. And later he ordered the masters of all ships in Hong Kong, at the time the only available harbour, to make oath to him that they had no opium on board, on pain of expulsion from the port. But Captain Elliot and many of the British merchants, their national pride affronted by the peremptory methods adopted by the Chinese authorities, refused to sign a bond undertaking not to engage in the trade on pain of death, since they affected to regard this as insulting. And when further sources of conflict with the Canton authorities arose, merchants, superintendent and Foreign Secretary equally began to
believe that national honour could never be satisfied, nor tolerable treatment by Chinese officialdom be assured, unless by force.

The war that erupted in 1839, and was terminated in 1842 by the treaty of Nanking, is known among Chinese as the First Opium War, the war by which the opium trade was forcibly imposed on China by foreign aggression. To the British it has been known as the first Anglo-Chinese War, the war by which the Chinese Empire was opened up to commercial intercourse on the normal, internationally accepted terms. In fact the war broke out neither over trading facilities, nor over opium; but over the killing of a Chinese subject by drunken British seamen in a brawl, the subsequent Chinese demands for the surrender of a scapegoat, and the various measures of retaliation, culminating in a clash between British and Chinese warships. But without the tensions that had occurred as a result of the other long-standing matters in dispute the incident would never have developed to the point of war, any more than had almost exactly similar events in the past. The British had certainly never originally contemplated going to war to enforce their demands for better conditions of trade and intercourse. Still less had they had any intention of forcibly resisting the Chinese Government’s efforts to stop the opium trade. In his instructions to the British negotiators after the war, Lord Palmerston specifically declared that “H.M. Government make no demand in this matter”; and, if the Chinese Government continued to prohibit the importation of opium “British subjects who engaged in a contraband trade must take the consequences of doing so”.

The treaty made no reference to opium. Nor did the treaty concluded after the second war, which arose out of a similarly trivial incident in 1856. But it is an inescapable fact that, after the conclusion of the first war, the trade in opium from India to China rose from about 20,000 chests in 1840, to over 60,000 in 1859; that after the second war the trade, under Western pressure, was legalized; and that it was not finally ended until 1917. It was not an episode that did credit to the British nation. And it is one that no Chinese has forgotten to this day.

Yet in a sense there was some truth in the assertion of British apologists that the true cause of the wars was not the opium trade. For more than a century the two countries had come into increasingly acute conflict over a variety of issues. The clash that took place in 1839 over the murdered Chinese seaman was the culmination of
this series. And the British Government, at once exacerbated by long years of mounting frustration in their dealings with an Empire they considered effete and corrupt, and exhilarated by the increasing power and glory of their own Empire, consciously or unconsciously made use of the opportunity it provided to enforce their demands for what they considered their rights.

In the war which followed they secured the opening of five ports to European residence and trade; the recognition of British consular officers who were to be assured of access to the Chinese authorities; the establishment of a "fair and regular" tariff of five per cent on both imports and exports; the abolition of the Co-Hong's monopoly of trade; the cession of Hong Kong; extraterritorial jurisdiction in the Treaty Ports; and the explicit recognition in the terms of the Treaty of Britain's equal status with China. After the second war, the British Government secured the opening of further treaty ports, especially in the increasingly important Yangtze area; the acceptance of a British permanent envoy at Peking with right of access to a minister of state; freedom for foreigners to travel and to trade in any part of the interior; and an assurance of protection, free speech and unhampered movement for missionaries. Thus on all the major matters on which, in the hundred years before, conflicts had arisen, on the conditions of residence in China, on the right to trade, on legal procedures, on commercial levies, on equality of status, on diplomatic intercourse—as well as on opium—Britain ensured that, during the hundred years to follow, her will was to prevail.