

# Opium War, Second

## Dì-èr Cì Yāpiàn Zhànzhēng 第二次鸦片战争

**The Second Opium War (1856–1860) is less well known outside China than the first, but its impact was no less profound. The First Opium War (1839–1842) marked the beginning of the end for imperial China, but only because of the second conflict were opium imports legalized, foreign governments granted the privilege of establishing embassies in China, and missionaries permitted to live and work in China’s interior.**

**H**istorians have as many names for the clash between the British, French, and Chinese from 1856 to 1860 as they have interpretations of that clash. It is sometimes called the “Anglo-French War” and perceived as yet another military engagement with aggressive imperialist powers. It is also called the “Arrow War,” after the ship whose allegedly illegal boarding by Chinese marines became the catalyst for war. Finally, the clash is most often referred to as the “Second Opium War” because in many ways the conflict was an extension of the tensions that caused the First Opium War (1839–1842).

As with the First Opium War, the opium trade was a crucial component of the tensions surrounding the Second Opium War, but it was by no means the only or even the most important bone of contention between the Chinese and the British. Most British at that time had an unshakable belief in not only the inevitability but also the righteousness of free trade, and Qing dynasty (1644–1912)

restrictions on commerce seemed unreasonable and even provocative. The First Opium War demolished the Canton (Guangzhou) system of restrictive trade, but only five Chinese ports were open for foreign commerce. The clandestine opium trade flourished but remained illegal, much of the city of Guangzhou seethed with antiforeign sentiment, and most Chinese still viewed the foreigners as barbarians. The British and the French quickly grew dissatisfied with the terms of the Treaty of Nanjing (1842), as well as what they saw as China’s unwillingness to live up to the promises contained in that treaty. The British were particularly angry that their merchants were still unable to live and work inside the city of Guangzhou, a measure that Chinese officials insisted would be dangerous for the merchants. By 1856 no one was satisfied with the status quo, and tensions were high.

The incident that began the war involved the *Arrow*, a *lorca*—a three-masted ship with a European-style hull and rigging characteristic of a Chinese junk—that Chinese authorities suspected of piracy. The Chinese crew was arrested and taken to shore. Initially, outraged British officials claimed that the *Arrow* was a British vessel and that the Chinese hauled down the Union Jack flying on its mast, but both accusations were false. In fact, the British registration had expired, and the flag was not flying when the ship was boarded. Sir Harry Parkes (1828–1885), British consul to Guangzhou, angrily called for military retaliation. Most scholars now accept that the *Arrow* incident was simply a British pretext intended to provoke open hostilities and wrest further concessions from a weakened Qing government. The French had their own excuse for joining the conflict—the beheading of

a Catholic missionary working in Guangxi Province in violation of Chinese restrictions on foreign movement. The two incidents were related because Guangdong and Guangxi provinces were administered as a single unit by the same governor-general, Ye Mingchen, a staunch opponent of foreign imperialism who resided in Guangzhou, the provincial capital of Guangdong.

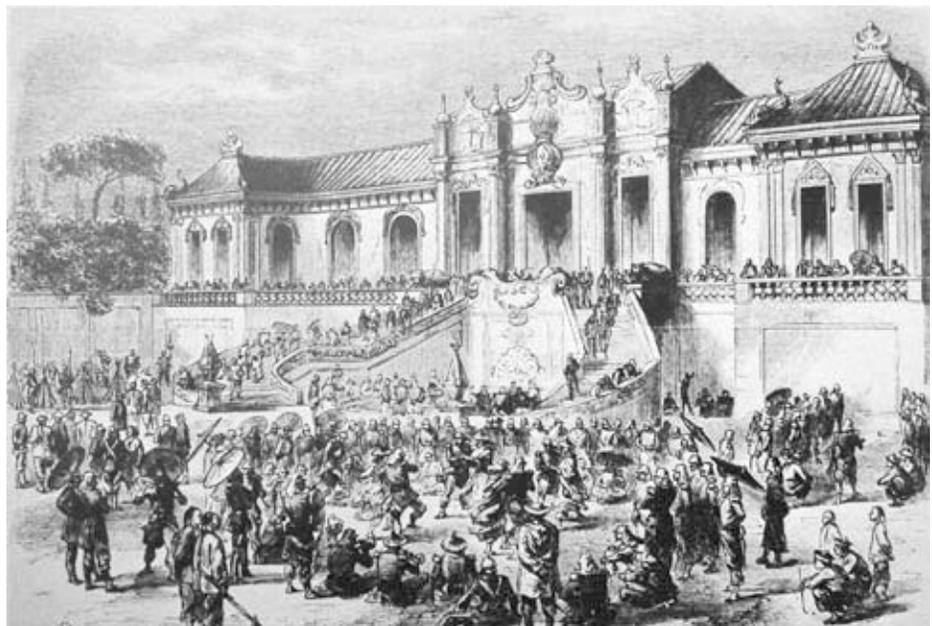
## Concessions of War

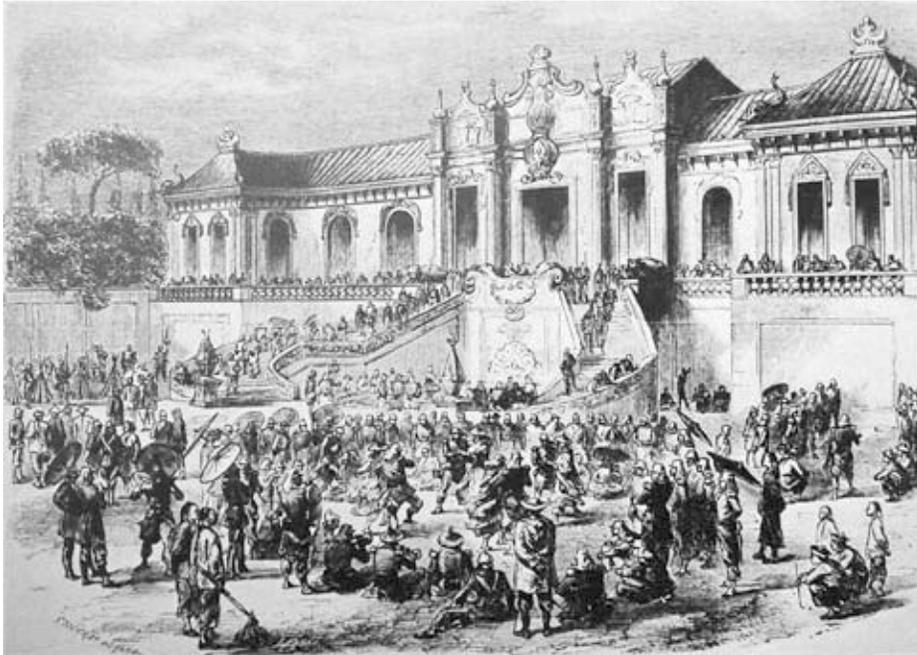
The British and French attacked Guangzhou in 1857 after some delays related to the outbreak of the Indian Mutiny, seizing the city and capturing Ye. They then sailed north to Tianjin, just southeast of the Qing capital of Beijing, which the British threatened to attack. Negotiations resulted in the Treaties of Tianjin (1858), which, among other concessions, allowed foreign ambassadors to reside in Beijing, opened ten new ports for trade, permitted foreign ships to travel the Yangzi (Chang) River (where four of the new treaty ports were located), and allowed foreigners—missionaries included—to travel freely in the Chinese interior. The Chinese were to pay Great Britain and France large indemnities and to cap transit tariffs on foreign goods inside China. In addition, a fixed tariff was to be paid on all imported opium, thus legalizing foreign opium imports. Russia and the United

States quickly claimed many of the privileges accorded the British and French in their own treaties. The agreements were to be ratified within a year, when all parties would gather again for a formal signing.

Although none of the concessions was welcome, the Xianfeng emperor (reigned 1850–1861) was said to have been particularly incensed at the notion of ambassadors from these aggressor nations living in Beijing and other foreigners traveling freely about the Qing empire. When it came time for the Chinese to ratify the treaties in 1859, Qing authorities unexpectedly changed their minds, blocked foreign troops and dignitaries intending to sail up the Beihe River toward Beijing, and bombarded them from Dagu Forts at the mouth of the river. Outraged, the British and their French allies—led by James Bruce, the eighth earl of Elgin (1811–1863), on the British side and by Baron Gros on the French—landed a combined army of nearly twenty thousand soldiers and marched on Beijing. Discouraged by the Russian ambassador from burning the Forbidden City, the complex in which the royal family resided, the troops instead looted the Yuan Ming Yuan, the summer palace just outside the city favored by the Qing royal family, and then burned the complex to the ground. Faced with the overwhelming military strength and advanced military technology of the Anglo-French forces, the Qing government backed down, and the Conventions of Beijing

**During the 1856 war, Chinese set fire to foreign factories. The British retaliated by burning Chinese houses. *Burning of Canton Harbor*, oil painting, by an anonymous Chinese artist, nineteenth century.**





**Looting of the Yuan Ming Yuan, the Qing summer palace, by Anglo-French forces in 1860.** ILLUSTRATION BY GODEFROY DURAND FOR *L'ILLUSTRATION*, 22 DECEMBER 1860.

were finally signed in October 1860, but only after China paid a much larger indemnity, adding Tianjin to the list of ports open to trade, conceding the Kowloon Peninsula across from Hong Kong to the British, and agreeing to a French demand that missionaries be permitted to purchase property inside China.

## Far-Reaching Ramifications

The conflict had profound political and socioeconomic consequences. The Qing dynasty was forced to allow greater foreign penetration of Chinese territory and to consent to the further erosion of its sovereignty. At the same time the humiliating settlement generated a strong desire for reform among a number of top Chinese officials. The Self-Strengthening Movement, spearheaded by Zeng Guofan (1811–1872) and Li Hongzhang (1823–1901), sought to learn from the West in order to modernize China's technology and strengthen its military. The treaties signed at the conclusion of the Second Opium War also contributed to the decision on the part of foreign powers to support the Qing dynasty against the Taiping rebels, whose catastrophic rebellion (1850–1864) overlapped

the war and had the potential to topple the dynasty and invalidate those treaties. Last but not least, after opium imports were legalized in 1860, the opium trade with India surged dramatically, with imports peaking in the late 1870s and diminishing only because of growing competition from the Chinese poppy crop.

The Second Opium War is less well known outside of China than the first, but its impact was no less profound. Although the First Opium War is often cited as marking the beginning of the end for imperial China, the lesser-known Second Opium War left more visible scars of the destructive power of Western imperialism. The summer palace has never been rebuilt; its ruins remain to educate subsequent generations.

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## Further Reading

Marx, K. (1951). *Marx on China, 1853–1860: Articles from the 'New York Daily Tribune.'* London: Lawrence & Wishart.

Wong, J. Y. (1998). *Deadly dreams: Opium, imperialism, and the Arrow War (1856–1860) in China.* Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press.