



# Joint Crisis: The First Opium War (British Empire)

Chair: William Jiang-Fogel '27

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Dear Delegates,

My name is William Jiang-Fogel, and I am currently in my junior year here at Concord Academy. This year, it is my distinct honour to be working with you all as chair of this committee alongside my rapporteur, Henry Lei '28. I have been a part of Model UN since my freshman year and have had an absolute blast working alongside all my peers over the last three years between CAMUN and various conferences around New England. I'm a theatre kid, I love cars, and I love wrestling and mixed martial arts.

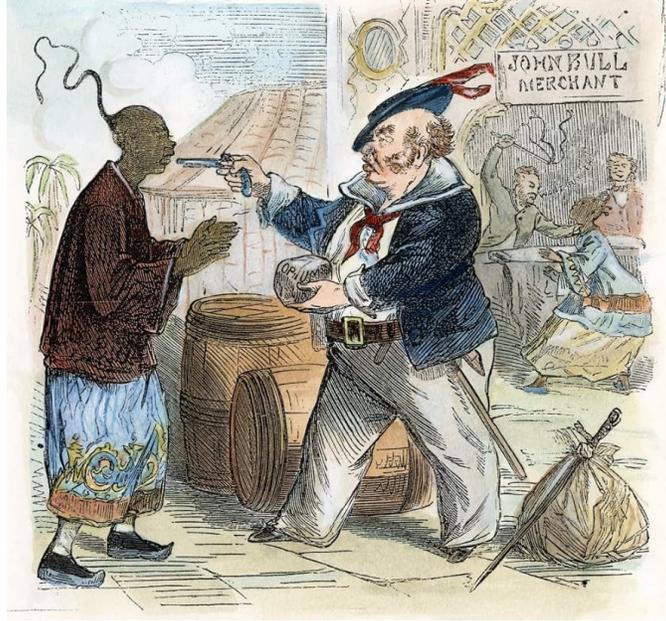
I hope that this committee, whether it is your first or your fifteenth, will offer itself as an opportunity for you to grow and expand upon your skills in debate, communication, and problem-solving. Model UN has been a highlight of my high school career, and I have learned many invaluable lessons on how to be a collaborator because of it. Thus, I want to encourage each and every one of you to come to committee prepared and ready to engage with your fellow delegates. Even if this is a step outside of your comfort zone, you never know what new things you will learn from others or even yourself. Trust me, it'll pay off.

Please let me know if you have any questions and I look forward to seeing you all in April!

Sincerely,

*William Jiang-Fogel '27, Chair, [William.Jiang-Fogel@ConcordAcademy.org](mailto:William.Jiang-Fogel@ConcordAcademy.org)*

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“To the Weak Relation” Political cartoon from an American newspaper in 1864

## Background

“How came any reasonable being to subject himself to such a yoke of misery, voluntarily to incur a captivity so servile, and knowingly to fetter himself with such a sevenfold chain?”

—Thomas DeQuincey, *Confessions of an English Opium Eater*

At the start of the 18th century, the British Empire ruled the waves. Her empire spanned the globe and, at its peak, covered almost a quarter of it. A product of this expansion and colonisation of the world, however, was that it gave the British access to commodities and artefacts that they previously hadn't. A few examples of such commodities that are especially pertinent in the case of the first opium war were Chinese products such as tea, silk, and porcelain, as well as opium, which was grown and produced in India. Chinese goods were so prized back in the West that the British populace was willing to pour insane amounts of money into purchasing things like Tea from China. However, the British weren't aided by the fact that the Chinese system didn't exactly favour Western trade.

Western trade with China was very difficult at this time. European merchants were only permitted to dock at a handful of ports, severely limiting the amount of imports going into the country. Among these ports, a clear outlier emerged because of its unique geographical advantage. Canton (now called Guangzhou), which was located at the mouth of the Pearl River, became the centre of European trade

with China. On top of this, European trade with China was highly regulated by the Qing government. All European trade had to go through intermediaries called the Cohong. These merchants were tasked with regulating the price of tea and often didn't broker good deals. It is also important to note that a trade deficit was beginning to form between the British and the Chinese, in that European silver seemed to be pouring into China almost endlessly, but the Chinese never really had an incentive for purchasing British goods. As Robert Hart, a notable British diplomat to China, once noted:

*“The Chinese have the best food in the world, rice; the best drink, tea; and the best clothing, cotton, silk, fur. Possessing these staples and their innumerable native adjuncts, they do not need to buy a penny's worth elsewhere.”*

This angered the British, who had also recently suffered some key economic defeats in the independence of the United States and Mexico. These colonies were especially important for trade with China because the British relied on them for silver to pay for things like Chinese tea, silk, and porcelain. Many British merchants viewed China as a source of seemingly unlimited wealth just barely out of reach, but how would they get past these unwieldy regulations? What would they even sell to the Chinese to cover this deficit? The answer: the British Empire would initiate one of the largest state-backed drug operations in history.

Opium is a highly addictive non-synthetic narcotic that is extracted from the poppy plant, *Papaver somniferum*. The opium poppy is the key source for many narcotics, including morphine, codeine, and heroin. The first uses of Opium are hard to track, but it is generally agreed upon that it originated from the Mediterranean and the Middle East. Today, many people still suffer from opioid abuse, and synthetic opioids like fentanyl are becoming more addictive and deadly. Opium was first used in China as early as the Tang dynasty and was often used in the field of medicine. The most notable early records of the recreational use of Opium in China date back to the 16th and 17th centuries, when madak (a blend of opium powder and tobacco) became popular, leading to initial opium restrictions in 1729. In 1796, the recreational use of the drug was fully banned in China.

After the Battle of Plassey in 1757, the East India Company, a company that was essentially an extension of the British government, expanded its control over the Indian subcontinent until it controlled the majority of what is now modern India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. In doing so, the British East India Company inherited an already existing and thriving opium industry. Soon enough, the East India Company had a complete and total monopoly over the production of opium in these areas, making its ability to export opium incredibly cheap. This provided the British with the perfect solution to their trade deficit; they would counteract it by smuggling Indian opium into China.



Lithograph depicting an opium factory in Patna, India.

As the British government continued to export more and more opium into China, it did not fail to catch the eye of the Qing government. By 1838, the British were importing about 1,400,000 kilograms of opium into China annually. Because of this, the Qing government was beginning to crack down on the use of opium as well as Western trade. In 1839, the Daoguang emperor appointed Lin Zexu to lead the drug crackdown. Lin Zexu took his job seriously and acted quickly and decisively. First, he wrote a letter to Queen Victoria in which he tried to appeal to morality. This letter never made it to her majesty, most likely being lost in transit. Nevertheless, Lin Zexu persisted and not only ordered soldiers to seize and destroy any opium in Canton but also helped make opium a crime punishable by death.

This angered Charles Elliot, the British diplomat in charge of overseeing trade in the area, who ordered British merchants to resist the seizure of Opium but later retracted his order after realising it may provoke war with the Qing. In April and May of 1839, over 1,150,000 kilograms of opium were seized and publicly destroyed on the beaches of Canton. That's 20,283 chests of opium, a whopping sum worth roughly 1.3 million English pounds. For reference, that's a little over 100 million English pounds today. This was a brutal loss for the British and was more likely than not one of the driving forces behind the war.

In July of 1839, tensions only grew higher when two intoxicated British sailors killed Lin Weixi, a Chinese local. Chinese authorities demanded that the men be tried under Chinese law; however, Charles Elliot, fearing that the men would be killed, refused to turn them over and instead tried them himself. This was viewed as a direct violation of China's sovereignty in the eyes of Lin Zexu. In response, the government placed an embargo on the sale of food to the British, and Chinese war junks

were deployed to the mouth of the Pearl River. At the same time, rumours that not pirates but rather Chinese soldiers were responsible for a recent attack on a prominent opium merchant ship travelling from Canton to Macau began to circulate. Charles Elliot ordered all British ships to withdraw from Macau in response to this. That same day, all British ships were barred from entering the port city, another loss for British trade. With provisions running low, Charles Elliot delivered an ultimatum to the Chinese on the evening of September 4th, 1839. If by 3:00pm the local government did not allow merchants to trade with British ships, they would open fire on the junks in the harbour. This deadline came and went, and true to his word, Elliot ordered two armed vessels to fire on the Chinese junks. This incident would later go on to be called the Battle of Kowloon. This is when our committee begins.

## Roles

**Queen Victoria of England:** As the queen of England, your stance on the war and foreign policy will have a significant influence over the decisions made by parliament, which holds the legislative power to alter the course of the war. Although it is important to remember that the British Empire at this point was a constitutional monarchy, at this time. So the actual political power of the queen is somewhat limited.

**Henry William Lamb/Lord Melbourne:** As prime minister of the United Kingdom and a member of the Whig party, Melbourne oversaw legislative action to protect the interests of trafficking opium into China. You will have significant influence over the decisions made by parliament during this time.

**Robert Peel:** A Tory politician of particular high standing, Peel was the leader of the opposition party during the events of the first opium war and likely held great influence over the decisions made by parliament at this time.

**Henry John Temple/Lord Palmerston:** As Foreign Secretary during the events of the first opium war, Palmerston initially sought peace with the Chinese but later sided with the interests of British expansion into China by martial force. To you, it is of utmost importance that the expansion of the empire and the establishment of a British foothold in Eastern trade are seen through.

**Sir Charles Elliot:** As the Superintendent of British Trade in China, you will be directly responsible for overseeing and guaranteeing the security of the British opium trade and all those involved, as well as

commanding a small presence of British troops in the area. It is in your interests to discourage a war with the Qing; finding a peaceful resolution to this affair would be wise.

**William Jardine:** A Scottish physician and merchant, Jardine was a key figure in the first opium war and would go on to convince Lord Palmerston to urge for more direct action against the Chinese. For you, the expansion of the opium trade, and moreover, your pocketbook, should be your primary concern.

**Sir James Matheson:** A close ally and business partner of one William Jardine, he also helped convince the Foreign Secretary Lord Palmerston to wage war on the Qing empire. You seek to ensure the same benefits for yourself as William Jardine. The expansion of the opium trade in Canton means bringing in more profit for yourself.

**Sir Henry Pottinger:** Pottinger played a crucial role in the later years of the first opium war. Serving as Charles Elliot's replacement and then later as the governor of Hong Kong. He urged the secession of Hong Kong from China. As Lieutenant General of the British army, should conflict arise, the swift defeat of the Qing is under your command. Failure to do so would mean dishonour.

**Hugh Gough:** In March 1839, Gough was appointed commander-in-chief of the British armed forces in China. He fought in numerous battles over the course of the next four years in China. Much like Pottinger, should war arise between Britain and the Qing, assuring their defeat will be your top priority. Victory means fame and honor which might lead to your promotion!

**Sir William Parker:** Serving as commander-in-chief of the Royal Navy in the East Indies and China, you will need to work hand in hand with your army counterparts to maintain British dominance over both sea and land.

**William Ewart Gladstone:** A conservative British statesman in the House of Commons during the events of the first opium war, he vehemently opposed the opium trade. This was largely due to the effects that opium had taken on his own sister. You are tasked with the daunting task of finding an end to this immoral war.

**George Eden, Earl of Auckland:** A Whig politician who served as Governor-General of India from 1836 to 1842. You will likely play a key role in the management of this delegation's rule over the colony of India, as well as its lucrative opium plantations.

## Questions to Consider

1. How should the British respond to the situation?
2. Is it better to try to find a diplomatic solution, or is war better?
3. What stipulations would be a part of a peace deal?
4. Who will pay for Britain's lost opium?
5. Should the opium trade continue to be pursued or not?
6. How should the British ensure financial victory and prevent a financial catastrophe?

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