The First Opium War 1839-42

Lin Tse-hsü was the accomplished governor of Hu-Huang Province and at 53 was known for his Confucian poetry. His integrity had earned him the nickname ‘Lin the Clear Sky,’ and his opinions were well regarded at the court of Emperor Tao-kuang. (1)

In October 1838, Lin Tse-hsü was summoned to the Imperial Palace in Peking where the Emperor appointed him to eradicate opium addiction in China. Lin knew that this was one of the most difficult problems facing China and although the sale of opium had been made illegal in 1800 the black-market flourished. Addiction was greatest around Canton where foreign merchants smuggled Indian opium into China. Commissioner Lin set up his headquarters in Canton and took command of the local naval forces. On March 10 1839 he proclaimed that the opium trade would no longer be tolerated in Canton and began arresting opium dealers. Those who were found guilty of purchasing, possessing or selling opium were sentenced to public execution by strangulation.

Lin also established a treatment center near Canton to encourage addicts to break their habit. Then he began a crack down on foreign opium smugglers. Opium shipments were brought to China in British clippers that also carried legal cargoes. The cargo masters of these ships sold their opium to Chinese smugglers at Lintin Island in Canton Bay before continuing to Canton where they would buy tea and silk and sell European merchandise. Commissioner Lin demanded that the clippers anchored at Canton surrender any opium they had on board as well as any supplies stored at Lintin. He also sought signed guarantees to never bring opium to China again on pain of trial and execution. The foreign traders were given three days to comply. But they made no move to turn any opium over to Lin as many Cantonese officials, including the Viceroy and other high ranking naval commanders, were accepting ‘squeeze’ from the western merchants to allow smuggling, as well as using Imperial navy vessels to carry the contraband ashore.

On March 25 1839 Commissioner Lin made his intentions very clear by suspending all trade with western merchants. They lived in a small neighborhood of waterfront godowns, which were homes, offices, and warehouses all in one. Lin’s troops surrounded the foreign neighborhood, barricaded the streets to prevent entry or departure from the docks and stood three rows of armed Chinese patrol boats in the river opposite the trading houses. The foreign community was to be held in detention until the opium trade was suppressed. Captain Charles Elliot, the highest ranking British naval officer in Canton, protested and asserted not only that he had the full support of the British government but that the traders were not bound to obey the laws of China. Commissioner Lin laid down strict terms for the foreign merchants if they wished to be free and to have the right to trade. First, all of the opium concealed aboard their ships had to be surrendered and second, they were to sign a binding pledge promising not to bring any more opium to China. Until these requirements were met he would not permit the traders to purchase any
te, rice, or silk. On March 27 the merchants agreed to surrender their opium to Commissioner Lin. (2)

Over two and a half million pounds of processed opium were delivered from the clippers to Lin. And on June 3 the destruction of the ‘foreign mud’ began. The first worker caught stealing from the stockpile was beheaded. For the next two weeks, Commissioner Lin supervised the methodical destruction of the ‘foreign mud.’ But despite this success most British merchants were not willing to abide by the laws of China. Many moved from Canton to Portuguese Macao where they intended to resume smuggling. And other British ships began to anchor near Hong Kong at the mouth of the Pearl River Delta.

Then on July 12 a Chinese villager was killed by a group of drunken British seamen in Kowloon. This came to be known as ‘The Kowloon Incident’. Lin demanded that the men responsible for the murder be turned over to him for punishment. But Captain Elliot refused, stating that the seamen could only be tried under British jurisdiction. Elliot then tried the sailors himself. Commissioner Lin was not satisfied as one seaman was acquitted of a murder charge for lack of evidence and the other five were only found guilty of participation in a riot. Lin repeated his demand that the men be delivered to Canton for justice. Elliot sent word that the men would all be appropriately punished when they returned to England. To force Elliot to give the men up Lin cut all supplies of rice, tea, meat and fresh vegetables to the anchored ships at Macao. And freshwater springs were poisoned. Lin also pressured the Portuguese authorities to evict the British from Macao by threatening trade restrictions. These measures forced the British ships to leave Macao and by August they had gathered in Hong Kong.

On August 31 a twenty-eight gun British frigate joined the clippers anchored off Hong Kong. Lin had a fleet of Chinese war junks at his disposal. On September 4th two British merchant ships and a navy launch attacked three Chinese junks to prevent them securing supplies of water at Kowloon. Lin was told by the junk captains that they had sunk a British ship and Commissioner Lin forwarded this false report to the Emperor. Lin also told the Emperor that he was preparing to drive the foreign merchants from Hong Kong. By September 22 he had assembled a fleet of eighty junks and fire-ships at the mouth of the Pearl River.

Meanwhile Captain Elliot demanded that British merchants be allowed to buy the recent harvest of Chinese tea. Lin ignored this demand and insisted that the British would not enjoy any trade opportunities until they agreed to obey Chinese law and ceased importing opium. If the British would not honor these terms they were to leave Chinese waters forever. Elliot refused to concede.

In November a second British warship, an eighteen-gun frigate, joined the British merchant fleet in Hong Kong and on November 3rd the two British warships delivered a sealed letter to the Chinese war junks demanding supplies and the immediate resumption of trade. The admiral of the Chinese fleet returned the letter unopened. The British frigates then attacked the anchored Chinese fleet and sank five of the largest war junks and severely damaging many more. Commissioner Lin feared reporting this defeat to the
Emperor as he was likely to be disgraced and punished. His report of the battle was brief and claimed the British barbarians had been severely damaged.

Emperor Tao-kuang had heard from independent reports that opium smuggling was continuing along the coast of South China and reminded Lin that his instruction was to eradicate opium from China, not only from around Canton. Lin continued to reinforce the defences of Canton. But by June 1840 a large British expeditionary force under Rear Admiral George Elliot, who was a cousin of Charles Elliot, arrived from Singapore. The expeditionary force included steam-powered gunboats and thousands of British marines and immediately besieged Canton before sailing north to occupy or blockade a number of coastal ports and cities along the Yangtzse River. He also threatened Peking. A message was sent to Emperor Tao-kuang demanding redress for Commissioner Lin’s actions at Canton. On August 21st 1840 Lin Tse-hsü was dismissed from his post as Imperial Commissioner and exiled to the northern frontier province of Ili to supervise irrigation and flood control. The Emperor’s representative negotiated with the Elliots and the British were persuaded to withdraw from northern China. In return the Emperor’s representative unofficially agreed to cede Hong Kong Island to Britain. But neither London nor Peking recognized this agreement.

Meanwhile Commodore Gordon Brenner led a contingent of naval men ashore and claimed Hong Kong Island for Britain on 26th January 1841. In late February, Captain Charles Elliot successfully attacked the Bogue forts at Humen, took control of the Pearl River and laid siege to Canton. He only withdrew in May 1841 after extracting Y6m and other concessions from the merchants of Canton. By August 1841, an even larger British force sailed north and seized Amoy, Ningpo, Shanghai and other ports. With Nanking under immediate threat the Chinese sued for peace and accepted the Treaty of Nanking. The Treaty officially ceded the Island of Hong Kong to Britain 'in perpetuity', opened five ports, including Canton, to European trade and allowed Europeans rights of residence in the newly opened ports.

In 1858 the Chinese government reluctantly legalized the importation of opium. (3)

