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# Book review

The Opium Wars are probably the only actual shooting wars in history that are named after a drug. They may be the only major wars between countries that are named after a commodity of any kind. Britain and Iceland had their cod war, but that hardly counts. The United States had a Whiskey Rebellion and Australia had a Rum Rebellion. France and Mexico fought a desultory Pastry War in 1838 that cost Santa Anna his left leg and catapulted the rest of him to dictatorship. But the Opium Wars set the trajectory of the East Asian interstate system for 100 years and resonate in historical memory to this day.

It wouldn't be so surprising if the Opium Wars fought between the United Kingdom and China in 1839-1842 and 1856-1860 had been given the label by aggrieved Chinese historians to highlight the key role played by drug trafficking in British imperialism, but that's not what happened. The first Opium War got the name before it even started, in an 1839 editorial in the London Morning Herald. Within four months the epithet "Opium War" was being used on the floor of Parliament. The "China War", as its boosters wanted it to be called, was infamous from the first shot.

For historian Song-Chuan Chen, the naming controversy was part and parcel of the making of the war itself. That's "making" in both senses of the word: both the manufacturing and the fighting of the war. In Merchants of War and Peace: British knowledge of China in the making of the Opium War, he explains how the "Warlike party" of British merchants in old Canton (now Guangzhou) pressed for war through a decade of editorials and pamphlets while at the same time collecting the detailed military intelligence on Chinese coastal defenses that made it possible for Britain to fight and win a war on foreign territory so far from home.

He shows that British government would have had neither the desire nor the ability to wage a war on China in 1839 had it not been for the

intellectual foundations laid by East Asia's stock villains, William Jardine and James Matheson. Jardine and Matheson both started out in the colonial carrying trade, but when the East India Company's commercial activities were wound up in 1833 they seized the opportunity to become the leading merchants connecting China to India and the United Kingdom. They dealt in all sorts of commodities, but the most famous (and most profitable) was opium.

It has always been known that Jardine and Matheson lobbied for war, both in pamphlets and in person. Chen argues that their lobbying was decisive, though this is more questionable. Chen himself points out that Lord Palmerston, then Foreign Secretary, only gave in to the Warlike party's pressure when domestic political calculations left the Whig government unable to form a majority without the support of pro-war Radicals. And the anti-war activists of the "Pacific party"—the "merchants of peace" of the book's title—were sufficiently persuasive to tar the war with the shame of opium.

Much more convincing is Chen's argument that without the painstaking intelligence work of Jardine, Matheson, and others like them it would have been impossible to convince the British government that the war was winnable—and difficult for the British to win the war, once started. In fact, Jardine presented Palmerston with a detailed plan for the war that became not only the blueprint for Britain's military operations but also for its peace terms. The merchants of the Warlike party were instrumental in sounding Chinese harbors, noting Chinese gun emplacements, and estimating Chinese troop strength. They also identified the best island to be demanded as permanent settlement for the British trading community in China: Hong Kong.

That said, considering the broader record of 19th-century European colonialism, it seems certain that war would have come at some point, if not in 1839 then a decade or two later, and if not over the opium trade then over something else. In fact, the arguments of Jardine and Matheson's Warlike party were opposed by those of an equally prolific Pacific party, whose writers argued that a war would be disastrous for the China trade, including the trade in opium. The "merchants of war and peace" of the book's subtitle may have accelerated or retarded the march of colonial expansion, but they couldn't have changed it.

Unfortunately, Chen gets drawn so deeply into the fascinating minutiae of the politics of peace and war that he gives short shrift to the most provocative argument of the book: that the "soft border" in Canton that permitted East-West trade while isolating the European merchants in Canton from their Chinese hosts gave gave British merchants the opportunity to gather extensive practical intelligence on China's economy, politics, and maritime security while giving away little of value to their hosts. Britain acquired the knowledge it needed to overthrow the Canton system and shake the very foundation of Qing rule in China.

In previous centuries, Jesuit scholars at the imperial court had educated China's rulers about the West while portraying the Chinese government itself as a "model of wisdom". But in the 1830s, no one in China had much idea who ran the British government or how, and no one in China had ever conceived of a steam-powered iron warship like the Nemesis, which sank an entire Chinese squadron in one engagement in 1841. The Chinese government was making policy on the basis of distant rumors of British conquests in South Asia. The British government had detailed diagrams of Chinese port fortifications.

Chen's merchants of war and peace were able to develop their knowledge of China right under the noses of the Qing authorities. In 1837, the 307 foreigners who lived in the famous "Thirteen Factories" of Canton supported three weekly newspapers, in addition to contributing to other newspapers published throughout British Asia. In these papers they openly debated which island they should take after a war with China, with one exhaustive review of 18 candidates settling on Chusan (today's Zhoushan), with Hong Kong as the runner-up. The Warlike and Pacific parties each had their own paper, in which they traded arguments about the merits and timing of an attack on China. The Chinese authorities, allowing goods but not ideas to flow across the soft border in Canton, were none the wiser.

Despite its focus on the run-up to the Opium War, Merchants of War and Peace is in the end neither a book about merchants nor a book about the war. Merchants and the war merely form the backdrop for a very profound book about the power of knowledge.

In Chen's telling, the Canton system "dictated China's perception of and relations with the Europeans" in ways that led to its own undoing. A system designed to keep foreign trade flowing while the foreigners themselves

were kept at arm's-length set up a century of foreign invasions—economic, cultural, and military. Could a more outward-looking China have staved off the depredations of the "century of humiliation"? Chen is too much the academic historian to speculate, but global engagement has certainly worked wonders for 21st century China. We can only wonder what might have been.

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