

Chapter Two

DAO GUANG'S DECISION

德川戰爭

To the casual onlooker, being Emperor of China – surrounded by palaces, empresses, slaves and kowtows – might have looked exquisitely pleasurable. The reality was rather different. It was not just the workload, though that was bad enough: a Qing emperor's average day at the palace consisted of audiences and memorial-reading, followed by more audiences, then more memorial-reading, sometimes varied by having officials presented, or by assessing death penalties. Emperors were also burdened with an oppressive sense of public obligation. During the first millennium BC (the formative centuries of Chinese statecraft) the ruling Zhou dynasty established the idea that emperors ruled by the mystical Mandate of Heaven. If a dynasty's righteousness went into steep decline, Heaven would withdraw the Mandate – publicizing its decision through cataclysms such as rebellions, civil wars and comets – and pass it to someone else.

Like most rulers of China before them, the Qing had won the country through military rather than moral supremacy. In 1644, bands of Manchu horsemen (disciplined into the Eight Banners – military units totalling between 300,000 and 500,000 men) had poured from the north-east through a pass in China's great frontier wall, defeated a vast rival army of Chinese rebels and founded the dynasty in Beijing. Within another hundred years, the three great emperors of the high Qing, Kangxi (1654–1722), Yongzheng and Qianlong (1711–1799), had forcibly doubled the dimensions of the Chinese empire inherited from their predecessors the Ming, with Manchu cavalry pushing the old frontiers back into Burma, Laos,

Vietnam, Taiwan, the Gobi desert, Outer Mongolia, into the deserts and steppes of the Jungaria and Tarim basins and Tibet. But like most rulers of China before them, the Qing conquerors quickly sought to justify their violent acquisition of the Mandate of Heaven by presenting themselves as imperial sages. Consequently, the language of Qing government dripped with paternalistic self-justification: dwelling on the emperor's 'soothing' and 'cherishing' of men from both near and far.

British traders and diplomats – reading the turgid translations of official Qing documents that their linguists assembled – jibed at the condescending tones ('our Celestial Government . . . nourishes, righteously rectifies and gloriously magnifies a vast forbearance') of imperial addresses. But this rhetoric was not just pomposity or self-love (though there was a deal of that too). Taking the moral high ground was a crucial part of the emperor's portfolio: to validate – through every public act and decision – his claims to superiority over the empire, and to the love and respect of peoples beyond. Both public and private spaces in the Forbidden City were hung with moral exhortations, in case emperors and their civil servants ever forgot their proper obligations: officials took their leave of audiences with their sovereign through the Gates of Luminous Virtue and Correct Conduct, while judicial verdicts were issued and assessed in the Halls of Diligence, Discernment, and Honesty and Open-Mindedness.

Qing emperors needed to hold their nerve beneath this heavy weight of responsibility, and the omniscient rulers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries – who oversaw such a massive expansion of China's frontiers and population – had each adapted themselves to the task in their own way. Warrior, scholar, statesman, diplomat, Kangxi multitasked his way out of self-doubt. Qianlong – the beloved philosopher-emperor of eighteenth-century Europe's chinoiserie craze – buried his anxieties (sorcery scares in the 1760s, growing fears about a decline in the martial Manchu spirit, apprehensions about British ambitions) in dazzling ritual and display. His son, Jiaqing (1760–1820), seems to have comfort-eaten his way through his reign: although one inauspicious rumour told that he had died after being struck by lightning, it was more likely a combination of obesity and heatstroke.

Daoguang, the emperor who decided to fight the Opium War with the British, was unfortunately blessed with few temperamental gifts for the job. It had all started well enough for him. As a nine-year-old, in 1791, he had won the favour of his grandfather, the great Qianlong, by dispatching his first deer with bow and arrow in front of him while out on a hunting expedition. The emperor was so delighted with his precocious grandson (who succeeded in felling his first animal at an earlier age than he himself had done) that he immediately rewarded him with a bright yellow robe and a jade-green feather. Twenty-two years later, the future ruler also pleased his father – the pleasure-loving Jiaqing – by springing to the defence of the Forbidden City against millenarian rebels who had conspired with eunuchs to storm the palace gates on a quiet lunch-hour and assassinate the emperor. While on his way to enquire after the health of one of his several stepmothers, the crown prince spotted the intruders scrambling over the wall into the Forbidden City. He immediately decided to break the rule forbidding the use of firearms within the palace precincts, sent for knife, musket and powder, and dispatched two of the rebels.

Once he took the throne in 1820, though, Daoguang's nerve seems to have deserted him. Gaze at his official portrait – arrayed in the standard-issue bulky red turban, yellow brocade gown and beaded necklace of Qing emperorship – and he looks a different creature from his predecessors: the face pinched, angular, just a touch apprehensive, compared to his father's expansive jowliness, or his grandfather's patrician gravitas. He quickly abandoned displays of machismo for the laudable, but less charismatic virtues of parsimony and diligence. He draped his apartments with exhortations to 'Be Respectful, Honest, Assiduous, Correcting of Errors'.¹ On becoming emperor, he issued a cost-cutting 'Treatise on Music, Women, Goods and Profit', began going about in patched clothes and reduced his fun-loving father's resident troupe of palace musicians and actors from some 650 to a more restrained 370-odd, while halving Jiaqing's 400-strong army of cooks. As he aged, he left instructions that – contrary to custom – he modestly wanted no panegyric tablet erected at his tomb.

Daoguang's two least successful attributes were probably indecision and a fondness for scapegoating others. A day or two after he had

succeeded his father, he removed three key advisers for letting a mistake slip into his deceased father's valedictory edict; a couple of days later, he reinstated two of them.² He even changed his mind about a choice of final resting place. Having spent seven years building one tomb, the would-be underground palace sprang a leak, reading this as deeply inauspicious, Daoguang punished the officials responsible and abandoned the project in favour of a new site. By the time it was completed, after another four years, the 'Hall of Eminent Favour' – the only Qing imperial tomb built entirely of unpainted cedar-wood – spoke of the emperor's love of frugality. (Compare the 2.27 million taels of silver – almost 3.5 million silver dollars – and 4,590 taels of gold spent by Cixi, the last empress, on her own tomb, in which even the bricks were carved and gilded.)³ This talent for vacillation – and for censuring and replacing any commander who did not achieve impossible victories – would serve him badly in his wars against opium and the British.

During the 1830s, there was much to occupy the mind of any emperor: a steep decline in public order, finances and – most worrying of all – in the Qing military machine, whose weaknesses were being exploited by a broad range of domestic rebels (vagrants, dispossessed ethnic minorities, secret societies).

After recovering from the horrors of the seventeenth century – its wars, plagues and crop failures – the Chinese population under the remarkable Kangxi, Yongzheng and Qianlong at least doubled between 1650 and 1800, to reach some 300 million. New World silver flowed through the empire, thanks in part to a healthy export trade, the proliferation of an empire-wide network of markets and the emancipation of previously servile labourers. But size, diversity and silver turned against the Qing at the end of its eighteenth-century heyday. At this point, the empire was approaching its limits, as demographic explosion led to fierce competition for work and resources, ecological degradation, price rises, bureaucratic chaos and corruption. Critically, things also began to go wrong in the Qing military. By the second half of the eighteenth century, the Qing's earlier capacity for dominating its borders was looking more questionable. Three invasions of Burma between 1766 and 1769 were defeated or stalemated, as Qing cavalry became bogged down along the humid south-western frontier; an occupation of Vietnam in 1788 was chased

out within a month, with the loss of 4,000 troops. The root cause of decline was the same as in other spheres of government: over-extension, and failure of funds.

As the empire began to malfunction, so the population began to complain, with growing militancy. Starting in 1774, the White Lotus Rebellion – only the most sprawling and destructive of the some half-dozen major revolts of the late-Qianlong era – united north-eastern peasants, actresses, carters, monks and sellers of fish, vegetable oil and bean curd in an acute sense of grievance against the fin-de-siècle empire.⁴ Thanks to the decline of Qing armies, the uprising straggled on until 1805, and was finally put down only through the government authorizing local elites to generate their own militia. After 1800, the Qing empire was for the most part far too busy maintaining its costly frontiers and interior to size up new, well-armed European antagonists along the coast. Chinese-language accounts of the Opium War reveal a divided, distrustful society, with practically every grouping in conflict with another: Han Chinese with Manchu officials; northern Chinese with southern Chinese; central southern Chinese with deep southern Chinese; provincial gentry with central government; and the increasingly desperate hoi polloi with almost every group they encountered.

But to give Daoguang his due, he dealt rather well with a variety of natural and man-made problems during the first decade of his reign: crumbling river dykes, salt-tax dysfunction and a jihad on the empire's north-western frontier, during which the entire Qing garrison at Kashgar perished ('from the vein of the earth a stream of blood boiled forth', as one contemporary account put it), and which came to an end only after seven awful years, with the jihad's leader being sliced to death in Beijing.⁵ On the whole, though, the emperor's actions through the first decade of his reign were often those of a man trying to keep himself too busy to panic. He promoted, he demoted, he audited; he was a bureaucratic fidget. He obviously did not know what to do: he was facing an environmental, demographic, financial and social crisis for which the Confucian or Manchu empire-management manuals had no easy answers.

The political culture of the late-imperial civil service did not help Daoguang keep a cool head. For much of imperial Chinese history, government service remained the most attractive career option for

educated Chinese men (women, of course, were expressly excluded). The sanctity of emperorship – ordained, as it was, by the Mandate of Heaven – ensured that working for the imperial state would be viewed as honourable and righteous in all but the most exceptional circumstances (for example, when Heaven was in the process of handing its Mandate from an unworthy to a worthy recipient). By the Ming dynasty, the imperial government had succeeded in channelling educational aspirations almost wholly into passing the civil-service exams: the tests of Confucian orthodoxy that controlled the paths to wealth and social success.

The life cycle of an aspiring bureaucrat began in the womb, with prenatal manuals lecturing pregnant women on maintaining the posture that would best aid the development of an embryonic graduand. Around two or three years after birth, formal training began: first with hours of memorizing characters – around 2,000 by the age of eight. Next came reading and memorization of the Four Books (*The Analects, Doctrine of the Mean, Great Learning, Mencius*) and the Five Classics (*Of Poetry, Documents and Changes, The Record of Rites and The Spring and Autumn Annals*) and others – perhaps as many as 518,000 characters in total, taking a five-to-twelve-year-old boy around seven years if he was memorizing 200 characters a day.

Finally, in his teens, a youth would start to practise constructing – through more rote-study – the ‘eight-legged essay’: a densely allusive eight-paragraph exposition (no more than a few hundred characters long) on a laconic goblet from one of the Classics, designed to demonstrate the candidate’s mastery of the terse exchanges of Confucius and his disciples. And even after a student ventured to attempt the lowest of the three rungs of imperial examinations (theoretically possible at fifteen, though twenty-one was a more usual starting age), the odds were stacked against success. During the Qing, around two million candidates sat for the lowest, county level of examinations, an opportunity available twice every three years; only 1.5 per cent passed. No more than 5 per cent would succeed at the next, provincial stage, and less than 1.5 per cent made it past the final, metropolitan rung.⁶ These ratios, if anything, probably deteriorated through the Qing dynasty, as appointment quotas failed to keep up proportionally with the eighteenth century’s doubling of popu-

As a result, late-imperial China was increasingly saddled with an ageing population of academic failures. In 1699, a man over a hundred was led into the examination by his great-grandson (who was trying his luck for the first time). In 1826 a hundred-and-four-year-old candidate failed the metropolitan examination yet again, but was awarded his degree out of sympathy.⁷ The majority swallowed their disappointment, and set about preparing for fresh attempts. A less restrained minority collapsed, went mad, died or violently rebelled, bringing mass slaughter and destruction to great swathes of the empire. The Ming dynasty was brought down in 1644 by insurrections led by a postman who happened also to be a failed examination candidate. The most destructive popular revolt of the nineteenth century, the Taiping, was led by a provincial school-teacher who after repeatedly failing the civil-service examinations suffered a nervous breakdown in which he hallucinated that God told him he was the younger brother of Jesus Christ. When his break-away Heavenly Kingdom was finally annihilated after fourteen years in 1864, it had left tens of millions dead and almost toppled the dynasty.

Under the Qing, positive discrimination in favour of the minority of Manchu candidates made the process even more frustrating for the Han Chinese majority. In theory, Qing orthodoxy held that the Manchus formed ‘one family’ with the Han Chinese that they ruled. In reality, the Manchu population (outnumbered by their Han Chinese subjects three hundred and fifty to one) worked to keep a sense of their ethnic otherness alive. Emperors lectured their Bannermen on the simple, honest traditions (archery, horse-riding, proficiency in Manchu, frugality) that China’s conquerors must cultivate to justify their possession of the empire. Worried about the softening influence of Chinese culture, Qianlong (who also personally kowtowed to Confucius’s ancestral tablet and wrote some 40,000 classical Chinese poems) encouraged his countrymen to celebrate drunken ancestors who washed their faces in urine and used their parents’ corpses to trap sabres.⁸ Bannermen were kept deliberately aloof from China’s majority civilian populations, segregated in walled garrisons that might occupy an entire half of a city’s area. Wander through the streets of Qing Beijing in the middle of the nineteenth century, and the traces of Manchu foreignness would be everywhere – not just in

the thick garrison ring around the imperial city (imitating, in permanent form, the layout of tents on imperial expeditions), and in the persons of the city's some 200,000 Manchu residents. The culture of the north-east also permeated the sights, sounds and smells of civilian life: in the songs beaten out on eight-cornered drums by Manchu street entertainers; in the pastry shops selling Manchu cakes and sweets; in the shaman shacks grafted onto the capital's elegant warrens of courtyard residences. Manchu women stuck out, too, by their distinctive, sculpted hair-dos (kept rigorously in place by elephant-dung lacquer); by their flair for cart-driving; by their very presence at dinners and ceremonies – for Han Chinese women were not allowed to socialize publicly.⁹

After 1644, Manchus were privileged over Han at every point in the imperial bureaucracy. The civil-service examinations were dumbed down for Manchu candidates: if Bannermen (for whom a quota of passes was reserved) found the competitive Han curriculum too challenging, they had the option of simply translating passages from the Chinese classics (which they had memorized) into Manchu and passing an archery test. Quite simply, the maths of minority worked for the Manchus: 'The path of promotion for Manchu officials is quicker than for Han officials because they are few and posts reserved for them are many', as one nineteenth-century observer put it.¹⁰ Han Chinese men were spending lifetimes over-educating themselves to face demoralizingly low examination pass-rates, while watching less talented foreign rivals overtake them – a sure recipe for ill-feeling.

This culture of pressure and rivalry tended to produce two, highly contrasted species of official: the creatively corrupt libertine, and the puritan. And it was the tension between the two that helped produce the Opium War, with all its unfortunate consequences.

No individual better personified the talent for venality of Qing officialdom than the Qianlong emperor's notorious Manchu favourite, Heshen, on whom the elderly ruler grew increasingly dependent – politically and personally, perhaps sexually – through the last quarter of the eighteenth century. In sole control of access to the emperor, Heshen accumulated a vast personal fortune, principally through inventive embezzlement and selling political favours. During his twenty-six years at the top of the Qing political tree after 1776, he acquired for himself appointments in four of the six key boards of

central government (of Civil Office, Revenue, War and Punishments) in addition to supervising the palace examinations – all of which gave him ample scope to broaden networks of influence and obligation, filling local governments with his protégés, then extorting vast bribes to ensure future discretion. After he was impeached in 1799, an official, conservative estimate calculated his property to be double the government's annual budget, at more than ten million ounces of silver, in items that reputedly included 600 pounds of top-quality ginseng, 550 fox hides, 850 raccoon dog hides, 56,000 sheep and cattle hides of varying thicknesses, 7,000 outfits, 460 European clocks and 600 concubines, all scattered thickly over his thousands of estates and residences. At the first possible opportunity, within a month of Qianlong's death, the new emperor Jiaqing had taken the unfilial step of pronouncing a death sentence on his father's pet, and confiscating his property. 'After Heshen fell, Jiaqing ate well', went one scrap of contemporary doggerel.¹¹

But long after he had obeyed the emperor's command to commit suicide amid the pleasant courtyards and lotus ponds of his palace just north of the Forbidden City, Heshen continued to leave his mark on Qing politics. After decades of scholarly grind, many graduands were anxious to make profitable use of their years in bureaucratic power. In addition to a fixed salary, an official post offered civil servants abundant opportunities for self-enrichment: in bribes and favours extracted from and granted to cronies, in access to public funds and goods, in unofficial extra charges and taxes passed on to the general populace. Reinforced by Heshen's example, patronage swiftly became a deciding principle in public life. And with profit-creaming becoming more important than imperial service, public-works budgets began to disappear. In the early nineteenth century, for example, perhaps only 10 per cent of the annual six million taels of silver earmarked for Yellow River Conservancy found their way to Yellow River Conservation, the rest washing away in official banquets and entertainments.¹² Even after Heshen's disgrace, officials were still expected to actively flaunt their wealth. When one of Daoguang's less corruptible officials retired to his native place, his family filled boats with eighty wooden crates loaded with bricks so locals would think it was gold hoarded in the course of a five-decade career.¹³

There was a counterpoise, however: such abuses could also generate

a kind of inflexible asceticism. The examination system was designed to indoctrinate imperial China's educated elites with a humourless service ethic, drummed into them through their decades of studying the submissive virtues (loyalty, filiality, modesty and so on) of the classical curriculum. Part of the great genius of the Confucian school of political education is its talent for persuading its practitioners to police themselves, through a reproachful emphasis on self-criticism, as stipulated in the fourth injunction of *The Analects*: 'I examine myself three times a day. When dealing on behalf of others, have I been trustworthy? . . . Have I practised what I was taught?'¹⁴ The downside to this was a certain unyielding self-righteousness. After so many exhausting, enervating years of training in Confucian statecraft, it was inevitable that some civil-service literati would become fixated on their mission to set the empire in order – a feeling sharpened by resentment at being often excluded from the top ranks of government by a less qualified foreign minority. And by Daoguang's reign, there was, by common acknowledgement, a good deal to set in order. Evidence from the provinces indicated that the rot had set in deep: that the conspiracy of self-interest and neglect encouraged by people like Heshen was destroying the bonds of government and society. Faced by the nineteenth century's dismaying variety of social, environmental, political and economic problems, earnest Confucian officials began to blame the whole sorry business on a massive failure of public standards.

After the 1810s, groups of the empire's educated Chinese elite started to form themselves into clubs – though the overtones of the word in English are perhaps too comfortable. At annual poetry banquets held in Beijing, members luxuriated in a melodramatic sense of crisis, rather than in the Chinese imperial equivalent of cigars, fine wines and roomy leather armchairs. At one such meeting, an associate later recorded, although no wine was served, the 'six or seven brethren present worked themselves into a state of high emotion': writing poetry, admiring facsimiles of fourth-century calligraphy, debating whether literary style was a true gauge of moral character, bemoaning the general state of things and considering radical bureaucratic solutions to the ills of the empire.¹⁵ Tame stuff to twenty-first-century eyes, perhaps, but in the highly regimented world of Qing politics, to form this kind of association was a daring

step. The Manchu regime had a particular horror of private clubs like this, linking them with sedition and instability. In the years after it was founded in 1829, one of the most influential of these groups – the 'Spring Purification Circle' – searched for an opportunity to persuade the emperor that they were the men to set the empire to rights.

As China entered its troubled 1830s, then, an anxious ruler was searching for a scapegoat for the country's many troubles, while a group of ambitious literati were looking for a cause that would win imperial favour and help wrest guardianship of the empire from venal Manchu privilege. Enter opium. For China's growing habit seemed to embody all that was wrong with the place: the empty, conspicuous consumption that was sending the empire's silver up in so much smoke and causing its subjects to forget their proper social roles; and the universal disregard for state laws tolerated by slick, self-serving official corruption.

In 1832, Daoguang's fears of looming crisis converged in one defeat: thousands of Qing troops were trounced by aboriginal rebels in the subtropical hills of north-west Guangdong. An imperial commissioner sent to investigate concluded, rather lamely, that the government forces 'were not used to the mountains'. He then added, more alarmingly, that 'many of the troops from the coastal garrisons were opium smokers, and it was difficult to get any vigorous response from them'.¹⁶ Most of the troops had been stationed along the coast before they had been dispatched into the mountains; most of them, therefore, had been busily extracting bribes from the smuggling networks, doubtless while smoking a good deal of opium themselves. By an unhappy coincidence, the empire was simultaneously struck by floods, droughts and famine. When even nature began conspiring against the Chinese empire – where political legitimacy depended so heavily on Heavenly favour – panic was likely to set in.

Daoguang was seriously shaken. On 24 July 1832, at the marble Altar of Heaven on the meridian due south of the Forbidden City – the centre of the Chinese world – and dressed in pleated yellow and embroidered purple, the emperor took the exceptional step of publicly

asking the celestial powers where he had gone wrong. First, he tried propitiating them by cremating a sacrificial buffalo, offering incense, jade and silk, reciting prayers and drinking the Wine and eating the Meat of Felicity. He then spoke his mind.

This year the drought passes all precedent . . . Mankind is bowed beneath calamity, even the beasts and insects cease to live. I, the Son of Heaven, am Lord of this World. Heaven looks to me that I preserve tranquillity. My bounded duty is to soothe the people. Yet, though I cannot sleep, nor eat with appetite; though I am grief-stricken and shake with anxiety; my grief, my fasts, my sleepless nights have but obtained a trifling shower.

Without waiting for a response, he suggested his own interpretation of events.

The atrocity alone of my sins is the cause, too little sincerity, too little devotion . . . Have I been negligent in public business, lacking in the diligence and effort which was due? Have my rewards and punishments been equitable? . . . Have unfit persons been appointed to official posts, and petty and vexatious acts oppressed the people?

'Prostrate,' he eventually concluded, 'I implore Imperial Heaven to pardon my ignorance . . . I have made the Three Kneelings, I have made the Nine Knockings. Hasten and confer clement deliverance . . . Oh, alas, Imperial Heaven, give ear to my petition!'¹⁷

In the absence of a clear sign from Heaven, Daoguang decided to start by taking stern measures against opium – this dark, sticky symbol of corruption and extravagance. He sacked the official responsible for the Guangdong debacle (who had clearly been waving opium shipments up the river, after letting his soldiers take their pick of the cargoes), and ordered his successor to strike hard: to 'pull up the roots and block off the source' of the drug. 'Do not muddle along', he added, 'with your gaze wrapt only upon the immediate tasks at hand and entirely oblivious to the longer-term interests of the state!'¹⁸

*

Yet soon, characteristically, he wavered again. Within a few years, anti-opium ardour had been dampened by bureaucratic inertia down in Canton and by the city's chastening encounter with Lord Napier (in which two British ships had given the supposedly impregnable forts protecting Canton a very hard time). The deep maritime south could breed a more pragmatic variety of Chinese official than the dry, landlocked north: one steeped in the ambiguities (and profits) of the smuggling trade. If trade were cut off, then the silver that washed about the city would also dry up. At the time of his death, the richest of the mid-nineteenth-century Hong merchants, Howqua, was ten times wealthier than Nathan Rothschild. Something had to be done to make the emperor see reason – to persuade him that opium would in fact not prove a convenient scapegoat.

And so, in 1836, a legalization lobby spoke up. A former judicial commissioner at Canton argued that banning opium and cutting off the trade there would achieve nothing. A tough policy would spread only terror among the people: 'bandits, under the pretence of preventing the smuggling of opium by order of the government, [will] seek opportunities for plundering'. Resistance was futile: the Qing government did not possess the necessary policing muscle to engage the forces (whether native or foreign) of lawlessness along the coast. As for the physical risks of opium, he continued in Malthusian vein, 'New births are daily increasing the population of the empire . . . the smokers of opium are idle, lazy, useless vagrants – undeserving even of contempt' – let them smoke themselves to death.¹⁹ The deal must have seemed almost done: the Governor-General of Guangdong enthusiastically endorsed the plan, and told the Hong merchants to give the opium traders the nod. The British superintendent of trade, Captain Charles Elliot, exulted at the prospect of 'very important relaxations' in the Sino-British trading relationship.²⁰ A happy ending was in sight.

Not long after, the anti-opium lobby found its voice – led by one Huang Jueci, a president of the Sacrificial Court and founding member of the Spring Purification Circle, who dashed off a lengthy memorial on the subject to Daoguang. After expressing unctuous regret for all the sleepless nights and disrupted mealtimes his beloved emperor was suffering, Huang's memorial nominated a single culprit for the impoverishment of the realm: opium. The opium trade, he

explained, was a foreign plot that began when the red-haired Europeans 'seduced the nimble, warlike people of Java into the use of it, whereupon they were subdued, brought into subjection and their land taken possession of'.²¹ 'In introducing opium into this country', echoed one of his allies, 'the English purpose has been to weaken and enfeeble the central empire. If not early aroused to a sense of our danger, we shall find ourselves, before long, on the last step toward ruin . . . Of this there is clear proof in the instance of the campaign against the Yao rebels in the twelfth year of our sovereign's reign . . . great numbers of the soldiers were opium smokers, so that although their numerical force was large, there was hardly any strength to be found among them.'²²

A sharp, shocking crusade was needed, to awaken the empire from its moral daze. Huang's solution was simple: execute the consumers, and watch demand (and therefore imports) dry up. Give smokers a year to repent, he added, sweetening his advocacy with a touch of Confucian benevolence, in the course of which, he estimated, eight or nine out of ten 'will have learned to refrain . . . Such are your majesty's opportunities of exhibiting abundant goodness and wide-spreading philanthropy!' And to enforce the suppression, he would make use of the punitive Legalist techniques of government invented by the ministers of one of Chinese history's most notorious tyrants, the First Emperor of China (259–210 BC): every five households would be bound together in a common bond, pledged to keep watch over the others, and denounce any infringement of the new laws; failure to report an offender would bring collective punishment down on the group. 'This', Huang concluded, 'will indeed be a fountain of happiness to the rulers and the ruled in ten thousand ages to come.' Except for those executed, of course.

Alien conspiracies, military and social decline, memories of 1832: the campaign was well judged to alarm the emperor. One other key point emerges from Huang's analysis: his ignorance of foreign traders. 'Among the red-haired race', he expounded, 'the law regarding such as daily make use of opium is to assemble all of their race as spectators while the criminal is bound to a stake, and shot from a gun into the sea . . . Hence England and other nations – which imports opium into China – have only preparers, not consumers of the drug.'²³

DAOGUANG'S DECISION

Huang's suggestions, moreover, seem not to have considered how the British might respond to a blow to their pocket-books.

His view was not a majority one. After receiving this fiery memorial, the emperor put the whole question out to tender, soliciting views from the empire's top officials, both civilian and military. Over the next four months, twenty-nine responses drifted back to the capital: only eight supported the death penalty for smokers; the rest wanted to concentrate suppression on opium's point of entry – Canton – and on the smugglers who brought it into the country.²⁴ Perhaps they objected for Confucian, humanitarian reasons; or then again, out of indolence, maybe. 'In Fujian and Guangdong', one response complained, 'seven or eight out of every ten persons smoke opium. There would have to be hundreds of thousands of executions, or even more.'²⁵ In addition to being grisly to implement, it would also be exhausting. If the problem of opium addiction was as severe as the prohibition party claimed, 1 per cent of the country's 400 million-plus population would theoretically face the death penalty – not to mention all those involved in the trade, a proportion estimated as being as high as 90 per cent in some parts of the country. The advantage of focusing punishment on the smugglers was that they existed beyond the pale of regular society: if you were skilful or diligent enough to catch one, you enjoyed the credit. If not, no one would find you particularly wanting. But if civilian opium smokers were the ubiquitous presence in local society that the prohibitionists reported, officials would have to work much harder to find an excuse for failing to crack down. Perhaps sensing this lack of enthusiasm, Daoguang continued to waver for months after Huang's memorial arrived. Making use of that universal bureaucratic fallback, on 23 October he put it out to another working party – this time, his grand council of advisers.

But at last, two weeks later, on 9 November 1838, he acted: summoning a Fujianese official called Lin Zexu – one of Huang Jueci's eight-strong minority of supporters – to an audience, to discuss his plans for annihilating 'the evil influence of opium . . . using strong medicine to blow up the root of the sickness.'²⁶ What finally swayed the indecisive Daoguang? Was it the ruthless simplicity of the scheme (particularly as he only had to authorize executions)? Or family

problems, perhaps? On 25 October 1838, a report reached him that one of the princes of the blood, together with one of the 'lords of suppressing the realm', had been discovered smoking opium in one of the Forbidden City's temples. On 8 November, Daoguang received a second report, from one of his most trusted ministers, Qishan, revealing that 130,000 ounces of opium had just been seized at Tianjin – the port town a hundred miles or so south of Beijing that supplied much of the capital's needs. This was the largest single seizure of opium since 1729. Qishan added that the opium was all from Canton: bought there, transported from there, by Cantonese merchants.²⁷

On the last day of 1838, the emperor decided to appoint Lin Imperial Commissioner to Canton. After a century of fits and starts, the Qing war on opium was about to begin in earnest.

Chapter Three

CANTON SPRING

鴉片戰爭

Lin Zexu's background was conventional. He was born on 20 August 1785 in south-east China, into a declining landholding clan that had been slowly bankrupted by preparing their sons for the examination system. When Zexu was born, the Lin clan had not won an official posting for four costly generations. All this failure seems only to have hardened the resolve of Lin's father (who had ruined his eyesight through fruitless examination preparation) to see his own son graduate to a state job. The adult Lin – who began studying the classics at the age of three – would recall how, 'through freezing days and endless nights, in a broken-down three-roomed apartment, with the north wind howling angrily, one lamp on the wall, young and old would sit next to each other, doing our reading and our needlework . . . till the night was out.'¹

His father's efforts paid off. Aged twelve, his son managed the lowest level of the civil-service exams, producing a solid Confucian essay on 'The Great Treasure That Is Being Benevolent to Relatives'. Aged nineteen, he passed the provincial exam; seven years later, in 1811, he advanced through the metropolitan exam on his third attempt, and finally stabilized the family finances with the iron rice-bowl of an official posting.

Once past these obstacles, Lin's career could have taken him along two different paths. The first would have been to make as much money as possible from his position, then retire on the proceeds. But his spartan upbringing pushed him in another direction. In the two

question, he became renowned for his bureaucratic virtuousness: hunting down pirates, fixing dams, relieving floods, managing the salt tax. He was, in short, a tremendous administrative asset – though his work-life balance could probably have used some fine-tuning. 'He never had any hobbies', commented an early biographer. 'Although he didn't mind books, paintings and inscriptions, he never bothered much with them. Instead, he preferred to be tirelessly diligent, day and night . . . When he saw the people in trouble, he felt as if his heart were on fire, his liver being stabbed.' His stint as judicial commissioner in the south-east during the 1820s won him the nickname 'Lin Qingtian' (Lin Clear-as-the-Heavens) in recognition of his incorruptibility. Transferred subsequently to river-conservancy work, his profligate predecessors 'became terrified their misdeeds would be exposed. Lin set about washing away the filth with honesty.' Temperamentally, he was the perfect match for the parsimonious Daoguang, from whom he received more than once the highest accolades of praise: 'I've never known such a diligent river superintendent', ran one encomium; 'you have not committed any mistakes' went a second; or a third, 'you are careful and reliable'.²

Lin Zexu, then, was in 1839 a man brimful of self-belief: an intensely moral individual who had made his way through diligence and self-control, and who was confident that this work ethic could crack the most complex of questions. He was also a man just a touch obsessed – though not, in fact, primarily with opium, the substance that would propel his name into the history books. Back in 1833, long before he began waging war on the drug, he had actually been rather pragmatic about what to do about it, proposing that – to combat the financial damage that opium imports were inflicting – China should simply grow its own.³ His pet ambition – on which he lavished much time and ink – was to reform the expensive system of grain transport along canals up to the capital by irrigating the dry plains that ringed Beijing. Western observers of Lin's campaign against opium reached for grand diagnoses for his actions: this was, they proclaimed, a collision of civilizations (the landlocked, anti-mercantile Qing versus the adventurous, free-trading British). The reality was more mundane, however, and concerned with the internal politics of the Chinese empire, as well as the activities of a gang of ill-behaved British merchants. Lin wanted to make a quick success of the Canton job, to win him governorship of

the wealthy Jiangsu area, in which the capital grain-transport began.⁴ He was no inveterately xenophobic crusader, however hard his British merchant antagonists tried to demonize him as such; he was a careful bureaucrat with a passion for freight management. Back in the nineteenth century, China – as it remains today – was a big and busy place, its priorities governed by domestic, far more than international considerations. To a degree, the Opium War – and all that it led to – was set off in a fit of bureaucratic haste.

Following his imperial summons, Lin arrived in Beijing on 26 December 1838 and, over the next month or so, enjoyed nineteen audiences with the emperor. Daoguang was showing signs of strain: 'Alas!' he wept before his official, 'how can I die and go to the shades of my imperial fathers and ancestors, until opium is removed!'⁵ He lavished unusual care and attention upon Lin: on 29 December, as a very rare privilege, he authorized him to ride a horse in the Forbidden City. The next day, solicitously noting Lin's discomfort on horseback, he offered an extra concession: 'You seem unused to riding. Try a sedan chair instead.'⁶

Lin offered this overwrought emperor one precious resource: certainty. To every one of Daoguang's doubts, he had a confident answer. His first step would be to confiscate all smoking apparatus. His second step was simpler still. 'The difficulty lies not with giving opium up', Lin reasoned, 'but in changing smokers' minds.' And how was this to be done? By threats. All smokers were to be put on a year's suspended death sentence, and if they failed to reform themselves within this time, and obliged the state to execute them, they would only have themselves to blame. 'It is really no pitiable thing to inflict the death penalty on reckless souls who persist to refuse repentance and fear of the law.'⁷ How were smokers to be detected? By mass public surveillance of their capacity (or lack of it) 'to subsist without smoking'. Gather all those accused of smoking in a public place, Lin advocated, search them thoroughly and lock them in a room, 'where they should be seated apart without being allowed to communicate with one another . . . from ten in the morning until after midnight.'⁸ On the off-chance that fear didn't work, there was

always Science. Lin boasted of knowing a failsafe prescription to treat opium addiction: 'Once you've taken it, the very smell of opium will be repellent; if you smoke it, you'll vomit . . . I've also heard there's one with white plums in . . . and that willow-peach blossom is the best of all . . . though I can't say whether that's true or not.'⁹

Like those of Huang Jueci, Lin's proposals suffer from one curious oversight: little thought was given to the effect of prohibition on foreign traders, the source of all this narcotic trouble. Even though many officials suggested that anti-opium measures be focused on Canton, the centre of legal and illegal European trade, few who supported the crackdown seem to have worried much about the reaction of the foreign community there: any opposition or procrastination would simply be 'properly dealt with'.¹⁰ Those who raised concerns about the likely British response, by contrast, have been denounced in China for spineless treachery. On his way out from the capital on 22 December, Qishan – the man who would be vilified for negotiating an early peace with the British after the first disastrous engagements of the war – exhorted Lin 'not to set off any frontier disturbances'.¹¹ (The seven-year troubles just past in Xinjiang had set the imperial treasury back a dismaying ten million ounces of silver, or even more.) Two years later, as the Qing's coastal defences were falling before British bombardment, Lin would bluster that he had foreseen the entire conflict. The events of the war proved otherwise: in every engagement, the Qing were surprised by the power of the British response. It seems certain that, as Lin prepared to strike hard against opium, he had not seriously considered the possibility of war with Britain – and certainly not the kind of war that actually ensued.

On 10 March 1839, Lin was welcomed into Canton after his two-month journey from Beijing. True to his incorruptible reputation, he had travelled from the sallow plains of the north-east down to the emerald rice-fields of the south in minimalist style. His entourage he pared down to one outrider, six men-at-arms, a chief cook and two further kitchen aides, who were at all times to travel with him (to prevent them from going on ahead to squeeze local innkeepers along the route).

Once arrived, he acted quickly. His first move was to put pressure on Chinese smugglers and smokers. He organized the people of Guangdong into 'security groups' (*banjia*): units of five individuals, each responsible for guaranteeing the narcotic hygiene of the other four. He lectured the degenerates of the city ('no province has as bad a reputation for opium offences as Guangdong') that resistance was useless: 'This time we are going on until the job is finished.'¹² On his journey down to Canton, he had reviewed a few case-histories indicating the scale of the problem – that of a certain Wang Zhengao caught his eye. After being dismissed from the army for malfeasance, Wang had somehow been appointed a coastal patrol, taking bribes of forty silver dollars for every couple of hundred pounds of opium that he ignored. The hundreds of chests of opium that he had seized from he had sold on for silver, which he then pretended he had seized from smugglers. For these actions, he had been not only rewarded but also promoted.¹³ Within two months of his arrival, Lin had arrested 1,600 people for opium offences, and confiscated nearly fourteen tons of opium and almost 43,000 opium pipes; within another two months, he had imprisoned five times more opium-felons than the provincial governor had in three years.¹⁴

Lin reserved some of his best anger for the Hong merchants, whom he summoned to an audience on 17 March at his campaign headquarters. After ordering them to kneel on the hard floor before him, he treated them to a lengthy disquisition on their perfidy. It was they – they – who were responsible for the magnitude of the opium problem, he informed them. For twenty years, they had waved up the river to trade at Canton vessels that were clearly laden with opium: 'Are you not indeed dreaming, and snoring in your dreams? . . . It is as if a man, to guard his house at night, should appoint a watchman, and that, nevertheless, his property should be bundled up and carried away, while yet the watchman should declare that there had been no thief.' Every level of the trade administration, Lin continued, was mired in smuggling (transporting, storing, buying, packaging the drug); and yet the Hong merchants did not just look in the opposite direction – they aided and abetted the foreigners. They paid them visits; they gave them secret information; they lent them sedan chairs (a criminal offence; foreigners were meant to walk). 'All now are equally involved in the stench of it, and truly I burn

with shame for you.¹⁵ (The quotations above are taken from Lin's written edict to the merchants; the oral version was probably less circuitous in tone.) All this was perfectly true: a mere glance at the Hong merchants' accounts would have revealed how deeply entangled they were with the British, from whom they had borrowed hundreds of thousands of dollars to pay for the unpredictable extra levies that the government squeezed out of them – repayment of this money would be one of Palmerston's demands during the war to come. The richest of them all, Howqua, promptly tried to buy Lin's acquiescence. 'The Great Minister does not want your money', Lin told him. 'I want your head.'¹⁶

Lin next moved to put the foreigners under similar pressure. He began by drafting a lengthy letter to Queen Victoria, initially forgiving her for being ignorant of the Qing empire's recent measures against opium, then exhorting her to eliminate opium production in her dominions. 'I now give my assurance that we mean to cut off this harmful drug for ever ... what has already been manufactured Your Majesty must immediately search out and throw to the bottom of the sea ... Our Heavenly Court would not have won the allegiance of innumerable lands did it not wield superhuman power. Do not say you have not been warned in time.'¹⁷ On 17 March, he told the Hong merchants to order the foreigners to submit all the opium currently in their possession at Canton and to sign a pledge not to import any more. Otherwise, both foreign traffickers and their Hong allies would be executed. 'No have see so fashion before', the alarmed Hong merchants told the foreigners as they delivered Lin's messages.¹⁸ By 23 March, the commissioner was no longer passing his messages on in writing. Instead, he was dispatching the two richest Hong merchants in chains to repeat his demands in person.

For the time being, he felt well satisfied with the start he had made: the day after his arrival in Canton, he had crowed to the emperor that Jardine had fled for England on hearing of Lin's appointment. (The tough Scot arrived in London just in time to advise Palmerston on how to make war with China.) Lin sat back and waited for a response.

History has been kind to Lin Zexu. In contemporary China, he is venerated as the great pioneer of Chinese nationalism: as 'the first National Hero of our modern history ... a true man of action of the reformist landlord class'.¹⁹ Posterity has done less well by his chief British antagonist and later plenipotentiary to China during the Opium War, Charles Elliot. For the past century and a half, British commentators have lambasted him for being foolish and indecisive – for lacking proper imperialist firmness when it came to dealing with China. (He would be sacked halfway through the war for having persuaded Qishan to cede Hong Kong – one of the world's great natural harbours.) Chinese accounts are far less positive. In the two Mainland blockbusters about the war, *Lin Zexu* (1953) and *The Opium War* (1997), Elliot is a lecherous villain (with a particularly evil leer), as incompetent or as diabolical as his detractors have claimed, or just a harassed servant of the British state doing his best in difficult circumstances?

Historians have long struggled to make sense of how the British empire – the largest in human history – came to hold sway over a quarter of the world's land and population. Old-school answers to this question blustered about the civilizing missions of Christianity and Free Trade, or muttered something about John Seeley's theory (a brilliant appeal to the English love of amateurism) that the empire was acquired in a 'fit of absence of mind'. Twentieth-century Chinese interpretations (heavily indebted to Marx and Lenin) favoured conspiracy theories: that the empire in general, and the Opium War specifically, were a long-plotted land- and resources-grab, driven by industrial expansion and greed. More recently, in Britain, other explanations – the quest for military glory, for safe sea-routes, for new investment opportunities – have been suggested. But what big theories tend to leave out is the inevitably extemporized nature of the empire: British policy abroad was usually designed under exceptional pressure, in alien environments, by operatives without local linguistic competence and isolated (in the pre-telegraphic age) for months at a time from counsel back home.²⁰ Charles Elliot, architect of Britain's Opium War with China, personifies this whole confusion: of imperialist ambition and opportunism; of duty and scruple; of hypocrisy and self-deception.

Like Lin, his background was orthodox. He came of good establishment stock: grandson of an earl, son of a soldier-diplomat who had 'distinguished himself by a truly British courage' against the Turks in 1772.²¹ In 1815, the fourteen-year-old Charles made a career choice popularized by national hero Nelson (who had died a decade earlier at Trafalgar): he took himself off to sea. Fourteen character-forming years' experience under naval fire – scrambling up swaying topmasts and over rolling decks, feasting on weevil-filled hard tack – would prepare him well for the perils of the China station: he steps first out onto the stage of nineteenth-century Sino-British entanglements as Master Attendant to Napier's ill-fated venture of 1834, seating himself calmly beneath an umbrella on the exposed deck of one of Lord Napier's frigates as it attempted to blast its way upriver to Canton. In 1830, he jumped ship to join the Foreign Office, serving as 'Protector of Slaves' in British Guiana, in the West Indies. Within two years, his experiences there had transformed him into a fervent abolitionist: 'What should be given to the Slaves', he wrote in 1832 to a friend, 'is such a state of Freedom as they are now fit for.'²² (One of his uncharitable Chinese biographers nonetheless labelled him 'a long-term oppressor and enslaver of local populations in English colonies'.²³)

In 1834 he was redeployed to China, where his conscience was again tested by his official duties. For Elliot – this aristocratic abolitionist – instinctively disliked the opium trade and everything bound up with it: both its moral dubiousness and its ungentlemanly, profit-hungry merchants. His weakness was to see a little of everyone's side: he understood the economic imperative of the opium trade, even while he hated the vulgarity of its perpetrators; he understood that his duty was to protect the British flag in Canton, even while he detested what some of Britannia's children were doing in the China seas. He was a man locked into the assumptions of his time: a fervent upholder of the national dignity and dutiful servant of the British empire, bound to protect its citizens (whatever they had done) from alien attack. Above all, he believed in the liberating virtues of Free Trade: that, *in extremis*, a war to introduce these virtues was justified; and particularly if such a war would do away with Britain's unsavoury dependence on opium sales.

By 1836, Elliot had been promoted to Napier's old job: Chief

Superintendent of the China trade. Although in the two years since Napier's death the British and Chinese had avoided open warfare, the job still had its difficulties. In late 1834, Elliot – in full, decorated captain's uniform – was set upon by Qing soldiers and knocked twice over the head, as he petitioned outside the city walls for the recovery of a twelve-strong merchant crew shipwrecked up the coast and taken captive by the authorities. But Elliot's greatest problem was the lack of clarity in his official instructions. The superintendent was his foreign secretary Lord Palmerston had ordered, 'to avoid giving offence to the Chinese authorities' while at the same time refusing to 'deal subserviently with the . . . Chinese authorities'.²⁴ He was to keep the peace and maintain the legal trade (to ensure the supply of tea and silk to British markets), but was given no authority over the illegal opium trade. Although Elliot personally considered the smuggling business 'a trade which every friend to humanity must deplore', he fervently hoped that the Qing court would legalize it, because it would force the Chinese to take full responsibility for its moral dubiousness and – by lowering prices of the drug – deter the British from trading in it.²⁵ 'It cannot be good', he reasoned in 1836, 'that the conduct of a great trade should be so dependent upon the steady continuance of a vast prohibited traffic in an article of vicious luxury, high in price, and liable to frequent and prodigious fluctuation.'²⁶ Elliot, it seems, barely tried to conceal from the luminaries of Canton and Macao society – Jardine, Matheson et al. – his thorough distaste for them. 'No man entertains a deeper detestation of the disgrace and sin of this forced traffic on the coast of China than the humble individual who signs this dispatch', he reminded Palmerston on the brink of the Opium War. 'I have steadily discountenanced it by all the lawful means in my power, and at the total sacrifice of my private comfort in the society in which I have lived for some years past.'²⁷ (Jardine and company returned the compliment in full, carping in their letters home at his 'unpopularity', 'impolicy', 'sad mismanagement', and so on.²⁸)

Yet without opium, Elliot knew, Britain would slide into deficit with China. 'The interruption of the opium traffic', as he put it on 2 February 1837, 'must have the effect . . . of crippling our means of purchasing in this market . . . The failure of the opium deliveries is attended with an almost entire cessation of money transactions in

Canton. And in the glutted condition of this market, your Lordship will judge how peculiarly mischievously the present stagnation must operate on the whole British commerce with the empire.²⁹ When faced in 1837 with the choice of joining the Qing government's renewed campaign against smuggling (in which perpetrators faced strangulation), or sheltering those Britons responsible, he had to side with the latter, writing to Lord Auckland, the Governor of India, for 'a man-of-war . . . with instructions to afford such countenance to the general trade as may be practicable, without inconveniently committing His Majesty's Government upon any delicate question.'³⁰ Deprived of clear authority, Elliot remained duty-bound to protect the lives and property of British subjects. At the same time, though, he asked the Foreign Office for an extension of his powers so that he might maintain 'due order amongst the seafaring class of Her Majesty's subjects, who visit this part of the Empire', a request that the Admiralty refused.³¹ Socially isolated by the foreign merchant population in Macao, separated from his family (although his wife, Clara, had sailed out to China with him, they had been forced to leave three of their beloved children in England), politically and linguistically challenged in Canton, and infuriated by contradictory instructions from London, Charles Elliot in 1839 was a man under significant strain.

He was in Macao when news of Lin's brusque new measures reached him. On hearing about the commissioner's ultimatum, Elliot pulled on full naval uniform and sailed straight to Canton where he docked at the foreign factories and flew the flag (to, he reported back to Palmerston, resounding cheers).

He found there a divided foreign community. James Matheson, characteristically, was unfazed by Lin's demands, reporting the Hong merchants' appearance in chains as 'the most complete exhibition of humbug ever witnessed in China'.³² Others lacked the British sang-froid: Howqua, an American trader reported, was 'crushed to the ground by his terrors . . . the Hong merchants were in instant fear of their lives and properties'.³³ In Elliot's absence, the trading community had done its best to stall Lin, producing vague declarations

CANTON
about the 'almost unanimous feeling in the community' against the opium traffic. Lin was unimpressed: 'if opium was not delivered up', the Hong merchants reported his response, 'he would be at their headquarters tomorrow at 10 o'clock, and then he would show what he would do'. The foreigners asked if Lin meant to carry out his threats of execution. 'As [His Excellency] says, so will he act', responded the Hong.³⁴ British traders then tried compromise: about 1,000 chests of opium would be given up. Useless, they were told; Lin wanted all the opium, and he now issued an arrest warrant for one of the leading British smugglers, Lancelot Dent. Dent refused to go and see the commissioner; Lin's deputy declared he would camp out at Dent's house until the latter came with him. Dent told him dinner and a bed would be made available.

Elliot strode fearlessly into this impasse, taking Dent under his personal protection and dashing off impassioned dispatches to Palmerston ('it was my resolution to reach those factories, or to sacrifice my life in the attempt').³⁵ Under pressure from Lin, Elliot seems to have undergone a curious metamorphosis. Back on 17 December 1838, he had reviled the 'deep disgrace' of the opium trade, expressing his readiness to leave British smugglers to their fate under harsh Chinese jurisdiction. Now, he solemnly vowed to resist 'aggression against foreign persons and property . . . This was my capital duty as the Queen's officer'.³⁶ Dent, too, had changed: no longer a diplomatic embarrassment, he became (in Elliot's words) 'one of our most respected merchants at Canton'.³⁷ A harassed government functionary and a fractious gaggle of foreign smugglers, in other words, were starting to reinvent themselves as a united community of persecuted innocents.

Irritated by Elliot's interference, Lin called off all trade and swore to blockade the factories until all tradable opium had been handed over. At 8 p.m. on 24 March, he ordered all Chinese servants off the premises; within half an hour, they were as 'places of the dead'.³⁸ (In the normal way of things, the area was internationally famed for its raucousness. Bemused Europeans wrote of the 'ten thousand different sounds coming from every quarter and with every variety of intonation', of the crowds of boats 'of all sizes, shapes and colours', of the clamour of gongs, trumpets, clarions and fire-crackers. 'The whole place teems with speculation', observed one Scottish visitor in

the mid-1830s – with 'shopkeepers, barbers, quacks, thieves, rogues, vagabonds and coolies', with fruit-sellers and freak-shows, with layabouts catching lice from the folds of their clothing and cracking them between their teeth, with beggars and malnourished children, with foreigners shouting orders to Cantonese sailors or yelling for their servants.³⁹) And there the 350-strong foreign population of Canton stayed for the next forty-seven days, the streets between the factories and the city filled with 1,000 armed police, soldiers, servants and coolies, the waterways south of the city barricaded with a triple row of junks. Even the Hong merchants were drawn into the surveillance effort, stationed in large chairs (that by night doubled as beds) just by the old East India Company building.

It was a pretty mild sort of imprisonment. Food was not a great worry: sugar, water, oil, bread and capons had been smuggled in before the blockade tightened, while a well-connected trader like William Hunter had his breakfast and dinner brought to him in boxes by one of the Hong's Chinese translators. The greatest physical risk the prisoners suffered, Jardine–Mathesons' authorized historian has concluded, was 'too much food and too little exercise'.⁴⁰ Boredom was another discomfort, alleviated by improvised entertainments: cricket, leapfrog, scrambling up the flagstaff, gossiping over beer with their guards. When these amusements grew stale, the prisoners laughed at their own domestic incompetence: at their inability to 'roast a capon, to boil an egg or potatoe'.⁴¹

Three days into this siege, at 11 a.m. on 27 March, Elliot did two things that Chinese historians have unanimously regarded as evidence of his scheming genius. First, he agreed to hand over to Lin 20,283 chests of British opium. Second, he promised the horrified merchant community that the Crown would take responsibility for the confiscated property. In two brisk moves, Elliot turned a private economic quarrel into a matter of state: a negotiation between the Queen of England and the Chinese emperor. When news of the blockade reached England some six months later, the British government would find £2 million (the cost of the opium) far more persuasive as a *casus belli* than emotive protestations about Lin's 'insults to national dignity'. (Palmerston had barely noticed when Elliot reported in 1834 that local officials had struck him twice over the head.)

Why did Elliot act as he did?

In his despatches to Palmerston, Elliot insisted that his hand was forced by the desperation of his situation. 'This is the first time, in our intercourse with this empire,' he wrote on 2 April, 'that its Government has taken unprovoked initiative in aggressive measures against British life, liberty and property, and against the dignity of the British Crown . . . They have deprived us of our liberty, and our lives are in their hands.'⁴² Elliot's enemies, by contrast, accused him of meddling unnecessarily in the Canton stand-off between Lin and the British traders, of inflaming the situation (and provoking the blockade in the first place) by placing himself between Lin and the opium traders. British life and property, William Jardine told a House of Commons select committee in 1840, were under no threat at the time of Lin's measures.⁴³ Why, Elliot's detractors ask, did he oppose then abruptly capitulate to Lin's demand, and capitulate in such an extreme fashion? 'What for he pay so large?' wondered the Hong merchants at his massive pledge of opium. 'No wantee so much!'⁴⁴

We will never know exactly what Charles Elliot meant to achieve – he left no diary or memoir for us to dissect. While noting his enemies' accusations against him (of calculation, incompetence, rashness and self-aggrandisement) we should also remember the difficulties of the situation. Lin was a different creature from his predecessors: an implacable, incorruptible anti-opium crusader. Did Elliot have any realistic alternative to involving himself in the affairs of these private traders, when Lin was issuing threats against British citizens and property? (With Lin threatening a stoppage to both smuggling and legitimate trades, his measures also had clear repercussions for Britain's supplies of tea, silk and bullion.) Although no one was starving in the factories, no one would escape either without a British climb-down of some sort. The besieged community did, moreover, fear that the phoney war might become real, under the right sort of provocation: if the armed foreign ships left at Whampoa ventured to blast through the blockade up to Canton, speculated the usually imperturbable William Hunter, 'the Chinese would probably fall upon and massacre us'.⁴⁵

Most of all, by 1839 Elliot was an exasperated man: worn out by Palmerston's inconsistency, by his own dislike of the opium trade and

by his inability to do anything to regulate it. Repeatedly, he found himself in the humiliating position of having to tell Qing officials that he had no power to expel British opium ships: 'can he yet', his Chinese interlocutors mocked him in response, 'be considered fit for the office of Superintendent?'⁴⁶ By surrendering the opium, he perhaps hoped to provoke some kind of unequivocal response from his foreign secretary. Like Napier before him, he seems genuinely to have believed in the purgative benefits (to both sides) of a short, sharp, clean war: 'I feel assured', he wrote on 11 April,

that the single mode of saving the coasts of the empire from a shocking character of warfare, both foreign and domestic, will be the very prompt and powerful intervention of Her Majesty's government for the just vindication of all wrongs, and the effectual prevention of crime and wretchedness by permanent settlement. Comprehensively considered, this measure has become of high obligation towards the Chinese government, as well as to the public interests and character of the British nation.⁴⁷

And that is how a publicly declared enemy of opium ended up begging his government to fight an Opium War.

Chapter Four

OPIUM AND LIME

鴉片戰爭

In May 1839, Humen – a small, unexceptional town on the south China coastline – bore witness to what would later become one of the most celebrated moments in nineteenth-century Chinese history: Lin Zexu's destruction of the 20,000 chests of opium surrendered by Charles Elliot. The spot is still marked, of course. The trenches from which the opium was flushed out to sea are now stagnant lotus ponds, which the opium was flushed out to sea are now stagnant lotus ponds, set within a small park named after the commissioner. The local tourist board has done its best to whip up visitors' patriotic fervour. Inside the entrance stands a huge, angry, rust-red sculpture in high socialist realist mode: a montage of bare-chested, pitchfork-wielding peasant heroes, their hair and clothes rippling in the imaginary wind. 'The brave sacrifice of the people's heroes in the Opium War', reads the plaque, 'will never be forgotten!' Just behind stands a tall, dignified statue of Lin. 'The British colonialists', the inscription explains, 'used every illegal trick to smuggle in opium . . . This accursed sickness paralysed our sacred land's economy, afflicted production, and weakened the army'. It's a quiet spot these days: a pleasant refuge for China's leisured classes (the retired, the unemployed) to meditate in, or for parents to give their toddlers a run-around (the Opium War-period cannon to the left of the statue are a favourite place for a photo opportunity).

A hundred and seventy years ago, though, the place would have looked (and smelled) very different. On 11 April that year, Elliot's opium began arriving – 7,000 of the total 20,000-odd chests from the great house of Jardine–Matheson's alone. In early May, Lin began