By the end of the eighteenth century, the British East India Company had established its eastern empire. Calcutta was its capital, in the Ganges delta. Not far inland along the same river was Patna, centre of the opium empire. And at the end of the trade routes to the Far East was China, a market with hundreds of millions of potential customers.

In the beginning only the Chinese upper class could afford to buy, consume and become addicted to opium. However, when British country traders and Chinese smugglers increased the quantity of opium brought into Guangzhou (Canton), the price temporarily became attractive, and the number of users grew rapidly. In 1875 the total value of the India shipments amounted to nine million pounds sterling; almost three million of that turnover was from the export of opium to one country: China.

The war for drugs

In 1839 Emperor Daoguang (r. 1821–1850) sent imperial commissioner Lin Zexu to Guangzhou to stamp out the traffic in opium. Lin had come to the conclusion that, by now, almost eighty per cent of Chinese magistrates and clerks were addicted. A man of action, Lin ordered the arrest of the most notorious British traders who were deport- ed, never to visit China again. British traders had to hand over more than 20,000 chests of opium (over one million kilograms). Lin had all of it destroyed in public on the beach.

The London government declared war and sent an expeditionary force. The purpose of the war, according to Home Secretary John Russell, was to demand compensation for the atroci- ties, maltreatment and losses suffered by British merchants. In future they should be allowed to conduct business under normal conditions. The Opium War (1839–1842) ended in victory for the British. Under the Treaty of Nanking (1842) the Chinese government was forced not only to legalize the import of opium, but to open several ports to for- eign trade and to hand over the island of Hong Kong to the British Crown.

After the assassination of the French missionary August Chapdelaine (1856) in the province of Guangxi, the French had an excuse to join the British in a second war. In those days, the Qing dynasty was threatened from all sides: from within by civil war, from the north by the Russians, and from the sea by the British and French. Only by giving way to a rather impossible demands in the so-called unequal treaties (1860) were the Manchus able to continue the so-called unequal treaties (1860) they were the Manchus able to continue the so-called unequal treaties (1860) the British and French. Only by giving way to a rather impossible demands in the so-called unequal treaties (1860) they were the Manchus able to continue the so-called unequal treaties (1860) the British and French. Only by giving way to a rather impossible demands in the so-called unequal treaties (1860) they were the Manchus able to continue the so-called unequal treaties (1860) the British and French. Only by giving way to a rather impossible demands in the so-called unequal treaties (1860) they were the Manchus able to continue the so-called unequal treaties (1860) the British and French. Only by giving way to a rather impossible demands in the so-called unequal treaties (1860) they were the Manchus able to continue the so-called unequal treaties (1860) the British and French. Only by giving way to a rather impossible demands in the so-called unequal treaties (1860) they were the Manchus able to continue the so-called unequal treaties (1860) the British and French. Only by giving way to a rather impossible demands in the so-called unequal treaties (1860) they were the Manchus able to continue the so-called unequal treaties (1860) the British and French. Only by giving way to a rather impossible demands in the so-called unequal treaties (1860) they were the Manchus able to continue the so-called unequal treaties (1860) the British and French. Only by giving way to a rather impossible demands in the so-called unequal treaties (1860) they were the Manchus able to continue the so-called unequal treaties (1860) the British and French. Only by giving way to a rather impossible demands in the so-called unequal treaties (1860) they were the Manchus able to continue the so-called unequal treaties (1860) the British and French. Only by giving way to a rather impossible demands in the so-called unequal treaties (1860) they were the Manchus able to continue the so-called unequal treaties (1860).