

CHAPTER
28

Section 1

PRIMARY SOURCE *from Letter to Queen Victoria*
by Lin Zexu

In 1839 the Qing emperor instructed Lin Zexu, an important Chinese official, to end the opium trade with Britain. Lin ordered a large amount of opium seized and publicly destroyed and sent a letter to Queen Victoria about the problems caused by opium. Britain refused to stop trading opium, however, and British warships based in Hong Kong harbor initiated the Opium War by attacking cities along the Chinese coast. As you read this excerpt from Lin's letter, think about why he opposed the opium trade.

Lin, high imperial commissioner, a president of the Board of War, viceroy of the two Kiang provinces, &c., Tang, a president of the Board of War, viceroy of the two Kwang provinces, &c., and E, a vice-president of the Board of War, lieutenant-governor of Kwang-tung, &c., hereby conjointly address this public dispatch to the queen of England. . . .

We find that your country is distant from us about sixty or seventy thousand [Chinese] miles, that your foreign ships come hither striving the one with the other for our trade, and for the simple reason of their strong desire to reap a profit. By what principle of reason then, should these foreigners send in return a poisonous drug, which involves in destruction those very natives of China? Without meaning to say that the foreigners harbor such destructive intentions in their hearts, we yet positively assert that from their inordinate thirst after gain, they are perfectly careless about the injuries they inflict upon us! And such being the case, we should like to ask what has become of that conscience which heaven has implanted in the breasts of all men?

We have heard that in your own country opium is prohibited with the utmost strictness and severity:—this is a strong proof that you know full well how hurtful it is to mankind. Since then you do not permit it to injure your own country, you ought not to have the injurious drug transferred to another country, and above all others, how much less to the Inner Land! Of the products which China exports to your foreign countries, there is not one which is not beneficial to mankind in some shape or other. . . . On the other hand, the things that come from your foreign countries are only calculated to make presents of, or serve for mere amusement. It is quite the same to us if we have them, or if we have them

not. If then these are of no material consequence to us of the Inner Land, what difficulty would there be in prohibiting and shutting our market against them? . . .

Our celestial empire rules over ten thousand kingdoms! Most surely do we possess a measure of godlike majesty which ye cannot fathom! Still we cannot bear to slay or exterminate without previous warning, and it is for this reason that we now clearly make known to you the fixed laws of our land. If the foreign merchants of your said honorable nation desire to continue their commercial intercourse, they then must tremblingly obey our recorded statutes, they must cut off for ever the source from which the opium flows, and on no account make an experiment of our laws in their own persons! . . .

Let your highness immediately, upon the receipt of this communication, inform us promptly of the state of matters, and of the measure you are pursuing utterly to put a stop to the opium evil. Please let your reply be speedy. Do not on any account make excuses or procrastinate. A most important communication.

from The Chinese Repository, Vol. 8 (February 1840), 497–503. Reprinted in Peter N. Stearns, ed., Documents in World History, Vol. II (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1988), 55–58.

Discussion Questions

Clarifying

1. According to Lin, what was Britain's motivation for trading opium?
2. Why did Lin oppose the opium trade with Britain?
3. **Making Inferences** What does Lin's letter reveal about China's attitudes toward foreigners and Western influence?