

The British Views of China on the Eve of the Opium War

—by Analyzing the Palmerston Letter and the UK Parliamentary Debates

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ABSTRACT--*The first Opium War which took place in 1840 was the first large-scale war between China (Qing dynasty) and the western colonial power. After the war, China began to integrate with the world system which was dominated by the western industrial civilization. This article tries to figure out how the British government officials view China and how did the views affect the emerge of the war. By analyzing the <Lord Palmerston to the Minister of the Emperor of China> and the parliamentary debates, especially the one held on April.7th-9th 1840, the finding is that the views of China showed British ethnocentrically and hegemony mentality, which is motivated by imperialism.*

Keywords--*Opium War, China, Britain, Viscount Palmerston*

I. INTRODUCTION

The British traders started to sell opium to China in the late 18th century. At the very beginning, the Qing administration tolerated opium importation because it can bring economic benefits. However, the usage of opium kept growing and spread outwards from Canton to the West and North of China. This spread led to an order from the governor of Canton to stop the trade in 1799. Then, the merchants created a system of smuggling to maintain the opium trade. In 1839, the Daoguang Emperor appointed Lin Zexu to crackdown the opium, which became the fuse of the first Opium War.

Viscount Palmerston, the top opium trader in Canton, is famous for his aggressive policy towards China. On February 20, 1840, Viscount Palmerston wrote to the emperor and, simultaneously, to the commanders of the British force sent to Canton. The letter can be summarized to four key points: (1) British residents in China were treated with violence and inhuman. He wrote that the British government felt “much regret” and “extreme surprise” that certain officers “have committed violent outrages against the British Residents at Canton, who were living peaceably in that City”. What’s more, a large number of British merchants “were suddenly imprisoned in their houses”, “deprived of the assistance of their Chinese servants”, “cut off from all supplies of food”, and “threatened with death by starvation”. All these injustice and insult treatment are Her Majesty cannot permit; (2) Communication between British government and Chinese government should follow the advanced and civilized manner. Viscount Palmerston appealed to modern diplomatic relations. He considered that the governmental communication shall be “in a manner consistent with the usages of civilized Nations, and with the respect due to

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the Dignity of the British Crown”; (3) British subjects should have a place of residence and of commerce which is safe. He claimed in the letter that (Qing dynasty) “shall be permanently given up to the British Government as a place of residence and of commerce for British Subjects”, which ensure their people “be safe from molestation”, and their property “may be secure”. These initiatives would be “fixed upon by the British Plenipotentiaries”; (4) The British government will send naval and military to China to ensure these demands be satisfied. He also added, “These measures of hostility on the part of Great Britain against China are not only justified, but even rendered absolutely necessary”, because Chinese Authorities committed to the outrages “against British officers and subjects”

From the letter we can strongly feel the inherent superiority of Viscount Palmerston. He viewed China as barbarous and uncivilized. On the contrary, Great Britain, the country he represented, is advanced. He ignored the Chinese law and applied the British rules and principles into the opium trade. In addition, he neglected the ethics issue of the opium trade, and treated the opium as the property of British merchants which mean they can't be confiscated or damaged. Hence, he claimed that Chinese government disobey the law of the free market. Furthermore, he threatened to use the military, believing him and his country standing in the justice side. Viscount Palmerston showed no respect to Chinese government (ironically, he asked Chinese government to respect the British Crown), he did not view China as a real government and diplomatic equal, but rather as an informal colony whose laws were not to be taken seriously

II. RESULT

Nearly two months later, from April.7th to 9th, the UK House of Commons held a debate about “War with China”. Viscount Palmerston was the leader of the pro-war camp (mostly Whig, the ruling party at that time), while the anti-war camp (mostly Tory) headed by the future Prime Minister William Ewart Gladstone. However, both sides adopted an imperial and ethnocentric stance which made the debate become “a debate of British honor”. The minority side, who opposed the war, trying to attack the justice of the war. William Gladstone claimed that the military action was “a war more unjust in its origin, a war more calculated in its progress to cover this country with permanent disgrace, I do not know and I have not read of”, he asserted this is the shame of the British Crown, by calling the British flag a “private flag, to protect infamous traffic” Sidney Herbert held the similar opinion, he considered it was “a war without just cause”, to “maintain a trade resting on unsound principles, and to justify proceedings which [were] a disgrace to the British flag” The minority wanted to occupy the moral high ground, but they merely emphasized the honor of the British reduce their persuasive. They avoided to talk about the ethical issue caused by the opium and the opium trade, namely, the destructive effects of opium in China. And they didn't try to put a halt to the expedition, even though they called it “unjust war”. If just like what Gladstone mentioned, the traffic is infamous and the war is unjust, why didn't they allow Chinese government to expel criminals from their territories since the Chinese government had the jurisdictional right to enforce laws on their own coasts? Why did they still acquiesce the military action? The fundamental reason is they never treat China equally in their potential mind. They also treated Chinese as barbarian, didn't think China is a nation like the Great Britain so that they didn't consider Chinese government had the jurisdictional right just like the British government had. What the minority truly worried about is if they can't find a reasonable cause of the war, it would do harm to the honor of the British Crown. But the pro-war camp believed what the Chinese officers did humiliate the prestige of the

British Empire, which is the foundation of the empire. The words from Viscount Palmerston hit the heart. He argued that Lin Zexu “put down the opium trade by acts of arbitrary authority against British merchants—a course totally at variance with British law, totally at variance with international law...The behavior of Lin had been “unjust and no better than robbery”. Thomas Macaulay argued that the Chinese government had no right to seize “our innocent countrymen, and insult the Sovereign in the person of her representative”

III. CONCLUSION

The pro-war majority mentioned international law, British law and the sovereign of the British, claiming that the Chinese violating them. What the ironic is the whole incident arouses precisely because the British against Chinese jurisdiction and disobey the Chinese law Finally, the pro-war camp won 9 more votes (271 to 262), the motion provided by Sir Robert Peel which aimed to censure the Majority’s expedition failed.

The British views of China on the eve of the Opium War showed their ethnocentrically and hegemony mentality. The British government believed their law, principles, and standard are the only criterion. They thought the Chinese are an uncivilized barbarian, forcing them to obey their rules, rather than building an equal diplomatic relation. At that time, Great Britain had already established its “Empire-centered” value. The British people believed their country is the most advanced and have supreme honor. They considered the honor of the British Crown is the most important and always defend it. That is why they sent the military to China when they felt their honor be insulted. Just like the sixth president of the US, John Adams suggested, the cause of the war is the arrogant and insupportable pretensions of China The pride British would never bear their honor insult by the barbarians.

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