

# The Opium Wars in China's Junior High School Textbooks<sup>1</sup>

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Received: January 16, 2019

Revised: March 20, 2019

Accepted: May 28, 2019

## Abstract

The Opium Wars were major events in China as they brought significant changes to the course of Chinese history. The objective of this article is to analyze how one of the junior high school history textbooks in China describes the Opium Wars and integrates national ideology into the curriculum. The study applied historical research methods by analyzing the book's content and structure. It found that the Opium Wars are presented in chronological order in this book: The First Opium War (1840-1842) and the Second (1856-1860). The latter, also known as the Burning of the Summer Palace, was connected with the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom Movement. The textbook points out the brutality of western countries in waging war upon China and their destruction of Chinese civilization, and praises China's national heroes. There is an emphasis on patriotism, loyalty and courage for the self-sacrifice of national heroes in the depiction of the events, thereby interpolating national ideology in accordance with Marxist concepts, the main values of Chinese socialism, and Confucianism.

**Keywords:** China, Opium Wars, junior high school textbooks of China, Chinese national ideology, historiography

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<sup>1</sup> This article is part of the M.A. Thesis "Writing of National History in Junior High School Textbook of China," Mekong Studies Program, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Khon Kaen University, Thailand, with research funding support from the Center for Research on Plurality in the Mekong Region, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Khon Kaen University, Thailand.

## Introduction

Textbooks are an important component of the educational process. Textbooks serve as the medium between knowledge and students. They can help students to learn easily and can generate understanding. Their content is aimed at transferring consciousness related to ideas, politics, virtues, ethics, values, etc. Moreover, they always follow political trends (Ju, 1988: 5).

China has a massive land area of approximately 9.6 million square kilometers. Its population is more than 1.3 billion with a total of 56 ethnic groups. And it has a long, 5,000-year history. In Chinese society, since ancient times much importance has been given to learning and utilizing history. For example, Liang Qichao (梁启超), an important thinker, politician, historian and educator during the late Qing dynasty and the early Republic of China, wrote, “there is interest in this country in teaching national history through the state textbooks, particularly regarding historical writing on the Opium Wars, in which China was defeated, and which is considered a turning point in China’s history when it moved toward modernization” (Liu, 2007:189).

For this study, a review of literary, historical and research works related to the examination of Chinese textbooks found the following eight theses: Wang (2003), Xuan (2013), Lu (2015), Jiang (2015), Hao (2015), Tang (2015), Meng (2016) and Li (2016). All emphasize content changes, an analysis of which points to political changes in China. The review found that textbook strategies have changed in accordance with changing international situations as a result of changing mainstream national ideologies and political courses. Two studies of the Opium Wars appear. Ma (2015) is a study of the wars through history textbooks that link China’s economy, politics and culture. Li Xin (2011) is another. Both examine and compare high school history textbooks of 1993 with those of 2003 to reflect curriculum reformation, and both focus on the Opium Wars.

However, research is yet to be done on history textbook accounts of the Opium Wars that attempt to influence the implanting of national

ideology. This article aims to fulfill the gap of how the events of the Opium Wars are depicted in China's junior high school history textbooks, and how national ideology is inserted. The textbook chosen for this study was *Zhongguo li shi* [Chinese History] published by Yuelu Su Yan Press (岳麓书院), which is famous for printing Chinese ancient history books. It is the combined work of three writers, Liu Zong Xu (刘宗绪), Ding Shuang Ping (丁双平), and Liu Lin Sheng (刘林生) and will be referred to as the "Yuelu Textbook (Liu, Ding and Liu, 2003)," in this article. The presentation consists of the following three parts: 1) basic knowledge of China's history-related educational program and textbooks; 2) the Opium Wars in present-day China's junior high school history textbooks; and 3) a conclusion.

## Education and Textbooks in China

Education has long been important in China. Its educational system began in approximately 3000 BC, when China started to have writing, according to Cai (2001: 30-42). However, compulsory education was introduced only in 1986 (Chen, 2009: 42). All children are now required to attend nine years of schooling, with six years of primary school starting at the age of six or seven, and three years of junior high school from the age of twelve to sixteen. Kindergarten and high school are not compulsory.

The emphasis on history and patriotism emerged in 1983, when the Ministry of Education announced: "The study of history instills fundamental concepts of dialectical and historical materialism. It is important for students to learn social sciences and natural science as necessary fundamental subjects. The study of patriotism is also important. At the primary school level, history-related content is inserted in Chinese language study. In the first year of junior high school, students start studying history. For children's physiological and psychological development, junior high school classes are considered important. Additionally, at this age, undesirable traits such as consumerism, hedonism, utilitarianism, etc., can also be easily engrained" (Tong, 2012:

43-50). The study of history is also expected to serve as a tool for the transfer of Chinese culture and the cultures of other countries of the world to help students build correct values and learn how to search for answers to essential questions.

### **The Opium Wars in the Yuelu Textbook**

The First Opium War between China and Great Britain began during the time of the Qing dynasty Tao Kuang Emperor (道光帝) in 1840. It was triggered by Britain's sending of opium from India to be sold in China, which was opposed to its sale and use. China was defeated and had to sign the Nanjing Treaty in 1842. Then in 1856, Britain and France engaged in another war against China with the support of the United States and Russia, which culminated in the burning of the Yuan Ming Yuan (Summer Palace) in 1860. This war resulted in the signing of the Treaties of Tianjin (天津条约) and Beijing (北京条约). The Taiping army<sup>2</sup> riot occurred as part of fighting against foreign armies.

The Yuele textbook presents both the First Opium War, which it refers to as “the Opium War” and the Second Opium War, which it refers to as “the burning of Yuan Ming Yuan and the Taiping army’s fight against foreign military.” These two events comprise pages 1 to 11 of the book. The book’s cover draws attention to the Opium Wars by featuring color photos of the signing of the Nanjing Treaty (1842), the Yuan Ming Yuan monument, the national hero Lin Zexu and opium burning at Humen.

The book consists of six main chapters, each containing between two and five lessons. Each lesson has the following structure: 1) name of the lesson, 2) content, 3) content knowledge, 4) revision of knowledge leading to the main idea of the next chapter, 5) chapter-ending questions

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<sup>2</sup> The Taiping army was part of the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom Movement, which was led by a visionary from Guangdong who created “a political creed and messianic religious ideology influenced by elements of Protestant Christianity. His object was to found a new dynasty, the Taiping [great peace]. Strong discontent with the corrupt and decaying Chinese government brought him many adherents, especially among the poorer classes.” For more information, see <https://www.encyclopedia.com/history/asia-and-africa/chinese-and-taiwanese-history/taiping-rebellion>.

/exercise /activities. The opium-related content is in Main Chapter 1, Minor Lessons 1 and 2.

Chapter 1: Imperialist invasions and the Chinese people's battles.

Lesson 1: The Opium Wars.

- 1) The burning of opium by Lin Zexu at Humen.
- 2) Britain starting the Opium Wars.
- 3) The China-Britain Nanjing Treaty.
- 4) Content knowledge.
- 5) Knowledge review and introduction of the content of the next chapter.
- 6) Discussion.
- 7) Additional study.

Lesson 2: Burning of the Yuan Ming Yuan and the Taiping army's fight against foreign troops.

- 1) The burning of Yuan Ming Yuan by British and French soldiers.
- 2) Russia's seizure of a vast amount of land in China's northern sector.
- 3) The Taiping army's fight against foreign troops.
- 4) Content knowledge.
- 5) Knowledge revision and introduction of content of the next chapter.
- 6) Additional study.
- 7) Exercises.

In the book, the events relating the Taiping army's battle with foreign military are linked with the Second Opium War.

The book identifies four points relating to the causes of the First Opium War. The first concerns Britain's trade imbalance with China. "In trade between China and Britain, China's porcelain and tea had sold well. However, in China's market, Britain wool and industrial good had not" (Liu, Ding and Liu, 2013: 1). To compare the low sale of Britain's goods in China, important handicrafts, considered examples of China's advancement at that time, i.e. porcelain and Chinese tea which had been

China's national drink, are put forward. Such products reflect Chinese people's national pride. The idea of prosperity, one of the main Chinese social values, is inserted.

The second point is that Britain is portrayed as seeking to expand its commercial markets in China. "During the early part of the 19th century, Britain sought to expand its overseas trading; consequently, China became Britain's main invasion target" (Liu, Ding and Liu, 2013: 1). The words "plundering" and "invasion" were chosen to depict Britain as greedy, void of righteousness, war-mongering and aggressive with respect to China.

The third point concerns the dangers of opium use and the amount of opium that had entered China. The book points out that prior to 1767, not more than 200 boxes of opium were sent to China by Britain annually, each weighing approximately 50-60 kg. However, by 1839, the amount of opium had increased to more than 40,000 boxes per year. The number of opium users also kept increasing, leading to a decline in the physical and mental health of the Chinese people. Soldiers became weak. Public servants became increasingly corrupt. As people became more aware of opium's devastating effects, there was a demand for the prohibition of its sale and use. The book points out that the Chinese people, "having become aware of the violent impacts of opium, petitioned for the termination of its sale."

Moreover, the book also mentions that opium not only damaged the users' physical and mental health, but also played an important part in the weakening of the army and Chinese society. Thus, it uses historical content to cultivate in students the practice of refraining from using drugs, which is one of values prioritized by the present Chinese government. The chapter ends with the question: "If opium were being sold in China in present society and dangerous effects from drugs were occurring, should we keep away from drugs?" (Liu, Ding and Liu, 2013: 6). Guidelines indicating the importance of love for family and nation, i.e. components of the Confucian concept of kindness, are also provided.

The fourth point concerns the burning of opium by Lin Zexu at Humen, which is considered the tipping point of the First Opium War. It consists of two stages. The first was the prohibition of the use of opium by the Tao Kuang Emperor. The book notes that “in the spring of 1839, Lin Zexu was appointed the representing commander by the Tao Kuang Emperor to prohibit use of opium in Guangdong” (Liu, Ding and Liu, (2013: 2). The second stage was the burning of opium by Lin Zexu at Humen. The book states, “A decisive method of eradicating opium was applied by Lin Zexu. British and American opium sellers were required to relinquish all of the opium they possessed to Chinese officials. The forthcoming burning of this opium was also announced by Lin Zexu” (Liu, Ding and Liu, 2013: 2). Britain was displeased and eventually went to war against China. At this point, the book, aiming to maintain national dignity, inserts ideas about the Chinese national spirit: “The burning of opium at Humen was a major victory for the opium eradication movement, illustrating the Chinese people’s commitment to protecting national dignity”<sup>3</sup> (Liu, Ding and Liu, 2013: 2).

### **Writing about the First Opium War**

The book’s portrayal of the First Opium War focuses on three themes. The first is the emphasis on Britain’s unjust waging of war against the Qing dynasty. The book states, “Britain, after hearing the news of China’s prohibition of opium use, on the pretext of protecting the trade relationship, decided to wage war against China” (Liu, Ding and Liu, 2013: 3). The choice of the word “pretext” emphasizes that Britain, for unjust reasons, started the war against China.

The second theme is that Lin Zexu, a national hero, is praised in the book. As a Qing dynasty scholar-official, his duty was to protect China from the dangers of opium. In addition to burning the opium, he fought against the British soldiers who had attacked Guangzhou.

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<sup>3</sup> The main principles of China’s national dignity consist of protecting national dignity, protecting national interest and opposing foreigners’ racial discrimination and oppression (Chen and Zhou, 1990: 8).

The book states, “In Guangzhou Lin Zexu had good defensive tactics which prevented the British from entering China. Therefore, they moved to Tian Jin and attacked Beijing” (Liu, Ding and Liu, 2013: 3). Lin Zexu is also depicted as having extensive knowledge and as being the first person in China to open his eyes to the modern world. During the time that he prohibited drug use in Guangzhou, Lin Zexu was interested in Western countries. People were sent abroad to study other countries’ dynamics, and books and newspapers from different countries were collected and translated. In writing the book, *SizhouZhi* (四洲志), he collected and organized geographical and historical information on more than 30 countries and five continents. To master foreigners’ views on China, foreign documents were translated, and compiled into a book entitled, *Hua Shi Yi Yan* (华事夷言) (Liu, Ding and Liu, 2013: 5). In writing this important work to resist the invasion of Western superpowers, he inserted learning from western technology. Manufacturing, science and technology form the main elements. They are important parts of China’s ideology (Wei, 2005: 220). Moreover, the textbook praises another hero: “Guan Tianpei (关天培), [who] suffered 10 wounds, but remained bravely and selflessly fighting against the enemies” (Liu, Ding and Liu, 2013: 4). These examples reflect the Confucian principle of honesty and other good practices emphasizing stable political ideals. Self-sacrifice for the sake of national protection is not to be feared. Therefore, the fighting and self-sacrifice of these two heroes is linked with the love of nation, which forms the main pillar of protection of motherland and national unity.

The third theme in the textbook’s portrayal of the First Opium War involves the incompetence of the Tao Kuang Emperor in fighting against Britain, as demonstrated by three incidents. (1) To evade Britain’s threat, Lin Zexu was punished. The textbook states, “When they became aware of Britain’s military threat, men were sent to negotiate with British leaders and promised that Lin Zexu would be punished” (Liu, Ding and Liu, 2013: 4). (2) The Tao Kuang Emperor decided to go to battle because he “felt that his honor was at stake.” The book explains, “Until 1741, Hong Kong had been occupied by Britain,

and the Emperor felt humiliated. Therefore, he declared war” (Liu, Ding and Liu, 2013: 3). This act exposed his selfishness. According to Confucian social and political concepts, where virtuous administrative principles (仁政) are followed and people are greater than the emperor, the battle is not for the sake of the people. (3) “In 1842, the British soldiers reached Nanking, the Qing government asked Britain for peace” (Liu, Ding and Liu, 2013: 3).

It can be seen that in writing about losing the war, the authors use the specific names, “Tao Kuang Emperor” and “Qing government,” rather than the terms, “China” and “Chinese government.” Moreover, in praising Lin Zexu as a hero, the book emphasizes his efforts to protect Chinese people’s national dignity, which is different from the incompetence of the “Tao Kuang Emperor” and the “Qing government.” The book emphasizes Britain’s malevolence and the Qing government’s incompetence as the main causes of the Opium Wars. In this way China’s incompetence and weakness are considered a specific situation which existed at that time, unlike that of present-day China.

The textbook’s coverage of the consequences of the first Opium War emphasizes two points. The first point concerns the injustices of the Treaty of Nanjing and its damaging measures against China. The content is as follows:

In August 1842, the Treaty of Nanjing was signed. The provisions of the treaty were not fair to China. The treaty contains the following measures: the granting of Hong Kong to Britain, payment by China of 21 million yuan for war indemnity and military demobilization; and opening of the following five harbors for trade: Guangzhou, Xiamen, Fuzhou, Ningbo and Shanghai. Moreover, in determining tariff rates, China had to first consult with Britain. The following year, to provide more details, as agreed the by representatives of Britain and China, a supplementary treaty was added. The following was established: Britain was to receive from China consular jurisdiction and one-sided assistance through which Britain had rights over the harbor areas and trade, as well as perpetual

ability to rent land for residential house construction. (Liu, Ding and Liu, 2013: 4-5)

These measures emphasized China's position of inferiority in relation to Britain. Although the Qing government remained the country's governor, the administration of almost all borders and tariffs, as well as China's sovereignty, had been undermined.

This situation caused changes in China's history, which is the second point emphasized in the textbook. Using Marxist analysis of social characteristics, it states, "With Opium Wars, China started to become half-colonialist and half-feudalist. It was the starting point of modern Chinese history." Moreover, China's internal conflict is emphasized as follows, again using Marxist terms: "Prior to the Opium Wars the main conflict in China's society was between the landlord class and the peasant class. After the end of the Opium Wars, China's internal conflict changed to one between capitalism and the Chinese people" (Liu, Ding and Liu, 2013: 4-5). To emphasize this point, the chapter ends with the following question: "After the Opium Wars, what have been main conflicts within Chinese society? What are China's other internal conflicts?" (Liu, Ding and Liu, 2013: 6). For students to perceive internal conflicts between capitalistic superpowers and Chinese people at that time, answer guidelines and Marxist concepts are provided.

### **Writing about the Second Opium War**

The Second Opium War is covered under the topic, "The Burning of Yuan Ming Yuan, and the Taiping army's fight against foreign troops." The causes of the war, events and consequences are described as follows.

The authors present two issues related to the cause of the Second Opium War. First, Chinese markets were continually being opened, and to obtain more rights, Britain and France invaded China in 1856 with the support of Russia and the United States. To obtain benefits from China, mediation of the war between China and the two countries was used as a pretext. Similar to the writing on the cause of the First

Opium War, these comments, particularly the use of the word “pretext,” demonstrate the unjust alliance of the western countries in invading China.

The burning of Yuan Ming Yuan is presented as an important event of the Second Opium War. The following three points are emphasized. 1) “Yuan Ming Yuan is a world-famous Chinese dynasty palace complex. The site covers more than 10 square kilometers and at one time it contained more than 200 palaces, countless Chinese works of art and architecture, as well as art from western countries and numerous rare treasures and antiquities” (Liu, Ding and Liu, 2013: 7). In this way the memory of Yuan Ming Yuan as the place where the past wisdom of Chinese ancestors had been assembled is revived by the text book. National pride is reflected in the greatness of Chinese civilization.

2) The burning of Yuan Ming Yuan, according to the textbook, constitutes destruction of world culture. “The burning of Yuan Ming Yuan did not merely cause damage to Chinese culture. It was also a loss of world culture” (Liu, Ding and Liu, 2013: 7). In this way Chinese civilization is upgraded to world civilization. The significance of the Chinese cultural revival concept, as part of the Chinese spirit, is inserted.

3) The burning of Yuan Ming Yuan was a callous act. “In early October, 1860, British and French soldiers occupied Yuan Ming Yuan, located west of Beijing. The invaders, both commanders and soldiers, plundered it madly. To conceal their crimes, they set fire to Yuan Ming Yuan” (Liu, Ding and Liu, 2013: 7). The text condemns English and French soldiers of all levels as wild, uncontrolled thieves and, in concealing their misdeeds, as arsonists.

In other words, the burning of Yuan Ming Yuan is presented for the new generation of Chinese to remember the malice of the Western nations that destroyed important aspects of Chinese civilization, which had been an important part of global civilization. Photos of ruined palaces of the Yuan Ming Yuan monument appear in the textbook in accordance with the Chinese government’s intention of maintaining the monument to serve as a remembrance of its past humiliation. The chapter ends with following questions: “Having seen the accompanying

Yuan Ming Yuan monument photos, what do you think? Some people support the repair of Yuan Ming Yuan, do you agree?" (Liu, Ding and Liu, 2013: 11). Answer guidelines are provided for students to review the process of maintaining the monument to emphasize the pain that should be forever remembered by the Chinese people.

The writing on the effects of the Second Opium War emphasizes two points. The first is China's loss of power and land. The book states, "The Second Opium War ended in late October, 1860. The Qing government was forced by Western superpowers to sign the Tianjin and Beijing Treaties. Consequently, the Qing dynasty lost both power and territory" (Liu, Ding and Liu, 2013: 8).

The second point is that Russia took advantage of this opportunity to occupy vast areas in northern China. The book states, "During the Second Opium War, under a treaty, more than 1.5 million square kilometers of China's northern realm came to be occupied by Russia" (Liu, Ding and Liu, 2013: 8). It should be noted that the book, rather than using the term "loss of land," instead uses the phrases, "Russia seized China's area," and "Russia occupied China's land." Despite being the largest loss of territory in China's modern history, the author used words that minimize the severity of the loss, perhaps for reasons of maintaining present international relationships.

Interestingly, the Taiping Thianguo movement is mentioned in the majority of Chinese historical documents as a consequence of the first Opium War in which the Qing dynasty was weakened, eventually leading to an expansion of the farmers' riot. Jin Kaicheng's work (2012) on the movement emphasizes the religion professed by its leaders, the movement's reformation policy and its failure. However, the textbook does not mention religion, reformation policy or the movement's failure.

The Chinese ideal of patriotism is presented through the description of fighting against foreign troops. This can be seen in the naming of the topic, "The Taiping army's fight against foreign troops." The movement was praised as the textbook states, "The Taiping Thianguo did not merely establish the Qing dynasty's administration, it also fought against invading foreigners" (Liu, Ding and Liu, 2013:

9). To indicate that the movement was different from many previous riots, chapter-ending questions are also raised. For example, “Regarding fighting, what is the difference between that of Taiping soldiers and that of previous farmers’ riots? Why?” (Liu, Ding and Liu, 2013: 11).

The Taiping army fought against Western superpowers and those Chinese who betrayed the nation. According to the textbook, during the summer of 1860, Taiping army leader Li Xiu Cheng (李秀成) led the army to attack Shanghai. In collaboration with Western invaders, local traitors were hired to fight against the Taiping army (Liu, Ding, and Liu, 2013: 9). The words, “traitors,” and “in collaboration with Western invaders” were used to refer to Chinese who had been hired by foreign troops. For all Chinese, such betrayal is against national ideology is considered horrendous behavior. The Taiping army fought against foreign soldiers and those who were themselves Chinese. Fighting is considered contrary to the ideal of harmony, which serves as a political foundation and an important condition for China’s development.

### **The Fight of the Taiping Army against Western Superpowers**

The book notes that, “in fighting against invading soldiers with modern weapons, the Taiping army used outdated weapons” (Liu, Ding and Liu, 2013: 9). Photos in the text show the obsolete weapons used by the Taiping army in their battle against foreign soldiers, who were shown with modern weapons. Nevertheless, eventually, the Taiping army won this battle. Throughout the textbook, the authors insert ideas of national prosperity or weakness as directly related to the population, emphasizing the idea that everyone is responsible for the building of prosperity in Chinese society.

Another point related to the Taiping army’s battle against foreign troops concerns the failure of foreign troops and their leaders. “In the Shanghai area, foreign troops fought against the Taiping army. At Qingpu (青浦), the Taiping army won.” and, “a foreign troop leader was shot with five bullets and fell from horseback. Then, to escape, he

quickly got on a litter” (Liu, Ding and Liu, 2013:10). Pride in the nation or in the fighting of ancestors is constructed through the content. Interestingly, the writing about the Second Opium War emphasizes the loss of China’s culture and the malice of the four countries that jointly burned Yuan Ming Yuan rather than the causes of the Qing dynasty’s defeat. The book also mentions the major role played by Taiping Thianguo movement in fighting against Western forces.

## **Conclusion**

Research into the Opium Wars, as presented in one of China’s junior high school history textbooks, found the following information. The First Opium War between Britain and China occurred during the period 1840-1842, marking the beginning of China’s modern history. The cause of the war was Britain’s desire to expand its trading market by sending opium to be sold in China. Chinese people were aware of the dangers of opium and wanted to prevent its use. Lin Zexu, an official, burned a vast amount of opium at Humen Beach. This event ignited the First Opium War. After being defeated, the Qing dynasty had to sign the Nanking Treaty through which it lost land and power. The writing praised two national heroes, Lin Zexu and Guan Tianpei, as well as the courage of the Chinese people.

In the textbook’s account of the Second Opium War, the emphasis is on the joint invasion of the Qing dynasty by Britain, France, the United States and Russia. Yuan Ming Yuan was burned, resulting in the destruction of Chinese culture and civilization. The war ended with the signing of the TianJin and Beijing Treaties. Consequently, in its modern history, China lost a large portion of its land. Moreover, the book linked the Chinese people’s courage in fighting against foreign invaders in the Second Opium War with the Taiping Thianguo movement. The victory of the Taiping army and the defeat of foreign military troops in a fight near Shanghai was emphasized.

Marxist Chinese ideology, Chinese socialist concepts and values and Confucianism were inserted throughout the account. The book also

emphasizes love of nation, honesty, self-sacrifice derived from ancestors' struggles as well as the importance of not forgetting the times of national humiliation, securing of national dignity and culture, the building of correct values, love of life and avoiding use of drugs.

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