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Tea as a Motivator for British Imperialism in China

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Tea as a Motivator for British Imperialism in China

Abstract

This poster is based on a research paper that sought to find out what influence the tea trade had on developments in Sino-British relations in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Through research, the paper concluded that the strong British desire for tea influenced British attempts to change its relationship with China, as a more "open" China would lead to more and cheaper tea for Britain. Ultimately, this desire led to Britain flooding China with addictive, illicit opium, and waging the imperialistic Opium Wars against China.

Keywords

Britain, Tea Trade, China, Opium War, Sino-British relations

Disciplines

Asian History | European History | International Relations

Comments

This poster was created based on work completed for FYS 156-3: Tea: An Experiential History, and presented as a part of the eighth annual CAFE Symposium on February 8, 2023.

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Tea as a Motivator for British Imperialism in China

Grayden Varisco

FYS 156-3: Tea: An Experiential History

Beginning of Tea in Britain

- Mid-seventeenth century: Tea first enters Britain, in coffee houses, and as a medicinal beverage.
- In 1662, the Portuguese Catherine of Braganza married into the English Royal Family, bringing tea as part of her dowry and making it popular among the aristocracy
- By 1703, tea had spread from the aristocracy to the common people.
- Increasing demand for tea led the English East India Company to seek direct access to Chinese tea, rather than relying on Dutch trade with Japan.
- Eventually, the EEIC is granted access to Guangzhou.

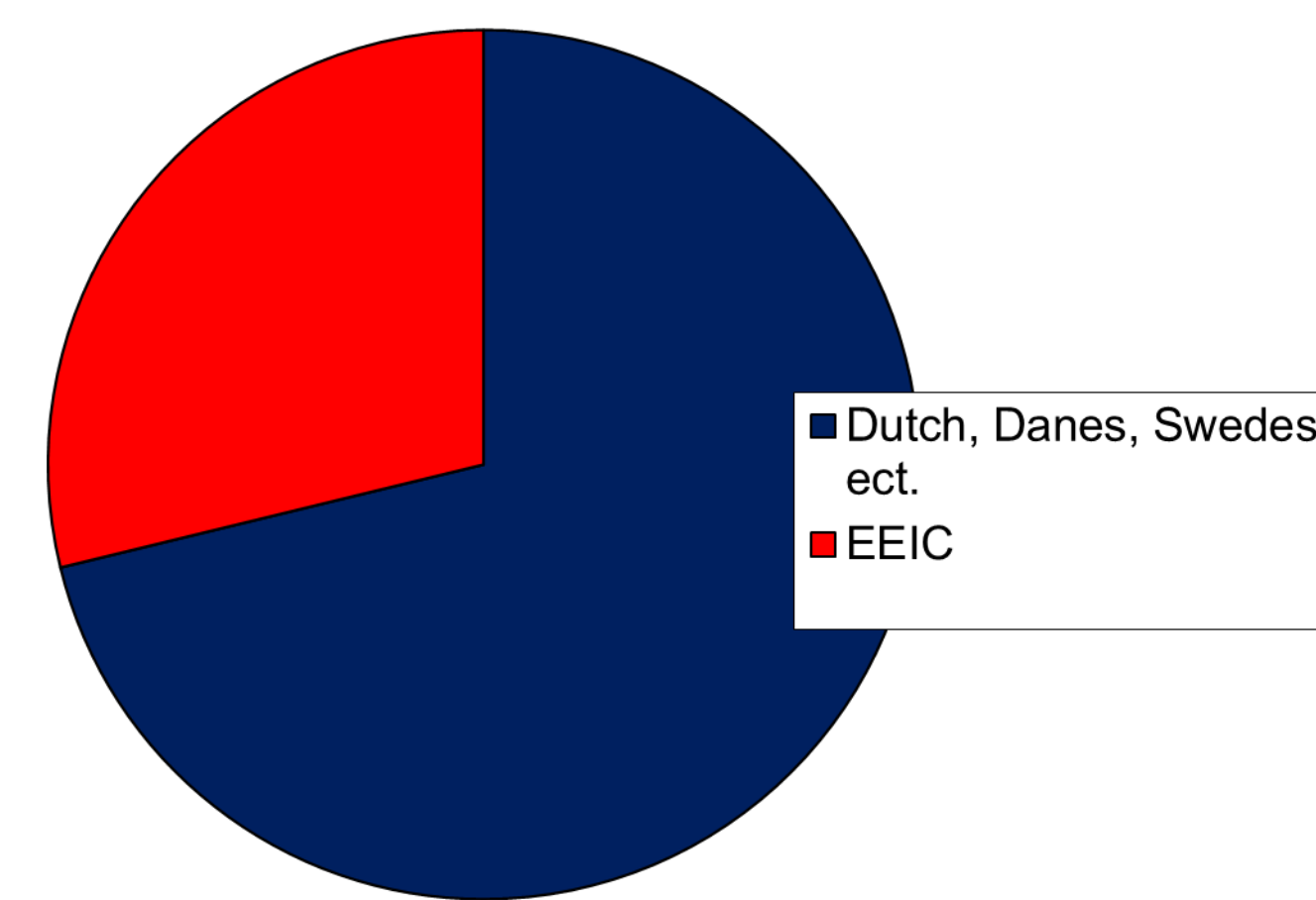
Rise of Tea in Britain

- Tea quickly takes over British culture, by 1740 the average British person consumed 10 pounds of tea a year.
- Prompted by this heavy demand, the British tea trade grows to become a massive industry; the EEIC goes from importing 100,000 pounds of tea in 1706 to 5 million in 1782.
- This massive increase in trade was unable to keep pace with the ever-increasing demand. High tariffs hindered the British trade and were aiding foreign competition and smuggling.
- In 1784 Parliament passed the Commutation Act, ending the old, high tariffs placed on tea.
- The Act fomented British trade with China to a massive degree, with the EEIC selling triple the amount of tea a single year after the passing of the act as they sold the year prior.
- The decade prior to the passing of the act had the EEIC obtained 54 million pounds of tea, while its foreign competitors obtained 134 million pounds. The decade after the passing of the act, the EEIC obtained 228 million pounds of tea, while its competitors only managed 38 million pounds.
- The Act doubled the profits of the average company trader, increased the total value of the trade by 600%, and increased the number of workers employed in the growing industry.
- The Commutation Act was the first instance of tea motivating and guiding British state policy. It was not the last, as tea has proven too lucrative to be ignored.

Professor Dina Lowy provided the mentorship necessary to conduct this research.

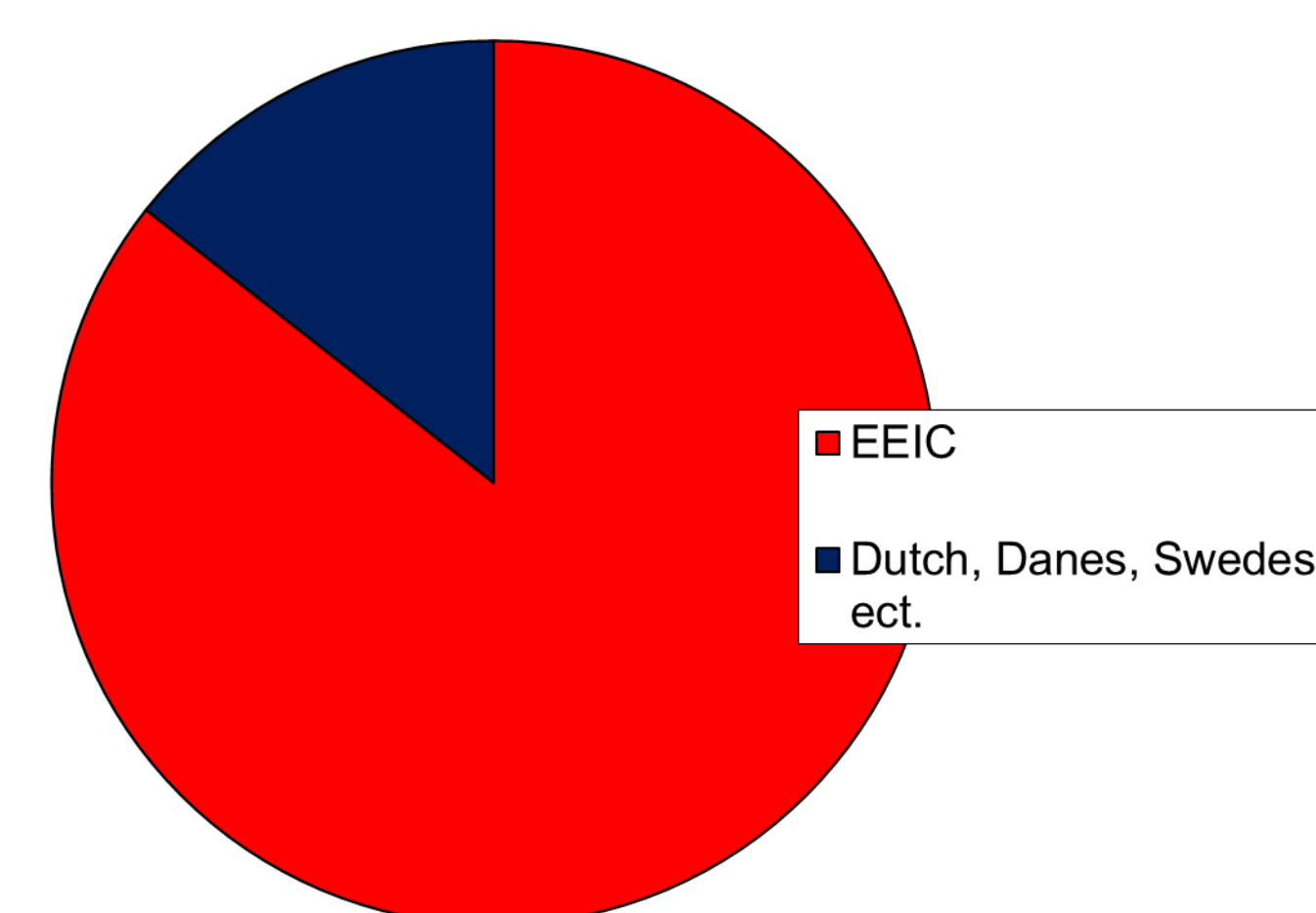
Effects of Commutation Act

Tea Exported to Europe from China, 1774-1784



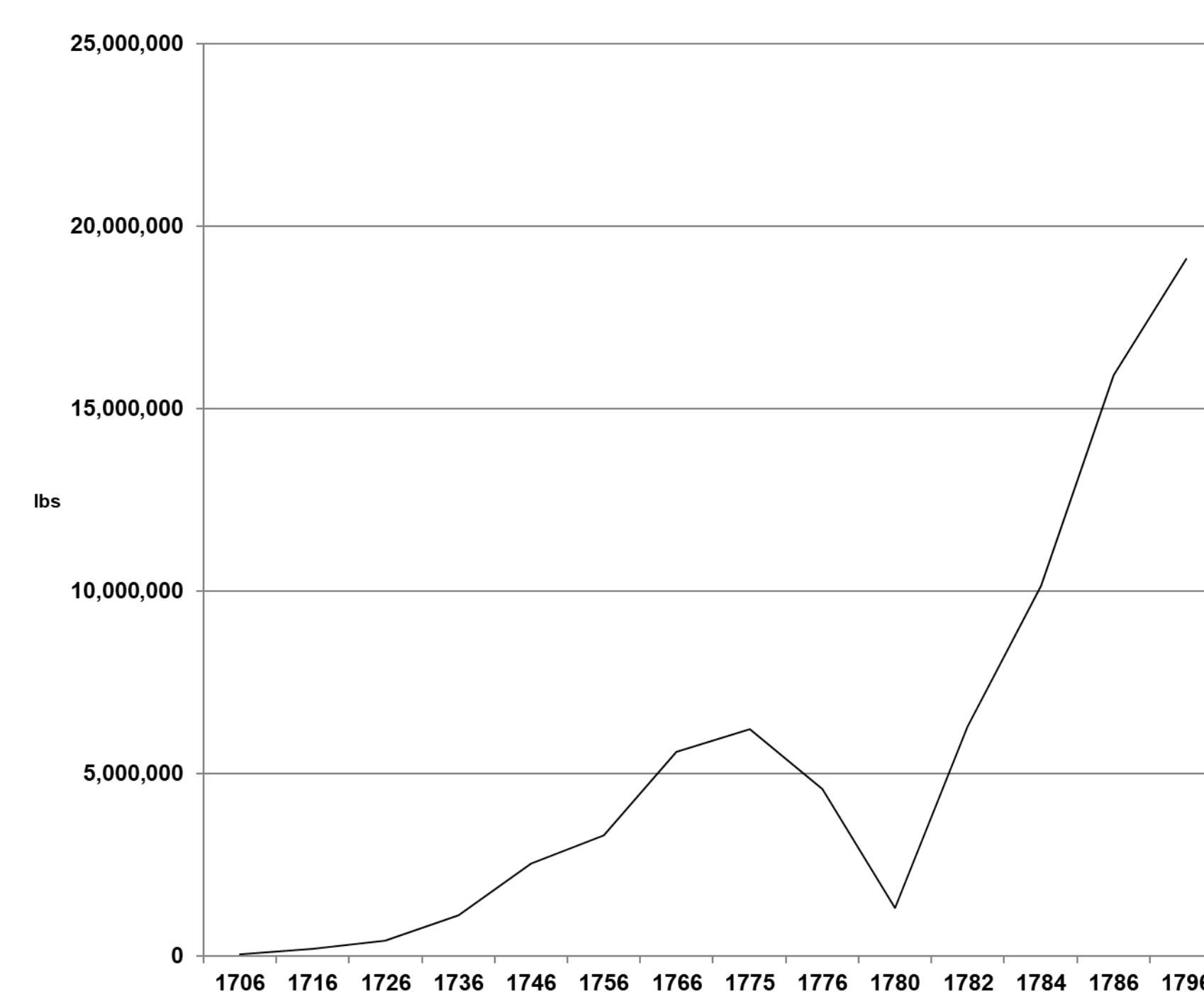
In the decade prior to the passing of the Commutation Act, the English East India Company acquired 54 million pounds of tea from Guangzhou, while its European rivals acquired 134 million pounds.

Tea Exported to Europe from China, 1784-1794



In the decade following the passing of the Commutation Act, the English East India Company acquired 228 million pounds of tea from Guangzhou, its European rivals acquired only 38 million pounds.

Tea Imported to Britain, 1706-1796



Tea imports dip during the American Revolution (1776), and surge after the Commutation Act (1784)

Obstacles to British Tea Acquisition

The Canton System

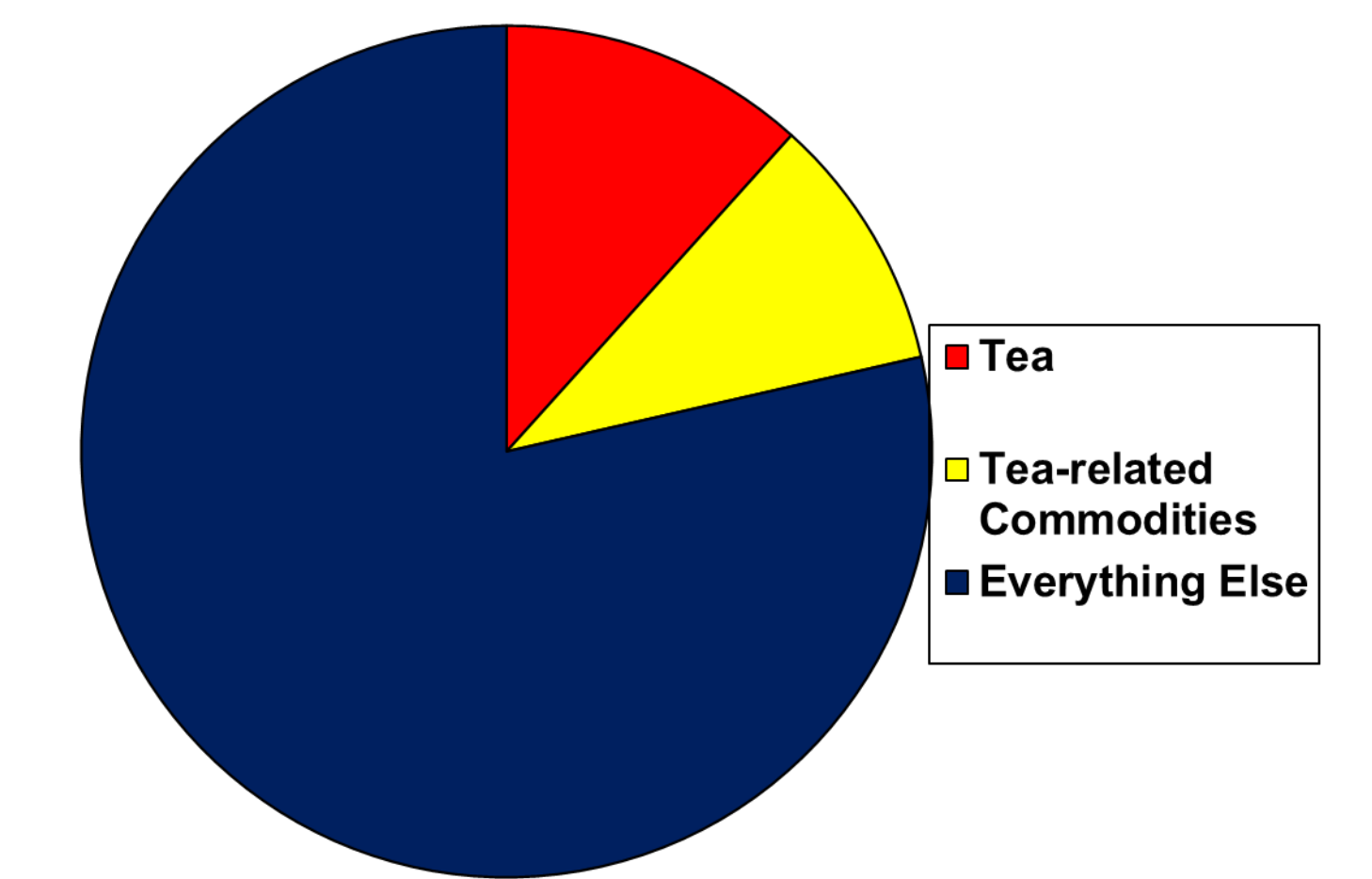
- The System by which the Qing regulated trade with Westerners. In this system, trade was restricted to a single city, Guangzhou.
- Many British traders felt this hampered the tea trade since they considered Guangzhou to be too far removed from where tea was produced.
- Another aspect of this system was that a select few Chinese merchants, known as the Hong, had a monopoly over the trade with Westerners, setting prices and deciding what tea was sold.
- The British resented having to be at the mercy of the Hong, and accused them of using unsavory business tactics, such as reusing tea leaves and adding weight to tea boxes with rocks.
- The system also involved excessive amounts of red tape and taxes, which made the entrance into Guangzhou slow and expensive.
- Out of frustration with this system, the British sent an envoy to China in 1792, requesting its end. Their request was denied by the Chinese Emperor, and from this, they learned a valuable lesson, that they could not "open" China up through ordinary, diplomatic means.

Trade Imbalance

- British merchants couldn't find goods to sell to the Chinese that came even close to matching tea's immense popularity in Britain.
- The massive demand for tea in Britain, combined with the relative Chinese disinterest in British goods caused a trade deficit for the British, for which they were forced to make up with silver.
- The amount of silver required was immense, for instance, one fleet of English trading vessels in the mid-eighteenth century left England for China with 6.6 times as much money in silver as they carried in actual English goods.

Tea Impact on Gov. Revenue

British Government Revenue from Customs Duties, 1800

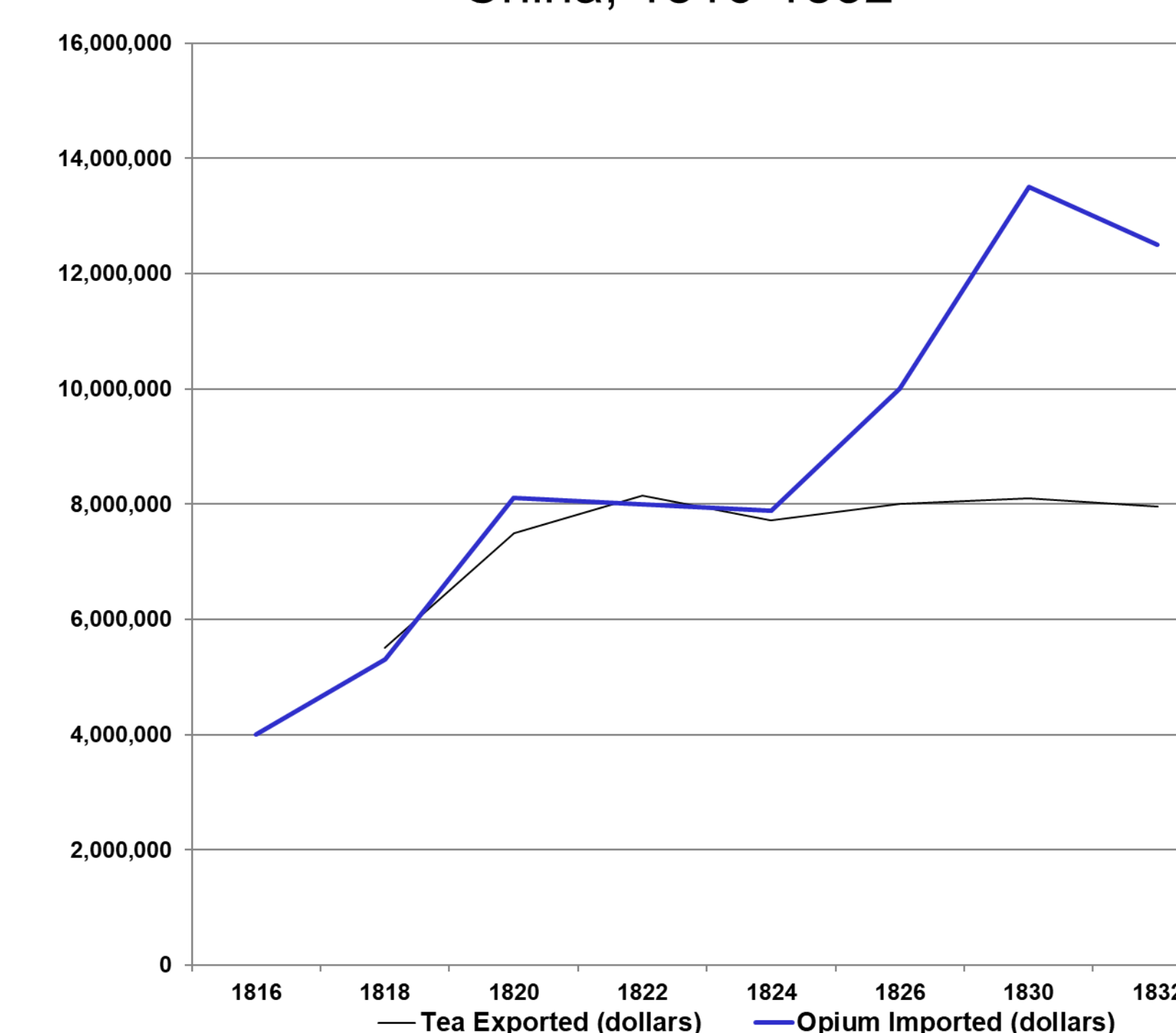


In 1800, the British government made 1 million pounds from direct duties on tea and 850,000 pounds from duties on tea-related commodities, such as the 50% of the sugar imported to Britain which was used for tea. The total revenue the British Government brought in from customs duties in 1800 was 6,700,000 pounds.

Removal of the Obstacles

- By the late 1780s the British had decided to fix their trade deficit by selling addictive, illicit opium to the Chinese. This strategy paid off, by 1819 the Chinese were spending more on British opium than they were getting by selling tea.
- In 1839, the Chinese, led by Commissioner Lin Zexu, seized over 20,000 chests of opium held by Western traders in Guangzhou, destroying it all.
- The British decried this as a violent seizure of British property, and in April of 1840, Parliament voted to go to war.
- The British Government had rushed to the defense of the opium trade, and the tea trade it propped up.
- The British won the war by 1842, after which they demanded reparations for the destroyed opium, as well as the end of the Canton System and the opening of multiple ports to British trade.

Tea Exports vs Opium Imports, China, 1816-1832



Opium imports exceed tea exports by 1819



Map of the First Opium War

("First Opium War 1839-1842 Conflict Overview" by Wikimedia Commons user "Phil88" and licensed under CC BY 4.0)