

LIN ZEXU'S LETTER TO QUEEN VICTORIA (1839)

This letter was written by Lin Zexu, an important official in the Qing Dynasty, to Queen Victoria of Britain. He wrote in response to the growing opium trade in China

We know that your country strictly prohibits opium, showing you understand its harm to people. Therefore, you should not allow this harmful drug to be transferred to other countries, especially not to the Inner Land.

China exports many beneficial products like tea, silk, and food items which are crucial for your survival. In contrast, the items you export to us are mainly for luxury or amusement, and we can do without them. Hence, if you are aware of the benefits of our goods, why do you continue to sell opium, which only brings harm?

If foreign traders introduced opium into your country and enticed your people to use it, you would surely act against it. You would not tolerate such actions. Your ships to Canton carry documents stating no contraband should be brought, indicating your commitment to strict laws. Since the ships are numerous, proper inspection might have been missed. Therefore, we urge you to enforce your laws against opium strictly.

We also understand that opium is produced in various parts of your colonies, such as Bengal and Bombay. We urge you to eradicate the opium plants there and replace them with beneficial crops. By doing so, you will eliminate a significant source of harm and ensure the prosperity of your rule and your descendants.

Foreign merchants in China benefit from our leniency and the goods they trade are profitable because of our kindness. However, it is a longstanding principle that foreign traders must respect local laws. According to Chinese law, selling or using opium is punishable by death. If foreigners did not bring opium into China, our people wouldn't suffer from its effects.

Your representative, Elliot, requested an extension to comply with the new opium ban. In response, our emperor, showing exceptional compassion, has allowed a grace period. Those who accidentally bring opium within the next year and a half can avoid punishment by voluntarily surrendering it. After this period, those continuing to bring opium will face severe penalties, including death.

We are informing you of our laws in advance because we prefer not to act without warning. If your traders want to continue doing business, they must adhere strictly to our laws and stop the opium trade. Proper enforcement on your part will ensure peace and demonstrate respect for our regulations.

Please inform us immediately of your measures to stop the opium trade. We expect a prompt response with no excuses.

P.S. Summary of the new law: 'Any foreigner bringing opium to China for sale will face decapitation, while accessories will be strangled. All related property will be confiscated. A grace period of a year and a half is given for those who voluntarily surrender any opium they bring mistakenly.'

Adapted for student use by Barbara Trapani, from this [Bloomsbury](#) version of the letter. The complete text appears in *The Chinese Repository*, vol. VIII, no. 10 (1840), pp.497–503, available via [Google Books](#).