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Lord Palmerston

This brief selection suggests a way to ease the growing tensions over the opium trade. Lord Palmerston, the British Foreign Secretary is writing to the British Envoy in China.

Discussion Questions

1. Do you think Palmerston's suggestion would have removed the tensions between the English and the Chinese? Why or why not? Use specific citations to support your argument.
2. Do you agree with Palmerston's statement that it was impossible for the English to help the Chinese prevent the importation of opium? What do you think is his underlying message?
3. How did Palmerston view the Chinese government?

Reading

From Lord Palmerston's Instructions to Sir Henry Pottinger respecting Opium, May, 1841, from S. Couling, *Encyclopedia Sinica*, London, 1917, p. 406.

May, 1841

Experience has shown that it is entirely beyond the power of the Chinese Government to prevent the introduction of opium into China; and many reasons render it impossible that the British Government can give the Chinese Government any effectual aid toward the accomplishment of that purpose. But while the opium trade is forbidden by law it must inevitably be carried on by fraud and violence; and hence must arise frequent conflicts and collisions between the Chinese preventive service and the parties who are engaged in carrying on the opium trade. These parties are generally British subjects, and it is impossible to suppose that this private war can be carried on between British opium smugglers and the Chinese authorities, without events happening which must tend to put in jeopardy the good understanding between the Chinese and British Governments.

H. M. Government makes no demand in this matter; for they have no right to do so. The Chinese Government is fully entitled to prohibit the importation of opium, if it pleases; and British subjects who engage in a contraband trade must take the consequences of doing so. But it is desirable that you should avail yourself of every favorable opportunity to strongly impress upon the Chinese Plenipotentiary, and through him upon the Chinese Government how much it would be for the interest of the Chinese Government itself to alter the law of China on this matter, and to legalize, by a regular duty, a trade which they cannot prevent.