

An Indefensible Defense: The Incompetence of Qing Dynasty Officials in the Opium Wars, and the Consequences of Defeat

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The Opium Wars were small scale wars fought with global implications. With fewer than five thousand troops and twenty naval vessels the British were able to win the First Opium War, allowing them to rewrite trade laws that were demonstrably unfair to the Chinese. After losing the First Opium War, the Qing Dynasty then had to deal with the Taiping Rebellion (caused in part by anti-foreign sentiment sprung from the Opium War) and a subsequent Second Opium War, which created more unequal trade stipulations. The Manchus and the British had very different militaries, as “Britain experienced an industrial revolution that produced military technology far beyond that of the Qing forces,” writes Peter Worthing.¹ While the Manchus would almost certainly be defeated by the British in an open, “fair fight,” there are many other ways of engaging an enemy while maintaining a tactical advantage. This is especially true when fighting an invading force, as the Manchus could utilize defensive structures to their advantage. According to the traditionalist view, the Manchus could not have competed with such a superior force,² but I contend it was the incompetency of Qing officials, not the superiority of European warfare, that caused the Qing Dynasty to capitulate.

Qing officials anticipated an armed conflict would be necessary to halt the importation of British opium, but the Manchus vastly underestimated the foe they were to face. The preparations made before the invasion were underfunded, underutilized, and most importantly undermanned; often leaving local provinces to fight without any assistance. In James Polachek’s *The Inner Opium War*, Polachek writes “such informal methods of militia organization... simply were not sufficient to service the more ambitious needs Qing leaders... perceived and were intent on meeting.”³ “To man these fortifications and patrol the barriers... [the Manchus] would need some kind of permanent standing army... Then, too, funds would have to be raised to fund these new riverine

1 Peter Worthing, *A Military History of Modern China* (Praeger Security International, 2007) 44-45.

2 John Rawlinson, *China’s Struggle for Naval Development, 1839-1895*. (Harvard University Press, 1967).

3 James Polachek, *The Inner Opium War* (Harvard University Press, 1992), 171.

defenses- funds that could scarcely be squeezed out of villages already well protected by their own guard.”⁴ There are many instances during the two Opium Wars in which the Manchus constructed reasonably adequate defensive structure, and even supplied them with cannons that could be effective against the British. On repeated occasions, however, the Manchus simply abandoned the structures at the sight of the British, because the fortifications were severely undermanned and the militia was not motivated to fight the British. In assessing the failures of the Manchus in the First Opium War, Qing scholar Wei Yuan believed, “as long as the Qing could conduct an effective defense- a requirement that... could be met without any naval or weaponry modernization- there was no reason... for it to abandon its original goal of forcing the termination of the opium-import traffic.”⁵ I agree with both Polachek and Wei Yuan that the ultimate factors contributing to the Manchu failures were the lack of an effective trained army and the inability to conduct a proper defensive war. However, I disagree with Wei Yuan; I do not believe the Qing could have done enough at this time to end the opium trade in China. Money is the driving factor in all the conflicts the British had with the Manchus. If it were not profitable to go to war, the British would not have fought. With demand for opium soaring, the British were making enormous profits and, through a system of bribery and smuggling, British merchants were capable of moving opium into China regardless of what Qing officials decried.

When Qing officials debated the prospects of war with the British, the foreigners were continually misperceived as a local threat and were expected to be dealt with by local militias and garrisons, when in fact they were a threat to the national integrity of China. “Qing officials did not perceive the British as a serious threat, believing that the empire’s military forces could make relatively short work of these Western ‘pirates.’ Yet the Qing military... had deteriorated over the centuries.”⁶ Harold Rauch reaches to the heart of this issue, stating “China was in a period of turmoil in the nineteenth century when its semi-medieval government struggle against modernization failed to respond flexibly to Western encroachment, resulting in the demise of the Chinese dynastic system.”⁷ I agree with Rauch that it was the failure of the Qing to respond to threats that caused the fall of Chinese autonomy, it was incompetence rather than inability. If Qing officials had realized the far-reaching and devastating effects of the Opium Wars, they surely would have tried to avoid war. Instead,

4 Polachek, *Inner Opium War*, 171.

5 *Ibid.*, 200.

6 Worthing, *Military History of Modern China*, 44.

7 Harold Rauch, *The Victorians at War* (Santa Barbara, 2004), 97.

Qing officials would antagonize a foe they were woefully unprepared to face, and would suffer through severe turmoil. Beginning in 1839, China would endure sweeping changes over the next twenty-five year period stemming from both external pressures from Europeans, and domestic issues that led to widespread rebellion.

The First Opium War was the result of a longstanding misperception between the Qing dynasty and the British (and to a larger extent, all foreigners). The Manchus had allowed European merchants to establish marinas for centuries, but they always viewed the merchants as inferior, and believed they could be expelled from China at any time. This was an openly held belief that the British were aware of. British Lieutenant John Ouchterlony remarked “The mercantile profession is not held in high estimation among the Chinese... the subdued tone which we had maintained towards them should have brought them to regard us in the light of an inferior people.”⁸ The Manchus also believed they were morally and even militarily superior. Jonathan Spence writes “[Qing officials] seem to have believed that the citizens of Canton and the foreign traders there had simple, childlike natures that would respond to firm guidance and statements of moral principles set out in simple, clear terms.”⁹ As a result, Qing officials continually underestimated the abilities of their foes, and repeatedly challenged the British unprepared.

The rise of opium addiction in Southern China and the trade imbalance caused by the drug forced the Qing into action. In 1820, an Imperial Proclamation ordered a halt to all importation and use of opium, but the Proclamation did little to slow the flow of opium into China. Opium was funneled in with regular bribes paid out to local merchants and officials; British Lieutenant John Ouchterlony wrote “the governor of Canton... was himself well known to be extensively interested in the opium trade.”¹⁰ This led the Imperial Court to send Lin Zexu to be governor over Canton charged with the responsibility of ending the Opium trade once and for all. In 1838, Lin Zexu began the systematic seizure of Chinese opium storehouses and imprisoned local merchants. Lin Zexu was determined to rid opium from Canton, and knew he could never fully expel the drug while the British remained in the harbor. Lin Zexu must have understood his future actions against the British

⁸ Lieutenant John Ouchterlony, *The Chinese War: An Account of All the Operations of the British Forces from the Commencement to the Treaty of Nanking* (Praeger Publishers, 1844, edit. 1970), 4.

⁹ Jonathan D. Spence, *The Search for Modern China* (Norton & Co. 1999), 154.

¹⁰ Ouchterlony, *Chinese War*, 6-7.

would probably incite violence, because he immediately set to fortifying the waterways into Canton, bought additional cannon, and set to training and drilling his forces. A critical oversight, as Spence notes, was that “if the Chinese crossed the [British merchants], they would be insulting the British nation rather than a business corporation, a distinction they did not fully see.”¹¹ This would turn out to be a major factor in the dynamics of the war, as professional Royal troops were used instead of British “pirates.”

The very prospect of war in China was not a popular idea in England, as British merchants only wanted to get as rich as possible through trade with the Chinese, and the most lucrative good was opium. If given a choice, the British preferred to remain at peace, as they had no aspirations of conquering China. Qing officials, however, outraged by the spread of opium and judging merchants to be inferior men, were aggressive in deterring the British from importing opium. Once this aggressiveness turned into overt military actions, the Qing blundered into a war with a power they didn’t fully understand or respect, and were woefully unprepared to face.

Armed conflicts ensued after Lin Zexu issued repeated proclamations forcing the British to give up their opium and ultimately flee from Canton altogether. The first battle of the Opium Wars began rather suddenly on the morning of October 29th, 1839. The British blockade of Canton, which Lin Zexu requested to be moved downriver the day before, was attacked by a group of twenty-nine Chinese war junks. The British, with their superior weaponry and vessels, quickly routed the Chinese force, destroying six ships. The British defeated their foes so soundly that “Captain Elliot (commander of the British blockade)... ordered it to cease, to spare the lives of the Chinese after their defeat had been accomplished.”¹² This account is disputed by Harold Raugh, who claims it was the British frigates that attacked the Chinese junks.¹³ However, if the British had attempted to engage the Chinese junks, they should have come within range of the new fortifications along the coast. Moreover, there is evidence the battle took place in the Bogue outside Canton. It’s clear the Chinese Admiral Kwan went charging after an enemy he underestimated and fundamentally did not understand. This small skirmish had very long reaching effects, because once England heard of the assault on its subjects they set to assembling “a small but efficient force for service on the coast of China.”¹⁴

11 Spence, *Search for Modern China*, 155.

12 Ouchterlony, *Chinese War*, 31.

13 Raugh, *Victorians at War*, 99.

14 Ouchterlony, *Chinese War*, 35.

The force, consisting of twenty war ships (five of which were steam ships) and about 4,000 British and Indian troops, sailed from India and arrived in Singapore in June of 1840. "Singapore was the rendezvous of the combined force (British from Canton and the new fleet from India), forming what was now called the 'Eastern Expedition'."¹⁵

If Admiral Kwan had not attacked the British blockade, there is little chance of the British mustering up a force to assault the Chinese coast. Tensions were high at the time, but the British blockade was more interested in trade than conflict, yet Lin Zexu refused to negotiate with the British. Instead, through the misguided notion that the British were inferior, Admiral Kwan attacked an enemy he stood little chance against in a setting that favored his opponent. This unnecessary attack set off a war that might have been averted altogether, and would set the stage for a series of humiliating defeats for the Qing dynasty resulting in a series of "unequal treaties."

Under the command of British Admiral Elliot, the fleet blockaded then subsequently assaulted the Zhoushan islands on the 24th of June, where "they found the Chinese utterly unprepared for the hostile visit."¹⁶ Despite being in open hostilities with the British for nearly 9 months, Qing officials governing Zhoushan had either not realized the strategic importance of the islands or believed their feeble garrisons would defeat a fleet of warships (most likely the former). Zhoushan was so easily overrun that "No fire was... opened upon the steamer as she advanced, and even her boats were allowed to row about among the junks... without any molestation."¹⁷ A week later, on the 5th of July, British troops landed in and occupied the fortifications on the largest Zhoushan island. As Lieutenant Ouchterlony notes, they were "the first European troops who had ever landed on the shores of China as conquering invaders."¹⁸ To be fair, the British had not landed on mainland China, but they soon would. The resistance organized by officials in Zhoushan was meager at best, and though they knew the British had a far superior force, "their duty and allegiance to the Emperor forbade their surrendering the island without offering all the resistance in their power."¹⁹ This was a fundamentally different way of fighting a war than what the British were doing. Qing officials were expected to fight and respond to the British fleet on a local level, the British were never seen as a national threat.

15 Ibid., 37.

16 Ouchterlony, *Chinese War*, 41.

17 Ibid., 42.

18 Ibid., 45.

19 Ouchterlony, *Chinese War*, 43.

Instead of concentrating forces and moving them as a coherent fighting force, like the British, the Manchus remained entrenched in vulnerable local positions and did not move to put together a single force that could compete against the invaders. The Manchus did not concentrate their forces on a well defended position, and no central army or fighting force was assembled to combat the invaders. This was a fundamentally different approach to fighting a war, and it left the Manchus at a significant disadvantage. Qing expectations dictated local officials should be able to handle the barbarous foreigners, and when the British repeatedly proved to be a serious threat too powerful for a local force to defeat, the Manchus failed to realize it would take a concerted effort to rid China of the invaders.

The British were able to move northward up the coast virtually uncontested, reaching the mouth of the Bai He river and the Dagou forts guarding the waterways to Peking by the beginning of August. The Manchus were caught off guard by this fleet setting up a blockade because, according to Lieutenant Ouchterlony, the “appearance of the position and works at the entrance of the river showed that the visit of the hostile squadron was totally unexpected.”²⁰ Yet again we see Qing officials, even officials charged with protecting the Emperor and capital city, were totally oblivious to the dangers of the invading fleet. Only now that they can see the size of the British warships and the advanced new steamships do Qing officials realize the severity of their problem. The Emperor wisely instructed Qishan, a governor-general of Guangdong, to negotiate with the invaders. The agreement, reached in January 1841, saw the British return to the Canton region, but it was the beginning of a series of treaties that were highly favorable to the British. Qishan ceded the British Hong Kong, along with 6 million Mexican silver dollars in indemnities. Emperor Daoguang, enraged by the terms of the treaty, fired Qishan and ordered his execution (though that sentence was later commuted). Meanwhile, current foreign secretary and future Prime Minister Lord Palmerston was equally outraged that Admiral Elliot had not negotiated better terms. Lord Palmerston insisted the treaty be made with the emperor himself, so he sent Sir Henry Pottinger in August 1841 to renew the military campaign and exact better terms from the Qing.

Between January and August of 1841, British subjects had almost continuous clashes with the local population in Canton, and these conflicts often turned bloody. Once Sir Henry Pottinger arrived in August, the conflict turned markedly more heated. The British quickly captured the fortifications

²⁰ Ibid, 57.

surrounding Canton and, upon sufficiently blockading the river, sailed north toward Xiamen. Officials in Xiamen had seen the British fleet the previous year as it sailed toward Peking, and had heard of the attacks in Canton. In preparation for an impending invasion, officials ordered the construction of new fortifications and bought additional cannon. The British, however, easily overpowered the smaller and undermanned fortifications, storming the battlements. Lieutenant Ouchterlony was so impressed by the new fortifications that he remarked “the scene afforded no point of worthy comment, save that it furnished strong evidence of the excellence of Chinese batteries, upon which the fire of the seventy-fours... produced no effect whatever”²¹ and “it was calculated that not fewer than 500 had been mounted in the batteries, forts, and junks.”²² The fortifications at Xiamen were very effectively constructed, as they were “impervious to the effects of horizontal fire.”²³ Credit must be given where credit is due; the Qing officials overseeing the construction of the Xiamen fortifications did an excellent job in improving and updating their defensive position. If an effective fighting force had occupied the fortifications, the Manchus probably would have created a lot of problems for the British. At the very least the well protected batteries may have damaged or sunk a few British ships, and that loss would be quite costly for the British. Although the Chinese lost this battle, they were not overwhelmed by the superior technology of the British. The fortifications were taken within hours because the Chinese troops defending the city were mostly locals, not trained soldiers. Many troops fled at the sight (and sound) of the British cannon, while those who remained were outmaneuvered easily by British officers, who had painstakingly scouted the topography of the islands to determine every weakness in the battlements. Soon after the British advanced to the Zhoushan islands where, upon capturing them, they held defensive positions for the winter in anticipation of the next fighting season.

In June of 1842, the British fleet sailed northward to the Woosung river, where they planned to overrun the defenses around Shanghai. Their arrival in Shanghai was unexpected, and the defenses guarding the entrance to the city’s harbor were dated. An account from the British steamship *Nemesis* recounts their remarkable journey upriver, as the ship made “a close reconnaissance of the whole line of defenses extending along both sides of the Woosung River.”²⁴ Unlike the fortifications at Xiamen, the battlements at Shanghai had not been upgraded; but similarly to Xiamen the troops in Shanghai

21 Ouchterlony, *Chinese War*, 174.

22 Ibid., 177.

23 Ibid., 174.

were untrained local militia who fled moments after the British invaded. The entire invasion of Shanghai saw the British lose three men total, none of whom had stormed the beaches because “the troops were in fact never engaged at all.”²⁵ This battle, though short and insignificant in the scope of the war, must be considered one of the most embarrassing defeats in all of Chinese history. Not only had the British fleet sailed past Shanghai two years previous, the fleet had been camped just south of Shanghai for months prior to the invasion. The fort and ramparts already had an estimated 200-250 artillery pieces, yet with such extensive warning and resources at their disposal Qing officials did nearly nothing to improve the defense of the city. The failure of the Qing leadership to competently manage a war, more than any technological disadvantage, was what lost the Opium War for the Chinese. Shanghai did not have to defeat the British fleet in order to be victorious; causing significant casualties or costing the British important resources could turn the tide of the war in favor of the Chinese, as the British would have no way to resupply or reinforce their units.

By July, the British fleet was anchored off the coast of the Golden Island, near Zhenjiang, the anticipated last hurdle before reaching Nanjing. As in Shanghai, the fortifications around the city were dated and virtually useless against the British fleet. The Chinese forces even chose not to use the defensive positions on Golden Island, instead retreating to an open field where “their flight would be comparatively easy.”²⁶ The abandonment of the island’s fortifications allowed British forces, which numbered roughly 12,000 men, to disembark on the coast without any harassment. Further, the British were afforded time to organize their units for a coordinated assault on the enemy. If the Manchus had mustered a competent fighting force, and had they put up even a reasonable defense, they may have scored a major victory over the invaders. The British had major difficulties in their landing, Lieutenant Ouchterlony went as far as claiming “owing to the difficult nature of the ground upon which the disembarkation... took place, had [the Manchu forces] been properly employed, [they could] have inflicted severe loss on our force.” Yet “the Chinese general omit[ed] to take advantage of the powerful means to oppose our landing which were at his disposal.”²⁷ The Golden Island fiasco serves as a further example illustrating the Manchus’ defeat was largely their own doing, and it did not extend solely from the superiority of the British fighting force.

24 William H. Hall, *The Nemesis in China: Comprising a History of the Late War in that Country* (Praeger Publishers- London, 1846 edit. 1969), 324.

25 Ouchterlony, *Chinese War*, 298.

26 *Ibid.*, 348.

27 *Ibid.*, 350.

Once the British attempted to engage the Chinese garrison on the island, the Chinese broke ranks and fled before the two sides could fight one another.

The decisive battle of the war took place in the city of Zhenjiang. The Chinese, numbering in the thousands, attempted to make a final stand behind the ancient walls of the city, out of reach of the guns of the British navy. It was not long, however, before the British land forces, with their mobile artillery and well-trained musketeers, overran the scalable walls of Zhenjiang. “The formidable array of [British] assailants at this juncture was more than the imperial troops could behold.”²⁸ In fact the most menacing enemy facing the British was the sun, as it was a very hot day and the British were weighed down by heavy clothing and equipment. While the Manchus weren’t able to slay many of the invaders, the sun claimed at least thirteen British soldiers. Once the gates of Zhenjiang were breached, the British poured into the city, leaving the “streets encumbered with the corpses of the slain, and the bodies of the wounded and dying.”²⁹ The massacre at Zhenjiang sent a strong message to Emperor Daoguang; surrender or suffer the same fate as the ruined city. Soon after, with the British navy anchored near Nanjing and soldiers encamped around the city, the Emperor was forced to request a ceasefire and would later sign the Treaty of Nanjing, officially ending the First Opium War.

The Treaty of Nanjing was a major cessation of power from the Qing government to British merchants, and it was not long before other foreign powers began using similar treaty systems to establish favorable trade patterns. Aside from paying millions to the British in indemnities, the Qing were also forced to allow the British to establish five additional trading ports, while ceding the island of Hong Kong altogether. The long term effects of the treaty were, however, far more important than the short term ones. Once foreign powers like the United States and France read copies of the Treaty of Nanjing, they immediately set to negotiating similar treaties, and by 1844 both countries had signed treaties. As Jonathan Spence observes, “within six years of Lin Zexu’s appointment as imperial commissioner, the Qing, instead of defending their integrity against all comers, had lost control of vital elements of China’s commercial, social, and foreign policies.”³⁰

28 Ibid, 384.

29 Ouchterlony, *Chinese War*, 394.

30 Spence, *Search for Modern China*, 163.

The Chinese people were shocked and humiliated by such a swift and painful defeat, and in the quickly turned Qishan into a scapegoat. According to Polachek, the Chinese believed “the Qing bureaucracy had allowed too many spineless officials, such as Qishan, to clamber into high office... it was but one small additional step to the conclusion that perhaps the whole war... had been deliberately sabotaged by mediocre bureaucrats.”³¹ One official even described the situation as “premeditated treachery.”³² I think the Chinese who felt this way were correct in a general sense, that the majority of the blame for losing the war rested on Qing officials, but Qishan was one of the few officials who made a positive impact on the war for China. Qishan attempted to use diplomacy to end the war, and only when the Qing had no choice but to capitulate or be sacked. The officials to blame were those in charge of funding the military and coordinating campaigns. More broadly, Manchus in elite society are all to blame for believing the British were an inferior force to contend with, that the troops didn’t require funding or a concerted Qing effort to rid the coasts of the foreign invaders. Most Qing officials had significantly reduced their fighting forces, and more importantly the forces they did maintain were poorly trained and underfunded. When a professional military was finally needed, and though advanced warning was given, Qing officials did little to prepare themselves for an upcoming invasion.

The grievance against Qing officials isn’t that they should have scored a major military victory against the British, but there is a significant difference between resisting the enemy and retreating unconditionally. Britain’s reasons for fighting the war were purely economic, thus it stands to reason that the Qing only needed to make the war cost more than it netted for the British, and the British would have halted their campaign. Polachek contends that the British were “extraordinarily vulnerable to attrition tactics,” and if the Qing had exploited this weakness they could “have been geared to extending the war until there was no more trade, and no more easy booty, for the enemy to batten upon.”³³ The need for a suitable defense is critical in war, without which there is no deterrent against your enemy from attacking you with regularity, as the Chinese would discover less than fifteen years later.

Emperor Daoguang was humiliated and enraged by the stipulations of the treaty, and his people felt the Emperor’s dissatisfaction. A growing

31 Polachek, *Inner Opium War*, 185.

32 Ibid, 185.

33 Polachek, *Inner Opium War*, 199-200.

resentment towards Western powers in China led Qing officials to delay British merchants from obtaining the “full rights” of the agreement. The British were prevented from using docks and harbors which were conceded in the treaty, and it wasn’t uncommon for angry Manchus to harm or seize the property of British merchants. In assessing the situation of the British, J.S. Gregory writes that “the primary concern of British policy [was] not so much the winning of further concessions as the full implementation and enjoyment of those now gained.”³⁴ Additionally, the British were anxious to open up Peking as a trading center for merchants and diplomats, and that “access to Peking... had been the chief objective of British policy in China since at least 1850.”³⁵ In order to press their advantage against the Qing Dynasty, the British helped support elements of the Taiping Rebellion, as long as it was in the interest of the British to have the Manchus in that area removed from power. In 1853, British leaders thought that “the solution to the dilemma facing British policy in China... [could come] as a result of the success of the rebels,” but by 1855 it was apparent it would require “direct force of arms” to ratify the treaty revisions.³⁶ Later, after the conclusion of the Second Opium War in 1860, the British abandoned the rebels and “the attitude of the foreigners ‘suddenly took a pro-Manchu tendency’; after the Manchus had satisfied their demands.”³⁷ By 1856, the British were searching for an opportunity to push treaty revisions on the Manchus, and a minor, seemingly insignificant naval search and seizure catapulted the fragile dynasty into another war with Britain; but this time France would join as well.

The Second Opium War was, in many respects, an extension of the First Opium War. Qing officials and local Chinese resented the terms of the Treaty of Nanjing, and many officials and merchants sought to harass and delay British trade as much as possible. As frequent delays and tensions were mounting, the British began to search for a military resolution to their problem, and the answer came in 1856 with the illegal search of the British ship *Arrow*. The British used the *Arrow* incident to declare war on China, and by late 1857, they had assembled another fighting force to assault the Chinese coast. The parallels between the military tactics used by the British in the First and Second Opium Wars are striking, and the results are nearly identical. In parentheses are the corresponding events and timeline from the First Opium War.

34 James S. Gregory, *Great Britain and the Taipings* (Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1969), 67.

35 Gregory, *Great Britain and the Taipings*, 67.

36 *Ibid.*, 67.

37 *Ibid.*, 68.

The British took Canton on December 1857 (British took Canton- June 1840), and moved northward up the coast until they reached the Dagu forts near Tianjin by May 1858 (reached Dagu forts, August 1840). The Qing capitulated in June under threat of occupation, resulting in the Treaty of Tianjin (Qing capitulated, Qishan compromise, September 1840). Qing officials, however, had no intention of following the ludicrous stipulations of the treaty, leaving the British to recommence hostilities in June 1859 (British recommenced hostilities, August 1841). This time at the Second Battle of the Dagu forts, however, the Manchus were prepared for the assault, resulting in the most significant defeat the Europeans had suffered in either Opium War. After being set back nearly a year by their defeat at the Dagu forts, the British and French returned in August 1860 to capture Peking (British surrounded Zhenjiang, August 1842). After a brief campaign meant to “teach the Qing a lesson they couldn’t ignore” and, upon burning the imperial palace outside Peking, the terms of the Treaty of Tianjin were reaffirmed and the Opium Wars finally came to an end.³⁸

The most interesting battle from the Second Opium War and the one most worthy of study is the Second Battle of the Dagu forts, where the Manchus were able to defeat a combined force of about 1200 British and French troops and delay the invaders’ campaign over a year. British and French troops planned to seize the Dagu forts on the afternoon of June 25th, 1859. American Commodore Josiah Tattnall was present for the engagements at the Dagu forts, at one point joining the fray himself, and left an account of the proceedings. Expecting no resistance, as false intelligence led them to believe the fort was sparsely occupied, the invaders landed “ten gun-boats, including one French, and three larger steamers... carrying in all about fifty guns.”³⁹ “On the Admiral’s reaching the first barrier the forts suddenly swarmed with men, and a terrible fire from very heavy guns was opened... from all the forts.”⁴⁰ The attack caught the foreigners off guard, and the barrage caused two vessels to run aground while still more were being shot with Qing cannon. Unable to retreat, “the British and French fought with the most determined valor,” but losses were mounting.⁴¹ Commodore Tattnall, observing from his American steamship, felt compelled to help the wounded fleet, he then “towed the boats through the

³⁸ Spence, *Search for Modern China*, 182.

³⁹ Charles C. Jones Jr., *The Life and Services of Commodore Josiah Tattnall* (Morning News Steam Printing House, Savannah, Georgia, 1878), 99.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 99-100.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 100.

British line to within a short distance of the Admiral.”⁴² British losses were significant, six vessels sunk (three were later recovered), 81 dead including 8 officers, 345 wounded including 23 officers, while the French also lost 12 men. The fleet was forced to retreat, causing over a year of delays in the war from defeat at one battle.

The Second Battle of the Dagu Forts is significant because it considerably extended the length and scope of the Opium War. The British loss not only caused a costly 13 month delay, but the fighting force went from 3,000-4,000 troops to a fleet of over 18,000 strong. Even if the Manchus could not defeat such a vast fleet, as was assembled in 1860, the cost to assemble the force alone is a loss for the invaders. The Qing didn't need sophisticated machinery or professional soldiers to win the battle, instead it was a basic tactic that had been around and perfected since the times of Sun Tzu: deception. The Manchus used the invaders' misperceptions against them, as the British had seen Manchu soldiers flee fortresses countless times before invasions, and the British and French did not expect to be challenged at the Dagu Forts. The Manchu soldiers sprung their trap, defeated the British, and this one false move by the invaders cost them dearly.

Incompetent Qing dynasty officials failed to provide an adequate defense of China in a war that, though difficult, should not have overwhelmed the Manchus. Qing officials pushed China into war, failed to respond to the imminent threat of invasion, and then again failed to properly respond when the same invaders returned for a second campaign. The incompetency of Qing officials was of greater help to the British than the superiority of their weaponry and navy. Had the Manchus provided a suitable defense, the cost of war could have easily repelled the British and saved China from the crushing trade stipulations instituted by the “unequal treaties.” Instead, an undersized corps of invaders was able to route the Chinese in a way that surprised the Europeans, who had once held reverence for the Chinese military tradition. Defeat in the Opium Wars was an avoidable catastrophe, and the effects of the loss persisted and haunted China well into the next century.

42 Ibid., 100.