Smoke, Steam, and Suffering:
Religious Influences on Narratives of the Steam Engine and Opium in China, 1840-1860

Although history is full of oppositional accounts—civilized man vs. barbarian, right vs. wrong, technology vs. religion—the reality of human experience is far more nuanced than these oppositions lead us to believe. For example, during the Opium Wars (1840-1842, 1856-1860), both British and Chinese accounts referred to the other culture as barbarian (夷 yí). The moral directions developed from Confucian, Daoist, and Buddhist religious teachings look very different from Anglican Christian moral code, yet moral “right” or “wrong” often depends on individual perspective. The division between religion and technology has deep historical roots, but a more critical perspective reveals significant nuances as modern scholarship seeks to “bridge hitherto disconnected disciplinary perspectives on religion, technology, and the things in between.”¹ This paper uses British and Chinese narratives of steam technology and opium use in China during the Opium Wars and Taiping Rebellion (1851-1864) to complicate general assumptions about technology, religious values, and culture. Through this specific case study, I challenge the idea that technology is value-neutral or can be defined solely as “craftsmen, mechanics…and scientists using tools, machines, and knowledge to create and control a human-built world.”² I contest the assumption that religion and technology are separate spheres that do not influence each other. I dispute the presumption that all cultures see the same technology in

the same way or attribute the same values to the technology.3 Chinese Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism, and British Anglican Christianity in late Qing and early Victorian narratives of steam power and opium use informed how different Chinese and British views of suffering—exemplified here by different cultural responses to suicide—gave rise to different views associated with steam technology and opium. For example, one aspect of this argument illustrates how Chinese Confucian, Daoist, and Buddhist values accommodated the moral permissibility of suicide under certain circumstances, specifically when being alive would result in more suffering than choosing to die. Alternatively, British narratives often condemned suicide under all circumstances, suggesting that Anglican Christianity framed suicide and suffering in different terms. Furthermore, if British and Chinese narratives construct aspects of suffering in different ways, the implications for the technological values associated with the steam engine and opium that rise from these constructions would be necessarily different.

This argument is the cumulative answer to a series of questions which correspond to the respective sections of this paper: I. Why did British and Chinese narratives tend to emphasize different aspects of suffering? II. How did these different nuanced emphases effect cultural norms and ethical values like appropriate responses to suicide? III. How do modern scholars define technology and frame the relationship between technology and values in the 1840s and 1850s? IV. How did British narratives characterize the relationship between steam technology or opium and suffering? V. How did Chinese narratives characterize the relationship between steam technology or opium and suffering? VI. How do these historical narratives apply to modern

technological issues? With these questions, I examine the intricate historical relationship between technology, religion, and culture.

I. Religious Perspectives on Suffering

In previous research, I observed that cultural responses to technology could often be measured on a scale from positive or optimistic to negative or pessimistic by the degree to which the technology was thought to cause suffering. For example, when Industrial Novels like Charles Dickens’ *Hard Times* and Elizabeth Gaskell’s *North and South* began using rhetoric that associated the steam engine with dismal industrial settings, impoverished and mortally ill characters, and a degradation of moral values, British enthusiasm for steam technology—the kind expressed by most early Victorians—dwindled substantially. Paradoxically, narratives of steam technology out of China during the Opium Wars tended to embrace steam technology and seek ways to develop systems that would support steam-powered industrialization in China. Did this mean Chinese people were ignorant of the death and destruction steamships like *The Nemesis* inflicted during the Opium Wars? Of course not. Instead, a comparison of British and Chinese narratives led me to realize that each culture placed a slightly different emphasis on what aspects of suffering were most significant. The Victorians often equated suffering with extreme poverty, pain, and death. Alternatively, the late Qing Chinese portrayal of suffering

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6 Some of the most influential discussions of suffering during the Victorian era came from John Stuart Mill (1806-1873) and Karl Marx (1818-1883). Mill’s platform in his work *Utilitarianism* seeks the greatest good for the greatest number of people, which implies that the suffering of many must be reduced. It should be noted that Mill does include mental and emotional suffering when calculating the utilitarian good of an action or idea, but the root causes of mental and emotional suffering can often be traced back to a physical concern. For example, a loved one’s death or the discrimination an impoverished person experiences. With a different perspective about what to do about suffering, but a similar framing of suffering itself, Marx describes the proletariat as the most suffering class in *The Communist Manifesto*. Again, this sense of suffering as a physical embodiment of poverty, pain, and death is present in the underlying recognition that the proletariat/working class suffers—is poor, gets sick, and dies—more than the
emphasized forced submission and lack of sovereignty. These apparently subtle nuances in emphasis led to dramatically different technological narratives. In this section, I argue that different religious values informed different British and Chinese emphases on which aspects of suffering were most significant.

Historically, suffering has often been framed in religious terms, or terms that arise from a culture’s dominant religious beliefs and practices. Instead of defining ‘religion,’ this section examines how religion was manifested historically and culturally in recorded actions and narrative. For example, instead of analyzing the teachings of Confucianism as a whole, only Chinese Confucian cultural norms and practices during the 1840s and 1850s, as described by modern scholarship, are addressed here. The nuanced differences in how Qing and Victorian religions framed suffering had dramatic impacts on social values, including the appropriate response to suicide. My attention was drawn to accounts of suicide because so many Western scholars dwell on how surprised the British were to see Chinese soldiers, officers, and civilians commit suicide instead of accepting surrender in response to the Opium Wars. When considering death and reasons to die, religious views of the value of life or how the afterlife looks often informed how opinions about suicide were framed.

Religious accounts are an excellent place to look for cultural conceptions of suffering because so many religious traditions engage these questions directly. Organized religions tend to address questions associated with suffering such as, “what is the best way to avoid suffering (individual or societal) in life?” or “will I suffer in the afterlife?” or even “what causes


7 Addressed in greater depth in Section III.

8 An equivalent technique might use U.S. legislature more than the New American Standard Bible to analyze American religious perspectives on abortion.
suffering?”. Different religious perspectives—Chinese Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism and British Anglican Christianity—have different nuanced perspectives on suffering and consequently different technological values. For example, in Christianity, many Victorians struggled to reconcile how a benevolent God could allow human suffering. Suffering is similarly important to the most basic Buddhist teachings—the Four Noble Truths (四圣谛 sí shèng dì)—which outline how to progress from the realization that all life is suffering to ending suffering by means of the eightfold path (苦集滅道 kǔ jí miè dào).\(^9\) Although this paper does not delve in-depth into Christian theodicy or the Buddhist Four Noble Truths themselves, these concepts suggest that religion framed Qing and Victorian ideals of the role of suffering in society.

**Chinese Religious Perspectives**

When considering how different British and Chinese religious values led to different cultural interactions, the easiest way to see these historical intersections is through the narratives of encounters between Chinese religious practitioners and British missionaries. This paper considers predominantly nineteenth century religious teachings and practices, which might differ from the original teachings of Confucius, Laozi, Siddhartha Gautama, and Jesus or modern religious interpretations. Furthermore, although this paper addresses Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism, these three major religions were not the only religious influences present in China during the Qing Dynasty. For example, many local communities viewed certain landmarks as sacred and integrated them into their own religious practices and traditions.\(^{10}\) Additionally, the Manchu leadership in government continued their own ritual practices and traditions,

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\(^{10}\) These practices are often termed “folk” or “popular” religion, but I prefer to consider them in terms of local traditional religious beliefs and practices.
emphasizing state sacrifice to a greater degree than the previous dynasties.\textsuperscript{11} Third, Qing religious and philosophical beliefs were marked by, “extraordinary eclecticism” and “the ability to tolerate seemingly incompatible notions with little sense of conflict or contradiction.”\textsuperscript{12}

With this diversity of Chinese religious life in mind, most scholars acknowledge the dominant religious tradition in Qing China as Confucianism. For example, Confucianism “played a significant role in shaping certain features of the Chinese legal system.”\textsuperscript{13} Descriptions of the relationship between Confucianism\textsuperscript{14} and heterodoxies like Daoism and Buddhism often center on how “heterodoxy was not a matter of deep moral differences between social classes or a matter of competition between starkly different systems of ethics… doctrines, myths, and abstract theories,”\textsuperscript{15} but instead, one of ever-developing social and moral constructs to encourage morality among the people. One Qing scholar, Qian Daxin wrote, “In ancient times, there were three teachings: Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism.”\textsuperscript{16} The “common language” of Chinese religious life included “vocabularies laced with \textit{yinyang} formulations and their equivalents, …common forms of worship (bowing, the use of incense, and the burning of prayers), the widespread employment of written charms, shared symbolism (notably the auspicious color red), philosophical eclecticism, and much more.”\textsuperscript{17}

\textsuperscript{12} Smith, \textit{The Qing Dynasty}, 207
\textsuperscript{13} Smith, \textit{The Qing Dynasty}, 251.
\textsuperscript{14} There is scholarly discussion about whether Confucianism qualifies as a religion. This paper does not engage this debate.
\textsuperscript{16} William T. Rowe, \textit{China’s Last Empire: The Great Qing}, History of Imperial China (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2009). 82.
\textsuperscript{17} Smith, \textit{The Qing Dynasty}, 241.
Orthodox religious belief and practice was closely aligned with Neo-Confucian schools including The School of Statecraft which, “took practical administration as its central concern, avoiding the moralistic extremes…as well as the scholastic extremes.”

In very oversimplified terms, Confucianism is based on the teachings of Confucius (孔子 kǒng zi) in The Analects of Confucius (論語) from around 500 B.C. and later scholarly and philosophical commentary on them. According to The Analects themselves, “子以四教：文、行、忠、信。” or “The Master [Confucius] instructs under four heads: culture, moral conduct, doing one’s best and being trustworthy in what one says.”

Much of the philosophy is devoted to developing in oneself the “ideal moral character,” which could take many forms, but could only be cultivated “by engaging and maintaining relationships with other people in a social context.” In the Qing experience, the ideal vision and the pragmatic vision of the world coexisted because both “valued order, stability, precedence, and social harmony, yet both existed alongside another reality in which violent disorder was common place.”

According to one historian, “Confucian prescriptions served, in essence, as mechanisms for coping with an underworld of willful disorder.” So what do these prescriptions and moral guides say about which aspects of suffering should be most emphasized? There is no explicit line in Confucian text that elucidates how suffering should be understood in terms of forced submission and lack of sovereignty rather

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18 Smith, The Qing Dynasty, 209
20 Confucius, Confucius, trans. Lau, xiii, 63.
21 Sommer, Chinese Religion, 41
22 Rowe, China’s Last Empire, 175.
23 Rowe, China’s Last Empire, 175.
than poverty, pain, and death, but general Qing Confucian teachings and practices place less emphasis on physical suffering than on the suffering caused by a lack of order.

Western readers with less familiarity in Chinese culture and religion might struggle with this aspect of Confucianism because Western systems tend not to emphasize hierarchy in relationships to the same extent. Yet the foundations of Confucianism are informed by benevolent hierarchical relationships: “filial piety (孝 xiao) and its corollary, fraternal submission (悌, di), lay at the very heart of Confucianism.”24 The Three Bonds—a vital component of Confucian teaching during the Qing dynasty—rely on the importance of healthy ordered relationships between ruler and subject, father and son, and husband and wife. Through these relationships a system of moral virtue and righteousness can be cultivated and both individuals and society will thrive.25 Recognizing this emphasis on hierarchical relationships in Confucian thought, a question that arises from the premise of this paper could be: why, then, if submission is an important component of Confucian righteousness, would the emphasized aspect of suffering be “forced submission and lack of sovereignty”? The key here is the emphasis on forced submission and the perversion of the individual or communal order of sovereignty.

For example, to many Qing Chinese, China was the most advanced, righteous, and sovereign nation in the world,26 and as such should not submit to a lesser nation—Britain—under any circumstances. Being forced to submit territory and open additional ports for trade at the ends of both Opium Wars was a perversion of righteous Confucian order. Qing philosophy argued that “each race should be controlled by its own ruler, and should never allow any encroachment by an alien race. In other words, all states should be nation states and self-

24 Smith, The Qing Dynasty, 223.
governing.” Being forced to submit and relinquish inherent Chinese sovereignty to foreign “barbarians” would have been seen as not only antithetical to Confucian righteousness, but also an example of terrible humiliation and therefore suffering.

The Chinese were not, of course, blind or ignorant of physical suffering, just as the British acknowledged that forced submission caused suffering to a degree. The difference here is in emphasis. Qing Chinese narratives tended to address forms of suffering like forced submission or humiliation more than British narratives did. For example, there is no English equivalent to the Chinese idiom associated with suffering,喪權辱國 (sàng quán rǔ guó) which means “to forfeit sovereignty and humiliate the country” or “to surrender territory under humiliating terms.” This idiom is especially popular in modern historiography describing the conclusion of the Opium Wars. The Chinese emphasis on the idea that喪權辱國 was a form of suffering worse than death led to many behaviors that confused Western observers—specifically decisions to commit suicide rather than surrender, which will be discussed in section II.

By emphasizing the importance of sovereignty—both individual and communal—and hierarchy, Confucian values paved the way for the idea that suffering could manifest when these qualities were lacking. This emphasis on hierarchy and sovereignty is clear in the letters of Feng Kuei-fen who used not only Confucian structure, but also imagery from Chinese religious traditions to make his point that Chinese sovereignty is a critical part of interactions with the West. Feng wrote,

The intelligence and wisdom of the Chinese are necessarily superior to those of the various barbarians, only formerly we have not made use of them. When the Emperor above likes something, those below him will pursue it even further, like the moving of grass in the wind or the response of an echo. There ought to be some [Chinese] people of extraordinary intelligence

27 Teng and Fairbank, China’s Response to the West, 10.
28 https://mandarinspot.com
29 Complexities regarding what values stem from communist influence in modern historiography versus what the Qing worldview might have recognized are not considered here, but would be worth addressing.
who can have new ideas and improve on Western methods…Only thus will we be able to pacify the [British] empire; only thus can we play a leading role on the globe; and only thus shall we restore our original strength, and redeem ourselves from former humiliations.\(^\text{30}\)

Feng’s illustration of the hierarchical structure—The “Emperor above” over the Chinese people, China over Britain—and the confidence that Chinese sovereignty and strength must be restored reflect significant Confucian values. In a later letter by Feng, describing how China hoped to gain “better control of the barbarians,” he wrote, “The various barbarians, though ignorant of our ‘three [Confucian] bonds’ [the relation between prince and minister, father and son, husband and wife] still know one thing, good faith. Not because they are naturally trustworthy, but because if one nation breaks faith then a hundred nations will rise in a group to attack and oppress her.”\(^\text{31}\)

With this statement, Feng both reveals the importance of Confucian thought in Qing Chinese understandings of their own position in the world, and reaffirms the Chinese emphasis on suffering as lack of sovereignty—foreign nations are forced to keep good faith by fear of being attacked and oppressed. Furthermore, Feng also mentions the need to redeem China from former humiliation, indicating how heavily the idea of喪權辱國\(^\text{32}\) weighed on Qing minds. Confucian officials constructed this worldview out of teachings insistent on establishing proper relationships between individuals as well as nations.

A critic might note that these religious and cultural values do not necessarily dictate how the exchange of “universal” ideas like science and technologies might occur and would therefore have less weight when considering narratives of steam technology and opium. However, Confucian ideals served as the framework for how interactions would take place with Western culture and consequently the new technologies arriving from the West. In *The Analects*,

\(^{30}\) Teng and Fairbank, *China's Response to the West*, 54.

\(^{31}\) Teng and Fairbank, *China's Response to the West*, 55.

\(^{32}\) “To forfeit sovereignty and humiliate the country.”
Confucius is explicitly quoted as saying, “子曰：「夷狄之有君，不如諸夏之亡也。」” which translates to, “The Master said, ‘Barbarian tribes with their rulers are inferior to Chinese states without [rulers].’” This view of seeing “barbarians” as inferior influenced many Qing business practices. For example, “Chinese Confucian culture favored the selection of business partners, suppliers, and subordinates according to ‘particularist’ ties of kinship and native origin, rather than ‘universalist’ criteria demanded by industrial enterprise.” This suggests that Chinese engineers not only engaged Western technologies through a strongly nationalistic perspective, but a perspective that was informed by Confucian values. Furthermore, the common credo of Qing scholars during the period of “self-strengthening” during and after the Opium Wars reflected Confucian teachings. 中學為體，洋學為用 means “Chinese learning as the substance, Western learning for the functional attributes” or “Chinese studies for the base, Western studies for use.” This statement has many similarities to the Confucian saying: 子曰：「溫故而知新，可以為師矣。」 which translates to, “The Master said, ‘A man is worthy of being a teacher who gets to know what is new by keeping fresh in his mind what he is already familiar with.’” Both quotes emphasize the importance of traditional Chinese learning and indicate a reluctance to accept new ideas without first considering them through a traditional Chinese lens. Confucian values encouraged the developing Qing industries to only pick and choose which Western teachings and technologies to integrate into China, thus preserving Chinese sovereignty and

34 Rowe, *China’s Last Empire*, 217.
35 Rowe, *China’s Last Empire*, 216.
36 Teng and Fairbank, *China’s Response to the West*, 50.
constructing a world with little to no suffering in terms of forced submission and lack of sovereignty.

Although Confucianism was the most pervasive ideological influence on Qing Chinese religious worldviews, most Qing people also drew elements of understanding from “heterodoxic” religions like Daoism and Buddhism. Daoist teachings, based on the Dao De Jing (道德經) of Laozi (老子) explore paradoxes like balanced duality and non-duality, describing—in part—how “the world actually entertains no separations and distinctions, for there is at once being and nonbeing, which are but different names for the same thing.” In the Qing period, Daoist ideologies “provided an emotional and intellectual escape valve for world-weary Confucians trammelled by social responsibility.” Some Qing emperors during the nineteenth century were also “ardent advocates of Tibetan Buddhism in addition to traditional Chinese Buddhism.”

Very few Chinese people and officials gave up Confucian practices entirely, often choosing to view Buddhism and Confucianism as “two sides of the same coin of ethical conduct,” and often including Daoism as a third philosophical guide.

Both Daoist and Buddhist writings contributed to a worldview aligned with an emphasis on suffering as forced submission and lack of sovereignty. These religions shape, to a greater degree, the importance of individual sovereignty and refusal to submit to base desires. For example in the Dao De Jing, “wars of expansion are fiercely denounced…represented as an evil force, a spiritual miasma born of a ruler’s insatiable desires for wealth and power.”

38 Also spelled Tao Te Ching. Expanded by the teachings of Master Zhuang.
39 Sommer, Chinese Religion, 71.
40 Smith, The Qing Dynasty, 233.
41 Smith, The Qing Dynasty, 251. Some earlier Qing emperors were less supportive and would express and encourage discrimination against Buddhist practitioners.
42 Smith, The Qing Dynasty, 253.
Consequently, many Qing leaders and scholars were more interested in continually improving themselves within China rather than expanding outward to encounter other cultures. In Buddhist teachings, the Lotus Sutra “promises universal salvation [from the suffering associated with attachments] for all beings and assures the assistance of benevolent Buddhas and bodhisattvas.”\textsuperscript{44} Furthermore, liberation from submission was a significant component of Buddhist worldview. One passage of the Lotus Sutra reads: “If, moreover, there be anyone guilty or not guilty, loaded with manacles, fetters, cangues, or chains, who calls on the name of the Bodhisattva Regarder of the Cries of the World, they shall all be snapped and broken off and he shall be freed [from suffering].”\textsuperscript{45} When confronted with British imperial ambition, then, it was not surprising that Confucian, Daoist, and Buddhist religious practitioners considered aspects of the Victorian worldview highly immoral. From the Chinese perspective, the British were not interested in adhering to either the Confucian rules of society or the Daoist and Buddhist ideals of liberation from attachment and peaceful earthly interactions. The Daoguang Emperor wrote to the Grand Secretariat in 1841:

\begin{quote}
The Celestial Empire treats the outer barbarians [夷] with compassion. If the foreign nations were obedient, we never omitted to show them friendliness and good will, for we strive for universal peace…The English barbarians, however, knew not to repent, but they daily increased their violence…It is thus apparent that their rebellious conduct is equal to the behavior of the beasts, which humanity can hardly tolerate, and at which both the gods and men are indignant. The only way is to extirpate them and thus raise the awe of our empire and console the mind of the people.\textsuperscript{46}
\end{quote}

This passage demonstrates how the Chinese worked to be self-aware of their own moral behavior and judged the behavior of the British by the same standards. In this single passage, the Emperor not only draws attention to the importance of foreign obedience to Chinese norms, but also calls

\textsuperscript{44} Sommer, \textit{Chinese Religion}, 127.
\textsuperscript{45} Sommer, \textit{Chinese Religion}, 129.
on religious authority [both gods and men are indignant] to support the worldview the
government hopes to instill.

**British Religious Perspectives**

This inclination to frame suffering in religious terms was not specific to Confucian,
Daoist, and Buddhist religions in China, but also influenced British views during this same
period. As described briefly, earlier in this paper, the British worldview tended to frame
suffering in terms of extreme poverty, pain, and death, which led to fluctuating responses to the
steam engine and opium as both were initially seen as *reducing* poverty, pain, and death, but
later in the nineteenth century were thought to *cause* suffering in those terms. Similarities
between the framing of suffering often seen in British Opium War narratives and the rhetoric
associated with Anglican interpretations of the King James Bible are significant.

The Church of England under Queen Victoria’s reign was Anglican, emphasizing
Protestant Christian beliefs and an organizational infrastructure similar to that of the Catholic
Church.47 Under Queen Victoria’s policy of religious tolerance, a wider diversity of Christian
sects were able to flourish, but Anglicanism remained the state-recognized religion. The study of
British missionary movements in China is nuanced, growing out of “a complex interaction of
religious, social, and ideological factors.”48 One aspect of this is exemplified by how many High
Churchmen within the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel “saw their role as purifying an
dominion in which ‘England’s too irreligious colonization’ had corroded the positive, godly
influence of higher forms of imperialism.”49 Protestant missionaries—like the Anglicans—in

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Anglican; Stephen Pickard, “National Anglican Identity Formation Project,” *Journal of Anglican Studies* 6, no. 1
(June 2008): 9–16.
48 Steven S. Maughan, *Mighty England Do Good: Culture, Faith, Empire, and World in the Foreign Missions of the
China were also different from local Chinese individuals in behavior; many were “aggressive individualists in thought and attitude, often in conflict with the established order in China.”

Throughout China, Christian missions and missionaries were as diverse (if not as widespread) as Christian churches in Western societies. Uniting many Christians was “the vigor of their nineteenth-century expansion” and “the self-confidence of evangelists who felt they had received God’s call…and that they must share their faith with the as yet unbelieving heathen.”

With this diversity of Protestant belief and practice in mind, a handful of examples do exist to indicate how the British worldview— informs by Anglican Christianity—tended to frame suffering in terms of extreme poverty, pain, and death.

Western readers tend to be more familiar with Christian constructions of suffering than others. For example, the depiction of Jesus’ crucifixion in John 19 uses very physical terms to describe the death of the Christian savior and how Jesus’ body was handled after his crucifixion. In the 1856 publication, “Introduction to Christianity”, a short tract from a Fuzhou mission, a Christian missionary lists sixteen characteristics that distinguish Christians noting that not only do “the poor and destitute devoutly worship these teachings” but repeating later that “even the sick and downtrodden continue to worship these teachings.” This tract implies that if these most suffering groups—the poor, sick, and downtrodden—can find Christianity appealing despite their physical suffering, so can the Chinese. Furthermore, according to Christian missionary teachings in China, “Jesus save Christians from their sins and permits them to be in

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The suffering of Christian missionaries is described in their own words in even more physical terms. Mr. E.J. Cooper, a missionary stationed at Lu-Ch’eng described how Reverend William Cooper’s keynote message for the group featured “the likelihood of the churches in China being called upon to suffer for Christ.” Later in his reflections, [E.J] Cooper addressed the forms this suffering might take in very physical terms by quoting Romans VIII:35: “Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation or anguish, or persecution, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?” When describing the death of his own wife Cooper says explicitly that she died from an illness, “after a month’s pain and suffering for Christ.” Further accounts describe suffering from dysentery, painful abscesses, sun-fever, sea-sickness, destitution, and emotional sorrow. These examples of British Christian suffering in terms of extreme poverty, pain, and death highlight the way British witnesses emphasized aspects of suffering very differently from Chinese witnesses.

As the British began to exchange worldviews with the local Chinese people, a variety of misconceptions were perpetuated. William Dallas Bernard, a British technical engineer, furnished modern scholars with an in-depth narrative of his observations from his position the steamship Nemesis. He wrote:

Civilization appears to float on the surface; you observe so much of social order and sobriety, and hear so much of paternal care and filial obedience, that you are half inclined to think that they must be very moral, humane, and happy people. Again, you witness such proofs of ingenuity, such striking results of industry and of combination of labour, in their public works and buildings, canals, embankments, &c., that you are inclined to believe their institutions must have something good in them at the bottom. But, when you look a little deeper, below the surface, you are

53 Barnett, “Justus Doolittle” in Christianity in China, 112-113. This emphasis on transcending physical suffering by seeking an ephemeral God and heaven actually dissuaded some Chinese from embracing these principles. One Chinese scholar wrote that “Europeans all emphasize profit…the basis of their wealth and power is labor…Western teachings destroy human relationships, even though teachers exhort one to filial piety and friendship.” 118.
56 Martyred Missionaries, ed. Broomhall,79.
astonished at the many evidences of barbarism and cruelty which militate against your first impressions.\textsuperscript{58}

This quote reveals a number of significant representative qualities about the British understanding of Chinese religion and therefore qualities of Christianity. First, Bernard noticed and admired the general social order of Chinese society. Important features of Chinese religion like social order, filial obedience, and self-improvement through labor are clear to this observer’s surface-level gaze. Next, Bernard drew on the common British belief in the 1840s that technological advancements demonstrate a moral society and therefore the technological advancement of Chinese society reveals “something good” about their moral character as a people.\textsuperscript{59} He seemed almost sad to relate to his readers that the Chinese do not conform to this model because they are both technologically advanced and demonstrate barbaric cruelty. The “evidences of barbarism” Bernard presented after the passage quoted here, addresses how the Chinese cause suffering in very physical terms, emphasizing pain and death. For example, Bernard wrote, “The infliction of the punishment of death in China, by any mode which shall cause the mutilation of the body, is considered much more severe and degrading than death by strangulation, or without the shedding of blood; and the more the body is mutilated, the greater is the punishment considered.”\textsuperscript{60} Bernard’s focus was predominantly on the mutilation of the body and how this process would undoubtedly cause physical pain—the British emphasis in description of suffering. Yet the Chinese framework might suggest that the intention behind this


\textsuperscript{59} This British conviction will be explored in more depth in section IV.

\textsuperscript{60} Bernard, \textit{The Nemesis in China}, 262
punishment might not have been to cause an intentionally painful death, but instead ensure that
the execution is humiliating—an important aspect of the Chinese emphasis on suffering.61

Yet Bernard’s account was not the only Christian perspective on Chinese suffering during
the Opium Wars. For example, the wife of a Protestant missionary—Emily De La Cour Gulick—in Yu Chou wrote:

Three or four [local Chinese people] who came [to the meeting] from curiosity were very much
moved. One old woman said “I believe in Jesus, I want to be baptized.” “Wait,” said Mr. Tsai,
“till you know more; if you worship Jesus you must destroy all your idols.” “Wait? I have no time
to wait, I am nearly 80 years old. I ought to decide at once to worship one or the other.”62

This quote indicates that some Chinese people were very open to Christian teachings. Small sects
of Chinese Christians began to arise and Christian Bibles, translated into Chinese, were printed
and distributed across the country. However, these interactions were not solely overseen by
Western missionaries. Some Chinese Christians began to use Biblical teachings and
interpretations for their own purposes.

The Taiping Rebellion (1851-1864) appeared to be a Christian uprising in inland China
and received the approval of British observers, until they realized that Taiping Christianity had
very little relation to what British missionaries had been preaching. Instead, “many Scriptural
ideas had been misapplied if not perverted” and the Taiping group demanded the allegiance of all
Christian missionaries to their leader, Hong Xiuquan who had received “a later revelation from
God than his elder brother Jesus.”63 For example, the Taipings used only the Biblical translation

61 My claim that the punishments might have been intended more to humiliate than to act as barbarically as Bernard
seems to think are reinforced by Bernard’s acknowledgement that despite how, “the Chinese seem to take pleasure
in inventing various cruel methods by which death may be inflicted…” those methods “are not now used, if indeed,
they ever were.” Bernard, The Nemesis in China, 263. This is not the only instance of Bernard’s narrative qualifying
general British misconceptions. Later in his account, Bernard wrote, “Infanticide, undoubtedly, does exist in China,
but it may be suspected that the statements of its prevalence have been exaggerated.” 277.

62 John Thomas Gulick, Evolutionist and Missionary, John Thomas Gulick: Portrayed through Documents and

63 Eugene Powers Boardman, Christian Influence upon the Ideology of the Taiping Rebellion, 1851-1864 (New
of Karl Gutzlaff, citing passages from the New Testament like “Blessed are those who suffer for Righteousness’ sake, asking for Jesus’ love, everlasting life, and God’s forgiveness for sinful acts,” but neglected the religious tolerance other Christian missionaries struggled to establish.

In one instance, when the Taipings encountered a group of Chinese Catholic converts, they demanded that the Catholics “recite the prayers according to the Taiping liturgy” and, when many refused, punished the group by either locking them in a storehouse, sending them to the Taiping front lines as soldiers, or executing them on the spot. Furthermore, ritual aspects of Taiping Christianity drew scorn from outside observers like Reverend Theodore Hamberg. He described how “after converts had expressed their faith in God and their intent to turn from idolatry ‘two burning lamps and three cups of tea were placed upon a table, probably to suit the sensual apprehension of the Chinese.’” Reverend Hamberg’s account reveals the disconnect between the practices of Western missionaries and those of the Taipings, emphasizing the physical aspects of Christian worship as the root of the ideological division.

Overall, the Taiping Rebellion was a gruesome and bloody civil war that cost twenty to thirty million people their lives. When Western observers consider the war retrospectively, it is often associated with “unspeakable human suffering” in very physical terms. Not only did this encounter change how the Chinese people and government viewed Christian values, it also influenced how missionaries understood their own work. A year after the Taiping Rebellion was put down, the editor of a mission book wrote, “Christianity still suffers from this travesty...there

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was no one to tell them that our religion is peaceful.” These accounts of the different ways Chinese and British religious views influenced concepts of suffering are important and provide context for understanding each culture’s worldview. To support the claim made here—that these religions influenced conceptions of suffering and in turn social norms and therefore technological values—narratives of suicide during the Opium Wars and Taiping Rebellion are addressed in the following section.

II. Religious Influence on Cultural Responses to Suicide

The religious principles behind cultural constructions of suffering and the practices that resulted from these principles could look very different. Here, Chinese and British narratives of suicide are examined to illustrate how the religious nuances each culture placed on suffering led to different views about when suicide would be considered socially acceptable. Imagine suffering as a sliding scale from no suffering to nothing but suffering. A stubbed toe would be low on the scale, while the death of a loved one, higher. Events that cause more suffering vary from person to person and also, as this paper demonstrates, culture to culture. Addressing British Christian and Chinese Confucian, Daoist, and Buddhist understandings of where “suicide” should fall on the scale gives insights into how religious values were applied in constructs that address suffering.

In the Protestant construction of suffering, suicide would be at the furthest, most terrible, end of the “suffering scale” because suicide would represent, to a devout Anglican, a deliberate contempt for the foremost gift the Christian god had given you—the gift of life. By spurning this gift, the person who took their own life would not be allowed a Christian burial and most

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68 Boardman, Christian Influence upon the Ideology of the Taiping Rebellion: 5.
69 This paper examines historical instances of suicide. Modern readers who might be thinking about ending their own life should contact a suicide hotline or care professional.
believed that you would also be denied access to the Christian heaven, a place of union with God and utterly without suffering. This Anglican stance was outlined as early as 1661 in a rubric which prohibited a formal Christian burial “for any that die unbaptized, or excommunicate, or have laid violent hands upon themselves.”\(^70\) Indeed, many Christians believed that the act of taking one’s own life (and the lack of proper Christian burial) would result in eternal damnation in Christian hell—a place of dismal suffering in both body and spirit.

This closed, shame-ridden mentality surrounding suicide made British sailors surprised and horrified to encounter events where Chinese people, soldiers, and even officers committed suicide during or after a hopeless battle. At one point, Bernard, our familiar engineer on the Nemesis wrote that near the end of a terrible battle, “Hundreds of them [Chinese soldiers], as a last resource, rushed madly into the river, and, of course, a great many were drowned…many committed suicide, including several high officers.”\(^71\) Later, Bernard noted that after the death by suicide of the imperial commissioner, Yu-keen, “His Majesty [the Emperor]…directed that his departed servant, ‘who gave his life for his country,’ should receive funeral honours of a high class, in the same temple of ‘faithful ministers’ in which his ancestor [grandfather] had found a place.”\(^72\) Although Bernard’s writings imply that he did not understand why the Chinese officer who had committed suicide should receive such honor, it is significant that he did observe this pattern.

In the Christian construct, the worst kind of suffering would be death without heavenly salvation and if a Christian takes his or her own life, this death was usually thought to be


followed by eternal damnation of the immortal soul and endless suffering in the Christian hell. In Confucian, Daoist, and Buddhist constructions of suffering, the furthest end of the suffering-scale would be forced submission and lack of sovereignty, while death would be considered, by many, to be a natural part of the cycle of life and rebirth. Unlike the Christian perception that suicide would, under any circumstance, result in eternal (physical) suffering in hell, some traditional Chinese religious practitioners, religious Daoists, and Chinese Mahayana Buddhists believed that physical suffering and physical death was less important than the suffering of the 靈魂 (líng hún) spirit in the afterlife or next life. Additionally, it would be considered worse to die having forfeited sovereignty and humiliated the country (喪權辱國) than to commit suicide and be honored by the community as a respectable ancestor. Both Chinese and British narratives reinforce this structure.

During the First Opium War, at the cusp of a Chinese defeat, Captain Hall of the steamship Nemesis wrote, “When they could no longer fight, they could die… Many… were with difficulty prevented from cutting their throats, which they did with apparent indifference.”

Julia Lovell, a scholar of Opium War history delved into this phenomenon in more depth in The Opium War, citing the same bleak battle in Captain Hall’s commentary,

One elderly wounded officer was carried from the fighting by the British: ‘I want no mercy’, he told them. ‘I came here to fight for my emperor…if you wish to gain my gratitude, and can be generous, write to my revered sovereign, and say I fell in the front, fighting to the last.’ But this was not the worst of it…Manchu families destroyed themselves: mothers hanging their children or drowning them in wells; husbands doing the same to their wives, before falling on their own swords. If fathers allowed their children to flee, they were carefully instructed to ‘beg for death’ on encountering a British soldier. If fathers were not there to help, whole families took poison, and were later found dead with distended throats and black lips.

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73 Sommer, Chinese Religion, “The spirit of the valley never dies” Laozi 73; “The Way of Heaven is to benefit others and not to injure” Laozi, 75; “Here, O Sariputra, form is emptiness, and the very emptiness is form” Buddhist Heart Sutra, 135.
75 Lovell, The Opium Wars, 212.
British observers were horrified by these actions (considered to be the worst form of suffering from a British perspective) and tried to rationalize them according to British values. Justifications included statements like the 1860 account of a Christian missionary, Reverend Griffith John. He noted that the villagers who had killed themselves in the face of the Taiping rebels were described as, “mostly suicides, rather than war victims, and thus, in spite of their piteousness, presumably less deserving of Christian sympathy.”\textsuperscript{76} In another account, Bernard wrote, “as they were not yet acquainted with the European mode of sparing an unresisting enemy, they suffered great loss from unsupported and useless resistance, when timely submission would have saved many lives.”\textsuperscript{77} Yet ‘timely submission’ was, from the Chinese perspective, often considered a worse fate than death, exemplifying how the Chinese placed less emphasis on suffering as extreme poverty, pain, and death, than on suffering as forced submission and lack of sovereignty.

In Chinese narratives of the Taiping Rebellion, people who committed suicide to avoid capture by the rebels were often glorified in later narratives. For example, when, in 1859 a female relative of Jin Changfu hung herself after her home was captured by rebels, she was celebrated for her piety. Her body was buried with her ancestors, and “thus symbolically returned to [her] proper place within the patriline.”\textsuperscript{78} This narrative would have suggested to others at the time that submitting to the oppressors—whether British or rebel—would be more humiliating and cause more suffering than choosing to die. Although complicated by considerations of “valorized female suicide”\textsuperscript{79} in other areas of Qing narrative, the example of Jin Changfu’s story

\textsuperscript{76} Meyer-Fong, What Remains. 119.  
\textsuperscript{77} Bernard, The Nemesis in China, 93.  
\textsuperscript{78} Meyer-Fong, What Remains, 110.  
\textsuperscript{79} Janet Theiss “Managing Martyrdom: Female Suicide and Statecraft in Mid-Qing China” in Paul S. Ropp, Paola Zamperini, and Harriet Thelma Zurndorfer, Passionate Women: Female Suicide in Late Imperial China (Leiden ; Boston: Brill, 2001): 47.
was not a uniquely female experience during this time—many Chinese men (civilians, soldiers, and officers) also committed suicide during the Opium Wars and Taiping Rebellion.

It is significant to note, at this point, that among the methods Chinese individuals used to commit suicide, opium overdose was a popular option. Especially after opium was legalized in China in 1860 and made more accessible, a lethal dose of opium was cheap, readily available, and easy to obtain; “even housewives who were fully dependent [on their husbands] economically would have the few coppers it took to purchase a potentially lethal amount of raw opium.”  

80 In one account, a woman who would have been forced to submit to a new husband after the death of her previous husband, “following intense pressure from her stepmother,” committed suicide by purchasing and consuming a lethal dose of edible opium.  

81 In this narrative alone, the importance of the Confucian husband-wife relationship is demonstrated, the general societal acceptance of suicide as an alternative to forced submission (exemplified by the stepmother’s response) is illustrated, and the use of opium as a method of death itself is addressed. Through the accounts above describing different British and Chinese reactions to suicide, the relationship between religion and cultural emphases on what could be considered the most extreme form of suffering become clear. The next part of my argument develops how these different Chinese and British emphases on suffering influenced the values associated with narratives of the steam engine and opium.

III. Technology and Values

As historian of technology Thomas Hughes noted in *Human-Built World*, “technology is messy and complex. It is difficult to define and to understand.”  

82 The Oxford English Dictionary

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82 Hughes, *Human-Built World*, 1.
frames technology, in part, as, “a branch of knowledge dealing with the mechanical arts and applied sciences” and, specifically, “the application of such knowledge for practical purposes.”

While “mechanical arts and applied sciences” is the more colloquial definition of technology, this paper uses a more inclusive view. David Nye frames technology from an evolutionary perspective—as a human-developed tool. Historically, the steam engine was a tool that removed water from British mines, powered factory machines (primarily in textile manufacturing), and transported people via steam-locomotive or steamship. Opium, as a technology, could be considered a tool for mental expansion or intoxication of imperialist agendas, or for pain relief. Additionally, opium is a product that requires varying human technologies to produce, distribute, and consume. While this paper does not take a stance on what kind of tool opium is, opium can be viewed as a kind of tool. With this understanding of opium and the steam engine as tools, and therefore technologies, the question becomes: what is the relationship between technology and values?

To answer this question, Hughes cites Lewis Mumford who said, “technology is both a shaper of, and is shaped by, values,” and pinpoints a handful of values in British and American contexts including, “order, system, and control.” These values arose as people used technology during the Victorian era to create an “Edenic recovery” or “promised land” out of what was

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81 “Technology, N.,” OED Online (Oxford University Press).
84 Many scholars outside history of technology studies may struggle with the idea that opium was a tool or technology of imperial agendas. However, many Chinese narratives explicitly name opium as a British tool used to oppress the Chinese. In this paper, you do not have to agree with this aspect of the argument, merely accept that opium can be analyzed through the same academic lens as the steam engine.
86 Hughes, American Genesis, 5.
87 Hughes, Human-Built World, 17, 27.
perceived as a chaotic natural world. With a focus specifically on Victorian steam technology, Herbert Sussman highlighted the praise given to Victorian inventors and innovators as they pushed for efficiency, entrepreneurship, and expansion in Britain and beyond.\textsuperscript{90} Wang Hsien-chun, a Taiwanese historian of science, also reinforces the relationship between technology and societal values.\textsuperscript{91} He writes, “本文的結論是，晚清中國發現了蒸汽機作為動力的來源，而引進蒸汽技術，是中國在技術、文化與社會的革命性改變,”\textsuperscript{92} which translates to, “this article concludes that employing steam power led to revolutionary changes in Chinese technology, culture, and society.” Within this article, Wang points to how the integration of Western technologies into Chinese society led, in some areas, to the adoption of Western business practices and economic mentalities.\textsuperscript{93} Even during the Opium Wars, nineteenth century scholars like Robert Vaughn were considering the relationship between technology and values, writing that “modern industry and the new railways” could create an urban middle class that would act as “the moral leaders of society.”\textsuperscript{94} Although modern scholars address technology more contextually than Vaughn, these examples illustrate how—for both Western and Eastern scholars—the relationship between technology and values continues to be a key element of the history of technology.


\textsuperscript{91} This paper, written in English for an English-speaking audience, does not delve in-depth into the nuanced differences between how British/American and Chinese historians of science attribute values to technology, but does recognize that both cultures acknowledge the value-laden nature of technology. While Chinese scholars may take a different perspective on the specific values associated with technology, the idea that technology and values influence each other remains.

\textsuperscript{92} 王宪群 and 杜兴, “蒸汽推动的历史——蒸汽技术与晚清中国社会变迁 (1840-1890),” 时代教育 (先锋国家历史) 3 (2010): 12, 1.; Misa, \textit{Leonardo to the Internet}.

\textsuperscript{93} 王，蒸汽推动的历史，73.

To most Chinese people, “the teachings of the missionaries – moral, philosophical, scientific and technological – were all part of a unified whole,” known as “heavenly studies” (天學 tian xue) or “Western studies” (西學 xī xue). Western studies were not only about religion, but also included much Western scientific information to attract Chinese attention. The Jesuit missionaries like Father Parennin understood that, “in order to attract their [Chinese people’s] attention, it is necessary to win credit in their minds and gain their respect through knowledge of natural things…there is nothing that better disposes them to listen to us when we speak of the holy truths of Christianity.” This mentality flourished in China and was picked up by Protestant missionaries who were allowed to publish Christian texts in exchange for also publishing Western technical and scientific documents. This aspect of Christianity in China has been explored in-depth by a number of scholars and is acknowledged as a crucial factor in Chinese scientific and religious history. To avoid repeating this literature at length, this paper addresses this aspect of the relationship between religion and technology only briefly and instead focuses on how religious constructions of suffering influenced technological values.

IV. British Narratives of Steam Technology and Opium

In Britain, the steam engine itself “linked Newtonian mechanics and engineers in a cycle of manufacturing and industrial changes that made efficient use of natural deposits of fossil fuels to provide an unprecedented amount of new energy for practical work in factories, arsenals, and

on ships.” By 1840, James Watts’ improvements to the steam engine were widespread throughout Britain and beginning to infiltrate even distant corners of the British empire. Coincidentally, 1840 also saw the formal declaration of the First Opium War.

**Opium Wars Context**

The term “Opium Wars” has been used to denote the two major Sino-European conflicts between 1840 and 1860, but scholars do not always agree on the terms, motivations, or dates of these events. This paper uses the term “First Opium War” to refer to the period of armed conflict between the first British assault on a Chinese port on July 4th, 1840 and the signing of the Treaty of Nanjing on August 29th, 1842. The “Second Opium War” is sometimes termed the “Arrow War,” or “Second Sino-European War” as the role of opium in this conflict was not as obvious. Scholars almost universally date this war as lasting between the British-flag fiasco on October 8th, 1856 and the Anglo-Chinese Convention of Beijing on October 24th, 1860. This paper chooses to call this conflict the “Second Opium War” because of recognized similarities between the First Opium War and because this paper focuses on the role of opium and steam technology in both wars.

98 Elman, *On Their Own Terms*, 186.
100 Historians like Kuo point to, “a predominant spirit of aloofness and self-sufficiency” on the part of the Chinese while historian Daniel Headrick cites the British hunger for imperial expansion as the driving factor. Other scholars argue that the conflict had economic motivations—namely that the British wanted Chinese tea, silk, and porcelain but China didn’t want anything from Britain but silver, which Britain didn’t have. Kuo, *A Critical Study of the First Anglo-Chinese War*, 1; Daniel R. Headrick, *The Tools of Empire: Technology and European Imperialism in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981): 43.; Simon Schama et al., *A History of Britain: The Complete Collection* (A & E Television Networks: Distributed by New Video, 2002).
101 Many scholars cite Commissioner Lin Zexu’s destruction of 20, 283 chests of opium in 1839 as the inciting incident of the First Opium War.
While over-simplified, Western-centric histories of the Opium Wars tend to conjure images of vast ‘Oriental’ poppy fields and moral British middle class men (Sherlock Holmes, for example) falling prey to the nefarious Chinese drug, these depictions are a far cry from the reality.¹⁰² More accurate accounts emphasize how much opium 鴉片 (yā piàn) was grown in British India and then shipped to China. Since opium had been illegal in China since 1729, the fact that between two and ten million Chinese people were addicted to it by 1830 was a source of dismay for both addicts and Qing officials alike.¹⁰³ Adding insult to injury, the Chinese government couldn’t help but notice that over 400,000 chests of the drug were being illegally smuggled into China each year through the port of Canton—the only port then open for foreign trade.¹⁰⁴

To handle the undesirable influx of the drug, the Daoguang Emperor, appointed Commissioner Lin Zexu to address the problem.¹⁰⁵ In the first three months of Lin’s position in Canton, “as many as 1,600 violators had been arrested, and 28,845 catties of opium and 42,741 opium pipes had been confiscated.”¹⁰⁶ When British merchants in Canton continued to import the drug, Lin blockaded the foreign population of Canton in the black-market opium-factory complex until they relinquished all 20,000 chests of the drug. Britain, with no foothold in China

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¹⁰³ Richard Baum, The Fall and Rise of China (The Teaching Company, 2010). Opium addicts at the time would spend approximately half their daily wage on the drug.
¹⁰⁴ Lovell, The Opium War. 38.
¹⁰⁵ Richard Baum and Teaching Company, The Fall and Rise of China.
¹⁰⁶ Hsin-pao Chang, Commissioner Lin and the Opium War., Harvard East Asian Series ; 18 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1964). 129. Lin also wrote imperiously to Queen Victoria, “Your majesty must immediately search out and throw to the bottom of the sea, and never allow such a poison [as opium] to exist. You will be showing that you understand the principles of Heaven...by respectful obedience to our commands...Do not say that you have not been warned in time.” Richard Baum and Teaching Company, The Fall and Rise of China.
beyond the opium trade, took these actions as serious offenses and responded with assertive military action.

To display authority, the British government dispatched a fleet of ships to subdue the “barbarians” in the East. They encountered a fleet of wooden vessels that hadn’t been used in war for hundreds of years, “mainly a coastal navy used principally for defense against pirates and local marauders.”\(^{107}\) The British barraged port after port using iron-sided steamships to outrun, out-fight, and out-last the Chinese navy, making their way up the coast from Canton, near Hong Kong, all the way to Shanghai. After two years of devastating battles, dishonest officials, and general defeat, China finally agreed to sign the Treaty of Nanjing (Nanking) in 1842. In the treaty, China consented to pay an indemnity of £21 million in silver to Britain (ten times the value of the original destroyed opium), open five coastal cities to British commerce and residency (Canton, Amoy (Xiamen), Fuzhou, Ningbo, and Shanghai), abolish the longstanding imperial Chinese trade monopoly, and permanently cede Hong Kong Island to Great Britain\(^{108}\)

With this treaty in place and China still smarting from the humiliating defeat, relations between Britain and China settled into a kind of strained cordiality. However, expanding imperial interests on the part of Britain and, to a lesser extent, France, Russia, and the United States, caused these Western nations to seek another reason to go to war with China. As one British official commented,

“"The time is fast coming when we shall be obliged to strike another blow in China… these half-civilized governments…all require a Dressing every eight or ten years to keep them in order. Their minds are too shallow to receive an Impression that will last longer than some such period and warnings are of little use. They care little for words and they must not only see the stick but actually feel it on their shoulders before they yield."\(^{109}\)


\(^{108}\) Richard Baum, *The Fall and Rise of China*.

What followed was four years of protracted skirmishes along the Chinese coastline as the combined British and French navies beat the improved (but still not technologically equipped) Chinese military inland. China was even more upset by this second incursion and one official wrote an angry letter, which read, “We note that you English barbarians have formed the habits and developed the nature of wolves, plundering and seizing things by force…Except for your ships being solid, your gunfire fierce, and your rockets powerful, what other abilities have you got?” The British responded with more ships, gunfire, and rockets until eventually, the Western allies pushed their way up the Hai River into Beijing, sacked and burned the Emperor’s Summer Palace and forced the Emperor to sign the “Anglo-Chinese Convention of Peking [Beijing].” This treaty opened ten more ports to free trade along various waterways, gave Western nations special privileges in China, and forced China to legalize the opium trade. With this outline of the events and motivations surrounding the Opium Wars, I now engage British narratives surrounding the steam engine and opium during these conflicts.

**British Narratives of the Steam Engine**

At the beginning of the First Opium War, Britain dispatched, among other vessels, the all-iron steamship the *Nemesis* to, “earn herself a name,” while “the prospect of immediate service, in active operations against the enemy, stimulated the exertions of every individual [crewmember].” Bernard’s narrative from his position as a technical engineer aboard the *Nemesis* is representative of the prevailing British attitude toward steam technology during the 1840s; the steam engine was the pinnacle of civilization, the herald of dawning morality, and the

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110 Allitt, *The Rise and Fall of the British Empire*.
assurance of prosperity.\textsuperscript{113} At Britain’s “Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations” in 1851, even “Charles Dickens took the opportunity to sneer at the comic fragility of China…comparing the ‘greatness of English results [of industry]’ with ‘the extraordinary littleness of the Chinese.’”\textsuperscript{114} Of course, within three years, Dickens changed his account of the same technologies from ‘great English results’ to “melancholy madness”\textsuperscript{115} in \textit{Hard Times} as he began to associate steam technology with suffering—emphasizing extreme poverty, pain and death—in Britain.

Furthermore, the values the British associated with steam technology were not constrained to British narratives in Britain alone. In China, Bernard described how the ship “was at length finished and sent to sea as a private armed steamer,”\textsuperscript{116} and eventually directed its guns, “with terrific effect upon the Chinese…”\textsuperscript{117} Advanced British steamships like the \textit{Nemesis} substantially reduced British injuries and losses, which drew an obvious parallel between steam technology and the alleviation of suffering during the first Opium War. Therefore, if steam technology prevented injury and death and promoted military victory in a war that facilitated British prosperity, the steam engine itself must not be the cause of British suffering,\textsuperscript{118} and thus could be viewed as a beneficial technology.

The British were not ignorant of the suffering on the part of the Chinese. Bernard recognized how the steam engine and British actions were causing the Chinese to suffer. He wrote,

\begin{quote}
\textsuperscript{113} Shectman, “The Steam Engine,” 236. While undertones of complex social unrest caused by the newly-visible economic disparities between the upper and working classes tarnished this idealism, the prevailing mentality, especially as the middle class grew, was that the steam engine was a beacon of moral civilization.
\textsuperscript{114} Lovell, \textit{The Opium War}, 242.
\textsuperscript{115} Dickens, \textit{Hard Times}, 23.
\textsuperscript{116} Bernard, \textit{The Nemesis in China}, 2.
\textsuperscript{117} Bernard, \textit{The Nemesis in China}, 72.
\textsuperscript{118} Instead, many writers attributed suffering to social factors like immorality and greed.
\end{quote}
But none of our ships astonished and alarmed the Chinese so much as the steamers; they were particularly alluded to in the official reports to the emperor, and were described as, ‘having wheels at their sides, which, revolving, propelled them like the wind, enabling them to pass to and fro with great rapidity, acting as leaders;’ and it is not surprising that the Chinese should soon have christened them the ‘Demon Ships.’

Surprisingly, Bernard sympathetically described how, “Many of the poor fellows [Qing soldiers] were unavoidably shot by our troops…under these circumstances it could not be wondered at that they suffered.” However, although Chinese soldiers were acknowledged to be suffering, the British prioritized their own wellbeing over their enemy’s.

This prioritization of British lives over Chinese was likely because the Victorians, by and large, were firmly convinced of their own superiority when encountering other cultures, especially with regard to people of color. Rudyard Kipling celebrated Britain’s industrial and imperial message in the poem “The White Man’s Burden,” which depicted people in the Philippines as, “Your new-caught, sullen peoples, / Half-devil and half-child,” and praised the white men who “tamed” them. With special regard to opium use, British newspapers perpetuated the sense that China was to blame for British opium addiction through propaganda that said opium was “being used by malign Orientals to enslave young white women.” In England, the suffering of the Chinese people seemed too far away to matter very much, especially given their uncivilized, heathen, morally corrupt ways. After a particularly gruesome battle in which hundreds of Qing soldiers were slain by the Nemesis’ guns, the captain “returned to appreciating the bucolic delights of the countryside, sighing over ‘one of the richest and most beautifully cultivated spots in the world’, its loveliness only slightly marred by the ‘dead bodies floating

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119 Bernard, The Nemesis in China, 78.
120 Bernard, The Nemesis in China, 87.
121 Suffering in British terms of extreme poverty, pain, and death.
along the canals.’”124 To the British, the suffering of the Chinese (as understood in terms of extreme poverty, pain, and death) was less important than the suffering of their own people and since steam technology alleviated British suffering, the technology itself was framed in very positive terms.

The narratives of steam technology produced during the Second Opium War were similar, but less enthusiastic due to the technological pessimism coming from Britain. The optimism most British expressed toward the steam engine began to wane around 1851, so that by the beginning of the Second Opium War in 1856, Gaskell and Dickens’ narratives equating steam technology to British suffering began to color how the middle class viewed steam technology. When the inciting conflict aboard the Arrow occurred,125 some British government officials argued that Britain “must support its agents abroad,” namely by sending more steamships into China. Others were less enthusiastic, saying they would rather, “express sympathy for the difficult circumstances under which Bowrig [a connected British official in China] had to operate, but ask him to patch up the differences with the Chinese.”126

The British understanding of the steam engine, both in England and in China reflected how the British framed the relationship between steam technology and suffering. When the steam engine was preventing suffering during the First Opium War, the technology was given an optimistic connotation. When the steam engine was used to fight the war in China during a time of technological pessimism in England, its relationship to suffering was reinforced and the

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124 Lovell, *The Opium War*, 213.
125 “On 8 October 1856, Guangzhou police boarded a Chinese-owned, but Hong Kong-registered ship called the Arrow. This ship had a British Captain but a Chinese crew. Hauling down the flag, the police arrested twelve crew members [because they were pirates who had been associated with the Taipings before taking the job under the British captain]…This incident gave Governor of Hong Kong, John Bowring a long-sought-for opportunity to demand treaty revisions from China.” Bruce A. Elleman, *Modern Chinese Warfare, 1795-1989*, Warfare and History (London: Routledge, 2001): 45.
technology was seen in more pessimistic terms than it had been in the first Opium War, despite how it continued to further British interests abroad. With this exploration of the steam engine addressed in depth, we now address the second technology to explore through the British emphasis of suffering as poverty, pain, and death: opium.

**British Narratives of Opium**

Why opium? I chose to analyze opium as the second case-study in this paper because both the steam engine and opium can be reconciled as comparable technologies—human-contrived tools—that had a significant impact on Chinese narrative during the Opium Wars. Analyzing steam technology during this period in China alone might have led to incorrect assumptions about British and Chinese narratives of *all* technologies during this period. Additionally, both the steam-engine and opium were fundamental players in the unfolding of the Opium Wars and it would have been difficult to analyze the narratives surrounding one without the other.

In the Victorian era, the British used opium in the diluted form of the painkiller laudanum and later chemists derived the modern drugs morphine and heroine from the same poppy plant. In Britain, opium could be legally consumed in liquid or solid-edible form, but smoking establishments (like the luxurious opium-“dens” that existed in China) were not permitted, and pharmacists rarely sold opium to be smoked. The most popular British narrative of the opium experience in the 1840s was Thomas de Quincey’s 1821 publication, *Confessions of an English Opium Eater*, which depicted both the pleasures and the pains of opium consumption.

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129 In this autobiographical account, De Quincey described his experiences while on opium; both the euphoria-inducing impact of the drug, as well as the mania and paranoia he subsequently experienced as an addict. De Quincey wrote that opium initially “communicates serenity and equipoise to all the faculties, active or passive: and
With the recognition that opium tended to have a positive, medicinal association in Britain, it may be unfair to accuse the British of intentionally and maliciously poisoning the Chinese people into submission by forcing opium into Canton. More likely, British commercial interests and the desire to further industrial and imperial aims led British tradesmen to justify commerce in a highly-addictive drug. One retrospective Western account encapsulates this Western justification of the opium trade in China saying, “for a very long time, the East India Company had sought to find a staple to send to China. But the Chinese had so little use for any of the commodities offered and made their demand for opium so clear that it became inevitable that it would be satisfied.”\(^ {130}\) In 1852, a British official in Hong Kong, W.H. Mitchell, expressed a similar sentiment. He wrote, “we bring the Chinese nothing that is really popular among them…Opium is the only ‘open sesame’ to their stony hearts.”\(^ {131}\) Between British economic motivations and the general sense of British racial superiority, it is not surprising that opium played such a significant role in the First Opium War—but opium’s role changed subtly during the Second Opium War.

The neutral view of opium taken by many British citizens (especially merchants) was by no means universal. Historian J.Y. Wong wrote, “Ironically, it was the Opium War which initiated the debate in the United Kingdom about the morality of opium smoking. During the debate in Parliament on the war, Gladstone condemned opium as a ‘pernicious article.’”\(^ {132}\)

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\(^{132}\) Wong, *Deadly Dreams*, 431.
Shortly after this condemnation, the British government quietly removed opium from the list of legal imports. However, Gladstone’s anti-opium rhetoric was slow to take hold as “anti-opium organizations were formed but were short-lived and without much public impact, principally because they were opposing opium smoking in Asia – something which was apparently of little concern to the average Briton.” It wasn’t until the Second Opium War that the anti-opium lobby was rekindled, and the British government’s hypocrisy was revealed: the opium trade remained illegal in Britain, but the Chinese were forced to legalize trade in the drug when they lost to the British the second time.

With this in mind, the British narrative shifted dramatically during the nineteenth century as, “the ways it [opium] was perceived altered almost unrecognizably – from homespun folk remedy to Oriental plague, from avatar of the sublime to agent of corruption and degeneration.” Much of this rhetoric came from British narratives written after 1870, but the period between the First and Second Opium Wars marked a shift between a more positive account of opium and a more negative, “Oriental” account. For example, Charles Dickens portrayed the addiction in the following terms: “To be hooked into opium smoking is thus not only to be made more Chinese but to be exiled to a sort of life-in-death…drained of both English identity and vitality.” As vitality was lost and opium was said to cause a ‘life-in-death’ like state, the British view of suffering—poverty, pain, and death—began to align more closely with the qualities associated with opium use. By 1868, the opium trade was still flourishing in China even while the drug was added to the Pharmacy Act’s list of poisons in Britain.

133 Wong, Deadly Dreams, 431.
134 Jay, Emperors of Dreams, 51.
135 Oscar Wilde’s The Picture of Dorian Gray (1891) and Arthur Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes adventure “The Man With the Twisted Lip” (1891).
136 Milligan, Pleasures and Pains, 89. Quoting Dickens from The Mystery of Edwin Drood (1870).
138 Jay, Emperors of Dreams, 73.
Although the connections between opium and suffering were drawn more dramatically in the 1870s and after, this shift from predominantly optimistic accounts before 1840 to slightly more skeptical technological viewpoint between the First and Second Opium Wars gives a significant indication of how British views of suffering informed the values associated with opium.

To most Westerners who are more familiar with suffering in terms of extreme poverty, pain, and death as well as Western frameworks for understanding the steam engine and opium, the relationship between “smoke, steam, and suffering” explored in this section does not require great leaps of the imagination. The British saw the steam engine reducing pain and death for British soldiers and increasing British prosperity during the First Opium War, therefore their narrative was predominantly positive, despite the suffering being inflicted on the “lesser” Chinese. As the steam engine began to be associated with extreme poverty, pain, and death in Britain after the mid-1850s, the British enthusiasm for military steam technology showed a corresponding fall. With regard to opium, the narrative reveals a parallel flux in British enthusiasm as opium was first understood in positive terms as a medicinal tool in England and foothold for economic advantage in China. As rhetoric from the Second Opium War drew British attention to the more negative influences of the drug, opium began to be seen as one cause of extreme poverty, pain, and death—a terrible form of suffering in British terms. Yet the narratives of technologies like the steam engine and opium were framed very differently in Chinese terms.

V. Chinese Narratives of Steam Technology and Opium

With this nuanced understanding of suffering in less-physical terms, the implication for Chinese technological values is that a technology will be judged—and subsequently selectively adopted—by the degree to which it forced Chinese people to submit and reduced Chinese sovereignty or more positively reinforced Chinese sovereignty and allowed China to resist
imperial powers. Consequently, China began to construct scientific and technological values in accordance with this view of suffering. For example, the Chinese accepted Western medicine like “smallpox inoculations, quinine therapy for malaria, and a number of herbal medicines unknown in China” but “rejected the theological underpinnings that [British doctors] used to link Western medicine to a natural theology common in Britain at the time.”\textsuperscript{139} This conscious separation of Western technologies and Western values was a fundamental component of the Chinese mentality regarding British enterprises in China. At the end of the First Opium War, Chinese officials wrote to the Emperor, “It is our belief that we must first have cessation of hostilities and resumption of trade, and after that, we can exercise our control over the barbarians.”\textsuperscript{140} Not wanting to appear to submit to Western demands, the officials chose to frame this surrender in terms of a strategic move to regain sovereignty and control. Later, at the American Centennial Exhibition, Li Gui wrote on Western technical engineers, “If we were to employ those [technologies] with such ‘ingenuity’ solely as tools for the benefit of the country and people [in China], then they [Westerners] would not scheme to profit themselves and their relatives. In that case, why not try to use them?”\textsuperscript{141} By emphasizing suffering in terms of forced submission and lack of sovereignty, China developed different technological values associated with the steam engine and opium than the British, which led to significantly different narratives.

**Chinese Narratives of the Steam Engine**

Western accounts of Chinese technological development range between cynical skepticism of the “true” advances of Chinese civilization and awed idealism for the magnificence

\textsuperscript{139} Elman, *On Their Own Terms*, 291-292.
\textsuperscript{140} Kuo, *A Critical Study*, 299.
\textsuperscript{141} Li, *A Journey to the East*, 119.
of Chinese ingenuity.\textsuperscript{142} While the British saw the steam engine being modified and improved over decades in England, the Chinese were introduced to the new technology fully-formed and ready for commercial and military use. While some residents of Canton had likely seen a handful of British merchant steamboats, most of the Chinese populace was ignorant of such power. This may have been one of the reasons “the apparently supernatural powers of the [steam ship] \textit{Nemesis} spread panic and bewilderment” among the Chinese on January 7\textsuperscript{th}, 1840.\textsuperscript{143}

When Commissioner Lin wrote to the Emperor in 1839, he said, “now here is the reason why people are dazzled by the name of England. Because her vessels are sturdy and her cannons fierce, they call her powerful…These vessels are successful only on the outer seas; it is their specialty to break the waves and sail under great winds.”\textsuperscript{144} Unfortunately for Lin, this assessment of British technology proved to be outdated and inaccurate. Instead, the First Opium War saw the Chinese vastly out-classed by British steamships. Most scholars attribute the Chinese defeat to this very technological disparity. Lovell wrote, “perhaps the Qing’s greatest weakness was its warships. When, in early 1841, the hostilities shifted south, to Canton, Qing ships and forts would be crushed by the world’s first all-iron war steamer: the \textit{Nemesis}.”\textsuperscript{145} The Chinese saw steam technology enter their country and destroy port after port, killing thousands of soldiers and displacing hundreds of thousands of Chinese citizens from their homes. After


\textsuperscript{143} Lovell, \textit{The Opium War}.

\textsuperscript{144} Kuo, \textit{A Critical Study}, 251

\textsuperscript{145} Lovell, \textit{The Opium War}. 112.
witnessing the destruction caused by the British steamers, Commissioner Lin wrote again in
October of 1840,

People may say that our junks and guns are no match for theirs and that ingenious diplomacy is
preferable to a protracted war. But, O they do not know! the desires of the barbarians know no
bounds. After they get one point, they want to get another. If it should be that we cannot suppress
them with our power, I am afraid that there will be no end to our woe! 146

This statement expressed Lin’s fear of submission as he condemned barbarian greed for the
atrocities committed—not the steam engine itself. In another battle, the lack of Chinese agency is
bemoaned in the same space as the sorrow for loss of life. Lovell recounted how,

Refusing to surrender, 500 Qing soldiers – the elite of the army – were said to have died on the
battlefield alone. Including those cut down in the retreat (most of those were picked off by
musket-fire or by the Nemesis, waiting its moment in a nearby creek) the total probably rose to
around 1,000; three Britons were killed and around twenty wounded. … ‘We sat by helpless,
watching our comrades die’, remembered one [Chinese] observer. ‘Even now the thought of it
tortures me.’ (British observers claimed that many of the wounded later died because they had
taken too much opium to steady their nerves.) 147

The Chinese perceived this lack of agency in such battles as a manifestation of severe suffering,
as they faced down incredibly destructive British technology.

However, despite the suffering witnessed, the pervasive Chinese mentality was one of
technological optimism as Chinese people and officials separated the suffering experienced
during the Opium Wars from the steam technology itself. This intentional disassociation of steam
technology from Western values enabled a sense of technological optimism that remained
consistent through both Opium Wars and beyond. After seeing the power of the steam engines
(and feeling the humiliation of defeat by the British wielding them) China resolved to develop
these technologies, instead of shying away from them. A period of rapid technological
development in China was expressly incited by the Chinese observation of British technology:

“從1840年代中國人目擊英國蒸汽船，就開始從錯誤中實驗蒸汽技術，進而在1860年代

146 Kuo, A Critical Study, 268.
147 Lovell, The Opium War, 206. Emphasis added.
設立機構，也就是製造局，引進工具機、聘請西洋技術人員，教導中國工人蒸汽技術的知識與技巧。” This passage translates to, “although the Chinese misunderstood the steam mechanism when they witnessed British steamships during the First Opium War, they soon learned from trial and error how the mechanism worked as well as the importance of machine tools and technical drawings.” By recruiting foreign engineers and technicians, the Chinese used their defeat as an opportunity to grow their technological prowess until, “by the time of the Arrow War, mail by steamer had been introduced between Canton and Hong Kong.”

During the Second Opium War, the technological disparity between China and the West wasn’t as dramatic, which probably contributed to the length of the second war; it was twice as long as the first. Elman described how “China had closed the gap somewhat with Europe technologically” and the contributing factors that led to China’s loss in the war were not technology but “(1) the political and regional disorganization of the empire; and (2) naval personnel were insufficiently trained and had a poor grasp of modern naval strategy.” Yet even after this second humiliating defeat at the hands of the Westerners, China continued to view steam technology as something to be sought. Wong wrote:

Furthermore, technological transformations pushed the reforms of political systems to a deeper level as Chinese businesses adopted Western business practices and economic mentalities to invest in modern era technologies that can only be enabled by the concentration of capital. Thus, this is the revolutionary change in China’s technological history and social history. It is also the technological foundation upon which China launched industrialization at the beginning of the 20th century.

148 Wong, Deadly Dreams, 22.
149 Elman, On Their Own Terms, 378.
The Chinese construction of how steam technology and suffering were related enabled them to take a predominantly optimistic view of the technology itself. In this construction of steam technology, the general mentality was that the steam engine would be able to help reduce suffering by preserving sovereignty and repulsing the foreign “barbarians”.

Yet, Western technology was not appropriated solely for military use. As China modernized, steam powered tea-packaging production, silk textile manufacture, soy-bean processing, and even some railways were enthusiastically engaged and undertaken with a distinctly nationalistic Chinese attitude. Westerners were confident that the steam-rail in China would mark the triumph of Western technology and culture over Chinese reluctance to allow outside influence, but the Chinese were determined that, “If ever a railroad exists on Chinese territory, it must be a Chinese and not a foreign undertaking.” In “Tseng Kuo-fan’s Report on the First Steamer Built at Shanghai” in 1868, the Chinese satisfaction with their first independently produced ship was expressed with distinct nationalistic pride, “印留心外洋軍械。維時丁日昌在上海道任內。彼此講求禦侮之策” meaning, “we must all contribute to the preservation of Shanghai’s sanctity and aiding in the strategy for resisting national defense against foreign aggression and insult.” This narrative later turned into Li Gui’s enthusiastic exclamation of: “how wondrous is this business of mechanical innovation!” This enthusiasm in favor of steam technology is significantly at odds with the Chinese narrative of opium in

153 Fairbank, *Ch’ing Documents*. A similar rhetoric is seen during the development of the Chinese railway. Both British and American developers in China in the mid to late 1860s expressed dismay that whenever they built a railroad, the Chinese government would take credit for it. Elman, *On Their Own Terms*.
154 Li, *A Journey to the East*. 118
Chinese society. Where steam technology was viewed as providing the power to resist foreign interference and reinforce Chinese sovereignty, opium was viewed in very different terms.

**Chinese Narratives of Opium**

Unlike the shifting British narrative, the accounts coming from China regarding opium were overwhelmingly negative. Although a pro-opium narrative might be expected from the two million addicts around Canton, my research yielded no such accounts. Instead, narratives like this account from a woman in Northern China during a famine were far more prevalent:

My husband sold everything we had.
There was a fur hat. He wanted to sell it. But I begged him not to sell it.
"Let's keep this." It was my uncle's. "Take my coat." He took the coat and sold it for grain. When he came home for food he drank only two bowls of millet gruel. I wondered why he ate so little. I looked and found that the hat was gone, and knew that he had sold it for opium. Those who take opium care not for food. ...

In other parts of this account, this woman emphasized her feelings of helpless despair and her dismay at her husband’s dependency on opium, drawing out the association between the Chinese view of suffering—forced submission and lack of sovereignty—and opium. The amount of opium that addicts would purchase typically cost about half a working man’s daily wage, but addicts required increasing amounts of the drug to receive the same effect. The “opium dependency” in China manifested in a number of ways. Women depended on their opium-addicted husbands, men depended on the drug itself, and the opium trade depended on British suppliers. The dependency opium created—the way opium forced many Chinese to submit to addiction and relinquish individual sovereignty—would have been seen by many as true experiences of suffering.

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155 "Qing China’s Internal Crisis [1887]: Land Shortage, Famine, Rural Poverty | Asia for Educators | Columbia University," http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/special/china_1750_demographic.htm. While this narrative was given many years after the Opium Wars, there is no evidence to suggest it represented a shift in view.
156 Baum, *The Fall and Rise of China*
It is probable that the associations of opium with suffering caused most Qing officials to view the effects of the drug as physically, morally, and economically deleterious. In response to a short-lived movement to legalize opium in China, the Censor of the Kiangnan Circuit wrote to the Daoguang Emperor in 1836; “I, your minister, believe that the success or failure in government and the prosperity or decay of administration depend largely upon our capacity to distinguish between right and wrong…and the foremost example of this [wrong action] is the proposal to legalize opium.”

Echoing this sentiment in 1838, the Governor-General of Hu-Kwang in Canton wrote, “I most humbly think that opium is having its pernicious influence in China, and that silver bullion is being drained off to foreign countries.” The Governor-General was not wrong—over £38 million in silver was being drained out of the country by the opium trade annually. Huang Jueci, another Chinese official, “nominated a single culprit for the impoverishment of the realm: opium.” While this emphasis on poverty might suggest a more British framing of suffering, the Chinese view of suffering did not exclude considerations of poverty, pain, and death, just as the British view could not have ignored the suffering caused by forced submission. Yet Huang’s statement goes on to say how, “the opium trade…was a foreign plot that began when the red-haired Europeans ‘seduced the nimble, warlike people of Java into the use of it, whereupon they were subdued, brought into subjection and their land taken possession of’… ‘In introducing opium into this country’, echoed one of his allies, ‘the English purpose has been to weaken and enfeeble the central empire.’”

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157 Kuo, A Critical Study, 211.
159 Lovell, The Opium War, 51.
160 Lovell, The Opium Wars, 51-52.
British is the emphasis of Huang’s horror—opium is equated to submission and submission is suffering.

In another example, the Daoguang Emperor declared in 1841,

Years ago, when the barbarians from the West brought opium and spread its evil in China, we proclaimed laws of prohibition in order to check the baneful influence. But England, relying upon her boldness, refused to give the bond. Therefore, edicts were issued, ordering a stoppage of her trade. The English barbarians, however, knew not to repent but they daily increased their violence.  

Even in the document allowing the British to trade in Shanghai after the end of the First Opium War, the Chinese wrote, “惟上海通商。事屬創始。所有撫馭外夷。以及彈壓內地商民。在在悉關緊要” meaning, “In Shanghai’s trade relations, it is vitally important to bring the outer barbarians under control (by soothing or forceful treatment as needed) as well as keeping down, in every case, the Western influence on Chinese ‘merchant-traitors’. ” These quotes highlight how the Chinese saw opium closely connected to the British and sought to, in any way possible, check the negative British influence in China.

The narrative of the second Opium War was very similar to that of the first. A similar vehement hatred of the drug, a similar resentment of the British who forced it into China, and a similar understanding of how that forced submission was indeed a form of suffering. It is even possible that this resentment of the British led some Chinese opium addicts to break their addiction in 1860. Evidence of the latter comes from the “dramatic fall [in Indian opium revenue], when the allied British and French forces fought their way into Beijing, ransacked the capital, and burned the Summer Palace.”

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161 Kuo, A Critical Study, 277.
163 Translation with the help of Fairbank, Ch’ing Documents; mandarinspot.com; Professor Mengjun Li, University of Puget Sound.
164 Wong, Deadly Dreams, 401. Other explanations of this dip in opium revenue are also possible but Chinese nationalistic sentiment should not be overlooked as a component.
Given the British emphasis on suffering as poverty, pain, and death as opposed to the Chinese understanding of suffering as forced submission and lack of sovereignty, it was not surprising that the values each culture associated with opium and steam technology were different. The way the British perspective on both opium and steam technology shifted from optimistic to gradually more pessimistic reflected how British views began to relate each technology to poverty, pain, and death. The Chinese abhorrence of opium and enthusiasm for steam technology reflects how they associated each with forced submission and lack of sovereignty or liberation and independence.

It might be argued that the Chinese warm acceptance of steam technology and vehement condemnation of opium might not have been due to a different emphasis on how suffering should be understood, but instead on the Chinese loss and British success during the Opium Wars. While the differences in victor and vanquished narratives could be a partial explanation for the accounts from British and Chinese writers, this explanation wouldn’t account for cultural influences like different religious groundings and traditions acting on Britain and China. Limiting the historical explanations for the differing Chinese and British narratives of the steam engine and opium to a “victor” narrative and a “vanquished” narrative blinds historians to the role other contextual factors played in shaping British and Chinese worldviews and consequently the values each culture attributed to their technologies. Instead of reinforcing this problematic “Western conqueror vs. Oriental/primitive subject” image, this project focuses on contextual factors, acknowledging the inherent dignity (as well as the inherent human flaws) of both Chinese and British people.

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165 poverty, pain, death vs. forced submission and lack of sovereignty
VI. Modern Implications

This paper has addressed five questions concerning the religious influences on narratives of the steam engine and opium in China between 1840 and 1860 thus far, making a complex and interwoven argument that challenges many modern assumptions about technology, religion, and culture. For example, the scholarship of many historians of technology including Thomas Hughes, David Nye, and Wang Hsien-chun illustrates that technologies (human built tools like the steam engine and opium) are value laden, shaping and being shaped by the societies that use them. The way the British perspective on both opium and steam technology shifted from optimistic to gradually more pessimistic reflected how British views began to relate each technology to the societal poverty, illness, and death being witnessed. The Chinese abhorrence of opium and enthusiasm for steam technology reflects how they associated each with forced submission and lack of sovereignty or liberation and independence. Furthermore, by demonstrating how different Chinese and British emphases on how suffering should be understood informed the narratives associated with the steam engine and opium, this research shows that the values associated with any given technology are not universal, but context-dependent. With the recognition that Chinese and British constructions of suffering were influenced by Confucian, Daoist, Buddhist or Anglican Christian religious frameworks respectively, the assumption that religion plays no role when considering technological values is disputed.

When thinking about modern technologies, we often describe them in oppositional terms, as good or bad, as beneficial or detrimental. The reality is that, like the steam engine and opium in the 1840s and 1850s, technologies tend to exist in a morally and ethically gray area. Do nuclear weapons prevent suffering or cause suffering? And whose suffering is prioritized?
modern technological developers and international policy-makers view technologies in oppositional terms, they neglect the impact these technologies have on cultures that aren’t founded on the same values. Maybe, as when China encountered the steam engine, a group that is less familiar with Western values will embrace and encourage the development of the technology. Or maybe the new technologies will be seen as causing suffering, as Chinese narratives saw opium reducing Chinese sovereignty. How will we know unless we generate a more introspective understanding of our own values (including values founded in religion) and the role our technologies play in the world? How will we know the degree to which our technologies are causing suffering unless we look through the smoke and steam of our own preconceptions?

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