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The Opium Wars of China in the Nineteenth Century and America in the Twenty-First

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Abstract

The Opium Wars of 1839-1843 and 1856-1860 revealed the devastating effects of narcotic addiction on the health of the body politic of China. The defeated Qing dynasty lost effective sovereignty to the British, leaving it helpless against more than 100 years of exploitation by the European powers, the United States, and Japan. Today we see the same risk posed by prescription narcotics and illegal opioids imported from China that can be seen as retribution for the "Century of Humiliation" nearly two centuries ago.

Keywords

First Opium War, Century of Humiliation, opioid crisis, opioid epidemic, fentanyl

"Century of Humiliation"

Most of the historical facts that follow came from the definitive one-volume history of China by John King Fairbank of Harvard University and Merle Goldman of Boston University.[1] Overland trade routes from Europe to China, identified with Marco Polo, began in the late thirteenth century. Maritime trade with Europe started with the Portuguese in the early sixteenth through the port of Guangzhou. The West paid silver for spices, silks, and tea. Because there was little the Chinese wanted in return, its dynastic treasuries swelled with the precious metal.[2]

The imbalance persisted until the nineteenth century when British traders fully exploited the opium market. It was nothing new to the country, where it was part of its pharmacopoeia. It was sourced from Arab traders since the seventh century. The Portuguese recognized its lucrative potential from the beginning of its trade mission.

Opium use became such a problem for the country that the ruling Qing emperor made the sale and possession of opium illegal in 1729.[2] Legal strictures did nothing but drive trafficking underground and make it much more costly. Authorities then tried legalizing the use of opium, a hopeless ploy that had no effect on consumption.[3]

The British became dominant in the opium trade in 1820s and 1830s. British tea merchants funneled raw opium into the country from India into Guangzhou, the only port where foreign trade was permitted. The demand for tea among the British was enormous, but the income from opium was even greater.[3]

The trade imbalance made the traders and the Crown fabulously rich but impoverished and debilitated the Chinese. Between 1829 and 1840, only $7 million of silver was imported while nearly $56 million of treasure was sent out [**3**]. The drain of silver devalued the copper coins used for common commerce, impoverishing everyone in the country.[1]

Chinese authorities saw with alarm that opium was both bankrupting its treasury and destroying its people. Emperor Daoguang sent in 1836 a strongly worded open letter to the king of England setting a deadline for an end to the opium trade. The traders made only a token gesture, staying offshore and eluding port authorities by shuttling contraband ashore with the help of Chinese collaborators.

In 1839, the imperial trade agent Lin Zexu confiscated 20,000 chests of opium, some 1300 metric tons, from the British trade factories in Guangzhou. The action, interpreted as a violation of British sovereignty, became the predicate for the First Opium War.[3]

The two navies clashed in the Kowloon Estuary in September 1839. With steam-powered warships and robust oversea supply lines from British possessions to the south and southeast, the Royal Navy easily defeated Chinese war junks and coastal defenses. The British hired Chinese mercenaries to fight their countrymen and bought

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Figure 1. Destroying Chinese war junks, 1843. Edward Duncan. Public domain.

agents provocateurs to sow dissent against the Qing. Unschooled in military tactics, 800,000 Chinese troops were dispatched by a British expeditionary force of 12, 000, hardened by its experience fighting colonial wars in Africa and Asia.[4]

Recognizing the psychological value of destroying an opponent's will to fight, the British forced on the Chinese the Treaty of Nanking in 1842, what historian Miles Yu of the U.S. Naval Academy called "the mother of all 'unequal treaties'(Figure 1)."[4] It forced China to cede the port of Hong Kong, then a small fishing village, to Britain in perpetuity. The Chinese was forced to pay $21 million to Britain as restitution for destroyed opium, gave most-favored-nation status in trade to the British, and opened four additional ports to Western trade (Shanghai, Ningbo, Fuzhou, and Xiamen).

The French and Americans took advantage of the weakness of the dynasty, demanding and winning the trade concessions granted the British (1844 and 1845, respectively). In 1856, the seizure of a Chinese cargo ship under the Union Jack and the assassination of a French chaplain sparked the Second Opium War (1856-1860) that ended as disastrously for the Qing as the first. At war's end, the British won free access to the interior via the Yangtze, the right of extra-territoriality that gave its subjects immunity from Chinese laws, and the seaward-facing part of the Kowloon peninsula opposite Hong Kong. The French expanded its rights in Shanghai and the right to proselytize Catholicism in China.[1]

With the Qing preoccupied with warfare in its south, in 1858, the Russians laid claim to northern Manchuria and its territory along the Sea of Japan, borders that are still observed today.[4]

Exposed as weak and illegitimate, the Qing lost control of the country. A massive civil war, the Taiping Rebellion (1850-1864), arose in the southern province of Guangxi. It was led by Hong Xiuquan, a messianic Han who saw himself the brother of Jesus Christ and his cause an apocalyptic Christian uprising. Hong and the Taiping armies waged total war northward into the middle and lower Yangtze River Valley and its delta. The war destroyed the country and left plague and famine in its aftermath.[1] The fourteen-year conflict claimed 20 to 30 million lives, the largest toll from any war in history, mostly from the disease and starvation. Some scholars estimate 100 million may have died from the war.

Taking the dissolution of the Qing dynasty as an object lesion of national weakness Japan took the industrial West as its model and developed a mechanized military. It easily dispatched the Chinese in the six-month First Sino-Japanese War (1894-1895) and gained Taiwan as a colony and dominance over Korea, previously a Qing client state. Seeing a new threat in Japan, in 1896, Britain, France, Germany, Italy, and Russia divided China into spheres of influence where each had control over trade, resources, transportation, finances, and legal privileges (Figure 2).

Meiji Japan expansionism into China continued with the annexation of Korea (1910), takeover of Manchuria as a client state (1931), and occupation of large regions of the coast and interior of China during the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945). The defeat of Imperial Japan in 1945 gave the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) the opportunity to defeat the Chinese Nationalists in the final phases of the Chinese Communist Revolution (1921-1949). As the defeated Nationalists evacuated to Taiwan, Mao Zedong took control of the mainland and established the People's Republic of China under his dictatorial rule.[1]

Figure 2. China, the cake of kings and emperors. *Le Petit Journal*, 1898. Cartoon by Henri Meyer. Public domain.

The period from the First Opium War in 1839 to the victory of the CCP 110 years later is referred to as the "Century of Humiliation." For the CCP the period is a painful lesson as to how the West behaves toward China. To Alison Kaufman, China policy expert with the Center for Naval Analyses in Washington, DC, the term is "a key element of modern China's founding narrative."[5] It resonates among the Chinese elites, providing the moral justification for its unabashed rise in the global arena. China's full recovery can be considered complete, she wrote, only when Taiwan is returned to the sovereignty of the mainland.[5]

Three waves

Elizabeth Gardner of the University of Alabama at Birmingham and her colleagues identified three distinct waves of the opioid crisis in America: (1) the release and promotion of OxyContin, the extended-release formulation of oxycodone; (2) heroin; and (3) illicitly manufactured fentanyl (IMF).[6] The number of opioid-related deaths had a steady increase from the start of the twenty-first century with two upturns: the first around 2014 and a sharper rise in 2020 (Figure 3).[7] In 2021, an estimated 107,477 victims died of opioid-related causes,[8] easily the leading cause of preventable deaths in the country since 2013, ranking first in all age groups from 25 to 64 years.[9]

OxyContin

OxyContin, approved by the Food and Drug Administration in December 1995, was aggressively promoted by its manufacturer, Purdue Pharma, to both consumers and prescribing physicians as a long-acting pain control drug with a near-zero risk of addiction "of less than 1%."[10] So effective was the campaign that the drug achieved blockbuster status with nearly $3 billion in sales in 2001 and 2002. Consumption was particularly heavy in such rural states as Maine, West Virginia, and eastern Kentucky where prescriptions were 2.5 to 5 times the national average.[10]

Nonmedical users soon discovered that they could bypass the time-release feature of OxyContin and get nearly its full narcotic effect simply by crushing the capsule. Its wide availability and ease in manipulation led to an explosion of abuse and addiction. Among new initiates to illicit drug use in 2005, 2.1 million reported prescription opioids as the first drug they had tried, more than marijuana and almost as many as the number of new cigarette smokers (2.3 million).[10] In 2002, deaths from prescription opioids surpassed those from cocaine and heroin and by 2009 exceeded automobile deaths.[6]

A concerted mitigation effort included legal actions against fraudulent marketing practices by Purdue Pharma, unethical prescribing practices by physicians and "pill mill" pain clinics, and the development of an abuse-deterrent form of OxyContin. Dedicated programs to limit the numbers of opioid pills prescribed by physicians succeeded in decreasing diversion of opioids to nonmedical users. The numbers of opioid prescriptions fell from 255 million in 2012 to 192 million in 2017, a number still three times higher than the 62.5 million in 1996.[6]

Heroin

Heroin became more popular as OxyContin and prescription drug abuse soared. Heroin had been a tiny proportion of drugs abused in the United States, accounting for less than 1% among 22.6 million respondents in a 2010 survey. As street prices for OxyContin increased, heroin use became more widespread in part because the price of heroin from Mexico and Colombia was one-third to one-half that of prescription opioids.

In contrast to the stereotypical strongarm enforcement of brutal drug cartels, 1 supplier, the Xalisco Boys from Mexico, operated their business along the lines of a pizza delivery service. Orders came in by phone to a boss, and a crew of several drivers distributed the product. A follow-up call made sure customers were satisfied. With efficient distribution of inexpensive heroin, the number of users doubled from 2008 to 2014 and deaths from overdoses tripled from 2010 to 2015.[6]

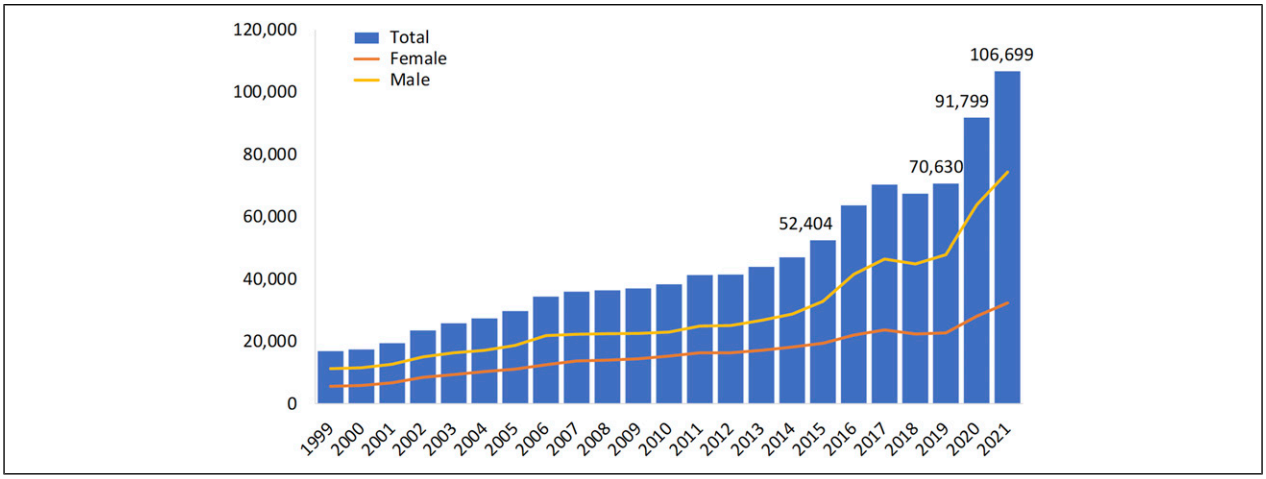

Figure 3. National drug-involved overdose deaths, number among all ages, by gender, 1999-2021. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Health Statistics.

Fentanyl

OxyContin and heroin created a ready market for novel psychoactive substances (NPS) and IMFs. In the mid-2010s, enhanced cannabinoid agonists ("Spice") and cathinone and cathinone analogs ("Bath Salts") appeared in the United States. Synthesized in labs in China and shipped by standard mail services to customers, both classes of drugs were unknown to law enforcement and thus were not subject to federal scheduling laws.[6]

Fentanyl and its analogs appeared on the street in 2013 when heroin traffickers began to mix the potent drug with heroin. Rather than pilfer the drug from hospitals, where it was an essential part of anesthesia practice, criminals set up homegrown labs to synthesize the compound. The laboratory procedures were not demanding, and specialized equipment and reagents were not needed. One kilogram of the drug, worth millions on the street, took only a few thousand dollars to synthesize. Labs were mobile to stay 1 step ahead of authorities.[6]

Quality and dosages varied wildly and made fatal overdoses a constant risk. Predictably the rates of accidental deaths from opioids skyrocketed. By 2016, the numbers exceeded those of all traffic-related deaths.

COVID-19 pandemic travel restrictions and ramped-up international confiscation efforts decreased distribution routes of traditional opioids as heroin and fentanyl. Newer compounds appeared, notably non-fentanyl opioids such as isotonitazene,[11] etonitazene, and metonitazene, drugs that quickly found their way into non-medical online markets.[6]

"Devastating"

Gardner noted that about 97% of fentanyl and precursor compounds seized from international mail in 2016 and 2017 came from China.[6] Fentanyl and IMFs inundated the country as travel returned to normal with the end of the pandemic and the US southern border became more porous after the 2020 Presidential election. The effect on the country was "devastating," a term used by Vanda Felbab-Brown of the Brookings Institution in Washington, DC, in written testimony before the US House of Representatives.[8]

Three US Presidents (Obama, Trump, and Biden) exerted all diplomatic avenues to induce the Chinese to interdict fentanyl trafficking, she wrote. There is, however, a fundamental difference between the diplomatic approach between the two countries. Where the United States "seeks to delink counternarcotic cooperation with China from the overall bilateral geostrategic relationship," she wrote, "China subordinates counternarcotic efforts to its geostrategic relations."[8] Not only does China use drug enforcement as a lever to obtain other economic and political concessions, but it is also unlikely to do so because nearly all of its officialdom from top to bottom benefit from the torrent of money in opioid trafficking.[8]

In August 2022, China officially announced its suspension of all counternarcotic and law enforcement cooperation with the United States.[8] The hardline stance reflects a realpolitik with a direct line from the "Century of Humiliation." Just as the Western Powers inflected more than 100 years of harm for its own political and economic advantage, the CCP pursues its political and economic advantage without concern of the harm inflicted on millions of Americans.

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