*02.102 WORLD SINCE 1400*

8. Compare and contrast the British and Chinese perspectives on the scourge that was the Opium Trade. What is the significance of the differences?

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**Introduction**

Thomas De Quincy wrote, “Thou hast the keys of paradise, o just, subtle, and mighty opium”. Originally used as medicine in the 7th century, the “international opium trade began in the 1700s as an answer to a crisis in Europe’s (especially Britain’s) international trade” (Pomeranz & Topik, 1999). Eventually, opium’s growth within the Britain-China-India trade triangle escalated to a major war, forming an indelible mark on the tainted pages of World and, more insidiously, modern Chinese history. Bearing many coats, the opium trade has been subject to multiple interpretations by the involved parties, often to buttress national motives. This essay will discuss the significance of Chinese and British perspectives of the opium trade during 3 main time periods: pre-Opium war, post Opium war up till the mid 20th century, and the modern era leading up to the 21st century.

**Of the Chinese**

In the early 18th century, a large influx of opium from India penetrated the Chinese market due to the East India Company’s covert relationships with underground traders and merchants. Demand for the drug grew and addicts sprouted throughout the country. During the early 19th century, China was losing millions of teals of silver every year to the opium trade. In light of the adverse economic impact of the opium trade, Chinese viewpoints took 2 divergent sides.

The first was that the opium trade should be legalized and taxed by the Chinese government. Xu Naiji, an esteemed court official, argued in his 1836 memorial that the sovereign should “permit the barbarian merchants to import opium paying duty hereon as a medicine” (“The First Clash with the West”, p. 113) and that the imported drug subsequently “be delivered to the hong merchants only in exchange for merchandise, and that no money be paid for it” (“The First Clash with the West”, p. 113). In doing so, government revenue would increase, only the rich would be able to afford the drug and China would benefit from making payments in terms of trading goods, rather than silver. Logically, Xu purports, the foreigners would happily oblige as “the amount of duties paid on it is less than what is now spent in bribes” (“The First Clash with the West”, p. 113). Xu’s forward thinking proposal is further bolstered by his well-reasoned consideration of the alternative: a trade ban and harsh domestic laws.

In foresight, Xu claims that “it will not be possible to prevent the clandestine introduction of merchandise” (“The First Clash with the West”, p. 113). Testament to this, despite Commissioner Lin Zexu’s fierce crackdown on the merchants and their inventories, the East India Company continued to import thousands of opium chests into China using underground trade networks. Moreover, Xu argues that “hundreds of thousands of people living on the seacoast depend wholly on trade for their livelihood” (“The First Clash with the West”, p. 113) and that “it would be wrong, for the sake of cutting off the English trade” to cut off that of all the other nations” (“The First Clash with the West”, p. 113). From an economic standpoint, the opium trade could be wisely used to China’s advantage. Xu is also careful to acknowledge that opium abuse by Chinese officials should be dealt with strictly, but not in a draconian manner, for “the result will be mutual connivance” (“The First Clash with the West”, p. 114) against the law. Hsu Nai-chi, vice president of the Sacrificial court, acquiesced with Xu that “was not the loss of silver bullion the heart of the problem? Morality aside, why not legalize the opium trade, but only for barter?” (Wakeman, 1966). Then governor-general of Kwangtung and Kwangsi, Teng T’ing-chen also lent his support by noting that “the more severe our laws are, the more ingenious are private smugglers” (Wakeman, 1966).

Unfortunately, this first viewpoint was subjugated by the opposite, more commonly held opinion at that time: to prohibit the drug and eradicate domestic usage through strict laws. Moralists claimed that “Opium was evil, a flowing poison that ruined the minds and morals of the people” (Wakeman, 1966). Im his 1836 memorial, Zhu Zun argued that opium served to “weaken and enfeeble the central empire” (“The First Clash with the West”, p. 117) by rendering Chinese weak, lazy and despicable in appearance. Legalizing the evil drug would debilitate even the mighty Chinese army as “the baneful influence will work its way, and the habit will be contracted beyond the power of reform” (“The First Clash with the West”, p. 117). Yuan Yu-lin, another prominent official, scare-mongered that “if opium were legalized, everyone would use it” (Wakeman, 1966). Hsu Chiu, head of the Board of War, postulated that the only solution was “the strict and draconian punishment of opium merchants, be they native or foreign” (Wakeman, 1966). Above all, Commissioner Lin Zexu exemplified the dominant anti-opium sentiment by destroying nearly 20,000 chests of opium and incarcerating several foreign merchants. His actions inevitably lit the inexorable fuse that triggered the Opium War.

The Opium War and its immediate aftermath are crucial historical antecedents to understanding the bipolar Chinese attitudes towards the entire opium trade affair in the second chronological period (post opium war to mid 20th century). Of the various events surrounding the opium war, the San-yuan-li incident was instrumental in cultivating among the Chinese a shared abhorrence of the West.

The San-yuan-li incident was an embodiment of Chinese resentment against imperialism whereby thousands of Chinese peasants armed with spears drove away well-equipped trained British soldiers from Canton. This heroic victory was romanticized by Communists and transcribed in Chinese history books as the “first popular movement against foreign imperialism” (Wakeman, 1966). The gentry began to view with hostility not only the British, but also the Hong merchants and other Chinese traders who were seen as traitors. Following China’s defeat, the Treaty of Nanking - considered by many Chinese even today as a national humiliation and a flagrant exploitation by the West - was signed. At this juncture, the opium trade bore another coat - one that shaped 20th century Chinese politics.

The early 20th century was a tumultuous period for China. The Xinhai revolution in 1911 ended with the collapse of the Qing government and introduced mass social unrest in a fractious China. One visionary leader named Sun Yat Sen capitalised on this to unite China under the banner of nationalism.

In1912, Sun Yat Sen “declared opium prohibition to be one of the most urgent tasks of the new republic” (Lovell, 2011). His party of loyal Nationalists were keen on generously peppering the propaganda dish served up to the Chinese people during the 1920s drive with the shortcomings of the opium trade. Their premise was “to transform the Opium War and its Unequal Treaty into a long-term imperialist scheme form which only the Nationalists could preserve the country” (Lovell, 2011). In order to fight imperialism and cultivate nationalism, the people had to be reminded of the coerced, debilitating opium trade with the barbarians. The opium trade wasn’t even a worthy topic of discussion until the Nationalists stepped in and employed it to their advantage; “The propaganda drive of the 1920s and 1930s that the events of 1839–42 stopped being a quarrelsome side-story (a ‘dispute’ or ‘expedition’) of the nineteenth century and became instead the aggrieved, unprecedented national tragedy that the ‘Opium War’ remains in China today.” (Lovell, 2011).

Everything relating to the trade and war – “the growing Chinese fondness for Opium; the crackdown of 1839; the arrival of gunboats; the main bottles; the treaty and the size of the indemnity” (Lovell, 2011) – was spun into “a tale of evil imperialists and foreign poison humiliating China” (Lovell, 2011). Lin Zexu was lionized for “trying to stop British opium imports” (Lovell, 2011) while the “ ‘arrogance’, ‘stupidity’ and ‘indecision’ of the Qing government” (Lovell, 2011) was underscored. The general consensus was that opium trade had polarized the nation and it was time for the Chinese to learn from their mistakes.

Yet, the same hypocritical leaders who condemned the opium trade were depending on it for revenue; “in 1933 the size of the opium traffic in China was estimated at $2 billion annually (5.2 per cent of the country’s gross domestic product)” (Lovell, 2011) of which a significant portion financed the army for battles with warlord regimes. Despite calls for prohibition, in the 1930s “there are opium dens along every street, government offices openly collect taxes on opium, and citizens openly smoke it . . . the whole of China depends upon opium” (Lovell, 2011).

The Communist Party led by Mao Zedong viewed the trade no differently. They overtly demonized the opium trade and extolled the Chinese “people’s unrelenting and heroic struggle” (Lovell, 2011) in the face of imperialism, with regular references to the San-yuan-li incident. Mao justified his use of violence by calling upon the need for emancipation from foreign oppression and alleged western sympathizers such as the Nationalists, warlords and anyone standing in his way.

Unsurprisingly, “Mao was as willing to profit from opium as the next warlord – even though he had officially banned opium production in Communist controlled areas in 1939, asserting that it ‘sickens the country and harms the people’” (Lovell, 2011). The drug “rescued the Communists from their trade deficit of the 1940s…by 1945, was generating more than 40 percent of the state’s budget” (Lovell, 2011) and was “processed in ‘Special Factories’ and transported south and west to generate export revenue for Communist armies” (Lovell, 2011).

**1949 onwards**

Following their triumph over the nationalists at the end of a civil war in 1949, the communists took decisive action to end the scourge once and for all. Using Maoist approaches, local governments and revolutionists fought the drug problem. “In mass rallies and public trials, smokers were rehabilitated; thousands of pounds of opium were publicly burned; traffickers were imprisoned, dispatched to labour camps or executed” (Lovell, 2011). Opium had simply ceased to serve its purpose as a propaganda tool and could be removed from the fabric of Chinese society, as a “local government in the north-east remarked in the early 1950s that lecturing on the history of the Opium wars or the opium policy of the imperialists was not an effective way to reach the masses” (Lovell, 2011). The entire nation was mobilized in the battle against opium trade and production and eventually in the 1950s, Mao’s government succeeded in eradicating the drug completely. Nevertheless, the crippling humiliation that the Chinese faced during and after the opium war remains etched in their memory.

**Of the British**

A colonial and technological superpower during the 18th and 19th centuries, the British empire was burdened by a massive trade deficit with China - between 1710 and 1760, Britain paid China nearly 26 million pounds of silver - due to domestic demand for tea and porcelain. Most of Britain’s “silver ended up in China, because the great empire’s major exports of tea, porcelain, and silk commanded high prices and the Europeans had no equivalent goods to offer in return” (Purdue, 2002). “The search for a commodity that the Chinese wanted to buy led the British to develop opium plantations in Bengal in India once they had secured control of it after 1757.” (Purdue, 2002). Thus began the scourge.

Britain never admitted that opium was used wilfully to reverse the tide in their favour. Instead, the British perspective was that the opium trade was necessary to open up China to free trade. They claimed to represented Europe in “demanding equality and commercial opportunity” (Pomeranz & Topik, 1999) since “the Chinese position on foreign relations….was out of date and insupportable” (Pomeranz & Topik, 1999). Britain felt that the trade would “bring a stagnant China not only into the world market, but into world history” (Pomeranz & Topik, 1999).

History, however, paints a different picture. “From ancient times, China had always traded with the outside world.” (Purdue, 2002). The British had been shipping textiles from India to China for a long time under the East India Trading Company. Furthermore, “In 1684 the Kangxi emperor reopened free trade access to the Chinese coast.” (Purdue, 2002) and subsequently in 1711, The East India Trading Company “gained its first outpost in Canton” (Purdue, 2002). China was open to trade, only it simply wasn’t interested in opium.

Fairbank was right in classifying the opium trade as “the most long-continued systematic international crime of modern times.” (Fay, 1977). Opium was illegal in England at that time, yet the East India Trading Company had no qualms about imposing the British Empire’s will on China, despite Lin Tse-hsu’s plea to Queen Victoria. China had already prohibited the use of opium from a century ago, yet the British paid no respect to their laws. In his letter, Lin Tse-hsu asks the Queen: “Where is your conscience? I have heard that the smoking of opium is very strictly forbidden by your country; this is because the harm caused by opium is clearly understood. Since it is not permitted to do harm to your own country, then even less should you let it be passed on to the harm of other countries-how much less to China” (Lodwick, 1996). Yet, the British wantonly disregarded Chinese laws with the unbridled hubris that their military muscle and technological prowess would undoubtedly prevail if push came to shove. That’s why Lord George McCartney, accompanied by a military envoy, was able to boldly demand an embassy in Beijing, an island off the Chinese coast and reparations for Lin Zexu’s crackdown. It wasn’t free trade that the British fought for, but rather a closed, one-way street of silver traffic in their favour.

The same reasoning was used to justify the opium war that followed. Britain’s intention was not to “fasten the opium habit upon the Chinese Empire” (Fay, 1977) as the war “could as easily have happened over cotton or molasses” (Pomeranz & Topik, 1999). The British maintained that the opium trade was clearly an insignificant side issue since what the Treaty of Nanking “gave them was not a legalized opium traffic but a sum of money for a certain number of chests” (Fay, 1977). Britain had supposedly gone to war to “protest the arbitrary confiscation of, and recover the value of, certain goods the private property of British subjects” (Fay, 1977).

**Protestant Crusade after the Opium War**

As the nineteenth century came to a close, British attitude towards the opium trade shifted from a fiscal to a moral one. By the end of the 19th century, the opium trade was “subjected to denunciations by vocal anti-opium movements in Britain” (Blue, 2000) primarily led by Christian missionaries.

Missionaries from both China and Britain “wanted to stop the opium traffic on the grounds that it was harmful to the Chinese people and, hence, that the British government was wrong in profiting from it” (Lodwick, 1996). Moreover, their attempts at “conversion were frustrated by the Chinese perception that the British opium trade demonstrated the immorality of Christians” (Blue, 2000). Morality was the crux of the missionaries’ opium trade abolition movement. In China and Britain, numerous societies were formed, petitions were signed and conferences were held, of which a sample are examined in the following paragraphs.

In China, publications such as the ‘Chinese Reorder’ and ‘The Friend of China’ enabled missionaries to voice out their objections accompanied by photographs of hapless opium addicts. In response to proponents of the trade, Rev. Griffith John of Canton emphasized that “It was the task of the foreigners to wash our hands clean of the iniquity, and allow [the Chinese] to deal with [opium] as they please” (Lodwick, 1996). The Anti-Opium league of 1896 was established as part of the missionaries’ efforts to “promote anti-opium societies in China and to send news of their activities to the societies in Britain” (Lodwick, 1996). Even Chinese and English doctors rallied to join the fight. The League compiled the harmful physiological effects of the drug as delineated by doctors in a book “under the title *Opinions of Over 100 Physicians on the Use of opium in China.*” (Lodwick, 1996) for dissemination throughout churches in China.

Britain was also replete with opium trade abolition movements. “The Presbyterian Church of England passed resolutions at synod meetings in 1858, 1880, 1881, 1887, 1891, and 1898 calling for the abolition of the opium trade.” (Lodwick, 1996). Most notably, the “interdenominational Centenary Conference of the Protestant Missions of the World held in London in 1888” (Lodwick, 1996) sought a resolution spearheaded by Rev. J. Hudson. Taylor that called for the “complete suppression of the opium trade and appealed to the Christians of great Britain” (Lodwick, 1996), with copies sent to British and Indian leaders.

Soon, the British Parliament became vested in the missionaries’ efforts. “In April 1902 Frederick Temple, the archbishop of Canterbury, forwarded to Lord Salisbury, the prime minister, another memorial from the Anti-Opium Societies in Britain” (Lodwick, 1996), backed by the most prominent MPs and churchmen of the day, requesting the abolition of the “vast national curse” (Lodwick, 1996) that was the opium trade. Following the failed 1907 agreement to suppress the opium trade, then British minister Sir John N. Jordan signed an agreement with the Chinese in 1911 to ensure that the rampant opium cultivation in China would be eradicated and that the British would take “further action to curtail its involvement in the opium trade” (Lodwick, 1996).

History books are lined with numerous such examples beckoning to be called forth, but the underlying point that they all convey is this: protestant crusaders were largely responsible for putting an end to the opium trade.

**Modern period**

The opium trade was extensively studied by historians in the late 20th and early 21st century, with a “general consensus that Britain, in its merciless pursuit of financial gain, trampled on the sovereign rights of China in the early nineteenth century to enforce a shameful trade in opium” (Dikotter, 2003) and that China was a “victim of gunboat policy” (Dikotter, 2003) due to Britain’s military superiority. The legendary John Fairbank aptly “characterized the opium trade as ‘the most long-continued and systematic international crime of modern times’” (Dikotter, 2003). These viewpoints are corroborated by the blatant historical facts that scream British imperialism, such as the East India Company’s methods, Lord McCartney’s demands and the Treaty of Nanking.

However, some historians adamantly contend that the cursed opium trade was not an act of imperialism and that Britain was not to blame for the scourge. Rather, the Chinese peoples’ lack of moderation in the use of the allegedly innocuous drug and the social significance of Opium in China were the reasons for the opium trade’s longevity and the war that ensued.

Firstly, opium is deemed to be harmless, since in 19th century England, “frequent and chronic users did not suffer detrimental effects from it: many enjoyed good health well into their eighties” (Dikotter, 2003). Moreover, it is contended that “opium use in Europe, the Middle East and Asia was light and moderate” (Dikotter, 2003). Apparently British reports during that time noted that Chinese officials and “countless others smoked no more than a dozen grams a year strictly for medical purposes” (Dikotter, 2003) and that “one never meets the opium-skeleton so vividly depicted in philanthropic works, rather the reverse – a hardy peasantry, healthy and energetic” (Dikotter, 2003).

Secondly, the opium trade was successful because of the narcotic culture that had pervaded all social strata. For the rich, “Wealth and status could be displayed far more effectively by smoking many pipes of pure opium than by drinking expensive tea or alcohol” (Dikotter, 2003). For everyone else, opium “became an indispensable aspect of social etiquette, and failure to offer opium was considered a serious faux pas” (Dikotter, 2003).

These preposterous arguments are highly inaccurate and dubious due to a number of reasons. Unlike in China, Opium was rare in 19th century England due to its illegitimacy. Moreover, the poppy plants from the plantations in Bengal were spiked with tobacco and chemicals to induce effects akin to that produced by nicotine. The huge supply of opium in China meant the drug was cheap and easy to obtain. Naturally, addiction would be expected. Regarding the depiction of the average opium smoker, these biased British accounts conveniently left out the ubiquitous photographic evidences middle and lower class opium smokers in 19th century China. Thousands of doctors have concluded that opium has an adverse impact on health. Dikotter also insinuates that despite trade bans and harsh laws on opium consumption, the Chinese maintained a prolific use of the drug. That certain groups of Chinese incorporated opium into their habits does not imply a nationwide narcotic culture.

**Conclusion**

In summary, this essay has covered the various British and Chinese perspectives on the opium trade from the early 19th century up till the late 20th century as interpreted by historians. A product of British imperialism, the opium trade sapped China’s energy and defined its modern history. Perhaps the opium trade was a necessary bane that tempered the spirit of the Chinese people and transformed China into the superpower it is today.

**Citations**

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