The Nineteenth-Century Anglo-Indian Opium Trade to China and its Lasting Legacy

El comercio del opio angloíndio del siglo diecinueve con China y su legado duradero

Abstract

In recent years, two apparently different and unconnected problems have received repeated attention from global news outlets, namely the opioid crisis and the pro-democracy movement in Hong Kong. The opioid crisis, which is especially catastrophic in the United States, involves the over-prescription and abuse of synthetic opioid painkillers such as oxycontin and fentanyl (Felter, 2020). The pro-democracy movement in Hong Kong involves legions of pro-testers, many of them university students, taking to the streets against what they see as the erosion of their civil liberties at the hands of the mainland Chinese government (Perper, 2019). How can these two issues possibly be connected? This paper tells the story of how the world's first great opioid crisis occurred in nineteenth-century China, and how the drug trafficking British thwarted the

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Chinese government's attempts to stop drug imports, fighting two wars in the process. Upon conclusion of the first of these wars, China was forced to cede the territory of Hong Kong. This British colonial outpost became the principle entrepôt for British opium entering the Chinese market. Over the next century and a half, Hong Kong grew into one of the world's most dynamic commercial cities, and its citizens enjoyed liberties under British rule that were not available to the mainland Chinese population. Thus, the legacy of the opium wars and the British opium trade to China is still very much with us today.

Key words

Opium wars, Anglo-Indian history, commodity trade, XIX century, socio-political effects and outcomes

Resumen

En los últimos años, dos problemas aparentemente diferentes e inconexos han recibido una atención reiterada de los medios de comunicación en todo el mundo, siendo estos, la crisis de los opioides y el movimiento pro democracia en Hong Kong. La crisis de los opioides, que es especialmente catastrófica en los Estados Unidos, implica la prescripción excesiva y el abuso de analgésicos opioides sintéticos como el oxycontin y el fentanilo (Felter, 2020). El movimiento a favor de la democracia en Hong Kong involucra a legiones de manifestantes, muchos de ellos estudiantes universitarios, que toman las calles contra lo que ven como la erosión de sus libertades civiles a manos del gobierno de China continental (Perper, 2019). ¿Cómo se pueden conectar estos dos problemas? Este artículo cuenta la historia de cómo ocurrió la primera gran crisis de opioides en la China del siglo XIX, y cómo los británicos del narcotráfico frustraron los intentos del gobierno chino de detener las importaciones de drogas, librando dos guerras en el proceso. Al concluir la primera de estas guerras, China se vio obligada a ceder el territorio de Hong Kong. Este puesto de avanzada colonial británico se convirtió en el principal centro de entrada del opio británico en el mercado chino. Durante el siglo y medio siguiente, Hong Kong se convirtió en una de las ciudades comerciales más dinámicas del mundo, y sus ciudadanos disfrutaron de libertades bajo el dominio británico que no estaban disponibles para la población de China continental. Por lo tanto, el legado de las guerras del opio y el comercio británico de opio a China todavía está muy presente en la actualidad.

Palabras clave

Guerras del opio, Historia anglo-india, comercio mercantil, siglo XIX, efectos y resultados sociopolíticos

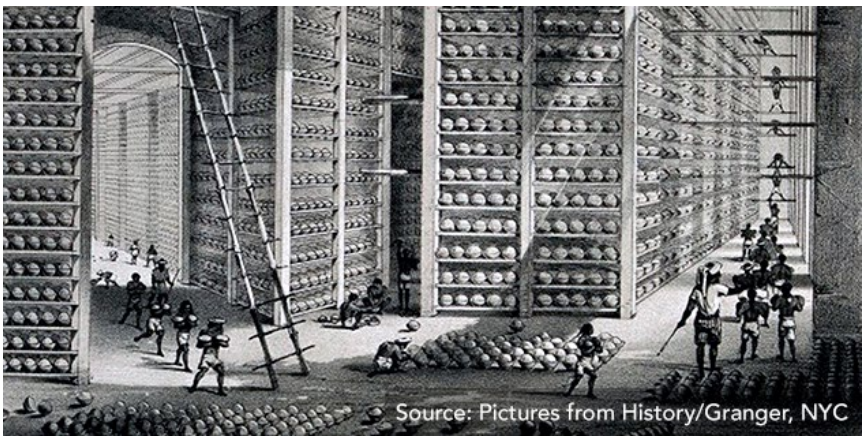
Introduction

Opium has been known since ancient times for its medicinal properties, including as a painkiller. It was also used as cooking oil and, of course, as a psychoactive drug (Derks, 2012). Chinese traders developed the habit of smoking opium from frequenting the Dutch, especially in Java, where they tended to mix a little bit of opium with their tobacco. This enticed the Chinese, leading to them establishing this practice on the mainland (Rush, 1985).

Eventually, the Indians began growing poppies, which is the plant from which opium is extracted, and consuming opium either by swallowing pills or drinking an infusion. When the British Empire arrived (through the East India Company), they were required to cultivate it more extensively (Richards, 2002).

The British began exporting Indian opium in 1773. That same year, they became the leading suppliers of the Chinese market, as was their intent. Indeed, opium soon became one of the most valuable and profitable commodities for the British (Richards, 2002). "Within a few years of the conquest of Bengal (1757) the East India Company declared a monopoly over the opium produce of the territories it had subjugated" (Farooqui, 2016).

This opium was cultivated by peasants in northern India. It was grown on the best land available, and required a lot of work, especially for irrigation. "The land that could be irrigated with one lever per day amounted only to approximately an eighth of an acre. It is reported that two to four levers were used at a well simultaneously, if possible" (Bauer, 2019). The soil was ploughed, which was extremely demanding, and then planted in October or November. The plants matured from December to February, growing very slowly at first and then shooting up at the end (Bauer, 2019).



This image depicts a "stacking room" in an opium factory in India. The shelves contain balls of opium (Asia Pacific Curriculum, n.d.)

The raw materials were then taken to one of two factories in Ghazipur, on the banks of the River Ganges. Workers inside the factory would then process and shape balls of opium full of morphine that weighed around 1kg. After the product was ready for export, workers would pack forty of these opium balls per wooden chest, which were subsequently sent downstream straight to Calcutta (Richards, 2002).

At the start of the business, the pioneering traders that made the trips from Malwa to China were Indian and Portuguese. Here, Derks points out that opium was initially smuggled into China on Indian vessels called Wallahs, which went all the way up to the China Sea. Upon arrival in Canton, besides opium, they brought raw cotton, rice, pepper and tin from the Malay States, (2012, pp. 49-86).

Figure 1. Route used to transport opium from India to China

Source: Gfiles, 2018

This map illustrates the route used to transport opium from India to China (Gfiles, 2018).

The East India Company, despite wielding immense political power, was also controversial. Many members of the British parliament and not a few pamphleteers considered its profitable business a "drain on national wealth" because it operated a chronic trade deficit with China. The problem was that the British had nothing to sell to the Chinese in exchange for the tea and other luxury goods they purchased from them (Deming, 2011). This deficit had to be made up in silver, for which the Chinese (with their silver-based monetary system) had great demand. Britain, which used the gold standard at that time, had to import this silver from Europe, making the tea trade impractical.

Opium was the solution to this problem. As Kalipci (2018) explains, the Chinese government had declared a ban on opium on two occasions (in 1729 and in 1796), adding strict measures to make sure it did not reach dangerous levels. However, this did not stop the British from seeking to remedy their trade deficit via the narcotics trade. During the second ban on opium, the East India Company stopped exporting opium directly to China, selling it rather to private English merchants who delivered the opium for them (Chang, 1964). As previously mentioned, the East India Company had obtained a monopoly on opium in Bengal in 1773 and were using that colony as the center of their production and export system.

A brief history of the British opium trade to China

Starting from 1770 the East India Company (EIC) began trading more to Canton, usually trading opium for tea (Feige and Miron, 2008). The Chinese found the English sovereign's support for the opium trade hard to believe. Accordingly, Chinese Commissioner Lin Zexu sent a letter to Queen Victoria raising the issue of the trade's unethical nature, but he did not receive an answer. Opium had become a major threat to China. This created great concern. If nothing was done, the country would be defenseless and its wealth would be quickly exhausted (Kalipci, 2018).

In 1799, the Jiaqing Emperor "warned the British as a result of his people becoming addicted to opium and the prohibition on opium importation was reissued implementing the decree of 1796 in stricter terms" (Kalipci, 2018). Eventually, the Qianlong Emperor delegated to Lin Zexu the responsibility of inspecting ships that carried goods into the country. In 1839, he was sent to Canton solve the problem "by bribing the trade under control in an orderly manner" (Kalipci,2018). However, he found that local officials and administrators were collaborating with the British, accepting bribes and receiving a share of the opium trade.

Commissioner Lin discharged the officers and urged the British to stop the trade and hand over the opium currently at the port. All the opium was destroyed and, as Kalipci states, "Lin Zexu had all opium mixed with salt, lime and water, and poured into the sea" (2018). Shocked at his actions, the British accused him of "destroying their own three-million-pound wealth, and obstructing 'free trade', one of the highest of the 'civilization' principles". The British did not cease trading after these events, and kept sending even more opium to Canton.

The British were concerned that if other nations rejected "free trade," this would threaten their global position. Despite their lobbying for the opium legalization, the Middle Kingdom always rejected their entreaties. Kalipci states that "The moralists believed that opium was the most abominable thing China had ever seen as it led people astray and ruined them gradually" (2018). Eventually, in 1839 drunken British sailors killed a Chinese citizen, but the British authority in the area, Captain Elliot, did not allow the sailors to be judged under Chinese law.

The First Opium war is explained by Feige and Miron (2005) as follows. Commissioner Lin sent Chinese junk ships that attacked a British ship, though they did little harm. China sent letters to London stating that they would perish if they disobeyed the laws of the Middle Kingdom. The British answered these threats by sending warships to Canton and destroying Lin's army. Commissioner Lin lied to the emperor, claiming that the British had been defeated and predicting that the opium trade would end in a short period. The British then captured key locations on the coast and besieged Canton. This forced the Chinese to surrender. They then signed the Treaty of Nanjing on August 28, 1842 and Lin Zexu was banished (pg. 911-913).

Under this treaty, the sanctions imposed on China included the following: payment of reparations, general amnesty to all Chinese subjects that had cooperated with the British during the war, Hong Kong to be handed over to Britain for settlement and trade by the British; five ports opened to European trade, namely Guangzhou, Amoy, Fuzhou, Ningbo and Shanghai, and British citizens would have extraterritorial rights such that any British citizens accused of crimes in China would be tried under British law (Kalipci, 2018, 291-304).

The Treaty of Bogue was signed on October 8, 1843. It contained some additional regulations to the previous treaty, granting Most Favored Nation status to Great Britain, meaning they would enjoy the privileges granted to all other powers. China had to sign further agreements in 1844 with the United States and France, granting them similar concessions (Kalipci, 2018, 291-304).

The Chinese naturally resented these treaties, which were labeled at that time as free trade provisions but are now generally categorized as "unequal treaties" and/or "gunboat diplomacy" (Lacroix, 2020). In particular, they resented the forced continuation of the opium trade, which had such a damaging effect on the Chinese population. "The Second Opium War broke out in 1856, when Canton officials boarded the Arrow, a vessel accused of piracy, and ripped down a British flag. British ships attacked the city in response" (Beeching 1975, as cited in Fergin and Miron, 2008). A treaty was signed after the British victory. Together with the French, they "forced the Chinese government to sign the Tianjin Treaty in 1858, but China refused to ratify it and the war restarted" (Hanes and Sanello, 2002, as cited in, Kalipci, 2018). Later, under the 1860 Beijing Treaty, the Chinese agreed to accept the Tianjin Treaty. This allowed foreign ambassadors to settle in Beijing, and provided for more ports to be opened to trade and for the settlement of westerners. Foreigners were allowed to travel to China's inland areas, and China would consent to freedom of movement for missionaries. Ongoing legal opium imports to China were also provided for.

Figure 2. China's treaty ports in 1860.

Location of treaty port cities are approximations only. Present-day city names are used, with some commonly referenced alternative spellings/names listed in parentheses.

Source: UK Essays, 2020

Economic point of view

From an economic point of view, the opium business was extremely profitable, especially during the 1820s, when this trade sent around £22 million worth of Indian opium and cotton to China (Chung, 1987, as cited in McCoy, 2000). The opium business provided wealth for the British East India Company and a steady supply for China. In fact, this commodity's export through Britain-China-India (triangular trade), was essential for their London-based commercial empire.

In terms of the amount of opium traded, specifically in the 1820's, almost two-thirds was exported from Daman. At this time the Company was also engaged in trading opium out of Malwa (Greenberg, 1951, as cited in Farooqui, 2012). Together with this, "The system's success was the cause of its downfall. Profits attracted competitors, and the Company's refusal to raise Bengal's opium exports beyond the quota of 4000 chests per annum left a vast unmet demand for drugs in China" (Chung, 1987, as cited in McCoy, 2000).

The EIC declared a monopoly over opium in the second half of the eighteenth century. It was also a monopsony: All opium production was for the state and was sold through the state (Bauer, 2019). Eventually, thanks to the Britain's control over India, "opium remained a staple of colonial finances, providing from 6-15% of British India's tax revenues during the nineteenth century" (Owen, 1968, as cited in McCoy, 2000). From 1821 on, as stated by Farooqui, "the Company's Malwa opium had to compete with Daman Malwa opium, while Bengal opium had to compete with both" Farooqui, (2012, p. 52.73).

The number of chests shipped to China increased after 1834. Exports of both Bengal and Malwa opium doubled around 1834-5 and 1838-9, from 21,885 to 40,200 chests. This played a big role in the start of the Opium Wars (Greenberg, 1951, as cited in Farooqui, 2012). By 1843, opium had become the second largest source of revenue for the British Colony of India.

Given such volumes, this commodity was definitely used as an instrument of state power. Opium was one of the main sources of revenue for the state (Chandra, 2008). The British relied strongly on this trade with China and, as Deming (2012) explains, it was crucial for rectifying Britain's trade imbalance with China and, in turn, for the stability of its currency.

Following the Second Opium War, opium became a major global commodity. It was produced and traded on a similar scale to other commodities like coffee and tea (Owen,1968, as cited in McCoy, 2000).

Social point of view

Socially speaking, the transformation of India's economy for opium production had a great impact on its population. This was especially the case with the rural population, where peasants were turned into growers of cash-crops and producers of a major agricultural commodity. In many cases they were forced to become producers. Based on accounts with detailed information on poppy farming, including leases, irrigation, or additional added labor, the government exploited poppy growers by buying crude opium at less than fair price (Bauer, 2019).

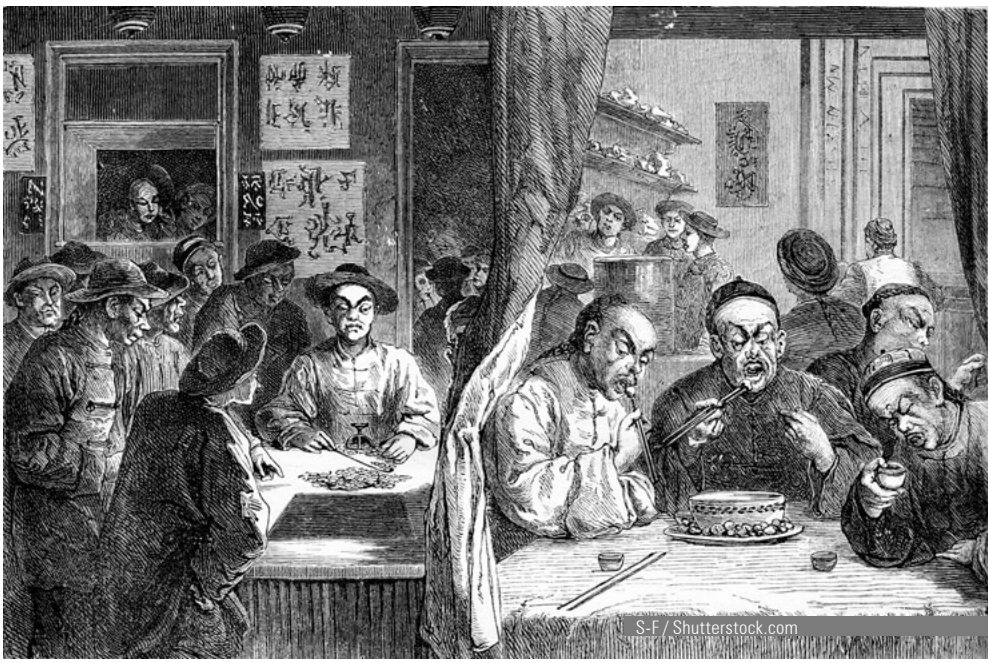
At the peak of the colonial opium industry, around 1.5 million peasant households were growing poppy intensively in this British colony. All the opium production took place in India, and North Indian peasants cultivated poppy for the Opium Department. The majority belonged to the Koeris, Kacchias, and Kurmis agricultural castes. It was commonly known that no one could grow delicate crops like poppy better than them (Bauer, 2019).

The government implemented a legal framework that enforced a rapid expansion of poppy cultivation. These laws allowed agents of the Opium Department to break down doors, search houses and arrest people. In certain cases,

if peasants refused to cultivate poppy they were harassed, kidnapped, had their crops destroyed, or were threatened with prosecution and imprisonment. Additionally, the Opium Agency underpaid growers (Bauer, 2019).

Naturally, opium also left a mark on Chinese society. The popularity of opium smoking amongst social classes beyond the Chinese elite coincided with the opium monopoly held by the East India Company. Opium was a symbol of class distinction and was widely used by rich merchants and scholars. This changed with the influx of EIC opium, as the number of opium smokers increased from 12 million around the time of the First Opium War to 40 million in the 1880s. From the 1880s onwards, China's population smoked between 30,000 and 40,000 tons of opium in a year (Bauer, 2019).

Historically, during the early nineteenth century opium was seen as an expression of wealth because of its high price. However, during the second half of the nineteenth century, opium became more popular with the lower classes. As such, the higher classes showed off their status with the varieties of pipes they purchased. Some were made from rare materials like ivory, jade, precious stones or silver. Even a pipe's age made it more precious. Together with this, opium bowls made of rare materials were highly valued (Paules, 2008).



Kalipci (2018) states that the Emperor and other witnesses called opium an evil substance because of the detrimental effect it had on the people. And Richard Brown (2002) clarifies that "despite the pervasiveness of opium in Indian history, its use never became as extensive as in China, nor did it engender such extreme concern." The Chinese smoked opium as a recreational drug. They smoked using a pipe because of its immediate effect and lesser likelihood of an overdose. Users would commonly pass out before achieving a lethal dose (Bauer, 2019).

This drug was popular because of its two psychoactive effects, analgesia and euphoria. It is said that the onset of addiction appears after consuming the drug from two weeks to thirty days. This occurs when as the daily dose of morphine is increased. In certain cases, addiction can occur in a shorter period, specifically amongst persons with certain emotional, psychological and

temperamental characteristics (Terry, 1931).

To achieve these effects opium was smoked in small rooms in the beginning, and these later developed into opium dens. These facilities were open to the public for smoking. Here, smokers could select their opium and it was then prepared and heated in front of them. Dens offered room service, including food and other services like gambling, music entertainment, and recreational sex. These smoking houses then spread throughout rural communities and the suburbs of Shanghai (Yangwen, 2005).

Two men at an opium house in China (Opiate Addition Resource, n.d.)

By looking at the effects opium had in the nineteenth century, especially in India and China, it is clear that a commodity can change the course of history. After the opium wars, as Kalipci states, "China entered into a period that witnessed the downfall of a long-lived Celestial Empire" (2018). They saw it as a "Century of Humiliation" (Kalipci, 2018) where they were turned into a kind of European colony, most definitely a symbol of disgrace.

The business had practically died by the start of the twentieth century. Opium, the commodity that had once been the most important source of revenue for the British, had finally been outlawed. After World War I, there was a global prohibition campaign, led by the League of Nations and the United States, that led to a hard decline in the legal opium trade. The British opium trade did leave one lasting legacy, however: Hong Kong. This territory was first granted to the British after the first Opium War, and the British maintained it until the end of the twentieth century.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On July 1, 1898, the British Empire and China negotiated the Second Convention of Peking where they stated that the line that divided mainland China and Hong Kong ran between Shenzhen River and Boundary Street. This lease was to expire in 99 years, meaning that on July 1, 1997, Britain had to return Hong Kong to China (Little, 2019).

Although no longer a centre of the opium trade, Hong Kong prospered as a British colony during the first decades of the twentieth century. Many British institutions were established, including the University of Hong Kong (1911). During World War II, Japan had control over Hong Kong but after the war, British rule continued in the colony. During the second half of the twentieth century, Hong Kong became one of the world's foremost commercial and financial centres. Although not a democracy, Hong Kong's residents enjoyed substantial freedoms and civil rights well beyond those of mainland the Chinese population.

In 1982, British and Chinese leaders met to negotiate the transition of Hong Kong. The creation of the Sino-British Joint Declaration that contained future plans for Hong Kong was signed in 1984. It stipulated that, on July 1, 1997, Hong Kong would become part of China, and that the "current social and economic systems" and "life-styles" in Hong Kong, meaning, press, and rights to speech, religious belief, and assembly, would remain in effect until 2047 (Little, 2019).

Such agreements notwithstanding, many of Hong Kong's citizens felt that their former freedoms were gravely threatened during the second decade of the twenty-first century. Finally, in 2019, protests arose throughout Hong Kong over a bill that would violate the "one country, two systems" principle by allowing local authorities to "detain and extradite fugitive offenders who are wanted in territories that Hong Kong does not have extradition agreements with, including mainland China and Taiwan" (Little, 2019).

Just as the legacy of the British opium trade left a political legacy that is still with us today in the form of Hong Kong and its institutions, so mass opioid dependency and its associated public health crises have also reared their heads in recent years.

Opium is the main ingredient in heroin; an extremely dangerous drug that left approximately 15 million addicts around the world (Ward & Byrd, 2004). Other drugs derived from opium are oxycodone, a very popular narcotic analgesic synthetized from thebaine, a constituent of the poppy plant, and fentanyl, which is an analgesic that is about 100 times stronger than heroin. In 2018

there were 31,335 overdose fatalities from this drug, an alarming increase from 2011 which saw 2,666 fatalities (Drug Enforcement Administration, 2018).

With the COVID 19 pandemic, the United States experienced an increase in drug overdoses, specifically from fentanyl and illicitly manufactured equivalents. More than 40 states reported opioid-related deaths together with concerns over substance disorders or mental illness (American Medical Association, 2021).

In conclusion, the nineteenth-century British trade in opium to China is not only a fascinating period of world history, but a prime example of how policy can make an imprint on future history its framers could surely never have imagined.

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