Opium and the Beginnings of International Drug Control in the Early Twentieth Century

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Abstract

In the second half of the 19th century, with the increasing sales of opium, the anti-opium voice in the UK became increasingly stronger. The increase in opium poppy in China led to a decline in the income of opium in the UK. As a result, the British government began to compromise with public opinion. At the same time, Western powers opened the door to China with guns, breaking China's tributary trade system for thousands of years. In 1895, the Sino-Japanese War broke out and the late Qing government began to falter. At the same time, the late Qing government faced the predicament of internal affairs and diplomacy and launched an anti-opium campaign. For the complex domestic and international background, Britain and Chinese government reach an international agreement to protect the government’s authority. From the historical view, the 1907 agreement plays a key role in Sino-Britain’s opium trade. It shows the turning point of Sino-Britain opium policy and commencement of international opium control system.

Keywords

The Opium Trade, Ten-Year Opium Agreement, International Drug Regime

Throughout the eighteenth century, Britain actively participated in the Asian opium trade; however, in 1907, it adopted a drugs policy and signed the Ten Years Agreement with China restricting Chinese opium importation from India and later engaged in Shanghai Opium Conference that had initially been proposed by America. This self-contradictory attitude is what I would like to explore.

From the end of the nineteenth century, opium had gradually become an international issue. All countries, including America, Britain, and China adopted regulations to combat growing drug abuse, both nationally and internationally. The United States signed the Treaty of Wanghia with China before the Open Door Policy was promulgated, giving up opium benefits and helping China to ban narcotics. For Britain, however, its ‘opium empire’ (Trocki, 1999) relied heavily on the considerable Chinese consumer market and opium revenues from India. As such, it was harder for the country to give up its interests in the Far East. From the 1900s onwards, with increasing opium consumption around the world, the Britain having started the opium trade in the early eighteenth century faced multiple pressures at both national and international levels. In this essay, based on primary and secondary sources, I will explore why Britain agreed to sign the Ten Years’ Agreement with China in 1907 and subsequently participated in the international drug control regime.

1. Opium Debate in Britain

Firstly, Britain had been under pressure from the United States over a prolonged period. Since the nineteenth century, the United States’ enthusiasm to participate in the Chinese anti-drug campaign can be explored both nationally and internationally. From a domestic standpoint, the drug problem in the United States had become increasingly serious. In 1875, the San Francisco Report estimated that the number of opium users in the United States
had reached 120,000. According to public and official opinion, Chinese labourers had been taking opium culture to America and Britain white people since the late nineteenth century (Martin Booth, 1999). The tension between China and the United States reached a climax when Congress passed a bill to exclude Chinese immigrants, namely Page Act of 1875, which led to China launched a campaign to boycott the US cargo in 1905, driving the United States to compensate in order to maintain its commercial enterprise in the Far East. Understandably, Britain feared that it would share a similar fate. In 1906, Mr Theodore Taylor, a representative of the Liberal Party, claimed that opium traffic had been legalised by the Treaty of Tientsin; nevertheless, for China, the treaty itself had been imposed by the British government. Taylor also criticised the Opium Commission appointed in 1893 which had concluded that opium was not a social or a moral evil just one year later. Moreover, Taylor argued that opium poisoning had been recognised throughout the Western World. Missionaries in China, particularly medical missionaries from Western countries, were also against the opium trade. More importantly, the United States had inherited opium problems from Spain and enforced opium regulations in the Philippines. Under such circumstances, it was shameful for the United Kingdom to continue to maintain this illicit drug trade and it should have withdrawn the provisions of the Sino-British treaty and ceased trade with China. Owing to pressure from parliament, however, the British Foreign Office approached China offering to abolish the trade and decrease opium importation from India.

Additionally, Britain had always been afraid of the United States’ rising prominence in the Far East. Following the Opium War of 1842, trade between the US and China advanced into a new era. As Morse states in his work, The International Relations of the Chinese Empire, the total quantity of opium supplied by the United States to China was calculated as being around 18, 000 chests-full at a value of approximately $15 million. Diplomatically, in fact, the United States had replaced Spain as an important influence on Asian power after the Spanish-American War. The majority of European countries claimed that they were performing a civilising mission and, in order to do so, it was necessary for them to acquire more control over the colonies; thus, the change in opium policy was an important feature of this. With the occupation by America, it can be said that the Philippines was the first Asian country where opium was completely eradicated. Scholars, such as Trocki, Carl, and Dawsonera, recognise that this was ‘the first instance of a decisive action by Western powers to abolish opium in Asia’ and was ‘also the first step in the international abolition of the opium trade.’

With regard to the trade, the British were worried about America pre-empting the Asian market – since the end of Westward Expansion in the US, its capitalist economy had further developed and the nation now sought expansion externally into Asia. As a result, the frontier of US aggression directly reached the Pacific region, particularly China. Charles Denby, United States Ambassador in China, noted that if the United States was to tolerate the efforts of the imperialists to divide up China, it would ‘lose [...] the world's largest market.’ Since 1899, the United States had twice taken two notes about open door policy to the powers and proposed an open-door policy to share the Asian market. Subsequently, through the signing of the Treaty of Wanghia, Chinese provincial officials had the power to regulate opium smugglers and levy a tariff. Although the Secretary of State apparently instructed his ambassadors to absolutely support the Chinese anti-opium campaign, the fact is that Congress secretly approved the Treaty of Tientsin signed in 1858, including the legalisation of the opium trade between China and Britain. With the gradual establishment of such legalisation also in the United States, opium smugglers lost interest. After considering the pros and cons, the US government adopted a more resolute stance with regard to meeting China’s demands for opium-smoking legislation. In 1880, China and the United States negotiated a trade agreement whereby each country was banned from importing opium from the other. In 1903, the United States agreed to a US restriction on morphine and in 1905 it formed an alliance with Japan and other countries to call for Britain to cease the opium trade. In addition, while the United States was implementing its open-door policy, China was also launching a large-scale anti-opium campaign. Some Chinese politicians, like Li Hung-Chang, coined the slogan ‘rely one foreign country against another’. The United States’ implementation of opium legislation in the Philippines and its missionaries’ efforts to support anti-smoking campaigns in China enabled it to take an active role in East Asian affairs. These factors further contributed to the Chinese rely heavily on America rather than on Britain in many areas, like foreign affairs.

Another reason the British were so determined to establish drug regulations was due to anti-opiumist pressure. In the early nineteenth century, the British had rarely considered that there was any link between opium and morality nor had they realised that overuse could damage individuals’ physical and mental health; On the contrary, opium was regarded by some distinguished writers as a unique path to the transcendental experience and as a source of inspiration. For instance, in his book, Confessions of an English Opium-Eater, De Quincy not only depicted various
absurd and bizarre dreams after taking opium, but also boasted of all kinds of wonderful emotional experiences brought about by the drug. He writes that the ‘warm, debauched opium is the sacred flower that blooms from the centre of darkness, deep in the imaginary world’. Similar scenes can also be found in the works of Shelley, Byron, Scott etc. By the second half of the nineteenth century, opium had begun to undergo changes from its original medical usage to being used recreationally and opium abuse had become a serious social problem in Britain. In particular, some workers experiencing poverty or pain regarded opium as a panacea which could enhance their strength. With increasing numbers of consumers, there were more and more cases of opium poisoning, overdose, and suicide by ingesting; an article in The Times about a clergyman named Johnston reported that he had written a suicide note and eventually committed suicide. Even the Chinese emperor Dowager himself committed suicide.

In the late nineteenth century, opium became associated with class – specifically, the poor and working classes were opium eaters whilst the rich smoked the substance and were able to more easily gain a high reputation from doing so. Excessive opium intake gradually caught the attention of the public, especially the middle and upper classes who were concerned about the abuse of opium by workers; however, due to a lack of understanding of its harmfulness in the medical and scientific communities, few realised the damage it could cause in excessive quantities. In fact, more attention was now being paid to the negative effects of addiction on smokers morally and spiritually. Opium dens were also the birthplace of the British drug subculture – indeed, the Victorian working classes had always been synonymous with ignorance, laziness, filthiness, and irrationality. Thus, in the literary works of the nineteenth century, opium smoking had increasingly become a manifestation of the underlying nature of the poor and was thought to lead to moral decline and crime. By contrast, the image of middle and upper class opium consumers was more positive and these rich smokers were viewed as eccentric rather than morally degenerate. In 1890, the British Pharmaceutical Association (founded in 1841), finally made the move to classify and regulate the use of opium.

2. Opium Trade between China and Britain in the Nineteenth Century

As early as 1842, the British launched anti-opium trade action at a national level. In a memorandum signed by businessmen, it was believed that as long as the illegal opium trade was continuous, then it was hard for them to engage in their commercial activities in a friendly environment. Even if in the transnational trade, opium was simply being used as a medicine, it was bound to have an adverse effect on traditional trade between China and Britain. In 1869, British citizens took a petition to their government: the Qing dynasty provided the country with fine silk and tea and, in return, Britain was luring them into absorbing harmful opiates. This movement attracted the British Opium Association’s attention which then opposed all forms of opium cultivation, except for medical purposes. Meanwhile, due to global pressure and the missionaries’ solidarity, the issue of the opium trade evoked a heated debate in US Congress.

It was also thought that the opium trade impeded the development of British capitalism. In 1870, Sir Wilfrid Lawson submitted a proposal about opium revenue accusing the British government of running the opium trade in India and China. In order to prevent the opposition from using the importance of opium taxation as an excuse to oppose this motion, he further set out the drawbacks of opium as follows: firstly, China was permitted to oppose the import of opium only in a certain political climate; secondly, another country might participate in the trade and thus undermine Britain’s monopoly in the near future; and lastly, China had already cultivated poppies across the board, and Lawson believed that the opium trade was not more profitable than alcohol. In 1858, Karl Marx suggested that although the Sino-British Treaty of Tientsin had expanded Britain’s trade privileges in China, this didn’t mean that there should be no contribution to Britain’s merchandise trade as a result of opium; that is to say, if a Chinese person was addicted to drugs, it would be impossible for him or her to purchase other British products except opium. As such, for Britain, whilst the opium trade was lucrative over a short period, it did little for the development of the capitalist production industry – on the contrary, it represented an obstacle. In his article, Marx elaborated on the history of the opium trade from 1767 to 1858, clearly demonstrating that the sale of opium in Britain was so profitable that the nation was reluctant to give up this sinful trade and that this led to a slump in its manufacturing industry. In 1856, British sales of opium accounted for one-sixth of its total fiscal revenue. The opium trade was evidently, therefore, a harmful activity for the long-term economic development of both China and Britain.

3. The Ten Years’ Agreement of 1907

By the end of the nineteenth century, Britain had numerous motives for engaging in the international drug control
regime including the fact that China’s policy regulating the cultivation and consumption of opium had proven successful. At the same time, the consumption of opium in India, however, had been increasing year on year and anti-opium movements had been organised by various groups. In particular, from 1880 to 1887, 14 percent of India’s fiscal revenue came from selling opium to China; however, by 1905, this had been reduced to just 7 percent. The British were also afraid of Persia and Turkey replacing the Indian opium market in China. Consequently, British colonial administration realised an urgent need to regulate its consumption and cultivation in India as well, despite the paradox that opium had aroused a heated debate within the international community which blamed Britain for ignoring its moral responsibility. Under such circumstances, the British were forced to negotiate the issue of anti-smoking in China and finally signed the Ten Years’ Agreement.

Despite the urgency for international and domestic anti-opium movements and the recession of the foreign drugs market in China, Britain, whilst agreeing to the Chinese edict on smoking, still shirked its responsibility regarding the opium trade in China. The British government suggested that banning drug use there had hardly worked before and intimated that the Late Qing Dynasty, in the name of regulating opium, had rejected foreign commodities entering China. Even as early as 1729, Emperor Yongzheng had explicitly banned the import of opium. In particular, after the legalisation of the opium trade, the output of native opium had soared sharply. In order to deal with the financial crisis brought about by the Opium War of 1858, Qing officials proposed a scheme of self-sufficiency. Nevertheless, after the execution of the edict, consumption of opium in 1906 was 12 times higher than it had been under Emperor Daoguang. The practice of opium smoking spread throughout the country and the number of individual smokers reached 20 million.

With regard to the Ten Years’ Agreement, British officials had always expressed scepticism over its effectiveness; for instance, John Morley, Secretary of State for India, took the view that the reason why the opium trade continued was not simply British guilt but the result of Chinese bureaucracy and a greed for opium tax profits. After protracted negotiations, Britain finally agreed to reduce Indian opium exports to China. In 1906, the British announced opium proposals in the House of Commons which consisted of six provisions submitted by Peking. In December 1907, China and Britain signed an agreement to gradually reduce Indian opium exports by 10 percent annually on the proviso that China would eliminate domestic production at the same rate. In May 1911 after three years of inspections, Britain and China signed a new agreement whereby Britain acknowledged the success of the anti-smoking campaign in China and promised to prohibit the export of opium to China by 1917. On January 23, 1912, the International Opium Convention was signed in Hague with the fourth chapter specifically regulating raw and prepared opium supply and demand in the Far East. From then on, Chinese smoking was promised by major countries. In the same year, opium exports to China were prohibited from everywhere except India. Britain also ended its opium trade with China in accordance with its own promise.

4. Conclusion:

Overall, Britain, India, and China jointly promoted the regulations which came into force surrounding the opium trade. Most importantly, the Ten Years’ Agreement signed by Britain and China laid the foundation for further international drug control regimes. As William B. McAllister claimed, the agreement became an influential model for the next six decades, primarily in controlling advocates (William B, 1999). Little attention, however, has been paid to the causes of addiction, the relationship between supply and demand, and whether formal controls fostered illegal activity in the agreement in 1907. Perhaps the results of Chinese efforts to eliminate cultivation have been exaggerated by some Chinese historians – yet, the legalisation of the opium trade along with domestic anti-opium movements certainly achieved some measure of success in China. Although, when profit-hungry warlords, such as Yuan Shikai, took control of the Middle Kingdoms from the Qing Dynasty in the mid-1910s, opium trade was again encouraged.

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