

PROHIBITION: THE CHINESE EXPERIENCE

Imperial China's drug war battled uphill against powerful traffickers and booming demand – with familiar results.

Opium problems in nineteenth-century China have been cited as illustrative of the evils of legalising drugs, but are more illustrative of the effects of a ban which lacked popular support and faced powerful traffickers feeding a significant demand. Lack of official control of the market led to widespread corruption and banditry. Later, underdevelopment and political instability underpinned China's growing home production.

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RECENT PROPOSALS for the legalisation of drugs have revived interest in the experience of countries where drugs were widely available in the past. Foremost among these is China, the world's largest producer and consumer of opium in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Opium was so widely available that the impression has arisen that its trade and consumption was legal, leading to the argument that China's addiction problem illustrates what could happen if drugs were legalised today. In fact, both trade and use were illegal. This article argues that prohibition of opium in China was mostly ineffective and had many harmful consequences, and that addiction was, in any case, less widespread than generally supposed.

The first of a long line of anti-opium edicts was issued by the Chinese emperor in 1729.¹ The main penalties fell upon dealers; smokers and importers – whose trade was in its infancy – were relatively lightly punished. By the 1790s both pipe smoking and the import trade had increased enormously and new prohibitionist edicts were issued.

In 1813 all of these measures were intensified in the aftermath of a scandal about opium-taking by eunuchs of the imperial palace. With China's domestic opium production reaching significant proportions, in 1830 heavy penalties were imposed on growers, refiners and conniving village headmen: poppies were to be rooted up, lands confiscated and annual affidavits supplied by officials to confirm their districts were clear.

The most detailed and intrusive measures against opium were taken in 1839. An attempt was made to stamp out demand for the drug completely in order to facilitate Lin Tse-hsu's campaign against foreign imports in Canton. A set of 39 regulations prescribed death for importing, selling or smoking opium or keeping an opium den. Even more draconian measures, some falling upon whole families, were laid down in 1850, although in practice this was when arrests and prosecutions dwindled. Anti-opium measures were not seriously revived until

1906 when, in a very different political climate, they were dramatically successful, at least for a time.

The willingness of the Chinese population to comply with its government's wishes – even more, the willingness of the ruling elite to cooperate positively with officialdom – determined the success or failure of these campaigns. In southern China in 1839, opium smoking was too widely accepted as a normal part of social behaviour for Lin's campaign to have much more than a superficial effect. In 1906, with opium eradication symbolic of wider currents of reform and nationalism, it was easier to win genuine support for imperial policy.

Economic imperatives

The growth of opium-related problems in nineteenth-century China is an instructive example of what can happen when a persistent supply and an insistent demand are coupled with ineffective suppression.

Up to the 1830s the problem was created largely by foreign suppliers – Dutch and Portuguese at first, British later. Imports of Indian opium into China were essential to balance China tea exports to Britain, which provided almost all the profits of the East India Company as well as a large slice of British government revenue arising from the import duty on tea. Equally important, and much less controllable, were the private merchants in India and Canton who saw the opium trade as a means of repatriating their fortunes to Britain.

The government of India, which maintained an official monopoly on opium production in its own territories, soon found that opium sales were one of its main sources of income. So powerful were the economic motives behind the triangular trade between India, China and Britain that heavy pressure to maintain sales in China was inevitable. Opium exports from India doubled in the 1830s, despite the measures which the Chinese authorities were taking against the drug.

During this phase of the trade southern



Hulton Picture Company

Estimates of opium addiction in nineteenth-century China range up to 15 million, but ignore the drug's widespread social and medical uses. Addiction as such probably only involved a few per cent of the population, but attempts to curb opium smoking caused serious social and economic dislocation.

China began to suffer some of the economic and social repercussions that have accompanied the illicit drug trade in more recent times. The currency came under strain as opium imports passed the level needed to balance exports and began to suck out silver bullion, and smuggling became integral to commercial life.

Opium was officially contraband. Ships carrying it were forbidden to sail up the Pearl River to Canton, so clippers from India transferred their opium to vessels moored in the estuary, beyond effective customs supervision. These floating markets, their decks piled with balls of opium and ingots of silver, unloaded consignments of the drug into fast rowing boats which ran the opium ashore under the eyes of compliant district officials. Bribery, already a recognised source of income for Chinese bureaucrats, was inflated to enormous sums by the opium trade, and the military forces around the coast were widely corrupted.³

Lin's crackdown in Canton simply drove the opium depot from the estuary out to Hong Kong, and the selling points to even more distant ports and estuaries. Pirates infested the coastal waters and bandits preyed upon the land routes that took opium into the interior. After the Opium War of

1839-42, when the British presence at sea was greatly strengthened, the pirates moved inland up the navigable rivers, adding significantly to the violence and rebellion that swept central China in the 1850s.

Meanwhile the opium trade continued in an official twilight. The Treaty of Nanking (1842) set up five treaty ports where foreigners could lease land and trade under consular protection, but opium was excluded from the agreement and its sale and distribution took place on receiving ships moored discreetly away from the ports.⁴ Half China's foreign trade was in a commodity which Chinese officials would not recognise and British officials could not prohibit.

Opium did not appear in the customs schedules until 1858. Thereafter the Chinese seem to have taken the view that import might as well be allowed into the open so it could be taxed and smuggling reduced, while laws against possession and consumption by Chinese citizens remained.

Only in this period, which coincided with the decline in prosecutions for drug offences, did the treatment of opium in China even begin to approach de facto legalisation. By then, however, the damaging consequences of ineffective suppression were already apparent: networks of illegal supply had been created, opium use was widespread south of the Yangtze and the bureaucratic system had been undermined.

China grows its own

After 1860 it was the Chinese themselves who played the major part in the production and distribution of opium, the most appropriate cash crop for many peasants. In Szechwan, for example, poppies could be grown in winter, leaving the summer harvest for food grains; in Yunnan, the backward state of communications meant opium was virtually the only cash crop that could be got to market.⁵ Being light but high

in value, opium was an ideal commodity for casual portage.

All over China, the production and distribution of opium became taxable activities. It was a time when rebels and local militias sought funds to fight each other, and when provinces became increasingly independent of Peking and embarked on their own modernisation programmes. Opium was too valuable a source of revenue for moral scruples to stand in the way of its exploitation.

By 1906 nearly a third of some provincial budgets came from opium taxes. The twin evils of rural underdevelopment and political instability, which provide a fertile environment for illicit drug production in many parts of the modern world, have their parallels in imperial China.

An addicted population?

The impact of the opium trade on the Chinese population was the subject of much adverse comment at the time, giving rise to the modern assumption that the nineteenth-century Chinese were uniquely drug-addicted. Such an assumption ought not to be made without careful consideration of the evidence.

Attempts to calculate levels of addiction have taken the total quantity of opium available and divided this by the amount required to sustain a heavy smoking habit. On this basis, estimates of the number of addicts have ranged between 2.8 million and 12.5 million for the 1830s, while Jonathan Spence has estimated that there were 15 million addicts in 1890.⁶

These numbers seem large, but represent between 1.5 and 6.8 per cent of the population of the provinces mainly affected in the 1830s, or 3.7 per cent of the national population in 1890.

Probably these calculations underestimate the amount of opium on the market, but, on the other hand, they do not make consistent use of the rudimentary definition of addiction on which they claim to be based, and the assumption is that opium was consumed solely by addicts.

This was clearly not the case. Opium was used in a variety of ceremonial and social situations: merchants often set the seal on a business arrangement by taking a pipe of opium together, and smoking was also a common accompaniment to gentry hospitality. Another important role for opium was as a folk medicine.

Since a large proportion of the available opium must have been consumed by these moderate users, full-scale non-medical addiction must have been much more limited than estimates suggest. Compared with the 23 million Americans (9.7 per cent of the population) believed to have recently consumed an illegal substance in 1985, it may even be doubted whether imperial China deserves its reputation as the most drug-ridden society in modern history.⁷ ■

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Chang op cit, p.34-35.

7. Bennett W.J. *National drug control strategy*. US White House, 1989, p.2.