

Causes of the opium war



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However, this prosperity and balance of trade came under severe threat when Britain discovered growing on the hills of India, a product that many Chinese people craved for and would shift the balance of trade in its favour – opium. In the ensuing war, the Chinese perceived cultural superiority did not reflect in its glaring military inferiority to the British technological and tactical military superiority (Schaffer Library of Drug Policy, 2010). China was heavily defeated in the war that also brought shame to Britain (CNN, 2009). In the British Parliament, William Ewart Gladstone criticised the government for a war he described as ‘ unjust in its origin’ and designed to cover Britain in permanent shame (Kossoff, 2010). Staring down the barrel of a gun, the Chinese were forced to sign a one-sided treaty at Nanking (see appendix B) as every Chinese move failed (CNN, 2009).

According to CNN, China was forced to part with 21 million ounces of silver to pay for a war started by Britain. Five ports were designated for unrestricted British trade – Shanghai, Canton, Ningpo, Amoy, and Foochow (Hooker, 1996) and Hong Kong became a British territory. Other Western countries soon moved in to exploit China’s war wounds as France and America secured similar trading concessions (CNN, 2009; Hooker, 1996). According to CNN, China’s defeat led to an invasion of Western culture, and on China’s doorstep, ‘ barbarians’ lived in grand houses. However, 150 years later, China has reclaimed these houses and taken back Hong Kong.

This essay aims to discuss the significant causes of the opium war over which there has been much controversy. On the one hand, the Chinese perspective on the cause of the war is about Britain’s immoral poisoning of China with opium from smuggling, while on the other hand Britain holds the

view that the war was as a result of Chinese arrogance that treated foreigners as inferior beings and subjected Western countries to unfair trade and unacceptable diplomatic standards.

Irreconcilable Cultural Differences

During the 18th and early 19th centuries, the Chinese culture projected a face of indifferent arrogance and contempt for foreigners which included the bland assumption of Chinese cultural superiority. This played a significant role in events that resulted in the opium wars (Hanes & Sanello, 2002; Helprin, 2006; Holt, 1964). The arrival of Western traders in China for the first time brought them in direct contact with a strange new world having an alien system of government. East Asian nations had barely any knowledge about Europe. Their relationship with each other was built on the idea of a Confucian hierarchy, with China as the head of the Asian family and other smaller nations - Korea, Japan, Vietnam, and Burma - occupying inferior positions around her (Schurmann & Schell, 1967).

This status was accepted by these nations and they paid homage to china by embarking on periodic visits to Peking to perform the ' Kowtow' - a series of kneeling down thrice and nine prostrations before the Emperor, climaxing with the tribute bearer bringing his nose to the floor (Schurmann & Schell, 1967; Holt, 1964). According to Holt (1964), the Chinese perceived China as the ' celestial empire' and their Emperor as the traditional Son of Heaven. Other rulers of the foreign world were perceived to be no more than vassals expected to pay tribute to the Son of Heaven (Holt, 1964; Lewis, 2009; Pelissier, 1967).

Holt (1964) as well as Hanes & Sanello (2002), note that envoys from England to China refused to perform this ritual, especially since they did not grant their own monarch such recognition. However, no matter how vehemently Britain protested, or how unreasonable she found this custom, and how powerful she declared herself to be, China made no exception to her treatment (Schurmann & Schell, 1967). Britain was among the other Western “barbarians”.

China’s perceived arrogance and deep sense of cultural superiority cocooned it from the rest of the civilized world by producing a complex administrative structure that isolated the Emperor and his chief advisers from direct diplomatic contacts. Though Britain had traded with the Chinese for many years, China declined to establish any formal diplomatic contacts because it did not perceive Britain as equal (Rodzinski, 1984). As noted by Chesneau, Bsatid & Bergere (1977), Britain twice attempted to dismantle this barrier by sending Lord Macartney in 1793 and Lord Amherst in 1816 as ambassadors to Peking. Both attempts failed. This was one of the infuriating features of the complex Chinese administrative structure that resulted in the Opium war.

Commercial Greed and Free Trade

The ‘foreign devils’ as they were called by the Chinese were merchants from many countries, particularly Britain, United states of America and Portugal but also included France, Germany, the Netherlands and Denmark (Holt, 1964). Portugal history with the Far East was the earliest and longest but Britain gradually secured the largest quota of the Chinese trade with the West. England’s trade with the Eastern countries was monopolised by the

East Indian Company until 1833. According to Holt (1964), this monopoly however allowed privately owned vessels from Britain and India to trade with China under licence from the East Indian Company. These vessels carried both raw cotton and the insidious drug - opium. Opium was a source of enormous revenue to the Indian Government, wealth to the foreign merchants, and brought pleasure as well as suffering to the people of China (Hanes & Sanello, 2002; Holt, 1964).

During this period, the British Government of India and the directors of the East Indian Company realised that the Chinese were addicted to opium and that this presented a great trade opportunity for a huge fortune. Opium cultivation was quickly monopolised by the Government and permission exclusively given to the East Indian Company for its production and sale for which the company paid substantial duty to the Indian Government (Holt, 1964). Both the British and Indian Governments found opium smuggling to China too lucrative to be discarded. By 1832, the duty paid on opium to the British Indian Government made up one-eighteenth of its gross revenue (Holt, 1964).

In the past, Britain had substantially imported tea, silk and porcelain from China. Holt (1964) estimates that twelve million pounds worth of tea was consumed in Britain annually. China had significantly much less interest in British goods of woollen, lead, iron and Cornish tin and so Britain had to pay for its trade deficit in silver (Pelissier, 1967; Holt, 1964). By 1817, China had been paid one hundred and fifty million pounds worth of silver by European traders (Holt, 1964). For the British Government, these profits from opium trade restored parity of payments from trade with China. Blinded by greed

both the British and Indian Governments failed in their legal and moral obligations not to participate in, or encourage the export to another country, goods prohibited by that country. This was another significant factor that provoked incidents that led to the opium war.

At this time, much of the economic theory guiding the British Empire was based on Cobden's perception of free trade - unrestricted trade in all commodities including narcotics (Ball, 2010). According to Ball, arguments for free trade were that it promoted civilization and peaceful influence. In 1833, parliament brought an end to the monopoly of trade enjoyed by the East Indian Company with China and established free trade (Holt, 1964). Private merchants succumbed to the greed for fast and enormous profits. Special ships known as ' opium clippers' were now more frequently being used for smuggling opium. Notable British owners included James Matheson, William Jardine and Lancelot Dent (Holt, 1964; Pelissier, 1967). These vessels were known to ship opium from India to China with great speed and efficiency thus compounding the opium addiction crisis in China.

Figure Opium Smuggling Clippers from the West (Hays, 2008)

Opium sales leaped. The trade spread from its original centre at Macao to nearby Lintin and by 1837 had reached the coast of Fukien, farther East. There they delivered their goods to Chinese smugglers in swift river boats called ' fast crabs' which headed for the opium dens (Pelissier, 1967). In the 1760s, China received about 1, 000 chests of opium. This increased to about 10, 000 chests in the 1820s. However, after free trade began in 1833, this amount reached 40, 000 chests of opium by 1838 (Rodzinski, 1984; Holt,

1964; Gelber, 2006). The opium crisis had become as much of an irritant to China as the refusal of equal status was to Britain (Pelissier, 1967; Holt, 1964). This massive increase in opium smuggling into China became a recipe for war.

The Effects of Opium on China

China's history with opium dates back to the 7th century when it was taken orally for medicinal purposes (Holt, 1964; Pelissier, 1967). After The Dutch introduced tobacco into Fukien and Formosa in 1620, the Chinese began smoking opium mixed with tobacco (Hays, 2008; Holt, 1964). By 1729, China was augmenting home-grown product by importing foreign opium from Portuguese traders. The damaging effect of opium smoking in China eventually led the Chinese Emperor to completely prohibit both home-grown cultivation and foreign importation of this pernicious article in 1780 (Holt, 1964). Apart from Portugal which actually began the importation of opium into China, French and Dutch companies were also involved in the trade within their limits. American firms also had their share in smuggling opium into China (Holt, 1964).

Corruption

Trade relations with the West had always been organized according to the 'Canton system' since the middle of the 18th century as Westerners were only allowed to trade in Canton. The Cohong was a group of Chinese firms exclusively responsible for trade with the West and fixed prices and volume of trade. The Cohong was responsible to the notoriously corrupt hoppo who received huge bribes from Hong merchants and members of the Cohong (Chesneau, Bsatid & Bergere, 1977).

The vested interests that controlled the opium trade within China included the foreign merchants, Chinese middle men and corrupt Chinese officials. These corrupt officials encouraged smuggling with little attempts at concealment. Even the Chinese fleet of ships stationed to prevent smuggling did nothing as long as they were duly paid a fixed charge on each smuggled chest of opium by the Chinese buyers. On occasions where the Chinese purchasers fell behind in payments, the foreign merchants were well too willing to oblige the admiral of the fleet with the payments (Allingham, 2006; Holt, 1964; The Free Dictionary, 2010). Massive corruption resulting from opium smuggling posed a major problem of authority that challenged the ability of the state to rule. This was the general pattern of trade that provoked the opium war. Canton and other ports of the Southeast regularly visited illegally by foreign vessels had become oases of corruption and insubordination (Chesneau, Bsatid & Bergere, 1977).

Addiction

Figure Opium Den in China (Hays, 2008)

While debates raged on in Britain about the moral sanction of the opium trade in China and about whose responsibility it was to stop the illegal trade—the British Government or the Chinese Government?(Holt, 1964), opium dens populated China. The effective aphrodisiac nature of the drug promoted obscenity. Smokers lay in stupor on wooden couches, their minds filled with fantasies and blissful emotions (Holt, 1964; Hays, 2008). Eventually, most of them were unable to work, business activities became significantly reduced and the civil service was almost completely paralysed (Holt, 1964; Allingham, 2006). According to Allingham, the smoking of opium had

affected the idle rich and more significantly, about 90 percent of all men under the age of forty in China's coastal regions. Sleepy addicts roamed the streets in their thousands causing many social problems and increasing the crime rate significantly as they searched for means to enable them support their habit (Wudi, 2002). According to Hays (2008), Emperor Tao-kuang's special High Commissioner Lin Tse-hsu estimated that 4 million Chinese people got addicted to opium but a British physician working in Canton puts the figure at about 12 million. Such was the level of addiction that led to the opium war. Even though Britain was aware of this level of addiction in China, it failed to respond positively to stop this decay.

Chinese Economy

This huge number of opium addicts required an equally huge supply of the drug. By 1838, opium represented 57 percent of Chinese imports (Allingham, 2006; Chesneauk, Bsatid & Bergere, 1977). This took its toll on the Chinese economy. The sale of goods to Westerners was no longer sufficient for Chinese purchase of opium. Export of Chinese silver, prized by the West for its fine quality had to be employed to balance trade (Chesneauk, Bsatid & Bergere, 1977; Asia for Educators, 2009). Even by 1833 when the East Indian Company's monopoly on trade ended, China already had a trade deficit of about 1.5 million to 2 million pounds a year that had to be paid in silver (Holt, 1964). This drain in Chinese silver caused inflation in its value within China and people had to pay more in copper for a fixed amount of silver (Holt, 1964).

High Commissioner Lin Tse-hsu

Emperor Tao-Kuang who was enthroned in 1820 had a fiery zeal for reform born out of genuine care for his people. He realised that the opium crisis required a radical cure (Holt, 1964). In 1838, after a great debate that involved most of China's top ranking officials in which a majority favoured an eradication of the opium trade while some advocated its legalization, Emperor Tao-Kuang commissioned a prominent official called Lin Tse-Hsu to go to Canton to eradicate the illicit opium trade that had become severely pervasive (Rodzinski, 1984; Chesneaux, Bsatid & Bergere, 1977). Extremely heavy punishments that included the death penalty were promulgated for native opium traders (O'Brien, 2010). According to Rodzinski (1984), Lin Tse-hsu was known for his integrity, justice, compassion and consideration for others. However, his attempt to carry out his assignment was fundamentally the immediate cause of the opium war (Teng & Fairbank, 1954; Rodzinski, 1984; Hooker, 1996).

Figure Artist Impression of Lin Tse-hsu (ChinaA2Z. Com, 2010)

When Lin arrived in Canton in March 1839, he began his mission by appealing to everyone, especially the foreign merchants, to co-operate with him in the suppression of opium smoking. He then ordered all foreign merchants to surrender to the Imperial Government all supplies of opium held in store-ships in Lintin. In addition every foreign merchant was given a three day ultimatum to sign a bond vowing to stop importing opium and agree that any default would lead to confiscation of the illegal cargo and execution of the defaulter (Holt, 1964; O'Brien, 2010). According to Holt,

under enormous pressure 20, 000 chests of British opium were turned over to Lin which he destroyed but Captain Charles Elliot (then Chief of the Commission) refused to allow British merchants sign the bonds. However a drunken brawl involving British and American sailors at a Kowloon village resulted in the death of a Chinese citizen called Lin Wei-hi. This brought more tension to the Anglo-Chinese crisis and directly resulted to an Anglo-Chinese war (Holt, 1964).

According to Holt, Lin had insisted that foreigners involved in Lin Wei-hi's death be handed over for trial. Captain Elliot refused, fearing unjust capital punishment as had occurred in the past. This led to a ban imposed by Lin on supplies of provisions and Chinese labour to the entire British community in Macao. Soon after, the British community was expelled from Macao to the barren island of Hong Kong. The effect was devastating on the community. In defiance however, Captain Elliot proceeded to arrange for supplies of food from the local peasantry backed by the 28-gun frigate which opened fire on some Chinese war junks that tried to prevent deliver of these supplies. This marked the beginning of military hostilities between Britain and China (Holt, 1964).

Aggrieved, especially because British merchants in response to Captain Elliot's orders had refused to resume normal trading in Canton after they were expelled from Macao, Lin issued a formal war threat accompanied with a demand for all British merchant ships in Chinese territory to resume trade in Canton within three days or leave the country. This again led to another military confrontation in which China sustained heavy losses and the whole Chinese fleet was forced to retreat as 29 war junks were no match for the

British frigates (Holt 1964). Lin responded by writing a long letter to Queen Victoria (see appendix A) in which he argued that the Chinese cause pertained to England's insistence on poisoning Chinese citizens with opium already banned in England. Many authors on the opium wars have expressed doubts that Lin's letter ever got to the Queen. In 1840, Lin passed an edict that listed the crimes committed by British merchants and barring Britain from trading with China forever (Holt, 1964).

The British Response

Having reached a decision to go to war, Britain responded by issuing an ultimatum to China demanding that China returned all confiscated goods or paid the monetary equivalent, reparations for imprisoning the Chief Superintendent of trade and British merchants, and that British trade would be secured in future. Britain declared that if China did not meet these claims as well as sign a treaty with these claims incorporated, the war would continue.

However, Britain acknowledged to China, its right to prohibit the import of opium but insisted that The Queen of England was obliged to protect her people from violence and ill treatment. Britain suggested that China should have dealt instead with its corrupt official who connived in the opium trade. Britain certainly took this position to protect her economic interest by forcing China into maintaining trade. By barring trade with Britain, China had provided the opportunity for Britain to exploit grievances Britain already had. This was the deciding factor that led to the Opium wars.

Conclusion

China's arrogance born out of a sense of cultural superiority created tension that significantly affected its relationship with Westerners. This was particularly evident in China's refusal to consider a mutually favourable balanced trade with western nations. But for this arrogance, Lin Tse-hsu would have immediately recognized that the Chinese military was inferior to the British and hence he would have adopted a more diplomatic approach rather than threaten war. His actions in trying to eradicate opium smoking and smuggling led directly to the opium war.

China's seclusion prevented proper diplomatic relationship with the West. This vital requirement between nations could have prevented a war, but instead it bred grievances that were significant to the Anglo-Chinese war. Such grievances encouraged Britain to promote free trade which led to an increase in opium smuggling, corruption and insubordination. Opium smuggling also resulted in China's increased opium addiction and subsequent destruction of lives, families, the Chinese society and degradation of the Chinese economy.

This caused great concern to the Chinese Government and thus increased tensions between both countries

The British desire to balance trade with china, establish proper diplomatic relations and be treated as equal to China were important factors that provoked the opium war. This was partly due to commercial greed. As a result, even though Britain recognized the damage opium had done in China, she failed in her moral and legal duty not to encourage or participate in

smuggling opium into China, especially after it had been banned in Britain. Finally, Britain's decision to go to war with china because it wanted to protect its citizens from Chinese unfair treatment was only an excuse that was justifiable in part. However, it was mainly to protect its economic interest with China by forcing China to continue trade which China had prohibited. A decision Britain took with the realization of the extent of Chinese military inferiority. This factor encouraged Britain to go to war.