# Opium trade between Britain & China

## Introduction

Firstly, opium is a substance produced from the opium poppy. One of the primary narcotic agents in opium is morphine. This is actually one of the commodities that have greatly attracted the attention of many historians for decades. It was first grown in Asia and was used for its medicinal properties to cure diarrhea and relieve cholera pains and dysentery. Its medicinal properties were noticeably known in the 13th century. It was introduced in China by the Arabs in the 19th century (Brook & Wakabayashi, 2000). During the 17th century, its consumption began changing from medicinal to recreational purposes. After some few years opium became a threat when individuals began smoking it as a mix of it and tobacco. This was when the introduction of policies by the Chinese emperor to ban the smoking of opium started. This trade was actually one of the great sources of revenue during this period as it became popular in many parts of China, Asia, Britain, and India. In India, the Mughal dynasty was widely growing opium poppy and making a profitable trade with East Asia and China (Brook & Wakabayashi, 2000). It was the largest source of revenue for the Mughal dynasty in India. The Mughal dynasty started falling in 1658, and thus the British through the East India organization took over the cultivation and production of opium. The British used the profits from the sale of opium to buy such Chinese luxury goods as tea, silk and porcelain, which were in great demand in the West. Britain largely exported opium grown in India and sold it to China, and this is how the opium trade started in this countries. In this paper, we will exclusively focus on the analysis of the opium trade in China and Britain (Brook & Wakabayashi, 2000).

## Analysis of the opium trade

As explicated earlier, opium was one of the commodities that were popular during the 19th century in India. It brought a good amount of revenue to this country, and this was the main reason that made other countries such as China and Britain to engage in this trade as they knew that this was a precious good that would bring a lot of revenue to their countries (Wakeman, n.d). Britain started purchasing the opium from India and exported it to China. Britain started this illegal trade with China in 1673. A trade that was in the form of a triangle began between China, India, and Britain where commodities such as opium, tea, and silver were bartered between the countries. During this trade, India was simply an instrument for the British to produce the opium that they anticipated to sell to China in return for silver and tea which was exported to Britain (Eykholt, 2000). China was actually one of the countries that played a key role in trade as it was the producer and consumer of tea and batered with opium.

Despite the fact that opium smoking was forbidden except use for medical purposes with license in 1729 by the Chinese government, illegal smuggling sustained. Opium use increased significantly despite the ban and it gradually spread from the coasts to the center of the country as indicated by Brook & Wakabayashi (2000). Because the commodity was sold at good prices, the Chinese officials also became corrupt and accepted bribes from the traders of opium thus it would be hard to be eradicated by the government easily. However, the British took advantage of these corrupt officials and occupied the port of Macao and Canton (Wakeman, n.d). In 1796, the Canton port was banned for the trade due to the sudden increase of the traders and usage of opium, but this never lasted for long as the British did not withdraw from the port. The British began selling opium at Calcutta port to local merchants from China who illegitimately traded the opium into China. The whole southern coast of china was under the British control during 1830-1839. The Chinese government kept restating the policies concerning import of opium, smoking and illegal trade throughout the era from 1821 to 1838. The Chinese emperor during this period went to the extent of imposing death penalties on the illegal drug traders (Brook & Wakabayashi, 2000).

In Britain, the trade was to be controlled by parliament during this period with China through the crown but not the East India Company (Eykholt, 2000). The officials or the representatives from the crown went ahead to convince China to make the trade legal and open up the port of Canton for the trade of opium, but all was in vain as the emperor denied this and even released a 39-article statute. It specified at outlawing opium at the ports and arresting the consumers to get to the illegal traders (Blue, 2000). It was an order of punishing the traders of opium and the smokers both internationally and locally. This order failed as all officials and informers were allied with the opium trade and weren’t ready to surrender. The trade went on despite the ban by the Chinese emperor as posited by Eykholt (2000).

The government of China never gave up on illegalizing the trade of opium as the emperor send Lin Zu-xe to control and regulate the trade in the canton port (Blue, 2000). They took risky steps to stop the opium trade by burning the British opium and destroyed the British ships. This simply led to the start of the First Opium War which continued from 1839 to 1842. This battle ensued in the conquest of Lin's military and the signing of the "Treaty of Nanjing." The treaty unlocked several ports to the British, Chinese controls were removed and eventually China was entirely opened to the west (Brook & Wakabayashi, 2000).

The exports from China outdid the imports by the British by 1853 thus the British had to look for more strategies to balance out the trade. They took silver, tea, silk and spices from the Chinese and in return upsurge the quantity of opium imported. They brought in other strategies of stressing the use of opium to increase its demand so as they could make more money (Blue, 2000). Gradually the associations between the Chinese government and the British became exceedingly rough, and this steered the Second Opium War (1856-1857). The successors of the Chinese emperor likewise opposed this illegal opium trade and battled the British but in vain. The British and the French army who were together fought this battle and once again defeated the Chinese. The Chinese, embarrassed yet again, had no option other than to sign the "Treaty of Teintsin" which opened some of the ports to the west and further asked China to remunerate the victory allies silver for their victory (Blue, 2000). The Chinese went ahead and opposed, protested and denied this payment. The French and the British army streamed into Peking and attacked the palace. The Chinese were conquered and signed the "Treaty of Peking" which ultimately legalized opium in China. It was actually a trade of war but the British emerged victors thus opium was able to be traded in all parts of China. According to Eykholt (2000), this drug became a major menace in the Republic of China as more people became more addicted to drug. The Chinese government was thus unable to control the trade as it would engage in the war once again with Britain and French (Wakeman, n.d.).

## Conclusion

In conclusion, China tried to kick out the dangerous drug from the country, but it failed. It faced severe opium problem which had to be addressed internationally. The trade went on in China despite the government illegalizing it. The issue deserved an international response to global laws on production and consumption of opiates. One basic ethical issue of this trade was that the British had snubbed the fact that this unsafe drug was being forbidden in their own nation even when they were unlawfully trading it into China to make more money as they could from this trade. Although the Chinese government cared for the good health of its people, they were overwhelmed by the force they got from these countries that traded with opium. They had no option other than to allow the trade of the commodity to keep the country safe and keep off from the war.

## References

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