

THE ORIGINS OF THE OPIUM WARS

HIST 699

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Abstract

This research includes a brief historiography surrounding the Opium Wars, comparing the perspectives contributing to the overall view of the military expedition through the study of Leeds Mercury News Paper articles, pamphlets, and other historical perspectives from the mid-18th century to the present day. Following the historiography, I will offer my perspective through supported documents regarding who pursued the Opium Wars, ranging from families in Europe, China, and India to America and beyond, in addition to why they were pursued and what was to be gained and ultimately proving the existence of widespread condemnation for the unjust, nefarious, and morally bankrupt Opium war.¹

¹ Stephen R. Platt, *Imperial Twilight: The Opium War and the End of China's Last Golden Age*, Knopf (2018) p.

In exploring the historiography of the Opium Wars, one can see that the trade had been taking place for quite some time, growing into a monopoly and eventually an erratic trade that sought to “open up” China to the rest of the Western world. Initially, a trade meant to carry on covertly while lining the pockets of the aristocratic families of the Western world, there was a clear break with the proletariat from the beginning. This isn’t to say that there were not individuals of the upper class that sought trade with China on morally acceptable grounds, as there were. Still, the majority were known as “smugglers” or drug runners and held nefarious intentions. Further, in analyzing historical sources from the mid-18th century to the present day, we see a majority that was wildly sympathetic to the Chinese as the Western elite waged their “nefarious war” against them. As history progressed, these views of sympathies were steadfast, as seen in the depth of research that continued on the same path through time while perspectives simultaneously sought accountability amongst the Western ruling class and aristocracy, a trend that continues today, with mild interjection from the elite, while at the same time, historians have brought more information to light regarding individuals involved, just as you’d expect from research that has stood steadfast and unwavering with the same laser beam focus for over one hundred and fifty years, yielding a wealth of information which should be regarded as study material for all who wish to understand the dynamics of China and the western empires. The fact that this information has evaded the public school curriculum is beyond alarming. It highlights the suppression of information by the very elite today, who gained their wealth through drug smugglers. Indeed, this would change the perspective of the proletariat of their upper ruling class, which, as well-known historian Howard Zinn has made very clear, works very hard to keep sensitive information under wraps, conforming to a consensus history. Regardless, there has been

a concerted effort amongst historians and significant publications to remember the Opium War as it was: an immoral and unpopular war.

On the eve of the war, publications around the world printed material regarding the opium trade. One of the major themes was the morality of the trade. Most of these works published in this early period helped shape future history on the subject. Of these early sources and publications was the Leeds Mercury, which, in 1839, began running a series of articles encompassing the history and current events regarding the opium trade, proposing the question of morality and long-term projected effects of the trade. Even further, the Mercury professed a need for accountability while simultaneously naming individual criminal smugglers at work in China; most noteworthy was the East India Company (EIC) and Great Britain's ruling class.

The Mercury began by claiming that there had never been a time “more manifest than the case of British Opium trade with China” that required public attention as the Chinese population had been forced into a destructive habitual lifestyle.² Additionally, the Mercury provides the reader with statistics illustrating the growth of the Opium trade from a thousand chests per year as a medical commodity to 40,000 chests per year as a “luxury item.”³ The Mercury also cast a general net of responsibility over the EIC and merely “the entire body of British Merchant's resident of Canton” as bearing the guilt of the Opium Trade.³ This is, however, only partially true, as we will see later that the British were not alone in their sinister trade but merely a cog in the wheel. There were many actors from America, China, and India. However, EIC owned most

² Leeds Mercury, British opium Trade with China, September 7th, 1839, British Opium Trade with China. Pamphlets. B. Hudson, Printer, 1839. <https://jstor.org/stable/60212219>.p.3

³ Mercury, British opium Trade (1839) p. 3

³ Mercury, British opium Trade (1839) p. 4

poppy plantations, which it received upon colonization of India, and was complicit in the initial surge of opiates into China.⁴

The Mercury also explains the ramifications of Opium use to the general user and how it compares to alcohol by citing the work of Mr. Thelwall's descriptions and ultimately concluding that "the operation of Opium is, on this account, more deadly by many degrees than its less tyrannous rival (alcohol)" and "of those who use it to great excess, the breath becomes feeble, the body wasted, the teeth black; the individuals themselves clearly see the evil effects of it, yet cannot refrain from it. It will be found on examination that the smokers of Opium are idle, lazy vagrants, having no useful purpose before them..."⁵ Essentially, the effects of Opium on the Chinese population will have economic ramifications for all those in Britain who seek to trade morally with a productive and healthy Chinese population. The money the demand of the corrupt merchant in retribution for their destroyed opium will bankrupt the general population and is done so with complete disregard for Great Britain.⁶

Aside from the economic impact of the smuggler's morally bankrupt trade comes "the greatest obstacle to Missionary success..."⁷ It is through the Opium trade the Chinese victim remains unwilling to speak to missionaries in terms of religion without addressing the opium issue first, and rightly so.⁸

The second article in the Mercury series interviews Mr. King from Olyphant & Co., who it portrays as a trader of Canton who "he and his partners have never contaminated themselves by meddling in the guilty traffic."⁹ King explains the occurrences at the Canton factory, from

⁴ Ghosh, Amitav, *Smoke and Ashes* (New York, Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2023)

⁵ Mercury, *British opium Trade* (1839) p.6

⁶ Mercury, *British opium Trade* (1839) p.7

⁷ Mercury, *British opium Trade* (1839) p. 8

⁸ Mercury, *British opium Trade* (1839) p. 9

⁹ Mercury, *British opium Trade* (1839) p. 9

public executions of Chinese smugglers in the factory square to the eventual confiscation of all opium from the merchants residing in Canton carried out by no other than Commissioner Lin Xesu.¹⁰ Understandably, King sees the actions of China as righteous and justified, as this centuries-long endeavor harmed the party. King and the Mercury conclude that unless the British government were to intervene to end the cultivation and distribution of the poppy, all trade with China, not just the opium trade, would be at a potential loss and that it is the government's responsibility to answer the call as "the opium trade is the child of their adoption."¹¹

The third installment in the Mercuries series outlines the purported justifications for the Opium War, none of which it agrees with. The first was the insult and imprisonment of Captain Elliot, and the second was the charge that China had violated the law of nations by imprisoning the merchants of Canton in their factory compound, which, according to the morally correct Mercury, were justifiable in defense of the Chinese and their dealings with the smugglers of Canton.¹²

The fourth installment of Mercury continues to stir up feelings of resentment among the British population by pointing out the fact that these occurrences abroad, some "12,000 miles distant," will absolutely find their way home if left unchecked and that now is the time for individuals who do not agree with the current policy of the government to take action in the form of protest.¹³

The final installment in the Leeds Mercury Opium series outlines the feudal plantation system employed in India under the work of indentured servants with which the product is

¹⁰ Mercury, British opium Trade (1839) p. 12

¹¹ Mercury, British opium Trade (1839) p. 15

¹² Mercury, British opium Trade (1839) p. 19

¹³ Mercury, British opium Trade (1839) p. 22-23

shipped to auction in China with “the degradation and oppression of India,-and to the unspeakable dishonour of Great Britain,” all operated under the strict monopoly of the EIC.¹⁴

Ultimately, the Mercury's position is clearly one of moral high ground. The survey of historical facts they have gathered is quite expansive and lays the foundation for further conversation both for and against the Opium War; however, as we will see, there is far more correspondence condemning the war than there is to support it. They have explicitly named the British Crown and the EIC as the most complicit and guilty parties in the Opium trade, but the blame shall grow, as we will see in further sources.

At the close of the first Opium War, The Advocate of Peace released a short article that starts by outlining the results of the war in the form of a concession to the crown. Namely, China must pay for the war over three years at a grand total of 21,000,000 (with the war itself costing over 100,000,000), five ports shall open to the British, including Canton, Amoy, Ningpo, and two others, Hong Kong is now a British colony, all prisoners shall be restored, an amnesty published, all officers of Britain and China shall be treated as equal, and the island of Chusan and Kolang-soo will remain occupied until full payment if tribute is made.¹⁵ Coming at the close of the war and maintaining the same moral demeanor regarding the war itself, the presence of first-hand accounts on the battlefield begins to surface, adding to the horror, and said by the Spectator to be “not a war, but sheer butchery.”¹⁶ Captain Bingham of the Royal Navy has shared a number of atrocities of unequal warfare where the British seemingly slaughtered hordes of innocent men, women, and children in every port they sought to gain access to, most of which were located in

¹⁴ Mercury, British opium Trade (1839) p. 27

¹⁵ Chinese War, The Advocate of Peace (1837-1845), January, 1843, Vol. 5, No. 1 (1843) p. 6

¹⁶ Chinese War, The Advocate (1843) p.6

dense villages. One account that truly stood out, quoted by Captain Brigham, outlines the level of devastation felt by the Chinese and witnessed by the British,

“With such tremendous bombardment as had been going on for two hours in the densely populated neighborhood, it must be expected pitiable sights were to be witnessed. At one spot, four children were struck down, while the frantic father was occasionally embracing their bodies or making attempts to drown himself in a neighboring tank.”¹⁷ The Advocate goes on to quote the Boston Courier as well, “The British forces have made religion and civilization, in the eyes of the Chinese, synonymous with murder and rapine. Violating women, who committed suicide immediately afterward, breaking to pieces monuments erected to the memory of the dead; digging up and mutilating bodies...”¹⁸ The atrocities are endlessly listed in the article and are quite depressing, and, as is displayed by the publication itself, there is immense remorse for Britain's actions and sympathy for the Chinese.

Somewhat selfishly, like the Mercury, the Advocate condemned Great Britain's actions but asked how this would affect the mission's efforts to evangelize China.¹⁹ I think it's safe to say that after the “red-headed barbarian's” actions in China, it may have been time for the Europeans to call their religion into question. Yet, they did not, as religion remained the base until well into the 20th century.

Ultimately, the Advocate takes a hard line against the actions of the alliance of the British crown and the smugglers against the celestial empire and offers praise to both secular and religious press, both England and America, “so loud in condemnation of the atrocities.”²⁰ As we can see, moral disgust is carried through from the earlier articles and elaborates further on the

¹⁷ Chinese War, The Advocate (1843), p. 7

¹⁸ Chinese War, The Advocate (1843), p. 7

¹⁹ Chinese War, The Advocate (1843), P. 8

²⁰ Chinese War, The Advocate (1843), P. 8

actions carried out against innocent Chinese, building upon earlier historical analysis and adding to the complete picture of the perspective of the Opium Wars.

On September 20th, 1858, Karl Marx shared his perspective on the Opium Wars in which he carried a more analytical approach to the commercial aspects (not surprisingly) of the Opium Wars and whether they would yield the desired results or be shut down the “by the general pressure of the civilized world to abandon the compulsory opium cultivation in India and the armed opium propaganda to China.”²¹ Marx quotes Montgomery Martin to give gravity to the morally inept situation, “Why, the ‘slave trade’ was merciful compared to the ‘Opium trade’” and that “every hour is bringing new victims to a Moloch which knows no satiety.”²² Whether or not it’s worth comparing this issue to slavery, I don’t believe it is adequate, as Martin could have been trying to relieve himself of his guilt. Still, the indentured servants or slaves anywhere is not morally acceptable. Further, using the reference to the biblical Moloch gives gravity to the level of depravity Martin perceived in the Opium Wars.

Regarding commerce, Marx understood that China was forced to purchase and consume immense amounts of Opium, which would not yield fruitful results in further commerce beyond the Opium trade. Marx again quotes Martin’s narration in response to an officer's request of the Chinese to increase commerce, “cease to send us so much opium, and we will be able to take your manufactures.”²³ There was only so much that could be extracted from the Chinese population, and the opium trade took up most of that capacity.

Marx also provides a brief history of the Opium trade with its origins again in medicine until speculation on behalf of the EIC, first with failure in Macao and then with great success in

²¹ Marx, Karl, Trade or Opium, New York Daily Tribune, September 20, 1858 p. 1

²² Marx, Trade or Opium (1858) p. 1

²³ Marx, Trade or Opium (1858), p. 2

Canton, until the EIC took its role as purely a producer in 1798, eventually with the EIC “rapidly converting the cultivation of opium in India, and its contraband sale to China, into internal parts of its own financial system,” ultimately a tragedy.²⁴

Marx follows the same theme of morality and builds on the earlier history of the opium wars by adding a further analysis of the commercial capacity of the Chinese under the demands to purchase goods from all Westerners, as the opium trade overruns their Economic capacity.

In 1860, David McLaren gave his perspective on the opium war. Following the theme of all previous historical perspectives, McLaren breaks down the causes and history in much the same way as earlier historians; however, as to be expected from highly focused work that follows the same theme as earlier individuals, he has expanded on earlier knowledge as well as offer the concession which was made by the Chinese to the west after the second opium war, “to admit opium on a fixed duty.”²⁵ Hence making opium essentially a legal commodity.

David McLaren offers an elaborate breakdown of the commercial aspects of the trade, building further on Marx's statement. Still, British imports were increasing while exports merely stayed the same, and by forcing opium into the occasion as a form of currency, ultimately, as the consumption of tea and silk increased, so would the export of opium.²⁶ McLaren quotes a somewhat surprising statement from Captain Elliot about the general effects, which is “intensely mischievous to every branch of trade.”²⁷

McLaren also explains the perils of the use of Opium, much in the same way as earlier sourced in the Mercury, in comparison to alcohol, in which Dr. Medhurst is quoted stating there

²⁴ Marx, Trade or Opium (1858), p. 3

²⁵ McLaren, David, An Inquiry into the results of the opium Trade with China: Including its bearing on the export of British Manufactures, The Opium Trade with China (1860) p. 6

²⁶ McLaren, the opium Trade (1860) p. 8

²⁷ McLaren, the opium Trade (1860) p. 10

is no comparison as it promotes “such destitute persons unable to procure either food or drug, lying at the last gasp...”²⁸ There is no shortage of examples of the pitfalls of opium use in this source, and it even goes to great lengths to put forth some of the most soul-crushing moments witnessed by opium users. The most depressing, by far, is the following account by Dr. Little, quoted by McLaren,

“upstairs, I found one woman who had been an opium smoker for three years. She stated she had two children, but they were very sickly, and always crying. And how did she stifle their cries? O, women ! if you have a spark of motherly feeling in you, ye will join with me in execrating this vice, whose practices are so horrible, that, if I could not vouch for it, credulity itself might turn a deaf ear to my cry. I saw a woman pressing her shriveled, sapless breasts, her weeping offspring, whose thin and yellow face, and withered limbs, showed how little sustenance was to be obtained there. Its shrill cries and convulsive limbs seemed now to excite the attention of the mother, who was all the time enjoying her pipe, when, to my horror and astonishment, she conveyed from her lips to that of the child’s the fresh-drawn opiate vapor, which the babe inspired. This was repeated twice, when it fell back a senseless mass into its mother’s arms, and allowed her quietly to finish her unholy repast.”²⁹

This account illustrates just how deadly and deep the addiction to opium runs and is sure to act as a deterrent when the opiate decides to make landfall In Europe, as I'm sure it was intended.

Beyond the horrors inflicted on the population, McLaren provides details of the trade itself and how Britain had annexed Scinde as a “necessary act of villainy” in which possession of the ports would enable the EIC to raise the transit duty. Through this port, factories produced and

²⁸ McLaren, the opium Trade (1860) p. 12

²⁹ McLaren, the opium Trade (1860), p. 13

delivered various types of opium, piloting each to find which one the Chinese preferred the most and then mass-producing it for export.³⁰

Ultimately, McLaren states that opium should be prohibited and counters a common argument that “prohibition is impossible,” to which he responds that “it is practiced with complete success already, wherever it is wished.”³¹ Further, that sovereignty is not divided and “that can never be politically or economically right, which is morally wrong.”³² McLaren continues to follow the theme of earlier historical research while expanding the conversation and shedding more light on the inner workings and results of the system.

In 1875, W. E. Ormerod released his interpretation of the opium trade with China, in which he opened with a statement condemning the reduction of Christianity to a caricature.³³ This is the first time in our reviewed documents that Christianity is mentioned beyond the goal of evangelization and more of a self-realization that the opium wars were unjust and broke firmly from the Christian mission with which it had been so earlier intertwined.

Ormerod follows the theme of earlier work in which he provides a brief history of the opium trade and how it got to the current era (1875); however, he elaborates further on the effects of the opium trade in India. Specifically, where the indigenous population is forced into the farming of the poppy, in which “nine-tenths of the whole” is sent directly to China.³⁴

One of the most damning accounts to come out of India was the famine of Rajpootana, in which starving people flocked to Malwa, but Malwa only exported opium and grew no grain, leading to the great famine in which 1.2 million people perished.³⁵ Had the 289,000 acres been

³⁰ McLaren, the opium Trade (1860), p. 14

³¹ McLaren, the opium Trade (1860), p. 16

³² McLaren, the opium Trade (1860) p. 16

³³ Ormerod, W. E., Our Opium Trade with China, and England’s Injustice Towards the Chinese (1875) P. 3

³⁴ Ormerod, Opium Trade (1875) p. 5

³⁵ Ormerod, Opium Trade (1875) p. 5

used appropriately for grain, the famine would not have happened, but Britain's death grip on India was too great, and the crown was too morally bankrupt to act accordingly.

When Ormerod arrived at the history of the Opium trade in China and the destruction of the opium by Lin Xesu, Ormerod has “honours the patriotism and admire the pluck of the brave Commissioner who dared step forth in defense of his country, and, in the interests of simple justice and of common humanity, to make a firm stand against a nation so great and powerful as our own.”³⁶ Ormerod, as his words state, appreciates the actions of Lin as he had taken more definitive and decisive action against the corrupt drug trade that one would hope their own government would make. Ormerod also takes a moment to appreciate the actions of Commissioner Keying and Emperor of China in which both men sought not to put a value on the health of their citizens. A moral code that has been entirely absent from the governments of the west, especially Britain.³⁷

Ormerod concludes that the Chinese have lost faith in the English because of the immoral opium trade and that the government’s inaction illustrates precisely what their goals are, as “actions speak louder than words.” Lastly, Ormerod states that the opium trade is, yet again, an obstacle to the spread of Christianity and calls on the politician to remember his honest morals for the sake of all.³⁸

We take a moment to briefly shift our sources from the mainland Western empire to the Celestial Empire in the accounts of Yuan Wei. Wei’s perspective of the opium trade in China offers a refreshing shift from the Western perspective and adds to the richness of the trade's history. He begins with what seems to be the first address of the fears of China falling victim to

³⁶ Ormerod, *Opium Trade* (1875) p. 9

³⁷ Ormerod, *Opium Trade* (1875) p. 10

³⁸ Ormerod, *Opium Trade* (1875) p. 20

Western imperialism, just as it bore witness in India and Java and “endeavored to seduce Annam.”³⁹

Wei follows the same historical pattern as many of the Western historical perspectives, with the continuation of slights that accumulated against the Chinese and led Lin Xesu to act in the destruction of the smuggler’s opium, starting with the altercations with lord Napier and Elliot on top of requesting the arrest of Jardine, which had already fled Canton to attempt to petition Palmerston into action.⁴⁰

Wei explains that when five Chinese ships had been dispatched to preserve order, the English mistook the red Chinese flag for the red flag of war in Europe. Fire was returned in which many Europeans soldiers died. This became the soft beginning of the Opium War. Wei Yuan concluded part one that he agreed with the popular verdict that trade should not have been stopped, - but with the reservation that opium should not have been intended anymore in trade and that steps should have been taken to prevent the English from taking advantage of the weakness of China’s maritime preparations...⁴¹ Whether this action would have prevented the eventual dispute between the smugglers and the celestial empire is up for debate; however, eventually, the war would have ensued as Canton merchant infractions and boldness ensued.

Ultimately, with very few exceptions, Wei’s historical perspective did not differ much from the sympathetic Western perspective of the Opium War. They had been wronged and were bound to act as a means of self-defense and preservation. However, the first blow was that of the English.

³⁹ Wei, Yuan, Chinese Account of the Opium War (1988) p. 3

⁴⁰ Wei, Chinese Account (1988) p. 4-6

⁴¹ Wei, Chinese Account (1988) p. 40

In 1896, David A. Wells contributed to the topic of the opium war in which he breaks with all other interpretations and of sympathy for the Chinese. Wells paints a much different picture of liberating the English from their guilt. He does so by stating that opium was already grown in at least ten provinces in China, that the opium trade existed long before the English arrival, and that the Chinese government failed to enter fair negotiations with the English.⁴² This is a valiant effort on the part of Wells, but nothing about these statements follows that China is a sovereign nation which can dictate its continental actions.

Wells also states that the insults thrown at Elliot and Napier were also terms for war because they belittled him, on top of his public execution in the factory square. At the same time, Wells recognizes the crimes committed by the smugglers against the Chinese that led to these events. Further, Wells explains that if the English hadn't attacked China, the United States would have eventually done so.

Wells concludes that "Britain has the righteous cause. The opium question is not the cause of war, but arrogant and insupportable pretensions of China that she will hold commercial intercourse with the rest of mankind, not upon terms of equal reciprocity, but upon the insulting and degrading forms of the relation between lord and vassal."⁴³ Wells, however, vindicated he may feel, makes extremely bold and arrogant claims that would be expected from an imperialist colonizer with a supremacist mentality. In his own statement, he says that China will be forced to trade with the rest of humankind. There was only one belligerent, and it was not the Chinese.

Shortly after Wells' publication, Joseph G. Alexander responded that Wells' work was anything but a "collection of facts." Alexander dismantles Wells' petty and baseless claims using the information previously well-known and greatly discussed above. Most noteworthy, though, is

⁴² Wells, David, *The Truth about the "Opium War"* (1896)

⁴³ Wells, *The Truth about the "Opium War"* (1896)

that he refutes Wells' claim that the war was, in fact, not an opium war. It factually was, as Alexander states, "the seizure of contraband, which was the direct cause of war. This was expressly stated to have been the case by Sir Henry Pottinger, the British Plenipotentiary who negotiated, in 1842, the Treaty of Nanking."⁴⁴ Wells was defeated by his lack of use of primary sources and his failure to consult factual history as it is recorded. Alexander concludes with a quote from Mr. Gladstone's speech in the house of commons,

"A war more unjust in its origins, a war more calculated to cover this country with permanent disgrace, I do not know, and I have not read of. The right and honorable gentlemen opposite spoke of this British flag waving in glory at Canton. That Flag is hoisted to protect an infamous contraband traffic..."⁴⁵ Through Alexander's brief analysis and the words of Mr. Gladstone, it is apparent that all citizens and some politicians were against the war, while most politicians, smugglers, and very few citizens supported the atrocities being carried out by the English in China.

In 1968, Jaques M. Downs offered a more focused evaluation of the opium wars, specifically, the role of American merchants. Downs begins by reiterating Britain's monopoly over the drug trade, which was the source of much of China's humiliation. However, Americans played a pivotal role that is meagerly studied.⁴⁶ The Americans pioneered new trade methods designed to circumvent the EIC and Chinese prohibition tactics and operated an industry that perilously developed into a means of national interest in the same way Southern slavery did into a means of national interest.⁴⁷

⁴⁴ Alexander, Joseph, G., *The Truth about the Opium War* (1896) p. 382

⁴⁵ Alexander, *The Truth* (1896) p. 383

⁴⁶ Downs, Jaques, M., *American Merchants and the China Opium Trade, 1800-1840* (1968) P. 418

⁴⁷ Downs, *Opium Trade* (1968) P. 420

Americans acquired their opium through a sophisticated trade pattern, which yielded Turkish opium, specifically loaded in Smyrna. After the opium was acquired, it was generally distributed by the British Levant Company to utilize the British flag for protection in appeasement of the Sublime Porte, which proved to be a lucrative enough venture to inspire more American companies to get involved. However, some of the first merchants were James and Benjamin C. Wilcox.⁴⁸ This excitement led to “opium rushes,” which left the American system ebbing and flowing, systematic highs and lows—periods of glut and abstinence, which was the pattern maintained in the American opium trade. Perkins and Company and Allied Concerns were the main organizers of the opium trade.⁴⁹ Through the analysis of Amitav Ghosh, it is stated that the Perkins, Sturgis, Russell, and Forbes families, who were all as intricately interrelated as the mafia lineage in southern Italy, calling themselves the Boston Concern.⁵⁰

After the prohibition of EIC monopoly, Americans grew bolder and tireless and began picking up opium for distribution at multiple ports, including that of the Mediterranean and London, creating new business for commission merchants.⁵¹ In the outbreak of the war of 1813, Willcocks began a new method of opium dealing for the Americans, that of marketing Indian opium in China, however it is worth noting that all smugglers attempted to cover their tracks.⁵²

Of the biggest sellers in America were the Girard, Astor, Joseph Peabody of Salem, John Donnell of Baltimore, and the Perkins firm.⁵³ Offering a clear break from previous historical perspectives which merely absolved the Americans of their opium sins, we now have evidence of their direct involvement in the monopoly in all capacities. Speaking further, Perkins & Company

⁴⁸ Downs, *Opium Trade* (1968) P. 422

⁴⁹ Downs, *Opium Trade* (1968) P. 423

⁵⁰ Ghosh, *Smoke and Ashes* P. 169

⁵¹ Downs, *Opium Trade* (1968) P. 5423

⁵² Downs, *Opium Trade* (1968) P. 424

⁵³ Downs, *Opium Trade* (1968) P. 425

took advantage of Chinese crackdowns because they knew sales would be deterred. Meanwhile, they made a killing.⁵⁴ Meanwhile, the same crackdowns and saturation of the market drew Cushing and Howqua to divest into direct connections and instead begin to work through his direct relatives, who were principles in the company of James P. Sturgis & Company.⁵⁵ In response to China's heightened resistance to the opium trade, Americans were said to have helped usher in the use of Lintin as an anchor point for smuggles to stop at sea and trade their drugs to the Chinese, who would then take their opium into port for resale.

Overall, Downs makes a break from the earlier historical perspective of investing the opium war as a top-down entity and, instead, does a fantastic job focusing on the American activities in China and the overall opium trade. The names including Perkins, Sturgis, Forbes, Cabot, Bryant, Paine, Cushing, and Higginson are all linked by blood, marriage, friendship, business, etc.⁵⁶ Additionally, Bates, Astor, Girard, Thomas H. Smith, Peabody, Gray, Donnell, and Low, among others, were all Americans involved in the Opium trade.⁵⁷

Historiographically speaking, the Opium trade has been covered most sympathetically towards the celestial empire, with the Chinese being the righteous and the English and Westerners the belligerence. Early sources of historical interpretation provided a comprehensive and detailed analysis of the occurrences in terms of British, Indian, and Chinese engagements in the opium trade from 17th and 18th-century accounts, in addition to the perceived level of violence against the Chinese and inhabitants of India and the long-term effect of opium use in the oppressed. It wasn't until the 20th and 21st centuries that historians began to isolate specific areas

⁵⁴ Downs, *Opium Trade* (1968) P. 426

⁵⁵ Downs, *Opium Trade* (1968) P. 426-427

⁵⁶ Downs, *Opium Trade* (1968) P. 430

⁵⁷ Downs, *Opium Trade* (1968) P. 430

of the argument, i.e., the Chinese perspective and the American role in the opium wars. As the study of the opium wars grows, so too will the information available.

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The Opium Wars are a great stain on the English and American historical record and still haunt us today, not only because of their existence in history but because the companies involved are still at large today and exert more force in the political apparatus than they did nearly two centuries ago. Yet, in the late 18th century, these same companies and families were fighting for their place in the opium trade against the EIC monopoly. Through the EIC monopoly, India had become a feudal colony with the sole purpose of opium production. Even after the EIC trade

monopoly with China had ended, they maintained their opium fields in India and sold through merchants much in the same way Americans would later do.

After the EIC left Canton, a seeming lawlessness overtook the trading community as rogue traders like Jardine, Matheson, and Forbes, in addition to merely all supercargoes in attendance in Canton, sought to expand trade further into China. Many waves of diplomatic envoys had attempted to gain an audience directly with the emperor, but as time drew in, the efforts became less and less fruitful. Beginning with the James Flint envoy, sent by the British crown to secure trading rights in Ningbo and alert of the corruption of the Chinese officials in Canton.⁵⁸ Flint made the arduous journey to the interior of China and eventually got to the emperor but was immediately turned back via land with one of the emperor's commissioners to bear witness to the Canton corruption. The corrupt Hoppo was removed upon their arrival, but Flint was jailed for making his unauthorized journey inland, and there he remained.⁵⁹

The next envoy would be that of the McCartney mission, which appeared to be approaching success as the pageantries and customs were all in line, except one, the kowtow, which was a matter of contention for multiple envoys. It is a battle of McCartney against his own ego, the prim and proper in his absurd wardrobe. He agreed to do a modified kowtow, met his audience with the emperor, and delivered the King's letter requesting that China consider England's textile trade.⁶⁰ McCartney returned to Beijing, where they had staged before they met the emperor. Upon the emperor's arrival, he had told them they had to leave, as McCartney had expected to stay over the winter and discuss the letter and the trade. However, the emperor was not happy with the foreigners seeking an audience out of arrogance, resulting in nothing but

⁵⁸ Platt, *Imperial Twilight*, 2018 p. 5

⁵⁹ Platt, *Imperial Twilight*, 2018 p. 8

⁶⁰ Platt, *Imperial Twilight*, 2018 p. 39

telling McCartney China has no interest in their worthless material items.⁶¹ McCartney was essentially labeled a failure after this mission.⁶² Something strange about the McCartney visit is that, around the same time, new strains of the White Lotus sect began to take action. McCartney doubly and ominously predicted a coming rebellion.⁶³ The White Lotus rebellion devastated the empire and depleted much of its resources. One can't help thinking McCartney directly or indirectly instigated this rebellion.

Not only were there diplomatic envoys involved in the Canton community, but the religious community also played a significant role. Robert Morrison and Thomas Manning before him were some of the earliest religious pioneers in the community and sought to proliferate China and convert the masses through major literary works and translations.⁶⁴

The next individual to seek an audience with the emperor would be Lord Amherst, who was willing to do the kowtow. However, he was unprepared and did not have his ridiculous wardrobe or a bath. Therefore, he refused his audience with the emperor, left in a heated fit, and never got his audience.⁶⁵

By the 1830s, the Chinese government had grown ever more tired of English attempts to seek an audience with the emperor and looked to ban the trade at Canton, when no sooner, Robert Forbes would bring in the Lintin, a coastal staging ship. China was aware of these continued pushing of their boundaries but still looked the other, for it was all they could do now. Through the Lintin, the United States began to ramp up their trading.

⁶¹ Platt, *Imperial Twilight*, 2018 p. 42-43

⁶² Platt, *Imperial Twilight*, 2018 p. 45-46

⁶³ Platt, *Imperial Twilight*, 2018 p. 59

⁶⁴ Platt, *Imperial Twilight*, 2018 p. 91

⁶⁵ Platt, *Imperial Twilight*, 2018 p. 175

By 1832, the reform act had set in and eliminated the monopoly of the EIC but also sparked riots in England against corporate overreach.⁶⁶ This set the stage for a catastrophic future in Canton, rife with turmoil. Jardine and Matheson seemingly have made the most deliberate moves at the end of the EIC monopoly. Their goal would now be to wage an information war on China and its competitors. They invested in unique shipping vessels known as clippers, which could travel in even the heaviest monsoons.⁶⁷ At the same time, other foreigners were ramping up their individual and collective efforts to open up China. Strangely, as much as EIC tries to paint itself as separate from the independent smugglers, they were all working together, and EIC and Jardine and Matheson had sent collaborative propaganda missions inland, which further added to the tensions between the smugglers and the celestial empire.⁶⁸

Not long after this, the Society of the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge in China formally began the information war against China with intellectual artillery.⁶⁹ As part of the plan for war against China, or to at least gain access to its interior, Lord Napier was sent to Canton to oversee operations; however, his stint was very short. Napier rather ignorantly sought an audience with the emperor but completely disregarded all pre-existing customs. He was to speak through a chain of command, in which Howqua tried to help him, but Napier didn't need help. Napier eventually took gunboats to the Tiger's mouth river, but his war efforts were lackluster due to inclement weather.

On top of that, his actions began to stir up the merchants if Canton questioned his authority. He, after all, only had the support of Jardine and Matheson, his fellow Scots. Still, ultimately, his

⁶⁶ Platt, *Imperial Twilight*, 2018 p. 265

⁶⁷ Platt, *Imperial Twilight*, 2018 p. 275

⁶⁸ Platt, *Imperial Twilight*, 2018 p. 281

⁶⁹ Song-Chuan Chen, *Merchant of War and Peace, British Knowledge of China in the Making of the Opium War* P. 61

embarrassment drove him to leave Canton, where, over the next two weeks, he grew ill and, upon arrival in Macao, died.⁷⁰

It was around this time that China realized it was having a currency issue in which copper currency plummeted, fueling new rebellions. By the mid-1830s, a consensus had emerged that the foreigners were to blame.⁷¹ At this point, the Chinese government realized it had to take decisive action. Governor-General Lu Kun, knowing that war against the foreigners would be fruitless, suggested legalizing the opium trade and poppy growth to displace the foreigners.⁷² At the same time, Daoguang pursued a zero-tolerance policy against the Chinese.

At the same time, the scale of the opium trade began to become common knowledge and give rise to resentment of the morality of the merchants of Canton began to give rise to individuals speaking out against the opium trade as Opium displaced cotton and accounted for over two-thirds of all trade while, at the same time, the government continued to play the role of inaction while hoping for the best.⁷³

As history may have us believe, Jardine just happened to leave Canton by chance right before an arrest warrant was issued for him. But seeing as he is a member of the SDUK, an information society, I hardly know a coincidence. And thank you to the work of Amitav Ghosh; information omitted from all other books is available to us through his complex research. Jardine had left Canton with a giant slush fund to invest in the politicians he had been working with over the last four years, specifically lord Palmerston through Napier's widow.⁷⁴

⁷⁰ Platt, *Imperial Twilight*, 2018 p. 298-301

⁷¹ Platt, *Imperial Twilight*, 2018 p. 307

⁷² Platt, *Imperial Twilight*, 2018 p. 311

⁷³ Platt, *Imperial Twilight*, 2018 p. 314-316

⁷⁴ Ghosh, *Smoke and Ashes*, 151

Following Jardine's departure, Lin Zexu arrived and demanded all opium be handed over immediately, which Elliot conceded to his demands. However, not all the opium was in his possession, and the foreigners were held hostage until they had come up with all that was owed.⁷⁵ "Russel & Co contributed 93% of the quantity handed over by the Americans, one hundred times more than its closest rival."⁷⁶ One account that Matheson wrote to Jardine was that their staff "not only lived comfortably all along" but also gave dinner parties for the other "inmates."⁷⁷ As Downs has coined, the "golden ghetto."⁷⁸

The Opium Elliot had taken from the merchants to hand over to Lin Zexu came at a cost; he told them that the crown would repay their constituents so they wouldn't have to worry about anything. However, they knew he did not get permission for this action but that his word was enough in the court of common law to seek reimbursement. However, it may happen.⁷⁹ Unfortunately for Elliot, he expected a tremendous reimbursement from the Chinese government; however, they did not deliver. Elliot was furious, and in the words of Stephen Platt, "He might as well have been channeling the ghost of Lord Napier."⁸⁰ He was upset and called for the capture of the "island of Chusan, the disgrace, and punishment of Lin Zexu and Deng Tingzhen, and to apologize for the indignities heaped upon the queen."⁸¹ Upon which, Jardine and Matheson's constituent in parliament and business partner in Magniac & Co. He assured the foreign secretary that the letter was not to him and not Matheson penned a conflict of interest

⁷⁵ Platt, *Imperial Twilight*, 2018 p. 367

⁷⁶ Ghosh, *Smoke and Ashes*, 185

⁷⁷ Platt, *Imperial Twilight*, 2018 p. 371

⁷⁸ Jaques M. Downs, *The Golden Ghetto, The American Commercial Community at Canton and the Shaping of American China Policy, 1784-1844* (Associated University Presses, Inc., 2014) p. 4

⁷⁹ Platt, *Imperial Twilight*, 2018 p. 375

⁸⁰ Platt, *Imperial Twilight*, 2018 p. 379

⁸¹ Platt, *Imperial Twilight*, 2018 p. 379

but, in fact, and by forwarding the letter to Palmerston he was asking the government to pay up for the opium lost.⁸²

Lin Zexu lifted the imprisonment of the foreigners on May 21, 1839, but not long before a group of foreign sailors killed a Chinese villager and demanded to be handed over to the Chinese government; however, Elliot did not comply, and what would ensue, would be the first official skirmish of the opium wars on September 4, 1839.⁸³ At the same time, the British public had enough of the corrupt trade and the actions of “Mr. Opium Elliot” and called for the government to “make the righteous decision” “to outlaw the trade and suppress the growth of poppies in India...”⁸⁴ There were many more calls of condemnation, as can be viewed in the historiography portion so that I will spare the length of this section for that sake. Still, there is no shortage of outrage amongst the tax-paying population, the missionaries, and some free traders. Regardless, the vote was cast for the war, 271-262, with support from a great number of individuals who had spoken on behalf of the war; however, none offered a compelling argument. The most surprising, however, was the call from Staunton for war. It appears he had finally broken.⁸⁵

Even after the government ruled in favor of the war, William Jardine continued his demands in favor of the war, namely, the opening of as many ports as possible to foreign trade and a request to keep opium illegal so that he may continue utilizing his specialized fleet of drug running ships clandestinely. These bold claims clearly show that Jardine and Matheson played a significant role in lobbying the government to carry out a war for their demands.

⁸² Platt, *Imperial Twilight*, 2018 p. 383

⁸³ Platt, *Imperial Twilight*, 2018 p. 391

⁸⁴ Platt, *Imperial Twilight*, 2018 p. 392-393

⁸⁵ Platt, *Imperial Twilight*, 2018 p. 407

It can be argued that since the very beginning, Britain had intentions to go to war with China if she did not open herself up willingly, purely based on the British government's actions up until the point of contention and beyond, even if it meant a policy of inaction, they knew what the result would be. The crown, private merchants, and investors were committed to open and free trading in China. Not only was the free trade doctrine in the hivemind at the time but so was the idea of the “frontier” that was termed by Frederic Jackson Turner, in which new lands were sought, in addition to calls for imperialism and colonialism by John Quincy Adams and the likes.

Jardine and Matheson had a pivotal role in finessing the situation to derive a desired result, which often worked for them. They coined the Society of the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge in China (SDUKC) in 1834. They worked directly with the Society of the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge (SDUK) in England, founded in 1822, and there’s no reason to believe the mission is any different in either location. They were able to successfully lobby the British Government to carry out a war for their sake, which led to a more lucrative environment in terms of the Opium trade while merely crippling all other exports to China.

EIC, Jardine, and Matheson all worked together after the prohibition of the monopoly, and eventually, all foreign merchants rallied together for the common cause, acquiring reimbursement for the opium taken by Lin Zexu.

The fault is not all there’s, though, which was an initial problem in early historical documents: the hyperfocus on one source of the issue rather than the many. Of the merchants involved, there were family names such as Matheson, Jardine, Astor, Griar, Delano, Latimer, Perkins, Sturgis, Russel, Forbes, Cabot, Peabody, Brown, Archer, Hathaway, Webster, Delano, Coolidge, Bryant and so on. These individuals were all friends, and some even family members,

and yet, the most unheard store from the group is of one of them making their money on their own. Most, if not all, had gotten initial investment money from immediate or extended family. These individuals worked together through secret societies in China, England, America, and India to accomplish their goals and make as much cash as efficiently as possible. Lastly, the missionary population eventually lost sight of their true goal and joined the smugglers in their war of attrition against China.

The Opium Wars were one of the most unjust occurrences in our somewhat recent history but, unsurprisingly, added to a list of grave wrongdoings carried out by the white man against the Indigenous and non-aggressive populations in search of capital and material gain. If you were to take anything from this essay, let it be the knowledge that these families still operate at the government level, if not in the open, in the shadows. Let these actions and occurrences of our past guide us in the future so that we may not allow our governments to make the same calculated mistake again.

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