

## Opium and Empire in Southeast Asia: Regulating Consumption in British Burma

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The history of narcotics in Asia in the last century and a half has been the subject of considerable controversy and significant revision over the last 20 years or so. Recent restatements of the view that had prevailed throughout the 20th century include Carl Trocki's influential *Opium, Empire and the Global Political Economy*.<sup>(1)</sup> This view held that British imperialists, and to a lesser extent other European powers, set out to finance their interests in Asia by forcing intoxicants and narcotics on local populations. He called the British who traded opium between their possessions in India and the Chinese empire 'a global drug cartel which enslaved and destroyed millions and enriched only a few'. For this school of thought it was clear that western imperialists compelled colonised peasants to produce large quantities of dangerous drugs to force upon guleless Asian populations that were poisoned for profit. Emdad-ul Haq even went as far as to claim that contemporary drug problems in parts of south Asia could directly be linked to this trade.

Unease with this school of thought began to surface in the 1990s as scholars like John Richards and Richard Newman began to look in more detail at the production of opium in South Asia.<sup>(2)</sup> They argued that peasants there were not forced to produce the crop but rather took advantage of the favourable conditions created by the British to do so. Opium consumption in India, and in Britain for that matter, was regarded with equanimity by both society and government in the period so the crop was not seen as controversial. In India and China there were long traditions of eating and smoking the drug for both medicinal and recreational purposes so those producing opium products were doing so for well-established markets. The opening of the Chinese archives over the last couple of decades allowed scholars like Yangwen Zheng and Frank Dikötter and his team <sup>(3)</sup> to examine what was going on in China in greater detail. They found a complex and sophisticated consumer culture around opium products, and argued that those buying them had been falsely represented by nineteenth-century missionaries as poisoned dupes for the sake of stirring up a moral crusade to justify funding for evangelizing projects there. Paul Winther <sup>(4)</sup> made the point that opium from India sold so well in China as its rich codeine content meant that it was more conducive to elite consumption in circles where smoking was done in company with conversation and conviviality. Chinese opium with a high morphine content risked rapid intoxication. David Bello's important study <sup>(5)</sup> noted that such was the size of the Chinese market for opium in the 19th century that the British in India were only one of a number of producers eager to access it and rivals could be found in Central Asia, where the Khanate of

Kolkhand was among those geared up to profit from it.

Ashley Wright's *Opium and Empire in South-East Asia* is the latest addition to this growing historiography. It is a thorough study of what is now Myanmar and was once Burma that does much to further nuance our understanding of the complexities and paradoxes of the history of intoxicants in Asia. Opium preparations were consumed by local elites and migrants there before the East India Company arrived in the 1820s. By the 1880s a distinction was enshrined in law and reflected the racial hierarchies of the British imagination; the locals were not allowed access to opium products while Chinese and Indian migrants were. If Western imperialists were really so keen to get on with what has been called the 'legitimate business of poisoning Hindoos and Chinese' then Wright's study suggests that they were more uneasy about doing the same to Buddhists, or at least those of South-East Asian extraction. Wright goes further and demonstrates that officials made this distinction based partly on empirical observation, that opium consumption was commonplace in India and China while the Burmese were apparently new to it. Discourses of paternalism and social Darwinism also shaped government thinking as the British imperialism of the late 19th century came to be tinted by both. That the colonial authorities chose to close off some markets for opium despite the potential revenue streams suggests that if they were a 'global drugs cartel' then they were one operating to more tangled rules than those functioning in Asia today.

The British were not alone in supplying opium to consumers in Burma. Chinese merchants brought the product from Yunnan while the Shan States in the borders between what are now Burma, China, Thailand and Laos frustrated British efforts at closer control. Wright explains that the poppy was particularly well-suited to the mountainous terrain of the region as it was a low-bulk, high-price commodity, although heavy rains could destroy crops. Colonial officials tolerated production there for a number of reasons, its place in a precarious local economy, the perception that there was a local taste for it, and an acknowledgement that their power to intervene at the very fringes of empire was limited. Opium production in those parts of Asia that earned the name The Golden Triangle in the 20th century had origins that stretched into the 19th century and perhaps beyond. Donald Smeaton, a Chief Commissioner in Burma during the 1890s, made the effort to persuade others in the administration that crop-replacement was the answer. He devised a scheme to construct a light railway in the area which would transport the fruit and vegetables he hoped would be adopted by local farmers. The scheme came to nothing and he was demoted to life as an MP where his speeches in Parliament suggest that he rarely returned to agricultural matters.

The book does well to trace the ways in which policy tangles persisted until the end of empire in the 20th century. The anti-opium campaigns in Britain of the late 19th century looked to Burma for further sticks with which to beat colonial government, and the early decades of the 20th century saw the emerging international drugs regulatory system take shape and seek to assert its agenda over imperial drugs dealing. By the 1930s the authorities in Burma found themselves increasingly caught between more liberal government impulses on opium and cannabis and the requirements to make the right diplomatic noises to the League of Nations about eradicating opium consumption. This is perhaps the weakest chapter in the book as the author seems to miss the growing importance of locals in government there. In dealing with cannabis she failed to spot the fact that it was a Burmese finance minister who in 1937 legalised the drug. This reversed the 50-year-old policy of his British predecessors and flew in the face of international agreements, quickly prompting a flustered correspondence between government departments back in London. To claim that this decision shows that 'a widening chasm opened between the rationale that the colonial government publicly professed and its actual priorities' seems mistaken. After all, it was a Burmese politician who took this decision, in a newly-appointed legislature that reflected a move to self-government.

If another criticism were to be made it is in the use of the word 'addict' in the book where 'consumer' would seem more appropriate. Many have persuasively argued that the term is a historical construct of the 19th and 20th centuries. It is certainly the case that the author here has been led by the sources where 'addict' was routinely applied to anyone who touched a drug, whether it be for an occasional pipe with friends, a one-off all-or-nothing blast, or a solitary daily ritual. In a book about regulating consumption, consumers seem largely absent so this is no surprise. But it is worth noting. After all, one of the chief absurdities of debates

about opium in Asia during the colonial period is that few Asian consumers had any voice in them. Although uniquely placed to report on the experience of taking these substances and the pleasures or perils of doing so, almost none were asked directly for their views in the various reports or inquiries conducted by the colonisers. Yet it is clear from Wright's work that many continued to consume opium despite the anxious efforts of European administrators to interfere. If anything drove opium policy in Burma, it was the determination to continue taking it of those that enjoyed or relied on the drug.

The author's key conclusion is that 'opium policy in Burma was never a simple interaction between Burma and Britain' and this is important and well-argued from plenty of hard work with the primary sources. The new evidence of the complexities of governing intoxicants in this book makes it another significant contribution to the revisionist movement in the history of narcotics in modern Asia.

## Notes

1. Carl Trocki, *Opium, Empire and the Global Political Economy* (London, 1999).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. R. Newman, 'Early British encounters with the Indian opium eater', in *Drugs and Empires: Essays in Modern Imperialism and Intoxication*, ed. J. Mills and P. Barton (London, 2007); J. Richards, 'Opium and the British Indian Empire: the Royal Commission of 1895', *Modern Asian Studies*, 36 (2002).  
[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Y. Zheng, *The Social Life of Opium in China* (Cambridge, 2005); F. Dikötter, L. Laamann and Z. Xun, *Narcotic Culture: A History of Drugs in China* (London 2004).[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. P. Winther, *Anglo-European Science and the Rhetoric of Empire: Malaria, Opium, and British Rule in India* (Lexington, IN, 2005).[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. D. Bello, *Opium and the Limits of Empire: Drug Prohibition in the Chinese Interior, 1729–1850* (Cambridge, MA, 2005).[Back to \(5\)](#)

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