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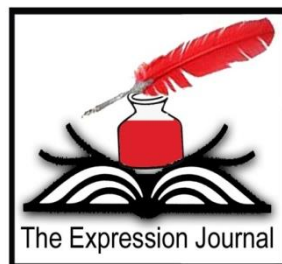
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HISTORICAL APPROACH TO OPIUM TRADE IN AMITAV GHOSH'S *SMOKE AND ASHES*

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Abstract

In India, it was traditionally consumed in the form of tonic but after it was introduced to China and smoked, its potential to addiction increased many times. In 1729, opium was banned by the Qing Dynasty due to its harmful effects, since the reports from Chinese merchants in the Dutch East Indies about the drug's addictive nature had reached them. During the 19th century, the prohibition resulted in an opium trafficking boom into China, and addiction and more severe social problems prevailed, the First and Second Opium Wars, after which Britain coerced China into legalizing opium in 1858. Amitav Ghosh takes a historical approach to his opium-based literature by situating his work at a time before the commencement of the First Opium War in 1839. Traditionally, opium had been cultivated and used medicinally across Asia and the Middle East. Still, the Dutch East India Company used it as a form of exchange starting from the 17th and 18th century, particularly in trading for pepper in India, on the Malabar Coast. The cultivated opium was then prepared by thousands of workers in two factories located along the Ganges River. The Opium Wars sealed the company's supremacy in the opium trade, forcing China to open its doors to the importation of British Indian opium. Notably, a hundred years earlier, China introduced the English to tea, and its demand soared by a considerable amount. This rise coincided with a decline in the extraction of silver from mines in the New World, which created a balance-of-payments crisis for Britain. The East India Company establish a monopoly on opium to counter China's tea monopoly. This was made possible through the development of a highly potent, smokable form of opium in world trade.

Keywords

Colonialism, Culture, Opium War, Power, History, Imperialism.

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Introduction

Smoke and Ashes goes into the vast implications of the opium trade that the British Empire was running, especially in how it left an indelible mark on India. Amitav Ghosh mentions how the British needed to finance their empire through opium exports from India, and most of the opium was sold in China. The implications were much more significant in India. The British authorities coerced in excess of one million Indian agriculturalists to cultivate opium poppies, thereby instituting a monocultural framework regulated by a complex colonial administrative system. Amitav Ghosh further reveals the interrelations between the opium commerce and the development of various significant Indian corporations and institutions. The narrative intertwines with his familial background, suggesting that his forebears might have established residence in Chapra, a pivotal area for opium production, to engage in accounting associated with the trade. *Smoke and Ashes* elucidates the significant influence of the opium poppy in molding contemporary history. The lasting impact, which is intricately tied to British colonial strategies, persists in its relevance to India's historical, economic, and cultural landscapes.

Amitav Ghosh, a writer from Kolkata, India, has always been fascinated by China's history, culture, and geography. Growing up in West Bengal, a state with a border with China, he never felt a connection to the country's history, culture, or geography. His fascination with travel led him to consider visiting China in 2004, while working on his novel *Sea of Poppies*. The novel's protagonists, Deeti and Kalua, embark on a journey as indentured laborers to Mauritius in 1838. As his research deepened, he discovered that the maritime trade of the early 19th century was centered not on India's exchanges with the West but on its robust trade with China, especially through Canton. This newfound understanding sparked his curiosity about China and its central role in this historical exchange. The appropriation of Chinese know-how became much easier after the British inflicted a crushing defeat on the Qing state in the First Opium War (1839 - 42). The war ensured much greater freedom for Europeans in China (SA 22).

Amitav Ghosh realizes that his earlier ignorance of China was not merely a personal oversight but reflected a broader cultural and historical divide. Many Indians, like Amitav, have been shaped by a mental barrier that fosters detachment from China. This separation stems partly from historical events, such as the 1962 Sino-Indian War. The war had a profound impact on Indian perceptions of China, fueling suspicion, fear, and resentment. In contrast to the complex but often engaged cultural relationship India shares with Pakistan, the war with China led to a sense of withdrawal rather than curiosity. The Chinese community in India, particularly in Kolkata, faced intense discrimination after 1962. This painful history highlights the enduring impact of mistrust and lost opportunities, underscoring the need for greater understanding and reconciliation in the present.

The opium poppy, *Papaver somniferum*, is believed to have originated in central or eastern Europe, possibly the Balkans, or around the coast of the Black Sea.¹ The flower appears to have forged, very early on, a special relationship with human beings: indeed, it is possible that the plant developed its chemical structure precisely to ensure that humans would propagate it.² This may be why there are no truly wild varieties of the opium poppy; they are all cultivars that evolved in collaboration with human beings, to enhance their medical and psychoactive properties (SA 26).

English merchants, led by the British East India Company, established extensive opium. Poppy was an efficient crop, with a short four-month growing cycle from seed to harvest. The aftermath of the Opium War saw China semi-colonized by Western powers for nearly a century. The Treaty of Nanjing in 1842 marked China's defeat, forcing it to open numerous treaty ports to Western traders and dramatically end its centuries of relative isolation from the West. This transfer of Western institutions into China had complex economic consequences. While the introduction of new technologies and more efficient capital markets had positive effects, the erosion of Qing state capacity, as evidenced by increased secret society protests, suggests the West's intervention also had negative impacts on China's economy. In sum, Western colonialism in China generated both beneficial and detrimental outcomes for the country. (Keller & Shiue 2023)

The 1962 war undoubtedly influenced Amitav's perception of China, but perhaps more profoundly, it underscored his almost complete lack of awareness about the country. This void reflects a broader dynamic: a worldview so deeply shaped by the West that other influences, particularly from China, went largely unnoticed. The dominance of Western culture in the Indian subcontinent has perpetuated the notion that modernity is exclusively a Western construct, spreading outward like a contagion. Amitav Ghose's perspective shifted dramatically in September 2005 when he visited China for the first time. His brief trip, primarily focused on Guangzhou, left a lasting impression on him, and he realized that his porcelain teacup symbolized centuries of trade connecting Kolkata to Guangzhou.

A substance that possessed extraordinary properties both as a painkiller and as a poison. However, awareness of the powers of the poppy almost certainly preceded these references by several centuries. Long before the beginnings of recorded history, many groups of people seem to have discovered, independently of each other, that the opium poppy produces a uniquely powerful medicinal substance that can be used to treat coughs, stomach disorders and many other ailments (SA 27)

The author's writing, *Sea of Poppies*, is a reflection of the profound influence China has had on global trade, culture, and material life. The author's research revealed that China's

historical influence often goes unnoticed, as it manifests more subtly through practices, objects, and materials. This realization is both humbling and enlightening, as it highlights the interdependence between humans and the natural world. Tea, for example, is an item that exists not only as a plant or beverage but as part of a complex system of trade, culture, and meaning. It embodies a web of relationships, linking growers, traders, and consumers across continents. This perspective finds support in the insights from botanist Robin Wall Kimmerer, who underscores a mutualism that exists between human beings and the more-than-human world. Plants such as tea are not only used to meet human needs but can also influence human culture as well as histories. Tea, by the beginning of the eighteenth century, was an indispensable item and driving force of Britain's economic activity. Around the same time, tea was fast becoming a very popular article, which increased the role of the British East India Company.

Historian Erika Rappaport notes that while funding Britain's imperial dreams, tea simultaneously provided that money needed to keep any war and government running. The funds made from the tea trade were deemed so crucial that legislation actually forced the East India Company to maintain a year's supply of tea. The increasing reliance of Britain on Chinese tea was evident, as the taxation imposed on tea, which varied between 75 to 125 percent of its value, emerged as a significant source of revenue for the nation, at certain periods contributing almost 10 percent of the overall government income. These funds supported public services, education, and the arts while also bolstering Britain's imperial ventures. However, trade with China was not without challenges. While Chinese goods were highly valued in Britain, the Chinese market showed little interest in Western products. The Qianlong Emperor famously rebuffed King George III's overtures in 1793, asserting that China neither needed nor desired Western goods. This imbalance frustrated the British, as the Chinese insisted on payment in silver for their exports.

Southeast Asia and China had long been exposed to alcohol, opium was a different matter. Not having had extensive exposure to the drug, they had not developed protocols other than smoking for the consumption of opium. Selling low-grade opium in India, where it had long been consumed in a less addictive form, was, therefore, a completely different matter from selling smoking-grade 'export' opium in China and Southeast Asia, where a large part of the appeal of the drug lay precisely in its novelty, in the idea that it was 'something utterly new in the world' (SA 244)

Flourishing Opium Trade to China and Its Consequences

In the nineteenth century, British colonial writers and officials often conveyed the impression that opium was a traditional Indian drug, widely consumed by people of all classes. But it takes only a cursory glance at the figures to see that this could not possibly have been the case. While the knowledge of opium may have been widespread, as in Europe, its actual use was obviously quite limited. Opium use did indeed become common in the subcontinent in the late nineteenth century, when India was exporting as much as 100,000 chests of opium in some years (SA 36).

To address this imbalance, the British turned to India. Cotton from India found a market in China, but it was opium, derived from the *Papaver somniferum* poppy, that became the cornerstone of Britain's trade strategy. This marked the beginning of a controversial trade relationship where one plant, tea, became deeply intertwined with another, opium. While the Chinese government resisted opium imports, its growing popularity among Chinese consumers

provided Britain with the leverage it needed to sustain the trade. At the same time, the British sought to cultivate tea in India, aiming to reduce reliance on Chinese exports. Despite these challenges, Britain's determination to establish tea plantations in India ultimately reshaped the subcontinent's agricultural and economic landscape.

The First Opium War, fought between Britain and China in 1834, Jardine urged Napier to resist the restrictions placed on him by Chinese officials, believing this would anger the British public and lead to military intervention. Jardine even persuaded Napier to request British naval and troop support, though this was ignored by the government at the time. After Napier's dismissal from Canton and subsequent death, Jardine led a petition to the British king demanding military action in response. Though no immediate action was taken, Jardine's efforts from the 1830s onward demonstrate his central role in laying the groundwork for the eventual outbreak of the First Opium War.

Some historians have argued that Jardine's involvement has been exaggerated, suggesting the war would have occurred regardless. However, a close examination of the record indicates Jardine was a key architect who maneuvered the British government towards this conflict with China. Tea, a product that symbolized refinement and sophistication, became entangled with opium, a commodity tied to exploitation and conflict during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries with neighboring cultures such as Tibet, Nepal, Sikkim, Ladakh, and Kashmir, where tea had been embraced centuries earlier.

British and French naval power ensured that foreign opium ships could not be seized, and smugglers could not be punished under local laws. Eventually Siam and other Southeast Asian powers were left with no option but to accept the British and French colonial models, in which opium was subjected to taxation and treated as a source of revenue. In Vietnam, after colonization, the French established an opium franchise that became one of the economic pillars of their colonial regime.²⁹ This pattern was repeated through much of Asia, Japan being the rare exception where the country's rulers were able to enact and maintain a strict ban on opium (SA 74).

The legalization of opium in China in 1858 offers a significant historical case for understanding the impact of drug prohibition on consumption. Before legalization, opium was banned in China, yet the British East India Company continued to export vast amounts of the drug from India. These exports were smuggled into China by third-party intermediaries, bypassing the prohibition. Implications of prohibition and legalization regarding opium consumption are addressed. In the context of 19th-century Chinese history, this analysis highlights some of the problems of the failures of poorly enforced drug prohibitions, including evasion and corruption. This case is interesting to probe into questions of whether there's an effect of drug policy to reduce consumption and offers data relevant to current debates concerning the effects of legalization as compared with prohibition. Feige, C., & Miron, J. A. (2008).

The discovery of *Camellia sinensis* in Assam during the 1820s marked a turning point. British officials, keen to reduce Britain's dependency on Chinese tea, saw this as an opportunity. Despite Assam's indigenous tea plants, British planters imported Chinese seeds, doubting the local variety's viability. They also distrusted Indian workers, believing they lacked the necessary expertise. To compensate, Chinese tea cultivators were brought in to guide cultivation and processing. Dependence on Chinese knowledge was made possible with Britain's victory over the First Opium War (1839–42) in which Britain established greater

access to Chinese resources and know-how. Small Chinese communities, therefore were formed in Assam. Such communities were eventually dislodged in the Sino-Indian War in 1962. This subject forms a good part of the writings of Assamese author Rita Choudhury in Chinatown Days.

The British contrasted the conventional framework of family-owned tea plantations in China by establishing a plantation system in India. Large estates owned by European planters depended on indentured Indian laborers, who labored under oppressive conditions. Although the initial development was slow, by the late 19th century, this system had surpassed Chinese tea exports. The success of the Indian tea industry cannot be attributed to market efficiency; it shows an inherently exploitative racial structure. The tax breaks and land allocation to planters also reinforced the previously existing inequalities, making a particularly unfair sector. This plantation model was not unique to India; similar systems had been established in other British colonies, such as in Sri Lanka, Kenya, and Malaya. In the tea advertising world, the British advertisers degraded Chinese products by saying that colonial teas were superior or more sanitary and up-to-date compared to their Chinese counterparts. This propaganda made the relationship between tea and British colonialism so strong that even started questioning the origins of tea in China.

The 19th-century Britain political entity closely followed and reviewed the First Opium War that took place between Britain and China in the late 1830s. They identified the conflict as stemming from the British government's determination to safeguard the highly profitable but morally reprehensible opium trade, which involved smuggling Indian opium into China. As the war unfolded, Chartist publications reported extensively on British military operations along the Chinese coast, highlighting the looting and violence inflicted on Chinese civilians. The Chartists supported the Chinese government's efforts to suppress the opium trade, acknowledging the severe harm the drug inflicted on the health and well-being of the Chinese population. The war's causes and consequences, condemning it as an unjust act of British imperialism that prioritized commercial interests over Chinese sovereignty and dignity. They denounced the war as emblematic of the broader exploitation and aggression of the British elite. The Opium War reflected their working-class consciousness and their sense of international solidarity with oppressed peoples. The opium trade context of their political struggle against imperialism and expansionist policies. The Chartist response to the First Opium War illustrates their commitment to opposing British colonial aggression and their broader advocacy for justice and solidarity with those subjected to colonial exploitation (Guan 1987).

Conclusion

Opium is a drug defined by a long cultural history tied to elites: has traditionally been seen to embody glamour and sophistication. Although highly expensive it initially limited its use primarily to wealthy, literate users: although, subsequently, it will also attract artists and writers and musicians: And whereas grass-roots forms of psychoactive, drugs, such as toddy or marijuana, which will reflect connections primarily among people lower in the social scale; so too, are much more 'vulgar.'. Opium culture has, in different ways, been enriched by engagement from various famous figures: Thomas De Quincey, Jean Cocteau, William S. Burroughs, and Zhang Changjia, among many others. Opium mystery continued into the 20th century and, in different ways, had a very strong impetus on movements as diverse as jazz. Word "hipster" may go back to the Chinese smokers of the 19th century. Coca plants, from

which cocaine is derived, have a different history, rooted primarily in indigenous use in South America. It took several decades for cocaine to emerge as a marketable product, long after opium had established its patterns of use in both medicinal and recreational contexts. Opium's unique history challenges the blanket classification of "drugs" and may require revisiting grassroots psychoactives as alternatives or complements to opioid treatments. Opium is highly addictive though it has tremendous medical value; hence, it has morphed into derivatives such as morphine, heroin, and oxycodone.

This account highlights the colonial strategy of deposing China's hegemony in the global tea market. British officials portrayed the manufacture of tea in India as a strategy to break China's stranglehold, describing the cultivation of tea in the Brahmaputra Valley as a strategic attack on Chinese economic power. This long-standing economic and cultural battle rarely took the form of direct military conflict; instead, it was waged through commodities like tea and opium. Opium's significance endures in modern medicine. Many of the contemporary medications, including painkillers and anesthetics, are derived from opium. The extraordinary pain-relieving properties of opioids make them irreplaceable in medical practice, especially for surgeries and dental procedures. Even so, opium's importance in healthcare has led it to become a strategic resource during wartime, as observed in both World Wars.

During the late 1830s, as the Opium War unfolded, the Chartists grew increasingly aware of the devastating effects of opium, both in China and within Britain. They recognized the drug's harmful impact on family life and society in Britain, prompting calls for stricter regulation of its sale and distribution. This awareness of opium's destructive consequences fueled the Chartists' support for the Chinese government's efforts to eliminate the opium trade. The Opium War was vociferously condemned as an immoral, exploitative venture by Britain's commercial interests that was undermining Chinese sovereignty and oppressing its people. And the Chartists had forged connections between China's efforts to resist British imperialism to their own experiences as the working-class movement of Britain from the terrible events of Peterloo Massacre.

Such suffering fostered a deep consciousness of commonality with the Chinese people, a theme in Chartist accounts of the war that recurs repeatedly. While acknowledging Britain's initial military successes, the Chartists argued that such successes could only be short-lived. They asserted that China's huge size in both population and area would gradually exhaust the strength of the invading army, with the fate of the invasion forces to be likened to one of famine or plague. The Chartist perspective towards the Opium War was rooted in the broader principles of working-class philosophy, antipathy towards imperial conquest, and a sense of commitment to advocating for the underclass. It synthesized deep understanding of the strategic challenges facing British military forces with a strong moral stance against the injustices inherent in the war.

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