

Imperialism in China Assignment

Background information:

Although opium had long been used in China, as elsewhere, for its pain-killing medicinal purposes, it was only in the early eighteenth century, consequent upon the increase in foreign trade with European merchants that the evil effects of its misuse came to the notice of officials. By 1729, the year in which the emperor first places a ban on its importation, only some 200 chests (each of about 130 pounds of the drug) were coming in annually. At first the lead in what was now to become an illegal trade was taken by the Portuguese, but these were displaced by British merchants in the latter stage of the eighteenth century, by which time well over 1,000 chests per annum were being smuggled in. The reason for Britain's ascendancy was the gradual takeover of the administration of India by the British government and the activities of the British-owned East India Company in advancing trade with China. Many merchant ships, operating under the license of the E.I.C., increasingly brought in illegal opium to sell to local intermediaries at Canton, sometimes with the corrupt collusion of local officials. Use of the drug spread everywhere in China and, despite scores of imperial edicts since 1729, it proved impossible to prevent its smuggling. By the 1820s, over 10,000 chests per annum were brought in illegally. Thus the problem was of long standing and, as future events was to demonstrate, led to the Anglo-Chinese war in 1840.

Now read these three primary source documents:

ITEM A: Decree of the Emperor - 1810

Opium has a very violent effect. When an addict smokes it, it rapidly makes him extremely excited and capable of doing anything he pleases. But before long, it kills him. Opium is a poison, undermining our good customs and morality. Its use is prohibited by law. Now the commoner, Yang, dares to bring it into the Forbidden City [i.e., Peking]. Indeed, he flouts the law! He should be turned over to the Board of Punishment, and should be tried and severely sentenced.

However, recently the purchases and eaters of opium have become numerous. Deceitful merchants buy and sell it to gain profit. The customs house at the Ch'ung-wen Gate was originally set up to supervise the collection of imports (it had no responsibility with regard to opium smuggling). If we confine our search for opium to the seaports, we fear the search will not be sufficiently thorough. We should also order the general commandant of the police and police- censors at the five gates to prohibit opium and to search for it at all gates. If they capture any violators, they should immediately punish them and should destroy the opium at once. As to Kwangtung and Fukien, the provinces from which opium comes, we order their viceroys, governors, and superintendents of the maritime customs to conduct a thorough search for opium, and cut off its supply. They should in no wise consider this order a dead letter and allow opium to be smuggled out!

ITEM B: Decree of the Emperor – 1811

Ch'ien Chieh memorialized that opium from the overseas countries has infiltrated into the Interior and has caused so much harm that he petitions us to prohibit it with all severity. What he memorialized is correct! This item, opium, spreads deadly poison. Rascals and bandits indulge in it and cannot do without it even for a second. They do not save their own earnings for food and clothes, but instead exchange their money for the pleasure of this narcotic. Not only do they willingly bring ruin upon their own lives, but they also persuade friends to follow their example. There is no doubt that opium will harm the morality of our people. Previously, we decreed its prohibition, yet treacherous merchants still buy and sell it. Its use is widespread chiefly because the maritime customs have not uncovered it diligently enough, but have tolerated the smuggling!

We order the superintendents of all maritime customs to enforce the strict prohibition of opium. The viceroys and governors of Kwangtung, Fukien, Chekiang, and Kiangsu, are ordered to search for it carefully. Hereafter, if any ships bring in opium with other goods, the merchants should be immediately arrested and punished according to the law. If officers or clerks have accepted bribes from smugglers, they should be severely punished. If the smugglers dare to smuggle opium into the Interior and are discovered, then the officials are ordered to question thoroughly as to where the opium came from and from whom the smugglers bought it. Since the smugglers cannot pretend they bought it from an unknown ship, [then the dealer of opium must be discovered eventually]. The superintendent of maritime customs who failed to discover this contraband is to be punished. His subordinates and clerks are also to be punished.

ITEM C: Memorial to the emperor of Sung-yun, Viceroy of Liang-Kwang – 1811

. . . . However, opium is the greatest evil harming our Kwangtung [Canton] people. It has been strictly prohibited by the Imperial edict. This item comes from the ships of foreign barbarians who smuggle it in, after which it spreads throughout the country. If we wish to stop the use of opium, we should cut off the supply. Your servant thereupon gave the barbarians [i.e., English merchants, mainly] oral instructions as follows:

When you people of various European countries trade in Kwangtung, you should follow the established rules and sell only useful commodities. Then you will not only gain profits, but will also obtain the blessing of your God. Otherwise, you commit great wrong. Take, for instance, the item of opium which no Chinese knows how to prepare. You brought it to Kwangtung and prepared it by mixing it with tobacco. When people smoke it, they may be incited to do all sorts of evil. When smoking becomes a habit, then they cannot stop even though they want to. Thus they bankrupt themselves and even lose their lives. Reflect on this matter--you build your fortune on the loss of the property and lives of others. This action of yours will certainly invoke the anger of Heaven, and eventually you will assuredly be punished by Heaven and suffer bankruptcy and other consequences worse even than those which befall the opium addicts. You should write to your country to cooperate with us in prohibiting this smuggling of a poisonous contraband. Then you may escape from the disaster [which Heaven will inflict on you]

The barbarians unanimously reported that they all knew that opium was contraband, and they dared not ship it to China. However, the petty merchants of the country ships [ships sailing under the license of the British East India Company] frequently smuggled it in to gain profit. They added: Now after Your Excellency has instructed us, We shall obey Your order and send letters to our countries to have them examine the cargoes, so that they may not violate the regulations and engage in the smuggling of contraband goods. After they finished their speech, they looked rather ashamed and fearful.
[Ref.: Lo-shu Fu, A Documentary Chronicle of Sino-Western relations, Vol. 1 (1966), pp. 380-83]

OPIUM LETTERS ACTIVITY:

Now that you have some rudimentary knowledge regarding the effects of imperialism in China, you will be writing a letter giving your stance on opium trade in China, assuming the role of various characters that would have been involved in this historical indignity.

You will depict the following characters and write a paragraph from each of the four perspectives. Make sure to “predict” the impact of the opium trade in china in the paragraph. We know the opium wars broke out, but pretend you are a person of the day and do not know what is to come of the opium trade. Write as if it were the early 1800s. Make sure to back up your prediction of what the opium trade will do to China/Britain/yourself.

PERSPECTIVE #1: You are a Chinese man/woman who has become addicted to opium. Write a letter to the British and tell them what has happened to you, what is your life like? Make sure to use information from the readings. Use your imagination, but make sure it is historically accurate. Tell them how you feel.

PERSPECTIVE #2: You are the loved one of a Chinese person that has become addicted to opium. Follow the same directions listed from perspective #1.

PERSPECTIVE #3: You are a British merchant that is making lots of money off the trade of opium in China. Tell us why you decided to trade opium, what your life is like because of it, and justify your trade of opium. **Hint you may have to disprove some of the statements in the readings**.

PERSPECTIVE #4: You are Queen Victoria, a proper British woman who is also head of a drug trafficking ring. You can either write a letter to a close friend telling them what you have done to the Chinese people and what profits you get from this. Or you can write a letter back to one of the men/women/family members of the Chinese people addicted to opium. Explain your stance and tell them why you are sending opium there. Make it believable and accurate, but use your imagination.

CREATIVITY+HISTORICAL ACCURACY= “A” ASSIGNMENTS