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Opium after the Manila Galleon: The Spanish involvement in the opium economy in East Asia (1815-1830)[☆]



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 20 March 2014

Accepted 1 July 2014

Available online 6 August 2014

JEL classification:

N45

N75

N76

N85

Keywords:

Opium

Spain–China relations

Spanish Royal Philippine Company

Jardine, Matheson & Co.

ABSTRACT

This paper identifies the Spaniards' involvement in the opium trade in China at the beginning of the 19th century. Several sources have been consulted, mainly the Jardine Matheson Archive at the University of Cambridge and the *Archivo General de Indias* in Seville. These activities took place from the end of the Manila Galleon until 1830, and were undertaken by some employees of the Spanish Royal Philippine Company in Calcutta and Canton in their private businesses. These houses collaborated closely with the British firms during the opium boom, and Manila private financial support was provided. Thus, Spaniards undoubtedly made a fundamental contribution during a key stage of development of the opium economy and evolution of modern Chinese history, being a precedent of what became the prestigious British company Jardine, Matheson & Co.

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Opio tras el fin del Galeón: la participación española en la economía del opio en Asia oriental (1815-1830)

RESUMEN

Este trabajo identifica la participación de españoles en el comercio del opio en la China de principios del siglo XIX. Se sirve de fuentes diversas, especialmente del Jardine Matheson Archive de la Universidad de Cambridge y del Archivo General de Indias de Sevilla. Dichas actividades tuvieron lugar desde el final del Galeón de Manila hasta 1830, y fueron llevadas a cabo por empleados de la Real Compañía de Filipinas en Calcuta y Cantón en sus negocios privados. Se efectuaron en intensa colaboración con las firmas británicas, en pleno estallido del sector del opio, y con el apoyo financiero de iniciativas privadas manileñas. Los españoles hicieron así una aportación indiscutible en un momento clave del desarrollo de la economía del opio, fundamental en la evolución de la China contemporánea, siendo además un antecedente de la destacada firma británica de Jardine, Matheson & Co.

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Códigos JEL:

N45

N75

N76

N85

Palabras clave:

Opio

Relaciones España-China

Real Compañía de Filipinas

Jardine, Matheson & Co.

[☆] Ramón Carande Award, Edition XXVII (Call 2013), Spanish Economic History Association.

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1. The Spanish involvement and the opium question

The opium trade, carried out mostly by British merchants in Calcutta (Kolkata) and Canton (Guangzhou) from the end of the 18th century until the middle of the 19th, is one of the central themes of contemporary Chinese historiography. Revisions of the role of opium in Chinese society have developed in recent years, detaching it from negative perceptions and anxieties which have been

constructed subsequently, without contemporary judgements about psychoactive substance consumption and playing down its harmfulness (Newman, 1995; Howard, 1998; McMahon, 2002; Dikötter et al., 2004; Zheng, 2005; Paulès, 2011). Opium consumption in other Asian societies has been analysed as well, together with the substance relevance in European imperial finances; opium has also been dissociated from monetary appreciation in China during the Jiaqing (1796–1820) and Daoguang (1820–50) eras (Polachek, 1992; Trocki, 1999; Brook & Wakabayashi, 2000; Bello, 2005; Lin, 2007).

Revisions of the opium trade in East Asia (Derks, 2012) and of the Canton trade in particular have also been made (Hao, 1986; Cheong, 1997; Van Dyke, 2005). However, it is necessary to reassess the still prevalent model centred on the British monopoly of the field, on the routes linking India with Southern China, by which certainly the whole of this trade was carried on. Still, no evaluation of all nuances of the Canton trade or of the involvement of other nationalities has been made, and there has been an excessive stress on the events leading to the first Opium War (Greenberg, 1951; Dermigny, 1964; Cheong, 1979; Le Pichon, 1998). Some exceptions to this are the studies about US participation in Cantonese trade (Downs, 1968, 1997), Parsi involvement in the opium trade (Palsetia, 2008) and some approaches to the Portuguese role (Guimarães, 1996).

This article¹ deals with a Spanish involvement in the opium trade, with its specific features, undertaken by the employees of the Royal Philippine Company (*Real Compañía de Filipinas*, from now on, RCF) in their private businesses, in close collaboration with the British private merchants, roughly from 1815 until 1830, which also relied on Philippine capital. In addition, in the Spanish colony the profits from opium were also considered from the 1820s onwards, and an official system of farming out ('*estanco de anfión*') was established from 1844 aimed at Chinese consumers, though we will not go over it here (Wickberg, 1965, pp. 49–50, 113–119; Gamella and Martín, 1992; Bamero, 2006). Despite its transitional character, Spanish involvement in the opium sector was of great relevance, not only for its numbers but also for the precedents established, which also illustrate a Spanish link with Chinese foreign trade, still too little known to the historians. Only Cheong (1979) has analysed this subject, establishing a necessary basis for a knowledge of this area, yet there was a need of a more comprehensive contextualization, avoiding an approach by which this involvement appears only as a kind of appendage of a mainly British sector, ignoring the Pacific links of the Chinese foreign trade. This limitation has been partly counteracted by the Spanish historian Fradera (1999).

2. Shortcomings in historiography

This overlooking of Spanish involvement can be explained by the absence, already pointed out, of a revision of the whole of the Cantonese trade. The discourse about the Canton commercial trade focuses mainly on English language sources, and seldom strays away from the India–China routes, disregarding the Pacific Ocean as well as Southeast Asia. This ignores the polyphony that defined this commerce, which included the Manila Galleon route, the proximity of the Philippine islands, the circulation of silver, the action of the RCF and, thereafter, the development of the Philippine export economy. In addition, this Pacific aspect has been analysed by a different historiographic tradition from the former, which is still too unfamiliar with Asian realities, and apart from some exceptions, the Galleon discourses very rarely deal with its connection to the Chinese economy (Cheong, 1965a; Alonso Álvarez, 2004; Martínez Shaw, 2007; Martínez Shaw and Alfonso Mola, 2007). Additionally,

¹ This work introduces the key aspects of my PhD thesis (Permanyer-Ugartemendia, 2013).

a comprehensive revision of the RCF, and its place in the Asian trade, is still lacking even in the most cited work on the subject, that of Díaz-Trechuelo (1965).

Another element explaining the absence of an approach to this subject has been the difficulty of defining some activities in circumstances in constant transition. This process was triggered by the Napoleonic wars, the end both of the Manila Galleon and of the RCF, the independence of the Spanish American republics, along with the expulsion of the Spaniards from Mexico in 1827, and also by the constant changes in Western commerce in Asia both in China and in the Philippines and in the opium sector during the first decades of the 19th century. The Spanish involvement is explained because of these constantly changing circumstances, and for this Cheong (1979, pp. 55–85) refers to a 'Spanish connection', between two stages of Western trade in China, from chartered companies to free trade. It can also be applied to the link between the Indian and the Pacific spheres, between Britons and Spaniards involved in the opium trade.

Furthermore, the dispersion and diversity of sources is another reason for this oversight. For this study, several archives have been used, related to two thematic areas, one to the RCF and the Spanish empire, and the other linked to private initiatives. As regards the first, the *Archivo General de Indias* in Seville has been the main source; however, its bias is too 'metropolitan' as it only reflects the concerns of Bourbon elites and the Board of Administration (*Junta de gobierno*) of the RCF. In order to counteract this tendency, the diaries of Manuel de Agote, first factor of the RCF in China at the end of the 18th century, kept in the *Untzi Museoa-Museo Naval* in San Sebastian, have been resorted to. These are the only known source for the Company at a factory level (Permanyer-Ugartemendia, 2012). Other sources about the Spanish official attitudes in the Philippines have been used, such as the *Archivo Histórico Nacional* and the *Archivo del Ministerio de Asuntos Exteriores*, both in Madrid, besides the *Archivo de la Real Academia de la Historia de Madrid* and the National Archive of the Philippines.²

With respect to the private initiatives, the Jardine Matheson Archive in the Cambridge University Library has been the main source, rarely used by Spanish historians to this day. It holds all documents related to Jardine, Matheson & Co., the main private company in the opium trade in China, an indispensable source for research in the history of opium trade in Asia. Various Spanish firms and individuals were part of this company's branches and earlier formations, mainly *Yrisarri y C^a*, formed by the Scottish James Matheson, before being a partner of Jardine, Matheson & Co., and the Basque-Navarrese, Cartagena-born, Francisco Xavier de Yrisarri. The correspondence of *Yrisarri y C^a* is the most homogeneous register of private Spanish activities not only of this firm but of its counterparts as well.³ Other sources have been employed, namely the *Archives Nationales de France* and the *Archives de Paris*, in order to establish Lorenzo Calvo's initiatives, another of the main actors in this paper.⁴

3. A transitional prominence

At the end of the 1810s and during the succeeding decade, the RCF employees in Calcutta and Canton reoriented their private businesses into the intra-Asian trade between the Bay of Bengal and the South China Sea and more specifically, in the opium sector. This

² Spanish documents from the National Archive of the Philippines can be consulted in microfilm in the *Instituto de Historia* of the *Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas (CSIC)*, Madrid.

³ About the Jardine Matheson Archive, see Le Pichon (2006); concerning Jardine, Matheson & Co., Greenberg (1951), Cheong (1979) and Le Pichon (1998).

⁴ Due to space limitations, only the most relevant documents are mentioned here.

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