



Historical analysis

Harms caused by China's 1906–17 opium suppression intervention



James Windle*

University of East London, School of Law and Social Sciences, Duncan House, High Street Stratford, London E15 2JB, United Kingdom

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 9 November 2012

Received in revised form 17 February 2013

Accepted 4 March 2013

Keywords:

Opium

China

Forced eradication

Drug law enforcement

ABSTRACT

Between 1906 and 1917 China (under the Imperial and then Republican regimes) enacted a highly effective intervention to suppress the production of opium. Evidence from British Foreign Office records suggest that the intervention was centred, in many areas, upon a highly repressive incarnation of law enforcement in which rural populations had their property destroyed, their land confiscated and/or were publically tortured, humiliated and executed. Crops were forcefully eradicated and resistance was often brutally suppressed by the military. As few farmers received compensation or support for alternative livelihood creation the intervention pushed many deeper into poverty. Importantly, the repressive nature of the opium ban appears to have been a contributing factor to the fragmentation of China, highlighting the counter-productivity of repressive interventions to reduce drug crop production.

© 2013 Elsevier B.V. All rights reserved.

Introduction

Between 1906 and 1917 China (under the Imperial and Republican regimes) enacted a highly effective intervention to suppress the production and consumption of opium. Historian [Mary Clabaugh Wright \(1968, p. 14\)](#) pronounced the intervention as 'the largest and most vigorous effort to stamp out an established evil': a quote often reproduced when discussing the intervention (see [Adshead, 1984](#); [Forges, 1973](#)). This article revisits the national intervention by analysing its impact upon opium farming communities. While the intervention was a 'comprehensive attack on the whole opium complex from growers to smokers' ([Adshead, 1984, p. 71](#)), this paper concentrates solely on the attention directed at opium farmers.

Evidence from British Foreign Office (FO) observers suggest that local interventions were centred upon a highly repressive incarnation of law enforcement, in which rural populations had their property destroyed, their land confiscated, and/or were publically tortured, humiliated and executed. Crops were forcefully eradicated and resistance was often brutally suppressed by the military. As few farmers received compensation or support for alternative livelihood creation the intervention pushed many deeper into poverty.

The brutality of the techniques used to enforce the opium ban, identified in this paper, remain underemphasized by contemporary accounts. This paper will, therefore, go some way to rectifying a blind spot in the literature by analysing new evidence, collected

from documents archived at the British National Archives, from the perspective of the harm's done to opium farming communities.

It is not the authors' intention to attribute blame, but rather to add some balance to the history of drug control in China. This has much contemporary significance. The case study provides some insight into the dangers of failing to consider the impact on opium farming communities when suppressing drug crops. Inhumane interventions can be politically destabilising which can, in turn, inflate drug crop production.

The documents used include reports by British FO officials. These reports were often the outcome of joint-investigations conducted by both British and Chinese officials. Reports from Chinese administered anti-opium societies and English translations of official Chinese regulations were also used. The reports of FO officials and anti-opium societies are based upon a mixture of direct observations and information gathered from informants. The informants included religious missionaries and journalists, themselves well situated for direct observation.

It is accepted that there may be some bias in British FO accounts: all archived documents are shaped by the political, moral and ideological context of the time ([Scott, 1990](#)). It is also possible that British and Chinese observers may have recorded, perceived or evaluated events differently from each other. The level of divergence between British and Chinese accounts may, however, have been limited by FO observers being joined in their fieldwork by Chinese officials and the utilisation of Chinese informants.

Furthermore, [Marc Trachtenberg \(2006, p. 147\)](#); see also [Tosh, 2010](#)) has suggested that closed or restricted government documents (which later become open-archival) that survive are 'far and away the best source there is'. Privacy allows authors to express themselves more freely than they would in public. Therefore, closed

* Tel.: +44 20 8223 7457.

E-mail address: J.Windle@uel.ac.uk

and restricted documents tend to be more reliable and less distorted than published documents, and as such can:

... normally be taken as genuine ... Documents, after all, are generated for a government's own internal purposes, and what would be the point of keeping records if those records were not meant to be accurate? It's just hard to believe that a major goal ... would be to deceive historians thirty years later (Trachtenberg, 2006, p. 147).

Additionally, a number of influential studies into Chinese opium markets have relied primarily (Adshead, 1966, 1984; Newman, 1995; Spence, 1975) or partially (Reins, 1990; Wyman, 2000) on archived English language sources. This said, the author sees this paper as a first step in investigating the abuses committed in the name of drug control in China. Future research might triangulate the findings of this paper with archival Chinese sources, and/or evidence generated from other foreign observers. By doing this a more complete picture may be established, one which limits the potential distortions inherent in any set of documents created and stored by political organisations.

Recent narratives on the 1906–1917 intervention

Following the tradition of Mary Clabaugh Wright (1968, p. 14), much of the contemporary literature on the 1906–17 intervention begins with an elucidation of its drug control success. Consider some of the following:

It brought about quick, impressive results that proved the initial scepticism of the British and other Western diplomats wrong (Bianco, 2000, p. 292).

The outcomes of the first years were impressive, and eradication seemed highly probable by the time the dynasty collapsed (Paulès, 2008, p. 233).

The outcome of the Qing anti-opium plan rapidly became spectacular: a very considerable decrease in both opium production and consumption took place, and on the eve of the 1912 Revolution, according to even formerly highly sceptical Western witnesses, opium was close to complete eradication (Paulès, 2008, p. 235).

Beginning in late 1906, it had by the end of 1908 succeeded in markedly curtailing the cultivation and consumption of opium at home and in obtaining formal assurance from the British to terminate gradually opium imports. These startling achievements are further magnified when we consider the setting within which they occurred (Reins, 1991, p. 101).

In terms of drug, or crime, control the intervention was undoubtedly successful: it is one of only a handful of major opium producing states to have successfully removed opium production from their national territory. If the intervention were administered today, however, there would be significant moral outrage. The effectiveness of the intervention would not – nor should not – detract from the widespread harms caused to opium farming communities.

As such, words such as 'startling achievement', 'spectacular', 'impressive', and even 'successful' should be avoided, or at least followed by a strong caveat on the abusiveness of the intervention. An additional reason to avoid too much celebration is that the intervention factored in the eventual fragmentation of China, which, in turn, factored in increased opium production after 1917. This is not to suggest that the authors cited above, or below, would support

the abusive treatment of farmers, nor is it an indictment of their scholarly contribution. Instead, it is hoped that this analysis of new evidence from an alternative perspective will be taken as a compliment to their work and help inform future research on the history of opium in China and drug control more generally.

While several authors have indicated some level of abuse, none have highlighted the extent. Thomas Reins, for example, uses British FO records to indicate how the governor-general of Yunnan-Kweichow 'under-took opium suppression with a vengeance' (Reins, 1991, p. 128). 'Vengeance' is, however, left undefined and thus open to individual interpretation. Judith Wyman (2000, p. 221) has indicated how law enforcement in Sichuan Province ranged from 'moral persuasion to heavy fines to corporal punishment', including on the spot strikes with a bamboo cane ('bambooning') for unregulated opium den keepers.

Lucien Bianco (2000, p. 306; see also Adshead, 1984), suggests that the majority of officials felt that immediate forced eradication was 'too stringent'. This may well have been the case, especially as evidence suggests that officials were coerced into mistreating farming communities by a combination of rewards and threats of punishment. Accounts described below, however, suggest that many officials were willing to put aside their reservations and administer interventions which went beyond the forced eradication of crops. Bianco (2000) does, however, highlight the economic damage that forced eradication placed upon the farmer by describing how several farmers completed suicide or violently confronted eradication teams.

Joyce Madancy (2001, p. 441) provides an account closer to the nature of the intervention described in British FO accounts. Madancy begins by suggesting that after the 1911 Revolution the intervention 'became increasingly coercive as opium farmers resisted efforts to uproot their crops'. While 'coercive' could be interpreted as an intervention centred upon law enforcement and does not necessarily equate abuse, a later sentence describes how it increasingly 'became difficult to distinguish genuine popular antipathy toward opium from a general tolerance of official policy or fear of state repression'. This is followed by a description of a magistrate who ordered that an entire village be torched for violently opposing opium suppression (Madancy, 2001, p. 458). This account is more intone with the evidence presented below. This said, as abuse remains a minor element of the study, Madancy's account falls short of illustrating the widespread nature of the harms caused to opium farming communities through physical punishments and economic insecurity.

Madancy is correct that the intervention became more 'coercive' after 1911. Increased repression may have had an element of a new regime asserting its authority, or it may have been a response to higher-levels of resistance to prohibition in many areas after the 1911 Revolution (FO, 1913a, 1913b). For example, a British official noted how one year after the Revolution Hunan Province under-took 'the severest repressive measures yet recorded against the opium trade' (Giles, 1913, p. 3). Nonetheless, as shall be highlighted below, the level of abuse had increased from a highly repressive foundation. The following section provides a historical context of opium in China. This will be followed by the presentation of evidence of the harms caused to opium farming communities collected from archived FO records. The paper concludes by reviewing the counter-productiveness of the intervention.

Context

In 1799, an Imperial edict was issued in China prohibiting the importation of opium. The British East-India Company (the source of the majority of opium consumed in China) responded by cosmetically dissolving responsibility for the trade by forbidding its

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/7514295>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/7514295>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)