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British East India Company war ships attack a Chinese fleet during the first Opium War, January 7, 1841. Drawn by G.W. Terry and engraved by G. Greatbach.

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courtesy of CICM, Rome

Opium and the Good Fathers

Research >
China

By the end of the eighteenth century, the British East India Company had established its eastern empire. Calcutta was its capital, in the Ganges delta. Not far inland along the same river was Patna, centre of the opium empire. And at the end of the trade routes to the Far East was China, a market with hundreds of millions of potential customers.

By Harry Knipschild

In the beginning only the Chinese upper class could afford to buy, consume and become addicted to opium. However, when British country traders and Chinese smugglers increased the quantity of opium brought into Guangzhou (Canton), the price temporarily became attractive, and the number of users grew rapidly. In 1837 the total value of the India shipments amounted to nine million pounds sterling; almost three million of that turnover was from the export of opium to one country: China.

The war for drugs

In 1839 Emperor Daoguang (r. 1820-1850) sent imperial commissioner Lin Zexu to Guangzhou to stamp out the traffic in opium. Lin had come to the conclusion that, by now, almost eighty per cent of Chinese magistrates and clerks were addicted. A man of action, Lin ordered the arrest of the most notorious British traders who were deported, never to visit China again. British traders had to hand over more than 20,000 chests of opium (over one million kilograms). Lin had all of it destroyed in public on the beach.

The London government declared war and sent an expeditionary force. The purpose of the war, according to Home Secretary John Russell, was to demand compensation for the atrocities, maltreatment and losses suffered by British merchants. In future they should be allowed to conduct business under normal conditions. The Opium War (1839-1842) ended in victory for the British. Under the Treaty of Nanjing (1844) the Chinese government was forced not only to legalise the import of opium, but to open several ports to foreign trade and to hand over the island of Hong Kong to the British Crown.

After the assassination of the French missionary August Chapdelaine (1856) in the province of Guangxi, the French had an excuse to join the British in a second war. In those days, the Qing dynasty was threatened from all sides: from within by civil war, from the north by the Russians, and from the sea by the British and French. Only by giving way to almost impossible demands in the so-called unequal treaties (1860) were the Manchus able to continue their rule over China until 1911. One of

the claims conceded by Prince Gong was the admission of European missionaries under imperial protection into the inland of China.

Opium and mission

Even before the Opium War of 1839 missionary entrepreneurs were active along the coasts of China. Preachers such as Prussian Karl Gützlaff travelled out in ships carrying opium, their

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funds remitted via opium traders; their charitable work relied on donations from Western firms involved in the opium trade. Gary Tiedemann (2003:3) argues it is not surprising that in the minds of many Chinese, opium and Christianity became closely associated.

After the treaties of 1860, a new generation of European Roman Catholics felt the urge to aid the Chinese. They heard stories of great numbers of Chinese children, especially female babies, abandoned by their parents and devoured by wild animals outside their villages. A French organisation, the Holy Childhood, provided money to help. Near Brussels, the Congregation of the Immaculate Heart of Mary (CICM) was founded with the aim of bringing aid and the true faith to the Chinese and their young. A first group of four Belgian and Dutch priests arrived in Dagu on an English ship in November 1865, bringing fifty chests of opium for further inland trade. A year later, four more CICM-members made the trip. Remi Verlinden, one of the Belgian fathers, safely arriving in Hong Kong harbour after surviving a typhoon, wrote to his brother: 'Next to my cabin was a cargo of opium, with a value of seven million francs. The owners were three Persians, the real Jews of the East. Their opium was not insured. You should have seen their faces during the hurricane!' (Verhelst and Daniëls 2003:870).

Wherever missionaries were working to convert the Chinese, they were confronted with opium. The drug was

so omnipresent that in their letters they sometimes made only casual remarks. The European fathers, while themselves smoking cigars and tobacco, did their utmost to persuade their converts to renounce opium. Hamer tried to achieve this with both presents and threats. He promised his young charges in a children's home brightly coloured pictures provided they did not touch the drug. Towards the same end, Hamer at times threatened to refuse absolution in confession.

Gansu, opium centre

In 1878, pope Leo XIII decided to extend the CICM-mission in China. He selected the territories of Gansu, Kukuonor (now Qinghai) and Ili (now Xinjiang) for the Belgian and Dutch congregations. Ferdinand Hamer, the first bishop of the diocese, travelled with a group of missionaries to his destination. When he arrived in Lanzhou, the capital of Gansu, in early 1879 it was clear that poppy cultivation was one of the major economic activities of the area.

Eleven years later, in 1890, Belgian Cyril van Belle of the CICM reported: 'Already in 1854, the opium trade had a value of 170 million francs and after the war of 1860, when the English had removed all obstacles to their trade, the value rose to 220 million. The Empire of Flowers has been reshaped into a



Fairbank et al. East Asia: Tradition and transformation, revised edition. Houghton Mifflin Company: New York (1989)

field of poppies!' Van Belle explained that the Chinese had come up with the idea of not only importing opium, but cultivating the poppy themselves. 'The Chinese have begun to sow the poppy and nowadays they grow it all over the country. The plant thrives here in Gansu. When it blossoms the region looks like an immense garden of flowers which delights the eye, but at the same time it makes me sad; all the same, there is a deathly poison in the many-coloured chalices' (Missiën 1890:260).

In Gansu, arable farming was largely replaced by the cultivation of the lucrative poppy plant. A field of poppies yielded a profit thrice that of a regular field. There might, however, be another problem. In a period of drought the yield of poppies was adequate, but in 1878 people were dying of hunger due to lack of food.

The CICM missionaries who established themselves a year later in Gansu were determined to declare a complete ban on the cultivation, trade and consumption of opium. They refused the right of confession to Chinese Christians who didn't obey the European priests. One could argue whether this was a stimulus to their conversion efforts. Not infrequently, they and their converts were reproached that it was the Europeans who had forced opium upon China.

A new missionary method

In their letters, the CICM missionaries sometimes made reference to opium-addicts who came to their stations for help. In 1897 Belgian Constant Daems wrote that he had gotten hold of medicine to help the addicts with their 'yin'. He was not always prepared to treat the victim with the potion he received from French nuns in Shanghai. 'The remedy is only available in the church. The heathens are therefore obliged to turn to us. At first we react in a rather cool way. In order to convince us they then begin to talk about conversion. If they persist we accept them in our residence for two or three weeks. In that case they have to promise us that they will submit completely to our authority. In the meantime we teach them the Roman Catholic catechism. In this way we have achieved quite a lot of conversions' (Missiën 1898:3).

One can question whether this form of converting Chinese heathens was effective. Daems considered the question himself, and had a clear answer: 'The required reading of our catechism stimulates in their heart a sure desire for conversion. Slowly but surely, as our teaching holds on and becomes firm, their want to become a Christian grows. Indeed, the soul of man is created for the truth, like the eyes for light... The grace of God is effective in their heart, the love of the Christians for each other delights the poor heathens. Usually those opium-addicts, when their body is healthy again, beg us to remedy their soul as well by means of baptism' (Missiën 1898:3). <

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