Opium: building block of empire

Research > Southeast Asia

When Sidney Mintz, in his now-classic *Sweetness and Power*, began to tug at the multiple meanings, purposes, and uses of sugar in Caribbean, European and American societies, he found it to be the essential ingredient in the creation of particular regimes of power, labour, taste, and consumption. Although sugar was also a major product in parts of Southeast Asia, the product which stood at the centre of government, social, cultural and colonial relations was opium.

Anne L. Foster

Like sugar, opium initially had purposes mainly medicinal, but came to enjoy wider consumption. As consumption grew, opium did much to shape the nature and purpose of government in the colonies as well as trading practices and routes, finance the infrastructure necessary for profit from other colonial ventures, and create and reinforce social, racial and gender hierarchies which underlay the ideology of empire. By the end of the nineteenth century, opium began to be contested in ways which both foreshadowed and reflected the ways in which empire itself would be resisted.

From medicine to drug

Opium is not native to Southeast Asia; foreigners brought it with them for both their own consumption and for trade. As with the early history of opium worldwide, the initial years are shrouded in myth, but already in the seventeenth century both Chinese and Europeans brought opium to Southeast Asia. It functioned in much the same way that it did in China: as a product among the very few considered desirable by Southeast Asians, as an exchange for their goods which Europeans found irresistible (Trocki 1999). In these early decades of European sojourning in Southeast Asia, however, opium had limited appeal, primarily as a medicine. Like attempts at European rule, opium was accepted by Southeast Asians on their own terms, only partially, and in ways not compatible with the power we associate in later decades with the narcotic - or the colonial state, for that matter.

Indeed, in many ways the power of both drug and colonial state grew up together. Singapore provides the most dramatic example. A near-empty island before the British decided to make it a hub port, Singapore did not have the ready supply of inexpensive workers for the docks and the heavy work of loading and unloading ships. Imported Chinese labourers could meet the need, but opium, as Carl Trocki so persuasively argued, meant that those workers could be induced to work long hours at physically demanding jobs, in medically challenging environments, and for low pay (Trocki 1990).

Ethnic Chinese were sometimes even paid in opium, literally smoking away their chances of saving up for a better future. While Singapore relied more than other colonies on opium to tie workers to undesirable jobs, European enterprise in all the colonies faced the same labour shortage, and many turned to the same solution. Europeans facilitated provision of opium to ethnic Chinese and indigenous Southeast Asians, usually in modest quantities. These workers became addicted, but only marginally so. When they did not have work, they went into forced withdrawal. This periodic abstinence meant that many workers developed tolerance only slowly, and therefore limited their craving for ever-greater amounts of the drug.

Empires built upon opium

If opium was as necessary as forced cultivation and high taxes to draw Southeast Asians into production for export, opium also provided revenue crucial for the functioning and growth of the colonial state and its infrastructure. Singapore, as a free port with no reliable tax base, relied most heavily on the opium farms for revenue. These opium farms, or government-granted monopolies over the retail sale of opium in a certain geographical area, brought in approximately half of Singapore's revenue from the mid-nineteenth century until the first decade of the twentieth century. The other colonies earned less from their opium farms but all, with the exception of the United States in the Philippines, implemented the farm system.

With at least ten percent of revenues coming from opium, the colonial projects of modernity - whether roads, schools, irrigation canals, or public health clinics - depended on addiction. The Dutch even made administration of the sale of opium a key part of the modernizing project by creating the Opium Regie in 1894. To replace the opium farms, increasingly seen as corrupt and outside state control, the Dutch implemented a government bureaucracy to make distribution of opium to the proper people more efficient and regulated. The building which

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Administrative offices of the opium factory, Weltevreden, Batavia,1899. The building which housed the Opium Regie appears solid, respectable, and permanent, and gives the impression that Dutch rule can transform even opium consumption into a tool for modernization.

housed the Opium Regie appears solid, respectable, and permanent, and gives the impression that Dutch rule can transform even opium consumption into a tool for modernization. The Opium Regie was supposed to serve as part of a regime of tutelage, since its ranks were more open than many other parts of the civil service to Indonesians. The successes, both in providing training in self-government and in more careful regulation of who had access to opium, were at best partial. The Opium Regie was usually perceived as a second-rate career, low in prestige and ill paid. Not surprisingly, corruption continued and evasion of the opium regulations through smuggling and illicit production perhaps even increased.

Gender, resistance and the problem of opium

The economic and political implications of opium's role in the building of the colonial state have received attention from scholars such as Carl Trocki, James Rush, Chantal Descours-Gatin, and Alfred McCoy. Opium also served as a marker of gendered, racial, and social hierarchies in the creation of colonial empire. Scholars, however, have typically ignored opium in the increasingly sophisticated discussions of gender and race in the construction of the ideology of empire. The anti-opium movements which grew during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries provide the most telling examples. The heart of their anti-opium message was that there was an

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incongruence between the increasing emphasis on a *mission civilisatrice* (or *ethicishe koers* or white man's burden, depending on which colony one was in) and the colonial state's reliance on opium revenue.

Certainly the observation was sensible, but the rhetoric then used to argue against opium consumption reveals the myriad ideological constructs at the heart of the colonial state. Some of the most lurid descriptions were of the opium dens, which in this literature were not merely local places for opium smokers to stop and consume their purchase, but dens of iniquity posing grave danger to, in approximately this order, children who might live nearby or have to go there on errands or to retrieve parents; young women, mostly indigenous, who might begin by entering the den merely to smoke but whose addiction and/or poverty might lead them into illicit relationships; and then young white men who might enter a den on a lark but be quickly drawn into a spiral of addiction. These men were in danger because they had sufficient funds to consume addictive quantities of opium, and their potential addiction would lead them into behaviours which would undermine the prestige, even the authority of Europeans over ethnic Chinese and Southeast Asians. Photos of opium dens, so standard across colonies as to be nearly generic, always show languid, often feminised men, disorder and dirt, and poverty. The horror stories about degraded women are rarely reflected in the composition of photos (usually women appear only in lithographs), since in fact women rarely smoked in dens.

Only sometimes did this literature mention those who actually went to these dens in large numbers - indigenous men and, by far the largest group to go, ethnic Chinese men. Clearly their habit was seen as nearly inevitable and possibly less problematic. At one level, such critiques of opium seem to mirror the paternalistic understandings colonial reformers had of the task before them. It might still be possible to 'save' the children through education and removing them from their 'natural' environment; it was important to 'protect' young women so they could bear and nurture the next generation of children; the men would be divided into two groups: those already beyond the government's reach (radical nationalists and addicts, for example) and those who would follow the government's dictates.

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The imperial system in Southeast Asia rested on opium. Colonial labour markets and state budgets would not have functioned without it. Customary or accepted use of opium reinforced, reflected, but inevitably also undermined hierarchies of race and gender which provided the ideological underpinning of empire. Not surprisingly, then, Southeast Asian nationalists by the 1920s came to believe that part of their struggle to gain independence was to also end legal sales of opium, no matter how profitable those sales might be to the government. The relative success of newly independent Southeast Asian nations in prohibiting opium during the early years, through most of the region, reveals the extent which colonial rule and opium consumption were seen as intertwined by Southeast Asians. <

Malay Opium Smokers, Nineteenth Century

Wellcome Library, London

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***Anne L. Foster** is assistant professor of History at Indiana State University. Her manuscript* Projections of Power: The U.S. in Colonial Southeast Asia, 1919-1941 *is forthcoming from Duke University Press. She is currently exploring the construction and contestation of opium policies in Southeast Asia from 1850 to 1950. As part of that project, she will be a visiting fellow at IIAS beginning in January 2006.*