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The Morality of the Opium Trade

Two differing perspectives regarding the morality of trading opium are presented in these selections. The first reading is the personal experience of an American merchant with forty years of experience in China, and the second selection is from another merchant in Canton, writing to a British magazine in 1837.

Discussion Questions

1. What is your opinion of the first writer's suggestion that smoking opium and drinking wine are the same? How does the second writer respond to this comparison?
2. What is the first merchant's conclusion as to the ethics of opium smoking? What underlying motives might influence his attitude? What arguments does the second merchant use to refute the views of the first merchant, and others whom you've read?
3. "That which, sold in chests, is commerce, and to be applauded, becomes vulgar and mean when doled out in small lots. Admirable logic!" What is the second merchant's point in this statement, and do you find merit in his argument?
4. Are the views regarding the morality of using and trading opium in the 19th century similar to present attitudes and arguments? Is it appropriate to use the standards of the present to evaluate past actions, such as the morality of the opium traders?

Readings

From W. C. Hunter, *The "Fan Kwae" at Canton Before Treaty Days: 1825-1844*, Shanghai, 1911, pp. 79-80; and "A British Merchant's Answer," from *The Chinese Repository*, Vol. V, pp. 407-412.

An American Merchant in Canton

While the opium trade was going on, discussions often occurred as to the morality of it, as well as to the effect of smoking on the Chinese. None of the Hong merchants ever had anything to do with it, and several of the foreign houses refrained from dealing in it on conscientious grounds. As to its influence on the inhabitants of the city and suburbs at large, they were a healthy, active, hard-working, and industrious people, withal cheerful and frugal. They were intelligent in business, skillful in manufactures and handicrafts. These traits are inconsistent with habitual smoking, while the costliness of the prepared drug was such as to render a dilution of it (to bring it within the means of the masses) utterly harmless. Amongst the wealthier classes, no doubt it was more or less common, this we knew; but I myself, and I think I may safely say the entire foreign community, rarely, if ever, saw any one physically or mentally injured by it. No evidences of a general abuse, rarely of the use of the pipe, were apparent. I remember one man having been brought to a missionary hospital to be treated for excessive smoking of opium, but he was looked upon as a Lion and much was made of him. In fact, smoking was a habit, as the use of wine was with us, in moderation. As compared with the use of

spirituous liquors in the United States and in England, and the evil consequences of it, that of opium was infinitesimal. This is my personal experience during a residence at Canton, Macao, and Hong Kong of forty years.

A British Merchant's Answer

Were the traffickers in this poison,— for such no one in possession of his senses can deny it to be, to state that they deal in it merely as a matter of gain; and that, with them, this determination supersedes every consideration of right or wrong, then their premises could be at once seen, and opposition or reasoning would be vain, since all conviction would be fruitless; but when, as now, the practice, evil in itself, and necessarily felt to be so, is upheld by anxious sophistication, it is but right that it be exposed. . . . Were not great capital, skill, and enterprise embarked in this trade, it would never have arrived at its present magnitude. . . . Constantly, avowedly, notoriously, in the practice of a trade, directly opposed to the laws of the empire; not less opposed to morality and propriety; the purveyors of a most powerful incentive to vice; a fierce moral destroying agent—on what has the opium merchant to plume himself, beyond his brother smuggler and law breaker, the contraband gin-importer into Great Britain? The one risks his life—the other, shielding himself behind the corruption of the local officers, or the weakness of the marine, carries on deeds of unlawfulness, without even the risk or excitement of personal danger; and coolly comments on the injustice of the Chinese government in refusing the practice of international law and reciprocity to countries, whose subjects it knows only as engaged in constant and gross infraction of laws, the breaking of which affects the basis of all good government, the morals of the country. . . .

Reverse the picture. Suppose, by any chance, that Chinese junks were to import into England, as a foreign and fashionable luxury, so harmless a thing as arsenic, or corrosive sublimate—that, after a few years, it became a rage—that thousands—that hundreds of thousands used it—and that its use was, in consequence of its bad effects, prohibited. Suppose that, in opposition to the prohibition, junks were stationed in the St. George's channel, with a constant supply, taking occasional trips to the isle of Wight, and the mouth of the Thames, when the governmental officers were sufficiently attentive to their duty, at the former station, to prevent its introduction there. Suppose the consumption to increase annually, and to arouse the attention of government, and of those sound thinking men who foresaw misery and destruction from the rapid spread of an insidious, unprofitable, and dangerous habit. . . .

The comparison of opium to wine is, I beg to say, mere “fudge,” and the attempt at argument, thence deduced, no better than nonsense: but, even did the parallel hold, what would it prove? That because people in the western world poison themselves with wine, it is light and expedient that the Chinese should be poisoned with opium. . . . Such is the opinion entertained of it, *in all countries where it is used*, that he, who has once become a prey to the infatuation, is regarded as lost to society, his family, and himself—he is looked on as a reprobate, a debauchee, an incurable; and experience proves, by the innumerable wrecks which the fatal habit marks on its page, the truth of the observation. I will refer you for proof of this, to all the writers* on Turkey, Persia, and other countries, where the habit prevails. You will find all agree in the remark, above made. Does not our

own experience confirm it? Who would have in his house a servant who smokes opium? Is not such a man a marked one, by his own countrymen and foreigners; and is he not looked down on with pity or scorn in consequence? The Chinese, who may be allowed to know somewhat of their own people, denounce the habit, as prejudicial and destructive. When once it is indulged in, renunciation is all but impossible; and the appetite, “growing by what it feeds on,” increases till premature decay and death close the scene of dissipation and vice. This picture is by no means so agreeable a one to contemplate, as the *fancy* one of using it—being merely “a rational and sociable article of luxury and hospitality; but, what it wants in pleasing imagery, it makes up in truth. Ask any Chinese (who does not use this rational and sociable thing), what it is, and hear what he will tell you. . . .

. . . The saving clause in the opium-smuggling profession is that it is, not a *vulgar* one. It is a wholesale trade. Sales are made in thousands of dollars’ worth. The amount is gentlemanly. Single balls would be low. Sales by retail would be indefensible. The seller of a pipe or two, the poor pander to a depraved appetite, should be pursued by justice—for none of these can be gentlemen. That which, sold in chests, is commerce, and to be applauded, becomes vulgar and mean when doled out in small lots. Admirable logic! with which one may hug one’s self, satisfied that it is nothing more than “supplying an important branch of the Indian revenue safely and peaceably.” . . . The trade may be a profitable one—it may be of importance to the Indian government, and to individuals—but to attempt a defense on the ground of its not having dangerous and pernicious influence on health and morals, is to say what cannot be borne out, by fact or argument; and what all, who reason on the subject, cannot but feel to be an impotent attempt to defend what is, in itself, manifestly indefensible.

* Hope, Chardin, Fraser, Madden, Raffles, and a host of others.