

The Global Vice: The Historiography of the Opium Issue in British Burma (1900 –Present)

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Abstract

Myanmar has long been under the scrutiny from international drug control agencies. Given that such realistic problem comes from a deep historical root, this paper revolves around the origin of the opium issue back in British Burma. With a focus on research pertaining to the opium issue in British Burma, this paper divides the historiographical changes of this topic from 1900 to present day into four phases, and ends with providing personal determinations about future research of this topic.

Keywords

British Burma; Opium Issue; Historiographical Changes.

1. Introduction

As the biggest opium producer in Southeast Asia and the second largest in the world, Myanmar has been under the spotlight of international drug control agencies. As the opium issue in Myanmar originates from deep historical roots, an examination of that in British Burma is unavoidable and essential. Back in the colonial period, opium was complexly interweaved with coercive imperial power and was used to extract labor and generate revenue from destructive addiction. Rather than simply a matter of interaction between indigenous Burmese norms and British imperial values, it represents a broader profit-driven and interest-maximizing global evil. Generally, the opium issue includes opium production, trade, and regulation. Focusing on the research on the opium issue in British Burma from 1900 to the present day, the paper aims to analyze the historiographical changes in the research and provides personal determinations about future trends of the topic.

2. Imperial Eyes (1900 –1960)

The twentieth century marks a new era of opium policies, characterized by international drug regulation negotiations. The landmark event was the establishment of the Royal Commission on Opium (RCO) from 1893 to 1895. Following was the League of Nations' assumption of responsibility for overseeing international drug control policy after World War I. It was succeeded by the United Nations (UN), where the United Nations International Narcotics Control Board (INCB) remains in function today. At this stage, Burma became drawn into a transnational network; however, in historical research, it did not gain much attention. Within

this context, political historians from Western countries concentrated on the international negotiation on regulating the opium problem in the Far Eastern colonies, mainly in China and India.

E. N. Baker concentrates on the RCO 's regulation in India, China, Burma, and the Straits Settlements. Baker presents that the opium regulation differed regarding varying consuming habits. In China and the Straits, addicts tended to smoke, while in India and Burma, opium was directly eaten or swallowed [1]. Baker analyzes the provisions from the Commission that the commissioners decided to restrict smoking to maintain social stability, as they were concerned about Chinese addicts in parts of India and Burma who would oppose the prohibition. Under the influence of the RCO, J. F. Scheltema states that regulations on opium for Chinese people was looser than other natives in Indo-China. For example, the opium sale was strictly forbidden to the Burmese in Burma and to the Malays in the Straits Settlements [2].

Quincy Wright focuses on opium conferences before 1925, mainly illustrating the limited effects of the 1912 Hague Convention, the first international narcotics treaty. Concerning suppressing opium consumption, he indicates that opium smoking was still widely practiced in the Far East after the 1912 convention. From the textual analysis of the treaty, Wright stresses that Britain had significantly reduced smoking in Burma through "government monopoly, shop licenses, and price regulations." However, besides Burma, opium regulation in other far eastern territories brought little effect. He further argues that subsequent agreements marked an advance over the 1912 treaty and advocates to immediately urge China to take the responsibility to suppress smuggling [3]. Similarly, Raymond Leslie Buell stresses that the ambiguity of the 1912 treaty resulted in the continuing smuggling of opium. Though the 1924 conference took the further steps to prohibit smoking, in colonies such as Burma, the illicit traffic was out of control because of the reduction of legal sales [4]. Like Wright, Buell argues that the solution lies in the restriction of opium production in China. Welles A. Gray also highlights that the opium problem in the Far East primely rested in China. Gray argues that in the countries like Burma, the smoking habit was prevalent largely among the Chinese population, rather than among the natives [5].

Facing the shifting world situation after World War II, Helen Howell Moorehead highlights the narcotics control under the UN. She presents that a new approach to the worldwide opium question is needed and uses the Burmese case to show the possibility to re-establish worldwide opium control. Through analyzing the British delegate's statements on the opium issue in Burma, she shows that the Executive Council in Burma prohibited opium smoking, possessing, and eating except for religious and ceremonial purposes [6]. Norman Ansley also advocates undertaking international efforts on narcotics control. Tracing the conferences on international opium control, Ansley stresses the efforts from the 1903 commission appointed by the civil governor of the Philippine Islands. The commission investigated the use and trade of opium in multiple colonies from the Far East, including Burma, and successfully banned shipping in or out of the Philippines Islands [7].

From 1900 to 1960, historians focused on the international efforts on opium regulations in their colonies in the Far East, especially India and China. The Burmese opium problem was relegated to and discussed with the Far Eastern opium problem and received no centralized attention. In the period, historians were all from western countries. They argue that drug

control is essentially a question of Western administration of colonies in the Far East, and therefore their research could be categorized as colonial studies. They offer a textual analysis of the official records and reports from international opium conferences and commissions.

3. Ethnic Minorities in the Golden Triangle (1960–1990)

In the 1960s, influenced by sociology and anthropology, scholars began to concentrate on opium production and consumption among ethnic groups in the Great Triangle, where the borders of Thailand, Laos, and Myanmar meet. The Great Triangle is characterized by its low latitude and high altitude, enabling abundant opium growth. Focusing less on opium policies and regulations, historians at the time studied the production, consumption, and trade of opium by ethnic minorities in the borderland.

William J. Chambliss illustrates why opium production spread from the high mountains of South China to the adjacent countries. The tax imposition by the Chinese Government in 1856 forced the British merchants to withdraw from the opium trade gradually and seek for other products. Driven by the potential immense profits, the border states of Laos, Burma, and Thailand changed the traditional crop-growing to the poppy-growing. By statistically analyzing the leap of the opium production in the Golden Triangle, he argues that opium “was a boon for the impoverished hill tribes and ethnic groups [8].” Robert Solomon and Robert G. Cooper present further reasons for widespread opium production in the Golden Triangle. Cooper stresses opium’s productive use of land. Opium swiddens can be used for more than seven years until soil exhaustion, while rice paddy can last one or two years [9]. Solomon argues that there are no crops like opium that can provide hill tribes a better income with considerable yield per unit of land and weight in the hill. Solomon also highlights the multiple uses of opium in the eastern region of the Shan and Kachin States. Except for medical treatment, opium was granted another social function as currency, exchanged mainly for salt and rice [10]. He also traces the Burmese opium transportation from northern Thailand and Laos.

Similar to Solomon, David Nugent also shows opium’s use for currency. Based on the fieldwork from the anthropologist Edmund Leach, Nugent argues that Kachin society in the 1870s possessed an opium-based economy as opium served as a means of payment and a standard of value. He further reveals the interrelationships between characteristics of poppy cultivation, the ecology of the area, and Kachin social organization. He shows a significant micro-ecological differentiation for growing opium in the border area and elaborates that this geographical differentiation created power disparity and legitimized the status hierarchy of aristocrats, commoners, and enslaved people [11]. Richard A. Crooker also focuses on the human ecology of the opium zone, especially the Karen from Burma, who migrated to Northern Thailand and constituted the largest hill tribe there. Based on the statistics provided by the Tribal Research Centre, Crooker shows “economic and social separateness” of the hill tribes as the opium-based economic system isolates them from the people in the lowlands [12]. Still centering on the Karen in Northern Thailand, Paul T. Cohen examines the economic system and relationship between Karen, Hmong and traders dwelling on the fieldwork in Baan Talaad. Cohen argues that opium cultivation and trade resulted in their economic interdependence and Karen’s suppressed social and economic position [13].

From 1960 to 1990, historians turned to study opium production, consumption, and trade of the ethnic minorities in the Golden Triangle. Influenced by anthropology and sociology, they mainly focused on fieldwork and provided a data analysis of graphs and reports from official departments. They shed light on how opium production, consumption, and trade influenced the social and economic aspects of ethnic minorities. However, at this time opium issue in British Burma still was peripheral and less systematically discussed in a single article or a monograph.

4. British-Burma Interaction (1990–2015)

After the 8888 Uprising, Burma gained its attention globally in the 1990s. Research on this theme returned to focus on the opium regulation in British Burma. Compared to the former scholarship, historians after the 1990s acknowledged Burma's specialty in British policymaking. They emphasized the British-Burmese interaction when the opium policy was formulated. Research during the period showed dimensions of cultural history by analyzing the mentality of British officials when making policies and revealing the power relationship behind policies.

Robert B. Maule concentrates on the policy discussion on opium smuggling from the Shan States between the British and Burma government in the International Conferences from 1931 to 1936. Maule presents that the opium scandal refers to both the British and the Burma Governments kept the opium market in the Shan States and rationalize themselves. The Burma government required to continue to allow growing opium for licit use and desired to be the opium supplier after India's removal. They reasoned that opium from the Shan States possessed competence in the market and "was readily available and commercially profitable." By analyzing the reports from officials such as Sir J. Campbell and Sir Findlater Stewart, Maule elaborates that the British officials opposed the Burma Government's proposal for political expediency. They maintained a *laissez-faire* policy on regulating opium in the Shan States. Maule argues that the main reason behind the scandal was that the British were concerned about international censure and tried to protect its international image [14]. In his other work, Maule centered on the opium discussions in the Shan States from 1937 to 1948. He further elaborates that the theme of prohibiting opium cultivation in the Shan States was deliberately omitted as there were no alternative cash crops for fiscal revenue. By analyzing Viscount Halifax's reports, Maule shows Halifax's fear for the *laissez-faire* policy "would meet with strong opposition from the Americans." Maule finally argues that the international criticism, especially from America, forced the British to carry out a new policy by banning smuggling but allowing cultivators and traders to obtain licit revenue from opium [15].

John F. Richards advocates to re-assess the massive reports on the RCO, as he believes they indicate "the cultural tensions and conflicts" between the British colonizers and the colonized in India and Burma. The salient point he presents is that the Burmese case was the exception that "severely tested opium policies for the Indian Government." Different from the policies for Indians, regulations for Burma was complicated. While the native Burmans were forbidden from using opium, Chinese and minorities were permitted to possess opium. Richards also examines the conflict between the anti-opium movement and the RCO. He argues that missionary-dominated opium reformers' opposition to opium use reflects their

biased judgment rooted in the western culture, which was a form of cultural imperialism against the Indians and Burmese [16].

Similar to Richards, Joyace A. Madancy also centers on the RCO and the relationship between anti-opium reformers and pro-opium Commissioners in the RCO. Compared to Richards, Madancy further explores the gendered language in the reports of the Commission. She argues that gender emerged as the vital framework for reformers and Commissioners to assess the motivations for and impact of opium use. While the reformers feminized consumers by stressing their lack of initiative and self-discipline, the Commissioners highlighted the role opium played in enabling male and female consumers to fulfill family and social responsibilities [17].

Unlike Richards and Madancy, Ashley Wright concentrates on British opium policies in Burma before the RCO was appointed. Centering on Sir Charles Aitchison, Wright reveals his contributions to reducing the opium trade in Burma and explores the motivation behind his decision. Through a detailed analysis of Aitchison's memorandum, Wright argues that Aitchison's purpose in restricting opium use and sale in Burma showed a paternalistic rationale for British rule. For example, the memo recommended a restraint system for habitual addicts to form good behavior for security. She finally argues that maintaining a socially stable population was one of the necessary elements for sound and profitable imperial rule [18].

Instead of centering on the opium conferences and commissions, Eric Tagliacozzo concentrates on how changing borders, opium and other goods in transit, and power interweaved and functioned at the frontier between Burma and Siam. Tagliacozzo enables to provide a flowing pattern. Given the complex geographic and ethnic characteristics of the border, British policy on commodities flows was unstable. The definition regarding the licit or illicit nature of opium was ambiguous, as the market at the frontier could be profitable and problematic [19]. He stresses that British policymaking on the flow of commodities, together with indigenous power in Burma and Siam, shaped the fluctuating border.

From 1990 to 2015, historians revolved around the British regulation policies on the opium trade in Burma. Above all, Burma was treated as a particular case in the opium issue. Historians at the time emphasized opium as a complex and valuable commodity and highlighted the vacillation of policymaking. They based their research on massive archival sources, mainly from British archives. Under the framework of postcolonial studies, they tend to explore power relationships between the British colonizer and the colonized and examine the British officials' mentality by offering a discourse analysis.

5. Node in the Network (2015 –present)

From around the 2015s, research on the topic has showed a "Global Turn." Recent historians still concentrate on regulating the opium trade; however, compared to the third stage, they set Burma at a node in complex intra-imperial and transnational networks. They comprehensively discuss more international power other than Britain that influenced opium prohibition in British Burma.

Ashley Wright's *Opium and Empire in Southeast Asia* is exceptional as it is the first

monograph focusing on British opium regulations in British Burma. Her central argument is that opium regulations were intertwined with imperial power complicatedly. As she puts it: "Control of opium and imperial rule were bound together in complex ways, with opium and its regulation influencing and influenced by the imperial power's desire to regulate labor, the construction of racial discourses, and the networked context of imperial power [20]." Wright successfully places the regulation policies in a global network context to show that multiple forces worldwide, especially America intervened in colonial officials' voices and decisions. She also reveals that ideal and moral sentiments were considered together with revenue, control, and power in a wide range of negotiations.

Like Wright but focusing on a more extended period, John Collins also emphasizes the American intervention in British opium control in Burma. He indicates that from 1944 Britain was stuck in a dilemma centering on "placating American wishes" and accommodating local powers, including Burmese elites and ethnic groups. Britain was concerned that the immediate prohibition might facilitate illicit markets and conflict with the indigenous people. However, the US pressured Britain to announce an absolute prohibition, as the US government was afraid that US troops would engage in opium addiction and bring it to the US after the war [21].

The recent prominent scholar in the field would be Diana S. Kim. Kim uncovers the links between opium control in Burma and other Southeast Asian colonies, integrating the Burmese opium issue into a broader Southeast Asian context. By concentrating on the Chittagong-Akyab dispute in 1870, she shows the differing British regulation on opium smuggling in Burma and Bengal, especially on opium pricing. She argues that the debate over opium pricing on two colonies reveals the "capricious nature of controls over opium," and reflects the British instable colonial interests [22]. Similar to Tagliacozzo, she suggests to shed a light on the changeable concepts and discourses.

Based on Wright's work, in her distinguished book *Empire of Vice*, Kim further discusses the Burmese opium issue with that in British Malaya and French Indochina to illustrate a "shared turn" to opium prohibition across Southeast Asia. Kim elaborates on the "shared turn" from the perspective of the micropolitics of bureaucracies, exploring how the daily work and ideas of the local administrators in various colonies promote the major anti-opium reforms across Southeast Asia. In the Burmese case, Kim reveals that local officials in British Burma created a narrative and official problem of "moral wreckage" that argued that opium consumption had destroyed the native Burmese population. The link between opium consumption and crime resulted in anxieties among Burmese administrators on the ground. As a result, those vulnerable agents in the colony exerted a strong influence on the emergence of one of the earliest and formalist expressions of the British prohibitionist position in Southeast Asia [23].

Building on the previous explorations of the global networks for opium regulations, Devyani Gupta explores the postal networks of opium smuggling within an inter-Asian context. Gupta highlights Burma's role as a postal transit station in the opium smuggling. He presents that the district of Burma was linked to India through avenues in Rangoon, Akyab, and Moulmein, and received opium packages from the Calcutta Post Office. Gupta shows the intrinsic weaknesses of the British administrative system, and stresses the individual actors' collaboration and conflict with British authority and their ever-changing alliance and identities [24].

After the 2015s, the network concept has been widely used and variously elaborated in research. Focusing on opium regulation and trade, recent historians shed light on Burma's embeddedness in networks connecting Burma to India, Britain, China, the rest of Southeast Asia, and America. They meticulously examine massive national archives from different countries to show the swaying nature of the opium regulations in Burma and other Southeast Asian colonies and the weaknesses of the colonial system of administration.

6. Conclusion

The opium issue in British Burma continues to generate widespread interest today. Based on exploration on the shifting historiography of the theme, the paper suggests that future research may continue to utilize and develop the network concept to study Burma's opium trade and control from Southeast Asian and inter-Asian perspectives. Further research would probably tend to concentrate on the interaction between the colonizer and the colonized from the perspective of global microhistory.

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