

Opium and Tea: Imperial Exchanges and the Strategic Positioning of British India Relations with China

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ABSTRACT

The influence of Britain upon the Chinese and Indian economies is discussed through the analysis of the interaction between trade, diplomacy, and inner dynamics during this time period. The article focuses on the interaction between Britain, China and British India from the middle of nineteenth century to the middle of twentieth century. The main features of Sino-British relations were determined by the development of the British Empire, the problems in China and their influence on the neighbouring countries. The main role of Britain played the British East India Company, especially the activity of the company in trading, particularly in opium trade, which affected greatly the Chinese economy. The main historical events, which were used for research, were mentioned at the key points: The Opium Wars and the subsequent agreements, which favored the British interests in this region. Besides, the research deals with the role of British India in the trans-Himalayan trade, which connected India and China with Tibet, Nepal and other neighbours.



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Introduction

The connection between China and British India has been perceived as a long chain of planned cooperation, rivalry, and political maneuvers. Often veiled through diplomatic and trading terms since the mid-19th century, it has been noticed that the relationship between China and Britain was motivated by imperial strategies rather than mutual benefits. The British Empire was acting according to the changing environment, which it influenced through economic and military power. At the same time, China faced an internal crisis, which created an opportunity for imperial powers in practice (Liu, 2020). It can be expected that tea and textile, which seem to be harmless items, became tools for the realization of British geopolitical ambitions (Nierstrasz, 2015). While British diplomats claimed to protect economic balance and trade security, it can be stated that the interest of Britain in the stability of China should be perceived as protection of investments (Liu, 2009). However, the internal conflicts within the country such as the Opium Wars and Taiping Rebellion can be considered as Chinese weaknesses. But, according to us, it was also the time when Britain used chaos to extend its power (Sharma, 2016). The justifications used by the British Empire during each intervention demonstrated the logic that was used at that time – if a state was weak, it became available for colonization. Thus, it can be expected that the same strategy was applied in other parts of the world during the colonial period.

In this regard, much of what was achieved and practiced happened due to the British East India Company, which did not just work in India but ran India. The part played by it in diplomacy, trade and agriculture was not just secondary but primary to the goals of British imperialism. Opium cultivation in India was transformed into an industry through the company and its export to China into one of the sources of profit for imperialism. Ironically enough, and tragically, what started as a business transaction for tea turned into an assault on the health, economy, and independence of China (Platt, 2018).

According to Pal Singh (2003), there were consequences of the relations between China and British India that went beyond the economic sphere. The exchange of various resources of matter and mind that occurred across borders had socio-cultural influences, which were quite important. There is yet another line of research in the field of Sino-British relations in connection with treaties and agreements like the Treaty of Nanking (1842) and the Treaty of the Bogue (1843) that did not bring about negotiations but rather created coercive agreements in order to secure certain British privileges under the mask of diplomacy (Liu, 2022).

As the British opened up trans-Himalayan trade through places like Sikkim, Ladakh, Nepal, Tibet, and China, this was no less than political maneuvering for regional power in which the British had the biggest stake. It all climaxed with the end of the British monopoly over opium in 1834, giving rise to a price war and increased addiction. The increase in opium imports from 4,500 to 40,000 chests from 1810 to 1838, in addition to the silver drain from China, amounted to economic siege. The destruction of British opium by Commissioner Lin Zexu in 1839 did not come across as a sovereign act in Britain but as an insult to national pride and commerce (Strayer, 2015).

The development process which is now known to be an economic development was actually a balance of power which was made in favor of Britishers. Wool, salt, medicines – all these commodities were actually tools in a greater scheme of things, which ensured that British India was tied down to imperial power through a complex network (Ghoble, 1997). Since French was also a competitor to Great Britain in the trade industry since the 18th century onwards, it added more to the controversy about tea plantation and exportation. In order to break the monopoly of China on tea production, Britain had tried to develop tea plantations in China and also obtained rights for doing so. However, the issue of who would have the right to export this tea from these plantations soon erupted. Gradually, tea from China started being exported to other countries

including colonial America, Germany and London.

The literature further tries to compare the actions of the two countries with regards to the opium trade. Even though both the nations produced and traded in the opium, it would be an act of dishonesty to overlook the extreme difference in terms of strength and intentions of the two. The production of opium by Britain in the lands and labor of India as well as its deliberate inundation of the Chinese markets was more than just business – it was economic blackmail (Dey, 2018). It is observed that despite the moral high ground taken by the British regarding cultivation of tea by China, it chose to overlook its imperialism (Harris, 2017).

The pattern that emerges from this literature is one whereby opium was more than just a good but rather a strategy of domination through the manipulation of structure. From 1773, Britain had control over Bengal and through that control they established structured cultivation of opium at the expense of local food production and exploitation of peasant labour through oppressive labour (Farooqui, 2016; Bauer, 2019). The nature of the labour and the employment of irrigation as a tool of maximizing production point more to industrialization and not innovation.

Similarly, we learn about the struggle of the Chinese government to counter the moral and social degradation brought about by opium. British unwillingness to submit to Chinese jurisdiction and violent reactions against Chinese measures indicate that the British did not see China as an equal sovereign (Kalipci, 2018; Feige & Miron, 2005). The burning of opium by commissioner Lin followed by military action by the British provides an ironic example of how the aggressor was treated like a victim while the victim was forced to concede.

Thus, we read this literature not just for what it states, but for what it omits. We recognize in these omissions a consistent pattern: economic exploitation framed as progress, and coercive diplomacy framed as benevolent engagement. These distortions are not accidental—they are constitutive of the colonial archive. The purpose of

this research is to examine the military, diplomatic, and economic exchanges that took place between British India and China in 19th century. The article aims to understand how colonial interests, trade, and cultural exchanges influenced the cooperation, conflict and competition between British India and China. The case of opium and tea trade is undertaken for the sake of understanding the British India's strategic and diplomatic engagement with China and their effects afterwards.

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Research Question

What were the main motivations for British India's strategic and diplomatic engagement with China?

What was the impact of trade routes, such as the opium and tea trade, on the relationship between the two powers?

How did British colonial policies in the Himalayan region influence geopolitical agendas?

How were the perceptions and policies of British India and China shaped due to cultural and intellectual exchanges between them?

Literature Review

The literature also attempts to equate the roles of Britain and China in the opium trade. While it is clear that the former manufactured the drug, it must be noted that it is misleading to ignore the enormous power imbalance and different intentions of the two countries (Dey, 2018). We would like to point out that despite the British trying to assert moral superiority by arguing that China should produce its own tea, they overlooked the logic of imperialism which drove their actions all along (Harris, 2017).

What emerges from this body of literature is a

picture of opium not merely as a commodity, but as a tool of structural domination.

Concurrently, we get narratives that reveal how the Chinese government, while being described as obstinate or backward, constantly rejected the moral degradation and social rot associated with opium use. The British government's refusal to acknowledge Chinese law as valid and its brutal response to attempts on the part of China to enforce the law reveal, in general, its unwillingness to treat China as an equal sovereign (Kalipci, 2018; Feige & Miron, 2005). The destruction of opium by Lin Zexu and the resulting military attack by the British are a clear example of an upside-down justice, where the perpetrator is declared a victim and the other way round.

Therefore, we do not only read these sources for their statements, but rather for the things they omit. We see in this omission a constant theme of economic exploitation under the disguise of progress and coercive diplomacy under the disguise of friendly negotiations. The purpose of this research is to examine the military, diplomatic, and economic exchanges that took place between British India and China in 19th century. The article aims to understand how colonial interests, trade, and cultural exchanges influenced the cooperation, conflict and competition between British India and China. The case of opium and tea trade is undertaken for the sake of understanding the British India's strategic

and diplomatic engagement with China and their effects afterwards.

Research Methodology

Qualitative historical methods were employed in present research. This method was based on archival and document analysis.

Results and Discussion

Opium Trade: Sino-British Cooperation and Conflict

For centuries, people in China and other parts of Eurasia had used opium, which the British sold in China, for medicinal and occasionally recreational purposes. It was manufactured from the sap of poppy plants. The British East India Company, established to capitalize on trade with East Asia and India, made significant investments in the cultivation and processing of opium, particularly in the eastern Indian province of Bengal, following the British colonization of a significant portion of India in the 17th century. In reality, the British established a lucrative monopoly on the production of opium for export to and sale in China (Rahman, 2002). Before the East India Company ceased to exist, it was selling large quantities of opium to China. It appears from the valuable work of Mr. M. Martin, entitled "Statistics of the colonies of Great Britain", explaining the rise a statement of the opium exported from Calcutta, Bombay, Damaun to China between 1800 and 1837.

Table I: *Opium consumption and its value in the Indian sub-continent, 1800-1837 (sicca rupees).*

Sr. No.	Year	Chests	Sicca Rupees
1	1800	4,054	3,142,591
2	1810	4,561	8,070,955
3	1820	4,006	8,255,603
4	1830	8,778	11,255,767
5	1835	12,977	13,215,464
6	1837	16,916	25,395,300

Source: *British Government's report by the Mr. M. Martine named Statistics of colonies of Great Britain, (1839: 9)*

By the early 1800s, an increasing number of

Chinese were using British opium for recreational

purposes. However, for many, what began as a recreational activity quickly turned into a life-threatening addiction. Individuals who stopped using opium experienced cramps, nausea, and chills, and some even passed away from withdrawal. People who were addicted would frequently stop at nothing to maintain their drug access. After realizing that opium was becoming a significant social issue, the Chinese authorities outlawed its importation and manufacturing in 1800. By making it illegal to smoke opium and punishing violators with 100 beatings, they went one step further in 1813 (Marshall, 1985).

To gather intelligence and determine the extent of Qing and local authority, early diplomatic missions were sent, such as those made by George Bogle to Tibet and William Kirkpatrick to Nepal. These expeditions contributed to the region's recognition as a potential buffer between hostile powers and British India, in addition to being a zone of interest. An example of this way of thinking was the Anglo-Nepal War (1814–1816) and the Treaty of Sugauli (Kirkpatrick, 1811). The British decided to use Nepal as a buffer against anticipated northern threats and limited its territorial authority rather than annexing the entire country. This was a strategic move in imperial realpolitik (Kumari & Kushwah, 2019). Similarly, in the mid-19th century, through their secret mapping activities conducted by trained Indian surveyors (referred to as “pundits”), the British had obtained crucial topographical and political information about forbidden regions like Tibet. In addition to being exploratory, these trips were essential to colonial intelligence and dominance in cartography (Stewart, 2006). By charting the Himalayas, the British were able to demonstrate their territorial expertise and progressively validate their claims beyond vague borders. The British imperial presence in the Himalayas was about internal fears and the ongoing performance of power on a mountain stage, not just about foreign threats (McKay, 2003). This had become a necessity in the wake of East India Company losing control over opium trade activities.

The loss of the British East India Company's

monopoly over British opium in 1834 also led to a situation whereby the dealers had cut their prices to compete for buyers, making it easier for more Chinese citizens to purchase opium, thus increasing its usage and addiction. Between 1810 and 1838, China's imports of opium grew from 4,500 chests to 40,000. The outflow of silver to pay for the growing amount of imported opium taken by the Chinese grew from roughly two million ounces in the early 1820s to over nine million ounces ten years later (Guotu, 1993). However, with the Qing dynasty's ban on the drug trade and Lin Xexu's burning of the opium at Guangzhou in 1839, tensions between the British and Chinese governments increased, which eventually resulted in the First Opium War. In the British perception that was a blow to their sense of honor and their trading principles. For years, the British East India Company, several British traders, and smugglers kept on contending that China was out of step with “civilized” countries that engaged in free trade and upheld “normal” international relations through treaties and consular representatives (Guotu, 1993; Derks, 2012).

Britain's aim to close its trade deficit with China was the main cause of the First Opium War (1839–1842). On the other side, Chinese tea, silk, and porcelain were in high demand in Britain, but China was not interested in British products. Opium cultivated in British-controlled India was exported to China by Britain to correct this imbalance, which resulted in addiction and social problems. The Chinese government's crackdown over British opium supply which had led to the war, the war ended with the Treaty of Nanjing in 1842. The treaty had marked initiating the “Century of Humiliation,” forcing China to cede Hong Kong, open ports, and pay an indemnity for the loss (Bard, 2000; Chung, 1973). The repercussions did not end there for China!

Britain's aim to increase diplomatic and trade privileges, and more specifically the Arrow incident provided the pretext for military escalation, hence the onset of the Second Opium War (1856–1860). The arrow was basically the Chinese owned ship registered in Hong Kong, later

on became under British control. Britain viewed it as a violation and a disgrace to the British flag when Chinese seized the ship and detained 12 Chinese crew members on suspicion of piracy. Britain's plan was to use this incident as a pretext to attack China militarily in order to increase their privileges and open additional ports for trade. (Wong, 1998).

This led to the outbreak of the second opium war, which lasted for four years. In the early phases of the conflict, China was defeated. China, Britain, France, Russia, and the United States signed the Treaty of Tientsin (1858), which put an end to the conflict. China opened additional ports to Western trade as a result of the deal. However, war resumed because China declined to completely enforce the pact since Chinese emperors had always been reluctant to deal with the western barbarians (Unal, 2013). After capturing Beijing, Britain and France set fire to the old summer palace. As a result, China was compelled to join the Peking Convention in 1860, which essentially legalized opium, increased foreign access, and furthered negotiations about China's sovereignty (Wong, 1998), (Ghoble, 1997). The two Opium Wars together exposed deep weaknesses in China's political and military structures, forcing humiliating concessions and triggering a long decline. The treaties confirmed the legalization of western trade particularly opium (John, 1980).

Consequences of Opium Manufacturing

The implications of opium consumption on the intricate organism known as man have already been hinted at above. The opium problem was more than a public health problem; it was a colonial experiment in manipulation. And all such experiments are characterized by their capacity for generating not only enormous profit but also disastrous consequences. The poppy flower, we contend, did not flourish in the realm of medicine but in the imperial landscape of greed. While beautiful, it bore within itself the poison of an entire age.

The result seen through history books is not only the health issue but also the disintegration of the moral and social fabric (Miskel, 1977). The state

of degradation and degeneracy that was the inevitable fate of the opium addict was not an overstatement of rhetoric but an observable phenomenon, one that was too well known in the landscape of nineteenth-century China. The picture portrayed by the contemporary observer as "a weak and thin symbol" of human excellence illustrates this disintegration clearly.

In order to avoid making assumptions about opium addiction, it seems appropriate to consider the testimony of those who would possess integrity, good judgment, and access to firsthand information. One of these individuals is the Chinese censor, who described the drug's ability to ensnare through its physiological and psychological power, in his memorial to the emperor.

"Those who smoke opium, and eventually become its victims, have a periodical longing for it, which can only be assuaged by the application of the drug at the regular time. If they cannot obtain it when that daily period arrives, their limbs become debilitated, a discharge of rheum takes place from the eyes and nose, and they are altogether unequal to any exertion; but, with a few whiffs, their spirits and strength are immediately resorted in a surprising manner. Thus opium becomes to opium-smokers their very life; and, when they are seized and brought before magistrates, they will sooner suffer a severe chastisement than inform against those who sell it" (Chinese censors, 1839).

This description of opium addiction was not only limited to those of Chinese nationality; a British merchant, writing in a Calcutta pamphlet, gave another very somber analysis of the drug's effect. The merchant pointed out that while there are different intoxicating properties in both opium and alcohol, both overstimulate the nervous system and bring momentary satisfaction at a huge physiological price. And once the excitement ends, everything collapses. As he noted, "The more frequently they are indulged for the sake of this enjoyable feeling of excitement, the more must be consumed... continuously increasing indulgence is required and practically inevitable... disorders of

the digestive system... reduced life expectancy... mental derangement and stupefaction... complete corruption of moral sense." These words underscore not only the physiological harm but also the erosion of will, reason, and conscience (Chinese censors, 1839).

A further remark from the same pamphlet drives home the irreversibility of the addiction: "The bondage that opium subjects its victims to is unmatched by any form of enslavement on the

planet. There is hardly any known example of a man escaping its toils... a fatal fascination, which needs almost superhuman powers of self-denial, and also capacity for the endurance of pain, to overcome" (Medhurst, 1839). Such language speaks not merely to the suffering induced by the drug, but to the deliberate imperial machinery that exploited and expanded this suffering for profit.

Table II: *Consumption of Opium during last twenty years 1816-1836*

Sr. No.	Year	Chests	Dollars
1	1816	3210	3657,000
2	1820	4770	8400,800
3	1825	9621	7608,205
4	1830	18,760	12,900,031
5	1832	23,670	15,338,160
6	1836	23,670	17,904,248

Source: *British Government's report by the W.H. Medhurst (1839, 10)*

Historical statistics bear witness to this exploitation. According to official figures between 1816 and 1836, the amount of chests of opium imported to China has grown from 3,210 to 23,670. The corresponding income increased from £3,657,000 to more than £17.9 million (Martine, 1839). This is not just statistics; this is the business account of a global market based on the exploitation of human debilitation and suffering (Chinese censors, 1839). The amount imported in the year ending in the spring of 1837 was 34,000 chests.

The various Chinese reactions to the imports of the opium were not uniform as Derks (2012) explains. The opium, which was an entirely foreign entity to Chinese people and caused great disruption, received varied reactions from different regions in China which were diverse ethnically and culturally. Some groups were faced with conflicts, crimes, and addictions while others made profits or developed new legal or treatment methods for the problem. However, instead of solving the crisis, the diversity in reactions made it more complex since it became evident that a

single commodity was able to split a nation in different ways (Unal, 2013).

Moreover, imperialism, paranoia, and insecure boundaries became intertwined in a complex web of indirect control, gun diplomacy, and cartographic domination during the course of the 19th century, which turned out to be a major milestone in the geopolitics of the Himalayan area. Imperialist defense reasoning, more particularly in response to the alleged Russian advance into Central Asia, motivated British involvement in the Himalayan region and not economic profit or administrative need (Hopkirk, 1990; Turner, 1800). Not motivated by administration and trade opportunities, geopolitical reasoning had dominated British colonialism with regard to Himalayan region in the 18th and 19th centuries.

Opium trade with China was not only an act of commerce, but there existed many other underlying reasons for it as well. Various treaties that were concluded in the interest of trade not only legalized the opium trade but included two other commodities in them as well. Opium used to

be purchased by China from Britain in return for silver, and silver, in turn, was used by Britain to purchase tea from China (Zhuang, 1993). Looking at the British-India's involvement in China in terms of tea cultivation, the same dichotomy of imperial enterprises comes up once again.

British India-China Cooperation on Tea Plantations

Since China held the near monopoly of tea cultivation throughout many centuries, the country not only attracted the adoration of the British nation but also suffered from their plundering. It was strategically important for the British authorities to put an end to the Chinese monopoly on the global market and start producing tea in India (Bruce, 1827).

The point is that the British government responded to China's competitive advantage in its own interests rather than attempted to change the situation by means of developing innovations inside the British territory. The lands and the labor force of the subcontinent were regarded as the tools for the achievement of these goals. It was Lord William Bentinck, the Governor-General of India at that time, who supported the development of this project. He appreciated the abilities of the Assam area and the neighboring territories to produce the required product (Beeching, 1977).

However, the central irony behind the entire process of change involved the British introducing the Chinese tea plants in India and importing Chinese workers to cultivate those plants. It is ironic because the act of transplanting a culture as well as plants from one place to another, usually explained as a process of global exchange of agriculture, was in reality a strategy used to take away the Chinese superiority through its exploitation (Harris, 2017).

It should be mentioned that it was the British government who aimed at developing tea plantations in so-called 'wastelands' which is a euphemistic term implying various forms of socio-ecological disturbance which took place during this process. The local plants were substituted, the existing labour system transformed and the use of

the land changed as well. The plantations which emerged as a result of all these processes are not an experiment in agriculture, but rather colonial enclosure (Mukerjee, 2022).

We must also note that the consequences were not the same for all cases. China was, and still is, an extremely heterogeneous society, and the social, political, and psychological consequences of the consumption of opium depended on ethnicity, class, and region. While one population might resort to enforcing the law locally and rebelling against it, others would include opium consumption in their very existence or criminality. Fragmentation was exactly what suited British interests since it made opposition weaker and fostered dependence (Derks, 2012).

However, the narrative takes on an even greater significance if we take into account the fact that the pattern was replicated. Indeed, the British were not satisfied with their work in Assam. Soon after, they started developing regions like Kumaoun and Gurhwal, employing Chinese experts and planting thousands of Chinese tea trees, thus creating an entire chain of tea cultivation regions throughout Northern India. One should not forget that the very locations chosen by the British for these plantations were strategic locations due to the Himalayan border policy of Britain (Platt, 2018).

While it may seem like an accomplishment on the part of Indian tea producers to have successfully exported their product to international markets, this view has to be reconsidered from a critical perspective. Indeed, the plants did grow well and the teas did become popular among London traders. However, there were darker undertones to this story, namely that of extraction, transplantation, and conquest. It is telling of the extent to which the mimicry was executed in this case that Chinese workers described the similarity of Kumaoun tea to their own teas (Bruce, 1841).

The samples were sent to London and assessed by the British merchants who incorporated the new tea into their commercial operations, marginalizing Chinese and Indian producers in the process. The celebration of the British officials

regarding the results of this endeavor just emphasizes the truth behind the scenes, and that is that tea trade was never just about taste—it was about control.

Conclusion

In revisiting the complex interplay between Britain, China, and British India from the mid-19th century onwards, we find ourselves confronting a legacy not of mutual exchange, but of strategic subjugation. Conventional narratives depict the Opium Wars as unfortunate unintended consequences of competing interests. Closer scrutiny, however, reveals them as calculated performances of imperial control. The British sought more than economic equilibrium; they sought geopolitical primacy through the mechanisms of trade, diplomacy, and war.

We must resist the temptation to view opium and tea as mere commodities. As we have seen in our analysis, these commodities came to function as commodities, that is to say as tools of extractivism, domination, and imperial legitimization. Tea becomes a symbol of consumption and pleasure and falls victim to the politics of replacement—its planting in India a response to China's resistance. Opium, the negative mirror image, however becomes a weapon that causes chaos within China and immense profit outside of its borders.

The treaties that came after the Opium War were neither diplomatic negotiations nor compromises, but imperial mandates that would legalize an illegal act and create an institution of inequality within international law. The supposed moral high ground of the British can be criticized in the face of human damage in the form of addiction, economic dependence, and the loss of sovereignty.

It is our assertion that the importance of imperial encounters is not limited to their results but includes their consequences, the stories created in that time, which continue to reverberate within today's geopolitics. The story of rational Western civilization facing resistant Oriental barbarians and forcing the former upon the latter persists in today's international relations. Hence, we end our analysis of the events of that era with a question rather than a conclusion. The Opium Wars were

far from being an exception; on the contrary, they represented a pattern of imperial behavior, one of domination over conversation. The study of the patterns does not allow us to retrieve the past but to understand the blueprint that persists in today's world.

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