

Missionaries vs. The Opium Industry

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From the Editor: *This historical case study proves that missionaries can provoke global change by challenging powerful industries and even their own government's policies--and by coming alongside the hurting they open the hearts of the resistant to the gospel.*

"I am profoundly convinced that opium traffic is doing more evil in China in a week than missions are doing good in a year," declared Rev. J. Hudson Taylor at the Centenary Global Missions Conference in 1888. Twenty-eight years prior, Taylor's home country of Great Britain had just finished its second war to protect and enrich British opium traders in China. Taylor implored his audience to sign on to a resolution that would,

acknowledge the incalculable evils, physical, moral and social, which continue to be wrought in China through the opium trade, a trade which has strongly prejudiced the people of China against all Missionary effort.... [and repudiate] the position occupied by Great Britain, through its Indian administration, in the manufacture of the drug and promotion of the trade...[calling] Christians of Great Britain and Ireland to plead earnestly with God, and to give themselves no rest until this evil is entirely removed.¹

Taylor and missionaries like him faced stiff opposition in their quest to banish opium from Chinese society. Many Britishers taken with Social Darwinism viewed the Chinese as an inferior people and so had no qualms selling them opium.² Poppy farmers, opium traders and government officials, both foreign and native, all had financial incentives to maintain the status quo. Many pragmatic and opportunistic arguments were put forward in favor of continuing the trade: "we are only meeting a need," "farmers earn more money from opium than from food crops," "if we do not make money someone else will."³ With so many powerful entrenched interests the problem appeared intractable. The missionaries were not dissuaded. Despite having much to do on many fronts they pressed on. Historian

Kathleen L. Lodwick put it perfectly in her book *Crusaders Against Opium: Protestant Missionaries in China 1874-1917*:

The missionaries had many other serious concerns—conversions, translation of the Bible, religious literature, and music into Chinese; famine relief; improvement of the status of women; anti-foot-binding efforts—with which opium had to compete for their time and attention.... The missionaries, especially a few vocal ones, were the publicists who constantly called the government to task for policies the missionaries considered wrong....⁴ Any missionary who departed [from China] was urged to spread the word among the homefolk about the evils of opium and...supplied with all of the latest anti-opium literature to aid him....⁵

Missionaries sought to change public opinion of opium. Many of the missionary doctors working in China had an intimate understanding of the tragic effect opium had on their patients. The anti-opium league in Great Britain worked with these missionary doctors to produce a pamphlet that would galvanize anti-opium sentiment. The pamphlet outlined the tragic consequences of opium use, the difficulty doctors had in helping their patients break the habit, the number of people committing suicide with opium and how Great Britain's involvement in the trade damaged the reputation of the gospel.⁶ The Bishop of Durham in 1881 put it thusly, "*It is no small hindrance to a Christian Missionary to have cast at him such a Chinese proverb as this: 'You bring incense in one hand, a spear in the other;' which is, being interpreted, 'You bring us the Bible in one hand, opium in the other.'*"⁷

1 Lodwick, 50-51

2 Lodwick, 30

3 Lodwick, 9

4 Lodwick, 31


5 Lodwick, 50

6 Lodwick, 40,46,47,33

7 anglicanhistory.org/asia/china/moule_opium1881.html

The movement against opium found allies in Chinese students returning from studying abroad. Many of these students felt ashamed because the rest of the world looked down on China because of its opium problem. They had come to believe China couldn't be a strong nation unless opium addiction was dealt a decisive blow. Churches in China worked tirelessly to rehabilitate addicts and prevent people from becoming addicted in the first place, so the Chinese increasingly saw missionaries as allies against the powerful opium industry and as people who genuinely cared for their people.

When at last the Chinese government made another attempt to ban opium in 1906 the groundwork for a successful transition had been made. Political attitudes in Great Britain were changing. Though opium had become fashionable in the 1870s, by 1906 many of the newly elected Members of Parliament were evangelicals who strongly opposed opium. Finally, after over a century of anti-opium agitation by missionaries, China and Great Britain came to an agreement to end the opium industry's trade into China within 10 years. "The anti-opium forces [in Parliament], 'a happy band of pilgrims' who had fought so long to reach the goal now in sight, linked each other's arms and marched down from the lobby to the street singing the doxology."⁸

Editor's Note: In 1909 opium was banned in the USA and other countries and an International Commission on Opium met in Shanghai to discuss ending non-medicinal opium production. However, heroin, invented by Bayer, Germany (1895) and distributed to cure opium addiction in the US, soon became a French industry, grown in French colonies in S.E. Asia and refined in Marseilles. There were virtually no Protestant missionaries in these areas at the time. By the 1950s, CIA anti-communist efforts, the opium industries and heroin refineries were all entrenched in the "Golden Triangle" with little opposition from the global community. Causing almost constant civil war, multiple attempts have been made since 1980 to restrict opium growing in Burma/Myanmar, with the Christian Kachin and other churches founding an anti-opium activist network called "Pat Ja San" which has over 90 detox centers.⁹ 

⁸ Lodwick, p 123

⁹ <https://thediplomat.com/2017/11/the-christian-vigilantes-fighting-myanmars-heroin-epidemic/>
Some are helping this effort through international publications.
<https://frontiermyanmar.net/en/fighting-addiction-in-kachin-state>

The Way of Heaven

In 1840, a Chinese official Lin Zexu wrote a letter to Queen Victoria signed by the Emperor saying:

"Where is your conscience?... Since [opium] is not allowed to do harm to your country, then even less should you let it be passed on to the harm of other countries—how much less to China—to be careful of [their] own lives but careless of the lives of others.... Such conduct is repugnant to human feeling and at variance with the Way of Heaven... Men are like this all the world over: that they cherish life and hate what endangers life... the Way of Heaven holds good for you as well as for us, and your instincts are not different from ours; nor nowhere are there men so blind as not to distinguish what profits and what does harm...."

Queen Victoria never received the letter.¹

TIMELINE OF BRITISH OPIUM SHIPMENTS TO CHINA

1729	China makes recreational opium illegal. 200 chests (14 tons)
1760s	1000 chests (70 tons)
1799	China bans opium imports and growing.
1820	Chinese emperor requires confiscation of opium "poison." 10,000 chests (700 tons)
1838	4-12 million addicts
1840	First Opium War 1839-42 China cedes Hong Kong to Britain. 40,000 chests (2,800 tons)
1860	Second Opium War 1856-1860) China legalizes opium. 70,000 chests (4,900 tons) ^{2*}
1880	95,000 chests (6,650 tons) with an equal amount being grown in China
2017	Under UN, British, and American oversight, Afghan production of opium and heroin production soared. 10,500 tons (9000 from Afghanistan), enough for 600-900 tons of heroin. ³

¹ [www.amoymagic.com/Opium War.htm](http://www.amoymagic.com/Opium%20War.htm)

² www.unodc.org/unodc/en/data-and-analysis/bulletin/bulletin_1949-01-01_1_page005.html

*Equal to the global production of opium in 2000AD, www.economist.com/economic-and-financial-indicators/2010/06/24/global-opium-production

³ www.france24.com/en/20180627-global-opium-cocaine-production-record-highs-un-report-says