

Anti-Opium Movement, Chinese Nationalism and the Straits Chinese in the Early Twentieth Century

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Abstract

This paper is a study of the anti-opium movement organized by the Straits Chinese leaders in Malaya in the early twentieth century. As the Chinese were the largest group of opium smokers, they were seen as a primary source of government revenue. The leading Chinese medical practitioners in the movement aimed not only at the prohibition of the opium trade but also the cure for opium smoking by medical treatment. As there was no effective cure for the addiction, the idea was radical but unrealistic. The movement leaders believed that if they could treat opium smokers, they could also help China to rid itself of the curse of opium that was forced upon it by Western powers. The rationale behind the anti-opium movement was more than for social or economic reasons but was an indirect show of support for Chinese nationalism in China.

Key words: anti-opium movement, anti-American boycott movement, Chinese nationalism

Introduction

The movement against opium smoking was initiated by the Chinese community in British Malaya in 1906. In the days before World War Two, opium smoking was not generally looked upon as a social problem, even in the Straits Settlements of Singapore, Penang and Malacca where the Chinese were more urbanized and enlightened than their counterparts in the Malay States. The revenue derived from opium was an important, if not the most important, item for the colonial administrations from the early nineteenth century. In the Straits Settlements, it was as high as 55.6 per cent in 1841-42 and a significant 31.8 per cent in 1926-27 (Trocki, 1990: 96-97). In the period between 1820 and 1882, the Straits government earned an average of 44.3 per cent of its total revenue from opium. That this substance was such a major income generator was due to the fact that the government “farmed out” the distribution and sale of opium to Chinese individuals or syndicates on a competitive basis. The colonial government

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The author wishes to thank Dr. P.K. Voon for his advice and comments.

monopolized the supply of raw opium and leased the right of preparing and distributing cooked opium (locally known as *chandu*) to the Chinese. This was an arrangement that was mutually beneficial to both parties. The “revenue farmers” were owners of capital who were invariably merchants, tin miners or planters. They were free to distribute and sell *chandu* to all adults in the Chinese community and to a captive market in the form of their own labour force. The colonial government, on the other hand, had an easy and assured source of revenue as the market for opium consumption expanded in tandem with increased inflows of Chinese immigrants (Swettenham, 1948: 253-256; Yen, 1995: 147-74). The revenue farm system was therefore a means of consumption tax collection that was primarily borne by the Chinese. This meant that opium smoking was virtually unregulated. Furthermore, it was generally perceived that to look upon opium smoking as a problem was in itself considered to be an anti-government act. All problems connected with opium were essentially regarded as those of opium smokers only, and had little to do with the colonial authorities.

This paper examines the process by which the opium issue, viewed officially as the private problem of the Chinese community, was turned into a colonial or public problem in British Malaya. This issue also surfaced at a time when two new empires that advocated an anti-opium policy appeared on the scene. One was Japan which colonized Formosa or Taiwan island in 1895 and the other was the United States of America (US) which occupied the Philippines in 1898. Both played prominent roles in raising the level of awareness of the opium problem at the international stage. At the same time, they undermined the position of the British government from a humanitarian standpoint. In addition to this, China’s anti-opium movement also started sometime in 1906 following a series of “New Policy” reform movements at the closing stages of the Qing dynasty. The anti-opium movement promoted by the Straits Chinese leaders surfaced rather suddenly in British Malaya. Under the pressure of international anti-opium criticisms and the demand of the local Chinese community, the Opium Commission was set up in July 1907 to make a study of the opium problem and to put forward its recommendations (*SS and FMS Opium Commission*, 1908 and 1909).¹

The reports of the Commission that contained more than 1,300 pages form the primary source of reference of this paper. Previously published works that relied heavily on this source include those by Cheng U Wen (1961) and Margaret Lim (1969). They were concerned with the findings of the Commission rather than with the anti-opium movement. This movement was seen as a mere reflection of the disputes between Britain and China. In another study, Yen Ching Hwang (1995) discusses the anti-opium movement from the perspective of Chinese nationalism. These studies did not deny the influence of China in the opposition to opium. It is therefore of interest to examine how Chinese leaders in British Malaya related to Chinese national influence and how they internalized it in their campaign against opium smoking. In

this respect, it is relevant to take into account the US Exclusion Act of the Chinese. In 1904, the US had renewed and amended the Chinese Exclusion Act to disregard the difference between the contract coolie and the people of commerce, the leisure traveller or the student. This act was already in enforcement in the Philippines and Hawaii. This had aroused an anti-American boycott movement in China in a patriotic response that left an impact on the Chinese community in British Malaya. At the same time, the US stance on opium also lent much international support to the anti-opium policy. It is thus necessary to consider how Chinese leaders perceived this seemingly contradictory US behaviour. The discussion here will take into account the US in the tripartite relationships among China, Britain and Malaya, and to examine the anti-opium movement from different perspectives.

Another aspect of the anti-opium movement in British Malaya was its promotion as an attempt by the Straits Chinese to transform society, culture and education from traditional to modern ways (see 李元瑾/Lee, 1990). Lim Boon Keng, Yin Suat Chuan² and Wu Lien Teh (Goh Lean Tuck), who organized the anti-opium societies, were medical practitioners as well as Western-educated leaders of the Chinese community. They were not merely targeting opium smoking as an all-round social evil to be banished, but also understood the anti-opium movement as a patriotic movement in support of China. This paper will also discuss the idea of nationalism as a force behind the anti-opium movement in a British colony. The origins of this movement and the unique situation of the Straits Chinese will be discussed in the historical context.

Recognition of the Opium Problem as a National Issue

A statement by Lim Boon Keng (1898: 47) regarding the opium problem in the Straits Settlements appeared in *The Straits Chinese Magazine*:

The Government of every civilized country recognizes its duty the repression of all sources of vice and crime...In the United Kingdom and America, steps have been taken to control and check the spread of the drinking habit and in many quarters these have been followed by good results...we wish to call the attention of the Straits Government to its position in regard to the baneful habit of opium smoking, to the revenue which it derives from this luxury and to the duties which it morally owes to the poor and helpless victims of the opium habit.

He insisted that the government should look upon the opium problem as an issue of a civilized nation and to change the laws on opium. He argued that the opium issue was not to be viewed as a problem of the Chinese, but as the responsibility of the government. The

general and deep-rooted attitude then was to ascribe opium smoking to the inborn habit of the Chinese (Lim, B.K., 1898: 48). Europeans would argue that “the opium use is good for a Chinaman” to defend the legal distribution and sale of opium (West, 1903: 91). It was apparent that this Western attitude was not without basis as a form of racial discrimination of the colonial authorities. The government of the Straits Settlements similarly considered opium as a Chinese “necessity” and its problem was the sole responsibility of Chinese society. Meanwhile, it continued to justify and derive significant sums of revenue from this Chinese “necessity”. A prevalent opinion that was circulating among Europeans and Americans then was that opium affected different races of people in different ways. The logical argument was that what might be harmful to an American might be good for a Chinese (West, 1903: 88). In the US, the stereotypical image of Chinese workers was that of an opium smoker. Although a great number of opium smokers were Chinese, this “ethnic profiling” was reinforced by racial discrimination and the fear was that opium might pervade American society as a whole (Choy, 1995; Goto-Shibata, 2005: 16).

Opium had surfaced as a national issue in England since the first Opium War of 1840-42. In 1874, the Anglo-Oriental Society for the Suppression of Opium Trade (SSOT) was established by Quakers of the Society of Friends and started the movement under the humanistic idea to “oppose the opium monopoly by the Indian Government and suppress opium traffic with China” (Muraoka, 1996: 159). In the 1890s, with the support of sympathetic members in the British House of Commons, SSOT was able to persuade Parliament to tackle the opium problem. These efforts eventually led to the appointment of the Royal Opium Commission in 1894 to enquire into the opium trade in India and Burma. However, the British still regarded opium as a kind of cigarette or a social habit. As such, England did not feel obliged to agree to any form of suppression of opium.

In contrast, Japan and the US took the lead in the opposition to opium in the late nineteenth century. Having learned from China’s mistakes in the Opium Wars of the 1840s, Japan chose to prohibit the trade in opium. When Japan opened itself to the world, T. Harris, a diplomat of the US, gave concrete advice on the evils of the British opium policy. Ever since then, Japan had consistently included the principle to prohibit importing opium in all its treaties with other countries (Ryu, 1983: 15-24). Japan realized that it could modernize according to Western ways without having to depend on opium. This policy was also to sharpen the contrasts in the subsequent fate of Japan and China. After the Sino-Japanese War of 1895, Japan occupied Taiwan and recognized that one of the major difficulties in its rule was the opium problem. Japan was reportedly making attempts to prohibit the sale of opium in Taiwan but won little support from the local people and did not bring an end to resistance against Japanese occupation. Japan shifted towards a policy of “gradual prohibition” to

reconcile the reality in Taiwan with its own anti-opium stance. On the basis of this policy, the colonial authorities monopolized the selling of opium with the aim of reducing overall usage, and channelled part of the revenues towards health care. Registration of all opium smokers was introduced to reduce the number of smokers gradually in 30 to 50 years. The intention was to control existing smokers and to prevent non-smokers to take up the habit. These efforts were overseen by Goto Shinpei, a medical practitioner and the secretary of the civilian department. As Japan regarded opium for non-medical use as contraband, it also classified it as an illegal substance under its “territorial expansion” ideology.

The US occupation of the Philippines from 1898 similarly encountered the opium problem. Under American rule, the Spanish policy of confining opium smoking only to the Chinese was abolished. Unfortunately, it led to a dramatic increase in opium smoking among Filipinos (Foster, 2000: 257). The government subsequently appointed the Philippine Opium Commission in 1903 to investigate the situation in opium-consuming countries and colonies including Japan, Taiwan, Shanghai, Hong Kong, Saigon, Burma, Java and the Straits Settlements (Alexander, 1906: 187). It investigated the workings of various government-monopoly systems, first introduced in French Indochina and later adopted in Java by the Dutch. In both cases, the primary purpose was to secure a source of revenue. On the other hand, the Commission appreciated Japan’s policy in Taiwan, and this was to influence American policy in the Philippines. The Commission’s findings that were published in 1905 were reported in *The Straits Times* in detail on 17 June. Except for medical purposes, the Commission called for the elimination of opium smoking within three years. In contrast to the Japanese policy in Taiwan, the Commission seemed optimistic. This might be because new Chinese immigrants were disallowed under the Chinese Exclusion Act and that the new policy included a severe measure to deport Chinese offenders from the Philippines (*The Straits Times*, 17 June 1905).

The advocacy of Japan and the US on the suppression of opium had a decided influence on the international stage. In British Malaya, this fact was received with great publicity in *The Straits Times* and *The Straits Chinese Magazine*. Views expressed in these publications reflected growing anti-opium sentiments in local society (see West, 1903; Alexander, 1906). Being forced into an awkward position, Great Britain was subsequently obliged to examine the India-China opium traffic more closely. Being remote from its Asian colonies, Great Britain was unlike Japan, which regarded newly-occupied Taiwan as its domestic territory. The number of Chinese immigrants in Great Britain itself was insignificant even in comparison with the US. These contrasting backgrounds were not entirely unrelated to its indifference towards the social problems caused by the opium trade.

Opium and Anglo-China Relations

The 1895 Royal Opium Commission that investigated into the opium issue in India and Burma had published voluminous reports covering over 2,500 pages. To the great relief of British officials, who did not take kindly to the criticisms relating to the revenue derived from opium, the Straits Settlements was dismissed in no more than 40 pages (Foster, 2003: 102). This Commission went as far as to examine the possibility of the government taking over the collection of the opium revenue, but found this attempt impracticable due to the inadequacy of staff and large initial loss of revenue. The Commission had consulted the revenue farmers in Singapore in its enquiries and seemed quite obvious that its conclusions attached great importance to maintaining the opium farm system (Lim, M., 1969: 41). However, British officials soon began to recognize the problems of the system and the need to introduce change. According to Swettenham (1948: 254), “this system is objectionable principally because of the enormous power it places in the hands of the farmer for a period of three years, during which he holds the monopoly.” The opium farmer employed his own police, called “*chinting*” to protect himself and to check smuggling activities, but the arrogant attitude of the *chinting* did little to promote public order. Some opium farmers themselves could also be directly involved in smuggling. In 1903, Swettenham sent the Secretary of Chinese Affairs of the Malay States, G. T. Hare, an acknowledged expert on the Chinese, to Singapore to survey the actual conditions of the opium farm system (Leong, 1906: 40). The opium ordinance was subsequently amended to allow the appointment of additional staff to the Chinese Protectorate as superintendents and inspectors of opium farms, and the manufacture of all cooked opium or chandu, in the colony in a special factory to be approved by the Governor. A significant feature of the amendment was to raise the maximum fixed retail price of chandu from \$2.15 to \$3.15 per *tahil* (about 37.8gm). This price hike saw a dramatic increase in the revenue of the Straits Settlements in 1904, as expected by British officials well in advance. Undoubtedly, the colonial authorities, besides taking into consideration the extra running costs ensuing from amending the ordinance, were acting in their self-interest. Hence, the official intention was to tighten control of the opium farms but not to reform the farm system itself.

In view of the reality of the situation, it was unlikely that the authorities would even attempt to alleviate what was considered as a Chinese problem. But a speech made by John Morley on 30 May 1906, then Secretary of State of India, marked a turning point. In reply to a motion laid on the table of the House of Commons by Theodore Taylor, Morley declared that “if China wanted to seriously and in good faith to restrict the consumption of this drug in China, the Government of India and His Majesty’s Government would agree to it, even though it might cost them some sacrifice” (Wen, 1907: 3) It was this remark, according to Wu Lien

Teh, that “the [Straits anti-opium] movement first originated on account of the speech made in the House of Commons by Mr. Morley” (*SS and FMS Opium Commission*, 1909: 649). China was closely watched on how it would respond to the remark in the British Parliament (see *The Straits Times*, 16 June 1906; 23 June 1906; 26 June 1906; 2 July 1906).

On 20 September 1906, the Qing government issued an imperial decree to eliminate opium smoking and the cultivation of poppy throughout the country within ten years (*The Straits Times*, 9 October 1906). While the British were not surprised by China’s decision, they were not hopeful of drastic changes as they knew that China had found it difficult to regulate the use of opium.³ Lim Boon Keng (1906: 149) noted with relief that “the Chinese as a nation are convinced of the injury which opium has caused to the individual and to the State”, and the recognition of the opium issue as the best opportunity for “the East and the West” to understand each other (Lim, B.K., 1906: 149). In 1907, China and Great Britain concluded the Anglo-China Agreement to eliminate opium in ten years. On the basis of this Agreement, Lim Boon Keng expressed the hope that the mutual approach towards the opium problem would commit the British government to suppress the India-China opium trade in ten years.

With the beginning of discussions between Britain and China, the opium problem would suddenly escalate to become an international issue, though not unrelated to the US position on opium. It was at this time that anti-opium societies were established in quick succession in British Malaya. The first one appeared in Singapore in August 1906, followed by the next in Selangor in the following month, and in Penang, Perak and Malacca in October. In view of the mounting criticisms on opium smoking and the trade in opium from various quarters, the British Foreign Office instructed the Straits government to establish a special Commission to investigate the opium problem in British Malaya. This Commission was duly set up in July 1907.

The anti-opium movement in the Straits Settlements and two Malay States became more formally organized at the time when “the East and the West” began discussions of the opium trade. One might wonder if the anti-opium movement in Malaya was a by-product of external forces or whether it was driven by internal events. It is necessary to examine this question from the perspective of the Straits Chinese community which led this movement.

Anti-American Boycott Movement and Anti-Opium Awareness

The US occupied the Philippines in 1898 and one of its colonial mandates was to deal with the opium problem “under the slogan of the anti-opium policy”. The American policy indeed had an impact on East Asian diplomacy concerning the opium question; it was essentially targeted against Chinese immigrants on the basis of their image as opium smokers.

It is in this context that the American policy was linked to the issue of Chinese immigration into the US and its administered territories. In reaction, Chinese businessmen and students in Shanghai began to boycott American goods as an expression of patriotism in May 1905 (*The Straits Times*, 29 November 1906). In the same month, the Philippine Opium Commission also reaffirmed the exclusive policy against Chinese immigrants (*The Straits Times*, 17 June 1905).

The US exclusion policy exerted a profound impact on the Chinese community in British Malaya as merchants and traders in Singapore joined in the boycott movement. In a meeting at Tong Chay Hospital on 20 June 1905 chaired by Lim Boon Keng, it was resolved that “the traders in Singapore stop all trading in American goods”. The result of the meeting was cabled to the government of China (*The Straits Times*, 22 June 1905). A similar meeting was chaired by Lim Kek Chuan, president of the Penang Chinese Chamber of Commerce, at the Chinese Town Hall in Penang. Wu Lien Teh, in an address in English, called for the boycott of the American goods as a protest against the amendment to the Exclusion Act (*The Straits Times*, 3 July 1905). Except for tobacco and oil, trade between the Straits Settlements and the US was not strong and it is difficult to estimate the actual damage of the boycott movement on US trade. However, the boycott movement was able to mobilize Chinese opinion through the Chinese media and theatrical performances, and hence to build a sense of Chinese solidarity (Wong, 1997: 17-32). The appeal of the idea of patriotism, aided by the common origins of the Chinese from southern China, quickly galvanized the Chinese community into a movement of considerable social significance.

At the time of the amendment of the Exclusion Act, Yin Suat Chuan, who had studied medicine in the US, was rehabilitating two opium smokers with the support of Lim Boon Keng (*SS and FMS Opium Commission*, 1909). His successful treatment convinced him to open an opium refuge. He put forward his concept in a public lecture on the method of managing an opium refuge with the support of the Chinese community at the Chinese Reading Room in Singapore in early 1906 (Murray, 1906: 133). There was no immediate response to the lecture. It was several months later, when he had an opportunity to explain his scheme to the Chinese Counsel in Singapore, that the Counsel offered to sponsor the expenses for the initial month and a location for the proposed institution.⁴ After hasty preparations the opium refuge was opened on 23 May 1906. Indeed, Lim Boon Keng had put forward the proposal to set up an experimental opium refuge as early as 1898. In other words, Straits Chinese leaders had been aware of the need for making available remedial treatment for opium smoking well before Morley’s speech in the British Parliament on 30 May 1906. It was probable that this Straits Chinese attempt was not unrelated to the US exclusion policies. According to *The Straits Chinese Magazine*, the opium issue was in fact part of the Chinese patriotic movement that was inspired by the boycott of American goods. It declared in an article (*SCM*, 1906: 209):

The awakening national spirit suddenly burst forth as if aroused from the stupor of centuries. National unity was achieved for the first time without bloodshed. A common sentiment of kinship with all yellow men – a feeling which Confucius vainly strove to instill into the China of his day – miraculously pervades all classes. It was this that made the American boycott a success. It is this which enables the nation now to combat the attractions of the narcotic which has done the Chinese nation such harm...In consequence of the new national aspiration, a strong feeling exists against the indulgence in opium. Societies sprang up in no time throughout China and all Chinese communities for the preservation of national vigour and the repression of the opium vice.

While the Chinese expressed their objection through the boycott movement in China, there was a feeling it should not become “a second coming of the Boxer Rebellion”, or not to show that China was incapable of joining “the progressive and universal civilized current” of the world (Yoshizawa, 2003: 86). Thus, the anti-opium movement began in British Malaya precisely also as a reflection of this patriotism movement “without bloodshed”. Yin Suat Chuan was particularly aware of the ugly face of racial discrimination behind the US Exclusion Act. On the occasion of the devastating earthquake in San Francisco on 18 April 1906, the shops of Chinese victims in Chinatown were shamelessly looted in the presence of US troops and police (Yin, 1906: 48). In a biting criticism of this incidence, Yin Suat Chuan described the looting as occurring “in the great civilized city of a great civilized country, by a great and civilized people, in the presence of troops, in the enlightened twentieth century” (Yin, 1906: 48). Noting that US government had decided to return to China a large part of the Boxer Uprising indemnity money, he lamented that “had the American people shared this benevolent action of their Government and condescended to treat the Chinese on more liberal terms, the boycott movement would never have started” (Yin, 1906: 49). Like many Straits Chinese, Yin did not allow his intense disappointment with the inhuman racial discrimination of “civilized” Americans to go unrecorded.

While the Chinese sense of patriotism was aroused by the racial prejudice of the exclusion policy of the US, they also realized the need to tackle the crippling impact of opium on the Chinese community. However, this awareness alone, while it motivated the anti-opium movement, had a negative side to it. The move to register opium smokers as a step towards the control of the drug, already adopted as an effective means by Japan and the US, were objected to by Yin Suat Chuan and Lim Boon Keng on the grounds that it was an infringement on the privacy of the individual (*SS and FMS Opium Commission*, 1908-09: 42 and. 420-422). At the Anti-Opium Conference held at Ipoh on March 1907, Yin Suat Chuan’s opposition to the registration policy in the name of protecting liberty and individual rights had

caused much debate (*The Straits Times*, 14 March 1907). When Lim Choo Boon, the secretary of the Perak Anti-Opium Society, referred to the successful opium regulation of Japan and the US at the interview of the Opium Commission, a member of the Commission claimed that this was because the “Americans do not want Chinese in the Philippines islands” and suggested a similar exclusion act in Perak (*SS and FMS Opium Commission*, 1908-09: 750). This member had justified opium smoking only because Chinese immigrants were necessary for the development of Perak.

The influence of the US exclusion policy was to make the Straits Chinese wary of government intervention, lest the Chinese were subjected to discriminating legislations. It was therefore impossible to trust the government to solve the opium problem. In other words, the anti-opium movement had to be promoted within the limited capacity of the Chinese themselves. Lim Boon Keng clearly showed this sentiment when he asserted that China must be free from opium. He saw the issue as fundamentally “entirely a Chinese problem”. He believed that, despite European indifference, “the duty of the Chinese is to do their utmost to destroy this incubus upon the Chinese race” (Lim, B.K., 1906: 151): He recognized the importance of coordinating their action with that of China. The Straits Chinese had embarked on the anti-opium movement even ahead of China. They were thus staunch supporters of China’s anti-opium efforts as a matter of duty to the Chinese.⁵

The Straits Anti-Opium Movement

Support for the anti-opium movement came not only from patriotic Straits Chinese leaders, but also from Christian missionaries. J. G. Alexander, the secretary of SSOT, was one of the prominent and vigorous campaigners. When visiting Penang and Ipoh on October 1906, he attended meetings and sought to establish anti-opium societies (Wen, 1907: 5-7). Soon after that, he was in Singapore and participated in two meetings. The first was at the Prinsep Street Church with Revs. J. A. B. Cook and W. Murray, and both had been working closely with the Straits anti-opium movement (*The Straits Times*, 6 November 1906). The second meeting was at the SCCC where he briefed the audience on the stringent regulations on opium in Japan and the US, and criticized J. Morley for doing nothing after his speech (*The Straits Times*, 7 November 1906; Alexander, 1906: 186-190).⁶

In addition to lending their support to the Straits anti-opium movement, Christians and missionaries appealed to the British government to resolve the opium issue. When R. Laidlaw, a member of the House of Commons, visited Malaya with J. G. Alexander, he joined an anti-opium meeting with at least 3,000 attendees and realized the gravity of the opium problem (*SS and FMS Opium Commission*, 1908-09: 650). It was realized that the anti-opium leaders

had to submit their opinions directly to the British Parliament, as their efforts with the Straits government had always been ignored (*SS and FMS Opium Commission*, 1908-09: 650). There was a great difference between the British government and that of the Straits Settlements. When Wu Lien Teh, who was associated with both Alexander and Laidlaw, attended the Anti-Opium Conference held in London, he took the opportunity to make an appeal on behalf of the Straits anti-opium cause to Theodore Taylor, one of the anti-opium leaders, and Edward Grey in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. These Straits Chinese connections with the Christians shielded their activities from being cast as anti-foreign sentiments, and rendered the movement more effective. Leaders of the anti-opium movement Wu Lien Teh, Lim Boon Keng, Yin Suat Chuan and Tay Sek Tin were all Christians.

The primary objective of SSOT was to suppress the opium trade. The purpose of the Straits anti-opium movement was to work towards the suppression of opium smoking (*SS and FMS Opium Commission*, 1908-09: 650). What Yin and Lim were primarily focused on was to seek an “opium cure” as the solution. Although the use of opium was shifting from being a substance of self-indulgence to a narcotic drug, the lack of scientific knowledge concerning opium militated against effective treatment of addicted smokers. There were doctors who denied that opium was harmful. The opium refuge, which Yin had opened under the support of the Chinese Counsel-General, was unique in itself and attracted widespread attention in various quarters (Murray, 1906: 133). In the refuge, patients were admitted for two weeks and provided with free food, medicine and other necessities, in what was called an “isolation policy”. As the patients submitted themselves to the voluntary treatment, anyone who insisted on leaving before his term was completed or resumed smoking would have to pay a fine. With all 39 in his first batch of patients succeeding in banishing the addiction, Yin felt even more convinced that the refuge must become a permanent project (*SS and FMS Opium Commission*, 1908-09: 410). Subsequently, with donations from some wealthy Chinese leaders (see 许苏吾/Xu Su Wu, 1973: 26-33),⁷ Yin established his original opium home at Tank Road that also housed the Singapore Anti-Opium Society. This refuge accommodated 30 patients at a time for a compulsory stay of 15 days. A year later, when the refuge was closed temporarily for lack of funds, more than 400 patients had benefited from the treatment.

In the search for a cure for opium smoking, two plants were believed to provide hopes for medical treatment. These plants were associated with what became known as the Selangor cure (*Combretum Sundaicum*) and Shanghai cure (a raw plant). The “Selangor cure” was a drink that was distributed freely at major towns in Malaya. Many opium addicts earnestly believed that it offered a cure for their craving for opium. However, through their own experiments, Lim Boon Keng, Yin Suat Chuan and Wu Lien Teh concluded that both forms of “treatment” were merely placebos and had no real medical effect. Instead, some Straits Chinese doctors

conducted their own laboratory experiments in pursuit of an effective treatment for the opium addicts. A morphine injection was also used as an effective treatment. Lim Boon Keng cautioned against its use lest it led to morphine addiction (*SS and FMS Opium Commission*, 1908-09: 50). Although it was immensely difficult to cure opium smokers of their addiction, Lim Boon Keng and his colleagues realized that it was more important than to confront the larger and complex issue of banning the opium trade.

In his approach to tackle the vice of opium smoking, Lim Boon Keng emphasized the need for more practical social reforms rather than the holding of lectures and distributing literature (Lim, B.K., 1898: 52). He attributed opium smoking by the poorly-paid labourers to social conditions of living and the lack of alternative recreation. Ultimately, the “real remedy lies in education, and in forbidding the use of it (opium) to the young” (Lim, B.K., 1906). But attaining this objective would involve nothing less than practical social reforms. To the leaders of the anti-opium movement, the challenge was more than suppressing opium smoking, but to foster the rebirth of “civilized” Chinese in order to restore their faith and pride which had been undermined by the addiction to opium.

As for the anti-American Boycott movement, support came mainly from a section of merchants and traders while those with vested economic interests were opposed to it. Leaders of the anti-opium movement who were respectable members of the middle class were also subjected to harassment by some opium farmers (see Wu, 1959: 241-244). While there was agreement on certain aspects of the opium problem, there were some fundamental differences between the anti-opium movement and the boycott movement. The former focused on curing the vast number of opium smokers rather than the control of the opium trade. Therefore, there were also differences of opinion within the Chinese community itself. One of the most influential groups that did not support the anti-opium movement included wealthy Chinese leaders who were opium smokers. It is even difficult to ascertain if the SCCC supported the anti-opium movement. Tan Tek Soon, vice-president of the Chamber, asserted that half of the committee members were opium smokers including the president and himself, and some of them were opium farmers and had vested interests in opium farms (*SS and FMS Opium Commission*, 1908-09: 295). This was probably why SCCC declined to offer support for Yin Suat Chuan’s opium refuge project. It was not until SCCC submitted its ten-point anti-opium suggestions to the Opium Commission on August 1907 that it officially adopted an anti-opium stance. Yin’s opium refuge was on the verge of closing down then, yet SCCC failed to come out with concrete support or participated actively in the anti-opium movement (*SS and FMS Opium Commission*, 1908-09: 411, 418). Thus, the clear lack of consensus and cooperation in the Chinese community frustrated the initiatives of the anti-opium movement. This could be because the idea of seeking an ultimate cure for opium addiction was a radical

social and educational reform movement or that a section of the community was indifferent or not supportive at all.

Despite indifferent results, the significance of the anti-opium movement goes beyond the mere fact of a campaign against opium smoking. Opium was a major vice that had brought about widespread social malaise and problems in China as well as its humiliation by foreigners as the “sick man” of Asia. More importantly, many felt it was a direct cause of the moral as well as political “collapse” of China. To leaders of the anti-opium movement such as Lim Boon Keng and his colleagues, the most appropriate way to seek a way out was to provide opium smokers with proper medical treatment. He was exposed to ideas associated with “Social Darwinism” during his stay in Britain (see 李元瑾/Lee Kin Guan, 2001: 12-17). Darwinism was generally accepted as the theory of the “struggle for existence”, and also the idea of social evolution including the concept of “the survival of the fittest”. The challenge of seeking ways to cure opium smokers was therefore likened to an ideological struggle to cure China of its social and political malaise.

As a student in Britain, Lim Boon Keng had become more conscious of his identity as a Chinese. Back in Singapore, he sought through reform movements to restore his own identity and to reconcile the roles of the Straits Chinese between “the East and the West” and as a “new race” in the form of a local-born “*baba*” community (see Lim, B. K., 1899: 102-105 and 1903: 94-100). In early twentieth century Singapore, he and his fellow professionals represented a new generation with more enlightened ideas than those held by the Chinese community in general. He and others like Yin Suat Chuan and Wu Lien Teh underwent a social “transformation” as a result of their Western and professional medical education. They lived in an age when the vice of opium smoking was the common problem of China and the Chinese community in British Malaya. It was also this problem that presented an opportunity for them to reconcile “the East and the West” and to help China out of its crisis. To borrow A. D. Smith’s phrase, his reform was an expression of “vicarious nationalism” from someone trying to compensate for the partial loss of his own ethnic heritage for being born in Singapore and raised according to non-traditional Chinese ways (Smith, 1986: 152). At the same time, the Straits Chinese established the Straits Chinese British Association to protect their interests and “British” nationality in 1900. This was the attempt by the Straits Chinese to maintain a healthy balance between their status as British subjects on the one hand and as Chinese on the other.

He and his anti-opium companions bravely took up the challenge of curing the vast sea of addicted smokers as the most appropriate and radical way to achieve these aims. Lim Boon Keng, for example, with the energy of his youthful vigour and his pessimism towards the “old customs and traditions” and “ancient prejudice”, was confidently seeing “the possibilities of the future” like his fellow professionals (*The Straits Times*, 27 November 1906).

Conclusion

In the early twentieth century, the problems associated with opium smoking were regarded as the private affairs of the Chinese rather than that of the colonial government. The Straits government, citing the US exclusion policies on the Chinese, attempted to justify opium usage as a necessary condition to attract Chinese immigrants as a source of labour supply. In other words, the policy associated with opium was tied to that of Chinese immigration.

Lim Boon Keng and Yin Suat Chuan launched the anti-opium movement in the early twentieth century before the US amended its Exclusion Act. They did this for the larger purpose of getting the Chinese back on their feet and to reclaim their proud civilization. The focus of their endeavour was placed on the more radical objective of seeking a cure for opium addiction rather than on suppressing the opium trade. They worked closely with SSOT and appealed to the British Parliament which had first made the idea of an anti-opium movement viable. In the pursuit of their objectives, the Straits Chinese assumed a “double identity” as British subjects and as Chinese in order to perform effectively their roles as local-born residents and subjects of Britain. Thus, this “hybrid identity” served not only to protect their Chinese legacy but also to compensate for their partial loss of Chinese identity. While the anti-opium movement allowed them to show their patriotism through “vicarious nationalism”, they were careful not to express their anti-opium stance as an anti-governmental act. Through the movement, the Straits Chinese were able to show their sense of nationalism and patriotism and at the same time able to push the limits of colonial rule and yet not to overstep the limit as being anti-government or anti-colonial. The Straits Chinese played this dual role to their full advantage.

In 1907, *The Straits Chinese Magazine*, published under the support of the Straits Chinese British Association was forced to cease publication for lack of funds and subscribers (see *SCM*, 1901: 38; *SCM*, 1907: 125-26). This had seemingly happened in parallel with the decline of the Straits anti-opium movement. Although the Straits government ultimately dissolved the opium farm system, it was to take over the opium monopoly in 1910 and thus assumed complete control and authority over the Chinese community. Since then, until opium was finally prohibited after the Japanese Occupation, the Straits Chinese were deprived of the initiative to move freely between the two territories of Chinese nationalism and British colonialism. The anti-opium movement failed to have any significant effects on either opium smoking or its trade. It seemed to have served as a means by which Straits Chinese showed their “vicarious nationalism” in the interest of curing China of its major social ills but without jeopardizing their legitimate place in the colonial state.

Notes

- 1 The Commission was composed of six members, chaired by J. Anderson (merchant), W. R. C. Middleton (doctor), D. J. Galloway (doctor), E. F. H. Edlin (attorney), W. F. Oldham (Reverend) and Tan Jiak Kim (merchant). There were three major purposes to enquire how the opium habit spread, whether it was excessive or moderate, and what the government should do. From these points, 33 Europeans and 53 Chinese were interviewed in Singapore, Penang, Perak and Selangor.
- 2 Yin was born in Amoy (Xiamen) in 1877. At the age of 21 he came to Singapore as interpreter in the police courts. In 1899, he went to the US and studied medicine at Michigan University and then proceeded to Toronto University. After studying in London, he returned to Singapore and worked with Lim Boon Keng as a private practitioner (see Song, 1923: 422-423).
- 3 *The Guardian* gauged China's progress by its imperial edict. On the other hand, *The Straits Times* says "we are by no means sure that it possesses any importance. The Chinese Government is the most accomplished *poseur* in the universe" (*The Straits Times*, 25 and 29 October 1906).
- 4 According to Tay Sek Tin, Suen Tze Ting, the then Chinese Counsel, had close tie with Zeng Zhu, the then president of Shanghai Chinese Chamber of Commerce. Zeng Zhu was known to be the key person not only in the boycott movement but also in the anti-opium movement in Shanghai. This fact indicates that Shanghai was a major city where various Chinese patriotic movements took place. However, Yin Suat Chuan denied the relationship with any movement in Shanghai.
- 5 For example, Foo Choo Choon, the first president of the Penang Anti-Opium Society, had never employed opium smokers at his tin mines in the states of Perak and Selangor. He mentioned this decision arose "from a patriotic feeling that the use of opium was hurtful to my nation" (*SS and FMS Opium Commission*, 1909: 563). Yen mentioned Wu Lien Teh was the first president of the Penang Anti-Opium Society (see Yen, 1995: 158), but actually Foo Choo Choon was the first president.
- 6 Tan Cho Nam, Teo Eng Hock, Lim Nee Soon and Tan Boo Liat participated in this meeting. Yin Suat Chuan chaired the meeting and acted as interpreter as well.
- 7 Tay Sek Tin addressed 12 wealthy leaders including Tan Boo Liat, Wong Pang Chieh, Tan Hun Chhiu and Shen Lien Fang.

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