

EMPIRES OF VICE: THE RISE OF OPIUM PROHIBITION ACROSS SOUTHEAST ASIA

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The change in attitude towards the consumption of opium which came about from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries has been widely studied by historians and others. Alongside national histories, there has been extensive analysis of how international restrictions came about, coalescing into a system of control under the League of Nations after World War One. Key issues here were: a growing medical opposition to and concern about the use of opium in western nation states ; the rise of moral movements to suppress the opium trade, focussing on the Indo-Chinese opium trade; the role of the United States as a new colonial power with its conquest of the Philippines in the 1890s; US moral entrepreneurship about the opium trade through missionary work in China; and the subsequent development of international treaties, driven by the US and given global force after World War One.

Diana Kim's book seeks to add another dimension to this story. She argues for a change of focus to examine the role of colonial states and their bureaucracies in this process. Her contention is that the role of colonial bureaucracies and the systems of control established in colonial states in Southeast Asia at the end of the nineteenth century have been barely mentioned. Yet it was the decision making of local bureaucrats which did much to determine the changed process of opium regulation established in those colonies. The diktats of London or Paris were far away and local bureaucrats were essentially trying to solve local problems.

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Kim's focus is the establishment in many Southeast Asian colonial states of opium monopolies from the 1890s. These centralised state control over opium markets within a colony. They were promoted by administrators as efforts to prohibit opium consumption and to protect colonial societies. These were given the character of prohibition but in fact generally had three components: laws declaring the state as the only legitimate importer and manufacturer of opium, licensing systems for sellers of opium, and policies restricting who could buy opium from these shops. As Kim notes, this was not prohibition as we usually think of it, but rather tight state regulation over a legalised drug.

These monopolies replaced the previous systems of opium tax farms, whereby the right to import and to sell opium had been granted by licensing to private importers and traders, often of Chinese origin. Opium had been integral to European expansion in Southeast Asia.

The establishment of the opium monopolies, which broadly lasted from the 1890s into the 1940s, did mark a decline in all colonial states' reliance on opium as a source of revenue. But they also operated in a pragmatic way, supplying opium to those who consumed in moderation. Kim takes as case studies, British Burma, Malaya and French Indochina, all of which had their own reasons for operating monopolies. In Burma, the monopoly offered an opportunity to replace the wealthy Chinese capitalists who controlled the opium tax farms. It was the result of longstanding battles within the colonial bureaucracy about how to deal with problems of crime and disorder. Malaya created an opium revenue replacement fund, intended to deflect criticism of Britain at the Geneva Convention meeting in 1924-25. In fact opium revenue continued in a new form and was used to finance public infrastructure projects throughout the British Empire. In French Indochina the

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monopoly was not based on opposition to opium consumption and became mired in a system of delayed payment for supplies, a spiral of debt which meant that the system did not end until the late 1940s.

The opium monopolies continued throughout World War Two, although the colonial states became increasingly uneasy about the moral capital which could be made by attacking their role. In the immediate post war years, both the British and the French sanctioned their continuance for political reasons. In the post war era opium continued as an issue, entangled in counter insurgency and political struggles. The monopolies came to an end by the late 1940s.

Kim's argument adds a valuable dimension and a perspective from the colonies most affected in a period which has been less written about by historians. The book began life as a PhD thesis and is in part intended as a contribution to debates about the role of bureaucracy in colonial governance. But it also adds to our understanding of how fundamental changes in response to the consumption of opiates came about from the end of the nineteenth century. Kim effectively argues for the role of local decision making in a process which has often been seen only in a 'top down' way. The creation of the monopolies themselves is also worth considering as a model of state regulation at a time when different models are under consideration in contemporary society.ⁱ

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