

# Stories from the Past Series I: Lost in the Past - Early 1900's

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*China Press, 1 October 1930: "The Cross-Roads of Life and Death – The plantation of poppy brings famine. The importation of drugs causes economic distress. If we do not eradicate these evils, the race will perish. The nation can only be saved by the suppression of drugs." Wang Kyung-Chi, President of the National Anti-Opium Association (translation of the poster)*

It was in 1909 that the first international opium conference was held in Shanghai and, in 1912, the first international drug control treaty was adopted. The international community, however, had to wait until 1925 to see an international treaty which provided for binding control measures. In the meantime, traffickers were busy with their business. Letters from the time tell us:

*Letter, dated 7 November 1922, sent from Amoy, China, to London: "... It was unfortunate that Mr. T[...] would meet the accident in Hong Kong. We found that he had some mistake in his part by bringing the thing himself. According to our strength it is to be done by ship, as we have full power to land it when it reaches our ports. This was first time he went to Europe and might not understand the condition of different places so it was hard for him to keep his action secret on his way home in hotels or with interpreter and carriers that caused great suspection as Hong Kong authority had prepared to seize him before his arrival." ... "This case was settled. He was sentenced to be in prison for six months and the remainder of 12 months may be ransomed by paying from 50 to 60 thousand dollars. We are now arranging for his coming out sooner."*

The "thing" means morphine or heroin (they never mention the substance in their communications) licitly manufactured by pharmaceutical companies in Europe, to be diverted into Asia. Their "full power to land it" and "ransom" hint corruption. That letter continues:

*... "All the codes and contract you gave to M. T[...], have been taken by Hong Kong authority so we wish you to strike out our former code and contract and not to use them for future business." "Please prepare the new codes for future send us as quickly as possible" ... "Here after if you are going to send us letters we wish you to send all to the address as following. [...], Osaka, Japan."*



**BETWEEN LIFE AND DEATH** Picture shows China bonded by local produced opium and foreign imported narcotics. The man represents China and the bigger snake locally produced opium, while the smaller one stands for imported narcotics.

So the reply went to Osaka, but this time from Paris, instead of London:

*Letter, dated 31 January 1923, sent from Paris to Osaka: "I was very sorry to hear of the misfortune that befell your friends, but was not very greatly surprised as this business requires very careful attention, and absolute quietness, and cannot be talked about. I of course had the information two days after the incident had happened. ... I have received your various telegrams some of which arrive mutilated and we cannot read them. the A.B.C. Code is a very Bad code, the better I am sending you under separate cover a Copy which I hope you will use in future. I am also sending you herewith a Private code to be used between us ..."*

Other related communications showed that the codes then used included numbers such as: "53762 Propose to receive the goods as personal, it will not be for company's account.", "55195 Propose to send from Shanghai to Amoy.", etc. Their private codes included: "Boeringer Morphia Muriate POWDER packed in 1 lb tins ..... WYVAV", "WINKS HEROIN packed in 25 ounce tines ..... WYVUB", "Mercks COCAINE

FLUFFY CRYSTALS packed in 25 oz tins ..... WYVWE", etc. And their "useful phrases to be used in the code" showed packing in strawboard, coal tar, printers ink, French wine, sugar of milk, quinine.

That indicates that trafficking was well organized and the traffickers did not need to clandestinely manufacture drugs to smuggle; they just needed to get hold of those drugs licitly manufactured by pharmaceutical companies and then "divert" them into illicit traffic. The above reply from Paris continued to note:

*"Now I would like to say that I have a perfect organization, I have many friends amongst Customs etc and I understand the business very thoroughly, in fact I do not believe that there is anyone who has a better control, in addition to this I am known to many of the buyers in Japan, and have sold very large quantities ... this business is a business of confidence and the Manufacturers are personal friends." ... "I can arrange delivery at Vladivostok very easily if this is of interest to you. I am not using the Firms printed stationery but you understand caution is necessary. ... I want to make it absolutely clear to you that I can deliver the goods right into your hands in any Private Warehouse or place that you may desire in Shanghai, but I must have your financial assistance owing to the heavy expenses incurred in protecting myself against the same fate that overtook Mr. T[...]. in other words I must PAY FREELY to get the goods FREE OF CONTROL".*

All these indicate that traffickers were diverting, then later smuggling, the drugs from licit channels into illicit traffic through different routes and destinations; that they could alter the routes easily; that they themselves operated from various countries, often from countries not their own; that they successfully bribed corrupt officials and company personnel; and that the trafficking at the time was already highly organized involving well-thought methods of concealment, forgery of documentation, and coded communications.

In this column in future issues, we will further look into such cases and how they led to the development of, among other things, international drug control.

*N.B. All the quotations reproduced as is, except where individual names are withheld.*