

Lost in the Past: Early 1900's – A Further Story

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Amoy, September 25, 1922, (No. 50 Confidential.) ... It appears that some time ago, more, at any rate, than three or four months, a consignment of morphia, smuggled from Germany overland to Vladivostok, arrived in Shanghai. The cost of the drug was 100,000 dollars and the owners are a combine consisting of M. T., Q. Z., Y. G. and T. C. The first three are Filipinos and Senators in the Philippine Islands; the Fourth is a Chinese citizen. The leader in the combine is Q. Z., who has recently visited the United States of America as one of the delegates to negotiate independence for the Philippine Islands. The morphia was originally intended to be smuggled into the Philippine Islands, where the price is said to be about 2,000 dollars per 1b. as against 450 dollars per 1b. in Shanghai, but owing to strong political opposition to Q. Z. the risk at present considered too great and the morphia remains in Shanghai deposited in a foreign hotel s kept by a French citizen. ... – Letter from the British Consul in Amoy to the British Legation, Peking [Beijing].¹

This confidential communication cites the source as an informant who obtained the information from a friend to whom the Chinese citizen named owes “a considerable sum of money”. The same person was stated to be in similar difficulties with an American-Japanese citizen resident in Manila, to whom he likewise owed money in connection with a deal in rice (see paragraph below on China Daily News). While available information would not allow independent verification of the statement made, it at least shows that different nationals of a number of countries were involved in just one case of drug smuggling.

What complicated the matter further was the fact that there were numerous source countries from which drugs (opium, morphine, heroin or cocaine) were obtained and eventually smuggled to China. For instance, upon receipt of an inquiry from the United Kingdom, which had been concerned with the discrepancies between its export data and Japan's import figures, the Japanese authorities cited nine countries as the exporters of the above drugs to Japan in 1921 alone.² Furthermore, transshipment was common and, therefore, those exporting countries were often not the original source countries, making it difficult to identify the actual sources of diversion into illicit traffic.

At the time, “diversion” of drugs from licit channels into illicit traf-

fic and “smuggling”, often involved routes through Japan into China. A letter from the British Legation to the Inspector-General of the Chinese Maritime Custom in 1922³ notes:

“... a very large number of Japanese are engaged in this illicit traffic, and that an effective control of the distribution of the drugs by the firms which are licensed by the Japanese Government to deal in them will be the only means of putting a stop to this traffic. The Opium Advisory Committee [of the League of Nations] have recommended that very close cooperation should be established between the Chinese Maritime Customs and the Japanese authorities, so that in all cases of seizures of morphine coming from Japan, the morphine may be tracked back to its sources and the necessary measures taken by the Japanese authorities.”

Another letter from the British Legation in 1922⁴ points out that the Opium Advisory Committee in a report to the Council of the League of Nations concluded that “Japan has recently been importing morphine far in excess of the normal legitimate requirements of the country and that little doubt exists that much of this morphine has found its way into China.” The letter continues:

“The Japanese representative admitted the existence of such smuggling and gave positive assurances of the Governments' intention to do all in their power to stop the traffic, in which endeavour they desired the close co-operation of the exporting countries ...”

It is noteworthy that the League of Nations, at such an early stage in history, already played a key role in international drug control. It is also interesting to note that at the time when licensing requirements were not in place [which were later codified into the 1925 International Opium Convention], “tracking back” the seized substance to its sources was an essential means of control. This was a measure required decades later in 1990's against the diversion and smuggling of precursor chemicals, which are used in illicit drug manufacture. Such substances are controlled under the 1988 United Nations Convention against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances, which, however, does not provide for mandatory licensing requirements for such substances. “Back-tracking” of seized chemicals is a major component of, for instance, Operation Topaz, an international



1909 Shanghai Opium Conference



operation launched in 1990's to control acetic anhydride, a critical chemical which traffickers must have in clandestinely making heroin.

While a number of drugs, often morphine, were trafficked then, what was the drug actually preferred and what was the mode of administration at that time? A letter from the Consul of Chefoo to the British Legation, Beijing, in 1922⁵ notes:

"Various kinds of pills containing morphia in greater or less quantities are sold openly in every street in Chefoo. Of those addicted to the drug, the number taking these pills is far in excess of those who take it hypodermically."

The letter quotes an interesting remark by a doctor: *"My impression is that the consumption of morphine has fallen off rather than increased in the last two or three years. The use of the morphine needle is not thoroughly understood, and its use has been constantly followed by abscesses due to imperfect cleansing of the needle?"* The letter further notes that *"the infection which the use of the needle so frequently produces is probably one of the reasons why pills are preferred to injections. ... In any case, morphine has only come into use as a substitute for opium, and the latter is still preferred to any other form of drug."*

Nearly a decade later in 1930, the situation remained the same. The North China Daily of 16 October 1930 (pictured) reports on a strongly-worded petition submitted to the Central Government by the National Anti-Opium Association, *"demanding that prompt action should be taken for the suppression of poppy growing and opium smuggling and for the abolition of special opium tax bureaux which have been established in Hunan and Hupeh and which have tended to encourage the use of opium."* The main reason why opium smuggling continued at that time was reportedly because the local authorities collect special opium taxes and gave protection to smugglers.

The North China Daily cites a report by the Hankow Bureau of Social Affairs, which showed that, of the 13,017 shops of that city, no fewer than 764 were engaged in the opium trade or conducting opium dens. Of the total of 62,721 shop employees, there were no fewer than 3,056 in the employ of opium shops. In contrast, there were only 536 rice shops and 2,698 rice shop employees. The paper reports on the remark of the National Anti-Opium Association:

"As rice in the principal food of the people, is it not amazing that the number of rice shops and the number of employees in rice shops should be less than the number of opium shops and their employees? There is no other city in the world where such a state of affairs prevails ..."

The National Anti-Opium Association's petition described a story on how the opium trade was carried on in Hunan. Some 45 merchants of that province, having paid the special opium tax shipped a large quantity of the drug to another place, where, however, it was detained by the district magistrate. The owners then reportedly tried to regain the opium by notifying the Provincial Government and charging the magistrate concerned. When that effort failed, they asked the Central Opium Suppression Commission to order the magistrate to hand back the drug. While the story does not say what happened to the opium in the end, it reports the National Anti-Opium Association's remarks:

"Persons engaged in opium smuggling should, when arrested, be dealt with very severely and it is really amazing ... that the Hunan smugglers should have the nerve to ask the Central Opium Suppression Commission, which is charged with the duty of suppressing opium, to return their drug when they know that their actions are contrary to the law."

The North China Daily article further speaks of the military involvement at the time and of the consequences. Upon receipt of numerous petitions to suppress opium poppy cultivation, the central Government in China reportedly issued instructions to the provincial authorities to deal with the matters, which in turn issued orders to the district magistrates. The latter, however, reportedly always replied that they were *"powerless because the poppy is grown under the protection of the military."* The article notes:

"Government orders for the suppression of poppy planting during the past few years have been held in ridicule and they are no longer enforced. Nearly all Government troops in Szechuan, Yunnan and Kueichow collect taxes from farmers who plant poppy instead of rice. And because the farmers of Shensi, Honan and Kansu are doing the same thing, no rice is grown and famine conditions have resulted."

Such was the situation that existed in the Far East in the 1920's, eventually leading to the international treaty law in drug control which evolved over the past century.

References

- ¹ United Kingdom Public Record Office, [F 3548/504/10] Enclosure 1 in No. 1, F.O.371 8026, no.52.
- ² United Kingdom, France, Germany, Belgium, Switzerland, Netherlands, Denmark, Turkey and the United States. Letter, dated 7 October 1922, from the Director of the Commercial Bureau, Japan, to the British Embassy. Ibid no.58.
- ³ United Kingdom Public Record Office, [F 3191/504/10], F.O 371 8026 no.3.
- ⁴ Ibid., no.5.
- ⁵ United Kingdom Public Record Office, [F 3429/504/10] Enclosure 7 in No. 1, F.O. 371 8026 no. 35.

Author's Note: Texts in italics were reproduced verbatim. Names of individuals are withheld.