

Book Review:

## The Opium Business: A History of Crime and Capitalism in Maritime China

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*The Opium Business: A History of Crime and Capitalism in Maritime China* by Peter Thilly, 2022, Stanford University Press.

Peter Thilly's book, *The Opium Business: A History of Crime and Capitalism in Maritime China*, offers a historical account of the opium trade and its smuggling networks in coastal China. Covering the years of China's transition from an empire to a fragmented republic, readers will learn about the deep-rooted connections between drugs and capitalism that have so fundamentally shaped local and global modern political economies. The book primarily focuses on the opium trade along the maritime coastline in the Fujian province, Southeast China and, as outlined in the Introduction, draws on rare and largely untold archival research. These include detailed records of the commercial correspondence between opium smuggling companies, the Qing territorial government and British Foreign Offices, police reports on arrests and investment patterns, nineteenth century American travelogues and twentieth century Hokkien fiction, newspaper descriptions, and other material remains including drug labels, stamps and photography. The outcome is a compelling and rich account of events that begins at the late Qing Empire in the 1830s through to the end of Japanese occupation in 1945.

The first chapter lays out the local foundations of Fujian to describe the cultural and social networks that fostered the early expansion of China's opium business during the 1830s. In a province where patrilineal lineage ties and descent shape the organisational structure of everyday life, opium businesses were advanced through the roles that powerful lineages took on as the dominant power brokers. Their roles were fundamental in establishing deals between Fujianese buyers and British sellers and strengthening coastal shipping networks to transport the drug north to other parts of the empire. Although these mercantile networks already existed through the trade of other commodity circuits such as cotton and tea, what was unique about opium was the illegality of the trade and the enormous amounts of money involved in the business.

Chapter Two delves into a new period of Chinese transition between 1848 and 1858. These years mark two decades of acute financial distress and unrest in China. They also mark the handing down of privileged status to foreigners with the opening of new treaty ports to Western trade under the Treaty of Nanjing and Treaty of Tianjin. These are the boom years for the Indian opium trade and the expansion of poppy cultivation across China. As the opium business swept across the country, the drug seeped into multiple levels of the state, and merchants entered a system of negotiated illegality.

Opium technically remained illegal for decades and yet by the mid-1800s, when the drug had become the most valuable article of import in China's treaty ports, Shanghai officials introduced formal taxes on the import of opium, which led to a chain reaction of other cities following suit. Tax revenue collected by the Qing state, which channelled directly into infrastructural development and military forces, was contingent on the prohibition of drugs. In Chapter Three, readers will learn about how traders at every level leveraged on the opium trade to expand their wealth by collaborating with the state while others sought to evade authorities and tax collectors through tactful, creative efforts. For instance, considering internal tariffs, or the *lijin*, levied only on Qing subjects, being a foreigner or holding foreign status played a substantial role in opium tax

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evasion. To bypass tax collectors, local smugglers in Fujian impersonated foreigners and dressed up in Western attire.

Chapter Four is a historiography of opium prohibition and taxation through the negotiations that impacted the political economy of the twentieth century. This chapter delves into the years between 1906 and 1938, when the drug was no longer coming only from India but through Persian, Turkish and domestic opium producers. To counter this growth, a series of edicts were put forth to suppress and eliminate the trade. These included the Anti-Opium Society established in 1908 and further taxation regulations on businesses such as those imposed on shops that sold opium paste and dispensaries. Farmers were told to cease growing the crop but with lineage feuding on the rise, many responded with violence. Government attempts to disrupt the drug trade failed not only due to the weakening role of the authorities but also as a result of a wave of heavy corruption that had infiltrated deep into the drug market.

From the end of the nineteenth century, China's opium business entered the global narcotic economy, which readers will learn about in Chapter Five. The Xiamen port in Fujian played a prominent role in this newly diversified global drug trade, as morphine and cocaine produced in local factories came and left China. The cheaper cost of Chinese produced drugs meant that narcotic operations expanded across borders into British, Dutch and American colonies, including Singapore, Burma, Dutch East Indies and the Philippines. At the time, the Chinese government was still fixated on suppressing and eliminating the domestic cultivation, distribution and import of opium, which meant there was meagre surveillance on China's maritime role in the growing export narcotic market. Ultimately, China rested on a tricky predicament both as a victim of the opium trade while at the same time evolving into a crucial player in the global market for narcotics across Asia.

Chapter Six continues to explore these new spatial qualities in the global drug trade and describes how Japanese imperialism fostered the success of Fujian drug traders. Morphine and cocaine trades were facilitated by the proximity of Japanese Taiwan, and Taiwanese opium merchants were important intermediaries that Japanese consuls relied on to oversee social and market regulations.

In the conclusion of *The Opium Business*, Thilly considers the overlaps in China's history of narcotic trade with contemporary drug markets, including the violent organisations in Columbia and Mexico, and their ties to consumers in the United States of America. In much the same way that drug traders crafted the Chinese political economy, narco-capitalist initiatives continue to facilitate and foster the workings of the state and government rule. Drug businesses, as Thilly's book so compellingly shows, have always been and continue to be embedded in stories of private investment – and yet, the people who gain leverage in illegal trade are rarely subject to violence or punishment. These should be lessons for drug epidemics both past and present – not to repeat the same mistakes.

Thilly's book ends with thought-provoking questions: Where did the private investments in Chinese drug traders go, and where were they allocated? How did they affect local institutions and practices, such as banking, commerce and agricultural production, in addition to Chinese people's lives and kinship ties? *The Opium Business* will be sure to inspire researchers to continue seeking answers to these questions and to help us uncover how the drug market navigated China's evolution onto the world stage.

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