

Opium Prohibiting Campaign in the Joseon Dynasty Under Tribute System

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Abstract

Opium played an important role in imperialist aggression. As early as during the Joseon Dynasty, Joseon realised the harmfulness of opium, and after the founding of the country, it cleverly made use of the principles of the modern international system to circumvent the entry of opium. Using opium as a reference point, we are able to discover more clearly how the modern Korean state has changed. As an independent vassal state, the Joseon dynasty was able to strictly control the inflow of opium and was able to use the feudal code under the tribute system to punish opium smokers. Through the Joseon dynasty's measures to ban opium, Joseon struggled to survive under both the tribute and treaty systems, and eventually gradually broke away from the tribute system.

Keywords: Joseon dynasty, opium, tribute system

1. Messages from "Yanjing-bound" Envoys

The first messages about opium for Joseon Dynasty originated from "Yanjing-bound" envoys to China, and these envoys brought message to civil and military officers in the Yi Dynasty either through avisos of Qing court or through the word of mouth. As early as the 12th year of Daoguang's reign (1832), Kim Kyung-seon (金景善), who came to China, had observed the inundation of opium in China. He wrote in *Yan Yuan Zhi Zhi* (《燕辕直指》) that "Opium smoke has been banned by imperial edict repeatedly, but this practice has never been stopped, probably owing to the well-established old habits, but the actual cause was that officials in different provinces failed to check and

inspected forcefully. Recently, many soldiers from Guangdong, Fujian and other provinces were especially addicted to it. Among the addicts were many resigned military generals. They followed and imitated each other, and it was not surprising to see things that didn't make sense happen. Their body was weak, and the management was neglected and lax. Given this, the soldiers in Lianzhou were feeble and delayed urgent matters, which was particularly detestable. The state set up troops to defend the people and the teams it cultivated all became strong brigades. When nothing happened, they shared a bitter hatred of the enemy, and when something happened, they deployed armies to defend cities. They armed themselves and prepared themselves against unexpected

circumstance. The frontier sentry existed in name only, which would certainly result in the absence of soldiers in a province....."¹

In the 18th year of Daoguang's reign (1838), Lee Won-ik (李源益), a pleader who came to China, noticed not only the harmfulness of opium, but also the massive outflow of silver from China because of opium trade. "Recently, the prices of silver at home and abroad are high, and the imperial court is extravagant and decadent. The harm of opium smoke is the most serious."² In the 20th year of Daoguang's reign (1840), on Mosepo Kapado Island, Dajing County, Korea, two British ships "shot and plundered cattle and livestock daringly."³ Later on, the envoys brought back the news of Sino-British war in succession. Yi Dynasty's vigilance and fear of western clout built up. For example, in the *Envoy's Notes* in 1840, there were records that "Westerners entered China, preached heresy, depraved people's heart, smuggled opium and butchered innocent people."⁴

Although the defeat of Qing government in the First Opium War didn't arouse introspection among Korean monarch and ministers, the upper class of Yi Dynasty had realized the serious harm of opium, severely prohibited opium, and punished those who smoked and sold opium without mercy, to prevent opium smoke from going into Korea. In the subsequent revision of treaty with China, opium was regarded as contraband. While in the revision of treaty with foreign powers, it also made efforts to categorize opium as a contraband. The Yi Dynasty equated the detriment of opium with exotic religion, and always harbored a vigilant attitude.

2. The Whole Story of Park Hee-young(朴禧英) Possessing a Smoking Set

Korea, as an important part of the tributary trading system, enjoyed very generous policy from the Qing government. The Korean mission adopted "eight packages" trade, and quite a few Korean officials who came to China were given corresponding trade preferences. Park Hee-young's elder brother, Park Hee-seo (朴禧瑞), once served as a painter. In the 15th year of Daoguang's reign (1845), being eager to make up for his brother Hee-young's "misappropriation of public properties"⁵, he defrauded goods from "gulf people" and was finally dismissed from his post. Three years later, Park Hee-young became a member of Korean mission with the

identity of a painter, only to be arrested when returning home. When the Korea government searched Park Hee-young's house, they found a smoking set possessed by Hee-young, but didn't find evidence that he carried opium smoke. The arrest of Park Hee-young aroused the vigilance of Korea scholars. Jeong Ki-se, who was then the Great Secretary of Sungkyunkwan, believed that "Now that the set was captured and exposed, whether he was caught smoking or not, there was no need for further discussion."⁶ He required the Ministry of Punishments to punish strictly, which was permitted by Heonjong.

Park Hee-young's case can be regarded as the first documented case of dealing with drug addict in the history of Korea. The trial of this case lasted from March 26 to May 9 in the 14th year of Heonjong's reign. Since it was the first case, the officials of Border Defense Council of Joseon seemed very prudent in the judicial process. They thought that "Hee-young was not caught smoking, so he denied. By tracking down his doings, we found that he did buy and smoke (opium)."⁷ Since there were no quotations from either *Yi Dynasty's National Code* or *the Law of Ming Dynasty* they adhered to the principle of "worship for great power" and convicted Park pursuant to "*the Law of Qing Dynasty*" about selling opium and opening a tobacco house.

There were two main reasons why Korea's judicial department advocated punishing Park Hee-young severely mercilessly. Firstly, opium was a "demon and poison that killed people". It "confused people's mind, shortened people's life and exhausted people's wealth". If it was not banned, someday it would "be disseminated in the country, and became freaky phenomon"⁸; Secondly, Park Hee-young was an accepted case, and severe punishment can play the role of "nipping the matter in the bud and forewarning the future generations"⁹.

In the end, Park Hee-young was "pardoned from death and relegated as a slave to Chuja Islands"¹⁰. In Zhezong's reign, Hee-young's wife Park Zhaoshi interceded for her husband, but the result was "the sin would not be forgiven."¹¹ This further illustrated the Yi Dynasty's resolution to strictly ban opium.

3. Avoidance of "Opium" in the Signature of Treaties After the Founding of Korea

After Korea's seclusion was broken by the *Treaty of Ganghwa* between Japan and Korea in 1876, foreign powers began to sign treaties with Korea

again and again. When Korea signed treaties with Russia and the United States, it always held an attitude of “forever banning” concerning opium. Article 7 of *A Treaty of Peace, Amity, Commerce and Navigation, 1882* “is prohibitory of the exporting or importing of opium, in either country.”¹²

Article 6 of *The Regulations on Land and Water Trade between Chinese and Korean Merchants* stipulated that “Whichever port or border, merchants of two countries are not allowed to trade or sell foreign opium, local opium or make them into military weapons. Offenders will be severely punished individually.”

In 1888, Para. 5 (2) of the *Regulations on Trade between Korea and Russia* listed opium as a thing that was prohibited. In 1883, Article 36 of the *Regulations on Trade between Korea and Japan* stipulated that “opium is strictly prohibited from being imported. If opium is shipped secretly, or intended to be shipped secretly, the goods shall all be confiscated and a fine of 7,000 pennies will be imposed per catty according to the total number of goods shipped secretly.”¹³

When mediating with foreign powers, Korea skillfully made good use of its own advantage as a “vassal state”, protected itself diplomatically, avoided the minimum loss of its rights and interests, listed opium as a permanent contraband, and punished opium addicts in Korea severely.

4. Conclusion

Although two Opium Wars didn't awaken Korea, it made the ruling class in Korea realize the harm of opium. The monarch and ministers in Korea took putting an end to “the practice of heresy and the smoking of foreign opium” their immediate priority¹⁴, and the strict disposal of Park Hee-young's case exactly mirrored the resolution of the rulers of Yi Dynasty to ban smoking.

After the founding of Korea, when signing treaties with Western powers, by taking “no diplomacy with foreign countries” as a shield, Korea skillfully applied the principle of modern international system to avoid the entry of opium. In 1884, the British newspaper *IMPERIAL PARLIAMENT* reported: “The treaty with Korea recently concluded by Sir H. Parkes does not contain an article forbidding trade in opium, but the exclusion of opium from Korea has been equally well provided for by its insertion in the tariff as a prohibited article.”¹⁵

However, it should be noted that due to the existence of the illegal privilege of consular jurisdiction, Yi Dynasty was unable to entirely avoid the influx of opium in the form of treaty. For example, *Regulations on Trade between Korea and Japan* stipulated that if Japanese expatriates did need “medical” opium, they just needed a proof by the Japanese consular officer.

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⁵ *Journal of Seongjeongwon*, February 2, 11th year of Heonjong's reign (Korea) and 25th year of Daoguang's reign (Qing Dynasty).

⁶ *Journal of Seongjeongwon*, March 26, 14th year of Heonjong's reign (Korea) and 28th year of Daoguang's reign (Qing Dynasty).

⁷ *Journal of Seongjeongwon*, May 1, 14th year of Heonjong's reign (Korea) and 28th year of Daoguang's reign (Qing Dynasty).

⁸ *Journal of Seongjeongwon*, March 26, 14th year of Heonjong's reign (Korea) and 28th year of Daoguang's reign (Qing Dynasty).

⁹ *Journal of Seongjeongwon*, May 9, 14th year of Heonjong's reign (Korea) and 28th year of Daoguang's reign (Qing Dynasty).

¹⁰ *Veritable Records of the Joseon Dynasty*, May 9, 14th year of Heonjong's reign.

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¹⁵ *IMPERIAL PARLIAMENT* (Friday, Feb. 22, 1884): Glasgow Herald (Glasgow, Scotland): 46.