Excerpt from the journal of William Almack (1811-1843), (Cambridge University Library, Department of Manuscripts and University Archives, William Almack: Journal, MS Add.9529)

(pp 58-63)

The quantity of opium consumed in China compared with that in any other country is most enormous. The passion that the Chinese have for it may be attributed to their love of present enjoyment without strength of mind to resist, for the fear of future consequences. But they would appear to have a natural taste for it, as it is said that a Chinese having had it administered as a medicine (and so disguised that no other person would have detected it) has requested a repetition of the dose.

In many years past the quantity of opium consumed in China has been increasing rapidly and has now reached an amount that appears almost incredible, especially when we consider that it's pretended at least by the Chinese to be contraband article.

In a statement of trade published by the Canton Camber of Commerce for the year commensing 1 July 1836 and ending 30 June 1837, the quantity imported appears to be 28197 Peculs[1] amounting in value to within a trifle of 20,000,000 of dollars! being exactly equal to the cost of all the tea exported to Great Britain and America.

I had not been long in China before I had made up my mind that, Opium having the insidious effects that it is universally acknowledged to have, is a curse to the Chinese people and ought not to be engaged in by any person who really wishes the happiness of his fellow beings (not to

1. One pecul = ±133lbs.

mention its illegality)– that it is a pity it should be encouraged by the East India Company who derive a large revenue from it – that it renders us hated by the good amongst the Chinese (few tho' they be) – that it is constantly throwing obstacles in the way of the legitimate trade and I believe that those who are attempting to teach the Chinese the Christian religion find it a great stumbling block in their way, being frequently asked "How can you possibly call that a good and true religion whose professors heartlessly feed our people with this vile poison?" On the other hand those who have not such tender consciences have many things to advance in excuse for their conduct. They say, "How are we to know indeed that the article is really prohibited, when those officers who should enforce the laws are the first to break them – edicts are issues which we are told come from the Viceroy himself, but we have only the word of the inferior officers for it, and and are told at the same time that these edicts are never intended to be enforced, and indeed the son of the Viceroy himself is a notorious smuggler. In other respects why are we worse than the importers to England of Spirits and Tobacco the use of which is also abused."

Still my opinion is that the English have done more harm by introducing opium to China than they have done good in sending out missionaries and all the slaves they have liberated since they first became a nation. For the English to put a stop to the traffic would require for the time a considerable sacrifice, but if the Chinese government have been sincere in their wishes to put it down, they might be induced to grant us considerable commercial advantages in exchange.

The smugglers having been emboldened by the passive conduct of the Chinese having [=have] lately carried on the trade in the river, and a Portuguese Lorcha has for some time been stationed at Whampoa as a receiving vessel for opium that has been well known as such by the Chinese authorities__ Schooners and other sailing boats even brought it up as high as Canton continually.

In november an edict of the Emperor appeared in the Canton papers ordering the Government and other officers to adopt strong measure for the purpose of putting down the Opium trade and stopping "the leak in the cup" (i.e. the oozing out of sycee silver, which goes in payment for the Opium). This was generally at the time considered a forgery, but proof was shewn of the contrary by the strict measures immediately enforced by the Viceroy, against the smokers and smugglers, many of whom were imprisoned or otherwise severely punished, and no sales of opium could be effected. But matters were also made much worse by Mr. Innes on the 3rd Decr. attempting to smuggle some opium in dollar Boxes into his factory at Canton– the mandarin who had been bribed on other occasions, now, for some reason or other informed against him and the Opium was seized. Mr. Innes's Coolies were taken and put to the torture when they confessed they had brought it from Captain Ke-le-fat's Ship at Whampoa (the Chinese only know a ship by the Captain). The Mandarins immediately ordered the punishment of the Cangue to Punhoyqua the Hong merchant who secured an American ship called the [?Tho] Perkins Captn. Graves– and his ship, Mr Talbot the Consignee, and Mrs Innes to leave China instantly.

The mistake originated in this way– the Opium really came from the Lorcha already

mentioned, of which Crawford is the Master. The Chinese in endeavouring to pronounce Crawford can come no nearer than Ke-le-fat; and Graves they call Ke-le-fan, thus between the tortured Coolies and the mandarins the mistake easily occured. I have see myself at Wonshing's, no 20. New China the name of Graves written Ke-le-fan and he could not pronounce the word more correctly.

Now Mr. Talbot is well known to be averse to the Opium Trade and the ship had never had a pound on board. After a great deal of trouble in writing and petitioning, the Chinese at length acknowledged they had committed an error, so far as Mr. Talbot was concerned. The Trade having been stopped, and Mr. Innes being threatened with his house about his ears, he thought proper to leave Canton. These affairs caused the Hong merchants so much trouble thtat they required some bond or security from the foreigners greater than they had hitherto obtained against further occurrences of the kind__ The general trade contineued suspended and for some time past not a chest of opium could be disposed of, thereby clearly shewing that the Chinese when in earnest, can easily put a check upon the traffic.

Things continued in this state till the 12th Decr. About 10 in the morning of that day a great mob of Chinese was collected in the open space fronting the foreign factories, it soon became known that the execution of a Chinese there, was intended and nearly all the foreign community were quickly on the spot__ the officials commenced by erecting the tent of execution just under the American flag_ but it was no sooner raised above our heads than it was pulled down and nearly demolished, by a few English sailors_ Mrs. Lindsay appeared very much much [sic] excited, calling on foreigners to arm themselves with sticks and resist such a barbarous insult.

The mandarin seeing our determination, thought it prudent to order the apparatus to a distance, and again attempted to erect the gallows in front of Mingquan's hong, but was again prevented. They then moved away from the square entirely.

Some foreigners not content with the victory they had obtained and feeling annoyed by the mob (who always crowd round whenever the Barbarians are to be seen conversing together) foolishly began to drive them back with sticks. Three times at least, the square was cleared, but flesh and blood could stand it no longer and a few of the Chinese began to throw stones__ this being a weapon which we had no meand of defending ourselves from, made us give way_ the enemy seeing the advantage they had gained soon showered the stones amongst "thick as hail"_ the Foreigners in vain attempted to pacify them, it was too late, and we were glad to retreat into our hongs and fasten the doors. The Hong Merchants who had arrived were obliged to seek shelter with us_ and wherever a head appeared a hundred stones were hurled. A small body of polic arriving, altho' not sufficient to put down the tumult were able to keep a little order, so far as to allow those who in the confusion had entered the wrong honds to pass to their own. We went to Tiffin [lunch] and afterwards hearing a great noise, hastened to the bottom of the hong. There was now a mob collected of about 8000 of the vilest wretched that this city can produce. They had commenced in earnest the walls in front were pulled down for ammunition_ nearly all the windows were broken and frames driven in_ some very strong railed were pulled down for battering rams, which they were using against the doors of our hong (the Lungshun or Old English) in course of a short time they had drive in every pannel but they had previously thrown so many brick bats over the top, that they were unable to force it open. We had by this time

mustered all the arms we were possessed of (my pistols I was not able to load as I had mislaid the barrel screw) _ as we expected the houses would at least be plundered and probably ourselves murdered. Mr. Morrison said, that any chinese entering the hong we should be justified in shooting and he would hold himself responsible_ One man entered thru' the pannels but Mrs. Murrow and [? Hearon? Teason?] running up to him, he was immediately pulled back by his comrades. The reason of their vengeance being particularly directed against this hon was from their supposing that we had got two fo their party prisoners. About 5 o'clock a body of troops arrived who soon dispersed the mob and set us at liberty.

Captn. Elliot arrived in the early evening from Whampoa, followed by about 120 armed sailers, but finding all quiet, they were immediately sent away again. At the request of foreigners a body of troops kept watch during the night over the factories.