An Analysis of the Definition of Opium Wars in Western Encyclopedia

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Abstract. Opium Wars were one of the most influential events in the history of China’s interchange with the West. The existing definitions of Opium Wars are still made in the frame-of-reference characterized by European-centered discourse and molded in their discursive consistency. An analysis of these phenomena indicates that the beneath the superficial cultural diversity and equality, imperial thinking still works on the latent stereotyping of the Orient.

Introduction

Opium Wars (the first Opium War 1839-1842; the second Opium War 1856-1860) were one of the most influential events in the history of China’s interchange with the West. For the first time, China was forced to face the outside world as well as her position in the world. In the Chinese experience Opium Wars will always be the mark of Western aggression, vicious manipulation and bully. In fact, the western centeredness, haughtiness and imperial thinking embedded in Opium Wars still dominate the definition of them in contemporary western references. Most of the writings are still put in the framework of European-centered discourse and molded in their discursive consistency.

Admittedly, there was condemnation against the Opium Wars. They believed that the wars were aimed to ‘compel China to continue to import opium, (and) were among the most immoral and hypocritical episodes in the history of the British Empire, which saw itself as shouldering a moral burden to educate and uplift the non-white world while in reality it was an exploitative and often brutal enterprise’. [1] Even in their denouncement the western imperialism is evident. Take the above mentioned item as an example. There was the moral judgment the wars were most ‘immoral’ because they conducted a war in order to legalize substance abuse. However, in what sense should the non-white be educated? What qualified the white with the education mission? What is the logic behind this way of practice? The mere moral denouncements of the brutal practice are inadequate. In essence, the reduction and stereotyping of the nonwhite underlies all these conflicts.

A Brief Introduction to Orientalism

Based on the Giambattista Vico’s argument that ‘history is made by men and women’, Edward Said put forward that ‘it (history) can also be unmade and rewritten, always with various silences and omissions, always with shapes imposed and disfigurements.’ [2]. Edward Said declared that neither the Orient nor the Occident was natural and inert, which on the contrary is deliberately created by human beings and is dynamic. Before we came to Orientalism, we must first address a very important term ‘Other’ (both as a verb and as a noun). The western philosophy is considered dialectic or the binary oppositional, which lays the foundation of western thinking and civilization. With binary opposition, all should appear in the pair, such as good and bad, male and female and etc. Therefore, the existence of an Other is the precondition of the definition of one’s self identity or ego, who possesses all the qualities opposite to what the ego owns. In this sense, Said said orientalism was a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between the Orient and the Occident. Furthermore, with the aim to prop up one’s ego, inevitably there is the ‘othering’ process of the other. In other words, the superiority of the self’s value is fed by the inferiority of the other.

From the industrialization to the present, the occident has always been the strong, while the orient
has remained weak. During this process, a body of knowledge was created in which the orient was othered to be inferior. ‘The essence of Orientalism is the distinction between Western superiority and Oriental inferiority.’ [3] That’s to say that Orientalism has less to do with the Orient than with the Occident/ the West. To some extent, it is the grid or the framework that Orient filters into the Occident. This contributes to the strength and superiority of Western culture against the Orient as it’s the other and the surrogate. However this doesn’t say that Orientalism mechanically determines what should be written or said about the Orient, but as an archive of information commonly and unanimously held and a whole network of interest they bear on any topic about the Orient.

When facing another culture that is different from ours, the attitude counts. To Said, there are two contradictory attitudes, one would ‘sympathetically’ and ‘subjectively’ entered a written text of another culture and the other would face another culture with ‘alienation’ and ‘hostility’. Also there are two different kinds of will to understand. One is for the purpose of coexistence or the broadening of one’s horizon; the other is for domination and control. To a large extent, the Orient is understood in the negative form and for dominion purpose. In face of the powerful Occident, Orient is gazed instead of gazing and represented instead of self-representing. The Western representation of the Orient is the main body of Orientalism.

**Imperial Thinking in the Definition of Opium Wars**

China is located in the furthest East. As the incarnation of exoticism, it remained the inspiration of many western artistic creations, as the opposite of their culture, the spiritual, the pagan, the sensual and the primitive. When the western industrialization gained upper hand, their culture and morality gained more predominance. The distinction in all aspects favored the west. For example, Stephen C. Neff compared the Chinese and the Western notions of cosmopolitanism. He explained why the Chinese notion can’t develop into the international prevalent law in our modern world. He claimed that the Chinese one is not ‘international’ nor ‘legal’ but too ‘radical’. When he employs the western logic to define the Chinese notion as illegal or radical, there isn’t much to talk about. If there is no overarching framework over both Chinese and Western understanding, the conclusion is inevitably one-sided.

The power of western military force had already outlawed the Chinese notion in the first place. Since the inequality remains unchallenged, the western thinking, way of living, political systems and so on would be preferred. The issues of importance on the western people’s agenda should be the focus of the world. What they neglected must be of less importance. They are the creator and preacher of knowledge and knowledge favors them with power.

There were various definitions of the Opium Wars in western literature, despite the similarity between them. I will take the English item of ‘Opium Wars’ of Wikipedia online edition (www.freewikimedia.com/en/wiki/Opium_Wars.html) as a sample, whose explanation is also widely shared by other source websites. My choice of encyclopedia is based on the assumption that they “contain summaries of current information...it’s information has always been seen as authoritative, we can use it to trace the prevailing opinions through time. The assumption is that encyclopedia has played an important role in spreading a certain view…” [4]

**Under the cover of commerce**

The most obvious and definitive nature of Opium Wars is stated clearly at the beginning. It was the climax of trade disputes and diplomatic difficulties. It was the result of contention of commercial interests and cultural misunderstanding or communication failures. This established the overall tone of this item, with no other explanation or option implied. The suspicion of the imperial expansion or the elaborate plan to subjugate China was cast off completely. If the reader had never heard other different comments on this warfare, his opinion would be established firmly on this. No uncertainty or doubts, the first opium war is about trade and diplomatic difficulties. In the following text, all the materials and information are gathered and structured to argue this point. China’s ‘limiting trade’, ‘Low Chinese demand for European goods’, ‘deficit’ and silver payment appeared frequently throughout the text. These cast a heavy trade flavor on this problem.
Edward Said pointed out the ‘strategic location that describes the author’s position in a text with regard to the Oriental material’ [5] is of vital importance. In this text, the writer never explicitly showed prejudice against China. Indeed, there was no trace of any bias and all the statements were indisputable facts, which assumed an apolitical stance for the author. He seems to be in a neutral position with no favor or disfavor for either party. However, if we look closely at these so-called reasons that activated Opium Wars, we would find they are from the Western side. China at that time, an agricultural and self-sustainable economy, had no complain like these. In fact they never realized these were serious problems. They felt comfortable with all the status quo and would rather leave it alone. It’s the western powers who can’t stand the limited market and desired to change it even if it meant war with another country located at the end of the world. If the reader shared the strategic location of the author, in this case the western side, one would find this explanation natural-drawn and well-grounded. But for a reader from the Oriental culture, we find this method of cause exploration quite unconvincing. Especially the market economy of China, at least at that time, never occupied people’s mind to such a degree. Even if that was what the western countries fight the Opium Wars for, it definitely had nothing to do with the Chinese decision to go to the war. So with trade and diplomatic problems defined as the cause, the western framework is established. Any discourse that went into this text will be structured according to this general direction, a direction favorable to the westerners, the imperialists.

Yet, the establishment of the causes of Opium Wars can’t justify the whole imperial practice. There is one obstacle that can’t be circumvented. Whatever was said, the opium, a narcotic should be banned. The imperial and western-inclined attitude is showed most clearly in the treatment of opium here. There were several steps arranged cleverly to address this tricky issue. First, at the beginning, it mentioned that the opium was not prohibited back in Britain. The implication is that if the British merchants’ trade of opium was not immoral. Opium was never an issue in Britain, how could it become so destructive in China? The implication was that Chinese should ask themselves for answers instead of accusing the western opium traders. Probably that’s because the Oriental was prone to seek insatiable pleasure since they are less civilized and lack the noble and rational self-control ability. The innocent opium traders shouldn’t be blamed for the primitiveness of the Oriental Chinese. Second, the negotiation with the Qing government still went on although it ended in failure. In this case, the ban on opium had not taken effect, at least not on the British side. Third, when the decree of ban on opium is carried out, there are disputes among the Chinese officials for or against this drug. This implied that there was an wavering attitude in China, so there was opium trade trafficking. Fourth, the responsibility of opium entering China lied with the Chinese poor management. The Chinese capital is too far away in the north that it can’t control the opium trade in the south. The Chinese border is so porous as to encourage the opium traders to come into Chinese market. Last, there is the rampant local demand. Therefore there came the British traders. However people seemed to forget to ask how this enormous number of opium consumers was created in the first place. The opium traders gave out opium to people to eat for free. This was never or seldom mentioned.

All these revealed that the Westerners in the first place took advantage of this situation by their superior wisdom, and in the second place had to respond effectively to the changing situation. There was no direct justification or defense for opium trade, but the overall effect is that the Chinese mustn’t take the British Opium traffickers as ‘scapegoat’. The Chinese government should blame themselves for the catastrophe of rampant opium consumption. If they try to embargo the westerner’s opium, that’s another form of limiting trade and isolationism. Lin ZeXu confiscated the opium trafficked into China and he damaged westerner’s private property and the Chinese government should pay millions of ounces of silver as compensation (as stated in the treaty of Nan Jing).

**The elaborate structuration of discourse**

There is also the shifting of active agency by which I mean an activating role in a particular activity. Although the dominating western mind commanded all the materials, the exterior or the
superficial active agency is Chinese, ‘Qing government’, ‘Chinese border’, ‘local demand’ and so on. This is a process of seeking the responsibility or the reasons for the opium trade in which the active agency take more obligation. When it is converted into a process to discover positive value, the active agency will get more credits. This is what happened when it aims to show the strategy to solve this problem. British became the active agency in seeking for solutions to the posed problem, while China is on the passive side that only needed to respond.

The efforts by the British also showed that war was not their first choice and they shouldn’t be denounced as war maniacs. They tried the peaceful ways, unfortunately they didn’t work. In comparison we could find the significance of the shifting of active agencies from Chinese to British lay deep. When it came to talk about the break out of the Second Opium War, China again is shifted back into the active role ‘Qing government conducted a search of a suspicious British ship…The search prompted the British to…’. The starting fire is incited by the Chinese. The causes of opium trade and Opium Wars mainly reside with the Chinese, in view of its poor administration, it’s easy to crack national border and its tremendous number of consumers; the solution seeker was the resourceful British who made active efforts and tried their best. This suggested that the Oriental could only make trouble and they had to rely on the westerner to solve them.

When it said that Charles Elliot promised British traders that the British Government would compensate the opium traders for the lost opium, ‘it amounted to a tacit acknowledgment that the British government did not disapprove’. There is very good rhetoric in this expression. First there is ‘tacit acknowledgement’ of the opium trade. Since opium can be a very effective way to turn the trade deficit, why not acknowledge it publicly? As the government of a civilized and more developed people, it is burdened with too much moral obligation. On the one hand it can’t degenerate itself into public acknowledgement of opium trade. On the other hand, it can’t give up the profits, from which comes the attitude, ‘not disapprove’. The essence of so called trade conflicts is a disguise for its greed for the exotic luxury like silk, species and privilege.

To satisfy their greed they use opium to trade for them. If Chinese don’t want Opium, the merchants seduced them into addiction and used military force to legalize the opium. This was worse than nude robbery because while taking the wealth away they left incorrigible degeneration behind. This obviously revealed the hypocrisy of British imperialism, to maintain a respectable outlook and conduct vicious practice discreetly at the same time. When the disguise became energy consuming and not convenient, Britain didn’t bother to cover it with fake legalization but turn to war robbery. This is exactly what happened to the Summer Palace and Forbidden City in the second Opium War. The hideous crime committed by British and French to these royal palaces were described as destruction, which word is too general and almost meaningless. The truth is they fought against each other for the jewels, gold, silk, antiques and other imaginable treasures that had been collected from all over China and all over the world. They took what they want and destructed those that can’t be taken. At last they set fire to the Summer Palace to burn the crime traces away. These crimes were reduced into a general word: destruction.

Lin ZeXu’s appeal to Queen Victoria was described as ‘extraordinary’. But the British superintendents have been seeing Chinese officials even the emperor himself and negotiated with them for a long time. The comparison indicated the exchange had always been the privilege of westerners. The freedom was always the westerner’s, because his culture was stronger. And he could give shape and meaning to the great Asiatic mystery. The Oriental was gazed and studied. When Said affirmed Orientalism as the geographical awareness into aesthetics, he implied the freedom for the metropolitan to the peripheral but the ‘subjects’ can’t be allowed to return to metropolitan space.[6] It’s natural for British administrators to contact Chinese from all walks of society, but it would be ‘extraordinary’ for a direct deputy of Chinese Emperor to appeal to the British Queen.

There is only one word, ‘havoc’, used to describe the devastation in China by the Opium Wars, another general and almost meaningless word. Compared to the scarcity of depiction of the loss of all kinds in China, there was a detailed and vivid description of the British military superiority, ‘ships’, ‘modern muskets and cannons’ and so on. There existed a purposeful manipulation of
information to achieve the result desired by the author. The insurmountable gap between the
western superiority and Oriental inferiority foretold the fate of the Orient. Different conclusions can
be drawn from the same information due to different logics. In the opium discourse, the cost of
Chinese was limited to as few words as possible through which the negative outcome was belittled.

China became the ever silenced. Besides the scarcity of sympathetic understanding of China
(sympathy means the will to understand for coexistence not for domination or control), the oriental
silence remained unbroken. The Chinese voice was muted except for one decree by the emperor and
Lin’s appeal to Queen Victoria. The discourse power allowed the west not only to conquer the
Orient but also to speak for it. This situation of strength in relationship stands for ‘the (general)
pattern of relationship between East and West and the discourse about the Orient that it enabled.’ [7]

Conclusion

The definition of Opium Wars in western encyclopedia was not meant to mislead the reader or
consciously cover the misbehaviors of the British government. I believe the author has done the best
to present an objective explain, because I think she/he must be aware that the information on the
website would be under the scrutiny of the whole world. As Said said, ‘I don’t believe that authors
are mechanically determined by ideology, class or economic history, but the authors are very much
in the history of their societies, shaping and shaped by that history.’ [8]. And in this sense, the
representation of Opium Wars in Western discourse take the impinge of imperial dominating
thinking. None of representation can be neutral in the real sense of the word. We must be aware that
the imperial thinking may turn into the latent stereotyping of the Orient and is more difficult to
track.

References

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