NOTIONS OF ADDICTION IN THE TIME OF THE FIRST OPIUM WAR*

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ABSTRACT. This article explores whether the British decision-makers and public were conscious of the habit-forming nature of opium at the time of the Chinese war of 1839–42, the First Opium War. While most political historians have assumed that the British authorities understood the nature of the drug, social historians argue that notions of addiction only arose, in Britain, at the end of the nineteenth century. Examining the abundant press, pamphlet, and parliamentary literature generated by the war debate, this article examines in what terms opium use was characterized. It considers the groups that intervened on both sides of the debate and draws lessons from the arguments they deployed for and against the war. Situating the source literature within the context of early Victorian values and mores, finally, it argues that the British leaders and political nation were aware of the drug’s habit-forming properties. Not only was it widely recognized that it was something dangerous that was being introduced, at the point of a gun, into China, but there can be said to have existed, in Britain, a layman’s notion of drug addiction.

The term ‘Opium War’ was popularized by opposition newspapers such as the Tory Morning Herald and the Chartist Northern Star, and it was meant in an unambiguously pejorative sense, a war begun by ‘opium smugglers’ and ‘pestiferous smuggling rascals’. Hotly contested in the parliamentary debate that soon followed, it became a tool for denouncing the hypocrisy and the callousness of Britain’s intended attack on China. That it has become the established label for the Anglo-Chinese war of 1839–42 is proof, indeed, both of the vitality of the original controversy around the war and the endurance of the case made by its opponents.

In 1839, British naval forces opened informal hostilities on Chinese military units in what would erupt in the following year into a full-scale conflict between Britain and the Chinese empire, a conflict that lasted until the signature of the

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Treaty of Nanjing in 1842. British and Parsee merchants were selling increasing quantities of opium at Canton and on the South China coast, or rather smuggling in this opium against Chinese law. The opium, originating in British-rulled India and the principalities, was produced or bought wholesale under monopoly, a practice which earned the East India Company significant revenue. The clash itself was triggered by the confiscation under threat of a large inventory of opium by a high-level Chinese official, commissioner Lin Zexu, at Canton. The war was the first step in the partial colonization of China, leading to the establishment of Hong Kong, and it remains a landmark in Chinese history, ushering in, in the national historiography, China’s modern era. Alongside its importance in international history, however, the episode raises fundamental questions as to the status of opium in Britain itself.

Political historians have typically assumed that the British authorities understood the nature of the drug they were peddling. In accounts such as Brian Inglis’s *The Opium War*, Peter Ward Fay’s book of the same name, Jack Beeching’s *The Chinese Opium Wars*, or Glenn Melancon’s *Britain’s China policy and the opium crisis*, for example, opium is effectively treated as a drug in the twentieth-century sense of the term. An exception is Julia Lovell, in the more recent *The Opium War*, who writes that there was prevailing ambiguity as to opium’s properties and effects. Social historians, meanwhile, argue that notions of drug addiction only arose, in Britain or Europe, towards the end of the nineteenth century. In this view and in what has become known as the ‘disease theory of addiction’, it was the medical body that coined the modern concept of addiction, having begun to classify habitual drug use as an illness, a biological phenomenon beyond the patient’s control. Under this theory, the concept also paved the way for institutionalization, at first voluntary under the Habitual Drunkards Act of 1875 but at last compulsory. In a creeping process and in the context of rising societal pressures for control, this would have led to penalization in the early twentieth century. Before that, opium use was ‘regarded at worst as a minor vice’, and the opium user had a ‘romantically intriguing and picaresque persona’, to quote the words of Geoffrey

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1 £1–2 million a year net, according to Warren more than one tenth of total Company revenue in India: Brian Inglis, *The Opium War* (London, 1976), p. 198; Samuel Warren, *The opium question* (London, 1849), pp. 55–6. This does not include what the merchants themselves were making, nor the duties collected on Chinese tea imports.


4 The Habitual Drunkards Act and successor Inebriates Act targeted alcoholism but also covered drugs taken in liquid form, and their scope was extended in the ensuing decades. Penalization was a multi-step process, but a landmark was the 1916 Defence of the Realm Act 40B.
Addiction remains a slippery term, a culturally bounded concept mixing social and biological factors. As Berridge writes, nevertheless: ‘Addiction to opiates may best be pictured as both a psychological and biological condition, characterized by a desire to continue taking the drug in high dosage, a salience of this drug-seeking drive over other life considerations, and a tendency to relapse.’

To continue to paraphrase, habit is born both of the intensely pleasurable experience of opiate consumption and the repeated experience of the pain of withdrawal. Beyond strictly medical definitions, addiction thus is and was susceptible to a layman’s understanding in its basic characteristics.

This article explores whether and how far the British decision-makers and public were conscious of the habit-forming nature of opium at the time of the Chinese war. The disconnect between political and social narratives is partly a question of focus: political historians have concentrated on events, and social historians on the longer time frame, with emphasis on medical sources. The First Opium War generated an abundant literature that has typically fallen outside the purview of historians of addiction: press, pamphlet, and parliamentary materials, in particular, and archival correspondence and memoirs. In the few years that the war lasted – or rather from 1839 to 1843, when a final motion to end the trade failed in parliament – opium was written about far more than had been customary, and by a larger slice than usual of the writing public. This article begins by examining how and in what terms opium use was described, and whether this betrayed an understanding of its habit-forming properties. Much of the Opium War literature was meanwhile tangled up with domestic politics and therefore slanted. While this asks for careful treatment, it also enables a useful parsing for allegiance, especially since the cabinet majority changed in the middle of the war. This article thus considers, next, the people who made the case for and against the war.

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7 In a third historiographical strand, literary criticism, addiction had been a known quantity since the seventeenth century: Alethea Hayter, *Opium and the Romantic imagination* (London, 1968), pp. 25–30.

8 Berridge, *Opium and the people*, p. 299.
seeking to draw lessons both from the arguments deployed and the composition of the groups who made them. Finally, it situates the source literature within the context of early Victorian values and mores. Wider ideas on morality, temperance, and regulation were bound to condition British notions on opium, and these notions both drew from and offered clues as to broader contemporary attitudes to substance abuse.

The words ‘addicted’ and ‘addiction’ themselves were occasionally used, it is worth noting, in the contemporary literature on opium. The pamphleteer A. S. Thelwall, the missionary and geographer Charles Gutzlaff, and the chronicler Lewis Shuck, for example, all used the term ‘addicted’, and so did the Canton-based Chinese Repository, edited by the Protestant mission, multiple times. A geography by George Tradescant Lay spoke of ‘addiction’, and the Foreign Quarterly Review wrote that ‘the use of opium is so much more dangerous, because a person who is once addicted to it can never leave it off’. The word, in use at least since the sixteenth century, nevertheless seems to have had a more general meaning than it has now, akin to the position of being dedicated or devoted to a thing or an activity, even if some echo perhaps remained of the word’s Latin root, *addictio*, a legal term describing a debtor’s remittance into the custody of his creditor and implying a loss of control.

The numerous terms used to describe opium, however, on both sides of the fence in the Opium War debate, are instructive. Even the numerically few apologists of the opium traffic tended to use mildly negative locutions to describe the drug. At best it was called a luxury, often a ‘vicious luxury’. Partisans sometimes argued opium-smoking was no worse than regular gin-drinking, using the comparison to make the opium traffic acceptable, if not necessarily respectable, in the Chinese context. Yet the salient feature of the war debate is that the language associated with opium was overwhelmingly derogatory.

Opium was possibly most often called a ‘poison’, a negative term that did not necessarily imply addictive properties, only that it was bad for health, whether due to the risks of overdose or its effects on longevity. The risks of overdose, indeed, as social historians have pointed out, were becoming a serious concern at the time, and a long-running 1850s debate on poisons would eventually help usher in the Pharmacy Act of 1868, under which opium became

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12 This article addresses the comparison and its implications for addiction further down.
labelled a poison and its sale restricted to the professional sphere.\footnote{Among opponents of the traffic, references to poison are innumerable. Pro-war writers who labelled opium a poison included John Elliot Bingham, Narrative of the expedition to China (2 vols., London, 1842), i, pp. 22–3; and Robert Viscount Jocelyn, Six months with the Chinese expedition (London, 1841), pp. 39–40. On concerns about opium poisoning and the Pharmacy Act, see Foxcroft, The making of addiction, pp. 98–111; and Berridge, Opium and the people, pp. 75–93 and 113–22.} Yet pamphlet, press, and other writers also made use of a more revealing vocabulary. Typical and widely used labels were the terms of ‘a pernicious drug’, ‘infatuating’, ‘demoralising’, ‘enervating’, and the cause of ‘mania’\footnote{As a sample of such uses: ‘The Canton Register’, British and Foreign Review (Apr. 1840), p. 394; Walter Henry Medhurst, China, its state and prospects (London, 1838), p. 83; ‘The iniquities of the opium trade with China’, Eclectic Review (Oct. 1859), pp. 459–9; Horatio Montagu, A voice for China (London, 1840), p. 12; and C.A. Bruce, Report on the tea plantations of Assam (Calcutta, 1839), p. 32.} All these terms – with their evocations of insidiousness, seduction, folly, and loss of moral compass – implied that opium’s effects were in some respect underhand, and that in a greater or lesser degree the drug had the power to subvert or circumvent the user’s will.

The Opium War literature also quoted numerous original Chinese documents in translation, such as imperial memoranda, as did a parliamentary Blue Book containing a selection of Foreign Office correspondence that was itself further excerpted in the press.\footnote{Correspondence relating to China (London, 1840); Times, 10 Sept. 1840, p. 3; ‘China’, Saturday Magazine (11 Apr. 1840), pp. 142–3; and House of Commons, Hansard’s parliamentary debates, Third Series, vol. 53, 7 Apr. 1840, c. 712.} It is worth noting that while these documents invariably referred to opium as ‘vile’, ‘evil’, ‘filth’, etc., this Chinese terminology was never or almost never challenged, even by partisans of the war. As wrote a Chinese memorial quoted in a book by John Francis Davis, a one-time British and Company representative at Canton:

Those who smoke opium, and eventually become its victims, have a periodical longing for it, which can only be assuaged by the application of the drug at the regular time...Thus opium becomes, to opium-smokers, their very life; and, when they are seized and brought before magistrates, they will sooner suffer a severe chastisement than inform against those who sell it.\footnote{From a memorial to the emperor quoted in John Francis Davis, The Chinese (2 vols., London, 1836), ii, p. 433.}

(Lovell, who consulted these sources in the original, sometimes implies that the Chinese only had a vague understanding of the drug’s properties. Dikötter, Laamann, and Xun go further and challenge the very view that opium smoking had any widespread, damaging incidence at the time. The sinologist David Anthony Bello writes that, on the contrary, ‘Qing opium prohibition was a response to the uncontrollable power of opium as an addictive consumable’, and that Mandarin administrators had developed a vocabulary for ‘craving’ or ‘addiction’ (yìn) and for describing the perils of withdrawal. It is
also worth noting, in this context, the early opium prohibitions by various Far Eastern countries ranging from fourteenth-century Thailand to Edo-period Japan noted by James Windle and suggesting there remains room for much valuable scholarship in the area.)

Perhaps the qualifier ‘vicious’ was meanwhile elucidated as follows:

Again it must be admitted without reserve that what is called opium-smoking in moderation is rank nonsense. The slaves to this habit must wind up the system at particular times, or be wretched; they must increase the dose from ‘moderation’ (!) to excess in order to continue its power over them, and which, like all vicious indulgences, it requires daily an addition in quantity to maintain.

As this example hints, moreover, the opium traffic was repeatedly compared to the slave trade. This had, of course, a rhetorical element to it, aiming to rouse the British public, with its considerable philanthropic clout, against opium as it had been roused against the slave trade and slavery itself. Yet the implication, from the language of such comparisons, was also that opium enslaved the user, rendering him or her powerless to escape its clutch. For the editors of the Morning Herald, the opium trade was ‘this demoralising traffic – a traffic as pernicious in its nature, and destructive of the human race, as the slave trade itself’. As a Times reader saw it: ‘It cannot be questioned, but that the peaceful industrious Chinese suffers greater degradation and wretchedness in passing from his condition of life to that of a paralytic idiot, than the African in passing from his native horde under the dominion of a West India planter.’ Lord Ashley, the social activist, proclaimed in a parliamentary motion to end the opium trade in April 1843:

That terrible system of slavery does not necessarily destroy the physical and moral qualities of its victims. It tortures and degrades the man, but it leaves him susceptible of regeneration. But the opium trade destroys the man, both body and soul, and carries a hideous ruin over millions which can never be repaired.

Such parallels with the slave trade are indeed all the more troubling for their potential implications for free will and moral choice. The prevailing historical model on drug dependence remains that moral blame prevented notions of


19 The many such parallels include for example William Groser, What can be done to suppress the opium trade (London, 1840), p. 12; and Leeds Mercury, 16 Nov. 1839, p. 4.

20 ‘Morning Herald, 21 Nov. 1839, p. 2.

21 Times, 6 Dec. 1842, p. 5.

22 Commons Debate, Hansard’s parliamentary debates, Third Series, vol. 68, 4 Apr. 1843, c. 391.
addiction from emerging until the ‘rise of science’. And according to this model, moral blame in turn rested on belief in free will: the conceptualization of drug dependence as disease, either involving a suspension of the human will or undermining belief in free will itself, was what would have helped addiction arise as a modern concept.\textsuperscript{23} The term ‘inebriety’ thus formalized in medical language, in the 1880s, the idea that the habitual drug user had durably surrendered his or her self-control.\textsuperscript{24} Yet slavery was classically seen to preclude or impair the capacity for moral choice. Indeed, this had been a major reason for evangelical campaigning against it. If, therefore, habitual opium use was akin to slavery, it involved a suspension of, or a threat to, the user’s free will. ‘It plucks the beautiful consciousness of moral responsibility out of the soul’, wrote the \textit{Illustrated London News} of opium in its reporting on the Ashley motion.\textsuperscript{25} The ‘moral’ implications of the slavery parallel are that opium use led to dependence.

Incidentally, historians of addiction have also taken De Quincey’s \textit{Confessions of an English opium-eater} as the model for a Romantic, early nineteenth-century British view of the drug.\textsuperscript{26} Yet Opium War commentators seem to have been aware that this was a poetical text and, on either side in the debate, the \textit{Confessions} tended to be taken as unreliable and/or as darker and less forgiving than historians have allowed.\textsuperscript{27} De Quincey himself, who had already flaunted his strong aversion to the Chinese civilization in the \textit{Confessions}, published in \textit{Blackwood’s Magazine} what were perhaps the most rabid opinion pieces of the war, calling the Chinese ‘bestial’, ‘savage’, and so on, and advocating their submission and colonization – and yet even these failed to defend opium.\textsuperscript{28} In a strange twist, his second son later fell a rare casualty on the British expeditionary force and died near Canton in 1842.\textsuperscript{29}

A number of contemporary documents, finally, described the mechanisms of opium addiction in detail, including the craving for larger doses and withdrawal symptoms. Perhaps the most explicit was Thelwall’s, a pamphlet which, having been published in timely fashion in 1839, enjoyed wide publicity through part

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\textsuperscript{23} See for example Foxcroft, \textit{The making of addiction}, pp. 119–29.
\textsuperscript{24} Ibid., pp. 124–5; Berridge, \textit{Opium and the people}, pp. 151–7.
\textsuperscript{26} They also focus on the 1823 not the 1856 edition, whose introductory pages are far more explicit: Thomas de Quincey, \textit{Confessions of an opium-eater} (2nd edn, London, 1856), pp. 1–13.
serialization in the press and other channels. Dwelling on the opium-smoking experience as well as citing the testimonies of travellers and doctors, this wrote:

The first indulgence prepares the way for the second; the second for a third; and so on till it becomes habitual. There is something peculiarly ensnaring in the use of opium; not only on account of the high excitation of the imagination which is the immediate result of the stimulus, but more especially because that high excitement is soon followed by a correspondent lassitude and intolerable depression, which scarcely anything but a repetition of the dose can relieve. Thus the habit grows upon the wretched victim, till he becomes entirely enslaved to it; and so strong is the necessity of having recourse to the stimulus at the regular hour, that it has even been affirmed, that fatal consequences might result from sudden and total abstinence.3°

Opium use thus involved a need for repeated doses and withdrawal pains. One also notes the word ‘victim’, another term implying that the user was somehow rendered helpless by the drug. In the words of the travel narrative of the missionary Walter Medhurst:

When the habit is once formed it grows till it becomes inveterate; discontinuance is more and more difficult, until at length the sudden deprivation of the accustomed indulgence produces death. In proportion as the wretched victim comes under the power of the infatuating drug, so is his ability to resist temptation less strong.31

For the anonymous author of China as it was and as it is, otherwise a supporter of the war: ‘The pain they suffer when deprived of the drug, after long habit, no language can explain; and it is only when to a certain degree under its influence that their faculties are alive.’32

The need for increasing dosage was likewise duly observed. According to the Foreign Quarterly Review: ‘Any one who is once enslaved by it, cannot, it is true, give it up without great difficulty... In this state they eagerly return to the cause of their suffering, and strive to drown the extent of their pain by increasing their daily quantum of the fatal drug.’33 The Chinese Repository published multiple descriptions of the addiction process, one of which detailed the stages of the opium habit in formation, complete with the first casual use, repetition and increase, and the pain of attempted renunciation.34 And in the Quarterly Review’s pithy formulation: ‘The increase of appetite grows by what it feeds on.’35

Whether or not they used the term itself, the pamphlets and press that arose around the war thus accounted for the principal features of the addiction process. The opium user was compelled to take the drug regularly, often in increasing dosage. Withdrawal had debilitating effects. Opium was a poison and it

3° Thelwall, The iniquities of the opium trade, pp. 4–5.
31 Medhurst, China, its state and prospects, p. 83.
32 China as it was and as it is (London, 1842), p. 59.
33 ‘On the preparation of opium’, Foreign Quarterly Review, pp. 120 and 138.
34 ‘Opium and alcohol’, Chinese Repository (July 1840), pp. 147–56.
was pernicious, the traffic in it worthy of being compared to the slave trade. Both the vocabulary employed in the 1839–43 literature and its descriptions of opium use implied an awareness of many or all of the basic aspects of drug dependence as it would later come medically to be conceptualized.

II

That the opium traffic was a less than glamorous cause, however, is best illustrated by the nature of the arguments deployed by the war’s own advocates. Though the drug had long been an illegal article in China, the Daoguang emperor had initiated a fresh campaign against opium and the opium trade in 1838. In addition to a raft of punitive domestic regulations, this had involved the appointment of the forceful commissioner Lin. Finding moral suasion ineffective, Lin had confiscated, in March 1839, a large quantity of opium held in and around Canton by the British merchant community: 20,000 chests, for a value of around £2 million. This had involved the blockading of the British merchants’ enclave within the Chinese town, and the merchants had been joined in their ‘factories’ by Charles Elliot, the chief superintendent of the Trade of British Subjects in China and the acting British representative. Though Lin’s blockade had been non-violent, his actions were soon characterized as the grossest abuse and an insult to the British flag.

The most flagrant feature of the war case was indeed how studiously it avoided resorting to a defence of the opium traffic. Central to the case for the Chinese war was denying that it was about opium. The tussle over the name ‘opium war’ was itself emblematic. The pro-war, ministerial newspapers the Morning Chronicle and the Globe both fought against the label, and so did the free-trade, radical Manchester Guardian.36 ‘Who after this can deny that the war with China is an OPIUM WAR?’, asked the Eclectic Review in reply, one of the numerous periodicals to find the name quite apposite.37 Denials could meanwhile go so far as to involve choice repudiations of opium itself. In the words of the Morning Chronicle, a Whig publication, perhaps the most staunchly pro-cabinet newspaper, and virtually Palmerston’s mouthpiece:

Fearful would be the responsibility of the Government, and deep-dyed the guilt with which they would have sullied and degraded our national character, had they permitted the battle flag of England to be unfurled in favour of a trade which bears, wrapped up in every case and bale it carries to the shores of China, delirium and death, and a moral plague more baneful than ever borne to a doomed people by ‘the pestilence which walketh in darkness’. The Chinese war has no such aims.38

36 Morning Chronicle, 27 Mar. 1840, p. 4, 13 Apr. 1840, p. 3, and 8 June 1840, p. 2; Globe, 12 Apr. 1840, p. 2; and Manchester Guardian, 17 Mar. 1841, p. 2.
38 Morning Chronicle, 27 Mar. 1840, p. 4.
Rather, the war was intended to seek redress from a power which cut off our whole trade, expelled our subjects from its shores, endeavoured to cut off the supplies of food and water, and ordered out a fleet of war junks to attack them, because they refused...to give up a man to be butchered before their eyes, in order to satisfy the requisitions of a barbarian revenge.39

*Blackwood’s Magazine* insisted on Chinese ‘outrages’ as the conflict’s true origin.40 ‘The English government cannot permit its officers and its subjects to be outraged in China’, explained the *Manchester Guardian*.41 For the editors of the *Examiner*, the fight was about the ‘indignity’ that China had forced on the British even while they confessed that: ‘We think opium smoking a baneful habit, as bad as gin drinking, or perhaps rather worse.’42

The looming Chinese war was the object of a House of Commons debate on 7–9 April 1840, on the basis of a motion submitted by the Tory James Graham which actually came close to bringing down the cabinet at division.43 Though the motion’s wording indicted the cabinet for its diplomatic failings, the debate came to revolve around the war and, inevitably, opium. Palmerston, as foreign secretary, was thus called upon to defend his and Britain’s position. ‘He would be the last to defend a trade which involved the violation of the municipal laws of the Chinese, and which furnished an enormously large population with the means of demoralization’, he pleaded.44 To an earlier inquiry, Palmerston had meanwhile explained that the purpose of the war would be:

In the first place...to obtain reparation for the insults and injuries offered to her Majesty’s Superintendent, and her Majesty’s subjects, by the Chinese government; and in the second place ... to obtain for the merchants trading with China an indemnification for the loss of their property, incurred by threats of violence offered by persons under the direction of the Chinese government.45

Thomas Macaulay, who as secretary at war was first in line to answer Graham, likewise condemned China for having ‘resorted to measures unjust and unlawful, confined our innocent countrymen, and insulted the Sovereign in the person of her representative’. He regretted deeply the existence of the opium trade, but as to the notion that the government was attempting to force an ‘opium war’ on the public, ‘he thought that it was impossible to be conceived that a thought so absurd and so atrocious should have ever entered the

39 Ibid., 4 Apr. 1840, p. 5.
41 *Manchester Guardian*, 14 Mar. 1840, p. 3.
43 The House divided 271 to 262 in the cabinet’s favour.
45 Quoted in ‘The quarrel with China’, *Examiner*, p. 178.
George Staunton, who was an important voice because he had gone on two China embassies, was a translator of works to and from Chinese, and had spent twenty years at the East India Company factory in Canton, declined to support the Graham motion but without omitting to mention the opium trade’s ‘immorality’ and calling the drug a ‘pernicious article’. John Cam Hobhouse, as president of the Board of Control, openly washed his hands of the trade, pointing out that, as earlier debates and reports relating to the East India Company attested, the whole body of parliamentarians had long been acquainted with opium’s ‘demoralising effects’.

In order to justify the opium traffic, indeed, rather than deny it was baneful, partisans of the war shifted the blame onto the Chinese in a tactic that deployed three key arguments. First, the Chinese were alleged to have connived at the trade through bribery and corruption, so that it should not be considered to have been genuinely illegal. Second, the emperor’s true concern in banning opium was said to have been the export of silver and the negative metallic balance involved in the trade, not his subjects’ health. Third, it was advanced that alternative suppliers would emerge anyway should Britain abandon the trade, so that it would be quixotic to do so. Palmerston thus hammered home that ‘this was an exportation of [Chinese] bullion question, an agricultural interest-protection question’. The argument of Mandarin connivance and the claim that the preservation of ‘sycee’ silver (Chinese silver bars) really drove opium bans were both brandished in pro-war press articles and pamphlets. No doubt there was a partial validity to all three claims: some low-level Mandarins did wink at opium imports, the drainage of silver was, as imperial memoranda attested, a concern in Beijing alongside public health, and the Company had earlier tried and failed to contain the growth of ‘Malwa’, the opium grown in the principalities and thus outside British-held Bengal. Yet the point was that the opium traffic was never defended on its own terms, but only through a circuitous argumentation and a combination of excuses.

Palmerston was meanwhile not the only responsible official seeking to distance himself from the trade and prove that he had ‘endeavoured to discontinue the traffic to the utmost of his power’. Charles Elliot, or perhaps his friends, published a second extract from the correspondence, alongside the Blue Book, with the aim of exonerating the superintendent of trade of responsibility for the Chinese conflict. This quoted Elliot’s missives to his chief on ‘a trade, which every friend to humanity must deplore’ and whose importance

48 Ibid., 9 Apr. 1840, cc. 882–96.
49 Ibid., c. 940.
to the British trade with China was ‘of itself, a source of painful reflection’. The book’s editor went so far as to describe Elliot as ‘one who was devoting all his heart, and soul, and strength to the suppression of it [the opium trade]’. It is worth noting, lastly, that the Treaty of Nanjing did not legalize or even mention opium, and that legalization was not a British demand. When asked by a Chinese representative why Britain refused to ban the trade, Henry Pottinger, the British plenipotentiary, replied that it was unable to do so while in the same breath he was prepared to describe the drug as an ‘evil’ and a ‘cancer’.

Yet a more accurate description of the Opium War debate is perhaps that it involved three rather than just two camps. Among the war advocates were on the one hand polemicists seeking to absolve the government of responsibility for the trade itself, and on the other a team of people seeking, on the contrary, to implicate it in order to secure the merchants compensation for their lost £2 million. Unsurprisingly, this second group was the more inclined to defend opium itself, and the drug’s most benign, or rather less offensive characterizations, including parallels with spirits and gin, tended to come from that corner. In May 1839, a group of merchants led by the Jardine–Matheson partnership had despatched a deputation to London to argue its case, with £5,000 or ‘any amount of expense’ at its disposal to pay for lawyers and ‘literary men’ to perform the job. The opium trade was discussed several times in parliament aside from the Graham motion, whether on the compensation issue or as the result of moves by anti-opium activists, notably Earl Stanhope in the Lords on 12 May 1840 and Lord Ashley in the Commons on 4 April 1843. This was also the occasion for a defence of the opium trade by the merchants, some of whom were MPs, or by their lobby. Among the ‘governmental’ group were, apart from Staunton, Macaulay, and Palmerston, the pamphleteer Syndey Bell, a number of newspapers, and Lord Wellington who, though a Tory, killed the Stanhope motion on patriotic grounds while denying that opium was the cause of the war. Among those prepared to speak more mildly of opium itself, the second group, were Hugh Hamilton Lindsay, Samuel Warren, the anonymous author of The rupture with China and its causes, Leitch Ritchie, Roundell Palmer, and the MP James Hogg. Lindsay was an ex-chairman of the Canton Chamber of Commerce and a partner at an opium-trading

52 Elliot to Palmerston, 6 Apr. 1839 and 21 Feb. 1837, quoted in A digest of the despatches on China (London, 1840), pp. 115 and 53.
53 Ibid., p. 79.
54 Quoted in Granville Loch, Closing events of the campaign in China (London, 1843), p. 173.
56 Sydney S. Bell, Answer to Samuel Warren’s ‘The opium question’ (London, 1840); Lords Debate, Hansard’s parliamentary debates, Third Series, vol. 54, 12 May 1840, cc. 34–43.
57 An exception to the group was Alexander Graham, who argued for compensation but also repudiated the opium trade: Alexander Graham, The right, obligation, & interest of the government of Great Britain to require redress from the government of China (Glasgow, 1840).
He had been calling for a war against China since 1836.\(^5\)\(^9\) Warren was one of the merchants' hired penmen.\(^6\) The author of *The rupture with China* may well have been Jardine himself.\(^6\) Ritchie was editor of the *Indian News* and possibly not disinterested. Palmer was a young jurist and probably another hired hand. Hogg was a director of the East India Company who had made his fortune in India.\(^6\) The magazine *John Bull* duly mocked Hogg with a poem entitled 'The praise of the poppy' ('A new song, to be sung by Mr Hogg, M.P., at the annual banquet given by the directors of the East India Company'):

```plaintext
To suit ev'ry taste,  
We've extracted a paste,  
More sweetly seductive than wine,  
Whose magical pow'r,  
Shall charm ev'ry hour  
...Thus, if thanks to our arms,  
And to Morphia's charms,  
The Emp'ror we can but cajole,  
What a glorious plan,  
For the ruin of man,  
In China, – mind, body, and soul!!\(^6\)\(^5\)
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The opium traffic was indefensible on its own terms. Almost no one outside the merchants seeking compensation for their lost £2 million and their hired penmen was prepared to speak up for it. As to the merchants' private views on opium, finally, Matheson's biographer believes that he was sincere in deeming it harmless.\(^6\)\(^5\) Some merchants were prepared to condemn the drug, however, notably C. W. King, from the firm Olyphant & Co., who also denounced his fellow traders' hypocrisy.\(^6\)\(^5\) Medhurst, who had spent many years in China, opined likewise.\(^6\)\(^6\) And the merchant-funded *Canton Press*, a rival to the *Canton Register*, decried opium and the opium trade on several occasions even while it took the merchants' side in their fight with the Chinese.\(^6\)\(^7\)

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\(^5\) Lindsay’s pamphlet was H. Hamilton Lindsay, *Is the war with China a just one?* (London, 1840). Lindsay also spoke against the Ashley motion in the Commons, *Hansard's parliamentary debates*, Third Series, vol. 68, 4 Apr. 1843, cc. 453–7.

\(^6\) H. Hamilton Lindsay, *Letter to the right honourable Viscount Palmerston on British relations with China* (London, 1836).

\(^6\) As the editors of the *Chinese Repository* confirmed: 'Pamphlets on China', *Chinese Repository* (July 1840), p. 157; and as noted in Inglis, *The Opium War*, p. 132.


\(^6\) Medhurst, *China, its state and prospects*, p. 90.

'China, we think, is essentially right, and this country is essentially wrong.'68 Historical works on addiction sometimes give the impression that anti-opium agitation was confined to a Quaker-dominated, puritanical fringe, and of having been narrow almost to the point of inexistence in 1839–43.69 Though the anti-opium agitation had a strong Christian component, it was actually broad-based, including many lay activists, and even in its religious dimension it swept well beyond nonconformity to encompass a broad, even a majority, Church of England section.

A large share of the press, notably, stood up against the Opium War and militated against the traffic, including some periodicals usually friendly to the cabinet. Sustained campaigns against the opium trade included those run by the highbrow Eclectic Review, by the free-trade and Liberal Leeds Mercury, and by The Times, Britain’s most widely read and influential newspaper. The Eclectic Review devoted several articles to the trade, beginning in October 1839 and ending in June 1842, calling it ‘that disgraceful traffic’, describing the opium user as ‘reduced by the fumes of opium almost to idiotism’, taking commissioner Lin’s side against the merchants, and generally demanding that the opium traffic be suppressed.70 The Times’s campaign was even more persistent, beginning as early as August 1839, when the first news of the Canton events arrived, running into tens of articles, letters, and editorials, and continuing beyond the peace treaty. The editors quoted Thelwall’s book at length and, in the name of both ‘honour’ and ‘humanity’, called for parliament to ‘put down this abominable traffic’ and free China from ‘this poisonous pest’.71 They indicted the Company, writing that opium promised ‘death to their infatuated customers’.72 On the Commons debate, they wrote:

We can tell Lord Palmerston that an utter detestation of the protection afforded by him to the opium traffic, notwithstanding his system of make-believe discouragement, prevails throughout this country, and animates the honest hearts of the people, and that before many weeks have passed he will find himself among the victims of the opium war.73

Campaigning continued into 1840, well after the war had started, comparing the opium traffic to the slave trade, poking fun at official arguments, and criticizing the war in a long editorial as late as November.74 On the signature of the
Treaty of Nanjing, the editors asked that ‘We should cease to be mixed up with it, to foster it [the opium trade], or to make it a source of Indian revenue ... We should not only disavow, but distinctly discourage and set our faces against it ... in short, that it should be put down.’

Significantly, The Times, a Tory newspaper, was also prepared to make sarcastic observations on Wellington’s betrayal of the Stanhope anti-opium motion of May 1840, and it complained in 1843 that the cabinet, now headed by Robert Peel, was churlish in having rejected the Ashley motion. The Leeds Mercury, conversely a long-time Whig supporter, stood consistently against both the opium trade and the war. Having begun to attack the opium trade in pieces that quoted the King pamphlet, among others, it published several virulent anti-war editorials in 1840 and continued calling opium ‘this poisonous drug for the infatuated multitudes’ into 1843.

Other major newspapers that denounced the opium traffic included the Standard, the Morning Herald – which though Tory likened Peel to ‘the keeper of a bagnio’ – and Britain’s foremost evangelical newspaper, the Record.

The opium traffic was also criticized because it involved smuggling, because it was accused of crowding out legitimate manufactured goods exports to China, and because it hindered the preaching of Christianity by missionaries. These were always distinct arguments, however, and opium was more often attacked for what it was. The case against opium rested in equal, indeed in predominant, proportion, on the opprobrium it attracted as a drug. Nor was agitation, importantly, limited to a narrow coterie of devout moralists, even less of nonconformist moralists. Among major anti-opium pamphleteers, William Groser was a Baptist, but both Thelwall and Horatio Montagu were Church of England clergymen, and graduates of Cambridge University. The Chinese Repository, which consistently opposed the opium traffic, was edited by the Protestant mission in China which, sponsored by the London, Foreign Bible, and Church Missionary Societies, ecumenically grouped Church of England and nonconformist members.

Key lay pamphleteers moreover included the merchants King and William Storrs Fry, the Irish essayist John Fisher Murray, T. H. Bullock, a captain in the Nizam’s army, and the Company superintendent C. A. Bruce. When, in February 1840, an Anti-Opium Society was formed, its founding committee included no more than two churchmen out of thirty members.

Admittedly, both parliamentarians who volunteered motions on the opium traffic were also prepared to make sarcastic observations on Wellington’s betrayal of the Stanhope anti-opium motion of May 1840, and it complained in 1843 that the cabinet, now headed by Robert Peel, was churlish in having rejected the Ashley motion. The Leeds Mercury, conversely a long-time Whig supporter, stood consistently against both the opium trade and the war. Having begun to attack the opium trade in pieces that quoted the King pamphlet, among others, it published several virulent anti-war editorials in 1840 and continued calling opium ‘this poisonous drug for the infatuated multitudes’ into 1843. Other major newspapers that denounced the opium traffic included the Standard, the Morning Herald – which though Tory likened Peel to ‘the keeper of a bagnio’ – and Britain’s foremost evangelical newspaper, the Record.

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trade, Stanhope and Ashley, were deeply religious figures. (Notably, William Gladstone also spoke up resolutely against the traffic: his sister Helen, to whom he was quite close, was a lifelong laudanum addict.\textsuperscript{81}) Yet the narrow cabinet majority on the Graham motion attested to widespread reluctance to condone the traffic. Other renowned petitioners and public speakers against opium meanwhile included the Quaker abolitionist Joseph Sturge, but also the Anglican anti-slavery activist Thomas Clarkson and the radicals Lord Brougham and Daniel O’Connell, who said of the drug that it was ‘destroying the intellects of the natives, murdering their bodies, and ruining their souls for ever’.\textsuperscript{82}

Couching argumentation in Christian language was only common of contemporary humanitarian causes, especially foreign causes which, like anti-slavery, had the potential for harnessing the domestically powerful missionary movement. Lay criticism, the composition of the anti-opium campaign shows, was just as and indeed rather more voluminous than clerical criticism of opium. Opposition to the traffic was not merely rooted in, and was far too strongly worded to have solely resided in, objections to vice. The press organs that lined up against it were furthermore bold and persistent in their denunciations. They were even prepared to thwart traditional political allegiances in their campaigning against it. The broad base of anti-opium activism, as well as betraying in its language an appreciation of the dangers of opium use, showed what widespread misgivings the drug invoked.

IV

The nature of the war case and the breadth of the opposing campaign confirm that, among the informed public, opium was overwhelmingly viewed as a destructive drug, a product whose ownership it was best to deny. The terms invariably used, furthermore, and the evidence deployed, evinced an awareness of opium’s habit-forming properties. There was, admittedly, an informative aspect to the Opium War literature, though much of it was sufficiently elliptical to imply prior knowledge, and one reason for the detailed accounts found in the various pamphlets was that the practice of Chinese opium-smoking differed from opium-eating, inviting graphic depictions of the process. Perhaps opium nevertheless carried, especially in literary tradition, specific Oriental connotations, inviting at home a certain detachment from Chinese affairs.\textsuperscript{83} Distance and familiarization, and the tension between the two, are inherent to cross-cultural observation and the discourses it generates. At the time of the


\textsuperscript{82} \textit{Leeds Mercury}, 28 Mar, 1740, p. 7; \textit{Morning Herald}, 12 May 1840, p. 4; and \textit{Times}, 8 July 1839, p. 6. The ‘natives’ in this last quote were Indian.

\textsuperscript{83} See Barry Milligan, \textit{Pleasures and pains: opium and the Orient in nineteenth-century British culture} (Charlottesville, VA, 1995).
Opium War, the London opium dens had yet to open and the social concerns they would spark yet to arise.\footnote{On the topic, see ibid., pp. 83–102.} Yet the twin mechanisms of contrast and association were already at work in the Opium War debate, in particular through hypothetical arguments around bans and imaginary smuggling on the English coast and through parallels with alcohol consumption at home.\footnote{For similes involving smuggling, generally French, off the English coast, see for example William Storrs Fry, Facts and evidence relating to the opium trade with China (London, 1840), pp. 29–31; Graham, The right, obligation & interest, pp. 11–12; and Hobhouse in Commons Debate, Hansard’s parliamentary debates, Third Series, vol. 53, 9 Apr. 1840, c. 893.} Opium’s British standing at the time of the Chinese war must also be considered in the light of broader contemporary notions on substance abuse.

The best that was said, indeed, of opium-smoking was that it was no worse than heavy drinking. Alcoholism only emerged as a term in the 1850s, and historians of addiction write that the concept flowed from its own ‘disease theory’, albeit in a somewhat earlier timeframe beginning in the first half of the nineteenth century, or even earlier, and therefore matching the 1839–43 period better.\footnote{William F. Bynum, ‘Chronic alcoholism in the first half of the nineteenth century’, Bulletin of the History of Medicine, 42 (1968), pp. 160–85; Brian Harrison, Drink and the Victorians (2nd edn, Staffordshire, 1994), pp. 22–3; Roy Porter, ‘The drinking man’s disease: the “prehistor[y]” of alcoholism in Georgian Britain’, British Journal of Addiction, 80 (1985), pp. 385–96. Berridge has a later timeframe: Berridge, Opium and the people, pp. 154–5. Report from the select committee on inquiry into drunkenness, with minutes of evidence, and appendix, House of Commons Parliamentary Papers (London, 1834).} Alcohol and opium are habit-forming in different degrees, moreover, the processes mixing social and biological factors in different proportions. As it has been suggested, perhaps the comparison evinced a lack of awareness of the drug’s habit-forming power.

Yet first, as discussed, such equations tended to be a rhetorical tool of the merchant lobby. Second, parallels with drinking were scarcely intended to evoke the convivial atmosphere of the local pub. The comparison was invariably with spirits, especially gin, and with dram-drinking. If China faced a problem in the shape of its opium shops, so did Britain with its gin palaces, the argument went. As a recent official enquiry into the matter attested, prevalent drunkenness was considered a serious issue in Britain.\footnote{‘The opium and the China question’, Blackwood’s Magazine, p. 720; Globe, 11 Apr. 1840, p. 2; Warren, The opium question, pp. 85–6; Some pros and cons of the opium question (London, 1840), pp. 11–16.} When pamphleteers and journalists confronted dram-drinking and opium-smoking, this was typically not in their biological effects, but in their statistical incidence. The point was less about similarity of experience, and more about the percentage of the population affected.\footnote{This content downloaded from 130.56.64.101 on Sun, 24 Jan 2021 03:34:15 UTC All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms} Opium was compared to spirits as an instrument of social destruction, not as something useful or benign, even by its partisans.
Third, a great many were ready to point out that opium was more strongly habit-forming than alcohol. Thelwall wrote of the ‘tenfold force’ of opium slavery compared to ardent spirits. Elliot’s own editor opined that opium was ‘more dangerous’ because it ‘enervates the will’. The Christian Observer found that it ‘exceeds in its horrors the effect of dram-drinking’. The popular Saturday Magazine observed that ‘It is different [from alcohol] with the use of opium; a moderate dose soon loses its power, and with time the quantity used requires to be progressively augmented until the opium-eater becomes a victim to the abuse of his drug.’

Fourth and last, though the rich relationship between contemporary notions of drunkenness, temperance, and alcoholism medically defined was still undergoing, at the time, a process of differentiation, the opium–spirits parallel itself arguably made the case for an understanding of the drug’s compulsive power. Britain was home to a temperance and a teetotal movement, both having begun to develop in earnest in the late 1820s. The teetotal movement, loosely aligned with Nonconformity, may perhaps be tied to a puritanical association of all stimulants with vice. Temperance, however, distinguished between drinking and drunkenness, so that the enemy was not so much inebriation itself as its habitual version. Admittedly, the Victorians did not systematically distinguish between drunkenness as state and as regular practice, this last notion being marred by ‘moral overtones’. Yet as one historian notes, habitual drunkenness had begun to be recognized as compulsive by the 1800s, and a ‘drunkard’ meant a person habitually drunk, as in: ‘There never yet was a thorough drunkard who, in the interval of sobriety, was not almost ready to cut his throat; and until he returned to the drink, as a dog to his vomit, his life was insupportable.’ Temperance, moreover, had social aims, and so did official worries over drunkenness. The problem was not inebriation or binge-drinking, but drunkenness as habit: this was what caused pauperism and the rampant evils that were the neglect of work, family, and Sabbath. The same model, in turn, applied to Chinese opium-smokers: ‘To satisfy that inclination, he will sacrifice everything – his own welfare, the subsistence of his wife and children, and the happiness of his children, and the maintenance of his family.’
and neglect his work.’96 Even if this was a moralistic view, the ‘moral’ problems originated in the habit-forming properties of the substances in question.

Neither was, finally, opium’s unregulated status in Britain the sign of an absence of notions of addiction, on the contrary. One reason for such restraint was simply that opium was needed as a painkiller. Yet the absence of a ban also reflected the strong contemporary prejudices against government intervention in the private sphere that were also at work in the drinks sector. Free-trade Liberalism was hostile on principle to prohibitions on products such as alcohol or opium. Relaxations on gin and beer-house licensing, including the 1830 Beer Act, had been intended to remedy the drink problem, the argument being that ‘government regulation and taxation lent a spurious glamour to selling and consuming strong drink’.97

The lack of a ban, in the Victorian context, arguably only supports the idea that contemporaries saw opium as habit-inducing. It was suggested that bans made demand stronger, both because they made trafficking more profitable and the product itself more attractive as forbidden fruit. This, indeed, was one of the core arguments of the war case:

The fact is plain to any one who is the least acquainted with the people, that to put an immediate stop to a custom which has taken such hold of them is impossible; no measures, however severe, can entirely succeed; thousands are ready to risk their lives to procure the drug, and there are thousands who, from long habit, would, if deprived of it, prefer to be in their graves.98

‘Such is the infatuation of the Chinese, that they will endeavour to procure the drug at all hazards’, wrote the Illustrated London News to explain why it would be useless for Britain to abandon the opium trade.99 In parliament, Macaulay asked:

Did they suppose that a traffic supported on the one hand by men actuated by the love of a drug, from the intoxicating qualities of which they found it impossible to restrain themselves; and on the other, by persons actuated by the desire of gain, could be terminated by the publication of a piece of paper signed ‘Charles Elliot’?100

The point was of course self-serving, bordering, in some cases, on dishonesty.101 The Hobhouse memoirs suggest that the premier, Lord Melbourne, was nevertheless for one sincere in believing it.102 More significantly, it was

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97 Harrison, Drink and the Victorians, pp. 63–5.
98 Jocelyn, Six months with the Chinese expedition, p. 11.
100 Commons Debate, Hansard’s parliamentary debates, Third Series, vol. 53, 7 Apr. 1840, c. 714.
101 E.g. Manchester Guardian, 25 Mar. 1840, p. 2, and 26 Nov. 1842, p. 2; Globe, 9 Apr. 1840, p. 4; A digest of the despatches on China, pp. 24 and 205; Review of the management of our affairs in China (London, 1840), pp. 49–50; and Bingham, Narrative of the expedition to China, 1, p. 139.
sometimes recycled by opponents of the war and of the opium traffic itself, parties that had persistently written against both, for example the Record and Tait’s Edinburgh Magazine. Alcohol prohibition had yet to appear on the temperance agenda, and while exact levels of regulation continued as the object of heated political debate, it remained a typical early Victorian solution to legalize and tax, while preaching moderation. Through education and abstinence, free-traders expected to ‘work harmoniously with temperance reformers’ and, for them, the private was separate from the legal sphere. ‘Moral evils are to be met by moral cures’, as wrote the author of the Digest of the despatches.

Opium’s legal status in Britain was thus compatible with an understanding of drug dependence. So were comparisons of opium with dram-drinking which anyhow mainly tended to conflate them as social ills. Meanwhile, as the terms of the Opium War debate suggest, there can be said to have existed an appreciation that opium was habit-forming among at least part of the reading public, a layman’s notion of addiction. None of this need contradict the disease theory of addiction, nor the historical process by which opium and other drugs became the object of penalization in Britain three-quarters of a century later. That it was the medical body, and the forging of a scientific consensus, that eventually prompted the authorities to action need not be gainsaid. Yet nor must one be beholden to a Foucault-based model by which knowledge is always handed from the top down and in the interests of control. Lay notions of addiction may well have pre-existed and, as Berridge herself hints was the case, they likely informed the disease theory itself.

The leaders who committed Britain to the First Opium War, and the political nation which, with some doubt and after much debate supported them, plainly identified opium as a noxious drug. That it was something dangerous that was being sold, at the point of a gun, into China was, as the debate is evidence, well-nigh universally realized. The terms employed to describe opium, the breadth of the campaign led by the daily press, and the nature of the war case all suggest a widespread understanding of opium’s character. Scarcely more than a narrow band of people with a vested interest in its trade were prepared to defend opium itself. The war saw the publication of a broad literature evincing an implicit understanding of what would come to be termed drug dependence and regularly providing explicit accounts of it. Many, if perhaps not

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104 Harrison, Drink and the Victorians, p. 63. As Harrison notes, pp. 182–201, prohibitionism only arose, under American influence, in the 1850s. See also Virginia Berridge, Demons: our changing attitudes to alcohol, tobacco, & drugs (Oxford, 2013), pp. 36–50.
105 A digest of the despatches on China, p. 209.
all, were aware that opium was habit-forming, and there can even be said to have existed, at the time, a layman’s notion of drug addiction in Britain.

How widely shared such notions may have been among the population at large is more difficult to ascertain. The Chinese historian Shijie Guan has attempted to gauge British working-class attitudes towards opium through the Chartist literature. The Northern Star certainly set itself boisterously against the war. Yet Chartism was a virulent opposition movement and only likely to attack cabinet policies, and temperance Chartism, whose main aim was to combat class prejudices about the drunken masses, risks having coloured the message. Parliamentary petitions hint at popular mobilization, and Opium War petitions arrived from locations as diverse as London, Darling, Liverpool, Leeds, Worcester, Maidstone, St Albans, Bishops Stortford, Galashiels, and ‘some place in Somerset’, some of them with thousands of signatures protesting a ‘dishonourable and immoral’ trade that was ‘enervating and impoverishing the consumers of the drug’. Yet this was an era of mass petitioning, and the motives behind these petitions are not always legible, even if one excludes those presented by temperance societies.

Perhaps the opium users themselves, finally, and friends and families or indeed ordinary bystanders, were occasionally able to conclude that opium-taking was compulsive from observation. In some regions such as the Fens or Lincolnshire, the drug appears to have been taken extensively by the poor. Opium consumption in Britain was, in 1839, the equivalent of around 300 chests, or around one sixth of China’s on a per capita basis. This was the equivalent of more than 200 doses per man, woman, and child per year and, based on these statistics, some and perhaps most British opium consumption must have been recreational. At about the same time that Lin was confiscating the Canton opium chests, the writer and chemist William Howitt observed:

I have contemplated with horror the rapid increase of the consumption of opium, and its spirituous laudanum, within the last ten years. The ravenous fierceness, with which opium-eaters enter the druggists’ shops, when want of money has kept them from their dose beyond their accustomed time of using it, and the trembling impatience with which they watch the weighing of the drug (every moment appearing to them an age), and the avidity with which they will seize and tear off their wonted dose, and swallow it – are frightful to be seen; yet must have been seen by many on such occasions.

108 Morning Chronicle, 4 Apr. 1840, p. 2; Fry, Facts and evidence, p. 54; and Wen-Tsao Wu, The Chinese opium question and British opinion and action (New York, NY, 1928), p. 44.
110 Berridge, Opium and the people, p. 294. One chest contained about 140 lbs. For Chinese imports, see Inglis, The Opium War, p. 183.