

Book Review

Diana S. Kim: *Empires of Vice: The Rise of Opium Prohibition across Southeast Asia*. Princeton & Oxford: Princeton University Press. 2020. 309 pp. ISBN 9780691199696

Colonial vices—particularly opium—in Asia as a whole are never a research terrain off the beaten path for historians. Going against the grain, Diana Kim chose an already well-treated subject and problematized one of the colonial vices: opium in the Southeast Asian colonies. It turns out, however, that the monograph is a real tour de force, empirically rich and well-researched. The book crisscrosses the colonial governance of different Southeast Asian regions under at least the control of three empires: Britain, France, and Japan. It also ambitiously pushes the boundaries of conventional periodization by covering a long period of opium history from the nineteenth century to present days (though mostly clustered in the modern).

Overall, the book can be divided into three larger sections and structurally it is organized in eight chapters. The first part (chapters 1, 2, & 3) is set in a background of nascent state opium monopolies, rising international opium prohibition discourses, and the specific situations of Southeast Asia. By doing so, Kim tries to challenge conventional narratives about “the [opium] revenue collected from and injury occasioned by opium consumption” (p. 28). Situated in this context, Chapter 2 takes an interesting turn to jump into the question why was it viable for Southeast Asian colonial officials and administrators (British Burma and Malaya) to turn against opium. Striking to this reviewer is that the answer is simple yet satisfactory: “the answer lies with the everyday work and ideas of local administrators stationed in the colonies” (p. 29). Chapter 3 advances the idea that opium prohibition developed unevenly across Southeast Asia because colonial local administrators built up different sets of official problems in each colony. A disparate set of official problems specific to a certain colony may generate different colonial knowledge and in turn the metropole would implement different policy accordingly.

The second part (chapters 4, 5, & 6) focuses primarily on three distinct, yet somewhat interconnected colonies run by Britain and France—British Burma, British Malaya, and French Indochina. In this core part, Kim maps the emergence of how the many local administrators generated the official knowledge related to opium across these three individual colonies. The chapters are arranged chronologically over evenly distributed historical periods: British Burma (1870s-1890s), British Malaya (1890s-1920s), and French Indochina (1920s-1940s). Each period centers on a different plot line. In Chapter 4 on British Burma, Kim makes an intriguing point about “an official problem of ‘moral wreckage’,” (p. 92) in which the connection between opium use and population health—as observed by a slew of local administrators such as J. W. Mountjoy—necessitated an opium policy reform from the metropole. More specifically, local administrators’ construction of the opium problem rested on the relation between the deterioration of people’s health because of opium consumption and their criminal tendencies. Chapter 5—on British Malaya—introduces the reader to the pet policy of an opium revenue reserve fund implemented in 1925. Despite British Malaya’s fiscal dependency on revenues generated from the opium industry, local administrators managed to carry out a scheme such as the establishment of the opium revenue reserve fund aiming to replace opium revenues. In Chapter 6, Kim unravels why French Indochina could not stay abreast of the opium regulatory prohibition policies in its counterpart colonies, despite of reputational risks and international pressure from the League of Nations’ Opium Advisory Committee. The micropolitics of the Indochinese colonial bureaucracies were not ready to accommodate such a regulatory opium regime due to “the opium monopoly’s accumulated debts and murky accounting practices” (p. 153).

The last part (chapters 7 & 8) takes a look at Burma, Malaya and Indochina when controlled temporarily by the Japanese Empire since September 1940, and at the legacies of a

regulatory opium regime in the process of state-building projects in Southeast Asian countries. Ultimately, the legacies of “an unwieldy and incomplete process of state transformation” endure to this day (p. 200). Chapter 7 provides readers with the lasting legacies of the opium monopolies and anti-opium policies on states and societies from the late 1930s to the present day. Chapter 8, the conclusion, invites the reader to dwell upon the anxieties and fragilities of the colonial administrative states, the problem-solving activities of the local administrators, and the micropolitics of colonial bureaucracies from a bottom-up perspective.

Instead of rehashing the existing scholarship on the topic at hand, Kim solidly grounds her work in a multi-language and multi-archival research. She argues that through identifying opium related problems on the ground the seemingly weak local colonial administrators could influence high-ranking officials in the metropole to initiate a series of opium policy transformations. In this regard, Kim succeeds in putting forward some convincing and thought-provoking arguments. Kim intrinsically forges an intimate link between colonial knowledge produced by the on-the-ground administrators and official policies implemented by their powerful counterparts back in the metropole. In other words, she reveals the internal logics behind the empire-building and policymaking by juxtaposing “the micropolitics of the colonial bureaucracy” (p. 123) against the ‘macro-politics’ of the empires.

Along the way, *Empires of Vice* restores the agency of “weak actors” (p. 12) through the prism of these micropolitics. The “minor administrators” (p. 222) constitute the dramatis personae of Kim’s riveting story and they powerfully steer the colonial regulations of opium in a totally different direction, otherwise the regulatory opium regime in the British and French colonies of Burma, Malaya, and Indochina could have taken another direction.

Highlights of the book notwithstanding, there are a few minor comments. First, the role of “weak” or “minor” administrators is essential to this enterprise. In Chapter 4 more than a dozen “weak actors” take center stage in the construction of an official opium problem in terms of public health in British Burma. Interestingly, the number of “weak” administrators declines markedly in the following two chapters on Malaya and Indochina where they are supposed to play a major part in producing official knowledge like in Burma. However, this sharp decrease of “lower administrators” (p. 162) may chip away at the core argument of the book, as it is built upon their voices and activities. Second, Kim argues that people with little power on the margins of the Japanese Empire are “seldom studied” (p. 69). Norman Smith’s *Intoxicating Manchuria*, and Mark Driscoll’s *Absolute Erotic, Absolute Grotesque* are among other studies that have partially addressed this topic.¹

Indeed, *Empires of Vice* offers a deeply nuanced account of opium history in a highly complex region of Southeast Asia; and it contributes to the field of modern empire studies by unpacking the inner lives of everyday administrators who may—as individuals—exert only tenuous influence on imperial operations; however, when “low-level administrators” (p. 217) engage with each other they are mighty enough to change the course of empires. To that end, the monograph is a welcome addition to the field; it sure will resonate with historians, students of history, and a general audience.

¹ About Japan: Norman Smith, *Intoxicating Manchuria: Alcohol, Opium, and Culture in China’s Northeast* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2012); Mark Driscoll, *Absolute Erotic, Absolute Grotesque: The Living, Dead, and Undead in Japan’s Imperialism, 1895-1945* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010); Kathryn Meyer, *Life and Death in the Garden: Sex, Drugs, Cops, and Robbers in Wartime China* (Lanham & London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014); and John M. Jennings, *The Opium Empire: Japanese Imperialism and Drug Trafficking in Asia, 1895-1945* (Westport, CA: Praeger, 1997). About Korea: John M. Jennings, “The Forgotten Plague: Opium and Narcotics under Japanese Rule in Korea, 1910-1945”, *Modern Asian Studies* 29.4 (1995): 795-815.

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