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Julia Lovell, *The opium war: drugs, dreams and the making of China*

Basingstoke/Oxford, Picador, 2011, 458 pp.

Xavier Paulès

Translator: N. Jayaram



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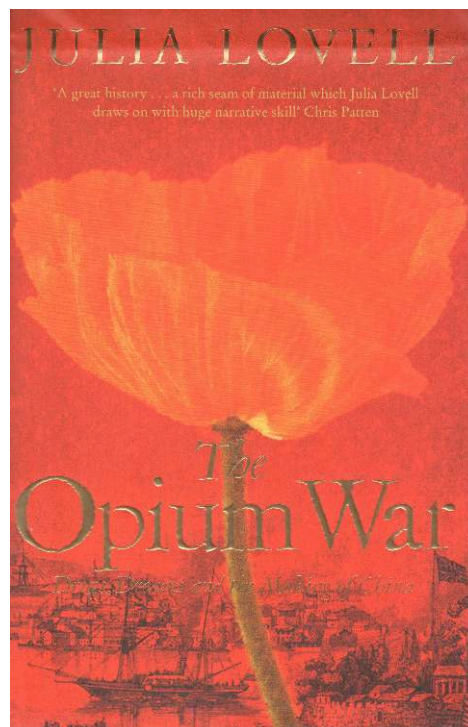
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1 Opium is one of the most bandied about subjects in Chinese history, and the specialist would learn little that is new in this study, which is mainly a (good) synthesis of existing works. The main value added in this book lies in its offering of a larger perspective that more pointed research tomes often lose sight of. We learn that the First Opium War (1839-1842) was actually of secondary importance in the eyes of contemporaries. The Qing dynasty faced threats (revolts and natural calamities) that its administrative elite deemed more serious for its very survival. In London, the frustrations of the far-off military operations came in handy as tools for internal political wrangling in parliamentary debates.

2 The author rightly points out the extent to which the British Empire's engagement in the war was marked by improvisations, hesitations, and pangs of conscience, so much so that it was far from having a precise or well thought-out plan of imperialist conquest. This is by no means a superfluous lesson for the historian, often given to attributing *a posteriori* coherence to a series of events.



- 3 Lovell has taken pains to present a series of lively and precise portraits of the major protagonists of the First Opium War such as the Emperor Daoguang, imperial commissioner Lin Zexu and his Manchu successor Qishan, and on the British side, foreign secretary Lord Palmerston and Chief Superintendent of the China trade Charles Elliot. It is a judicious choice, considering that distance conferred on the actors on the ground much freedom of action: it should be borne in mind that for the British forces, the operation theatre was many months' voyage from the mother country. Thus, the replacement in May 1841 of Elliot (rather inclined towards conciliation) by the intransigent Henry Pottinger represented a real turning point in the war. From then on, the British expeditionary force turned ruthless in using its crushing military superiority to force a speedy agreement. This was the famous Treaty of Nanking (Nanjing), hammered out under extraordinary conditions. Lovell describes over some wonderful pages the poker game between Pottinger and the Emperor's two emissaries, Qiying and Yilibu, highlighting the role of the obscure Zhang Xi, personal secretary of Yilibu.
- 4 As the title indicates, the First Opium War takes up two thirds of the book, and the Second (1856-1860) is dealt with in much less detail. The final chapters show how late nineteenth century intellectuals such as Yan Fu literally "invented" the Opium Wars (until then, historiographers did not label them as such, simply referring to border skirmishes). Finally, Lovell presents interesting elements regarding the privileged place accorded to the Opium Wars in the current historic orthodoxy. She stresses that it is only since the late twentieth century that the wars have gained primacy in school curricula and official rhetoric in the People's Republic of China. Following the Tiananmen massacre, the Communist Party had the brilliant idea of exploiting the anniversary of the 150-year-old opium wars to deflect public wrath towards an external enemy - imperialism.
- 5 To the reader's delight, Lovell has produced a clear, agreeable, and lively account. Some lengthy passages could have been shortened, especially descriptions of the horrors of different military operations, as well as discussions of the appalling hacks pushing the Yellow Peril thesis (pp. 274-291). It is regrettable that Lovell seems to be unaware (but then again, unfortunately, so is a near totality of opium historians) that the routinely reproduced photographs of opium smokers in the late Qing are just studio jobs meant to fuel a flourishing picture postcard industry presenting a rather spurious exoticism. It is thus futile to theorise as she does over the degree of addiction and even more over the feelings of "smokers" from the time the cliché caught on (p. 17).
- 6 She may also be accused of some lack of fair play. While she has read (and generously used) the best of historiography in English on the subject, she rarely mentions a few older academic works in Chinese. It is regrettable that some excellent accounts of the history of opium, such as the one by Wang Hongbin, have been ignored. While it may not necessarily have been the author's intent, the book gives the impression that all Chinese historians today adhere to the totally grotesque official interpretation of the Opium War aimed at the larger public.

AUTHORS

XAVIER PAULÈS

Assistant Professor at EHESS, Paris.