

Cat.4 #10 The Dutch and the Opium Wars

By Pieter Bos

For many Chinese, history contains mainly two things: the horror of the Cultural Revolution and the “Christian” Europeans flooding the market with opium.

For a national conference of Chinese Christians in Hong Kong, coming July, (2012?) a European delegation has been invited to take responsibility of this section of our shared history. Here are some facts.

Opium was, besides used in pharmacy, a drug for the rich. How did that change?

When the Dutch, under the flag of the VOC, Dutch East Indies Company, reached East Asia and chased away the Portuguese, they found out that the Asians were not really interested in European goods and European currency. Their main income was derived, not so much by importing spices in Europe, but by developing a network of inter-Asian trade. They soon controlled, and in a way monopolized, the trade of the whole region, using Indian silk and opium as currency. A main trade route was from the Mughal Empire, now West India, and Bengal, now East India, via Batavia, where the opium was refined, to Formosa, then the gate to China. Chinese goods were traded for opium (1).

Mid-17th century the Dutch invented to smoke opium by pipe, which made it cheaper and therefore very popular, which was profitable, and at the same time terrible (2). The use of opium by pipe is also more addictive, which was again more profitable, and at the same time disastrous (3). That was the change, in three stages.

In the mid-17th century the British involvement in the Far East became significant and in the course of the 18th century the British got the upper hand and consolidated the opium exports to China. During the 19th century the drug addiction in China gained terrible proportions. When the Chinese opposed opium imports, the British imposed their commercial interests on China, even by waging two “Opium Wars”, 1839–1842 and 1856–1860. Primarily through the reports and protests of the missionaries of the China Inland Mission a public debate started in the UK, comparable with the debate and action leading to the abolition of the slave trade a century earlier. The China Inland Mission gained a good reputation in China through this action. From the beginning of the 20th century the British policy changed, and the Chinese government started a process of fighting the evil of opium imports, local production and use.

Thanks to the determined action of the missionaries the issue had strong and effective coverage in the UK. The Dutch share in this gross episode has virtually remained in the dark. It is tempting to suspect a relation between this national past and the tenacity of drug abuse and the weak drug policy in our nation. It is sobering to consider that the Dutch East Indies Company gave this stamp on this big scale and shameful dynamic. Colonialism was bad, slave trade was worse, but the Dutch involvement in opium trade was the worst, and most ignored.

Even today Christianity in China is identified with this painful period of the colonial past and so encounters a major obstacle. For a national conference of Chinese Christians in Hong Kong a European delegation has been invited to take responsibility of this section of our shared history. We are on our way to Hong Kong with a draft “declaration of confession”.