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Julia Lovell

The Opium War: Drugs, Dreams and the Making of China

Julia Lovell is a British historian of China and a literary translator from Chinese to English. She is a gifted scholar and storyteller with a profound appreciation of Chinese culture. She has brought these gifts to bear on a series of subtle but revolutionary explorations of contemporary Chinese nationalism, and the role of history in its construction.

Her earlier work includes The Great Wall: China Against the World 1000 BC-AD 2000 published in 2006, a narrative account of China’s iconic national monument and the symbol of the fictitious historical isolation that is part of China’s contemporary doctrine of exceptionalism. The Politics of Cultural Capital: China’s Quest for a Nobel Prize in Literature, also published in 2006, is a detailed history of the links between literature and modern Chinese nationalism, told through China’s preoccupation with winning a Nobel Literature Prize.

Lovell’s work as a critic and translator of Chinese fiction - her translations include the work of China’s most important 20th century writer, Lu Xun - allow her to combine her profound literary and cultural sensibility with a historian’s forensic inquiry, a combination that has made publication of her recent books an event to be anticipated with pleasure.

In The Opium Wars, Drugs, Dreams and the Making of Modern China, Lovell continues her long exploration of contemporary Chinese identity, told through the re-mythologising of history.

China may be an old culture but it is a very young and, as yet, ill defined nation. The concept of the nation state was imported only in the C20th with the end of the Qing Empire. It took uneven root. The first blueprint for a post imperial China was drafted in imitation of Western democracy; in 1949, there followed a Chinese version of Soviet Communism with all its horrors; with the death of Mao and the trauma of Tiananmen Square in 1989, yet another model was required, and a fresh narrative to justify it.
There were two Opium Wars, the first from 1840 to 1842, the second in 1860, but here the term stands for the roughly 60 years of the encounter between expanding Europe and the then declining imperial China. It is the story of how these episodes became key elements in a new historiography of China, a state designed narrative that aims to impose an answer to the still unresolved question, what is China?

The core narrative of the Opium War, as mythologised in contemporary Chinese historiography, is that a rich and stable imperial China was all but destroyed by Western barbarians - European and eventually American imperialists, who sought to colonise and enslave. Opium, traded first by the East India Company to balance an otherwise uneven trade, is emblematic in this narrative of Western evil intent.

The first battle of the first Opium War took place in July 1840 off the southern coast of China. It lasted nine minutes and the war it signalled - a sporadic series of unequal military engagements lasted until 1842. The second opium war culminated in 1860 with the looting and burning of the imperial pleasure grounds, the Yuan Ming Yuan, in the northwest suburbs of Beijing by a punitive expedition of British and French troops.

At the time, these events were noticed, if at all, as a border skirmish, unusual only in being a maritime affair. The Qing emperor had far bigger problems to contend with in the internal rebellions that were shaking the empire to its core, and his officials were so nervous of passing on the letters the British handed in demanding the right to trade that he had little idea of what the trouble was about.

When hostilities began, repeated accounts of glorious Chinese victories understandably left the emperor in the dark about the real outcome. Of those Chinese who did pay attention, many blamed the catastrophe less on the rude foreigners than on the weakness and corruption of the Qing empire. Lovell’s account is rich in wit and irony and her masterful use of evidence spins a multilayered story. As she writes, the wars themselves were: a tragicomedy of overworked emperors, mendacious generals and pragmatic collaborators.

For the British, the Opium War defined the Chinese as the decadent orientals caricatured in popular fiction in the early 20th century. Their influence lingers today in recurrent racist stereotypes as China’s rise sets Western nerves on edge. In China, the Opium War is now centre stage. The ruins of the Yuan Ming Yuan, neglected for 100 years, is now honoured as a memorial to the “century of national humiliation” that were constructed after the crushing of the student protests in Tiananmen in 1989.

Today in China, the Opium War has been elevated to a national cause, the start of what official propaganda describes as a century of national humiliation, a western
conspiracy that brought a proud nation to its knees. It has cast a long historical shadow in the West, too, fixing China in the Western mind for many years as “an arrogant, fossilized empire cast beneficially into the modern world by gunboat diplomacy.” It continues to influence attitudes and relations on both sides, as China struggles to define itself, and the world struggles to decide what it thinks of China.

Lovell’s history is both a rigorous exploration of the historical events, and equally importantly, a brilliant narrative of the reinvention of history for contemporary use. It is scholarly, witty and hugely enjoyable and I warmly commend it for consideration for the prize.

Isabel Hilton
Member of the Jury

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