

Clash of Empires: The Invention of China in Modern World Making by Lydia H. Liu

Opium Regimes edited by Timothy Brook and Bob Tadashi Wakabayashi,

Reviewed by Pete Sweeney for SISEA590 Professor Dong

“Values are of course an elusive thing to observe and I became very uneasy with a great deal of theorizing about values, which seemed often to combine the absence of a rigorous empirical base with an affront to common sense.” Immanuel Wallerstein

Shortly prior to penning this review, I learned from my father that an Irish ancestor of mine served in the British royal navy in China during the Boxer Rebellion and was injured in action there. It is therefore with an unusually personal sense of culpability and curiosity that I now review my attitudes towards the Opium Wars in China, and in particular to their depiction in the two works cited above, both purporting to apply illumination and stimulus to the discussion of colonialism in China, opium in China, and the linkages between the two.

The two works are worth reading in tandem as they both complement and conflict with each other. Lydia Liu's work, *Clash Of Empires: The Invention of China in Modern World Making* is not particularly original in its moral condemnation of the collusion of colonial powers in using opium markets in China to subsidize their imperial ambitions at the expense of the Chinese people. It is, however, original in its approach and in the priority it assigns to linguistics and semiotics. To be fair, as Liu's title indicates, this is not a work focusing on the opium trade as such, but rather attending to the envelope of colonial diplomacy that made the trade possible, and what that envelope tells us about concepts of sovereignty, colonialism, imperialism, and the emergent “international order.” Thus I found myself a bit disappointed to discover that the work is first and foremost treating not with China or the Chinese, but with Britain and by extension, the modern Western world. While not expressedly polemical, she barely advances a page into the introduction before she issues a warning about modern imperialism masquerading in national garb—not particularly subtle dig. She also makes clear that her scope is a discussion of the abstract concept of sovereignty itself, and thus we are to extrapolate from her discussion of the opium wars in China all sorts of conclusions about the modern world order.

Liu's strength is also in a way her weakness. The most interesting position she takes is that semiotics is force when applied to diplomatic translation, and that British used such force to diminish Chinese sovereignty over their own language. “The battle of words and translations in the official archives,” she writes, “turned out to be central, not peripheral, to the sovereign will that drove the opium wars.” She takes as her primary evidence the fact that the British banned the use of the character *yi* because in their opinion it was translated as “barbarian,” and thus insulting. In Liu's view, this is an error. “Why should the character have posed a threat to law and to the emergent order of international relations?” she asks. The

answer she posits is that the British manufactured the issue to both assert control over the Chinese language and thus assert sovereignty over the Qing dynasty. To Liu's mind, the emergent order of international relations was an order designed to serve the interests of the colonizing Western powers, which wanted free travel, free trade, and free proselytization guaranteed as "natural" rights by . . . which happened to also nicely coincide with the establishment of empire.

However, it is not sufficient to Liu to limit herself to a discussion of the usages of yi and the merits of the British case. While she takes time to expose the British maneuvering, the Chinese responses, and the tolerance of the character by the Manchu, she goes from there into positing the existence of a sort of third category of sign, a sort of supra-logos; the "super-sign." By enforcing a translated definition of yi, Liu says, the British effectively created a sort of word with a meaning only significant in the context of being translated. Her argument is thick with academic language here, and it is, in fact, one of the weaker points of her argument, in that it presents an unfalsifiable hypothesis, is unnecessary to her main thrust, confuses the non-academic reader, and is largely composed of quotations from secondary sources from the academic community. The reader is left sweeping up name-droppings from Fanon to Bataille to Derrida (Said's Orientalism gets a requisite nod). She does so deploying the most dense form of literary critical language possible. And she also routinely asks open-ended questions that lead the reader nowhere: "Why does Bataille call the process [of the multitude of recognizing the sovereign because they see themselves in him] a miraculous moment? Does it have anything to do with what we might call the mystified power of recognition (or conjuration)?" The effect is to establish parts of her work as accessible to the reading public, while reserving large sections exclusively for her peers, and her ideologically sympathetic peers at that. She manufactures new words where none are needed; "problematic" for "problem," "wordness", and so on. At times it seems she considers words to have personalities while individuals are only significant as representatives of a group.

Indeed, Liu indulges all too frequently in phrases like "seems to" and "almost as if" and then goes on to treat her speculation as a logical premise of an argument, as opposed to a mere impression (ex. "If genocide is indeed the dream of modern powers . . ." !). Poor Robinson Crusoe is trotted out, accused of "subduing Friday by *semiotically* displaying [his rifle's] killing power," and then accused of something called "deixis" which appears to be a crime you commit when you use pronouns.

That said, in much of the work Liu does employ first hand accounts and primary sources; she repeatedly quotes both Chinese and British observers dealing perceived insults. Also, her discussion of how the Qing redirected the debate over yi by seizing on the least insulting interpretation of the symbol while simultaneously trying to defuse the ethnic debate by asserting that their mandate and "Chinese-ness" was derived not from ethnicity but from their adherence to/restoration of traditional Confucian values.

On the one hand, it is difficult to argue that the British did not use language as a weapon and as an instrument of colonization. In their very own neighborhood they were responsible for the effective destruction of the Celtic languages in Scotland, Wales, and Ireland. And it is fascinating to read how the Chinese engaged with a new language and method of diplomacy. But Liu seems to eager to strike a condemnatory attitude towards the British and it makes her support sloppy. “To suggest that the super-sigh yi/barbarian was one of the most tragic and costly fabrications in modern diplomatic history is by no means an exaggeration,” she says (note the usage of “suggest”). Yet it is not fair to load so much weight onto the yi/barbarian supersign cart.

Liu’s excellent appendices, which include multiple translations of Chinese diplomatic messages sent to the British, are full of excellent examples of why the British were prepared to believe the worst of Chinese attitudes, few of them dependent on the interpretation of yi. For example, what were the British to make of Lin Zexu’s missive that described the regents of England as “submissive”, “grateful for the Celestial grace”, and attributed Britain’s international success solely to its trade with China: “It is merely from these circumstances that your country—deriving immense advantage from its commercial intercourse with us, which has endured now 200 year—has become the rich and flourishing kingdom that it is said to be!” This combined with the perceived Chinese rejection of British values: ocean voyaging, trade, pragmatism . . . it is difficult to believe that the clash was as purely cynical and political as Liu describes it.

“Civilizations don’t clash, empires do,” she says, but a reading of her work makes it clear that the dividing line between the one and the other is only clear if one conflates individual British citizens with imperial agents. Napier himself, the infamous “barbarian eye”, did not justify his anger solely in terms of yi. After ranting about the powers and accomplishments of the English throne, he went on to say: “let the governor then judge if such a monarch will be ‘reverently obedient’ to anyone,” clearly a reference to prior diplomatic communications. Also, Liu makes numerous references to the way the Chinese immediately came up with other racial epithets to throw at the British. Had the British succeeded in preventing the Chinese from hating them by banning yi, I might admit to the central importance of the “super-sign” concept, but as it is, I have some difficulty engaging with it as anything more than manufactured jargon.

And despite Liu’s clear desire to settle the “sinocentrism” debate in favor of Chinese tolerance, she herself sabotages her own argument; she does not use the term China but instead “Central States”, a more direct translation of zhongguo, to be sure, but how does one argue that people who call themselves “central” aren’t “centric?” And aren’t all empires “centric” by their nature? How can one multi-ethnic empire ever recognize the sovereignty of another multi-ethnic empire and retain its mandate?

Also, it would have been edifying to have a better explanation of the profound socio-linguistic differences between China and England. It is entirely possible, likely even, that the average British mind simply did not grasp the distinction between an English word and a Chinese character. The character for yi is a

person with a bow. To the person with only a basic knowledge of the language, such as myself, it is far too easy to read too much into any given context of the character. For a character with such a continuous existence it is far easier to find an offensive usage or a benign one simply by sifting through the massive historical record to find a usage that fits the argument– which is precisely what the British, the Chinese, and Liu do. Whereas English is itself a relatively young language without a continuous literary record lasting thousands of years. Was this an issue? We would benefit more from a more clear explanation of why the Qing were compelled to deal with the British as second-rate citizens, and with the subtleties of their approach. When the British arrived, the Chinese didn't have a formal ministry for foreign relations, and when they established it, they put it in a rather dilapidated facility, according to Spence. On the other hand, they staffed it with some of their best people. Certainly given their own internal sovereignty challenges, they could hardly afford to lose face in front of their Han subjects. Did the British perceive the degree to which Chinese diplomatic forms were simply traditional formulas? The degree to which the Qing could not be seen as sullyng the mantle of the Chinese empire they conquered so recently? Certainly the British turned quite rapidly into Qing supporters, props even, once they had secured their trade interests, which makes me curious about the differing natures of Chinese pragmatism and British pragmatism during the same period.

Opium Regimes, on the other hand, is explicitly free of moral judgment. It provides in many ways a respite from Liu, both in terms of accessibility and its general refusal to wander into the realms of abstract semiotic speculation. The work is a collection of articles submitted for a conference on the opium trade in Canada, and as such there is a degree to which dead horses are beaten, but all in all the reach of the work is wide and focused. The main argument is that opium was a complex phenomenon, and that while moral arguments and judgments are worthwhile, they do not contribute to a thorough understanding of the simple question, Why opium? Instead of textiles, or another product? What precise function did opium serve in the region, economically, socially, politically? Why was it so hard to eradicate, even after the British justification/support for trading it faded?

The general thesis is that opium was so popular and prevalent because it offered numerous practical advantages. The focus is explicitly on diving into the collusion of the “oppressed” colonial peoples with their oppressors, both in encouraging the trade and in discouraging it. Opium was many things, yes, but most importantly it was the following things:

1. A way to “concentrate capital.” Opium was useful as currency– it was compact and light, valuable and easy to store. It also served as a bulwark for the development of investments schemes, trading networks, and savings programmes that served other businesses.

2. A way to coalesce social control and national identity. The book offers multiple perspectives on how the Chinese and the Japanese used their mandates to control opium to consolidate state power.
3. A way to finance colonial expansion- or state expansion.
4. An addictive drug that weakened the moral legitimacy of Chinese governments. The book explicitly distinguishes between the Chinese Nationalists and the Communists; it attributes the Communists popular mandate largely to their success in purging the country of opium.

Obviously the work has profound relevance for those studying modern narcotics policy. Unfortunately the chapter that allegedly provides “resolution” i.e. a description of the PRC’s opium elimination campaign is sparse and isolated in comparison to the other chapters. A simple assertion that Chinese communists managed to purge opium through strong mechanisms of social control plus a wave of post-war euphoria is engaging but it is only one of seventeen chapters! Also it provides little illumination as to the history of social control as practiced by the Qing and the Nationalists, both of whom aspired to create low-level networks of social “informers” to control moral behavior.

It would be cheap and easy to accuse the work of apologizing for colonialism. Indeed, the work does present an image of an opium trade in which Chinese enthusiastically participated; a trade which enriched certain Chinese, a trade which those allegedly oppressed by it, including the peasantry, occasionally fought to preserve. However, the work also takes pains to point out the degree of English cynicism surrounded the decision to go to war; despite claims to that the controversy was more over general principles of fair trade, Gregory Blue argues that speeches by members of parliament (Lord Stanhope, Gladstone, etc.) specifically argued for warfare over the right to impose Indian opium on the Chinese market whether the Chinese wanted it or not, and not some more general moral principle. “It was accepted among much of the political class in Britain at the time of the war, and not only among the war’s critics, that the opium trade was the *casus belli*.” This case is supported by evidence that opium was the only product capable of rectifying (if temporarily) Britain’s enormous trade imbalance with China, which had the effect of absorbing a large portion of the British money supply.

Indeed the mechanical analyses of the amoral operations of opium is the greatest advantage of the work, particularly in its description of the unanticipated benefits and costs of the trade. The authors assert that trans-national opium trade was responsible for the definition of formal borders in Southeast Asia. They assert that the usage of opium as a “work drug” helped establish an addicted sort of indentured bondsman who worked for opium alone, thus lowering commodity prices by allowing those employing addicts/users to save labor costs. On the other hand, opium was both popular and unpopular with Chinese peasants depending on economic circumstance. For example, during periods of rapid food price inflation, some landlords had to force peasants to grow opium, as peasants preferred to grow things they could subsist

on, not cash that would lose value rapidly between planting and harvest. On the other hand, Qing attempts to completely ban opium met frequent violent resistance.

Discussions of the changes in social attitudes in Shanghai towards opium highlight the class implications of opium; at one time, a high opium tolerance was considered a sign of status and wealth by matchmakers, who would market young men to potential brides and describe how many pipes they could smoke. This attitude underwent a change, and the country gradually began to rally against opium as a symbol of foreign oppression and indicative of moral decay.

The weakness of the work is that in its explanation of economic and secular self-interest, it denigrates the influence of ideological or religious thought. On the other hand, it does allow for its effect in certain areas. While the book takes a posture that opium is “very complex” and that moral stances against it are simplistic, it should not extend to the believe that because morality or ideology simplifies, it is therefore merely the surface ripple on a deeper current of self-interest, and therefore all that is worth studying is the undercurrent.

The two authors share the assumption that capitalism and the arrogation of power were the only motives *of actual effect* propelling British policy in China. Liu ascribes capitalism, imperialism, and colonialism to a certain exceptional nastiness in the European mind; a sort of inverted imperialism where the primary distinction between colonizer and colonized is their moral foundation and their relative “innocence.” Liu posits a China of largely innocent bystanders. The authors of *Opium Regimes*, on the other hand, posit a China of resistance and collaboration, but both were driven first and foremost by political and economic convenience. There may have been genuine moral *significance* but the significance lacked *influence*. Thus the idea that Napier was genuinely angry and insulted, and thus changed the course of history for reasons related to his personality, including the history of the individuals he killed, is set aside. To Liu he is simply a symbol of British imperialist group think. To *Opium Regimes* (although Napier does not feature there) he must have done what he did within the context of a dictating economic system.

Both works also give the reader the impression that in every case, the author is asserting the primacy of influence to forces covered by their disciplinary aegis. Granted *Opium Regimes* is more modest in its proposed scope than *Clash of Empires*; it does not propose to revolutionize our understanding of semiotics etc. but rather shed light on some dimmer aspects of the opium trade and is quite useful as such. Likewise Liu’s insights on translation and semiotic control are quite valuable. However, I must close with a less-than-academic condemnation of her taste in movies. It was a singular disappointment to a China specialist of her renown wasting her concluding chapter meandering about one of the worst movies about China ever made by Westerners, by which I mean *The Last Emperor*, a beautifully filmed outhouse of a movie in which Western style sentimentality is plastered onto English-speaking actors (reading hamfisted dialogue) prancing about in historically accurate costumery; it has the authenticity of a ghost

catcher on a rearview mirror. There are few things Liu could have done more to damage her credibility on China, as far as I am concerned, than express a fascination with this movie, which symbolizes everything wrong about “exotic” movie making to my view, and indicates an appalling lack of taste. Which is, of course, subject for a different class of review.