

Activity 9. Protesting the Opium Trade (1840)

Source: The High Commissioners Second Letter to the Queen of England in The Annual Register of the Year 1840 (London: Rivington, 1841), p. 428-432.

Instructions: In 1839, the Emperor of China issued an edict outlawing the importation of opium and spelling out the penalties for violating the law. A copy of the law was sent to Queen Victoria of England along with a letter requesting support in suppressing the trade. Examine the law (A) and excerpts from the letter (B-D) and answer questions 1 – 5.

A. “Any foreigner or foreigners bringing opium to the Central Land, with design to sell the same, the principals shall most assuredly be decapitated, and the accessories strangled; and all property (found on board the same ship) shall be confiscated. The space of a year and a half is granted, within the which, if any one bringing opium by mistake, shall voluntarily step forward and deliver it up, he shall be absolved from all consequences of his crime.”

B. Among the numerous foreign merchants resorting hither, . . . some, who, by means of introducing opium by stealth, have seduced our Chinese people, and caused every province of the land to overflow with that poison. These then know merely to advantage themselves, they care not about injuring others! This is a principle which heaven's Providence repugnates [hates]; and which mankind conjointly look upon with abhorrence!

C. He who voluntarily comes forward, may yet be deemed a fit subject for mercy, and his crimes be graciously remitted him. But as for him who again knowingly violates the laws, difficult indeed will it be thus to go on repeatedly pardoning! He or they shall alike be doomed to the penalties of the new statute.

D. We have heard that in your own country opium is prohibited with the utmost strictness and severity: this is a strong proof that you know full well how hurtful it is to mankind. Since then you do not permit it to injure your own country, you ought not to have the injurious drug transferred to another country, and above all others, how much less to the Inner Land! Of the products which China exports to your foreign countries, there is not one which is not beneficial to mankind in some shape or other.

Questions

1. What is the new penalty for importing opium into China?
2. What does the high commissioner call opium?
3. What are they requesting of Queen Victoria and her agents in China?
4. Why do they believe Queen Victoria will be responsive?
5. In your opinion, is it likely that Great Britain will respect the new law and these requests? Explain.