

## ORIGINAL ARTICLE

### Perspectives on Opium Trade from Persia to China and its Impacts on the Economic Life and Health of Iranian People

#### Abstract

Opium was one of the drugs in the medieval history of Persia which has been used in medical affairs. By commercialization of poppy in Qajar dynasty with the permeation of the colonial policies, the material was conveyed to India and thence to China as a center of consumption. By enhancing the demand in India, the cultivation of poppy in Persia increased. The circumstances accompanied by a strenuous drought led to the breakout of famine in Persia which inflicted a lot of casualties. In 1907, new arrangement partly altered the previous sphere when constitutional revolution took place. In China, after the second opium war in 1842, Britain could dominate over the economic arteries and escalated Chinese dependency. However, by the production of opium in Bengal and many other cities of China, importing of poppy from Persia confronted an unexpected depression but the uprising of Boxers against British ambitions changed dependency situation. This paper sets out to portray the transaction and treatment of Persian and Chinese societies against the imposed policies.

**Key words:** Opium, Persia, China, Constitutional Revolution, Boxers Uprising

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### Introduction

Opium has been employed in the Middle East for medical and other purposes. Consumption of Poppy is recommended for the sedation of pains, remedy of squirt and paroxysm. From ancient times and one of the sound references to it in Persia is by A. Baihaghi in the second half of the tenth century, maintained that it was used as a cure and entertainment.<sup>1</sup> Ibn Bibi, a Seljukid historian, however, suggested that the poppy has been cultivated in Anatolia “from the end of the eleventh century. Anyway, these sources revealed that both production and consumption of “Afyoun” were small until the mid-nineteenth century.<sup>2,3</sup>

The Industrial Revolution in the 1850s induced both production and demand in Europe and stimulated entrepreneurs and governments to find new sources of raw material for industry, new markets for trading-off, and markets for selling surplus goods and cheap labor. Seeking for overseas markets was intensified by a long and deep economic depression across Europe, on the threshold of 1873 and continued until mid 1890s. When their economies slumped, one country after another imposed customs as a means of protecting their own industries from foreign competition. Such obligations led to further declines in foreign trade and contributed to the deepening depression.<sup>4</sup> The nineteenth-century changes in Persia should be cited with a colonial and dependent idiosyncrasy, serving the ambitions of foreign merchants rather than the native community. Greater consumption of sugar, tobacco, and tea in the nineteenth century indicated an imposing increase in the use of colonial goods, which lost its market in favor of foreign traders, similar to that experienced by other Middle Eastern societies. In short term, some additional sum was carried to semi-civil economies but in the long term, the lives of the peasants and artisans aggravated. European firms replaced merchants from Afghanistan and Central Asia as well as Turkey and India, as Iran’s major trading partners in the second half of the nineteenth century. The interference by foreigners led to a distinct shift in the country’s export and influence on importing merchandise towards one characteristic of colonized countries.<sup>5</sup>

In the mentioned era, wheat was still an important export article, and landlords would hardly ignore the profitability

- 1- Baihaghi, 1374: 250.
- 2- Ibn Bibi, 1350: 178;
- 3- Drouville, 1828: 47.
- 4- Mason, 2011: 93
- 5- Afary, 1996: 19



of grain crops. The record also shows that at the end of the 1860s, cotton cultivation was on the wane, and that grain production was elevated in the littoral region of Persian Gulf. Wheat was an important export commodity in Persian trade with Europe, large quantities being exported from the Persian Gulf by British merchants in the 1860s. Besides the rise in demand abroad, domestic demand also rose, owing to the growth of the urban population.<sup>6</sup> This resulted in brisk trading in grains and the increasing importance of wheat in commercial transactions. However, by domination over China mainland provoked British policy to encourage Persian peasants to comply with their interests. The mentioned enterprises erupted a great famine in Persia by prevailing cultivation of poppy and exporting the commodity to China and India. Nevertheless, I try to deal with the reason for this phenomenon in subsequent pages.

#### **Production of Opium and Theories on Spreading of Famine in Persia**

Some of the native and foreign scholars have maintained their ideas on famine in Persia; many of them contend famine in Persia from 1871 onward was the result of a drought on a large scale but others claimed this phenomenon took place owing to the cultivation of opium and poppy. The latter statement has attracted the attention of many economic historians, some of whom have used it as a basis for asserting that there was a link between the development of commercialized agriculture and the great famine. Others, however, are doubtful about this explanation. Among them is Pakdaman, who asks “to what extent did the allocation of arable lands for the cultivation of opium remove these lands from the cultivation of wheat?”<sup>7</sup>

In order to answer Pakdaman’s question, it is necessary to examine the cultivation of two of the profitable article(s) of trade referred to as cotton and opium.<sup>8</sup> In 1850-51, an American missionary managed in the experimental cultivation of American Sea Island cotton in the Urumiyeh region. Although the cultivation of cotton scattered all over the country, the project was only gradual, and the quantity of production was still partial. All in all, shortage of cotton in 1861-65, however, increased enormous demand. In 1863, the price of cotton in Tehran soared. Exports from

6- Yate, 1900: 60.

7- Okazaki, 1986: 186.

8- Ibid: 187.



Bushehr to Bombay in 1864-65 reached 1 million man-e Tabriz (7,750,000lbs.), or approximately five times the level which prevailed two years earlier. Such a rise in cotton exports from Bushehr can be attributed to the increased cultivation in Fars and other provinces of Southern Persia.<sup>9</sup>

After the American Civil War, however, the trade in cotton diminished, and at the end of the 1860s cotton exports from Bushehr stopped approximately.<sup>10</sup> Though Persian opium was inexpensive, little was exported in the 1820s because of high Indian transit duties.<sup>11</sup> In the 1830s, as in the case of Turkish opium, however, production gradually grew as the demand for opium expanded overseas. Foreign merchants dominated the growing opium trade between Bushehr and Hong Kong.<sup>12</sup> By enjoying the opportunity, when the trade-off of opium market unsettled at the time of the British-Persian dispute of 1838, Mahdi Arbab<sup>13</sup> loaned large sums of money to purchase at a low price opium yet to be accumulated. When the dispute was abated, and the price recovered, he acquired a huge profit.<sup>14</sup> In order to expand their Persian Gulf trade, the British had to find export produce. What they found was Persian opium, tobacco and cotton.<sup>15</sup> A British consular report of the 1840s implied that the soil and climate of central and southern Persia were well suited to the cultivation of those crops and proposed that the Persian government should be encouraged to produce them.<sup>16</sup>

Thus, the 1860s saw a considerable increase in opium production in Persia. In addition to the main production areas of Isfahan and Yazd, cultivation began in Kashan, Khorasan, Shiraz, Kazerun, and Istahbanat, and even in Nayriz in 1285/1868-9.<sup>17</sup> One cannot say, however, that there was large-scale conversion. From grain to poppy cultivation in the whole area of the Zayandeh-Rud basin. Lucas accounted for the bulk production of opium at that time; a few years ago, the profit of the opium trade having attracted the attention of the Persians, almost all available of suitable grounds in Yazd, Ispahan and elsewhere were utilized for the cultivation of opium to exclusion of all cereals and other produce...the attempt of the people to enrich themselves by the cultivation and growth of a profitable article of trade [i.e. opium] and their neglect to provide for the necessaries of life [i.e. cereals] combined

9- Sephr, 1956: 89.

10- Ibid: 90-91.

11- On the basis of Persian document, poppy of Iran was regarded a medium opium with 5 percent Morphine (Gelber, 2004: 153).

12- McDaniel, 1971:42 and Rabino,1901:265. Rabino wrote we see the money of the Manchester manufacturer come in cotton goods to Persia, and return in Sultanabad carpets to Constantinople and London, or in opium from Shiraz to Hong Kong.

13- In the 1850s a new situation developed. A proponent of modernization, Mirza Hosayn Khan, during his duty as consul in Bombay (1266-69/1849-53), proposed to the government that it should encourage Production of opium as an export product. In response to this, in 1267 (1850/51) Amir Kabir, the Minister, experimentally cultivated poppies near Tehran. In this period, a leading Isfahani merchant, Mohammad Mahdi al-Isfahani (Mahdi Arbab), laid the foundations of the development of opium production in Persia. Mahdi Arbab learned the methods of cultivating poppies and refining opium in Bombay and afterward returned to Persia (1273/1856-7) to grow poppies on his own land in Isfahan. He shared his knowledge with other local landlords, and actively promoted the production of high-quality opium to enable him to carry on an extensive trade. (Okazaki,1986: 187)

14- Ibid.

15- Seyed Ali Al-e Davud, 1999: 153.

16- Okazaki, 1986: 188.

17- Hoseni Fasaei, 1997: 871.



with drought and other circumstances resulted in the famine of 1871-72.<sup>18</sup>

### **British Primacy in Trading of Persian Opium**

As mentioned before, with colonial competitions in Europe, British government to gain raw materials inclined to Asian countries. Since Britain had dominated India after Plassey war, she tried to administrate foreign trade of India. However, Opium consumption in China encouraged them enthusiastically.<sup>19</sup> Hence, the incumbents decided to teach Persians to cultivate opium on large scale. Colonel Stannus, writing in 1824, predicted that “it appears by no means improbable that a communication may shortly be opened...for the purpose of introducing Persian opium into the Chinese market,” because “this drug may be made with common attention to its cultivation and package fully equal to any produced in India, and can be produced in Bushire for one-third of the prices at which the best Malwa opium sells in Bombay.”<sup>20</sup> But his prognostication did not accomplish until almost half a century later. As far as the available documents seem to indicate, the poppy was principally cultivated in Isfahan, Yazd, Fars and, to a lesser extent, in Khurasan, Kerman and Kermanshah. Attempts to produce opium were made in the Caspian provinces, particularly Gilan, but failed. It is in 1853, however, that one finds the first record of opium having been made an article of export from the province of Isfahan, though it was not till after the collapse of silk production and trade in the mid-1860s that the poppy was at all widely cultivated.<sup>21</sup>

There are no available documents on the acreage of land under poppy cultivation, but, speaking of the estimated volume of the exported opium, it may be reasonable to suggest that its production increased up to 1871-72, diminished as a response to the Great Famine of the early 1870s, and increased again towards the end of the 1870s. The volume of exported opium reached its highest level in the early 1880s, after which production and export seem to have leveled off. The compact, valuable cases of opium could be carried all the way across Persia on the backs of pack animals and still bring a profit. The caravans which carried it to the Persian Gulf piers grew constantly in number and size in the last decades of the century.<sup>22</sup>

18- Afary, 1996: 20.

19- Horatio, 1893: 24.

20- Seyf, 1984: 238.

21- Hoseni Fasaei, 1997: 872.

22- Seyf, 1984: 237.



### Drought in Persia

One of the minor idiosyncrasies of modern Persian nationalism is the belief that the British government sent its agents into Persia during the nineteenth century to the dispensation of poppy seeds. The object of this imperialist plot was to encourage the Persians to use opium and thus to weaken the Persian national spirit. It is possible that the British traders who bought for the China and London markets encouraged the spread of poppy cultivation, but the good prices prevailing in the 1880s were much more effective.<sup>23</sup> Not only did the peasant get a good price for opium, but also the product was extremely hard to tax. Colonel Yate wrote "there is no tax on the opium in Birjand". The peasant who grew opium did better all-around than those who stuck to wheat.<sup>24, 25</sup> He added that huge amount of the produced opium in Khurasan exported through Bandar Abbas and exchanged by tea and sugar. The author continued losses of this trade "would be ascertained in the future".<sup>26</sup> However, today many scholars claim that what escalated famine in Persia was drought. On the basis of an account, we can find some implies for this statement; the rains of the second winter 1870-71, fairly plentiful in the South, were again very scanty in the North and East of Persia. The harvest consequently failed entirely in many places and was everywhere below the average. Still there was plenty of food in the country, the harvests in the South and West having been fairly good: but the great landowners, who are also the great corn-dealers, instigated by love of filthy lucre, or perhaps, as they declared themselves, by fear of the third year of famine, held for a rise, utterly indifferent to the sufferings around them.<sup>27</sup>

In Fars province, especially in Kazerun, when the farmers sowed opium seeds until the time of harvest, landlords gave 1 Qeran to each farmer. Anyway, they did not pay tax to Persian government.<sup>28</sup> Saidi Sirjani in his chronicle implied to spread of disease due to opium cultivation and drought. Hence, Fassa in Fars province lost many of its population.<sup>29</sup> Consul Baring, who prepared a valuable report on opium production in 1881 and was a strong advocate of its expansion, had to admit,

It is true the Ryot [peasant] would have his savings derived from opium wherewith to buy food, but it must be

23- Anonymous, 1871: 8.

24- McDaniel, 1971: 43.

25- Yate, 1900: 62.

26- Ibid: 65.

27- Anonymous, 1871: 10.

28- S'aidi Sirjani, 1383: 240.

29- Ibid: 241.



remembered that the absence of good roads and the utter apathy and Helplessness of the Government render the transport of food grain from one province to another in time of dearth a matter of difficulty, so that a man may have money, but still may not be able, in many districts, to buy food.<sup>30</sup>

On the other hand, Lord Curzon cited from Colonel Stewart, each year died hundreds of people due to consumption of opium. Not only men but also women had addicted, they have nothing but opium.<sup>31</sup> Some years later, Persian government enacted laws to decrease poppy cultivation. Europeans to prevent from poppy cultivation dispatched missionary deputies with the head of Delano to Persia. Persian statesmen asserted, first we must find a suite substitute merchandise for opium and then we would desist of lubricate production.<sup>32</sup> Consul Ross reported from Bushire in 1882:

During the panic caused by the recent continued drought a cry was raised by the populace in some towns against the cultivation of poppy and in few instances, a poppy field was plowed up and wheat was sown instead.<sup>33</sup>

Many sources implied that bulging of poverty was related to exploiting of terrain. To illustrate this point, Consul Aganoor reported from Isfahan in 1906; "The quality of the opium also was not good as in former years, the reason being probably deficient maturing and using the same ground for cultivation too often."<sup>34</sup> A few years earlier, Consul Kemball had reported from Bushire in 1900 that "the adulteration of Persian opium has become so apparent that cases have been returned from China being unsuited for the market there."<sup>35</sup> Consul Sykes, writing in 1905, owing to "the shameless adulteration" of Persian opium, it "has rightly fallen into disrepute in the Bombay market."<sup>36</sup> Over and above these remarks, it was widely maintained that adulterated opium could not be exported to the European markets. Consul Chick reported in 1908 that "a Persian merchant in Shiraz has ascribed the great falling-off of the export from Persia to Hong Kong...to the capture of the Formosan market by the Japanese."<sup>37</sup> On the other hand, the expanding opium production of Turkey meant that European markets had a more easily accessible source of supply as compared with Persia. However, in Iran, rev-

30- Seyf, 1984: 238.

31- Curzon, 1892: 272.

32- Hedayat, 1385: 210.

33- Rabino, 1901: 270.

34- Seyf, 1984: 241.

35- Okazaki, 1986: 188.

36- Seyf, 1984: 241.

37- Sephr, 1956: 144.



enue of opium restricting allotted to Gendarmerie organ.<sup>38</sup>

### China and Boxer Movement

The main market for Persian opium was China, but it was also exported to European countries. Given the prohibition on importing opium into Russia before 1900, it is unlikely that any opium was legally sent Northwards, though some smuggling might have taken place.<sup>39</sup> Consequently, almost all the opium intended for export was sent to Bushire or Bandar Abbas for shipment to China via Bombay and Hong Kong, and to Europe, mainly London. In the post-1842 period, it is possible to exaggerate the importance of opium contribution to capital accumulation in Bombay. A strict attention to the history of the best-known Bombay firm, the House of Tatas, portrays that, while it contributed actively in the opium commerce with China after 1842, two non-opium ventures played an imposing role even more decisively to the initial fortunes of the firm. One of these was its participation in the financing of the British military expedition to Persia in 1856, and the other was its role in the financing of the military expedition to Abyssinia in 1867.<sup>40</sup> From 1862 to 1869 alone Russia exported to China hard Currency, gold and silver (over and above the cost of exports) worth 97.9 million Robles.<sup>41</sup> Lord Curzon wrote in 1889 exportation of the Indian government to China is 39000 lira.<sup>42</sup> But this trade stopped suddenly. To see the development of opium production and trade in the last quarter of the nineteenth century in this part of Persia Consul Barnham noted in 1906 that opium trade with China and London was “practically dead, so much so that the local cultivation is now about one-tenth of what it formerly was.”<sup>43</sup> A reason for this slumping was the rise of another rival in poppy commerce. In the 1890s, the South Asian drug once again competed with Persian and Turkish imports into China. India, however, still accounted for approximately 95 percent of the country’s foreign opium.<sup>44</sup>

The rapid expansion was of China’s own opium production. Amounts of [Persian and Turkish imports were small, but China’s domestic production was enormous; by 1905 China manufactured over eight times as much as she imported and Szechuan province alone produced more than India.<sup>45</sup>

38- Anonymous, 2009: 77.

39- According to Sephr, Russia prohibited importing of opium and even closed its opium customs (Sephr, 1386: 149).

40- Markovits, 2009: 111.

41- Petrov, 1987: 634.

42- Curzon, 1892: 275.

43- Seyf, 1984: 242.

44- Reins, 1991:114.

45- Newman 1989:530; The opium trade between India and China, 1870: 6. An agency Pall Mall Gazette inform us many years befor, the cultivation of the poppy, which had its origin in Tunnan, has spread to Szchuen, Shensi, Shansi, Kiangsu, Honan, Shantung and Manchuria.





Documents show that British India export was much less than Bengal opium chests after midcentury also identify the cause of the decline.<sup>46</sup> It was the rise of indigenous poppy cultivation in China and competition from Turkish and Persian imports into that country<sup>47</sup> (Figure1). The Government of India met this challenge throughout the era by reducing manufacturing costs whenever possible. Another strategy was to periodically raise the price of each chest. This was feasible because the Chinese, especially inhabitants in the Southern coastal cities supposed Bengal opium yielded the highest quality smoking extract. By the last decade of the century, a high price policy to make up declining numbers of exported chests from Calcutta, as

46- According to East India Finance report, there were two agencies in Bengal. One was at Panta and the other at Ghazeepor (The Bengal Opium Monopoly, 1871:5).

47- Ministry of financial affairs, No 25.

48- Ibid.

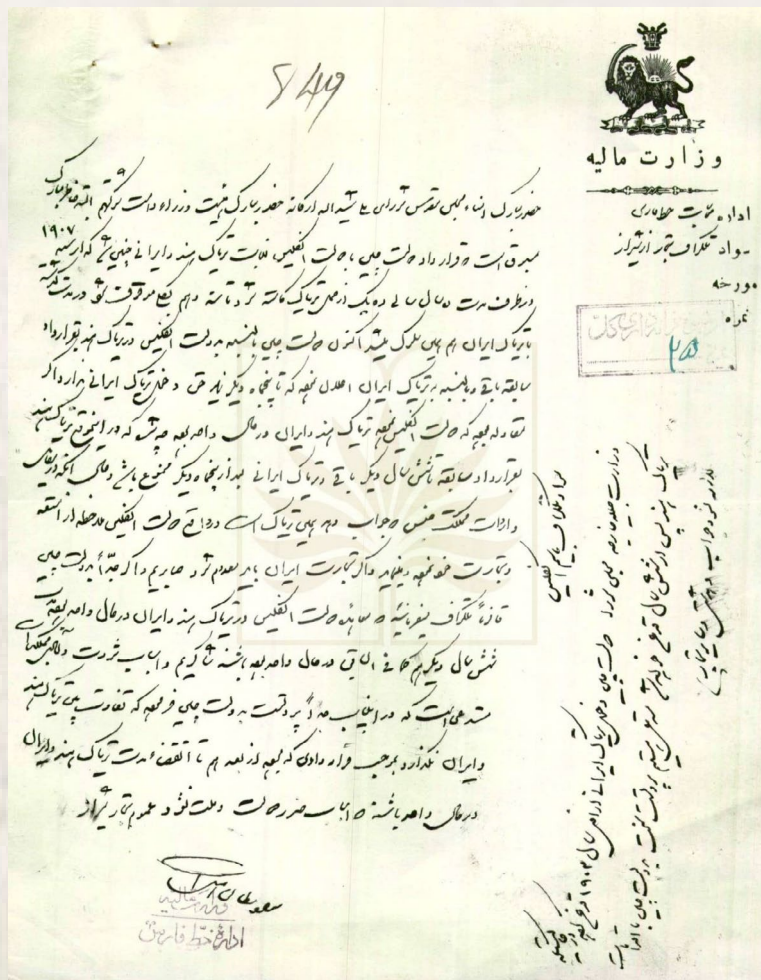


Figure 1. Document; Ministry of Financial Affairs (gradual reduction in opium exporting from 1897 up to 1907, on the basis of China government demand).<sup>48</sup>



well as Bombay, was no longer feasible.<sup>49</sup> Each increment made less expensive and increasingly higher quality indigenous and non-Indian 'foreign' opium more attractive to Chinese consumers. The Government of India was in danger of pricing itself out of the market if it relied upon this tactic to compensate for the declining number of Provision chests leaving Bombay and Calcutta. In 1907, the Government of India signed an international agreement to end exports of opium to China by 1917. This was not an act of atonement. The decision was pragmatic. Indian rulers realized that Provision opium was destined to yield even less profit in the future.<sup>50</sup> Therefore, Indian government sent an announcement to Persia with this dictum "Interdisant import opium persan ture a partir 1 Janvier 1912 Chine".<sup>51</sup> (Figures 2 and 3).

At that time, ever-increasing conscientious movement finds its way throughout China. In fact, awareness of the West conveyed China, about the dangers of chronic dependence. Anglo-European science contributed to this public re-education. The debilitating effects of opium indulgence had become a dominant theme in the rise of Chinese nationalism, and Great Britain was blamed for enslaving innocent Chinese citizens. This slogan envisaged among the Protestant (evangelists).<sup>52</sup>

The peasants, for their part, appeared to have been reluctantly resigned to the anti-opium campaign. In a province that witnessed its own version of the Boxer Movement in the early years of the twentieth century and had the highest rate of violent attacks on foreigners and Chinese Christians in all of China during the late nineteenth century, the anti-opium campaign in Sichuan was notable for its lack of outcry from the poppy cultivators. There were no more than a handful of violent outbreaks in protest of the campaign and one of the most serious of these, the incident in Kaixian in 1907, was as much a protest against foreigners and the New Policies as it was against opium reforms.<sup>53</sup> Peasants were vocal mainly in their demands for lower rent. After suppressing the Boxers, domestic and foreign oppressive acts increased in China. Independence of China omitted and its resources were sacked. However, many intellectuals and liberals escalated their activities, rebels established their ideas on nationalism and democracy.

49- Wakabayashi, 2000: 222.

50- Reins, 1991: 114.

51- Ministry of financial affairs, No. 12768/492 and 001244.

52- Charles, 1849:211.

53- Wakabayashi, 2000: 223.



They created the new uprising backgrounds and eventually stir up a movement in 1911. By expansion of the revolt, the Mancho government lost its sovereignty over different sections and finally overturned and republic regime was proclaimed by the new government.

54- Ministry of financial affairs. No. 12768/492.

### Conclusion

Late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries saw growth in exports of opium to China from states in Western India under the native rules as well as from Persia and Turkey.

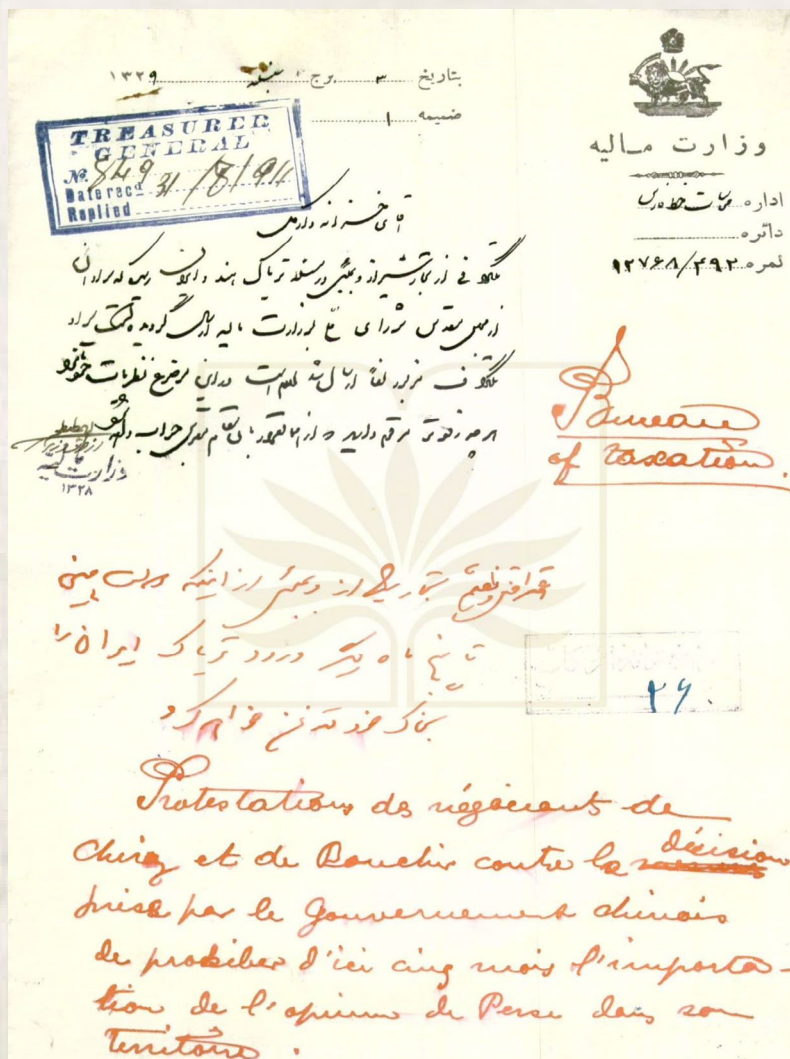
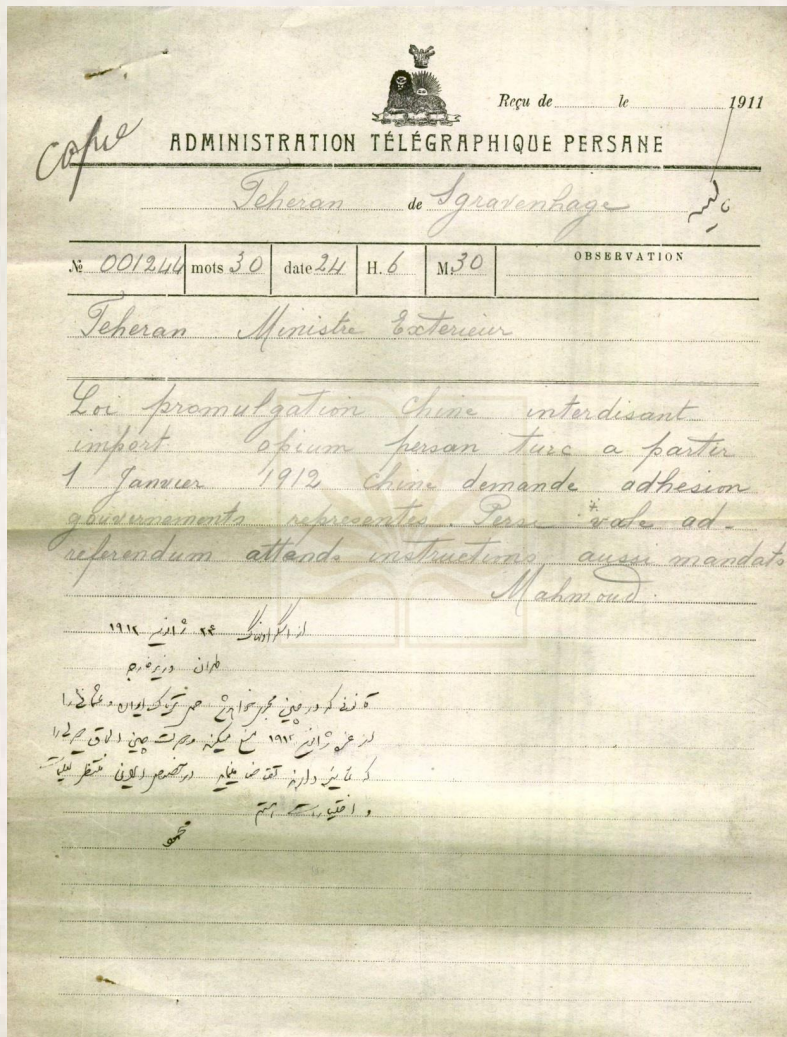


Figure 2. Document; Ministry of Financial Affairs (Persian opium traders in Shiraz and Bombay protested to prohibition of poppy bargaining in August 1911)<sup>54</sup>



55- Ministry of foreign affairs. No. 001244.



Figure 3. Document; Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Boycotting decree about Ottoman-Persian opium exporting to China from January 1912)<sup>55</sup>

Cultivation of opium in Persia was welcomed by landlords for escaping from tax but in the long run, the supported policy on the behalf of Indian British Company weakened central government and national constitutional and simultaneously break out a great famine in Persia which had never been seen. Many Iranian people died by the colonial policy. In contrast, Chinese were enslaved by addiction to opium. Meanwhile, merchants of Britain acquired much profit because they brought poppy of Persia with a one-tenth price.

Competition from these sources led the British East India Company to lower prices and increase exports from terri-

tories under its control as one strategy of winning a greater market share. At the same time, it succeeded in gaining increasing control over the hitherto competing supply of “Malwa” and Persian opium, a feat it managed partly by introducing a system of transit passes for opium moved through its territories and partly by extending the territory under its direct rule. But the poor quality of Persian opium, on the one hand, widespread adulteration of the opium destined for the Chinese market tended to reduce the price it fetched there, whereas on the other, unchanging primitive methods of cultivation and preparation meant that its quality did not improved and in most cases deteriorated. So far as the Chinese market was concerned, Indian and especially Japanese opium seemed to be more in demand. Over and above the aforementioned factors, on the one hand, the economic depression in China, and on the other, the steps taken by the Boxer movement to abolish the opium trade tended to reduce the demand for opium.

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