Britannia Unchanged Post-Brexit

https://www.e-ir.info/2021/05/16/britannia-unchanged-post-brexit/

ARIEL SHANGGUAN, MAY 16 2021

In 2012, a group of Conservative MPs wrote the now-infamous book, *Britannia Unchained*, where they claimed to have examined the conditions for Britain to thrive amid increasingly intense global competition. They made a case about the decline in UK economic competitiveness and argued that, in order for Britain to "level up", it had to embark on a more "aspiring" form of economic liberalism. This means to "reward hard work" by "tackling welfare dependency" and "overhauling marginal tax rates"—even if that means to shred workers' rights and social protections. Understandably, the book received considerable criticisms: Jon Cruddas wrote that the proposal was "extreme and destructive", and *The Financial Times* called it an "anti-worker book". Paul Owen then concluded that it might be better to rename the book "Britannia Unhinged".

Little did people know that the phrase "Britannia unhinged" could gain a new level of meaning in the matter of a few years. Nearly nine years since the publication of the new Conservative manifesto, five since the UK voted to leave the EU, issues concerning the future of the UK post-Brexit have consumed almost every waking moment in British life. The arduous journey of negotiating a trade deal with the EU took four and a half years; but even after finally signing the trade deal, news headlines have been dominated by a series of disruptive incidents that were caused by nothing but the UK government's lack of foresight in the coming social and political adaption. Foreign coverage of Brexit is often concomitant with a sense of confusion and astonishment, while political commentators in the UK struggle to find words to justify the constant chaos. For many who are witnessing the Brexit drama unfolding in front of their eyes, this country that was once admired for its pragmatism really seems to have gone mad.

That being said, from historical points of views, the ongoing Brexit fiasco has shown that, when it comes to some of the characteristics—if not problems—with modern British politics that were exposed by Brexit, Britannia is not "unhinged", but rather *"unchanged"*. In his research on the idea class in Britain, David Cannadine (2000: 14) writes that, "the study of [British] political history… is a study of the visions of society entertained by the British ruling class, and of the ways in which they have conceived their task to be that of imposing their visions *of* the people *on* the people." If this is a truism, then Brexit is an example *par excellence* of such an imposition of the so-called people's visions. Disguised as a genuine opportunity to subvert the establishment, the Brexit movement has managed to not only reduce a set of incredibly complex social and political issues to catchy but empty slogans, but also create the perfect scapegoat to shift the blame for the years of economic mismanagement which was what gave rise to the Brexit sentiment in the first place. The result of this imposition, then, was a perfect triumph for the ruling class: elections after elections, the British electorate have repeatedly and unequivocally demonstrated that they *did* want to "get Brexit done", the country *was* "taking back control", and the government *was* representing "the will of the people"—even though deep down, they were well aware that nobody was prepared for the pain from Brexit. Rafael Behr hence wrote that Brexit was a "typically English revolution"—one that gives people an illusion of upsetting the establishment but leaving the established order intact.

As a non-expert of British history, I cannot make a judgment on whether Brexit was a "typical" English revolution. But readings of the Sino-British interactions before and during the Opium Wars shows me that British political history is certainly not short of examples where ordinary people unknowingly pay heavy price over the needs and wants of their ruling class, with the most representative case of all being the British Empire. As German historian Jürgen Osterhammel (2014) argues, the success of the British Empire is most conspicuously highlighted by the fact that, millions of British people are still very proud of it—despite history showing no evidence that ordinary people had

Britannia Unchanged Post-Brexit
Written by Ariel Shangguan

gained anything from the empire. In fact, a close look into Britain's trading practices with China then has revealed that, the working-class population of Britain were just as—if not more—affected by the selfish conducts of their ruling class as the ordinary Chinese people, and this was mostly manifested through the consumptions of one item that was at the heart of the Opium Wars, that is, tea.

Although tea had become closely associated with British identity as early as the early nineteenth century, for much of the first century after it arrived, the demand for tea was consolidated mostly in the upper echelons of the society. Tea from China, along with coffee from Arabia and chocolate from Mexico, were brought in to Britain around the same time in the mid-seventeenth century, and it was done so in the context of the upper class' growing appetite for exotic novelties. In England, tea was especially popular among upper-class women, and by the 1680s, the notion of "tea socialising" had been associated with the elite female circle (Ellis et al., 2015: 38). Folk tales about tea also involved either the queen or women of the royal court. For them, tea leaf, with its bitter taste and the intriguing psychoactive effect, represented a distant and mysterious civilisation from the East; and the act of drinking tea symbolized the experience of internalizing this Oriental culture. In a few years' time, accordingly, the aristocratic obsession with tea completely changed the dynamics of British trade with China: for most of the 1680s, China trade only represented less than 4% of the combined Asia imports, but in 1689, that number suddenly increased to 17.6%, and in two years' time, it increased again to 22.8% (Chaudhuri, 1978: 508). In 1694, the first English ship named *Dorothy* was sent out from London with "a specific instruction to buy tea from China" (Ellis et al., 2015: 57). There was no comparable story for either coffee or chocolate.

Yet the upper-class craving for exotic novelties did not just stop there. By the end of the seventeenth century, the consumption of Oriental tea brought about the aristocratic yearning for another import from China, that is, porcelain. As Ellis et al. (2015) says, the decision to import porcelain was not necessary for Britain. At that time, kitchen equipage in Europe was mostly made of silver or other metals, and British manufacturers were more than capable of producing silver tea cups or kettles. But porcelain's resistance to heat and its translucent appearance stirred up intense desire among not just the British but also the European aristocrats. *Chinoiserie*, the word that described the upper-class taste for Chinese decoration also emerged during this time; many affluent women began to decorate rooms and salons using Chinese porcelains and other Oriental goods (Thornton, 1978). As a result, the quantities of British imports grew once again: the early eighteenth century saw another significant jump in British imports from China; in the year of 1705 alone, Britain imported 100 *tons* of tea and 10 *tons* of porcelain, and by the middle of the century, English ships were carrying home more than *a million pieces* of Chinese porcelains every year (Ellis et al., 2015). The British presence in China was also becoming ever more visible: in 1704, there were four English trading ships in Canton (China's southern port), each weighed around 350 tons. By 1801, the number of English ships had increased to 54, each weighed over 1,100 tons (Van Dyke, 2005: 105).

The ever-expanding trade volume was beneficial to China—but not so much for Britain. This is because China only accepted silver (which was considered to be the international currency then) as payment for their teas. Britain tried to pay with other trading products such as cotton, but China declined. The trade continued and naturally, there emerged a visible silver drainage from the British side. This trade imbalance, therefore, is often said to be one of the main reasons behind the outbreak of the Opium Wars. Yet in England, it was not until the late eighteenth century that this drainage began to be seen as a serious political problem. In fact, the late eighteenth century saw a rapid politicisation of tea; and while it is true that it was due to the exponential increase in imports and the resulting silver drainage, there was another crucial element that led to this politicisation of tea—and that is the growing tea consumption among the working class.

By the mid-eighteenth century, tea drinking was a well-established habit among common English households. But the late 1700s saw a drastic increase in the amount of tea consumed by the working-class population. The exact reason why the working class began to drink tea was unknown, but two causes can be inferred from patches of evidence. Firstly, it is said that there was a price collapse of tea in 1784 and 1785 (Griffiths, 2007); the drop in price made it a lot easier for the working-class people to purchase the beverage. Secondly, and more importantly, the mid- to late eighteenth century saw the rise of industrial revolution across Britain. The economic grew and living standard improved. However, wages among the working population basically remained stagnant and the conditions for the poor was even worsened (Lindert and Williamson, 1983). Working conditions were also said to be dire for workers at

Britannia Unchanged Post-Brexit

Written by Ariel Shangguan

factories: it had become common to work for 14 to 16 hours a day, mainly due to factory owners wanting to leave their machinery running for as long as possible, and in so doing maximizing their profits. In the midst of long working hours and worsening working conditions, tea, especially tea with sugar, became the common drink among the labouring class. Sugared tea was not only cheaper than traditional products such as bread and cheese, but it had also provided workers with a legitimate excuse to take a break from otherwise unremitting labour (Griffiths, 2007). As such, by the end of the eighteenth century, tea-drinking became a near universal social practice in Britain, and the China trade was accounting for on average 20-30% of Britain's combined Asia imports (Chaudhuri, 1978: 509).

Consequently, at the dawn of the nineteenth century, the imports of Chinese tea were costing Britain more than twenty million pounds a year, and it was posing an enormous financial challenge for the country (Mintz, 1985). British elites struggled to find effective measures to stop the drainage, and eventually, the arrow of blame was pointed at the working class. From the late 1750s, there was a rise in anti-tea discourse in public debates, with the most vocal opponent of tea-drinking being an English philanthropist named Jonas Hanway. Hanway's (1756: 272-273) main argument was that, not only that the working class should not "ape the lord", but drinking tea—which he considered as an "effeminate and idle custom"—would also emasculate the labouring class on whom the nation depended their production, as he wrote:

It is the curse of this nation, that the labourer and mechanic will ape the lord…To what a height of folly must a nation be arrived, when the common people are not satisfied with wholesome food at home…There is a certain lane near Richmond, where beggars are often seen, in the summer season, drinking tea. You may see labourer who are mending the roads drinking their tea…Were they the sons of tea-sippers, who won the fields of Cressy and Agincourt, or dyed the Danube's streams with Gallic blood? What will be the end of such effeminate customs extended to those persons, who must get their bread by the labours of the field!

He also believed that the tea drinking of the poor was costing the nation "an absurd expense":

The ordinary computation among the poor is a halfpenny a time for tea, and as much for sugar. Suppose it to be drank only *once* a day, by one million two hundred thousand *females*, out of three millions; and eight hundred thousand *males*, out of four millions; the expense then would be annually £3,041,666., exclusive of the *fire*, equipage, and lots of time, which still *exceeds* the calculation above-mentioned. (ibid: 154)

It is worth stressing here that, at this point of time in history i.e., mid-eighteenth century, the habit of tea drinking had just begun to spread among the working class, while it had been established among the upper-class circle for a century. Besides, when it comes to the other major British import from China, that is, porcelain, the consumption was still mostly concentrated in the upper and middle class. But somehow tea consumptions among the upper and middle classes were accepted. In fact, it was more than "accepted"—drinking tea, for the upper class was considered as an "artificial necessity" and providing an "essential comfort" (Griffiths, 2007: 400). Meanwhile, the scorn of the poor continued; in 1823, *Edinburgh Review* published a book review of William Cobbett's *Cottage Economy*, and while reviewing the book itself, the article also did not forget to review the working class's indulgence in tea:

…many parts of the country where labourer seldom lifts his life his thoughts higher than water, unless it be towards a little milk…What remains to recommend it [tea], then, but a tendency to affect the nerves, which the substitutes for it actually in use among the poor certainly possess to a more pernicious degree? We venture to assert, that when a labourer fancies himself refreshed with a mess of this stuff, sweetened by the coarsest black sugar, and by azure blue milk, it is only the warmth of the water that soothes him for the moment…

Such a condescending attitude towards the tea consumption among the working class persisted until the mid-nineteenth century, and it was eventually "accepted" for two reasons: firstly, the increase in tea consumption helped augment the Exchequer and freed up land in Britain for the farming of more profitable foods (Ellis et al., 2015). In other words, despite them "aping the lord", the tea consumption by the working class was still contributing to the macro-economic gain of the state. Secondly, by the beginning of the 1840s, the attention of the ruling class had shifted from tea to another trading item with China, that is, opium. It is worth mentioning here that, contrary to popular belief, by 1870, the British public opinion was roused against the opium trade. In 1874, the Anglo-Oriental Society for

Britannia Unchanged Post-Brexit
Written by Ariel Shangguan

the Suppression of the Opium Trade was established. Their mission aimed at educating the public about the harm of the opium trade, applying pressure to the parliament, and in so doing urging a political action—but they achieved little success. This is because, for the British Empire, the opium trade was the main source of revenue for the Indian subcontinent. This was poignantly highlighted by Sir John Strachey (1888: 84) who wrote, "Next to the land revenue, the most productive source of the public income in India is Opium. It yielded in 1886-87 nearly £9,000,000., almost the whole of which was derived from opium exported to China." The opium trade and the resulting wars, it can be argued, was the commercial-military solution to a politico-economic problem created by an empire that was overstretched beyond its limits.

To conclude, thanks to decades of intellectual endeavours from scholars of Chinese history, the part the British opium trade played in causing a large-scale social suffering and derailing the trajectory of modern Chinese history is now widely acknowledged by not only the academic community, but also the general public. Such a scholarly output often takes place within a broader theoretical framework which highlights—and rightfully so—issues regarding racial othering that underlined the British imperial thinking in the nineteenth century. However, as Cannadine (2001: 41) says, "the British Empire was first and foremost a *class act*"; while condemning the role of the British Empire in creating global suffering, we shall not forget about the mental and physical sacrifice made by the ordinary British people who were also the victims of the nineteenth century imperial project. For no matter what age we live in, just like Brexit, it is always the lower parts of society that pays for the mistakes of the elites —and yet it is also them who make history.

References

Cannadine, David. 2000. *Class in Britain*. London: Penguin.

–. 2001. *Ornamentalism: how the British saw their empire*. London: Penguin.

Chaudhuri, K. N. 1978. *The Trading World of Asia and the English East India Company 1660-1760* . Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Ellis, Markman, Coulton, Richard, and Mauger, Matthew. 2015. *Empire of Tea: the Asian leaf that conquered the world.* London: Reaktion Books Ltd.

Griffiths, John. 2007. *Tea: the drink that changed the world*. London: André Deutsch.

Hanway, Jonas. 1756. *A Journal of Eight Days Journey from Portsmouth to Kingston upon* Th*ames . . . To which is added, An Essay on Tea.* London: H. Woodfall.

Lindert, Peter, H. and Williamson, Jefferey G. 1983. 'English Workers' Living Standards during the Industrial Revolution: A New Look', *Economic History Review*, 2nd series, 36: 1–25.

Mintz, Sidney W. 1985. *Sweetness and Power: the place of sugar in modern history*. London: Penguin.

Osterhammel, Jürgen. 2014. *The Transformation of the World: a global history of the nineteenth century* . Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Strachey, Sir John. 1888. *India*. London: Kegan Paul, Trench, & Co.

Thornton, Peter. 1978. *Seventeenth-century Interior Decoration in England, France and Holland* . New Haven, CT: Paul Mellon Centre BA.

Van Dyke, Paul. 2005. *The Canton Trade: Life and Enterprise on the China Coast, 1700–1845* . Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press.

Britannia Unchanged Post-Brexit

Written by Ariel Shangguan

About the author:

Ariel Shangguan is an incoming Assistant Professor at Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University. Her research interest mainly concerns knowledge formations and translingual epistemics in the history and theory of international relations. She is currently a postdoctoral fellow at the Schwarzman College of Tsinghua University.