

Introduction

The history of opium is a major theme in modern Chinese history. Books and academic careers have been devoted to its study. Yet the question that scholars of the opium wars and of modern China have failed to ask is how the demand for opium was generated. Who smoked opium, when and why? Recreational smoking was foreign to China, as was opium itself. How and when, then, did opium come to lodge itself within the sophisticated Chinese culture of consumption? Opium not only thrived, it spread like wildfire over the next few hundred years. This was during a period when western Europeans, the British in particular, were naturalising tea and sugar.

Opium has its own story. Historians have not set opium in its social and cultural context; they have not taken its consumption into account in the historiographies of opium and modern China. Some have dwelt on the opium trade, some on the opium wars, some on imperialism and others on the politics of control. The political history of opium, like the theatre of war, is only part of the story. However, the vital questions for me are, first, the point at which opium was transformed from a medicine into a luxury item and, secondly, why it became so popular and widespread after people discovered its recreational value. A full understanding of the root problem of the opium wars and of the role of the wars in the emergence of modern China is not possible without first explaining who smoked opium, when and why. This book studies the introduction of and the naturalisation of opium smoking; it makes preliminary conjectures as to why the Chinese embraced smoking and the use of opium.

I have chosen to look at opium biographically because, as Arjun Appadurai and Igor Kopytoff have argued, 'commodities, like persons, have social lives', that is, 'life histories'.¹ Commodities, be they houses or paintings, lead independent lives regardless of the change of their owners. We learn about them by studying their owners and their life histories. The social life of opium is indeed a biography of 'Mr. Opium' from his birth

as a recreational item to his old age as a social icon. Such a perspective on the circulation of commodities focuses on ‘the things that are exchanged’, because, as Arjun Appadurai has said, ‘their meanings are inscribed in their forms, their uses, their trajectories. It is only through the analysis of these trajectories that we can interpret the human transaction and calculations that enliven things.’ With opium, the social significance of smoking was ‘inscribed’ in its vanguard consumers, who were the literati and the officials, and on the pipes packed with precious stones and symbolic designs. Chinese people of different classes, regions and times have endowed many meanings to opium, from luxury to necessity.

The ‘genealogical method of anthropological inquiry’ is revolutionary, as Kopytoff has pointed out. His example is slavery. Slavery began with capture; an individual was dehumanised, commoditised and later rehumanised when he/she was reinserted into the host group. Dehumanisation begins the biography of a slave; it also marks ‘the diversion of commodities from preordained paths’. Opium was likewise diverted; from a herbal medicine it moved to become a luxury item. Diversion is ‘frequently a function of irregular desires and novel demands’. This could not have been more evident with opium in 1483, when a medicinal herb became ‘the art of alchemists, sex and court ladies’.² This diversion shaped the history of opium and indeed of China for five hundred years to come. ‘A more theoretically aware biographical model’, Kopytoff stressed, should be ‘based on a reasonable number of life histories’. This book is the life history of opium as an aphrodisiac from the mid-Ming, as an expensive *yanghuo* or ‘foreign stuff’ and hobby among the scholar–official elite in the eighteenth century, and as a popular culture in the late Qing–Republican era and beyond. These histories tell us who smoked opium, when and why; they also help us to stitch together a much more complete picture of the Ming–Qing–Republican economy, and of its culture and society, and enable us to see both change and continuity in the culture of opium consumption.

This book examines opium from a cultural perspective because, as Daniel Roche has emphasised, ‘Any object, even the most ordinary, embodies ingenuity, choices, a culture. A body of knowledge and a surplus of meanings are attached to all objects.’³ Roche’s example is clothing. ‘Clothing speaks of many things at once, either in itself or through some detail. It has a function of communication because it is through clothing that everyone’s relation to the community passes.’⁴ The same can be said of other forms of consumption, including opium smoking. Roche emphasised that one should pay attention to the whole as well as to the parts; the signs that indicate

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minorities, the colours that can characterise social functions and membership of different groups, the cut, the material, the types of jewellery. For this, reference the smoking sets and accessories that accompanied opium smoking. Roche also advanced much more: 'the history of consumption must include analysis of demand, and therefore of the structuring of needs, the classification of consumers, the circuits of distribution and the spatial organisation of supply'.⁵ To understand needs, we must understand 'the texture of our ordinary life', that is, 'the real weight of everyday life', or the 'history of what seems to have no history: material life and biological behaviour, history of food, history of the consumption of food'.⁶ For the Chinese, opium smoking, like tea drinking, was material life and biological behaviour, a history of food and a culture of consumption.

Pierre Bourdieu is significant here. His influential *La Distinction: critique sociale du jugement* studied 'the science of taste and cultural consumption'.⁷ Bourdieu applied this science to the consumption of the arts and music; I shall extend it to that of opium. Bourdieu saw taste as 'markers of class' and consumption as 'predisposed, consciously and deliberately or not, to fulfil a social function of legitimating social differences'. This was true with opium as its vanguard consumers, the literati and officials, enjoyed opium long before the 'ordinary' people heard about it. It was they who made opium smoking cultured and a status symbol; they who marked themselves apart from those below them, legitimating their social differences. Bourdieu analysed the consumption of pictorial and musical works. 'A work of art has meaning and interest only for someone who possesses the cultural competence, that is, the code, into which it is encoded'.⁸ An opium pipe carved with an epic poem and served by a highly literate courtesan was limited to and had meaning for those who could appreciate the poetry and exchange-coded language. Bourdieu had 'one foot in structural Marxism and the other in cultural studies'.⁹ The case of opium supports this approach. Opium was an aristocratic luxury item during the Ming dynasty. It became a necessity during the late nineteenth century. The story of opium is the story of taste and distinction; it is also the story of politics and class formation.

One of the most influential works on consumption is Jean Baudrillard's *La Société de consommation: ses mythes, ses structures*. For Baudrillard, consumption is 'a language'.¹⁰ Breaking away from a standard productivist orientation, the post-modern social theorist believed that consumption was 'both a morality and a communication system, a structure of exchange'.¹¹ This was certainly true of opium smoking, where offering the smoke to friends, colleagues and guests involved a fundamental Chinese

socio-cultural value in the late Qing–early Republican era. Regardless of whether one sanctioned opium or not, one must offer the smoke in order to be ‘*ti mian*’ (polite or fashionable), thus a Chinese ‘morality’, ‘communication system’ and ‘structure of exchange’ was created. Many sought to catch up with the Joneses; consumption became conspicuous. Consumption itself is subject to individual manipulation; it is also ‘subject to social control and political redefinition’.¹² Parallels can be drawn to alcohol in general and vodka in particular. Opium is a perfect example of the political redefinition of consumption. When the rich smoked it, it was cultured and a status symbol; when the poor began to inhale, opium smoking became degrading and ultimately criminal. The lower classes made the consequences of smoking visible and social; the literati and officials had the power to reinterpret consumption. Consumption has never been a simple economic matter.

Mary Douglas proposed ‘a distinctive anthropological perspective’ in *Constructive Drinking*.¹³ Anthropologists brought ‘their own professional point of view to bear interestingly upon the same materials studied by specialists on alcohol abuse’. They argued that medical and sociological research exaggerated the problems. As Dwight Heath pointed out, ‘Even practitioners of the so-called “hard sciences” acknowledge that social and cultural factors must be taken into account, together with physiological and psychological factors, when one attempts to understand the interaction of alcohol and human behaviour.’¹⁴ I extend this distinctive anthropological perspective to opium because drinking and smoking are the obvious analogies. ‘Drinking is essentially a social act, performed in a recognized social context’; so it was with opium smoking.¹⁵ Many authors have studied the social context of consumption. David Christian’s *Living Water* argued that vodka played a crucial role in Russian society on the eve of the Revolution. Thomas Brennan illustrated the ‘positive uses of drinking’ in pre-revolutionary Paris. And David Hardiman exposed the different political agendas injected into drinking in colonial India. Brennan’s work is important because it challenged the heavily used accounts of the intermediaries, ‘the three robes’ – the clergy, the nobility and the liberal professions – their condemnation of taverns and consequently their influence on the study of popular culture.¹⁶ Here, I will challenge the heavily used accounts of ‘the Chinese robes’.

Deborah Lupton has furthered our understanding of the history of food and the culture of consumption. ‘Food and eating habits and preferences are not simply matters of “fuelling” ourselves’, she writes.¹⁷ This was true of opium, since smoking did not fill one’s stomach. ‘Food is inextricably

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interlinked with group membership as well as kinship', Lupton continues, and again, opium is a good example where friends and family gathered to share leisure through smoking. Food is 'the ultimate "consumable" commodity'; so was opium.¹⁸ George Ritzer has identified 'McDonaldization', a process whereby corporations cater to the 'lowest common denominator' of mass consumer culture.¹⁹ The same happened with opium in the late Qing, when smoking catered for the lowest Chinese common denominator – coolie labourers and peasants. Peter Atkins and Ian Bowler have summarised recent trends in food studies. Where functionalists emphasise 'the utilitarian nature of food', structuralists focus on the 'broader and deeper causes and meanings of food habits' and on how 'taste is culturally shaped and socially controlled'.²⁰ Opium smoking was utilitarian in nature, but it was also socio-culturally conditioned. Structural functionalists such as Mary Douglas draw upon elements of both approaches. Douglas has deciphered the grammar of the meal, a structured social event. I will decode the syntax of opium smoking by 'mov[ing] away from a reliance upon the production-oriented explanations of society, which [have] for so long dominated materialism, towards a framework that can accommodate considerations of consumption and lifestyle'.²¹ This is pertinent to the study of opium as a commodity and smoking as history of food and culture of consumption.

The above-mentioned 'three robes' speak to sources, and they matter a great deal in the study of opium. Many of those who wrote about opium used sources provided by the court or government. These works were prohibitionist in nature and were the products of political redefinition. This is essentially the same problem of which Brennan complained when writing about public drinking and popular culture in eighteenth-century Paris: 'information on the lives of the common people has always come from an external and socially superior perspective. In this way the opinions of elite observers have shaped historical accounts for generations by providing the most accessible and coherent evidence.'²² Seen through such eyes, the popular culture of public drinking was 'a major contribution to, and expression of' the degraded nature of the lower classes, and the tavern was 'a symbol of misery and debauchery'.²³ The perception of opium suffered the same fate in the nineteenth century. Historians who used prohibitionist sources provided by the government unwillingly, or willingly, perpetuated the prejudiced official line in their condemnation of opium. However, scholars and officials themselves have cautioned us about the prejudice of official histories: 'the sources of a historian are three: official history, family history and unofficial history'.²⁴ Older generations of sinologists also warned about

the problem: ‘Chinese history was written by bureaucrats for bureaucrats’.²⁵ This helps to explain why official history has a ‘solemn ethical function, the duty of expressing “praise and blame”’.

Enlightened by such insights, I dived into the ocean of unofficial histories and unconventional sources, such as *biji* or *zaji*, that is, notes, jottings or miscellaneous and pornographic books. The more of these works I read, the more I found out about who smoked opium and under what circumstances. *Libianxian Zhiyan*, for example, revealed that opium was ‘becoming a hobby among both the high and the low in the officialdom’ in the middle of Jiaqing. Scholars and officials were opium’s vanguard consumers; yet they condemned smoking in the 1830s when consumption needed a political definition. *Yin shu* or pornographic books are the most helpful; *huafanglu*, for example, is dedicated to the sex industry. These books expose the circumstances under which men and women smoked opium and how opium accompanied by sex has helped to galvanise the industry ever since the mid-Qing. The books demonstrate the value of unconventional sources and speak to the truth that unofficial histories complement official histories. Not only did I enjoy these delicious books, I also found more than enough material for my work, identified future research projects and learned to swim in the ocean of Chinese sources. Other helpful sources are the dinner and wedding menus of the late Qing–early Republican era, when entertainment included and was highlighted by opium smoking.

This book follows opium’s journey from its birth as a recreational item to its old age as a social icon. The chapters that follow examine each social strata that have used opium and/or the circumstances under which they succumbed to it. From luxury to necessity, opium consumption went through many phases, from first introduction to its transformation in the fifteenth century; its popularisation in the eighteenth century; its urbanisation from 1800 to 1860; complete socialisation from 1861 to 1911; and its final decline in the twentieth century.

Chapter 1 traces the social life of opium back to the Ming dynasty, when opium was transformed from a medicine to a luxury item. The vassal states presented opium as a tribute to the Ming court, and it became an aphrodisiac for emperors and their leading consorts. This medicine-to-aphrodisiac transformation would survive the destruction of the Ming. Chapter 2 focuses on the seventeenth century. The empire changed hands, and tobacco smoking was naturalised. Here I situate opium in the larger context of its sister cultures – tobacco and snuff, and the four cultures of consumption, tea, cuisine, utensils and herbs. Just as the Ming’s economy, culture and society helped the absorption of tobacco and smoking,

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the above-mentioned cultures of consumption provided the best soil from which opium was to grow. Chapter 3 studies the eighteenth century. Opium arrived in China via two routes: one as tribute; the other by way of sojourners of south-east Asia and participants of the Taiwan conquest. Opium was a natural addition to the Qing's economy, culture and society. In addition, high-ranking literati and officials helped imbed it into mainstream sex recreation. Chapter 4 examines the short reign of Jiaqing (1799–1819). Opium made its way to the interior with the help of compradors and corrupt officials. Meanwhile, smoking spread from princes to eunuchs. Jiaqing's reign saw opium permeate the literati and official establishments, its popularity and availability increasing.

Chapter 5 is devoted to the first half of Daoguang's reign (1820–50). Literati-artistic elite and officials exemplified opium smoking in the taste-making and trendsetting urban centres. They spread the gospel of opium, while smoking made its way from the top down to the middle and lower classes. Chapter 6 discusses the political redefinition of opium consumption on the eve of the first Opium War (1839–42). When men of letters smoked, opium was cultured; when the poor began to inhale, opium became a social problem. It led to prohibition and war. It also brought along a political discourse that continues to this day. China lost the war to Britain because she had already lost the war to opium. Chapter 7 centres on the 1840s and 1850s. These crucial interwar years saw the second Opium War (1856–60); they also saw a proliferation of smuggling, domestic cultivation and consumption. When wars were fought, opium led an enduring social life. Smoking facilities stood side by side with rice stores and tea houses in 1860. Like rice and tea, opium had become a Chinese necessity. Chapter 8 is dedicated to women and their lives with opium. Opium continued to live on as an aphrodisiac and galvanised the sex recreation industry in the late Qing and beyond. It helped the rich to escape boredom; it helped the poor to make a living. It generated jobs for women, but it also intensified their subjugation.

Chapter 9 dwells on opium-generated literature, be it praise, condemnation or narrative. 'Language is of critical importance in cultural transmission', Evelyn Rawski said; opium allows us to see this importance and the mechanisms of culture transmission.²⁶ Literature demonstrated opium's popularity and further instilled it into the Chinese psyche. Chapter 10 looks at the half-century after 1860. Opium consumption was completely socialised, as coolies depended on it to function and politicians used it to finance modernisation. It continued to sicken China; it also helped regenerate the Chinese economy, its culture and society as millions, from the

Empress Dowager to the ordinary man and woman, enjoyed it. Chapter 11 studies the cult and culture of opium in the late Qing–Republican era, when consumption became a refined popular and material culture. Opium was so chic and à la mode that it brought strangers together and entertained friends and family alike. It became a norm of social contact and exchange. Many individuals and households identified themselves with opium. Indeed, it ultimately identified the Chinese nation on the international stage. Chapter 12 focuses on the twentieth century, when opium became a political economy, as warlords, Nationalists, Communists and the Japanese battled it out for China. Whoever controlled opium could control China. What is more, opium's modern derivatives have come back to haunt China in the 1990s.

From aphrodisiac to material culture, from social identity to political economy, opium lived a colourful social life and played an even larger role in the theatre of modern China. This book tells the story of opium, and in so doing also addresses several 'black holes' in the study of China. First, opium is the history of an aphrodisiac and sex recreation. Although many have studied prostitution, opium widens our view of the Chinese 'art of sex'. Second, opium exposes mechanisms of culture transmission. From south-east Asia to China, western Europe and North America, opium spread in the same fashion. This kind of cross-language, cross-class and cross-continent culture transmission calls for more studies. Third, historians have ignored the inland march of opium. This book exposes opium's transportation to and distribution within the interior. Fourth, in their effort to assess the complexity of the Ming–Qing economy, historians have failed to study the important consumer trend *yanghuo re*, the craving for foreign stuff. Sandalwood, birds nests and singsongs came from or via south-east Asia, as would opium. Historians have also ignored *yanghuo's* vanguard consumers – the court, the literati and the officials. They spread the gospel of *yanghuo* and helped to create the demand for opium. Fifth, many historians have fallen victim to official histories and perpetuated the fallacy that opium was a vice that 'enlightened Chinese wished to stamp out'.²⁷ This was the political redefinition of opium consumption.

Sixth, the circumstances under which women succumbed to opium varied dramatically. We must not generalise Chinese women; the story of opium exemplifies this assertion. Seventh, many have emphasised the devastating effect of opium in the late Qing, but few have seen that it was also a consumer, material and popular culture. Opium destroyed some, entertained many and delivered many more from their stresses and strains. A final 'black hole' concerns the Communists. Chen Yongfa believes that

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they cultivated opium in Yan'an in order to survive the economic crisis. I will argue that they were indeed one of the 'opium regimes'. 'Economic growth during the Ming-Qing could not have been significant if it did not produce a discernible impact on the lives of ordinary people.'²⁸ Opium enables us to see this discernible impact on the lives of ordinary Chinese. China's political and genealogical intimacy with south-east Asia facilitated the introduction of smoking and opium. It would not have thrived without the cash-cropping market town economy and indigenous cultures of consumption. The Chinese assimilated and redefined a foreign way of leisure, embedded it into their general relaxation and sex recreation. Opium smoking could not have come to a better place at a more opportune moment; it was a welcome addition to the Ming-Qing-Republican economy, culture and society. Opium's sinicisation took both exogenous and endogenous forces; the dynamics can be seen when these two forces met. Chinese historians will rise above the China-centred paradigm. *The Social Life of Opium in China* is a beginning.

CHAPTER I

'The art of alchemists, sex and court ladies'

This chapter follows the early life of opium, from 1483 up until the end of the Ming dynasty and the start of the Qing dynasty. In July 1405 a fleet of sixty-three treasure ships with more than 27,870 crew members and 255 smaller vessels left the port of Nanjing under the helmsmanship of the eunuch-admiral Zheng He. This was the third year of the Yongle emperor's reign (1403–24), and the trip was the first of seven epic expeditions Zheng would make with 317 ships between 1405 and 1433. The fleet called on many ports in the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean, from Surabaja and Chittagong to Calicut, from Hormuz and Jidda to Mombasa. In 1418 Zheng moored off the coast of Malindi with junks full of porcelain, silk, lacquer-ware and other fine art objects to trade for the things China prized: ivory, rhinoceros horn, tortoiseshell, medicines and precious stones. It was eighty years before Vasco da Gama would round the Cape of Good Hope. Zheng and his fleet were goodwill ambassadors of the Ming dynasty. The expeditions projected China as the benevolent Celestial Empire; they reinforced the role of the Middle Kingdom and strengthened China's ties with south, south-east Asia and the world beyond. The ties that were created were both political and genealogical, maintained by tribute when tribute was diplomacy and by coastal people when seafaring was a way of life. They would facilitate the introduction of new world produce, the peanut and tobacco for example, and would change the course of China. Old vassal states would continue to pay tribute to the Chinese empire, while new ones would be enlisted and would learn the ritual. Zheng's expeditions were important in the social life of opium, because when states selected the best indigenous produce to present as tributes to please the mighty Chinese emperor, a few would present opium.