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THE SOCIAL LIFE OF OPIUM IN CHINA

In a remarkable and broad-ranging narrative, Zheng Yangwen's book explores the history of opium consumption in China from 1483 to the late twentieth century. The story begins in the mid-Ming dynasty, when opium was sent as a gift by vassal states and used as an aphrodisiac in court. Over time, the Chinese people from different classes and regions began to use it for recreational purposes, so beginning a complex culture of opium consumption. The book traces this transformation over a period of five hundred years, asking who introduced opium to China, and how it spread throughout all sections of society, embraced by rich and poor alike as a culture and an institution. It is accompanied by a fascinating collection of illustrations, and offers a vivid and alternative perspective on life in China during this period, which will appeal to students and scholars of history, anthropology, sociology, political science, economics, East Asian studies, and to all those with an interest in China.

ZHENG YANGWEN is a Research Fellow at the Asia Research Institute of the National University of Singapore. She received her Ph.D. from the University of Cambridge in 2001.

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*Dedicated to
Carol and Arthur Taylor*

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I think it could plausibly be argued that changes of diet are more important than changes of dynasty or even of religion.

George Orwell, 1937
The Road to Wigan Pier

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