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OPIUM BEFORE THE 'OPIUM WAR' (*c.* 1600–1840)

The last chapter examined the global spread of psychoactive substances, showing how after the fifteenth century opium was used widely in many parts of the world, including Europe and India. The ways in which it was administered could vary greatly and often depended on patterns of consumption already in place before its advent. In Britain opium was swallowed in liquid form: opium tinctures consisted of a solution in alcohol and water and were very popular in a culture of self-medication. Where hashish was eaten in India for complex social reasons, opium was administered orally to combat numerous medical problems. However, its spread in China depended on the discovery of an entirely novel mode of delivery: smoking. The history of opium in China thus starts in America, where European settlers enthusiastically adopted the local habit of inhaling tobacco before spreading it to the rest of the world.

Tobacco and the culture of smoke

While a wide range of plants had been used for centuries by the indigenous populations of Central and North America for both ceremonial and recreational purposes, the origins of tobacco smoking remain relatively obscure. By the time European settlers arrived along the east coast of North America, tobacco cultivation was widespread. The Montagnais of Quebec were apparently so committed to their smoking habit that they even inhaled the incinerated wooden stems of their pipes once the tobacco itself had been used up. A a powerful hunger-suppressant, nicotine enabled warriors, traders, hunter and farmers to remain alert over long periods of time.[1] Europeans eagerly adopted the habit of smoking tobacco themselves, and by the 1570s pipe smoking was spreading rapidly through their settlements of the Americas, while it became a popular pastime in Europe in the early seventeenth century. It was also quickly disseminated throughout Africa, facilitated by Portuguese and French traders. Within barely two generations the use of tobacco had become entirely inculturated, producing a rich African smoking culture which extended into social ritual and religious rites.[3]

Tobacco was first introduced in parts of Asia at the end of the sixteenth century, though not always smoked. In Java it became an important additive to the betel chew, along with areca, betel and lime; smoking would also become widespread in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.[4] In Japan smoking through long-stemmed clay pipes (*kiseru*) became popular among members of the imperial elite during the first decades of the seventeenth century.[5]

Snuff was introduced to China by the Jesuit Matteo Ricci in 1582 and rapidly became a luxury item among the ruling elites.[6] Wang Shizhen (1641–1711) noted how it had become a prized commodity in the capital by the end of the seventeenth century:

> Recently, somebody made snuff (*biyan*) from tobacco in the imperial capital. It is claimed that snuff can be used to sharpen one's eyes; it is especially useful in remedying various illnesses. Snuff bottles are made of glass, and they come in all shapes, sizes and colours, including red, purple, yellow, white, black and green. The white ones are like crystal and the red ones look like fire.[7]

Finely crafted snuff bottles were appreciated by tobacco connoisseurs, not unlike the expensive opium pipes which would appear on the market in the following two centuries. Snuff often contained rare fragrances such as musk and was thought to alleviate the symptoms of colds,[8] although its use remained confined to social elites and foreign missionaries.

Smoked tobacco (*danrouguo*, *danbagu* or *yancao*) was also introduced to China by European traders in the Wanli period (1573–1620), probably on Spanish or Portuguese vessels from Manila and through the ports in Fujian.[9] Dutch traders may have been involved too, since copious amounts of tobacco were kept in loading bays for their personal consumption.[10] The smoking of tobacco rapidly spread to the court, despite numerous bans passed by the Manchus already before their conquest of China in 1644, as it was considered 'a more heinous crime than even that of neglecting archery'.[11] Despite these legal constraints, smoking soon became popular at the highest level: all the women put in charge of Kangxi's upbringing, including his wet-nurse, took to

the habit. A series of prohibitions were loosely enforced and then quickly abandoned, as Kangxi himself tolerated the habit.[12] Within two generations the Manchus had acquired a thriving smoking culture.

The tobacco plant became a popular crop in the seventeenth century, particularly in the tropical south.[13] Yao Lu (d. 1622) was an early observer of the smoking habit: 'You light one end and put the other in your mouth. The smoke goes down the throat through the pipe. It can make one tipsy, but it also protects against malaria.'[14] An important passage in the *Siku quanshu* also traced the origins of tobacco smoking in 1701:

> From officials to servants and women, everyone smokes tobacco today. Many farmers have planted the crop and make enormous profits. I looked it up in various pharmacopoeias and in the *Er Ya* [encyclopaedia of the third century], but did not find any reference to it. In the work of Yao Lu it is suggested that the plant is known as *danbagu* [tobacco, transliteration] in Luzon, as well as *jinsixun* [gold threaded intoxicant]. The smoke enters the lungs via a tube and can be intoxicating. It can also be used as a prophylactic against malaria (*zhangqi*). Its juice can be used to poison snakes. It was originally imported from overseas by someone from Zhangzhou. It has also been planted in Putian. Today more tobacco is being grown [in Putian] than in Luzon. It can be seen almost everywhere.[15]

Ye Mengzhu also noted the rapid spread of tobacco despite imperial prohibitions:

> Tobacco originally came from Fujian. When I was a child, I heard my grandfather say that it was cultivated in Fujian, and that one could become intoxicated when smoking it. He claimed that it was also called 'dried liquor', but that it did not grow in our region. Later it was prohibited by imperial edict. It was claimed that wandering bandits used it against the symptoms of cold and rheumatism. Common people were not allowed to plant it or the merchants to sell it. It did not take long for tobacco cultivation to die out as a result. In the beginning of the Shunzhi period [of the early Qing], however, everyone in the army used tobacco. Tobacco merchants suddenly reappeared and farmers cultivated it as profits shot up.[16]

The medical qualities of tobacco, despite early imperial edicts against its use, were praised by a number of scholars. Zhang Jiebin (1563–1640), one of the first medical writers to comment on tobacco, concluded that soldiers who smoked in Yunnan were protected from malaria, while its juice was a potent antidote against lice on the scalp: its fine quality earned it the name 'golden silk smoke' *jinsiyan*). He recommended occasional smoking, but cautioned that excessive use could cause the smoker to faint.[17] Fang Yizhi (died 1667), another medical authority prescribed it against rheumatism and the common cold, but warned that too much smoke could lead to 'dried-up lungs' and

mentioned in 1679 that
yond the [northern] border are subject to diseases caused by ex
cold, and cannot be cured without tobacco'.[19] Qing author Wang Ang (
1615) remarked that smoke 'circulates throughout the whole body' (
yishen), invigorating the smoker and suppressing hunger. Its medical pro
ties could be enhanced by boiling the tobacco and applying the hot pa
the affected body parts.[20] In the beginning of the eighteenth century, the
ebrated writer Quan Zuwang (1705–55) even lauded tobacco as a medi
panacea in his *Danbagufu* (An essay on tobacco):

> Alcohol is good at dispersing depression. Tea is good for quenching thirst
> neither can be compared to tobacco. When depressed, tobacco can cheer the sp
> guide the *qi* and open up spiritual passages—a plant of immortality. Betel can
> used to eradicate malaria ['to chase away bad air'], while olives can help ext
> poison, yet none can compare to the usefulness of tobacco. It can sober up t
> drunk, yet may also be intoxicating. As a good gastric remedy, it can relieve hung
> and boost the appetite. It can dispel boredom and preoccupation—a necessity f
> daily life.[21]

Popular opinion in the eighteenth century likened it to the betel nu
although its taste was considered more refreshing.[22] Betel nut chewing wa
widespread as a prophylactic against malaria,[23] but tobacco, and later opium
would become much more effective and popular remedies against fever, as wi
be shown in another chapter.

The perceived medical benefits of tobacco and the positive reception of
smoking as a new mode of delivery may well have thrived on the positive
meanings traditionally associated with smoke. Incense sacrifice originated in
Buddhist India and was incorporated into the ancestral rites during the Song,
aided by Buddhist scholars such as Channing (919–1001). Incense was burnt
not only for ritual purposes but also for the soothing effect it had on partici-
pants: 'Incense clears foul odours by exuding a fragrant scent.'[24] Healers used
the fumes of burning herbal drugs to exorcise demons and release evil *qi*
('vapours' or 'energy').[25] Moxibustion, in which a herbal substance was burnt
on the skin as a counterirritant, also drew on the healing powers attributed to
smoke. The famous physician Li Shizhen (1518–93) praised moxa fumes as
an effective cure against illness, especially rheumatism, while burning moxa
was used in sacrificial ceremonies to obtain protection from evil. Moxa was
even hung outside the house to repel evil spirits with its protective veil of
smoke.[26] While relatively little is known about folk remedies in late imperial
China, ordinary people may of course have been less impressed with the abil-

ity of smoke to offer spiritual protection than with its effectiveness in repelling insects, which were a constant and ubiquitous irritant if not a direct threat to personal health.

By the 1780s tobacco was cultivated widely in China. The rage for tobacco smoking was noted by Macartney in 1793: 'They almost all smoke tobacco', the British ambassador elaborated, 'and consider it as a compliment to offer each other a whiff of their pipes. They also take snuff, mostly Brazil, but in small quantities, not in that beastly profusion which is often practised in England, even by some of our fine ladies.'[27] Tobacco pipes could be elaborate and made of valuable materials, whereas ordinary pipes were small compared to contemporary European pipes, often consisting of a brass bowl and a brass or stone mouthpiece, connected by a reed stem. Such implements, mainly used in eastern China, merely yielded a handful of inhalations per pipe-load. The ash would then be knocked out on to the floor.[28] Tobacco smoking also accorded well with a thriving tea culture, as the next section shows.

Minerals, alcohol and tea culture

A tea revolution marked the Tang dynasty (618–906), permanently relegating alcohol to a lesser position among the culturally privileged intoxicants. New processing techniques and advances in cultivation methods combined with the widespread promotion of tea as a suitable substitute for alcohol by monastic Buddhism.[29] Tea was important for the long periods of sleepless meditation practised in Chan (i.e. Zen) monasteries, while itinerant monks further disseminated tea drinking all over the country in the second half of the eighth century, encouraging temperance by highlighting the social problems associated with alcohol.[30] Pious tracts extolled the virtues of tea while rebuking the objections made by proponents of alcohol.[31] Medical writers also acknowledged its medicinal and therapeutic qualities, recommending tea to nurture the stomach, clear inflammations in the throat and aid digestion. Liu Yuanliang attributed ten virtues to tea, including its taste, nutritional and stimulating virtues, and its value against depression and tiredness. He regarded it as instrumental in the promotion of rites and general civility, which was indispensable for 'reaching enlightenment' (*mingde*).[32]

The rise of a tea culture during the Tang was a significant shift away from heavier patterns of intoxication, all the more so since the previous period had been a 'golden age' for alcohol.[33] During much of this early period, mineral powders were taken in conjunction with alcohol to act as powerful 'immortality drugs, and usually had the opposite effect. The most popular of these substances was called 'cold eating powder' (*hanshisan*), used in alchemy with cinnabar (*dan*) and consumed with copious amounts of alcohol between the Later Han (25 BC–220 AD) and the Tang (618–907).[34] Alchemist Zheng Xuan (127–200) specified that the medically active minerals chalcanthite (*shidan*), cinnabar (*dansha*, red arsenic sulphide), realgar (the arsenic sulphide *xionghuang* or *xiongjing*) and magnetite (*cishi*) should be enclosed in an earthen receptacle, continuously heated over three days.[35] The drug obtained from the concoction could then be applied to the affected areas of the sick body. Resembling fresh blood, the realgar was probably an early ingredient in alchemical attempts at creating an elixir of immortality. Iron, saltpetre and mercury were also standard ingredients, while other pharmacopoeias mentioned over forty different minerals.[36] Alcohol was seen as an indispensable ingredient of the 'cold eating powder', to be taken either cold or heated to prolong life and avert death.[37] The effects of the powder-alcohol concoction could be overpowering. The medical expert Huangfu Mi (214–82) recalled that it could give rise to sensations of sudden heat and cold, sleeplessness, amnesia, anxiety and suicidal impulses. From the Song onwards, mineral powders became more varied, including increasing quantities of medical herbs, ginger, ginseng and oyster extract, thus changing in character from alchemical substances to formal medicines (*yao*).[38]

While the use of immortality drugs remained confined to a small number of literary figures in search of longevity, tea culture gradually percolated in late imperial China to lower social levels. The beverage became particularly popular during the Ming, largely because monks and scholars actively promoted it as an alternative to alcohol.[39] The medicinal properties of tea were widely appreciated and undoubtedly contributed to its spread. For instance, a southern variety known as *kudeng* was thought to have a cooling effect and was often used with local herbs to treat malarial fever.[40] While high-grade tea required pure water, the scent of flowers could disguise the poor quality of ordinary water as well as the bitter aroma produced by cheaper tea leaves. In late imperial China the addition of flowers such as jasmine (*molihua*) as well as herbs and petals thus allowed tea consumption to permeate throughout the population.[41]

Well into the twentieth century, high quality tea nonetheless remained a relatively expensive beverage, since clean water was beyond the means of many people. Tea houses put a premium on pure water, not for reasons of hygiene but because it enhanced the taste of the produce they served. In Suzhou tea

houses collected rain water or obtained it from selected wells or unpolluted canals outside the city, where boats operated specifically for this purpose.[42] Frequent water shortages in large areas of Shaanxi and parts of Shanxi may have been one reason for the spread of smoking, first of tobacco and later of opium. Since pure water was an important ingredient for tea and alcohol, the quality of both suffered when water supplies were inadequate: tobacco and opium provided convenient alternatives.[43]

Tea also fulfilled a variety of social roles which account for its success in late imperial China. As tea varied widely in price and quality, from rare leaves brewed with imported water down to cheap jasmine tea made with ordinary rainwater, it was ideal as an indicator of elite status—a role that opium would replicate in the nineteenth century. Discerning customers distinguished between different regions, types and even parts of the leaf, while certain varieties such as Pu'er tea attained the status of luxury items. An elaborate tea ritual remained the exclusive occasion for the conspicuous display of good taste and social status, while tea utensils and porcelain ware were cherished by connoisseurs as *objets d'art*.[44] While less complex than the tea ritual in Japan, the quality of the tea, the heat of the water and the type of teapot used were important in the preparation of the beverage. On the other hand, tea culture was also a vector of social inclusion, as teahouses (*chaguan*) developed during the Ming into meeting places comparable to coffee houses in Europe. Popular venues included luxurious tea salons (*chashi*), tea rooms (*chawu*), simple tea stalls (*chatan*), tea huts (*chapu*) and the teahouse (*chaguan*), each catering to a different category of people. Teahouses provided entertainment in the guise of popular plays, story-telling and games, while fruit, snacks and desserts were also served.[45]

Tobacco was the ideal companion of tea before the spread of opium: the teahouse acted as a venue for a combined activity which became known as *yancha*, namely 'smoke and tea'.[46] Guests would first smoke and then drink tea, which was supposed to cleanse the palate of the lingering taste of tobacco. Water also took time to boil: customers were offered a smoke while waiting for tea to be prepared.[47] Tobacco was also used in conjunction with alcohol, a combination celebrated by the poet Han Tan (1637–1704), but its association with tea enabled its exceptionally swift reception outside scholarly circles.[48] With the spread of opium during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the distinction between social spaces for the consumption of opium and tea would become blurred, with most opium houses serving tea and most teahouses offering smoking: opium replicated the role of tobacco in a culture

Opium was available in China via Arab merchants from the eighth onwards. Taken orally as a medicine, however, opium left a bitter taste. W smoked it released a sweet, pleasurable aroma, which rapidly became kn for relieving boredom (*[illegible]*) and anxiety (*[illegible]*). To be smoked easily, raw opium was mixed with other substances. Engelbert Kaempfer, Westphalian physician working for the Dutch East India Company, that the Javanese soaked their tobacco in water that made the head spin lently'. The opium required for this preparation quickly became the most pre- cious traded commodity in Batavia.[49] The first traders to introduce opium smoking to China were probably the Dutch between 1624 and 1660, from their trade posts in Taiwan, and from there to Fujian. During the tumultuous decades of the Ming-Qing transition, opium (madak) smoking was confined to the Taiwan Strait, and not noted by the Qing authorities until Xiamen was captured in 1683.[50]

Javanese opium was blended with roots of local plants and hemp, boiled with water in copper pans and finally mixed with tobacco: this ble was called madak.[51] The mixture was prepared by the owners of smoking houses and fetched prices significantly higher than for pure tobacco. Opium house owners in Taiwan also provided the smoking implement: a bamboo tube with a filter made of coir fibres produced from local coconut palms.[52] Early reports from Taiwan indicate that they often offered the first smoke of madak free, serving copious amounts of appetisers, food and desserts.[53] Travellers to Fujian and Taiwan observed that honey, candy and fruits were eaten as the opium was budding and crackling above the lamp.[54] Contemporary observers such as Zhu Jingying also mentioned that opium (*[illegible]*) originated from parts of Southeast Asia which correspond to Indonesia and the Philippines today. The same author described the first opium pipes made of bamboo, round, slender and with a fine opening, with a mouthpiece made of china clay. The substance was smoked with a hollow pot made of yellow clay, which was used to cook the opium. While the cleaning tool and the opium box were made of bamboo, opium paste scrapers were based on either iron or bamboo, flat or curved.[55]

Although these early reports were condemnatory, the habit of smoking madak spread throughout the coastal provinces of south China, even though

never exceeding the popularity of tobacco. A precise chronology is not possible in the absence of reliable source material. The first references to opium smoking date from the early eighteenth century and come from Fujian and Guangdong, the same points of entry as for tobacco: 'The opium is heated in a small copper pan until it turns into a very thick paste, which is then mixed with tobacco. When the mixture is dried, it can be used for smoking by means of a bamboo pipe, while palm fibres are added for easier inhalation. There are private opium houses where people gather to lie on couches and smoke in turns by passing the pipe around. This carries on till late at night and goes on night after night without a break.'[56] Another description is provided in a memorial sent to the Yongzheng emperor in the 1720s:

> Opium (*[illegible]*) is produced overseas, and the foreign merchants who import it as medicine (*[illegible]*) derive a lucrative business from this trade, in particular in the Fujianese districts of Xiamen and Taiwan. Shameless rascals (*[illegible]*) lure the sons of good families into [the habit] for their own profit. The opium is boiled down to a paste and is blended into tobacco (*[illegible]*) in order to produce smoking opium (*[illegible]*, i.e. madak). Privately run inns are established, where [smokers] congregate at night, only to disperse at dawn (*[illegible]*), leading to licentious behaviour. The truth is that youngsters become corrupted (*[illegible]*) by smoking (*[illegible]*) it until their lives collapse, their families' livelihood vanishes, and nothing is left but trouble. If one is intent on extirpating this evil (*[illegible]*), one must tackle it at the root by ordering the imperial officials of Fujian and Guangdong to be strict in prohibiting the trade. Strict legal measures will prevent any resurgence of the opium trade and lead to the closure of private opium houses.[57]

The memorial is significant for several reasons. It emphasises that opium smoking was an 'evil' afflicting only the south eastern coastline; it shows that the 'opium' smoked was in reality madak; and it indicates that opium smoking advanced from the bottom of the social order—opium houses run by disreputable locals—threatening to ensnare the sons of 'good families'. The moralising language is reminiscent of the concurrent anti-'heresy' (*[illegible]*) edicts, in particular the allegation that people congregate throughout the night, thus reversing the 'natural order' promoted by the Confucian state. Such heterodox gatherings, as in the case of religious heresy, would inevitably lead to lewd behaviour, economic ruin and eventually social decay.[58]

The Yongzheng edict of 1729, which banned the importation of opium for madak, still referred to smoking as a practice confined to Fujian, Taiwan and Guangdong. The consumer base must have been very narrow indeed, if the official trade statistics of the Oost-Indische Compagnie can be trusted. The Dutch trade in Bengali opium to Batavia outstripped the Chinese trade by a ratio of nearly seven to one: some 80 tonnes exported to the archipelago between 1738 and 1745, as opposed to a peak of 12 tonnes reaching China during the Yongzheng period.[59] Even if allowance is made for illegally traded opium, few eighteenth-century sources comment in any detail on the use of madak, let alone pure opium. Consequently the Yongzheng edict, mentioned in most standard histories of opium as a landmark in the struggle against the foreign drug, cannot be understood by reference to opium only and must be placed in a wider political context.

The Yongzheng emperor (1723–36) took over the imperial throne in 1723 in a military coup after a brutal internecine power struggle. The young emperor enacted a welter of measures designed to consolidate his grip on power, including the strengthening of the old *baojia* system of mutual surveillance.[60] He also promoted a policy of integrating outcast groups into one homogeneous body of commoners (*gejian weiliang*). Whereas duties and privileges traditionally depended on a stratification which divided officials from merchants, workers from peasants and commoners from outcasts, the new regime mandated a uniform standard of criminal liability across all social boundaries. Status performance, as Matthew Sommer has argued, was replaced by gender performance, in which all people were expected to conform to gender roles defined in terms of marriage. In a new age of prosperity and anxiety, increasing alarm at the presumed breakdown of moral and social order in a context of rapidly changing socio-economic realities led to heightened concern over proper behaviour. With this paradigmatic shift emphasising rigid norms of behaviour for all commoners, the Yongzheng emperor sought to reform their moral character and to wipe out social activities deemed reprehensible: adultery, prostitution, sodomy and the forced remarriage of widows, for instance, were all severely punished.[61]

Smoking, increasingly at the centre of male sociability, was also seen to constitute a heterodox activity. The use of madak by ruling elites may have seemed tolerable, but popular consumption raised fears of social disorder. James I, who attempted to rule in 1603–25 as absolute monarch in England, called tobacco smoking 'loathsome', 'hateful', 'harmful' and 'dangerous' to the body in his treatise *A counterblaste to tobacco*, while contemporary pamphlets predicted a society of 'idle' and 'bewitched' smokers. His edict against tobacco portrayed smoking as an heinous activity which needed to be strictly controlled.[62] In a similar vein, the 1729 edict in China should be seen as a continuation of the earlier prohibitions against tobacco and as part of a more general attempt to cope with broader social changes rather than as an attack on opium only.

> The smoking of madak first became popular along the coasts of Fujian and in Taiwan, frontier regions which were considered of strategic importance to imperial control and political stability. People in the south were farther away from the centre of the empire and were traditionally regarded as less well educated and more prone to rebel. For potential rebels to 'gather in groups' (*juzhong*) in order to pursue a 'corrupt' (*xie*) and 'lustful' (*yin*) habit seemed to pose an even greater danger to dynastic rule in this part of the empire. These official restrictions did not extend to the medical uses of opium: 'Opium is used for making medicinal paste or pills, for the treatment of diarrhoea. It is a medicine required by physicians and doctors. It becomes immoral and harmful only when it is made into opium for smoking.'[63]

From madak to opium c. 1780–1820

The British trade colonies in Southeast Asia encouraged a policy of free competition in the distribution of opium, but trade with China was under the strict auspices of India House. The reason for the Company's circumspection was the prohibition of 1729, which forbade the importation of opium for smoking while deeming trade in medicinal opium legal. Foreign firms residing at Canton risked having their licences revoked or faced heavy fines. These restrictions ensured that the ships of the East India Company, with few exceptions, steered clear of opium cargoes during most of the eighteenth century.[64]

Until the last decades of the eighteenth century, opium exports from India and the Ottoman empire to China were exclusively shipped on Portuguese vessels to Macau, all intended for medical use. During the Qianlong period, a maximum of 200 chests of Malwa per year (circa 12 tonnes) thus found their way on to the market.[65] The demands of the market must have remained limited until the end of the eighteenth century, since attempts to trade opium illegally were largely unsuccessful. When the Indian possessions of the East India Company faced bankruptcy in 1780 (the result of several factors, including the cessation of transfers from Britain following American independence, increased piracy, the falling price of opium, and wars with the French and Indian powers), two of its ships were authorised to sail to Guangdong, disguised as warships free of any cargo, in order to seek private outlets for smuggled opium. The operation resulted in an expensive embarrassment, although the cargo was eventually sold at a substantial loss to Sinqua, an influential *hang* merchant at Canton, already in the habit of acquiring opium directly from the independent 'country ships'. However, the *hang* section shows, was extremely positive, leading to rapidly growing exports China during the decades before the 'Opium War'.

Traders, pirates and opium 1793–1820

Opium, whether laced with tobacco as madak or smoked pure, remained, relatively rare product consumed mainly by local people in a few coastal provinces until the very end of the eighteenth century. Descriptions of the reception extended to the McCartney embassy by local officials in 1792–4, for instance, never even mentioned opium, although there were references to the smoking and chewing of the areca nut at official banquets.[76] On the other hand, George Staunton observed that tobacco smoking was widespread including women and children as young as eight: 'The smoke of the tobacco is inhaled through bamboo tubes. Its powder, too, is taken as snuff as is likewise pulverised cinnabar; and opium and odoriferous gums are sometimes made use of for smoking.'[77] Moreover, madak was still smoked for several decades in the nineteenth century, as the British traveller Clarke Abel noted during the Amherst mission of 1816:

> No opium is exposed for sale in the shops, probably because it is a contraband article, but it is used with tobacco in all parts of the empire. The Chinese indeed consider the smoking of opium as one of the greatest luxuries; and if they are temperate in drinking, they are often excessive in the use of this drug. They have more than one method of smoking it: sometimes they envelope a piece of the solid gum in tobacco, and smoke it from a pipe with a very small bowl; and sometimes they steep fine tobacco in a strong solution of it.[78]

According to H. B. Morse, who researched the opium trade extensively on the basis of sources in Chinese now lost, 'There is no evidence to show when opium ceased to be mixed with tobacco; it is probable that opium was not much, if at all, smoked by itself before the year 1800.'[79] The use of pure opium only became socially significant during the first decades of the nineteenth century. Its spread up the social scale and out of the coastal provinces may have been the combined result of a shift in the quality of opium and of a stricter ban on trade during the 1790s: high-quality Patna successfully replaced poor-quality Malwa. However, even during the first decades of increasing opium imports the supply was at best haphazard, depending on price fluctuations and piracy as much as on local insurrections and administrative whims. In 1802 the foreign Council of Canton concluded that the annual consumption had risen to a mere 3,000 chests (i.e. some 180 tonnes):[80] England, by comparison,

imported up to 100 tonnes of opium every year from Turkey during the decades before the Sino-British War (1839–42), although its population was much smaller.[81] The unpredictable nature of the trade meant that the *hang* merchants often refused to engage in illegal transactions, increasing the risk for foreign traders involved in contraband activities. On the other hand, the illegal trade had become so lucrative that it was indispensable to British commerce:[82] the ranks of independent English and Scottish traders ('agency houses'), such as Fairly Fergusson & Co., were soon joined by Parsis and Armenians eager to exploit a market niche.[83]

In addition to the increased activity of country traders, pirate fleets ruled the waves of the South China Sea between the 1780s and the 1810s. The pirates would seize the cargo of entire convoys, both of local junks and of foreign vessels, which was then traded with coastal merchants for silver and provisions. The uncompromising attitude of the pirates ensured that the coastal sea routes fell under their influence, as the burning of two commercial fleets in 1805, resulting in the loss of 180 government junks, demonstrated.[84] Once fleet owners had been forced into paying bribes, mutual arrangements with powerful protectors such as the salt merchants offered substantial advantages for the pirates, including the provision of arms and food. The collaboration of local officials was frequently guaranteed by similar means. Damage inflicted on the mainly British-owned opium vessels was described as 'frequent' in contemporary accounts.[85]

Despite the lack of precise figures, it can be safely assumed that considerable quantities of opium found their way onshore with the pirates as intermediaries, possibly outperforming the equally illegal activities of country traders. Moreover, in 1820 the Qing government declared tough new anti-opium legislation which forced the foreign Canton trade to Lingding (Lintin) Island, some 125 kilometres south of the city, at a great distance from any supervision that Qing officials could effectively have imposed. The new-found isolation suited the country traders, who turned the island into a harbour for a new breed of fast, armed opium clippers. The new harbour thus formed an ideal starting-point for the contraband traffic which culminated in the 1830s.[86]

Between 1797 and 1820 high-quality opium percolated the coastline in south China through well-established contacts between local merchants, official intermediaries and contraband traders. Such smuggling could either be undertaken by British, Parsi, Jewish, Dutch, Portuguese, Danish and American traders or by local pirates. After 1820, when supplies were built up systematically in Lingding harbour, market conditions were ready for a dramatic expansion of Chinese opium imports.

War on drugs: The 'Opium War'

Far from eliminating the illegal trade in opium, the expulsion of the foreign merchants from Canton to Lingding island in 1820 on the contrary increased contraband considerably: up to 7,000 chests, or 420 tonnes, were traded in 1821. Opium trade continued to flourish during the next two decades. In the years immediately preceding the war, 307 foreign residents, belonging to fifty five firms with 200 ships, produced profits through commerce and financial services which employed thousands of labourers, runners and petty officials. The value of contraband opium rose to £ 3 million per annum paid for in sil ver bullion.[88] Moreover, in 1819 the East India Company started to buy al Malwa opium which was competing against its own Bengal produce and sold it in China: the result was a huge supply capable of responding to the growing demand for opium in parts of China beyond the southern coast where smoking was becoming popular. Control over Malwa opium was ensured by allowing it through British territory on payment of a fee, while new districts were developed for poppy cultivation between 1831 and 1839.[89] In 1833 the East India Company's monopoly of trade in China was abolished, opening up the market to ambitious entrepreneurs like William Jardine and James Matheson who had little patience with the trading restrictions imposed by the Qing. These were not confined to opium: large quantities of saltpetre and salt were also illegally imported (the import of both products continued to be strictly forbidden even during the republican period),[90] while official prohibitions on the export of silk were not respected either. Attempts by the court in Beijing to restrict commercial transactions between their subjects and foreign merchants had all but failed by the 1830s.[91] This observation holds good equally for other parts of the empire; opium, for instance, was also being carried t China in considerable quantities by Kokandi traders via Inner Asia,[92] bu camels were less efficient than clippers. It is interesting to note that Josep Fletcher has referred to the military victory of the Kokand over the Qing arm in Xinjiang in the 1830s as the 'First Opium War': the concessions granted t the coastal trading powers in the Nanjing treaty several years later (main extraterritoriality, an indemnity, taxation rights, and most-favourednatio treatment) were directly based on the trade advantages wrung from imperi negotiators under the threat of military power by the Khan of Koka between 1831 and 1835.[93]

The sheer amount of illegally imported opium was blamed by some offici for reducing the empire's silver holdings. Historians have also underlined t massive opium imports produced a substantial trade deficit and severe e

nomic dislocation, leading to the 'Opium War' and the forced integration of China into a world order dominated by imperialist powers. While there is little doubt that a global economic recession in the second quarter of the nineteenth century significantly affected China, economic difficulties may not have been caused only by the outflow of silver or the importation of opium. As Dermigny already underlined in his study of Canton, the scale of opium imports could not account for more than half of the outflow of silver.[94] The 'balance-of-trade' theory of bullion flows is inadequate in accounting for the changing fortunes of silver in late imperial China, as it fails to consider precious metals as commodities. As one observer commenting on the relatively low value of silver noted in the 1850s, 'silver is, in China, not money, but merely merchandise.'[95] As Richard von Glahn underlines, China was not a passive participant in the international market: merchants in China traded the commodities they possessed in abundance (porcelain, silk) for a commodity they lacked (silver) in the sixteenth century, while merchants in Europe brought silver to China because they too benefited tremendously from this trade. The flow was reversed from the late eighteenth century onwards as a consequence of a global shortage of silver. The silver had a higher value in Europe and the United States, relative to that of gold on world markets, than in China, a trend which eliminated the incentive to export the metal to that country. Commercial growth in eighteenth-century China also fuelled local demand for copper coin as an instrument of exchange: copper reclaimed the functions assumed by silver, which had been adopted by the Ming as a basis for state finance. In short, merchants in China traded silver during the first half of the nineteenth century because they could make a profit and bought a commodity they lacked (opium) in response to local demand.[96] Even without any opium imports at all, China would have been adversely affected by a global recession after 1820.

Imperial elites may not have been in a position to question the economic significance of the drain of silver out of China, yet recent scholarship has indicated that in the decade preceding the 'Opium War' official opinion was divided about the amount of silver outflow that could be attributed to payments for opium. A majority of court administrators, including the Daoguang emperor, did not even regard a trade embargo on opium as an effective solution to domestic monetary problems. Some officials pointed to the existing deficiencies in currency management and proposed to solve the financial crisis by monetary reforms; others advocated legalisation of the opium trade to reduce the price and bring down the volume of imports. Few favoured a frontal attack on the opium trade, because of the enormous practical problems posed by rough action against foreign and local traders, efficient prosecution of smugglers and effective enforcement of legal controls by the military in a province far away from the capital. Had these views prevailed, James Polachek hypothesises, 'there probably never would have been an opium war.'[97]

The reasons for the abrupt change in favour of a policy of opium prohibition had more to do with internal court politics, in particular tensions between Han officials and Manchu aristocrats, than with the actions pursued in the 1830s by the British government in favour of free trade. James Polachek has demonstrated that Han scholars turned opium prohibition into a political agenda, enabling them for the first time since the Manchu conquest in 16 to challenge the dominant position of the court aristocracy. These scholars not only believed that it was their mission to sound the alarm over moral decline and an alleged breakdown in social order, but also wished to restore the scholar-official class to the position of collective power and moral authority which it had enjoyed under the Ming. The central political system under Daoguang was particularly responsive to local interests, including reckless regional administrators from Guangdong with strong links to sympathetic officials who wielded considerable influence at court level. Han scholars effectively used their networks of patronage to undermine the Manchu-Mongol strategists who dominated military thinking. Influential officials, in particular Lin Zexu and Huang Juezi, believed that they could profit from an opium embargo as they used the fiscal woes of the 1830s as an opportunity to challenge Manchu-imposed administrative priorities.[98] When the Daoguang emperor finally sided with the prohibitionists, conflict with foreign opium traders was inevitable. Prohibition, in other words, was a political tool exploited in court politics by Han scholars against Manchu diplomats.

As part of its new prohibition policy, the imperial administration despatched Lin Zexu (1785–1850) in 1839 as commissioner to Guangdong in order to bring all opium imports to a halt. Opium stocks were confiscated, the movement of foreigners was further restricted, and in a highly symbolic act of purification, 20,000 chests of imported opium were burnt in public. The retaliatory action by British forces provided the spark for the first Sino-British War (1839–42), later remembered as the 'Opium War'.[99] As John Quincy Adams commented in a lecture before the Massachusetts Historical Society in December 1841, opium was a 'mere incident to the dispute but no more the cause of the war than the throwing overboard of the tea in Boston harbour was the cause of the North American revolution.'[100] Free trade and the 'opening' of China prompted the first Sino-British War in 1839, just as the United States would force Japan to 'open' in 1868.

4

OPIUM FOR THE PEOPLE

STATUS, SPACE AND CONSUMPTION (*c.* 1840–1940)

This chapter explores the many different and shifting functions which opium fulfilled within specific social circles: opium could be alternatively or simultaneously a medical product, a recreational item, a badge of social distinction and a symbol of elite culture. Moreover, it was prepared in highly intricate and complex rituals, much like the tea ceremony which conferred social distinction to the ruling elites. The elaborate ritual of opium smoking stood in marked contrast to the simplicity of opium ingestion in contemporary Europe, and contributed to the relatively low incidence of problematic consumption. While important differences in social status existed between a variety of consumer groups, ranging from the wealthy merchant who indulged in imported Patna to the poor coolie who resorted to dross, the smoking of opium had nonetheless become one of the chief factors of social inclusion rather than exclusion by the end of the nineteenth century.

The expansion of opium culture

'So far back as the year 1793, Mr Barrow found this fascinating drug very generally indulged in by the opulent, though its price placed it beyond the reach of the poorer classes.'[1] We saw in the last chapter how tobacco laced with opium became popular in a few coastal regions of south China during the late seventeenth century. The habit of smoking opium pure appeared in the 1760s but remained relatively rare till the 1790s, as cheap and impure Malwa was competing with high-quality Patna. Pure opium was expensive and used by wealthy elites. From the 1820s larger imports and lower pr broader social participation in narcotic culture. In the second half of the teenth century the advent of steam navigation improved the transpor opium, innovations in banking facilitated monetary transactions, and chemistry made possible a qualitative expansion of the range of op offer. By the end of the century, as local production surpassed impor ties in quantity, opium was used across the social scale, from the im household down to the poor rickshaw puller.

By the middle of the nineteenth century an effective system of cultiv and processing opium had already developed in parts of the country. cultivation of the poppy required intensive fertilisation, usually achieved soybean cakes, night-soil and ammonium sulphate, applied at least three ti per year. Opium fields were also labour-intensive, which suited regions w had an abundant and cheap source of labour. Wet-rice cultivation, widesp in China, also demanded intensive labour, producing work habits which w easily replicated in the poppy field. Since harvesting the poppy sap requ more dexterity than physical strength, the task was often taken over by wom and children, leaving the male farmers time to devote themselves to oth agricultural work.[3] The poppy thrived best on fertile but dry soils, often o on top of sandstone.[4] Ordinary crops required less investment, in terms both fertilisation and labour, but yielded smaller returns. As a winter cr opium poppies were succeeded by cotton, beans, maize and rice, althou some farmers were driven by profit to replace their ordinary food crops opium during the late nineteenth century.[5] In the arid central-western pro inces, principally Shaanxi, Shanxi and Gansu, farmers could make an acu decision whether to plan for a food or opium cultivation. In the fertile sou including Sichuan and Yunnan, they faced no such choice, since a second even third harvest often sufficed for purposes of subsistence. During the la decades of the nineteenth century the poppy was the most prominent win crop in Sichuan.[6]

Opium had the added advantage of not depleting the soil of its nutrients rapidly as rice, wheat or vegetables. Late nineteenth-century comparison between the relative yields of wheat and poppy produced a profitability ra of two to one in favour of the latter, further increased by the fact that opiu was cheaper to transport to the marketplace than wheat.[7] After extraction o the flower's precious sap, the poppy plant also provided fodder and seeds. Th oil was particularly popular with farmers, who used it for food and lighting

The lower leaves could be prepared as food, resembling spinach in taste, while the remainder would be used as fodder.[9] Finally, after incineration, the stalk produced a sought-after dye.[10]

The extraction of juice contained in the poppy heads required skill and patience. A series of incisions had to be cut into the seed capsule at sunset with a little stylus or a hook, and the white fluid would ooze through it.[11] Around Chongqing in the 1880s farmers were 'armed with a short wooden handle, from one of the ends of which protrude three or sometimes four points of brass or copper blades, firmly inserted in the wood'.[12] Each capsule was incised three or four times, at intervals of two to three days, although some were exhausted by only one incision. The exuded juice would coagulate overnight on the capsules, turning brown on contact with the air. The following day, the brown 'latex' would be scraped off with a pruning knife and collected in vessels, where it separated into two parts. However, in Wenzhou (Zhejiang) poppies were not incised but the outer skin was shaved off with a little plane, leaving the sap to seep out along the exposed surface. When employing the shaving method, it was imperative to collect the juice almost immediately with a hollow bamboo. Once harvested, the drained residue was exposed to the air for several weeks, during which time it set into a soft brown mass, which would deepen in colour with age and with exposure to air and light, constituting what was known as 'raw opium'.[13]

Opium was compact and light, and could be carried over great distances and difficult terrain—steep mountains, deep valleys and wild rivers. As the Prussian traveller Ferdinand von Richthofen testified regarding central Shanxi, opium was unlike rice or wheat in that it repaid rugged travel along winding trails in the hinterland.[14] As one observer noted, 'No other product is so easy to transport as opium. A man can carry several hundred dollars' worth on his person; a man with a mule can carry several thousand dollars' worth. That is one of the reasons why opium is a more profitable crop than potatoes or wheat.'[15] It also remained relatively impervious to changes of climate and could keep its quality over a long period, unlike more delicate crops such as rice and wheat, which presented storage problems as soon as they were harvested.[16] But even in less harsh conditions as in the plains of Manchuria or the maritime provinces, opium production boomed during the late nineteenth century. In some cases, opium complemented or replaced other cash crops such as tobacco, sweet potatoes, rhubarb or sugar cane.[17] For many farmers in Yunnan, it formed an additional cash crop, intended to supplement the meagre income derived from other winter crops such as cereals, potatoes and

beans.[18] To the farming communities and commercial districts of Sich
was a valuable export commodity.[19]

After 1870 domestic production exceeded imported opium in quan
the poppy provided an important impetus for the rebuilding of the
economy after the devastation of the Taiping and other rebellions.[20] By 18
when Indian imports were at their peak of nearly 5,800 tonnes, the pro
tion of opium in Sichuan alone (c. 8,500 tonnes) easily outstripped the
of all foreign produce reaching China. Opium from Yunnan came se
(1,600 tonnes), while Guizhou, Zhejiang, Henan, Gansu, Shanxi and Sh
also played a certain role (in this order). By 1906 the output of Yunnan op
(*yuntu*) had risen to 4,700 tonnes, but it was still dwarfed by the produc
of Sichuanese opium (*chuantu*), at 14,400 tonnes.[21] While local produc
far exceeded imported opium in quantity in the late nineteenth century,
varied significantly in quality, as the next section explains.

Varieties of opium

The cultivation of the poppy in various parts of China added to the variety o
opium products available. Opium came in different shapes, colours, textu
fractures or 'touches', gravities, consistencies, strengths and aromas, as well a
degrees of purity. In the narcotic culture of the nineteenth and early twenti
centuries, producers and consumers were acutely aware of the many diffe
ences between opium types, some subtle enough to require connoisseurshi
others obvious even to an outsider.

By the early 1880s the vast majority of the imported opium came fro
India, the high-quality Patna variety from Bengal accounting for more tha
37 per cent of the total, just under 20 per cent coming from Benares (Beng
and the remaining 42 per cent from Malwa. Other imports consisted o
Persian and Turkish produce, and smuggled Bengali opium.[22] Patna an
Benares opium (both known in China as *datu*, Patna also being called *yangy*
or *bantu*, Benares as *guyangyao* or *lazhuangtu*) were carefully examined b
experts for quality before being placed on the market, where it was usuall
presented in the form of balls which had an outer shell or covering. Malw
opium (called *xiaotu*, *baipitu*, *baiyangyao* or*gongsibai*) was worked by hand
into balls which were rolled in poppy leaves or chaff, to be packed in chests a
soon as they were sufficiently hard. Malwa opium varied in quality and wa
usually considered inferior to Patna and Benares. When smoked, it was stron
and fiery and caused irritation, while Patna and Benares opium were mild an

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preferred by most smokers, particularly in hot climates. Persian opium (*basitu* or *jinhuatu*) was prepared with oil and was often highly adulterated. It was usually made into cakes rolled in red paper, and tied with red string.[23] Even some African opium was traded in China in 1884, 'the first African imports ever' according to a commercial report.[24]

Bengal opium originated from poppy fields in the Ganges plain, was processed and packed at government factories in Ghazipur and Patna, and reached China by way of auction houses in Calcutta. Once sold on to the free market, the successful bidder would transport the opium to markets spanning the globe, from London to Manila. The same went for Malwa opium, which was grown and produced in the central Indian states, and privately exported from Bombay—against payment of a fee to the British authorities. An important difference was that Malwa opium contained less evaporable matter than its Bengali rival, reducing to about 72 per cent after processing by repeated boiling and filtering of the opium-water solution. Patna reduced to nearly half its original weight, at 52 per cent.[25]

Consumers in China were well aware of the differences in taste and quality between the two Bengali types, which was reflected in price levels. In order to influence the price, but also in reaction to consumer demand for specific flavours, opium from plantations in China was blended with Malwa and Patna produce, not unlike tea, coffee or tobacco.[26] Locally produced opium, on the other hand, had little success outside China. In British Malaya it was considered inferior: as one observer noted as late as the early 1930s, 'Because of the large quantity of the highly flavoured Indian and Persian opium consumed in British Malaya, it is not likely that Chinese opium—which every smoker knows to be the least desirable—has a good market there. Unmixed with Indian or Persian opium, Chinese opium would not be smoked by the discriminating smoker.'[27]

Indian opium, in particular from Bengal, thus dominated the market in the nineteenth century, establishing a reputation which was to last well into the twentieth century. Its price depended largely on its quality and place of origin, but also on the prevailing market conditions.[28] If market prices happened to be too low, traders had an additional means of effecting higher returns; following the Treaty of Tianjin (1858), they could delay the unloading of their opium cargoes by leaving them on board the vessels without payment of any excise duties or taxes for an indefinite period.[29] Indian imports peaked in 1879–80, declining by half to an average of some 50,000 chests in the later 1890s and most of the 1910s. Imports ceased in 1913, when the Sino-British treaty of 1908 on the suppression of the opium trade came into full effect.[30]

Estimates of opium consumption

While it is beyond doubt that opium culture expanded enormously throughout the nineteenth century, estimates on the number of opium users differ wildly in the absence of reliable and meaningful statistics. Estimates ranged from 0.66 per cent of the adult population to 60 per cent or more, while consumption patterns could be finely differentiated or on the contrary lumped together into a single category.[31] The difficulty of compiling reliable statistics lies in the nature of the object: rather than merely gauging the number of smokers, smoking patterns have to be established and an average consumption quantified. Moreover, estimates can vary greatly, often depending on the extent to which opium was defined as a 'problem'.[32] A common method used by a number of organisations in the first decades of the twentieth century was to use the official import figures, with estimated domestic production output, to be divided by an estimated number of smokers, based on counts in 'representative districts'. A survey carried out at a national level by the National Anti-Opium Association in 1929 produced an average total of 3.85 per cent, with results for the individual provinces differing substantially (e.g. Shandong 0.6 per cent, Hubei 29.14 per cent).[33] Accordingly, China would have had some 18 million smokers, although the authors of these statistics failed even to allude to the important differences existing between occasional, intermittent, light and problematic smokers.[34]

Medical uses aside, the amount of opium smoked for recreational purposes could vary from a single puff on the arrival of friends, over light social smoking, to the ceaseless heavy smoking of a minority who were physically dependent.[35] Robert Hart, Inspector General of the Imperial Maritime Customs, commissioned a survey that his department carried out in 1879, revealing that 3.5 per mille (0.35 per cent) of all inhabitants were smokers of foreign opium.[36] Taking into account a number of demographic considerations, including the facts that about half of the population were children and that women smoked much less than men, the historian Richard Newman recently reached the following estimates for 1879. Including not only imported and local raw opium, but also the recycled ash from pipes and the extracts from boiling, as was usual in the calculations of consuls and customs officers at the time (a method curiously overlooked by historians of China), he arrives at a total of smokable material of over 423,000 piculs, or roughly 25,000 tonnes. Of the estimated population of 400 million, around 30 per cent were adult males, 30 per cent adult females and the rest children. Any smoker who used more than a mace (3.78 grams) per day could be seen as 'dependent'. Around one gram would have been sufficient for one daily pipe, or one long smoke every ten days.[37] While the vast majority of smokers used opium intermittently for medical purposes (estimated at four mace a year) and occasionally at festivals (one mace per year), about 20 per cent of men could be characterised as light or moderate smokers, with individual amounts varying from two-fifths of a mace every three days to one or two mace a day. Heavy and regular smokers, using more than five mace a day, constituted no more than 1 per cent of the total population, or 5 per cent of all recreational smokers. Taking detailed figures supplied by the Qing government to the International Opium Commission, the total of smokable opium, including ash, increased to approximately 813,000 piculs in 1906, or roughly 50,000 tonnes. While Newman would never claim complete accuracy for these estimates, he believes that official observers may have overestimated the amount of raw opium, leading to slightly inflated figures. He uses these numbers to show that the number of heavy and regular smokers probably increased to 2.5 per cent of the total population in 1906. However, the most important qualifying statement is that the health and longevity of these 'addicts' would hardly have differed from those of light or moderate smokers, and a considerable number would have led normal lives.[38]

The emphasis in Sir Robert Hart's survey, on the other hand, was less on the quantity consumed (on average given as 11.34 grams, sufficient for thirty to forty inhalations),[39] but on the period of the habit's enjoyment: answers differed wildly, with some defining a mere two months of opium smoking as leading to addiction, and others stating a period in excess of ten years. The average duration was placed between one and three years.[40] In interviews with 2,000 opium smokers conducted in the middle of the nineteenth century by the French physician Libermann in Shanghai and Tianjin, 646 confessed to consuming one to 8 grams per day, 1,250 consumed between 10 and 20, and only 104 between 30 and 100 grams, an amount the author considered '*une grande habitude du narcotisme*'. Libermann's figures differ also in the amount of opium estimated to suffice per smoke (0.1–0.15 g per one minute session), but not in the conclusion that only a tiny minority (circa 5 per cent) of all smokers were dependent.[41] The German traveller Eugen Wolf observed in 1896 that rickshaw pullers commonly made use of their spare time by smoking small amounts of opium very slowly: three pipes an hour, with each pipe lasting no longer than for three deep inhalations.[42] The American surgeon Robert Coltman, on the other hand, dutifully noted in the 1880s that entire villages in Shanxi were 'debauched', though he added that his own acquaintances mostly smoked opium in modest quantities, and usually in the course of hospitality. The consumption of opium for recreational purposes, according to his observations, averaged between 4 to 8 grams, rarely exceeding 12.[43] Higher per capita figures could also be found, though heavy smokers were capable of managing their lives despite the large amounts of opium they consumed.[44] As one close observer exclaimed while on a mission to Sichuan in 1882, 'Nowhere in China are the people so well off, or so hardy, and nowhere do they smoke so much opium.'[45] Even the League of Nations had to concede in the 1930s that people in China had 'better control over themselves, avoiding excessive use and keeping the daily consumption within the limits', and that individuals would find by experience a quantity 'which will not endanger his earning capacity or bring other undesirable results.'[46]

Many smokers only took up the pipe on special occasions. The official He Yongqing exclusively smoked opium to treat diarrhoea,[47] while countless others smoked no more than three or four mace a year strictly for medical purposes. Many were intermittent smokers, drifting in and out of narcotic culture according to their personal and social requirements. Men and women would smoke a pipe or two at festivals and ceremonies several times a year without ever becoming regular users. R. A. Jamieson, a doctor in Shanghai, noted at the end of the nineteenth century that if those who smoked a few pipes on the occasion of a festival such as a marriage were to be counted, few adult males could be excluded, although habitual consumers were very rare.[48] A British consul based in Hainan, an island notorious for malaria, also reported that 'although nearly everyone uses it… one never meets the opium-skeleton so vividly depicted in philanthropic works, rather the reverse—a hardy peasantry, healthy and energetic.'[49] In Taiwan, opium could be smoked after local ceremonies taking place during the festive season.[50] As late as in 1932 missionaries based in the Hubei and Hunan region reported that 'at funerals, weddings, or feasts, on any occasion when many guests are invited, a number of rooms is prepared for smoking with beds, pipes, lamps and opium provided for all smokers. Opium is provided as a matter of course, just as is wine.'[51] As the journalist Richard Hughes noted, even foreign bankers and merchants in cities like Shanghai and Hong Kong occasionally enjoyed a few pipes without ever developing a craving for the substance: 'Those few who became addicts would have become alcoholics had they stuck to liquor.'[52] Even ardent opponents of opium in the early twentieth century had to concede that only a minority of smokers were physically dependent. In *Drugging a Nation* (1908), Samuel Merwin observed that 'probably the majority of the victims take it up

as a temporary relief. It is a social vice only among the upper classes.'[53] Similar observations came from local anti-opium associations: 'In Yunnan and Guizhou, few have not smoked a couple of puffs of opium. However, not everybody has become addicted. Even among habitual smokers, degrees of craving can vary enormously.'[54] J. F. Molyneaux, working as a surgeon in Ningbo at the end of the nineteenth century, confirmed that many men 'habitually smoke a limited amount with so little effect that they are easily able to conceal the fact.'[55] There is no doubt that opium could also be smoked in excessive quantities among wealthy circles, some scholars retiring to their mansions, rich merchants leaving business to their partners, or government administrators handing over their districts to clerks in order to smoke away their assets: they could develop a complete dependence and spend their lives in compulsive reliance on opium.[56] On the other hand, many individuals did not take to opium at all because they could not inhale the smoke or were repelled by the taste.[57] Zhou Zhaoxi recalls that as a child he was once offered an opium pipe by his aunt when suffering from a stomach pain but disliked the taste.[58] Shushan, a keen reader of Cocteau, had tried opium several times but found the smell too foul (chou).[59] Countless others smoked opium once or twice only to reject it.

Not unlike tobacco, opium was a substance generally taken in determined amounts rather than in ever-increasing ones: even habitual smokers reached a plateau, often between seven and fifteen pipes a day, a number rarely exceeded. The same daily dosage could easily be maintained year after year without developing a tolerance that required the user to increase the dose over time.[60] The riddle of opium, as Jean Cocteau observed, is that the smoker never had to increase his dose.[61] Opium smokers, in short, were perfectly able to determine the desired level of consumption. They could moderate their use for personal and social reasons and even cease taking it altogether without help. The idea that smokers felt an irresistible compulsion to use increasing doses of opium has little foundation, and none can be found for the supposition that consumers suffered from 'loss of control' in their use of opium. The idea that opium smoking had devastating economic consequences, inevitably leading to financial ruin, is equally simplistic: smokers could determine the quantity and quality of opium they wanted to consume, while abundant supplies of cheap local produce, including recycled dross, made the practice affordable even for regular smokers among the poor. In the late 1930s, when opium prices soared in Canton, most smokers halved the amount they consumed in order to make ends meet: few would rigidly hold on to their usual dose.[62]

Many occasional, intermittent or moderate smokers may even have b unaware of any undesirable effects. Even the medical missionaries Lock and Medhurst considered the use of 3.5 to 4 grams, as smoked daily by m consumers, to be entirely 'harmless', since the effects of opium were red by 90 per cent through burning.[63] However, the authors stated that the quantity ingested orally in a solution with alcohol, as was common England, could lead to poisoning.[64] According to another medical auth opposed to opium, the substance was six to seven times more powerful wh swallowed than when smoked. He also underlined that domestic opium h a morphine content of merely 3–7 per cent, thus being considerably wea than produce imported from India.[65] Smoking was generally acknowledged be more wasteful than ingestion, although the morphine content reached th bloodstream more quickly and caused a rush: 80–90 per cent of the acti compound was lost from fumes which either escaped from the pipe or we exhaled unabsorbed by the smoker.[66] An expert of the League of Nations con firmed in the 1930s that eating opium or dross was more harmful than smok ing prepared opium, since much larger quantities of morphine entered th system via ingestion than by smoking.[67] Dr P. L. McAll, on the other hand had already concluded from his experience with opium patients in 1903 tha 'one part of opium swallowed by the mouth has the same effect as smoking si or seven parts' through a pipe.[68]

A variety of figures indicate that opium was smoked widely but in relativel small quantities in the nineteenth century. While the available statistical evi dence is often contradictory, it does not support the prevalent view that a majority of smokers lived in the grip of addiction and were compelled to tak ever-increasing amounts of opium. However, mere numbers fail to convey th cultural meanings and social uses of opium in late imperial China, which ar analysed below.

Opium as social status

Opium is often understood to have been widespread in China because of its addictive properties, foreign traders using the drug to create a physically dependent market. This popular explanation defies common sense, since opium was also used in many other parts of the world, not least in India, Turkey and Persia where it was traditionally produced. Rather than focusing exclusively on the pharmacological properties of opium, it would be more fruitful for us to examine the cultural norms and social factors which sustained its consumption in the specific historical context of the late imperial period. At the core of such research is the analysis of opium as a marker of social status in a culture of conspicuous consumption.

Patna opium was an exotic commodity which became an object of connoisseurship for wealthy scholars and rich merchants during the early nineteenth century. Within these privileged circles, opium was appreciated in intricate rituals, very much as the careful boiling of high-quality tea could confer social distinction. Terms such as 'yellow' (*huang*), 'long' (*chang*) or 'loose' (*song*) were used to describe the proper preparation of opium (*zhuangyan*). A rich family normally had at least one 'opium sous-chef' (*xianzi shou*) to prepare its pipe.[69] The cooking would be done by using two needles (*yanzhen*), one in each hand, kneading and rolling a wad of opium between the two points in the heat above the lamp. A properly trimmed wick in the lamp would generate a flame with just the right temperature, over which the carefully cooked opium would gradually acquire a dense rubbery texture and a deep tan, the appearance and colour of the substance signalling that it was ready for smoking. Once cooked, the wad was removed and hardened like caramelised sugar. Most of the opium would set on one needle, while a small pellet was left on the other for smoking. After being pulled out of the heat, the pellet was rolled into a cone and inserted into the hole of the bowl for smoking.[70]

Inserting the pellet into the hole was a delicate operation: the bowl was first held inverted over the flame to heat the hole, then the tip of the needle would be spun back and forth over the heat, allowing the pellet to soften slowly without melting or charring. When sufficiently soft, it was plunged into the hole and pressed down, forming a small compact ring on the hole like a miniature doughnut. After withdrawing the needle, a round hard clump of opium with a hole in the middle was ready to be smoked. The pipe would be held with the pellet exposed towards the lamp at a 45 degree angle. Lips had to be pressed against rather than around the mouthpiece to create an airtight seal. A slow and steady draw on the pipe with the bowl securely in place over the lamp would cause the pellet to sizzle and vaporise as the fumes were sucked into the bowl, which cooled and distilled the smoke before it moved through the pipe into the smoker's lungs. The opium vapours, by abruptly expanding and condensing in the pipe, separated from any impurities which gathered as a crust, also known as 'dross', on the chamber walls. A smoker would therefore only inhale the chemically purest form of alkaloidised vapour, unencumbered by any unpleasant by-products.[71]

Before the smoke reached the lungs, a smoker would feel a bittersweet sensation on the palate, followed by a pleasant tightening of the capillaries.[72] A single breath sufficed to absorb each serving, as larger pellets tended to sp and evaporate unevenly and to overheat the bowl. When the pipe wa ished, the hole was cleared with the needle and a cloth was used to wip surface of the bowl.[73] Here is a description from Emily Hahn, who ha acquired a smoking habit during her days in Shanghai:

> Heh-ven never stopped conversing, but his hands were busy and his eyes were f on what he was doing—knitting, I thought at first, wondering why nobody ever mentioned that this craft was practiced by Chinese men. Then I saw that w I had taken for yarn between the two needles he manipulated was actually a l of gummy stuff, dark and thick. As he rotated the needle ends about each other, stuff behaved like taffy in the act of setting; it changed color, too, slowly evolv from its earlier dark brown to tan. At a certain moment, just as it seemed abou stiffen, he wrapped the whole wad around one needle end and picked up a pott object about as big around as a teacup. [The bowl] looked rather like a cup, exce that it was closed across the top, with a rimmed hole in the middle of this fixed l Heh-ven plunged the wadded needle into this hole, withdrew it, leaving the w sticking up from the hole, and modelled the rapidly hardening stuff so that it sat the cup like a tiny volcano. He then picked up a piece of polished bamboo that h a large hole near one end, edged with a band of chased silver. Into this he fixed th cup, put the opposite end of the bamboo into his mouth, held the cup with the ti cone suspended above the lamp flame, and inhaled deeply. The stuff bubbled an evaporated as he did so, until nothing of it was left.[74]

Smoking utensils could become sought-after collectables. Expensive pipe were made of precious black wood, ivory, jade or tortoiseshell, with orna silver decorations.[75] The stem could be long or short, the knot carved out o silver or precious wood and the bowl carefully polished. Flowers or leave would climb along slender silver pipes, with blooming hibiscus surrounded b leaves of wild mint, while some ivory or jade pipes resembled an elephant tusk.[76] Some connoisseurs cherished the accessories to such an extent that the became more important than the substance itself, and affluent households sa expensive pipes as a symbol of wealth and social status.[77] The lamp even cam to signify for many the most atmospheric aspect of the smoking experience The invitation to 'light the lamp' (*diandeng*) meant to share the comfort and peace of the smoking chamber.[78]

The close interrelation between status, consumption and connoisseurship was not confined to China, as the *chinoiserie* craze of eighteenth-century Europe shows. As tea became a sign of gentility and respectability in the higher echelons of British society, serving the beverage became associated with other novel objects of conspicuous display—fine china porcelain tea ware, gilded mahogany tea furniture, silver tea *equipages* including tea caddy, teapot, tea-kettle, milk or cream jug, sugar bowl and spoon-tray.[79] China's opium utensils, likewise, were an integral part of the smoking ritual. The wealthier the smoker, the more expensive the material chosen, with exquisite jewels embellishing the pipe. Seduced by beautifully carved woodwork, illuminated by soft light intermingling with the smoke and the scent of opium, smokers experienced—according to enthusiasts—an intoxicating 'journey of immortality' (*si shenxian*), a veritable 'ascent to the moon' (*dao yuezhong*).[80] The following observation in 1801 by Yu Jiao (1751–1820) is one of the earliest on record:

> My friend Yao Chunpu has praised opium in front of me. He said that it is fragrant and sweet in taste: 'On a miserable rainy day, or when you feel down, light up an opium lamp on a low table, recline face to face, pass the pipe around and inhale. At first there is a sudden feeling of refreshment, one's head and eyes becoming very clear. Soon afterwards, there is quietude and profound well-being. After a while, one's bones and joints become extremely relaxed and the eyes heavy. This is followed by a gradual descent into slumber, and detached from all worries, one enters a world of dreams and fantasies, completely free like a spirit: what a paradise!'[81]

In a period marked by social mobility and anxiety over class distinctions, the traditional attributes of the scholar—calligraphy, art, literature—were perceived as being less desirable than clear markers of social status: opium clearly contributed to this role.[82] The ability to spend money on opium became a direct manifestation of wealth and status, while opium houses became known as 'money-spending holes' (*xiaojinku*) where customers vied to outdo each other in the conspicuous consumption of the prized narcotic.[83] As the following account demonstrates, great amounts of money filled the pockets of enterprising opium house owners in the prosperous Jiangnan region:

> Frequenting opium houses was as common as going to inns and teahouses. These places of entertainment possessed exceptional charm, and customers visited them as often as they could. In the most prestigious places, couches were made of red sandalwood, mattresses beautifully embroidered with soft cushions and spittoons made of white copper. The servants were usually very attentive and took pride in making customers feel at home. There were also many peddlers who sold food all day long. Besides smoking, customers indulged in desserts and fruits, such as toffee apples, Huzhou lotus rice and other fancy snacks. Some big spenders could smoke up to thirty or forty holders a day. an attraction exclusively for the rich, for whom the couches had to be exquisite. The same was true for the [smoking utensils]: rainbow-coloured bowls from the Yongzheng period, equipped with silver lamps, ivory pipes with translucent jade heads. How could anyone not be seduced by this experience?[84]

comparatively rich in morphine (12–15 per cent), whereas Indian (opium had a higher percentage of narcotine (4–8 per cent): both Pa Benares, the most popular imports in China, had extremely low mor content (2–3 or 4 per cent). Chinese opium also yielded low percen morphine (2.5 up to nearly 7 per cent), but in some cases contained up per cent of narcotine. The modest morphine content of opium types able by the majority of smokers can be seen as one of the factors for the tively low rate of dependence among them. Opium types with high yield morphine were generally not imported into China (Turkish, Egyp French, German and American produce could contain as much as 20 per of morphine).[67] The smoking of narcotine-rich Indian opium in modera was therefore highly commended by European observers such as H. N. formerly a customs official at Canton. Without it, Lay concluded, m water-bound populations would simply disappear.[68]

European physicians, clerics and public figures may well have question the tendency towards habit-forming, but the moderate use of opium almost never queried.[69] Narcotine had gained a good reputation in India the 1830s, when supplies of the potent anti-fever drug quinine were falli Quinine, naturally present in the bark of the cinchona (also known as 'Jesuit bark'), needed to be imported from the Andes, its only natural habit before being planted experimentally in the hills around Darjeeling.[70] Since bark required costly processing, quinine was extremely expensive and cou not be synthesised before the twentieth century.[71] The British medical admi istration therefore established experimental laboratories at Ghazipur an Patna, from which narcotine was despatched to medical depots throughou India.[72] Colonial surgeons preferred the remedial powers of the cinchon bark, and quinine soon became the preferred cure against malaria, cholera an other 'miasmic' diseases.[73] The rise of quinine shadowed the gradual declin of opium as the favoured remedy against fevers, the continued use of which among non-European peoples was observed with increasingly condemnator comments.[74] However, this coincided with common practice in Europe: laudanum was openly available in shops in rural England, a business which provided trade for up to 26,000 shopkeepers.[75]

Until the first decades of the twentieth century opium would still have a staunch following among the medical community, being prescribed in particular 'in those wretched situations of combined poverty and disease, where wine cannot be purchased'.[76] European practitioners even conceded that the habitual opium eaters in Bengal enjoyed 'remarkable immunity from malarial infection'.[77]

Medical opinion was corroborated by medical practices among a variety of social categories in late imperial China, starting with government officials and the army. Malaria had long presented a serious threat to Qing officials posted in the south of the empire, and the high mortality rate for local representatives of the government was such a concern during the Qianlong period that magistrates who had survived an initial three-year post without any serious health problems were asked to extend their duties by another term. Similar preoccupations also existed in the army,[78] and soldiers often smoked opium before long marches to escape miasmic fevers.[79] Various reports and diaries from army officers suggest that opium was used by soldiers in southern China to relieve a whole range of illnesses.[80] It was also used in the imperial army to maintain morale on military campaigns.[81] In the provinces of Shanxi and Shaanxi, the imperial army was a major vector for the spread of opium smoking after the 1860s.[82]

Opium was also embraced by ordinary people as a fever suppressant in various parts of the country. In Hong Kong the local population was so convinced of the medical efficacy of opium that many would attach small plasters to their temples to act against headaches.[83] The same practice was reported by a senior medical official based in Xiamen.[84] Yan Shek-tsim, a shop owner in Canton and experienced smoker, even explained that the local farmers had extolled the virtues of the substance not only in alleviating rheumatism, but also in warding off malaria and fever.[85] One foreign resident in Canton was assured by his local friends that it was smoked not only 'for amusement' and 'to welcome guests', but also against malaria. Smoke was deemed all-important, and it was stated that 'Birdseye and manilla cigars have the same effect'.[86] According to vice-consul F. S. A. Bourne, opium was 'universally regarded as a prophylactic against malaria' in the south of China.[87] Alexander Hosie, travelling through Guangxi in 1883, took three teaspoons of quinine daily, while the locals smoked opium to protect themselves from malaria.[88] An anonymous French missionary who had lived in Canton for thirty years even remarked that opium smokers suffered less frequently from illnesses than those who abstained. Those who did not smoke ingested opiate-based pills instead.[89] Dr Alexander Rennie, a medical practitioner in Taiwan who was critical of recreational opium smoking, commended its use against feverish and rheumatic malaria. In cases where a painful death seemed certain, he thought it cruel to deny his patients the anodyne qualities of the drug.[90] It was generally assumed that labour-intensive work in rice paddies and sugar plantations in the malarial districts of the island was little short of impossible without opium—an argument opium proponents seized upon when the new Ja rulers began to phase out its use.[91]

Even in the north of China opium was thought to have febrifugal and gesic virtues. John Dudgeon, who had little direct experience of malar observed that opium 'seemed prophylactic' and alleviated its symptoms, 'in the absence of skilled physicians' it was used by a great number of com ers in Beijing to relieve pain.[92] Henry Cockburn, a British official in Be commented on the similarities between smoking patterns in Europe, China. He concluded that the stronger nature of European tobacco m opium superfluous, while the Chinese faced the alternative between t tobacco and the effects of opium.[93]

Chinese labourers earning their living in malarial regions of Indi Southeast Asia usually took the habit of opium smoking as a prophyla measure with them. Provided they remained physically active and well no ished, it was no immediate threat and could be regarded as a 'legitimate l ury'.[94] At least half of the labourers blazing the trail for the Burma Road du the early 1940s relied on opium smoking for its antispasmodic and analge effects.[95] Malnutrition, beri-beri, malaria and other subtropical diseases co immobilise up to one-third of the workforce, many of whom remained i constant opium stupor. Whether to dull pain or to fight a range of illnes endemic to this part of Asia, poor workers embraced opium with fe qualms.[96] The opium smoked for self-medication complemented the offic course of anti-malarial prophylactics (quinine pills containing atabrine) di tributed by the company twice a week.[97] In the absence of the medic advances of the twentieth century—synthesised quinine, aspirin, penicillin— opium smoking continued to be simply 'the best possible and sure shiel against malaria.[98]

Opium as a social aphrodisiac

Opium was described in the medical treatises of the late imperial period a 'medicine for the bedroom' (*fangyao*). This term is generally translated a 'aphrodisiac', meaning a substance capable of awakening or increasing sexual desire. However, available evidence indicates that opium was used less to stimulate or excite desire than to control and extend performance: after all, it is not an excitant but a sedative, and can be better described as an 'aid to sexual stamina' than as an 'aphrodisiac'. Opium is not even mentioned in the famous erotic novel *Jin Ping Mei*, suggesting that relatively few people used it for

sexual purposes during the late Ming.[99] Li Shizhen (1518–93), on the other hand, reluctantly supported the claim that opium enhanced sex, noting that it was taken orally by some in the bedroom.[100] Medical treatises of the last third of the eighteenth century were much more explicit. According to Huang Guanxiu (1731–1818), writing in 1769, opium was used in the 'art of the bedroom' in an 'unrestrained and hasty way', whether or not any medical problem had been diagnosed. As we noted in an earlier chapter, the link between opium and sex probably contributed to the gradual shift after the 1760s from madak to pure opium. Although Huang did not specify whether the opium was eaten or smoked, his observation nonetheless reflected mounting concern from the end of the eighteenth century onwards over its use as an aid to sexual stamina.[101] Similar comments were made by medical contemporaries like Wu Yiluo (1704–66), who also mentioned the sale in the capital of a golden elixir (*jindan*) specifically designed for use in the bedroom.[102]

Opium's link to sex undoubtedly contributed to the success of narcotic culture in the nineteenth century. In China's more exclusive opium houses, it was often blended with other 'aphrodisiac' substances such as pearl powder and wild ginseng. For the male elite smoking utensils became sexual fetish objects, and these were often shaped like 'golden lily' feet or a woman's breasts. Opium houses also provided courtesans for smokers, while female entertainers in the many sing-song houses of the late Qing offered their customers the opium pipe. In Shanghai brothels were even called 'chambers of smoke and flowers' (*huayanjian* or *yanhuajian*).[103] Sex and opium also overlapped outside elite circles: the acting British consul at Danshui (Taiwan) estimated that around 70 per cent of ordinary smokers 'acquired the habit through associating with public women'.[104] Whether in the palace or the brothel, folk belief had it that opium impaired fertility and prolonged the performance.[105] Its habitual application in cases of syphilis and urological disorders further consolidated the sexual connotations of opium:[106] as late as 1935, more than 5 per cent of patients in a detoxification centre in Shanghai even claimed that smoking could cure spermatorrhoea.[107]

If opium became inextricably enmeshed with sex in elite and popular culture alike, most customers used it to calm rather than excite their desire. For inexperienced smokers who inhaled the fumes too quickly the result could be impotence. Moderate amounts, on the other hand, assuaged sexual desire and could enhance intercourse, either at home or in the brothel. Smokers were often aware of the sedative qualities of opium, using it to delay ejaculation and thus enhance pleasure.[108] In Europe too, writers such as Claude Farrere observed that 'opium calms virility and brings it under control'.[109] In cases it could even be used to suppress desire altogether. The American geon Robert Coltman related the story of an old judge he had heard of w talking to local practitioners. Following the death of his wife, the judge abstained from remarrying or taking a concubine and had kept his passion bay for a decade by smoking opium, but having successfully abandoned opium habit, his sexual desire returned with unprecedented violence. T story ends with the judge being so taken by the young courtesan he enco tered along the way to the capital that he decided to marry her. If there is truth in this story, opium has the property of counteracting sexual impulses

The sedative qualities of opium were confirmed by a report of the Ro Commission on Opium (1894–5) (discussed in much greater detail in t next chapter). While stressing that it could indeed increase male potency, t report also found that excess could lead to 'absolute sexual impotence after brief period of super-excitation'.[111] When a group of Australian prostitutes expressed their views on opium and sex, all denied categorically that opium had been used by Chinese customers to dull their awareness ('A woman th smokes opium has always got her senses about her').[112] Asked about th alleged aphrodisiac qualities of opium, the women confirmed that Chinese customers tended to share the opium pipe with them. This did not so much stimulate as reduce sexual desire, if not completely killing it off: 'The man wh has the opium habit is not like another man; he does not care for women.'[11

The Commission's conclusion conforms to the available medical evidence which indicates that opium has few harmful effects on the body, apart from inducing constipation and possibly impairing sexual capacity.[114] Heroin, another opiate substance, also reduces the level of sexual activity.[115] The aphrodisiac qualities of opium, in short, are more myth than fact. Peter Le attacks the popular link between opium and sex:

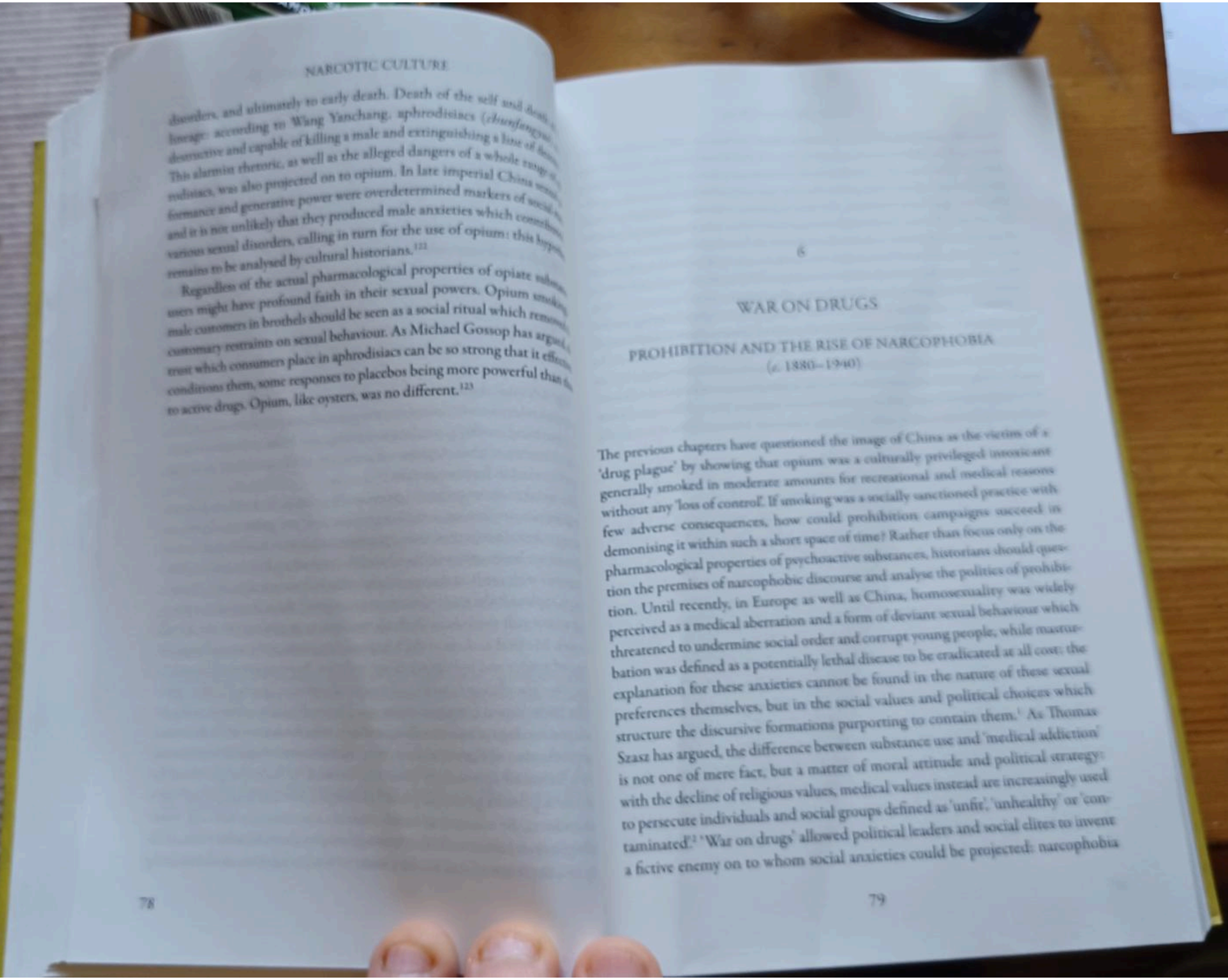
> Opium does not prompt the smoker to wild behaviour or extravagant sexual orgies, as many uninitiated Western commentators have reported. The mistaken view that opium works as a potent aphrodisiac probably stems from the fact that brothels in China often offered it to their customers on request, while many opium houses provided prostitutes to smokers who asked for them. In fact, men in brothels sometimes smoked a few pipes of opium before sex to cool the heat of their desire, so that they could better control themselves during the act, not to fire up their libidos.[116]

The author backs up this claim by referring to the reminiscences of individual smokers, such as the septuagenarian Laotian-Chinese owner of an

opium establishment, who confessed that he first began smoking 'for sex, to play with young ladies'. 'Three pipes of opium', he concluded, were sufficient to have sex 'all night with the same girl, or with many different girls because it is very easy to control himself.'[117]

Customers in both dens and brothels, of course, could also gamble, although gambling would hardly be considered to be an 'aphrodisiac': historians have tended to characterise the activities which took place in these social spaces by reference to a single, stark and uncompromising word in English, namely 'sex', a tendency reflected in the use of such terms as 'aphrodisiac', 'prostitute' and 'brothel'. 'Sex', however, was not necessarily the only desired outcome for male customers, who may not have perceived it as an activity as discrete and distinct from other forms of leisure as the modern notion of 'sex' implies, although sexual intercourse undoubtedly played an important role in recreational activities. Female servants employed by brothels regarded the preparation of opium pipes as part of their work as much as massaging and the serving of tea—and they often enjoyed their regular smoke.[118] Social intercourse in a relaxed environment was the principal aim pursued in such activities as gambling, smoking, snacking or drinking, and female entertainers could help achieve these goals. Opium was a relaxant which could help male customers unwind in female company.[119]

The social anxieties projected on opium by political elites included fear of sexual license, attributing to the benign paste dark powers out of all proportion to its actual properties: some opium smokers keen to control their sexual performance better may well have shared this conviction. Late imperial China was awash with medical therapies designed to increase sexual power:[120] remedies to replenish the *yin* (*ziyin*), tonics to invigorate the *qi* (*yangqi*), prescriptions to nourish the kidney (*bushen*), medications to give tone to the blood (*buxue*). Medical authors of the Ming and Qing constantly warned against abuse of tonics and indulgence in aphrodisiacs. Spermatorrhoea (*huajing*), premature ejaculation (*zaoxie*) and nocturnal emissions (*mengyi*) were some of the pathological categories constructed by medical discourse in order to enforce a message of restraint. In a patrilineal culture which revolved around the production of healthy sons, a disciplined practice of sexual intercourse and a balanced approach to food were deemed to have the potential to increase a person's generative power, prolonging life and multiplying one's descendants. By contrast, as health manuals continuously warned, overindulgence and abuse would turn a potent weapon into a baneful force, leading to a depletion of vital forces, a waste of bodily substances, debilitating



disorders, and ultimately to early death. Death of the self and
lineage: according to Wang Yanchang, aphrodisiacs (*chunfang*
destructive and capable of killing a male and extinguishing a line of
This alarmist rhetoric, as well as the alleged dangers of a whole range
rodisiacs, was also projected on to opium. In late imperial China
formance and generative power were overdetermined markers of social
and it is not unlikely that they produced male anxieties which contrib
various sexual disorders, calling in turn for the use of opium: this hyp
remains to be analysed by cultural historians.[122]

Regardless of the actual pharmacological properties of opiate sub
users might have profound faith in their sexual powers. Opium smoking
male customers in brothels should be seen as a social ritual which remov
customary restraints on sexual behaviour. As Michael Gossop has argued,
trust which consumers place in aphrodisiacs can be so strong that it effec
conditions them, some responses to placebos being more powerful than
to active drugs. Opium, like oysters, was no different.[123]

6

WAR ON DRUGS

PROHIBITION AND THE RISE OF NARCOPHOBIA

(*c*. 1880–1940)

The previous chapters have questioned the image of China as the victim of a 'drug plague' by showing that opium was a culturally privileged intoxicant generally smoked in moderate amounts for recreational and medical reasons without any 'loss of control'. If smoking was a socially sanctioned practice with few adverse consequences, how could prohibition campaigns succeed in demonising it within such a short space of time? Rather than focus only on the pharmacological properties of psychoactive substances, historians should question the premises of narcophobic discourse and analyse the politics of prohibition. Until recently, in Europe as well as China, homosexuality was widely perceived as a medical aberration and a form of deviant sexual behaviour which threatened to undermine social order and corrupt young people, while masturbation was defined as a potentially lethal disease to be eradicated at all cost: the explanation for these anxieties cannot be found in the nature of these sexual preferences themselves, but in the social values and political choices which structure the discursive formations purporting to contain them.[1] As Thomas Szasz has argued, the difference between substance use and 'medical addiction' is not one of mere fact, but a matter of moral attitude and political strategy: with the decline of religious values, medical values instead are increasingly used to persecute individuals and social groups defined as 'unfit', 'unhealthy' or 'contaminated'.[2] 'War on drugs' allowed political leaders and social elites to invent a fictive enemy on to whom social anxieties could be projected: narcophobia