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The successful demonisation of opium during the 1920s and 1930s in China and the end of opium culture

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Zusammenfassung

Opiumkonsum kam in China zu Beginn des 18. Jahrhunderts auf und endete mit der von der kommunistischen Partei orchestrierten Abschaffungskampagne zu Beginn der 1950er Jahre. Die Phase zwischen 1920 und 1940 war gekennzeichnet vom Verfall der zentralen Machtorgane in China, was zu einem erneuten Anstieg des Opiumkonsums führte, obwohl die Droge noch in der Endphase des chinesischen Kaiserreiches dank einer Bekämpfungsaktion (1906-1912) fast vollständig verschwunden war. Trotz politischer und wirtschaftlicher Bedingungen in den 1920er und 1930er Jahren, die an sich sehr günstig für den Opiumverbrauch waren, scheint dieser jedoch in jenem Zeitraum deutlich unter dem Niveau der Jahrhundertwende gelegen zu haben, die den absoluten Höhepunkt des Opiumkonsums markiert hatte. Der Beitrag zeigt, dass hierfür ein entscheidender Imagewandel des Opiums in der Bevölkerung verantwortlich war: Es gelang durch eine ebenso massive wie kluge Propaganda, die ambivalente und tendenziell sogar eher positiv besetzte Vorstellung von Opium, wie sie bis dahin innerhalb der chinesischen Bevölkerung vorgeherrscht hatte, vollkommen zu invertieren. Opium wurde systematisch mit den Missetaten des Imperialismus in Verbindung gebracht, die in der Öffentlichkeit verbreiteten Vorzüge des Opiumkonsums wurden gezielt diffamiert und das Opium-Rauchen als Symbol der ärmsten Gesellschaftsschichten stigmatisiert.

The 1920s and 1930s as a critical period of "opium revival"

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It is very common among Westerners to consider that China and opium are strongly connected, that opium was part of the Chinese life and culture for a long time. This constitutes a serious mistake as the practice of opium smoking in China only dates back to the 19th Century,¹ quite a recent period considering the scale of China's history. Moreover, the practice of opium smoking actually lasted only for two centuries, its total and definitive suppression being achieved by the communist authorities in the early 1950s.²

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During the 18th and the early 19th century, opium was mostly prevalent among the social elites. Then it slowly worked its way from the top to the lowest layers of Chinese society. As

¹ The poppy can be traced back to the Tang dynasty (7th century). Different parts of the poppy were used as remedies. Consumption of opium *stricto sensu* for the sole purpose of leisure dates back to the 17th Century. But at that time, consumption method was different as opium was mixed with tobacco. See Wang Hongbin: Jindu shijian (History of drugs prohibition), Changsha 1997, 11 and 15-27.

² About the successful communist campaign, see Zhou Yongming: Anti-drug crusades in twentieth-century China: nationalism, history and state building, Lanham 1999.

to the proportion of smokers in the population, the importance of opium consumption reached its apogee during the late nineteenth century. From 1906 up to 1912, during a nationwide successful anti-opium campaign enforced by the Qing government, a very serious decrease in both opium production and consumption took place in China. On the eve of the Revolution in 1912, even according to formerly highly sceptical occidental witnesses, opium was close to complete eradication.

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But the fall of the Qing dynasty heralded the end of centralized power³ and the rise of local warlords. From the late 1910s on, these warlords used opium as a fiscal resource to pay their troops and thereby triggered a resurgence of opium plantation and consumption of opium throughout the whole country. The situation remained practically unchanged until the 1950s, when, as we mentioned, the total suppression of opium was achieved by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).

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So, as we see, in the long run of the history of opium in China, the position of the 1920s-40s period is a very specific one. It could be characterized as one of "temporary revival" of opium.⁴

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When they describe this "opium revival" period, historians (especially Chinese) assume that the level of production and consumption of opium reached again the same levels as during the pre-1906 period (according to some of them, the situation grew even worse).⁵ I think this assertion deserves to be re-evaluated, as it is not backed up with real evidence. Present-day Chinese historians in particular, are certainly too eager to describe the social situation during the pre-communist era in the most apocalyptic way to contrast it with the achievements of the CCP during the 1950s.

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The resurgence of opium after 1916 compared to the 1912 situation is certainly beyond dispute. But by investigating thoroughly the case of Canton in my PhD dissertation, I realized that during the 1920-30s, the proportion of opium smokers in the population clearly remained significantly under the levels reached before the 1906 plan was launched. Of course, more investigations need to be done at different places to see if the outcome of my Canton-based research is representative of the whole country. It is plausible that Canton might be only representative of the modern coastal cities.

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But a puzzling fact nonetheless deserves an explanation. In Canton, the 1916-1949 period was, considered as a whole, very favourable to opium. First, in terms of politics, opium

³ The real fall of centralized power dates back to the death of Yuan Shikai (1916).

⁴ In this paper, due to the shortage of sources consecutive to the War with Japan (1937-1945) and the civil war (1945-1949), I shall focus only on the 1920s and 1930s.

⁵ Su Zhiliang: *Zhongguo dupin shi* (History of drugs in China), Shanghai 1997, 334; Wang: *Jindu shijian* (FN 1), 378; Zhu Qingbao / Jiang Qiuming / Zhang Shijie: *Yapian yu jindai Zhongguo* (Opium and modern China), Nanjing 1995, 124; Wang Jinxiang: *Er, sanshi niandai guonei yapian wenti* (The problem of opium in China during the 1920s and 1930s), in: *Minguo dang'an* (Republican archives) 1992.2, 71-76, here: 71; Zhao Yinglan: *Minguo shenghuo lüeying* (A glimpse of life in Republican China), Shenyang 2001, 188.

enjoyed a legal status with almost no restrictions for the smokers.⁶ Second, there was no problem of supply; the poppy was grown in abundance in neighbouring provinces and found its way to the city. Moreover, the retail prices of the drug were comparable and probably even slightly inferior to that of the late 19th century.

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Then, how can we explain that in Canton, despite a situation undoubtedly very favourable to opium consumption on the supply side, the proportion of smokers nonetheless remained relatively low compared to the late nineteenth century?

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The argument of this paper is that this can only be explained by dramatic changes that occurred in the realm of opium representation among the population.

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In the 19th century there was a sophisticated system of valorisation of opium elaborated among the smokers since the introduction of the drug in China: an opium culture. It is certainly not to say that the representation of opium smoking in the population was unambiguously positive, but at least, there was a certain alternative to the anti-opium discourse of that time. That was no more the case during the 1920s and 1930s. During these decades, the success of the demonisation process of opium in Chinese society was completed. This deep re-evaluation was the result of an active propaganda, which successfully undermined the major staples of opium culture. And as a result, the representation of opium tended to become almost purely negative, even among the smokers.

The glory days of opium culture⁷

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Even if one may say that anti-opium discourse dates back to the very introduction of opium smoking in China⁸, it was counterbalanced during the 19th century by a sophisticated system of valorisation of opium elaborated among smokers. This system that I call an opium culture, tended to fade away in the 1920s and 1930s. Nevertheless it did not disappear, and there was still some evidence of its existence among smokers. What were the characteristics of this system?

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⁶ There were nevertheless a few exceptions: Guangdong province witnessed a prohibition policy between 1920 and 1923. See Xavier Paulès: *L'opium à Canton 1912-1937. Essais de mainmise politique et pratiques sociales*, Ph. Ddiss., Lyon University 2005, 111-118. In the rest of the country, in some places and times, opium prohibition measures were enforced. But they were not of significant importance with respect to the general situation during the whole 1916-1949 period. In Shanxi province, for example, the local warlord Yan Xishan was also active against opium during the 1920s. See Ma Mozhen: *Dupin zai zhongguo (Drugs in China)*, Taibei 1996, 133-141.

⁷ The system of valorisation of opium among Chinese smokers is the focus of the following article: Xavier Paulès: *L'éloge interdit: étude du système de valeurs des fumeurs d'opium dans la Chine républicaine*, in: *Genèses* 62 (2006), 69-92.

⁸ Zheng Yangwen provides some examples of early critics of opium consumption. See Zheng Yangwen: *The social life of opium*, Cambridge 2005, 58-60 and 87-100.

First of all, opium was praised to being one of the best possible enjoyments, as it has the effect to relieve the boredom of life. According to some smokers, it had also a stimulating effect on creativity and made the brain more active.⁹

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Smokers also celebrated the occasion it provided to spend a pleasant time with fellow smokers.¹⁰ As a rule, it was considered much more enjoyable to gather with friends rather than smoking on one's own. When asked about the pleasures of opium, smokers often mentioned it was a perfect way to make friends.¹¹ The collective opium consumption was considered as sort of an art, a ritual requiring specific human qualities. As an example, beginners deserved the particular attention of experimented smokers for the making of an opium pipe required special skills.¹² A smoker had to show his generosity by sharing his opium with his fellow smokers.¹³ Significantly, the set of human qualities required to be considered a good smoker were sometimes referred to be similar to that of the junzi, the ideal tempered gentleman who meets all Confucian moral standards.¹⁴ The complexity of the ritual pertaining to opium consumption was valued as an expression of refinement and also as part of the experience shared by common smokers.

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Another aspect of the celebration of opium, as some scholars have rightly pointed out, was that it was praised for being the equal of a panacea. Due to the high price of modern synthetic medications at that time, opium was truly the only affordable analgesic for the common people. Opium was used not only to relieve pain but also to cure many ailments, like diarrhoea.¹⁵ It was also taken as a preventive for malaria.¹⁶ Some smokers declared that their moderate smoking was innocuous and on the contrary that if they would stop smoking, this would probably be detrimental to their health.

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In the early nineteenth century, opium consumption was also considered an expression of wealth and refinement. This prestige associated to opium consumption had to do with its very high price and that of the sophisticated paraphernalia involved.¹⁷

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During the second half of the Nineteenth Century, when the price of the drug fell and opium consumption consequently progressed down the social scale, the rich amateurs opted for different strategies to continue to express their high social status by smoking. For example,

⁹ Lingnan shehui yanjiusuo: Shan'an danmin diaocha baogao (Report on the inquiry about the Damin people of Shan'an), Canton 1934, 103; Royal Commission on opium: Report of the Royal Commission on opium, volume No 5, London 1894, 225-226.

¹⁰ Report of the Royal Commission on opium (FN 9), 225-226 and 227-228.

¹¹ Xianggang gongshang ribao (Industry and Commerce Hong Kong Daily) 20/6/1935.

¹² Luo Liming: Tangxi huayue hen (Nostalgia of the romance world of Tangxi), Hong Kong 1994, 252-253; Xianggang gongshang ribao 20/6/1935.

¹³ Keith Mac Mahon: The fall of the god of money, opium smoking in Nineteenth-Century China, Lanham 2002, 116-117.

¹⁴ Luo: Tangxi huayue hen (FN 12), 252-253; Xianggang gongshang ribao 20/6/1935.

¹⁵ Frank Dikötter / Lars Laaman / Zhou Xun: Narcotic culture. A History of drugs in China, Chicago 2004, 75-88.

¹⁶ Report of the Royal Commission on opium (FN 9), 222 and 227-228.

¹⁷ Peng Yang'ou: Heiji yuanhun (Souls from the land of darkness) [1909] reed. A Ying: Wan Qing wenxue congchao xiaoshuo (Reedition of Late Qing literary writing. Novels) volume No 3, Beijing 1982: 134-135.

they continued to use the highly praised imported Indian opium instead of the cheap Chinese varieties that flooded the market.¹⁸ The paraphernalia was another important way to display one's wealth. Some pipes were made with rare materials like jade, ivory, precious stones or silver.¹⁹ Costly varieties of bamboo (for example the hunanese mottled variety), and opium bowls made by the most famous artisans were highly valued. The age of a pipe could also make it very precious. Some well-to-do families were proud to pass ancient pipes from a generation to the other.²⁰ Rich men also bought slave girls for the specific purpose of preparing the opium pipes for them at home.²¹

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So, despite a certain democratisation due to the moderate price of native opium, opium smoking nonetheless kept part of a social prestige due to the fact that it was introduced in Chinese society by the well-to-do. Interestingly, connoisseurship and expertise did not only concern the rich smokers. Even among the common smokers, the smoking of opium was praised for being a refined practice, requiring both skill and experience. Occasionally, rank-and-file smokers liked to give themselves a bit of a treat by purchasing a box of the Indian variety.²²

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The elements of valorisation of opium we have just listed do not imply that the smokers had an unambiguously positive vision of opium. On the contrary, they were fully aware of the health hazards resulting from opium consumption. They acknowledged the sufferings it could cause as awful. In their mind, opium was clearly a two-faced substance: it was hell and paradise altogether.²³ The way smokers deal with this somehow paradoxical image of opium was the claiming that one could enjoy the pleasure of opium but one should by no means get addicted to it.²⁴ As a consequence, it was considered an important duty for experimented smokers to make this point very clear for the novices, and to explicitly warn them against the dangers consecutive to addiction.²⁵ So, according to the smokers, a clear distinction had to be drawn between the reasonable smoker and the addict. Certain rules regarding the correct or moderate way of smoking existed. If one wisely respected them, one was almost certain not to become addicted.²⁶

¹⁸ Évariste-Régis Huc: *L'Empire chinois faisant suite à l'ouvrage intitulé Souvenirs d'un voyage dans la Tartarie et le Tibet*, Paris 1857, 32; Report of the Royal Commission on opium (FN 9), 216 and 221; League of Nations Archives, file S 196, 20th January 1930 interview of Tsang Yin, Hong Kong street coolie; Yuehuabao (Yuehua News) 17/1/1932.

¹⁹ Some of these pieces are still kept nowadays in private collections or museums. A recent book displays superb photographs of this sort of deluxe pipes: National Museum of History (Taiwan): *Bainian yanhen, yapien yanju yizhen (One century of opium damages, the treasures of opium paraphernalia)*, Taipei 2004.

²⁰ *Yugong sanrikan (Yugong News)*, n° 75 (circa 1930).

²¹ Report of the Royal Commission on opium (FN 9), 222.

²² League of Nations Archives, file S 196, 20th January 1930 interview of Tsang Yin, Hong Kong street coolie.

²³ *Xianggang gongshang ribao* 20/6/1935; Alexander Desforges: *Opium/leisure/Shanghai urban economies of consumption*, in: Timothy Brook / Tadashi Wakabayashi (eds.): *Opium Regimes, China, Britain, and Japan, 1839-1952*, Berkeley 2000, 167-185, here: 168; Mac Mahon: *The fall of the god of money* (FN 13), 114-15, 118-19; Report of the Royal Commission on opium (FN 9), 223.

²⁴ Report of the Royal Commission on opium (FN 9), 223-25.

²⁵ Luo: *Tangxi huayue hen* (FN 12), 252-253.

²⁶ *Xianggang gongshang ribao* 20/6/1935; *Guangzhou zazhi (Canton review)*, volume 1, No 1 (1924), 6-9; Xu Xu: *Lun yan (About smoke)*, in: *Renjianshi (Human world)*, No 1 (1934), 38-41, here: 41.

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As we see, even if it itself conveys a somehow ambiguous vision of the drug, there was a sophisticated system of valorisation of opium. But, as we shall see, anti-opium propaganda successfully challenged all these positive aspects of opium: as the symbol of a high social status, a panacea, and also an innocuous pastime.

The process of opium demonisation

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The demonisation of opium has a long history. Anti-opium discourse dates back to the very introduction of opium smoking in China.²⁷ And, one must underscore that 1906-1912 was also a period of important anti-opium propaganda action.²⁸

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But in the long-term process of opium demonisation, I posit that the period between the fall of the Empire (1912) and the Sino-Japanese War (1937) has a specific importance. Instead, or may be because of the deteriorated situation regarding opium suppression, it stands as a golden age of anti-opium propaganda activities, and there are two main reasons for this:

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First, for the first time in the history of anti-opium movements, anti-opium activists were showing deep concern for possibilities of direct action towards public opinion, the ultimate goal being the mobilisation of the masses for the anti-opium crusade.²⁹ It starkly contrasted with the strategy of their predecessors. From Lin Zexu³⁰ to the supporters of the 1906 edicts, the latter had relied more on the exemplary role of the elite (supposedly inducing the masses to follow their good example) than on direct propaganda for the masses. Of course, the fast development of Chinese periodical publications and press during the Republic (concomitant with that of primary education) was also a very favourable factor for an action towards the masses.

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Second, a non-official organisation, the National Anti-Opium Association (Zhonghua guomin judu hui), founded in August 1924, proved to be the most active anti-opium association ever seen. Its action, unlike those of all its predecessors, had a truly national scope.³¹ Its propaganda action took very various shapes: parades, theatre plays, publication of anti-opium periodicals, dissertation contests for high-school students, public lectures, speeches

²⁷ See Dikötter et al.: *Narcotic Culture* (FN 15), 32-39; Zheng: *The social life of opium in China* (FN 8), 58-60, 87-100.

²⁸ Paulès: *L'opium à Canton* (FN 6), 85-89. For the case of Fujian see Joyce Madancy: *The troublesome legacy of Commissioner Lin*, Cambridge 2003, 103, 116-118.

²⁹ Edward Slack: *The anti-opium association and the Guomindang State*, in: Brook / Wakabayashi: *Opium regimes* (FN 23), 248-269, here: 251; Su: *Zhongguo dupin shi* (FN 5), 365; *Guangzhoushi jinyan weiyuanhui: Guangzhoushi jinyan weiyuanhui gongzuogaiyao* (An account of the activities of the committee of the city of Canton for opium suppression), Canton 1937, 2, 14, 146; *Jinyandu zhuanke* (Special edition for drugs suppression), 1936, 37.

³⁰ Lin Zexu was sent to Canton in 1839 by the Government to end the illicit trade of Opium. He took measures against opium consumption in the population. On the supply side, he seized and destroyed the stocks of English merchants, an action that triggered the First opium war (1839-42).

³¹ For the National Anti-opium association, see the relevant article by Slack: *The anti-opium association* (FN 29), 249-270, and Zhou: *Anti-drug crusades in twentieth-century China* (FN 2), 44-53.

on radio, propaganda films, posters, etc.³² In the early 1930s, the 3rd of June became a national day to commemorate Lin Zexu's 1839 destruction of British opium and an important occasion for parades and speeches.³³

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It is worthy to note that during the 1920s and 1930s, anti-opium activities were sponsored not only by the National Anti-Opium Association but also by the different authorities, very eager to show an involvement in anti-opium action. Even if it may sound contradictory to some extent, the same authorities that on one hand used opium as a revenue, on the other supported anti-opium propaganda.

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As an example, important official festivities took place in Canton to commemorate the 3rd of June in 1935, under a warlord regime which derived huge revenues from opium.³⁴

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As a result of the existence of all these activities during this golden age of anti-opium propaganda, the people had great exposure (especially in the main cities) to often read or listen to anti-opium propaganda. These circumstances were undoubtedly very favourable to a reshaping of the public's representation of opium. But the success of anti-opium propaganda was the result not only from quantitative factors, it was also due to its inner coherence and efficiency.

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During the 1920s and 1930s, the demonisation of opium resulted from two means of propaganda: discourse and images. I shall now briefly expose, unlike other scholars, the reason why it is relevant to study them separately, and thereby to pay special attention to the role of images.

Anti-opium discourse

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The keystone of official and non-official anti-opium written propaganda³⁵ was that the drug was a major factor in the recent weakening of the Chinese nation.³⁶ On the international level, the humiliating position of China was said to be mostly the result of the evil influence of opium. Anti-opium texts claimed the drug had been used by the imperialists (the English during the Nineteenth century and, more recently, the Japanese) as a tool to weaken China.³⁷ The drug was considered an emblematic factor in the process of China's decline and very often compared to ties binding the country. Another common metaphor presented

³² China Critic, 6 June 1929; Minguoribao (The Republican daily) 15/4/1931; Opium a World problem, June 1928, October 1929.

³³ Canton Gazette 11/5/1934, 4/6/1935, 4/6/1936; Shenbao 8/6/1935; Judu yuekan, n° 89 (May 1935), 26.

³⁴ Shenbao 8/6/1935; Canton Gazette 4/6/1935.

³⁵ As official and nonofficial propaganda are very similar in content, it does not seem relevant to study them separately.

³⁶ Dai Jitao: Jinyan wenti (The question of opium suppression), in: Daijitao yanxing lu (A compilation of Dai Jitao actions and talks), Shanghai 1929, 238.

³⁷ Huazi ribao (Huazi daily) 3/6/1930; Guangzhoushi jinyan weiyuanhui: Guangzhoushi jinyan weiyuanhui gongzuogaiyao (FN 29), 3-4; Guangzhoushi gejie qingdu dahui: Guangzhoushi qingdu yundong tekan (Special edition for the movement of drugs eradication in the city of Canton), 37.

China as a body ill with opium and in peril of death, especially as it was under the threat of fierce Japanese imperialism.

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When investigating the inner process of this weakening, anti-opium propaganda generally described the nefarious consequences of consumption of opium and narcotics on each individual first, then on the smoker's family, and finally on the level of the whole society and country.³⁸

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First, every smoker on an individual level was said to necessarily become an impoverished wreck. Smokers rapidly became hooked, and therefore had to take increasingly large doses of the drug to satisfy their craving. Enslaved by the drug, the smoker turned lazy and then quit his job. When he reached the state of dramatic impoverishment, he was compelled to commit crimes in order to get his dose.³⁹ At the same time, his health suffered serious trouble, which grew worse and worse. He was described as a feeble, skinny, yellow-faced person.⁴⁰

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Second, according to the anti-opium discourse, the family of the smoker suffered dramatic impoverishment. The egotistic smoker, because he desperately needed increasing amounts of cash, might finally be compelled to unscrupulously sell his own wife and children.⁴¹ The final outcome was destruction of the family.⁴²

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Third, anti-opium activists claimed that in a country with a great number of smokers, great damage took place. The ultimate values of civilisation being challenged by the proliferation of immoral smokers and the dissolution of the family, crime was sharply increasing.⁴³ On the economic side, the "productive" part of society was shrinking as adult males, supposed to be the most productive part of the Chinese society, quit their jobs and devoted all their time to the drug, thereby becoming purely unproductive persons. As a consequence, the consumption of opium was challenging the balance between producers and consumers in the country.⁴⁴ There were even sometimes mentions of race degeneracy as a consequence of opium. Some authors claimed that smokers had weak children, often physically or mentally deficient, and that opium represented a serious threat to the Chinese race.⁴⁵ As we

³⁸ Guangdong jinyan weiyuanhui: Guangdong jinyan jikan (Anti-opium quarterly of the Guangdong province), No 1 (1937), lunwen chapter, 14-16.

³⁹ Luo Yunyan: Zhongguo yapian wenti (The question of opium in China), Shanghai 1929, 38-40.

⁴⁰ Guangdong jinyan weiyuanhui: Guangdong jinyan jikan (FN 38), fulu chapter, 12.

⁴¹ Luo: Zhongguo yapian wenti (FN 39), 34-38.

⁴² Guangzhoushi jinyan weiyuanhui: Guangzhoushi jinyan weiyuanhui gongzuogaiyao (FN 29), 6, 21; Guangdong jinyan weiyuanhui: Guangdong jinyan jikan (FN 38), fulu chapter, 12; See also the following theatre play: Huang Jiamo: Furonghualei (The tears of the lotus flower), Shanghai 1928. Another anti-opium theatre play: Heiyán honglei (Black smoke and tears of blood) was published in Judu yuekan, No 58 (circa 1932), 38-47.

⁴³ Luo: Zhongguo yapian wenti (FN 39), 39-40.

⁴⁴ Guangdong jinyan weiyuanhui: Guangdong jinyan jikan (FN 38), lunwen chapter, 15-16.

⁴⁵ Guangzhoushi jinyan weiyuanhui: Guangzhoushi jinyan weiyuanhui gongzuogaiyao (FN 29), 138.

see, through these different ways, the aggregated result of many individuals being smokers were tremendous damages to the whole of society.⁴⁶

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Finally, it is important to observe that the influence of the anti-opium discourse we have just summarized went far beyond the limits of specialized anti-opium periodicals. It was, indeed, widely echoed in the press and literature of that period.⁴⁷ By these ways, the influence of anti-opium propaganda was present almost everywhere. By contrast, at the same time, pro-opium opinions were frowned upon and deprived from access to all sorts of media. Anti-opium propaganda vulgate simply became the only possible opinion to publicly express about opium during the 1920-30s.

The system of images

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Present-day historians who study opium are well aware of the existence of an important quantity of propaganda pictures, but they tend to consider them as simple avatars of the written propaganda, a mere way of exemplifying the generic anti-opium discourse through a visual medium.

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My point here is that, on the very contrary, visual propaganda deserves a specific analysis. I posit that it not only reflected the conceptions of written anti-opium propaganda, but that pictures played a specific role in the shaping of people's representation of opium smokers. For that purpose, anti-opium iconography must be analysed not only poster by poster but rather as a whole pictorial system (within which recurrences, associations of images and symbols – as well as absences – truly make sense).

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Considering such a system, I was struck by the permanence of skinniness associated to the representation of the smokers (for an example, see picture A). And importantly, in a way similar to the anti-opium written discourse, in every sort of non-specialized publication, we see opium smokers portrayed exactly as anti-opium propaganda pictures did. Picture B is an example of a smoker's representation in a Cantonese periodical.

⁴⁶ Guangzhoushi jinyan weiyuanhui: Guangzhoushi jinyan weiyuanhui gongzuogaiyao (FN 29), 135, 138-39; Guangdong jinyan weiyuanhui: Guangdong jinyan jikan (FN 38), fulu chapter, 12.

⁴⁷ Cantonese operas, for example, conveyed the same representation of opium as a trail to the ruin of the family. The script of the opera *Maihua demei* is a typical case: *Maihua demei*, Canton [no date of publication].



Fig. 1: smokers drowning in a sea of narcotics rescued by anti-opium activists. Note the opposition between vigorous people on the boat and the pitiful skinny smokers.
Source : *Judu yuekan* n° 32 (August 1929), cover page. (no title, artist: Zhi Mo).

Figure 2: a Canton smoker entering an opium house.
Source: *Guangzhou zazhi* n° 29 (15 June 1934). (title : "To suppress opium", artist: Lu Shi)

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The figure of the smoker as a necessary skinny person was certainly not neutral and deserves a careful attention. As we still are nowadays accustomed to see the Chinese opium smokers portrayed as skinny persons, physically decrepit, we are tempted to consider as an obvious fact that opium smokers were truly all like this. It was not the case: the specific and universal skinniness of opium smokers, as some recent scholarly researches clearly demonstrate, is a myth. The physical exhaustion and frightening skinniness of the smokers were often due to a serious illness they hoped to cure or at least to attenuate the resulting sufferance by smoking opium.⁴⁸ As an example, statistics provided by an anti-opium clinic inaugurated in Canton in 1937 demonstrated that more than one third of the patients did loose weight during the process of their detoxification there.⁴⁹ As a consequence the skinniness of anti-opium propaganda smokers did not simply mirrored reality and deserves an explanation.

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⁴⁸ R.K. Newman: Opium Smoking in Late Imperial China: a Reconsideration, in: *Modern Asian Studies* 29.4 (October 1995), 765-794, here: 776; Dikötter et al.: *Narcotic Culture* (FN 15), 135-36.

⁴⁹ *Guangzhoushi jieyan yiyuan nianbao* (Annual report of the Guangzhou anti-opium clinic), statistics chapter 9. In this anti-opium clinic, on the 1012 patients who received treatment in 1937, only 475 won weight. No less than 334 patients actually lose weight, and 203 remained stable. Another striking evidence is a set of official instructions regarding the way to determine whether a person was addicted to the drug or not. They contain absolutely no mention of skinniness among the possible symptoms. See *Guangdong jinyan weiyuanhui: Guangdong jinyan jikan* (FN 38), *gongdu zhaiyao* chapter, 132-133. On the question of the mythical skinniness of the smoker see Dikötter et al.: *Narcotic Culture* (FN 15), 69-70.

Actually, for anti-opium propagandists, the use of skinniness to portray opium smokers contributed to creating a system of correspondences pertaining to the opium smoker that I call a "pejorative system". The elements of this system reinforced each others, solidly tied up by the iconographical theme of skinniness.

The following graph tries to present this system: #



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This "pejorative system" very efficiently labelled the smokers as miserable and unhealthy, contrasting them with plump and prosperous-looking non-smokers. One may object that written propaganda also associated opium to death and poverty. But there is a considerable difference: to the rhetorical demonstration by the written propaganda of the diachronic process of impoverishment and health deterioration caused by opium taken in ever-increasing amounts, it substituted the obviousness of synchronic evidence. For example, poverty was, in the anti-opium discourses, the result of a progressive impoverishment. The smoker turned lazy and ceased working when at the same time he had to increase his daily ration of opium. On the contrary, the visual system simply assimilated every smoker to a miserable person. Therefore, a consensus emerged to portray the opium smoker as a necessarily impoverished person.

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Because, as we mentioned, the figure of the emaciated opium addict spread among all sorts of written materials (pictorials in particular) whose concern was not actually to stigmatise opium consumption and consumers, a very important consequence was the general "deglamorization" of opium. Chinese people became convinced that it was no more prestigious to smoke because it was the obvious indicator of a low social position. People started believing that the act of smoking was in a way "acting poor". As a consequence of this widespread belief, many people, especially among the well-to-do, stopped smoking because they didn't want to be assimilated to the lowest part of society.

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Finally, the use of severe skinniness in the smokers' representation had another consequence. By starkly contrasting them with the healthy (and plump) non-smoker, it contributed to radically separating them from the rest of the population. The implicit meaning being that there should be no intermediate type, no such thing as a "reasonable" opium smoker (that is to say: an occasional and non-addicted smoker). Therefore, these pictures were going against the opinion (widely spread among smokers) that it was possible to smoke very occasionally, just to spend some enjoyable time with friends, with no danger of getting "hooked" on the drug.

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Lastly, by underlining the connections of opium with death, anti-opium visual propaganda also contributed to undermine the positive image of opium as a panacea. Opium was nothing else than a trail to death.

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As a result, the anti-opium propaganda, by means of texts as well as through images (the latter been accessible even to the illiterate) successfully challenged the three positive facets of opium founding what we had called the "opium culture", those being: the symbol of a high social position, an innocuous pastime, and a panacea.

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As a conclusion, the 1920s and 1930s witnessed the complete victory of a very negative vision of opium throughout the Chinese population, whereas before that time, a more neutral and ambiguous vision of opium was prevailing. In this process, besides written propaganda, the importance of the role played by visual propaganda must be underlined.

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Propaganda proposed a very efficient response to opium culture: from the association of opium to a refined activity characteristic of the elites, it transformed the association of opium to extreme poverty. To oppose the vision of opium as a panacea, it claimed it was a trail to death. And last but not least, the visual propaganda efficiently promoted the idea that no such thing as an occasional "reasonable" smoker could exist, non-addiction was impossible.

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One may consider the victory of the anti-opium propaganda to be almost complete. It was present everywhere, at the same time that pro-opium ideas were deprived access to all sorts of media. Interestingly, when interviewed, many smokers confessed feelings of guilt.⁵⁰

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One last fact deserves mention here as it is highly symbolic: it is impossible to find during the 1920s and 1930s any literary writing about the drug by a smoker. At a time when there were tens of millions opium smokers in China, there was no Chinese equivalent to Jean Cocteau, a famous French author who wrote about his experience of opium smoking.⁵¹ By contrast, during the 19th century, Chinese literary smokers had depicted their relation with the drug in numerous novels or poems. The lack of such works during the 1920s and 1930s is the vivid expression of two dramatic changes: first, they were now much less potential writers, that is to say well-educated smokers. Second, if it was the case for someone, he would nevertheless feel ashamed of that and consequently would not dare to publicly deal with it in any sort of literary work. The demonisation of opium was successfully completed.

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⁵⁰ About the influence of anti-opium propaganda arguments among the smokers themselves see Paulès: *L'éloge interdit* (FN 7), 86-87.

⁵¹ Jean Cocteau: *Opium*. Journal d'une désintoxication, Paris 1930.