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NOTE DE L'ÉDITEUR

Translated from the French original by Jonathan Hall

- 1 This work sets out to be a social and cultural history of drugs in China within a wider general history of mind-affecting substances throughout the world. Opium provides a way of approaching this wider perspective. The authors take a closer look at the commonplace image of China as having been transformed in the second half of the nineteenth century into “a nation of opium addicts at the hands of pernicious imperialist traders”. In the last two decades of that century, this image was created and disseminated in different social contexts and in the service of a diverse range of interests. On the one hand there were the foreign missionaries, and on the other were the reformers from the Chinese elite. Until the 1880s their attitudes were divided, but then the missionaries joined in the condemnation of a substance which, in their view, made the smoker passive and unable to receive the gospels. Doctors also partook in this attack on opium, through the official voice of the China Medical Missionary Association, representing it as a substance which led to compulsive behaviour. In Europe, ever since the laws on professional exclusivity had been passed, doctors had enjoyed the sole rights to practice medicine and to regulate the use of pharmaceutical substances, and so their aim in China was to assert the same medical authority, by restricting the use of opium to personal medication. The theories of addiction which grew up in Europe in the 1870s also played a role in changing the image of the opium smoker. He became an invalid and victim of remorseless chemical dependency, which

the medical profession alone was equipped to treat. These pronouncements against opium, coupled with the image of the “sick man of East Asia” built up by the missionaries, were taken up within their own perspectives by reformists from the Chinese elite at the end of the nineteenth century. From 1895 onwards, they represented opium as a poison spread by the Whites, and as the main cause behind the widespread sapping of individual will and the collective degeneration of the Chinese race. Along with the image of bound feet, it became a symbol of national debility. Only its eradication would allow China to rise again.

- 2 This image of China as a victim of “the opium plague” spread by the imperialist powers remained unchallenged by the successive governments of the twentieth century. According to the authors of this volume, this was because it served to legitimise their respective actions, policies and retention of power. Nor was it questioned by historians until 1995, when Richard Newman sounded a note of caution by asserting that the historians of modern China were victims of an “opium myth”. This myth fed on unfounded beliefs, namely that opium was a purely Chinese affair, that the consumer was physically or socially ruined by it, and that it inevitably led to ever-increasing compulsive consumption. Richard Newman helped to dispel this myth by asserting that opium has only rarely undermined the health of its smokers, let alone shortened their lives.
- 3 *Narcotic Culture* provides a critical history of opium, based on a wide range of published and archival sources, and informed by the latest research on the social and cultural history of drugs. In the first place, this work shows that most of the opium consumed in China in the nineteenth century, initially imported from Bengal but later produced domestically, contained relatively low quantities of morphine. Moreover, between 80% and 90% of this active ingredient was eliminated by smoking, which was the favoured mode of consumption in China. Secondly, it reminds us that in the nineteenth century opium was widely used in India, Persia, Turkey, Europe and America, so that it was very far from being a narcotic exclusive to China. Lastly, the authors insist on the controlled way in which the opium was used. Its consumption took place in the context of ritualised gatherings, until the campaigns for its prohibition changed these practices and introduced opium substitutes at the same time. In this respect, the work goes beyond the opium question and, in the final chapters, provides a cultural history of the different narcotics used in China in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.
- 4 In the second and third chapters, the history of Chinese opium consumption is placed in a far wider context, which is the worldwide use of mind-affecting substances (tea, coffee, alcohol and tobacco) from 1600 to 1780. Cultures such as those of Europe, which had been dominated by alcoholic drink since the seventeenth century, gave preference to taking opium in liquid form, whereas in China, where alcohol was marginal in comparison with tobacco, opium use became common in the alternative form of smoking, and the opium was at first mixed with tobacco. Smoking this mixture of opium and tobacco, known as *madak*, became widespread at the beginning of the nineteenth century, although opium itself was already known in China, where it had been used for therapeutic purposes since the eighth century. *Madak* was condemned by the Emperor Yongzheng in the early eighteenth century, but it became popular in the course of the century, before being gradually replaced by pure opium after 1760. There are different factors behind the growth in the consumption of opium from the beginning of the nineteenth century. These include its reputation for enhancing sexual

performance, the restrictive policies of 1796 to 1800 which pushed the opium trade into a less easily managed environment and encouraged a black market, but also the fact that opium smoking became a mark of high social status.

- 5 The fourth and fifth chapters explore the social and cultural meanings attached to using opium. Being limited at first to the social elite because of its high price, opium appears to have played a major role as a mark of social distinction. Western and Chinese eye witness accounts from the mid-nineteenth century make it clear that opium smoking at that time was embedded in a complex ritual, similar to the one surrounding the tea ceremony, with its delicately wrought implements testifying to the refined taste of the host. According to the authors of this volume, just as tea drinking in seventeenth-century British society became a sign of respectability, giving the host a chance to show off his delicate Chinese porcelain and fine silverware, opium was integral to a social ritual which conferred power and respectability on the elite. In a period of social instability, the traditional attributes of the scholar (calligraphy, fine arts and literature) were perceived as less distinctive than the power to spend large sums on substances and fine implements.
- 6 However the growth in opium imports in the early nineteenth century, and the expansion of domestic production in different localities, led to a fall in price and a consequent democratisation in use. The lower levels of society, bent under crushing labour conditions, resorted to it for the sated feeling that it bestowed and for its recreational and tonic effects. This democratisation of opium use was not accompanied by compulsive patterns of consumption. Moreover, until the end of the nineteenth century, opium smoking remained a collective experience which tended to favour social inclusivity rather than marginalisation ; people smoked at home together with friends to whom they wished to show respect, or else in opium houses. Far from being the smoky dens and hell-holes of perdition portrayed belatedly by Chinese elite reformers and later by the nationalists, these house were on the contrary places for male socialisation where opium consumption took place in an entirely controlled manner. Tea was always served there, being a *yang* substance, to counterbalance the consumption of opium which was considered to be a *yin* substance.
- 7 Opium also played an important therapeutic role. Already highly valued over a long period by Chinese doctors for combating pain, fever, coughing, and dysentery, it became by the nineteenth century a universal panacea for the poor who could not afford imported pain killers. Being recommended in Chinese medical books for all sorts of complaints, opium became even more widely used because some doctors ascribed aphrodisiac properties to it, and because smoke, from whatever source it might come, was perceived in the Chinese collective imagination as an excellent preventive measure against epidemics.
- 8 If opium was a drug that was “well suited” to Chinese society (according to Andrew Sherrat’s expression) because it fulfilled functions that were both social and therapeutic, how can one explain the triumph of all the talk about “narcolepsy” in the late nineteenth century and the prohibition campaigns so typical of the first half of the twentieth century ? In Chapter six, the authors maintain that such interpretations were not based on the pharmaceutical properties of this particular mind-affecting substance. The fight against opium allowed the imperial elite, followed by the nationalists and then the communists, to point to a fictional enemy capable of becoming the object of projected fears, i.e. opium became a scapegoat. People were constantly reminded that it

was introduced by the imperialist powers seeking to sever the country from its own strength, and they were assured that it turned its devotees into dependent, weak and depraved victims. According to the authors of this book, opium thus became the central rallying point around which affirmations of social unity could be made, while the opium addict, through his dependence on the pernicious imperialists, emerged as the negative entity against which the national identity could be positively defined. The opium addict became increasingly the incarnation of everything negative: the weakling, the degenerate, the slave to his habit and to the imperialists, the thief, the brawler, and lowest of all, the impotent robbed of future descendants. Accused of driving the Chinese race to extinction, opium became the object of increasingly radical pronouncements and increasingly harsh campaigns, throughout the 1930s. The mission which now fell to those responsible for constructing and circulating these images of opium dependency, was the moral remoulding, as well as the medical cure, of the smoker.

- 9 The seventh and following chapters deal with the development of detoxification cures and the establishment of treatment centres, which were initiated by the missionaries and the Qing authorities at the end of the imperial epoch, and continued by the republicans up to the Second World War. But the pronouncements and campaigns for the prohibition of opium aggravated the very ills that they were supposed to cure, mostly by making new substances available and introducing modes of consumption that were far more dangerous than smoking the drug. Heroin and cocaine were distributed free of charge by the Protestant clinics, and sometimes they were mixed with highly toxic substances, even deadly ones like arsenic, atropine or strychnine. These substances, which could be sniffed or chewed or injected, gave the former opium smoker the chance of taking a drug without smoking it, thereby avoiding the attention of the authorities. The treatment centres operated along the lines of prisons, and led to the social exclusion of the opium smoker, especially since his criminalisation and persecution was part of the official policy of the Chiang Kai-shek regime. In the 1930s, opium smoking was the principal reason for incarceration.
- 10 In sum, this volume demonstrates that, although opium was a relatively benign substance, especially when it was taken in moderation, as was the case in China, the transition from a culture which tolerated its use to a system of radical prohibition produced catastrophic results. In the first three decades of the twentieth century, the Chinese market was flooded with far more toxic substances. At the same time, new modes of consumption were introduced, especially injection which, although extremely dangerous, was encouraged by official campaigns. The authors argue that the prohibition campaigns caused many more deaths than the habit of smoking opium.
- 11 Two criticisms could be made of this rich and highly readable work. The translations of the term *shanghan* by “typhoid fever” and of *wenyi* by “plague” on page 77, are off the mark. In pre-scientific Chinese medicine, these two terms covered a whole nosology which cannot easily be made to correspond retrospectively to specific illnesses in the modern lexicon. The other criticism is that, contrary to the argument on page 84 concerning the difficulties of proving that betel was probably used widely in China, local gazetteers (*fangzhi*) and especially those from southern China, all mention its use, under the heading of customs (*fengsu*).