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David Serfass

► **To cite this version:**

David Serfass. Opium in Republican China: Political Challenges and Social Practices [Review of: Xavier Paulès, Histoire d'une drogue en sursis. L'opium à Canton, 1906-1936 [History of a drug condemned. Opium in Canton, 1906-1936], Paris, Éditions de l'EHESS, 2010]. Books and Ideas, 2011. hal-04356271

**HAL Id: hal-04356271**

**<https://hal.science/hal-04356271>**

Submitted on 20 Dec 2023

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**Opium in Republican China**  
**Political challenges and social practices**

David SERFASS

**Opium was a constant feature of the power struggles which affected Republican China, and is often perceived as one of the main social problems of the period. Xavier Paulès' complete re-assessment of the issue is thought-provoking, and he challenges a number of received ideas in his monograph on the town of Canton.**

Reviewed: Xavier Paulès, *Histoire d'une drogue en sursis. L'opium à Canton, 1906-1936* [History of a drug condemned. Opium in Canton, 1906-1936], Paris, Éditions de l'EHESS, 2010, 24 €.

As a symbol of decadence and the “sick man” that China became from the middle of the 19th century, opium has been well-chartered by historians – or so it seems. Xavier Paulès refutes this impression however in an essay taken from his thesis which was written in 2005.<sup>1</sup> He puts forward his arguments in a monograph on the town of Canton, continuing with the work of the French school: Paulès' predecessors – Marie-Claire Bergère and Christian Henriot in particular – produced the landmark work for the history of that period of urban China.

The author's choice to narrow down the geographical scope of his study is the result of the objective he sets himself: to examine the issue of opium “from all angles” (p. 21). Although much has been published on opium in China, both in Asia and in the West, not one study has attempted to investigate both sides of the issue – supply and demand – i.e. the supply and distribution of opium on the one hand, and the consumption of opium on the other. Most studies have focussed on supply, and have not therefore been able to calculate the real

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<sup>1</sup> Xavier Paulès, *L'opium à Canton 1912-1937. Essai de mainmise politique et pratiques sociales* [Opium in Canton 1912-1937. Essay on political control and social practices], doctoral thesis, University of Lyon II, 2005.

social impact of opium, because they have tended to overestimate it from the outset. With this diplomatic and political history as a background, in the mid-1990s it became fashionable to deconstruct the myth of the opium addict by relativising the impact of the “drug” – a problematic term because of its negative connotations – on the health of opium users and on Chinese society as a whole.

Working at the intersection between these two approaches, Xavier Paulès focuses on the town of Canton (Guangzhou) – located near the outposts of Hong Kong (British) and Macao (Portuguese) – which played a key role in the unrest in China at the end of the empire. Rather than restricting his study to the Republican period (1912-1949), Xavier Paulès steps outside this chronological framework and begins his essay with the anti-opium edict of 1906. This edict was a turning point, the beginning of a gradual decline as opium became a “drug condemned” from this point onwards. In 1936, the policy to eliminate opium in Canton became part of a national policy launched by Nanjing, marking the end of a period in which successive local authorities had faced the same dilemma: finding a balance between opium and legitimacy.

### **Opium and Legitimacy**

The first “opium war” (1839-1842) was triggered when the imperial envoy Lin Zexu destroyed the English merchants’ stocks of opium in 1839. After this war, China was forced to sign a series of unequal treaties with the imperialist powers. Yet by the end of the century, Indian opium – which was exported by the British – had been replaced by Chinese opium production. The Chinese implemented a proactive policy from 1906 onwards, which they carried out alongside the agreements signed with Great Britain: the British committed to gradually reducing Indian opium exports, provided that the Empire reduced local production at the same time. The imperial authorities, supported by the elite in Canton, drew up an ingenious plan. Opium dens were closed and each smoker was given a permit stipulating the quantity of opium that he was allowed to consume. When the permit was renewed every year, the permitted quantity was reduced, ensuring that the smokers could gradually be weaned off the drug. However, the fall of the Empire in 1911, and the resulting loss of authority by the central government, meant that this policy was not carried through to a successful conclusion.

Xavier Paulès argues that the approach of the local authorities during the Republican period can be divided into two broad phases. The first phase (1912-1923) saw an increase in a

softer approach to opium. The energetic action taken by the revolutionaries – whose administration imposed a strict ban on opium consumption – came to nothing as a result of the authoritarian clampdown by Yuan Shikai's central government. Long Jiguang, the government's representative in Canton, set up an opium monopoly in 1915, and used this monopoly to evade control from Beijing. He was driven out of office the following year by militarists from the old Guangxi clique. Without pursuing the same policy, these militarists quietly supported the contraband trade of opium to their own gain. Chen Jiongming's conquest of Canton at the end of 1920 marked the beginning of a brief period when opium and gambling were banned completely. Chen acquired a certain level of legitimacy by giving up the tax revenues derived from opium and gambling, but it weakened his power to such an extent that he was unable to withstand the assault of a coalition led by Sun Yat-sen in 1923.

Xavier Paulès describes the second phase (1923-1936) as a time when the organisation and control of the drug networks were improved in order to maximise revenue (p. 95). The system – which had been set up over the course of the previous decade and had become unstable due to the successive power struggles involving the different factions that took control of the town – was improved to provide a major tax resource. This tax made a significant contribution to funding Jiang Jieshi's (Chiang Kai-shek's) Northern Expedition (*Beifa*) in 1926. From 1929 to 1931 opium revenue in Canton was controlled by the new central government in Nanjing. From 1931 until 1936 however, this revenue was appropriated by the local authority of Chen Jitang who was hostile to Jiang.

Xavier Paulès questions the simplistic conclusions that many historians have drawn from this picture. Historians have argued that the policy of opium prohibition which was launched in 1906 was followed by a period when the warlords legalised opium regardless of the cost. Xavier Paulès challenges this received idea, showing that although the local authorities could never have given up opium revenue without being in danger of undermining their authority, they were certainly aware of the “political cost of opium” (p. 129). In a context of incessant political and military struggles, the powerful man of the moment sought to bolster both his finances and legitimacy by taking control of an opium ring while at the same time launching a new plan for a gradual ban on opium. So in fact the policy of prohibition which was devised at the beginning of the century, with its permits and clinics to wean people off opium, served as a model throughout the Republican period. This paradoxical approach is evident in the terminology used at the time: the monopoly of 1915

marketed a product known as *yaogao* (medicinal mixture) because it contained a substance which was supposed to make it easier for people to give up opium (p. 77); the administration responsible for managing opium was called *Jinyanju* (Department for the prohibition of opium). So although the anti-opium rhetoric was ineffective, it certainly served some purpose given that it kept criticisms regarding power to a minimum.

It is not surprising therefore that anti-opium propaganda was issued throughout the period. Propaganda proved to be an effective means of stigmatising opium smokers, enclosing them in what Xavier Paulès calls a “pejorative system” (p. 227) that associated opium with images of death and poverty. This propaganda was circulated by a specialist press, including the magazine *Judu yuekan* (monthly magazine for the eradication of drugs) which published a number of illustrations reproduced in the central part of the book. One of the successes of this series of illustrations was that it managed to impose a lasting image of an opium addict as a “skull-like man” with a skeletal body – an image of illness and poverty – when in fact the majority of smokers did not noticeably lose weight and consumed opium in moderation without becoming addicted to the drug. In the absence of a pro-opium opinion, this propaganda was able to shape the way in which opium smokers were portrayed. The narrative associating opium and deprivation became increasingly true as the privileged sections of society started to avoid opium as a result of this discourse.

### **The Scourge of Society?**

Although opium was commonly considered to be one of the main problems in society at the time, Xavier Paulès’ analysis of the anti-opium discourse leads him to question how serious the situation actually was. Together, his account of opium supply and opium demand comprise a thorough sociological study that examines both the practices of opium smokers and the issue of how many smokers there were.

Between the rich merchants who smoked top quality Indian opium with a collector’s pipe in a private room in a luxury opium den, and the rickshaw pullers who reduced their withdrawal symptoms in-between jobs by smoking a mixture made from opium residue (*yantiao*) in a miserable hut, there were a wide range of practices, places and types of people. The author highlights the fact that there was a group of smokers in between these two extremes that used local opium dens. It is difficult to define the typical opium smoker precisely because, contrary to the impression given by the propaganda, there was not exactly a

population of opium addicts cut off from the rest of society. The author suggests that there could have been a “*continuum*” (p. 246) between opium smokers and non-smokers. As a result, in which category should one put casual smokers?

As regards the actual process of smoking opium, Paulès underlines the fact that this was a sophisticated rite that smokers liked to perform in a group and in moderation. Naturally there were cases of solitary smokers who were addicted to the drug, but Paulès’ estimates suggest that on average, the majority of smokers consumed relatively small quantities of opium. The choice to consume opium in a group was not simply a result of the fact that the Cantonese enjoyed having discussions over a pipe of opium; “distinction strategies” (p. 23) also played a part. This Bourdieusian concept applied to the opium dens which were places for socialising. The floor of the building on which people smoked, the type of opium they used, and even the services of a desirable hostess were all external signs which provided a clear indication of the smokers’ position in the social hierarchy.

Smoking opium was a pastime for the elite at the beginning of the nineteenth century because it was prohibitively expensive, but it gradually spread to all sections of society. Due to opium’s role as a social marker, and, as we have seen, due to propaganda, opium consumption decreased among the elite as it increased among the lower echelons of society. This sociological development tallies with an overall decrease in opium consumption over the course of the Republican period. Using figures which are admittedly vague, Xavier Paulès estimates that less than 4% of the Cantonese population smoked opium at the end of the period, as opposed to more than 15% of the population in the 1890s.

As opium became marginalised in society, so opium dens were marginalised in spatial terms to the outlying areas of the town. The author devotes a whole chapter to the “Geography of consumption” (pp. 137-170), showing how a mental map was superimposed onto the real map of opium in Canton, which contributed to the process of relegating opium to the margins of society.

Although opium did ruin some people both materially and physically, it was not a major social problem for the whole town. The fact that this image of ruin remains is in large part due to the anti-opium discourse which influenced both how opium was portrayed and actual opium practices.

Xavier Paulès's re-assessment of the opium issue in Republican China, using the example of Canton, characterises the period as a time when opium consumption decreased – a process which began in 1906 and was completed by the communists. In this work, as in other areas of study, the year 1949 no longer appears as the clean break which had been described in the historiography, which had been overwhelmed by the revolution paradigm for so long.

Shedding light on this process is not always an easy task. Although Xavier Paulès uses a wide range of sources – diplomatic archives, Chinese and Japanese publications of the time, the press, and even eyewitness accounts – he is often forced to put forward hypotheses based not on what the sources say, but on what they don't say. This is all the more to his credit: Xavier Paulès is able to fill in the gaps between scraps of information in order to re-create – through a clear argument which is supported with a comprehensive system of notes – a convincing picture of all aspects of opium in Canton.

#### **For Further Reading:**

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First published in [laviedesidees.fr](http://laviedesidees.fr). Translated from French by **Rebecca Atkinson**.

Published in [booksandideas.net](http://booksandideas.net), 16 May 2011.

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