Two Accounts of Dependence: Class, Drug, and the Canton Opium Trade, 1834 to the Late 1840s

Keaton Pregozen, Department of Sociology, UC Berkeley

Extended abstract (draft) for the Anticolonial Workshop, November 13, 2026

Claim and Question

This paper asks how 'addiction' became a general category for opium users in the 19th-century Canton trade. The answer (because one can clearly see they were addicted to opium!) seems obvious until one lays out the positions involved:

- British merchants and officials with trade at stake
- Qing officials keeping the balance between silver flight and maintaining social order
- Chinese intermediaries who carried the trade
- Translators, missionaries, and temperance writers who moved descriptions between them

I am working on a story in which, between approximately 1834 (the end of the East India Company's monopoly on the China trade) and the late 1840s (aftermath of the end of the First Opium War and abolition of the Cohong), two accounts of dependence with incompatible implications circulated side by side. One made harm conditional on the user's class position, so that, on this reading, the wealthy habitual user escapes ruin. The other located the harm in the drug itself, so that it applied to every user and added up to a problem for whole populations. An 1839 pamphlet, for example, prints both: a reprint of Medhurst's account of ruin only following a fall in income, and a quote of a British merchant for whom smoking itself is the sin (Thelwall 1839). This paper asks how the second came to carry more weight in some sources by the 1840s (Zheng [2005] reports missionaries taking every smoker for an addict) and what the structure of the opium *trade* can and cannot explain about that shift.

Trocki argues that population-scale opium dependence was unprecedented in China before the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and that individual dependence had been recognized as harmful in the late seventeenth century without being seen as a social problem (Trocki 1999, 25-26). Qing writers had already named individual dependence: by the early nineteenth century the word *yin* described the craving, and in 1831 the censor Liu Guangsan called it an illness contracted from long smoking and fatal if not "satisfied" at the proper time (Caquet 2022, 29). A concept of opium dependence as a social problem presupposes dependence

at the scale of a population, so it would have lacked a referent until such dependence took root.[1] That inference should be tested against the record. A Fujian official wrote in 1729 that opium smoking was “like an epidemic” in Zhangzhou (Zheng 2005, 46), which may look like a counterexample, but it describes the spread of a behavior through opium traffic, not individuals’ dependence.

I hypothesize that the general account gained salience as opium trade grew outside the state-licensed channel for foreign commerce and as that channel lost its financial base after 1834. This is a hypothesis to test, not a result. The shift is overdetermined, and this paper does not claim a complete causal account. I analyze one strand – the structure of the trade (who governed it, and how) – and read the pattern conjuncturally, as overlapping residual and emergent formations (Williams 1977). That lets me leave open whether the universalizing account later became dominant, and in which direction such categories traveled between China and Britain.

Class-Coded Concepts

Qing sources of the 1830s describe the same habit in more than one way. The Jiaqing Emperor complained in 1813 that opium had once been confined to "city rascals" but now reached "attendants, guards and officials" (Zheng 2005, 58). Xu Naiji, a prominent official, wrote in 1836 that long-time users "clearly see the evil effects of it, yet cannot refrain from it," and that severe prohibitions seemed necessary against "so vile a practice" (Cheng et al. 1999, 111). In the Chinese Repository's translation, the same memorial calls smokers "idle, lazy vagrants" (Zheng 2005, 95). Zheng reads this as a political redefinition: when scholars and officials smoked, opium was cultured, and when the lower classes smoked, it became degrading and ultimately criminal (3, 88-89). Her example is Xu Zhongyuan, who condemned "reckless youngsters" while granting that "gentlemen have also succumbed" (88). Huang Juezi described use spreading from "pampered sons of fortune" to officers, gentry, and laborers (95), and Jiang Xiangnan estimated that 10 to 20 percent of central officials and 20 to 30 percent of local officials smoked (96), which Zheng judges closest to the reality. Qing law already had precedent to distinguish offenders by status, since bannermen and civilians were punished differently (Hu 2013, 28, 44). I

[1] This account is disputed. Dikötter, Laamann, and Zhou (2007) question the image of China as an “opium slave,” which they describe as the cornerstone of the 20th-century anti-opium movement and as underpinning the legitimacy of today’s war on drugs. They argue elsewhere that recreational use drew little more than “moral opprobrium” until the end of the nineteenth century (Dikötter et al. 2002). This paper does not need to settle the question of the scale of use; rather, it asks how a general category of dependence came to be applied. Such a question accords with the authors' attention to class-specific meanings of consumption (2002, 323).

have not yet determined whether Qing opium law drew class lines, nor whether the harsh punishments prescribed (Caquet [2022] cites the Daoguang Emperor's 1839 edict that "opium cultivation, refining, trafficking and warehousing would all be punished by decapitation... 'as a warning to all'") were administered equally across class lines.

The Rupture

By 1821, the opium trade had moved outside the arrangement through which the Hong merchants (the imperially licensed Chinese merchants who handled most of Canton's legal foreign trade) vouched for foreign ships. After a petition from Ye Hengshu, who informed on an opium-carrying vessel, Hong merchants had to sign bonds that no foreign vessel entering Canton carried opium, and subsequently the receiving ships anchored at Lintin, an island outside the main port (Harris 2018, 83). After the prohibition of 1799, Hong merchants had direct dealings in opium on only one or two isolated occasions (Greenberg 1951, 60). Inside China, Guangdong and Fujian guilds monopolized wholesale and long-distance distribution (Zheng 2005, 67), and Jardine's comprador Ahee sold opium to procure tea near Wuyi (68).

The Hong merchants' problem was financial, not opium. The Qing licensed them and punished their failure: bankruptcy was "degrading and even criminal," and a bankrupt Hong merchant was generally exiled to Ili, in what is now Xinjiang (Greenberg 1951, 61). Yet foreign creditors, including British and Indian investors, financed them at high interest (Greenberg 1951, 63-64), and the East India Company advanced funds so that weaker Hongs could meet the Qing government's demands for duties (62-63). Insolvency crises came in 1810-15, 1827-9, and 1836-7 (62-63). The Hong therefore depended on the Qing for their license and on foreign credit for their solvency. After the Company lost its monopoly in 1834, the foreign support weakened: no Select Committee stood behind them, over a hundred tea-men, the middlemen who supplied their black tea, demanded cash or security, and Jardine and other buyers dealt with the tea-men directly (189-90). The Hengtai Hong then failed, owing $2,261,000 (190). Meanwhile, imports of opium rose from 4,244 chests in 1820 to 40,200 in 1839 (Zheng 2005, 71).

I read these developments as two processes. Opium left the licensed channel by 1821 and the trade grew around it; separately, the licensed channel lost its financial base after 1834. The war restructured the trade on Western terms, but it arose from a prior imbalance in the trade structure (Zhuang Guotu 1993, 10), and Zheng ties the 1830s consumer trend to the end of the Company's monopoly (2005, 92), although her own series was already rising from 1820 (71).

The war therefore formalized changes already under way. I do not yet have a mechanism linking this to the change in how dependence was described. One candidate is a shift in the object of governance from classes of persons to the trade itself, which the next round of sources can test.

The War Debate and After

By the British debate over the war, a notion of a habit that grows with use was in circulation. The Chinese Repository printed accounts of the stages of the opium habit, and the Quarterly Review described an appetite that "grows by what it feeds on" (Caquet 2015, 1016). Even politicians who would not act against the trade did not deny the harm: Hobhouse pointed to the "demoralising effects" Parliament had long known, and Staunton called the drug "pernicious" (1019). War partisans shifted the blame onto Chinese officials and the emperor's concern for silver (1019). Pamphlets then reused Qing material in a general account. Thelwall (1839) sets Xu's memorial beside reports of users in Turkey, Syria, Java, and Canton, so that the opium victim becomes one figure across places. Class does not drop out at once: Medhurst's passage ties ruin to falling income, and the Sunqua paintings make the wealthy smoker the source of refuse for poorer victims, but the merchant Thelwall quotes makes the act itself the sin. Later, Zheng reports, missionaries took every smoker for an addict and focused on the poorest (2005, 97-98). Zheng's own judgment is that such writers misrepresented consumption by focusing on the worst cases and the poorest, claiming that their work would mislead later historians (98). It is unclear who carried the general account from the Repository and the pamphlets into this later, religiously charged writing; this evidence has still to be collected.

Relation to Colonial Theory

Canton before 1842 was a Qing-managed system, not an informal empire in Osterhammel's sense. Its trade ran on negotiated regularity between Qing officials and foreign traders (Van Dyke 2012, 8). Osterhammel's ideal type has a stronger power that avoids direct rule while holding effective veto over the weaker state's domestic policy, a foreign military presence, a substantial foreign business establishment, and collaboration by indigenous rulers and comprador groups (Osterhammel 1986, 297). Several phenomena on Osterhammel's list of imperialist features in China appear in my sources only with the war, such as indemnity obligations (Morse [1926] 2010, 73; Osterhammel 1986, 290). Others appear earlier, such as foreign agency houses (301-2), missionary activity (290), and indigenous intermediaries like Jardine's comprador Ahee (Zheng 2005, 68). Osterhammel's model of a business segment and a

political-military segment mediating between indigenous and international environments (308) gives a way to sort the four positions listed in section 1: British merchants fall in the business segment and officials on the spot, such as Captain Elliot (Greenberg 1951, 206, 211), in the political-military segment; Qing officials belong to the indigenous environment; Chinese intermediaries are the collaborating groups of the ideal type (297); and translators, missionaries, and temperance writers carry descriptions between the environments. I use the informal empire concept descriptively: the chapter's case is twentieth-century China, and Osterhammel says the model merely structures evidence and leaves the interpretation to further theory (309). I also do not claim that Canton fit the colonial mode of production, a concept built for colonized societies (Bou Ali 2020, 249, 260). I do, however, borrow Mahdi Amel's question about how categories that seem natural, such as addiction, emerge from a structure of dependence (247, 253).

Questions for the group

1. The Hong depended on the Qing for their license and on foreign creditors for their solvency. Which dependence matters more for understanding the break, and why?

   After the war, the Treaty of Nanking charged China three million dollars for Hong debts owed to British subjects (Morse [1926] 2010, 73). Does that suggest that the Hong's two dependences were already linked through the state?
2. Are the two accounts of opium dependence incompatible, or can a reader reconcile them?
3. Is "informal empire" the right frame for the post-1842 relation? If not, what alternative approaches might you suggest?

References

Bou Ali, Nadia. 2020. “Mahdi Amel’s Colonial Mode of Production and Politics in the Last Instance.” *Critical Historical Studies* 7 (2): 241–69. https://doi.org/10.1086/710800.

Caquet, P. E. 2015. “Notions of Addiction in the Time of the First Opium War.” *The Historical Journal* 58 (4): 1009–29. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X14000739.

Caquet, P. E. 2022. *Opium’s Orphans: The 200-Year History of the War on Drugs*. Reaktion Books.

Cheng, Pei-kai, Michael Elliot Lestz, and Jonathan D. Spence, eds. 1999. *The Search for Modern China: A Documentary Collection*. 1. ed. Norton.

Dikötter, Frank, Lars Laamann, and Zhou Xun. 2002. “Narcotic Culture: A Social History of Drug Consumption in China.” *The British Journal of Criminology* 42 (2): 317–36.

Dikötter, Frank, Lars Laamann, and Xun Zhou. 2007. “China, British Imperialism and the Myth of the ‘Opium Plague.’” In *Drugs and Empires: Essays in Modern Imperialism and Intoxication, c.1500-c.1930*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Greenberg, Michael. (1951) 2008. *British Trade and the Opening of China 1800-42*. Cambridge Studies in Economic History. Reprint. Cambridge Univ. Press.

Harris, Lane Jeremy. 2018. *The Peking Gazette: A Reader in Nineteenth-Century Chinese History*. Brill.

Hu, Xiangyu. 2013. “Reinstating the Authority of the Five Punishments: A New Perspective on Legal Privilege for Bannermen.” *Late Imperial China* 34 (2): 28–51. https://doi.org/10.1353/late.2013.0006.

Morse, Hosea Ballou. (1926) 2010. *The Gilds of China: With an Account of the Gild Merchant or Co-Hong of Canton*. Kessinger Publishing.

Osterhammel, Jürgen. 1986. “Semi-Colonialism and Informal Empire in Twentieth-Century China: Towards a Framework of Analysis.” In *Imperialism and After: Continuities and Discontinuities*, edited by Wolfgang J. Mommsen. Allen & Unwin.

Thelwall, A. S. (Algernon Sydney). 1839. *The Iniquities of the Opium Trade with China: Being a Development of the Main Causes Which Exclude the Merchants of Great Britain from the Advantages of an Unrestricted Commercial Intercourse with That Vast Empire : With Extracts from Authentic Documents*. With University of California Libraries. London : W.H. Allen. http://archive.org/details/iniquitiesofopiu00thelrich.

Trocki, Carl. 1999. *Opium Empire and the Global Political Economy*. Asia’s Transformations. Taylor and Francis.

Van Dyke, Paul Arthur. 2012. *The Canton Trade: Life and Enterprise on the China Coast, 1700-1845*. Repr. Hong Kong University Press.

Williams, Raymond. 1977. *Marxism and Literature*. Marxist Introductions. Oxford University Press.

Zheng, Yangwen. 2005. *The Social Life of Opium in China*. Cambridge University Press.

Zhuang Guotu. 1993. “Tea, Silver, Opium and War: From Commercial Expansion to Military Invasion.” *Itinerario* 17 (2): 10–36. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0165115300024384.