

*Narcotic Culture: A History of Drugs in China.* By Frank Dikötter, Lars Laamann, and Zhou Xun. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004. vii + 319 pp. Index, notes, bibliography, glossary, illustrations, photographs. Cloth, \$35.00. ISBN: 0-226-14905-6.

Reviewed by Kristin Stapleton

This book sets out to destroy what the authors see as a pernicious myth created by Christian missionaries and nationalists in the late nineteenth century and accepted by most historians of China today: the claim that opium undermined Chinese society and weakened the Qing empire (1644–1911). Although I suspect that few readers will be entirely convinced by their arguments, the authors have marshaled an impressive amount of evidence, and they make a forceful case. Clearly, by putting forth statements such as “The Qing waged the world’s first war on drugs” (p. 110), the authors hope to contribute to current debates on drug policy in Europe and the United States. The “narcophobia” rampant in the world today, the authors argue, originated around the turn of the twentieth century, fueled by the image of an opium-besotted China. The book’s central aim is to show that this image was fallacious and that opium prohibition was more harmful to China than opium itself.

Their argument, which is clearly presented, runs like this: opium smoking emerged in eighteenth-century China after tobacco smoking had become established and at a time when supplies of high-quality opium were increasing. The burning of herbs to produce smoke had a positive cultural value from the indigenous medical tradition, and opium was used in elaborate rituals that served the purpose of conspicuous consumption in a status-conscious era. This form of consumption, which resulted in little physical harm according to medical studies of the time, ensured that excessive use was rare. By the late nineteenth century, its use had become widespread, and “opium served as a refreshing tonic for hardworking men and women” (p. 69) as well as their favored treatment for a range of illnesses. Meanwhile, however, missionaries and nationalists began to identify opium as China’s scourge. Missionaries habitually confused the symptoms poor laborers were trying to ease by smoking opium with the effects of the drug itself. Nationalists made use of opium campaigns as a way to unite the country

against imperialist foreigners. The prohibition movements of the twentieth century caused immeasurable damage, depriving people of their most effective medicine, criminalizing users, creating a gangster-controlled black market, and promoting the spread of more dangerous drugs, such as heroin.

The book, with 56 pages of notes and 36 pages of bibliography to document 211 pages of text, is intended to be authoritative. The authors have clearly done a considerable amount of research. Still, the evidence for their core argument that prohibition was responsible for more harm to the Chinese than widespread opium consumption is not conclusive. On the authors' own admission, statistics on consumption are meager. While they introduce many first-hand accounts by foreign observers, they also rightly observe that these foreigners had an interest in the question. They do not tell us why the writings of foreigners who considered opium not to be a problem are more believable than the opinions of those who thought it was ripping apart the social fabric. More careful analysis of the credibility of each piece of evidence would have made their argument more convincing.

Their argument is further undermined by uncritical inclusion of fanciful accounts of opium's benefits. In a few places, the authors overstate the case to the level of absurdity, as when they remark, "Since the entire province [Guizhou] had only one public hospital with ten beds before the 1940s, self-medication through opium was the only effective solace for pain and disease" (p. 171). In reality, thousands of traditional medical practitioners in 1940s Guizhou used a rich store of remedies for treating pain and disease.

A quick perusal of modern Chinese-history textbooks confirms the authors' view that opium continues to be represented as having been harmful to China. In one typical text, the second edition of *Revolution and its Past: Identities and Change in Modern Chinese History* (2006), R. Keith Schoppa points to two issues that *Narcotic Culture* barely touches on: the impact of opium consumption on the prestige and effectiveness of the Qing military and bureaucracy, and its effect on the household budgets of individuals (pp. 51–54). Were many nineteenth-century Qing soldiers and bureaucrats so incapacitated by opium as to be ineffective in battle and in administration, respectively? Did heads of households starve themselves and their families in order to participate in the

seductive culture of opium? According to the nationalists and missionaries, the answer to both claims was yes, and most textbooks accept that conclusion.

*Narcotic Culture* responds to the suggestion that opium undermined the Qing military and its bureaucracy with a general argument: most opium consumption was moderate and thus had little effect on users. The authors refer to the claim that men ruined their families for opium, only to dismiss it as a product of rising narcophobia (p. 112). In the absence of reliable data on patterns of consumption, however, their conclusion seems premature.

Whether historians will ever be able to provide a convincing account of opium's impact on China is not clear. But this overlooked issue certainly deserves to be raised, and *Narcotic Culture* does so in an engaging way. The book is also useful for other reasons: its demonstration of how the rise of opium use in China occurred in the context of a "global spread of psychoactive substances," and its comparison of Chinese methods of consumption with modes that were popular in India and Britain (p. 10). The section on cures, which, they point out, often involved substances containing a large amount of opium, is particularly interesting. Later chapters explore the proliferation of other drugs, culminating in a brief discussion of the "modern drug," nicotine.

Regrettably, the views of Chinese drug users are rarely recorded in these pages. The only vivid personal accounts of opium's effects come from famous Western users, such as Jean Cocteau and Emily Hahn. Relatively little attention is paid to the effects of opium consumption and prohibition on women. The book's lively accounts sometimes veer into sloppiness, as when Commodore Perry is described as arriving in Japan in 1868, when in reality he had steamed into Edo Bay fifteen years earlier.

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