

Book Review

Xavier Paulès, *Living on Borrowed Time: Opium in Canton, 1906-1936*, trans. Noel Castelino (Berkeley: Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California, Berkeley, 2017), pp. x, 334.

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Living on Borrowed Time: Opium in Canton, 1906-1936 is a fluid translation of author Xavier Paulès's 2010 French-language monograph *Histoire d'une drogue en sursis*. This work examines the phenomenon of drug consumption against the backdrop of prohibition, as well as nation-building, imperialism, war, and other early trends in early twentieth-century China.

Appearing seven years after the French original and a decade after the latest citations in its bibliography (with the exception of Paulès's own writings), *Living on Borrowed Time* opens with a few outdated or overstated historiographical assertions. Paulès claims, for instance, that both Western and Chinese historians of opium in China have focused almost exclusively on diplomatic developments. Yet thanks to scholars such as Yangwen Zheng (2005) and Xiaoxiong Li (2009), the study of social and cultural aspects of drugs has advanced a great deal in recent years. Similarly, Paulès critiques the field for emphasizing the nineteenth century (particularly the years around the Opium Wars) at the expense of the twentieth. However, the decades leading up to and including the Republican period (1911-1949) have been well covered by Zhou Yongming (1999), Edward Slack (2000), and Alan Baumler (2007). Meanwhile, scholarship by Frank Dikötter (2004), Norman Smith (2012), and Guy Ramsay (2016) belies the contention that “no interest has been

shown in consumption.”¹ Nevertheless, the fact that historians have already begun to round out the picture of drug use in twentieth-century China is all the more reason to welcome Paulès’s contribution.

As the author argues in a straightforward introduction, the lack of reliable sources and vast contrasts at the regional, provincial, and even local level confound the examination of a topic as broad as opium in national terms. Instead, Paulès offers an urban study as a building block for illuminating consumption in China as a whole. As the geographic focus of the work, he chooses Canton (present-day Guangzhou). In the early twentieth century, Canton was the largest city in southern China. Unlike most other treaty ports, it was a cohesive unit with relatively little area given up as foreign concessions. Canton was vitally connected to its hinterland in Guangdong Province and beyond, and to the neighboring metropolises of Macau and Hong Kong. As such, it was a gateway to Western ideas and influences. Moreover, though the scholarly literature on Canton does not approach the scale or depth of that devoted to Shanghai, figures such as Virgil Ho, Michael Tsin, and others have worked to uncover the distinctive urban patterns of coastal south China. Paulès contributes to this literature as well, using opium as “a transversal subject par excellence” for probing the stratigraphy of Cantonese society.²

Before arriving at the central issue of drug use, the book devotes three chapters, or approximately half its overall length, to the global and national context that informed local developments in Canton. China scholars who have not engaged significantly with the history of opium will appreciate Paulès’s comprehensive treatment of the pharmacology and preparation of the drug, its discovery and early history, and the dynamics and challenges of prohibition. From the nineteenth century on, successive Chinese governments wished to claim moral legitimacy and improve public health and the national reputation by eradicating opium. However, in times of fiscal difficulty, leaders reluctantly abandoned this goal and repeatedly turned to a state-run monopoly system as a means of generating revenue. Rather than enacting a comprehensive ban on the drug, they sold permits for legal distribution, thus giving rise to a distinction between “licit” opium offered by licensed vendors, and “illicit” opium marketed outside the regulatory system.

Having established this background, Paulès tackles the issue of consumption. As drug historians commonly find, extant primary sources often do not allow the historian to track the use of banned substances by ordinary people. Paulès turns primarily to newspapers as a lens on public attitudes towards opium in an age of rapid media development. During the years under consideration, the *Yuehuabao*, Canton's leading daily newspaper, published approximately 350 opium-related articles, including news briefs, personal accounts, and editorials. Additional sources include other local and national newspapers, journals, and magazines; literary and sociological accounts; oral histories; *wenshi ziliao* (literary and historical materials); and various diplomatic and urban, provincial, and national archives in China, France, and beyond.

Living on Borrowed Time organizes its discussion of drug consumption on an elegantly narrowing scale, from the city to the smoking space to the public habitus, moral outlook, and demographic profile of the user population. The scene is set through an original and productive exploration of the various types and distribution of smoking establishments. These included the home (particularly for wealthy users), hotels, teahouses, restaurants, brothels, gambling parlors, *julebu* (clubs), and "opium houses," sometimes referred to pejoratively as dens. Paulès estimates the number of opium houses operating in mid-1930s Canton at about 350, or approximately one per 2,000 persons. Legal opium houses were concentrated in the foreigner-heavy district of Honam, while illegal operations flourished on the outskirts of the city. This division tended to reinforce the marginality of the periphery—in Paulès's words, "the manifestation in the spatial register of the powerful thrust toward pushing opium to the fringes."³ Maps showing the placement of legal and illegal opium houses and their density relative to the population help the reader to follow the terrestrial progress of drug from the 1910s through the 1930s.

From the distribution of smoking throughout the city, Paulès constricts his focus to the activities within the opium house. Historians have conventionally depicted these institutions as either luxurious palaces or sordid dens, the "lairs of the Canton mobsters."⁴ Paulès, by contrast, finds that levels of violence and criminality generally reflected

those of the city at large. In his depiction, opium houses typically served as spaces for escape, relaxation, and sociability for adult men in the hours following the workday. These institutions were also ephemeral, springing up and vanishing virtually overnight due both to low start-up costs (except at the upper register of the market) and to high taxes, which often allocated more revenue to the state than to the owner. However, for the women staff (the so-called *yanhua*, or “smoke flowers”) who prepared and served the drug, the opium house sometimes offered opportunities to earn a “decent” living and escape poverty and prostitution.

From the opium house, Paulès narrows his gaze to the opium smoker. As he writes, drug users maintained an essential material culture, moral code, and social ethos. Initially smokers (especially those among the elite) maintained the value of their habit by representing it as a luxury indicating refinement and good taste. Knowledge of drug varieties and connoisseurship of smoking paraphernalia functioned to denote the status of a gentleman. The spread of opium through the social ranks and the rise of propaganda against it (the book reproduces and discusses numerous horrifying examples) led smokers to shift their defense strategy. Echoing the newly medicalized language of “addiction,” they began to distinguish between “moderate” use characterized by self-control and sociability, and “excessive” consumption leading to degeneracy, emaciation, and ruin. Following the 1911 revolution that replaced the Qing monarchy with a republican government, however, the nation turned so resolutely against opium that even this justification of smoking became impossible. Users maintained their habit privately but ceased to discuss it in public.

In the final chapter, luridly entitled “An X-Ray of the Opium Smoker,” Paulès seeks to establish the scale of drug use and demographic characteristics of users. As he notes, the very category of “opium smoker” was and is difficult to delineate, given the range of consumption levels it encompassed. Including only individuals with “plausible dependency,” the author estimates a smoker population of thirty to forty thousand persons. Given that this number comprised only three to four percent of the total population of Canton in the early twentieth century, Paulès concludes, “it would be quite an exaggeration to see opium as a scourge

having a major impact on the society of the time.”⁵ Nonetheless, within certain subgroups, opium did make its impact felt. In identifying these subgroups, the records of addiction treatment clinics established in the late 1930s and early 1940s are particularly revealing. While patients were almost certainly not representative of smokers as a whole, clinics nonetheless collected interesting data not measured by other institutions. Through these and other records, Paulès ascertains that the modal smoker was a working-age male at the lower end of the socioeconomic ladder. Both in discourse and reality, rickshaw pullers, soldiers, Cantonese opera performers, and criminals were particularly numerous among drug users.

At the end of the monograph, a brief conclusion recapitulates the major findings. An appendix follows with useful paragraph-length biographies of some key actors, including not only well-known figures such as Chiang Kai-shek and Sun Yat-sen, but also local military, prohibition, and gang leaders of importance to the history of opium in Canton.

Joining a host of recent works on opium and urbanism in modern China, *Living on Borrowed Time* is a welcome contribution not only to the study of these topics, but also as a model for the close analysis of drug consumption and its social ramifications.

Notes

¹ Xavier Paulès, *Living on Borrowed Time: Opium in Canton, 1906-1936*, trans. Noel Castelino (Berkeley: Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California, Berkeley, 2017), 3.

² *Ibid.*, 12.

³ *Ibid.*, 171.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 194.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 277.