

PETER J. KITSON

Opium and Addiction in a Cross-Cultural Context:

De Quincey's 'Confessions' (1821) and the Chinese novel,

Romantic Illusions of the Fool of Yangzhou (Fengyue meng) (c. 1848)

Abstract:

This essay examines De Quincey's representation of opium 'addiction' in the cross-cultural context of Britain and China in the light of recent revisionist medical discussions of addiction and dependence, and revisionist historical writing about opium use in nineteenth-century China. De Quincey's representation of the opium user is compared to that of China's first 'city novel', *Courtesans and Opium: Romantic Illusions of the Fool of Yangzhou* believed to have been written in 1848 (trans 2009). In this complex fiction, opium smoking is presented as a largely pleasurable and common pastime which has the potential for danger if abused by the unwary. It is not connected with dreams and nightmares, or figured as a stimulus of, or analogy for, the creative imagination. It offers a fascinating view of the leisure world of nineteenth-century China, where recreational opium smoking is common and not problematic when undertaken moderately.

Keywords: Opium, De Quincey, addict, addiction, drugs, China

De Quincey's 'Confessions' 'reconceived the confessional genre and transformed our perception of drugs in ways that continue to inform current debates' putting in place narratives of the 'inexorable decline and collapse of the addict' and the terrors of withdrawal.¹ It charts a paradigmatic descent from promising literary and intellectual brilliance to addiction, penury, and destitution, followed by a promised moral reformation or death. Two hundred years after its publication in the *London Magazine*, we can affirm that

De Quincey's (and his biographers') construction of what we have come to define as the state of 'addiction' and the personae of the 'addict' has influenced later discourse about the drug and its global representation.² His narrative of 'addiction' was absorbed as medical truth by many in the nascent British medical profession.³ The anti-opium trade and missionary lobby, with their evangelical preference for temperance and sobriety, were most assiduous in exploiting depictions of the horrors of the opium habit; while the proponents of the opium trade with Qing China and their defenders were all too keen to point to how De Quincey's literary versions of the horrors of opium use had been imported.⁴ De Quincey's well-known depiction of the pains of opium and his struggle with the drug were profoundly influential in the changed understanding of drug uses from habit to disease and addiction. De Quincey's notion of addiction was, as has been argued by recent revisionist historians of China, exported by the missionary and anti-opium lobbies and assimilated into late nineteenth-century Chinese understanding of the drug and its effects, informing both late imperial and republican assessments of the drug and the formulation of twentieth-century anti-opium policies after 1906.⁵

In 'Confessions' De Quincey asked of himself the primal question, how 'came any reasonable being to subject himself to such a yoke of misery, voluntarily to incur a captivity so servile, and knowingly to fetter himself with such a seven-fold chain'.⁶ Addiction, as we understand it, is a state which manifests itself in powerful cravings and an overwhelming desire to take a drug substance. This desire is characterised as virtually irresistible, obsessional, and stronger than all other desires. It is something that has mutated from an initial, voluntary act of free will to becoming as necessary as our involuntary biological processes, such as respiration. However, the nature of De Quincey's iconic addiction, his lucid dreaming, and his traumatic withdrawal symptoms, as recounted in his 'Confessions' (1821), have always been treated with judicious scepticism despite their influential literary

and cultural impact.

This essay seeks to examine De Quincey's representation of opium 'addiction' in the cross-cultural context of Britain and China, in this recent revisionist medical and historical writing about China. Specifically, De Quincey's presentation of the opium user will be compared to that of China's first 'city novel', *Courtesans and Opium: Romantic Illusions of the Fool of Yangzhou* believed to have been written in 1848 and translated into English by Patrick Hanan in 2009.⁷ In this complex fiction, opium smoking is presented as a largely pleasurable pastime which has the potential for danger if abused by the unwary. It is not, however, connected with dreams and nightmares, or figured as a stimulus of, or analogy for, the creative imagination. *Romantic Illusions* offers a fascinating view of the leisure world of nineteenth-century China, in which recreational opium smoking is common.

Querying Addiction

Susan Zieger affirms that the historical and cultural consensus is that 'addiction is a side effect of modernity,' and that that 'with its incoherent subjects, chronic repetitions, wretched stupidity, and debilitating intransigence' it is a 'distinct burr in the side of rational Enlightenment modernity and progress' (Zeiger, 10). Alexander and Roberts argue that 'addiction emerges directly alongside modernity, haunting the various discourses of digression, dissent, and the transcendence of the commonplace so often associated with the modern era'.⁸ For poststructuralist and postmodern theorists, addiction is an exemplary state of the modern human subject. Jacques Derrida, for example, argued that the addict is stigmatised because 'he cuts himself off from the world, in exile from reality, far from objective reality and the real life of the city and the community' escaping 'into a world of simulacrum and fiction'. We cannot abide the addict taking pleasure 'in experience without truth'. When 'the sky of transcendence comes to be emptied ... a fatal rhetoric fills the void,

and this is the fetishism of drug addiction'. It is this lack of authenticity in the experience of the addict that, for Derrida, troubles us.⁹ Addiction is paradoxically a work without work, an ersatz inspiration obtained through the injection of a foreign body into the body's systems. It inhabits or haunts our modern notions of culture as repetition and alterity. Similarly, Avital Ronell regards 'addiction' as 'a certain type of "Being-on-drugs" that has everything to do with the bad conscience of our era.' It is a 'structure that is philosophically and metaphysically at the basis of our culture'.¹⁰ Such deconstructive readings echo De Quincey's experience and locate addiction within culture itself as the trace or as the absence which is necessary for the affirmation of presence of the western subject, and the negative determinism that negates the positive affirmation of modernity's alleged free will and choice. Such readings accomplish two contradictory things. On the one hand they hypostatize (or perhaps even fetishize) the special case of the 'addict' as the normative, and, perhaps, the only valid case of drug user and, on the other, they imply that this is, in effect, the exemplary, authentic inauthentic state of all subjects under late western capitalism: all of us are addicted to something.

Brodie and Redfield have detailed how the noun 'addiction' is derived from the Latin *dicere* meaning, to say or to relate. *Addictionem* is a noun of action derived from the past participle stem of *addicere*, 'to deliver, award; devote, consecrate, sacrifice'. It thus signifies 'an awarding, a delivering up'. These etymological origins of the word in roman law show that it held the primary significance of a giving (gifting) or binding over of someone or something. This came to signify the surrender of a person as slave to a master.¹¹ The legal notion of 'binding' is thus linguistically and metaphorically carried over to describe a compulsive need for something, and from thence to the modern medical usage of a compulsion to take a drug substance. The OED records the first use of the term 'addiction' in this specialised drug context as occurring in 1881 and the first modern usage of 'addict' in

1905 to describe the state of a person compelled to take drugs. This process was informed by a new ‘disease model’ of drug abuse in which ‘the old moral view of opium eating was re-formulated in “scientific” form, where social factors were ignored in favour of explanations in terms of individual personality and biological determination’ (Berridge & Edwards, 153, 150-170). This disease model drew heavily on the Victorian understanding of types of personality, still current in today’s formulation of an ‘addictive personality’.¹² The relevance of this kind of analysis to De Quincey’s representation of his opium addiction and the decentering of romantic formulations of the self and imagination are clear. Indeed, it is De Quincey’s formulation of addiction that ‘haunts’ poststructuralist discourse.

In the case of opium and opiate dependency, recent writing has queried the relevance of ‘addiction’ as a concept. John Booth Davies argues that most people use drugs ‘on purpose, because they like it, and because they find no adequate reason for not doing so; rather than because they fall prey to some addictive illness which removes their capacity for voluntary behaviour’.¹³ Theodore Dalrymple, a medical practitioner experienced in the treatment of opiate addiction, excoriates a medical addiction industry for propagating the myth of traumatic opiate withdrawal, a process he claims which is seldom fatal and rarely dangerous. The main cause of modern ‘addiction’, it seems, ‘apart from the fact that many people have nothing to live for, is a literary tradition of romantic clap-trap, started by Coleridge and De Quincey, and continued without serious interruption ever since’.¹⁴

Most nineteenth-century domestic opium usage in Britain, as Berridge and Edwards demonstrate, remained stable and moderate and its consumption generally occasional. This was also much the same in China, where ‘opium was used by many people in moderate quantities; the relative absence of problematic users—rather than a proliferation of “drug fiends”—is the most striking feature of narcotic culture in late imperial China’ (Dikötter, 4). This does not deny the serious health and financial problems that the minority of heavily

dependent users of the drug experienced, nor the real dangers of accidental overdosing, but suggests that such cases, while a valid source of public health concern, remained unusual. The situation was analogous to the dangers of the use and abuse of alcohol then and now. In the most serious cases of alcoholism, hallucinations, psychosis, and actual fatalities resulting from precipitate withdrawal were very real consequences of the drug's abuse. Glenn Sonnedecker states that in the eighteenth century it would be difficult to infer that 'addicts' were either numerous or conspicuous in the west, confirming that it was not until around the 1870s that 'the main components of a modern concept of addiction' had been put forward and Andreas-Holger Maehle concludes that nineteenth-century habituation to opiates and other drugs was generally viewed more as an interesting pharmacological phenomena, rather than a serious medical condition or disease.¹⁵ Mike Jay similarly emphasizes the distinction between the occasional and the habitual user of opium in the period (Jay, 21-22). Addiction thus was never an inevitable consequence of taking opium.

As the supply of opium increased in the nineteenth century the cost of the drug fell and its popularity increased globally, moving it from an elite, luxury item to a cheaper and popular commodity.¹⁶ Inevitably, this led to the greater visibility of its use and concomitant public concern. The first modern formulations of what we think of as 'addiction' followed. Such notions were premised on the increasing prevalence of intravenous injection of morphine, first in subcutaneous and then intravenous injection technology, and the subsequent invention and refinement of the innovation of the hypodermic syringe.¹⁷ In 1868, the American physician, Horace B. Day published *The Opium Habit*, formulating a rudimentary modern understanding of addiction. The use of the terms, 'addict' and 'addiction' rather than 'habit', were given more coherent formulation by Eduard Levinstein in his study, *Zur Morphiumsucht* (1876; translated as *Morbid Craving for Morphia* [1878]) (Sonnedecker, 2:31). This was contemporaneous with the first serious attempts at the

criminalization of drug use and its racialization, increasingly associated ‘with colonialism, with the foreign—especially Asian—“Other,” and with a feminized or otherwise “degenerate” nation’ (Brodie and Redfield, 3). The first western prohibition of the drug in 1875, the Californian Opium Exclusion, was directed at opium smoking among the immigrant Chinese coolie population.¹⁸ Similar racial fears were on the rise in Britain in response to concomitant Chinese immigration into the East End of London (Berridge & Edwards, 195-208). As the non-medical usage of opiates became prohibited by law, addiction became more commonly associated with immorality and vice. Thus, what we understand as ‘addiction or dependency’ came to be formulated in terms of a specific disease pathology, typified, perhaps, by the image of the self-injecting morphine user in both the scientific and popular mind. The ‘addict’ was medicalised as a patient and the causes of his or her addiction were seen to be individual and psychological rather than social or cultural. This led to a new series of treatment regimens and institutional practices, pioneered, and developed by specialist medical professionals.

De Quincey and Addiction

The modern notion of addiction was grounded in De Quincey’s ‘Confessions’, crucial in its creation of a paradigm of substance abuse that fixed the idea of the addict as it was gradually absorbed into medical, legal, political, and other discourses, often unconsciously. The ‘Confessions’ gave rise to numerous imitative drug autobiographies in the nineteenth century. Alina Clej’s claims that ‘with the *Confessions*, not only did opium eating become fashionable with a middle-class public. The very idea of describing this experience proved to be intoxicating’, profoundly influencing Poe, Baudelaire, Gautier, Dumas, Balzac, and others.¹⁹ Commentators have similarly begun to situate the ‘Confessions’ more in the historical moment, including medical and political discourse, beyond the literary romantic circles

(Foxcroft, 79-165). The major aspects of De Quincey's depiction of his 'seven-fold' opium 'bondage' are well known. He stressed a close relationship between opium, dreaming, memory, and its inextricable relationship to creativity.²⁰ Yet as Elisabeth Schneider demonstrated, opiates, though administering profound sleep, do not apparently stimulate the kinds of dreaming, hallucination, or vision De Quincey and Coleridge claimed to have experienced.²¹ It was De Quincey, with Coleridge, who established the crucial convention of the user as a passive victim of a powerful and mysterious agency, the drug serving as the active agent and the 'true hero of the tale; and the legitimate centre on which the interest revolves'. His main subject is the 'marvellous agency of opium', confessing that opium-eating is 'a sensual pleasure' rather than a medical treatment (*Selected Writings*, 69, 4). He insists, however, that his original recourse to the drug in 1804 was neither recreational nor experimental but an expedient to alleviate toothache. De Quincey mystifies his first experience with opium as an uncanny encounter with an 'immortal druggist', constructing an *Arabian Nights* vignette, with the druggist 'sent down to earth on a special mission'. The druggist disappears never to be seen again. The event is represented as predestined, signifying De Quincey's 'addictive personality' and effacing his free choice in a commercial exchange. Opium is depicted in exotic hyperbole as a 'celestial drug', a 'dread agent of unimaginable pleasure and pain' (36-37). Its use precipitates special insight and profound revelation, presenting an 'apocalypse' of 'the world within' (37). De Quincey's 'Confessions' will thus establish itself as the user's sacred text, the De Quincey version, revealing the 'doctrine of the true church on the subject of opium' of which he is the sole member, 'the alpha and the omega' (39-40). The 'Confessions' exoticizes and mystifies a largely quotidian medicine, a substance that is 'dusky brown', 'rather dear' and fatal 'if you eat a good deal of it' (38).

De Quincey testifies that he had taken opium at regular intervals for eight years,

suffering no depression of spirits nor any other complications and demonstrating that addiction is neither swift nor inevitable. He recounts how from 1804-12 he would 'commit a debauch of opium' (42) once every three weeks or so on Tuesdays or Saturdays when visiting the opera. Describing how he wandered around London on Saturday nights after partaking, his sense of self and difference from the working people of the city decreased; opium magically dissolving the very rigid boundaries of nineteenth-century class consciousness. London became a gothic labyrinth with, 'such knotty problems of alleys' and 'enigmatical entries, and such sphinx's riddles of streets', rendering it an uncanny '*terrae incognitae*' unmapped in contemporary charts (44). Later, under the influence of heavy opium dependence, he records how these early scenes are transformed into hallucinogenic nightmares where 'the human face tyrannized over my dreams, and the perplexities of my steps in London came back and haunted my sleep' (44). From 1813 onward De Quincey admits that he resorted to the drug daily in ever increasing quantities becoming the quintessential addict *avant la lettre* in response to his grief at the death of the three-year old Catherine Wordsworth in 1812. He claims to have taken heroic amounts of the drug, way beyond any moderate use, a true addict. At the height of his habit, he was imbibing around 8,000 drops of laudanum or 320 grains of opium per day, claiming to suffer prodigiously with intense agony from his several attempts to decrease his consumption. In the *Confessions* of 1856, this was revised upward to as much as 'twelve thousand drops of laudanum' per day (*Selected Writings*, 50, 462). Withdrawal from the drug led to painful 'irritation of stomach', 'intense perspirations', and other, indescribable feelings, being 'agitated, writhing, throbbing, palpitating' for months after his abandonment of the drug (56, 69). This occasioned the celebrated opium dreams with their oriental terrors in which De Quincey further gothicises and orientalises his depiction of the effects of opium in the terrible nightmare where he sees himself as both priest and sacrificial victim: 'I was the idol; I was the priest; I was

worshipped; I was sacrificed. I fled from the wrath of Brama through all the forests of Asia: Vishnu hated me: Seeva laid wait for me' (65). De Quincey's compelling account of his opium experience thus created the genre of confessional writing about drug usage that would come to define later nineteenth-century understandings of the addict, a pathology that it had itself constructed.

Figure 0. George Paterson (fl. 1830-1849) after Thomas Allom (1804-1872), 'China Opium-Smokers' from *China, in a Series of Views, Displaying the Scenery, Architecture, and Social Habits, of that Ancient Empire* (London, 1843). Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection.

China

De Quincey's 'Confessions' have been discussed in many contexts, though largely Eurocentric and Anglo-American ones.²² This essay seeks to compare the British 'Confessions' of 1821 with a Chinese opium fiction of 1848, composed it seems some six years after the conclusion of the First Opium War between Britain and China. The use of opium in China has a long history but, much as in Britain, that pattern of usage tended to change in the 1820s. The reasons for the nineteenth-century expansion of this trade between British administered Bengal and Qing China have been extensively discussed.²³ Europeans exported something like 200 chests per annum to China for much of the eighteenth century, mainly intended for medical rather than recreational use and exempt from legal prohibition. It was first supplied by the Portuguese and Dutch who brought Malwa opium over from India to Java and thence to China. The impetus for the first imperial prohibition of 1729 was largely due to concerns over the morals of young elite Chinese males rather than public health in general (Dikötter, 34-37). In the early eighteenth-century opium was increasingly combined

with tobacco and smoked for pleasure in a weaker mixture known as *madak* (Dikötter, 32-36). It is well-known that in the nineteenth century, China became a ‘nation of enthusiastic smokers’ and by 1906 it is estimated that around 16.2 million people were smokers (that is around 6 per cent of the adult population).²⁴

Yet, as in the case of nineteenth-century British opium use, several recent commentators have robustly argued against the received idea of the mass and debilitating addiction of Chinese people, which they claim was promoted by the anti-opium lobby and missionary writing, and later by twentieth-century Chinese Nationalist historians. Notably, Dikötter, Laaman, and Zhou argue that in the first half of the twentieth century, ‘a narcophobic discourse gradually established itself ... the image of China as an opium slave became the *locus classicus* of the modern drug debate, the cornerstone of the anti-opium movement, the founding case of concerted international efforts to enforce increasingly draconian measures not only against opium but against all illicit drug use’ (Dikötter, 2). The opium smoked in China was a milder and less potent drug than that ingested in solid or liquid form in Britain.²⁵ In addition, it was generally consumed as a social ritual with the practice of *yancha* or the combination of tea and smoking.²⁶ Smoking, rather than ‘eating’ opium, thus became known as a specifically oriental practice. Alan Baumler has convincingly argued that the Chinese opium prohibitions of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were mainly ‘connected to traditional concerns about disorder and frugality rather than as yet unknown ideas of addiction’ (Baumler, 19). It is true that there was a more aggressive trading of the commodity by British merchants after the termination of the East India Company’s monopoly of 1834, but it was primarily the Chinese court’s change of mind concerning the moral dangers of the drug which was crucial (Baulmer, 25). James Polachek has argued that there was an extensive debate within the Chinese court concerning the legalisation of the opium trade in 1836, terminating with the emperor’s acceptance of the arguments of Lin Zexu and

the ‘Spring Purification Movement’. These advocated a stricter policy against opium to bolster their promotion of a gentry-led moral revival.²⁷ Baumler argues the Chinese ‘did not see opium use as being as awesomely destructive as twentieth-century ideas suggest’, and that this view was the dominant Chinese position until the importation of modern western notions of addiction and prohibition in 1906 (Baumler, 27). The Qing state opium suppression campaigns of the 1830s were not, as later presented by twentieth-century nationalist historians, the beginning of the fight against opium addiction, but the expression of a more general threat against the established Qing moral order. After the First Opium War, the issue of opium’s connection with the threat of western invasion and encroachment was a serious concern but this concern was not about the addictive properties of the drug itself. In 1858 the Treaty of Tianjin effectively legalised both opium imports as well as the now substantial Chinese domestic production of the drug. As Chinese opium production, sales, and smoking were assimilated into everyday life opium became less ‘other’ and less associated with western importation, perhaps analogously to the domestication of oriental tea in nineteenth-century Britain. From 1840 to 1940 millions of Chinese men and women smoked opium, either regularly or occasionally, or moderately or immoderately, much as alcohol was consumed in the west. The practice became less an elite luxury and more of an affordable pastime. By 1906 it is estimated that the smoking population was around 13.3 million (Baumler, 29). R. K. Newman has calculated that around 12 per cent of men and 2 per cent of women were either regular or moderate users at the time, and that smoking opium rarely undermined the health or shortened the lives of most smokers in nineteenth-century China (Newman, 766). Dikötter *et al* have vigorously challenged the image of China ‘as a victim of the opium plague’ claiming that most cases of habitual opium use appear not to have significantly harmful effects on health or life expectancy (Dikötter, 3). As Baumler summarises, ‘Opium dens were also part of the public sphere, places where men went to

socialize, conduct business, and to consume culture. All of these things tended to remove opium from its limited associations with deviance and make it a more acceptable substance'. Though in Britain, De Quincey would have it otherwise, in China 'opium might also be nothing, an ordinary substance of no great importance' (Baumler, 38-39). The story of how De Quincey's narrative of addiction was imported into China to become the dominant paradigm for both western postcolonial and Chinese nationalist discourse is not the subject of this essay.²⁸ But prior to this opium use was represented in Chinese literature in a very different way to that of De Quincey's 'Confessions'. As Keith McMahon has shown much of this literature 'is heavily focused on the erotic' with opium frequently featured as an aphrodisiac (McMahon, 9).

In 2009 Patrick Hanan published his important translation of the Chinese novel, *Fengyue meng (Romantic Illusions)* composed in 1848, some twenty-seven years after the publication of De Quincey's 'Confessions' and six years since the Treaty of Tianjin which ended the First Opium War with China.²⁹ The author of the novel gives his name as *Hangshang mengren*, which Hanan translates as the 'Fool of Yangzhou' and nothing much else is known about him. He claims in a preface that his fiction is a form of penance for his thirty years of pleasure seeking in the brothels of Yangzhou, and that it constitutes a semi-confessional warning to others of the temptations and downfalls of this lifestyle. If true, then the novel is probably set in the 1820s when the author was a young hedonistic fellow, like the 'sworn brotherhood' of the five young men of his fiction and close in time to the De Quincey at the close of the 'Confessions'. The novel describes in elaborate and sumptuous detail the world and romantic adventures of five young men with five highly accomplished and beautiful courtesans employed at one Yangzhou pleasure house. In a world where arranged and often loveless marriages were the norm, courtesans supplied a much-needed romantic interest. Such women were beautiful, highly refined consorts, fashionably and gorgeously

dressed and highly accomplished as singers. Chinese courtesans were not simply prostitutes, but companions who would accompany their clients on pleasure excursions and their liaisons were romantic, leading in some cases to formal concubinage or marriage as a secondary wife, if the client were sufficiently wealthy. The novel features touching examples of their genuine emotional connection and fidelity, especially in the story of Paria, who commits suicide on the death of her lover Yuan You in the hope of following him to the netherworld and who is held up as a model of fidelity by the author. However, frequently such relationships were illusory and young men were systematically drained of their money and abandoned. Such houses functioned as social clubs where friends dined, conversed, played games, and socialised on a regular, often daily basis. As part of the entertainment, they drank, smoked tobacco and opium. *Romantic Illusions* is a complex and sophisticated fiction describing in intricate detail the manners and mores of Yangzhou city life, but it is its treatment of opium use that is most relevant here. Opium use is almost entirely social and recreational, rather than solitary, and employed to enhance mood and facilitate relaxation. Nowhere in the novel is the smoking of opium connected with literary creation or the enhancement of dreaming. It is largely viewed as a ritualised pleasure, as common as drinking wine, frequent in the pleasure houses or venues such as the ‘Willow lane opium parlor’ (*Romantic Illusions*, 91). We also briefly glimpse the workings of ‘an opium den on the south side of the tea house’ where Yuan You purchases four packets of the drug and drinks tea. The opium is not for his own use, as he does not smoke, but for Wu Zhen who is suffering withdrawal during his imprisonment (228-29).

The novel also depicts several instances of a more serious ‘habit’ or dependency. One minor character, a bully named Guo Xueyou, has ‘a huge opium habit’ and ‘once he lights up, goodness knows how many of those little packets of yours he’ll go through’ (*Romantic Illusions*, 88). Notably one of the five ‘sworn brotherhood’, Wu Zhen, has an opium habit

that precipitates his downfall, though it is his refusal or inability to pay a large bribe that leads to his imprisonment and exile during one of the periodic crackdowns whose real purpose is to extort money from well-off locals. Every time Wu Zhen enters the house, the opium lamp is lit for his pleasure. He confesses that he ‘smokes several pipes a day but is trying to stop’ (218). Even still, when offered opium on one occasion, he refuses, responding he ‘had four or five puffs after lunch today at the Tianqingtang, and that’s enough for me’ (95). This supports those who argue that most users, unlike De Quincey, tend to achieve a plateau of drug use.

In the novel the perils of drinking and opium smoking are entirely secondary to the ‘unmitigated disaster’ of ‘whoring’. The novel describes the ‘currently fashionable use of opium’ (*Romantic Illusions*, 2):

No sooner has a playboy arrived at the door of a brothel--whether or not he is an addict, whether or not he has smoked before--than a lamp will be lit and a prostitute summoned to lie opposite and roast the opium for him. The addicts go without saying, but even someone who is not addicted will take the opportunity to enjoy a chat and a few laughs with the prostitute and perhaps prolong his visit (6).

Here Hanan uses the English word ‘addiction’ to translate the Chinese character *yin* in line with conventional practice, though as McMahon points out ‘craving’ is a better rendition (McMahon, 19-23). The novel presents opium use as recreational social icebreaker enjoyed by those who have not contracted a ‘habit’. It describes in detail the ritual of opium smoking. We are introduced to Wu Zhen’s ‘large pipe of speckled bamboo with a jadeite stem and gold mouthpiece’ and the ‘white copper opium lamp with a revolving top, a glass lamp cover ... steel pick, a small pair of scissors, a pipe cleaner’ (*Romantic Illusions*, 23):

Wu dipped the steel pick in the opium case and retrieved some opium, which he

roasted over the lamp until it hung down an inch or more. Then, with a twist of the pick, he transferred the opium to the second finger of his left hand and rolled it into a tiny ball. Then he dipped the pick in the opium again, roasted it over the lamp, and also rolled it into a ball. After repeating the process several times, he rolled the balls into a pellet.

With the pipe in his hand in front of the lamp, he placed the pellet in the bowl, kneaded it with his fingers until it was wedged in tightly, then held it to the lamp and made a hole in it with the pick. After blowing through the pipe once himself, he wiped the mouthpiece with his hand and passed the pipe to Lu Shu (24).

Lu Shu, a young man visiting on an errand for his father, has been enticed into the pleasure house scene by one of his friends. Wu attempts to initiate him into the delights of opium smoking but it takes Lu several attempts before he manages to inhale. Returning the pipe to Wu, he declares, 'I'm no smoker, I'm afraid. Actually I found it rather unpleasant. But don't let that deter you. By all means go ahead and satisfy your habit' (24). The other companions also decline, leaving Wu to smoke on his own. Wu is frequently smoking throughout the novel and is clearly identified as someone whose opium use is habitual and damaging to both his purse and his health. But he is the only one in a novel where opium use is common whose habit is seen as especially problematic, though several of the brotherhood clearly drink far too much.

Wu Zhen is not the only regular smoker. The courtesans Cassia and Phoenix also smoke and are both said to have the 'habit'. The courtesan Fragrance comments that Phoenix is lucky as she is able to 'take the elixir' to which she replies, 'You must be joking, Sister ... This stuff will bury us alive' (*Romantic Illusions*, 60). Phoenix entices the non-smoker, Jia Ming of the sworn brotherhood, to become a smoker. He is surprised that her opium (bought

for her by a client) has ‘more fragrance’ than that smoked by Cassia. Phoenix says it is ‘some of the big stuff’, a reference to the higher quality product exported to China from Bengal, one of the only references in the novel to the opium trade itself (*Romantic Illusions*, 72).

Presumably Cassia’s poorer quality opium is home produced. Cassia uses her opium to soften up Jia Ming before engaging his sympathy for her plight as a cash-strapped prostitute financing her feckless family. As the novel progresses, Jia Ming acquires an opium habit. Clearly, opium smoking, though in most cases a relatively harmless vice, has its dangers. As their relationship develops Jia Ming becomes concerned about Cassia’s opium use:

“So far as opium is concerned, the runners and deputies of both counties have seized a great number of people, beating them, clapping them in cangues, imprisoning them, and putting them on trial. They’re searching everywhere. I was given a prescription for an antidote ... and now I don’t need to smoke anymore ... But opium is the light of your life, and if I ask you to stop smoking, I know that you’ll never agree” (244-45).

Phoenix agrees to abstain and take Jia’s cure, yet she surreptitiously continues to smoke and Jia Ming also returns to ‘his old habit’ (249). Wenlan sings a song about a courtesan deprived of her opium who feels ‘Listless when the craving bites’ who feels ‘buried alive’ without her drug:

Innumerable yawns,
Interminable sneezes,
Tears that fall in a stream.
No strength is left in her limbs;
With an itch in her throat, a pain in her belly,
She feels as if she were giving birth.
She has no money for opium. (68)

She fantasizes that her lover truly cares for her and will bring her opium so she can retire from the profession as his concubine. Yuan You responds that if Wenlan would give up her role as courtesan, he will bring her ‘a big bowl of the stuff’ so she can shut her door and spend her life with him. The song depicts a courtesan with a serious opium habit suffering what we would think of as withdrawal symptoms and having to smoke ‘dross’ instead of opium. It is, however, the smoking of dross (the recycled remnants and ashes of previously smoked opium) that is here figured as fatal and her lack of money to finance her habit as the problem (68-69). While unpleasant her symptoms are not described as life threatening. Later Wenlan sings another lament on a similar theme, bewailing the plight of the penurious nightwatchman. At the fifth watch the character states that ‘if I weren’t so hooked on opium, I’d have gotten out years ago’, complaining of his poverty as ‘when the opium craving hits, there’s nothing we can do’ (71). Paria, who is offered the chance to escape the life of a courtesan, quotes a poem warning that ‘the opium habit makes your face look old, \And who will love you when your youth recedes’ (194).

Wu Zhen is the person who suffers most because of his opium habit. During a periodic clampdown by the prefect of Yangzhou against opium smoking he is singled out for a shakedown. Wu Zhen refuses to pay a bribe of twenty taels of silver to effect his release and is chained and sent to prison. Deprived of his opium, Wu presents a pitiful sight swaying back and forth with blood-stained face and red and swollen cheeks. He confesses that, ‘last night was more than any man could bear, I have a burning sensation inside me ... in three or four days I’ll be dead’. Yuan You, however, points to his general lack of strength and his punishment and imprisonment as the true cause of his weakness and stresses finding a way for him to ‘give up opium’ (*Romantic Illusions*, 224). Yuan bribes the guards and is able to administer two pellets of opium to Wu which he dissolves in boiled water and which Wu gulps down as if it were ‘the elixir of immortality’. In his defense, Wu testifies that he suffers

from 'stagnation of the vital forces' and his opium habit was contracted as a result of this medical condition (229).

What insights can be learned from this cross-cultural comparison of De Quincey's 'Confessions' and *Romantic Illusions*, both highly literary and sophisticated fictions featuring opium use? In both cases, the figure of the problematic drug user is largely marginal to his or her society. Both texts feature opium use as recreational rather than medicinal, though underlying usage in each text is the medicinal power of the drug. Both De Quincey and Wu Zhen resort to opium initially for medical purposes. In *Romantic Illusions*, the smoking of opium is almost entirely featured as social, ritualistic, and recreational undertaken in pleasure houses or opium houses. At times it functions as an aphrodisiac at others as a relaxant, perhaps even an anti-depressant, for the women working in the pleasure houses. Its corrupt and half-hearted prohibition is more of a public morality than a public health issue. Characters in the novel smoke it largely because they want to and of those few who contract a habit, only the case of Wu Zhen is seen as ruinous, yet he also has underlying health problems, and his misfortunes are indirectly related to his habit. The character who suffers most in the novel, Lu Shu, is crippled as a young man by venereal disease and fleeced by the unscrupulous Fragrance but is not a smoker. Opium is certainly an issue, but it is not the true hero of the novel. *Romantic Illusions* presents a very different understanding of the signification of opium as well as a very different understanding of eastern and oriental cultures than is portrayed in De Quincey's 'Confessions'. Opium is here a quotidian substance, largely consumed in moderation for social pleasure by recognisably non-othered people. Certainly, the fiction is some distance from De Quincey's evocation of a celestial, magical, and visionary substance that opens the gates of paradise and dissolves the self in an internal apocalypse of memories and dreams, but leaves its adherent endlessly addicted and suffering terrifying nightmares of Asiatic invasion and infection.

Notes

¹ Robert Morrison, 'Introduction', *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater and Other Writings* (Oxford, 2013), ix. See Robert Morrison, 'De Quincey's Addiction', *Romanticism*, 17 (2011), 270-77.

² Victoria Berridge and Griffith Edwards, *Opium and the People: Opiate Use in Nineteenth Century England* (London, 1987); Thomas Dormandy, *Opium Reality's Dark Dream* (New Haven, 2012); Louise Foxcroft, *The Making of Addiction* (Aldershot, 2007); Terry M. Parssinen, *Secret Passions, Secret Remedies: Narcotic Drugs in British Society, 1820-1930* (Manchester, 1986); Susan Zieger, *Inventing the Addict: Drugs, Race and Sexuality in Nineteenth-Century British and American Culture* (Amherst, 2008).

³ Barry Milligan, 'Morphine Addicted Doctors, the English Opium Eater, and Embattled Medical Authority', *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 33.2 (2005), 541-53.

⁴ Peter Kitson, 'Romantic Nationalism, Thomas De Quincey, and the Public Debate about the First Opium War, 1839-42', *Studien zur Englischen Romantik*, 22 (2019), 141-155.

⁵ Frank Dikötter, Lars Laamann, and Zhou Xun, *Narcotic Culture: A History of Drugs in China* (Hong Kong, 2004); R. K. Newman, 'Opium Smoking in Late Imperial China: A Reconsideration', *Modern Asian Studies*, 19 (1995), 765-794; Alan Baumler, *The Chinese and Opium under the Republic: Worse than Floods and Wild Beasts* (Albany, 2007).

⁶ 'Confessions of an English Opium-Eater' in *21st-Century Oxford Authors: Thomas De Quincey*, ed. Robert Morrison (Oxford, 2019), 6. Hereafter, De Quincey, *Selected Writings*.

⁷ Anonymous, *Courtesans and Opium: Romantic Illusions of the Fool of Yangzhou*. Trans Patrick Hanan (New York, 2009). Further references will be cited by page number in the text.

⁸ Anna Alexander and Mark S. Roberts, ed. *High Culture: Reflections on Addiction and Modernity* (New York, 2003), 1-18 (3).

-
- ⁹ Jacques Derrida, 'The Rhetoric of Drugs' in *High Culture*, ed. Alexander and Roberts, 19-43 (25-26, 29).
- ¹⁰ Avital Ronell, *Crack Wars: Literature Addiction Mania* (Lincoln, Nebraska, 1992: Urbana & Chicago, 2004), 2-3, 12-13.
- ¹¹ Janet Farrell Brodie and Marc Redfield, ed. *High Anxieties: Cultural Studies in Addiction* (Berkeley, 2003), 2-3; see <https://www.etymonline.com/word/addiction>. Accessed 01/04.2021.
- ¹² Mike Jay, *Emperor of Dreams: Drugs in the Nineteenth Century* (Sawtry, 2002), 65.
- ¹³ John Booth Davies, *The Myth of Addiction* (London and New York, 1998), xi.
- ¹⁴ Theodore Dalrymple, *Romancing Opiates: Pharmacological Lies and the Addiction Bureaucracy* (New York, 2006), 61.
- ¹⁵ Glenn Sonnedecker, 'Emergence of the Concept of Opiate Addiction', *Journal Mondiale de Pharmacie*, 5 (1962), 275-90 (282) and 6 (1963), 27-34 (29); Andreas-Holger Maehle, *Drugs on Trial: Experimental Pharmacology and Therapeutic Innovation in the Eighteenth Century* (Amsterdam, 1999), 81.
- ¹⁶ Berridge and Edwards, 3-74; Zheng Yangwen, *The Social Life of Opium in China* (Cambridge, 2005), 3-86.
- ¹⁷ Berridge and Edwards, 135-72; Thomas Dormandy, *Opium Reality's Dark Dream* (New Haven, 2012), 2-3.
- ¹⁸ Diana L. Ahmad, *The Opium Debate and Chinese Exclusion Laws in the Nineteenth-Century American West* (Reno, 2007).
- ¹⁹ Alina Clej, *A Genealogy of the Modern Self: Thomas De Quincey and the Intoxication of Writing* (Stanford, 1995), viii.
- ²⁰ Alethea Hayter, *Opium and the Romantic Imagination* (London, 1968), 101-31, 226-54.
- ²¹ Elizabeth Schneider, *Coleridge, Opium, and Kubla Khan* (1953: New York, 1970), 21-109.

²² See John Barrell, *The Infection of Thomas De Quincey: A Psychopathology of Imperialism* (New Haven, 1991); Barry Milligan, *Pleasures and Pains: Opium and the Orient in Nineteenth-Century British Culture* (Charlottesville, 1995); and Nigel Leask, *British Romantic Writers and the East: Anxieties of Empire* (Cambridge, 1992).

²³ See Carl A. Trocki, *Opium, Empire and the Global Political Economy* (London and New York, 1999).

²⁴ David T. Courtwright, *Forces of Habit: Drugs and the Making of the Modern World* (Cambridge, MA, 2001), 15, 35-36.

²⁵ Jonathan Spence, 'Opium Smoking in Ch'ing China', in *Conflict and Control in Late Imperial China*, ed. Frederic Wakeman and Carolyn Grant (Berkeley, 1975), 143-73 (232-33).

²⁶ Keith McMahon, *The Fall of the God of Money: Opium Smoking in Nineteenth-Century China* (New York, 2002), 33-44.

²⁷ James M. Polachek, *The Inner Opium War* (Cambridge, MA, 1992).

²⁸ Baumler, 43-56; Dikötter, 93-146.

²⁹ The earliest known edition was published in 1883 (Hanan, 'Introduction', *Romantic Illusions*, xii).